

Sharon Quesada

A.P. English

Period 3

May 20, 2002

In the novel Beloved, Toni Morrison reveals the horrors of slavery and how it destroys an individual's identity and role within the community. Slavery in its fundamental nature acts as an obstacle to motherhood. The way in which Baby Suggs and Sethe deal with motherhood is relative to their situations. Sethe is forced to murder her daughter so that slavery will not overcome her. Slavery acted in direct opposition to the ability of a woman to be a proper mother. Through the usage of symbolism, Morrison explores and depicts the internal conflicts that lead Sethe to the extremity of killing her child. Throughout the novel, Morrison uses the characters Sethe and Baby Suggs to illustrate how their roles as mothers was dehumanized because of slavery.

Sethe loved her children, her own flesh and blood, enough to take their life away because of the fear that their life would be filled with pain and servitude. Sethe killed her baby because, in her mind, her children were the only pure part of her and had to be protected from the "dirtiness"(251) of slavery. Sethe felt that the only way she could keep her children away from a life of slavery was by offering them freedom in the form of death. By killing her child, Sethe had a little taste of what it was like to have some control over her own life. Sethe did not want her own children to have to go through what she did. By committing this act, Sethe planned on saving her children from the cruelties of slavery. When the schoolteacher came for them, Sethe "just flew. [She] collected every

bit of the life she made [to] a place where no one could hurt them”(163). It was Sethe’s dominating love for her children that drove her towards a desperate attempt to kill them. She allowed her motherly instincts to take over. Giving away part of herself out of love was the most powerful and only act of love Sethe knew of. Sethe’s desperate act was out of love and for her children’s protection.

The idea of motherhood and the maternal roles of both Sethe and Baby Suggs were disrupted because of slavery. All that Sethe could remember of her own mother was a mark under her breast and the words, “If something happens to me and you can’t tell me by my face, you can know me by this mark”(61). Sethe had never experienced the traditional motherly love. These images of her own mother bruised and distorted her image of a mother. These morbid memories for Sethe were reminders of the imperfect and cruel society she was forced to live in and the challenges she would face as a slave mother. Baby Suggs learns that “the nastiness of life was the shock she received upon learning that nobody stopped playing checkers just because the pieces included her children”(23). Baby Suggs learned early in her years of motherhood that slavery destroyed the union of her family. Slavery was the institution that destroyed the special bonds of motherhood. It broke Baby Suggs family apart. Through her experiences, Baby Suggs realized that nothing is definite and that she would probably not be able to see her children to adulthood and attempted to guard herself against this pain.

Sethe’s role as a mother was symbolically defined and influenced by the tragedies that occurred in her life. Sethe’s powerful love for her children had her believe

that she had “milk enough for all”(201), but it was the act of being robbed of this milk that drove Sethe to kill her children. The breast milk symbolized how strong Sethe’s maternal desires were. She could never forget the terror of the schoolteacher’s nephews robbing her of her nurturing substances. In a way, she was robbed of her role as a fulfilling mother. Denver “swallowed [Beloved’s] blood right along with [her] mother’s milk”(205). She fed Denver her breast milk right along with the freshly poured blood of the dead Beloved. The inhuman image of milk and blood further solidifies the importance of maternal instinct by portraying the value of a mother’s milk as equal to that of her own blood. This horrific image illustrates the dehumanization of motherhood through the horrors of slavery. This gruesome act scarred her for life and affected her role as a mother. Her milk was the ultimate symbol of motherhood, but unfortunately it was robbed from her. The ultimate symbol of Sethe’s suffering was the “chokecherry tree” on her back with the trunk “red and split open, full of sap”(79). All the tragedies Sethe experienced could be summed up in this scar. The tree represented her sufferings in a tangible way. All these sufferings and horrific experiences shaped her attitude towards life and motherhood.

Sethe’s overpowering love and her need to save her children from slavery led her to extremes that destroyed her child’s life. Sethe was a woman who knew how to love, and ultimately crumbled because of her “too-thick love”(164). For a slave, loving was a risk and dangerous. Sethe’s too- thick love led to extremities in her life. She believed love was either tough or not present at all. Her love was strong enough to go to extremes for. Beloved describes her mother’s actions by saying, “She took my face away there is

no one to want me to say me my name”(271). The love that led Sethe to extremes also led to her down fall. By going to extremes, she robbed her baby of her life. *Beloved* shows how not only her life was taken from her, but also her mother. This demonstrates how slavery tears mothers away from their daughters. Her strong love has Sethe state how her “plan was to take [them] all [including herself] to the other side were [her] own ma’am [was]”(203). In Sethe’s eyes, death is a much better alternative than slavery, and because she has never had to deal with separation from her children before, she knows of no other way to escape from her situation. Her love for her children was as strong as any bond of motherhood that she did everything, including murder, to keep her children with her. Sethe knew that in death, unity was guaranteed.

In Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, Morrison exposes a new image of motherhood as contaminated by the atrocities of slavery. By killing her child, Sethe is protecting her child. She tried to break the destructive power of slavery by taking her child’s life before it could be taken from her. Slavery was the ultimate obstacle that stood between motherhood and destruction. Morrison’s use of symbols helped convey the internal struggles faced by the characters because of slavery.