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Revisions, Rememories and Exorcisms: Toni Morrison and the Slave Narrative

CYNTHIA S. HAMILTON

Beloved is a self-conscious examination of the possibilities and limitations of the story-making process, both for the individual and for the community. Because slavery is a highly emotive subject and because historical narratives of slavery are so controversial, the exercise is a particularly potent one. The basic problem of the novel concerns the need to transform facts of unspeakable horror into a life-giving story, for the individual, for the black community, and for the nation.¹ It is a problem which encourages compulsive repetition and avoidance; hence the stories of slavery proliferate. On the individual level the stories are shaped by the points of view of a variety of characters; on a wider level, by the demands of different types of utterance and by the structuring power of different kinds of historical perspectives and linguistic formulations, including, most significantly, generic forms. This profusion of storytelling makes the statement at the end of the novel, that “this is not a story to pass on” exceedingly problematic, for there is no single referent for the pronoun “this”, and the article “a” seems singularly inappropriate in view of this profusion.²

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¹ See Andrew Levy, “Telling *Beloved*,” *Texas Studies in Literature and Language* 33 (1991), 114–23 for another view of the centrality of the storytelling process in *Beloved*. Levy focuses on the personal level of storytelling. See also Trudier Harris, *Fiction and Folklore: The Novels of Toni Morrison* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1991), 164–72.

² Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1987), 275. Future references are to this edition and will be cited parenthetically.

I

On a personal level, Morrison explores the power and limitations of the story-making process as individual experience is edited and codified into narrative. In *Beloved*, characters define themselves by relating and explaining their experience. This link can be very direct, as happens when Baby Suggs and Stamp Paid tell stories which explain their names. Storytelling also allows individuals to forge social and inter-personal bonds. So, Sethe longs to share the burden of her life experience with Paul D – “Her story was bearable because it was his as well – to tell, to refine and tell again.” (99) – and Paul D’s acceptance of the shared bond and shared burden is signaled when, at the end of the novel, “he wants to put his story next to hers.” (273) The potency of storytelling need not be beneficial, however; it can be damaging and limiting. Denver constructs her sense of self from the stories that are told about the extraordinary circumstances of her birth, but this story limits her possibility for growth, confining her in childhood until she is able to assign to it a less privileged status.³ The discourses and ideology which underpin slavery, with their stunting objectification of the individual, require the antidote of pride, love and acceptance which Baby Suggs gives to her audiences in the clearing as a healing gift.⁴

The power of story-telling also has its limits, for life-supporting fictions can easily be destroyed by facts which shatter the protective formulations. Both Baby Suggs and Stamp Paid insulate themselves from past horrors by constructing stories which contain and explain their suffering within a safely demarcated past. For Baby Suggs, the Ohio River divides her experiences in slave territory from the free world of her own personal reconstruction until the intrusion of the slave catchers exposes her continued vulnerability. For Stamp Paid, the Civil War promised to end the threats associated with slavery, but the red ribbon “knotted around a curl of wet woolly hair, clinging still to its bit of scalp” shatters his complacency. (180) Part of the vulnerability of life-giving fictions is that they have gaps, silences, and omissions of significance. It is these that Ella listens for as she wraps Sethe’s baby, and it is these Paul D assesses as he contemplates *Beloved*. Most noticeably, it is the inability of the characters

³ See also Ashraf H. A. Rushdy, “Daughters Signifyin(g) History: The Example of Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*,” *American Literature* 64 (1992), 576–85 for Rushdy’s analysis of Denver’s personal reconstruction.

⁴ See Harris on the ritual significance of Baby Suggs’s preaching in the clearing, 172–5.

involved to speak directly of the scene of murder which produces the most significant gaps within the told stories of the novel and marks the area of greatest vulnerability for the characters.

The potency, for good and ill, and limitations of storytelling for the individual provide a running theme in the novel, and the dynamics isolated on this level echo through the analysis of more complex levels as well. On the personal level exposure is achieved through the use of multiple points of view, and stream of consciousness narration, techniques associated with modernism. Juxtaposition of such different points of view as those of Sethe, Denver, *Beloved*, Paul D, Baby Suggs, Stamp Paid, Ella, Lady Jones, and the slave catchers not only exposes the biased and partial nature of all personal narratives, but shows the extent to which the subject of one narrative can become demeaned and objectified in a competing, hostile narrative. This is clearly demonstrated by the use of the slave catcher's point of view to narrate the scene of slaughter at 124. While giving prominence to Sethe's story, Morrison refuses to privilege any single strand of narrative, though she does make it clear that the implications of some points of view render them dangerous. The importance of storytelling for the immediate community is also explored as the reader is shown the way characters' behavior and interaction with the community is affected by the narratives embraced or rejected. So, the community must construct its narratives of preternatural threat before it unites to exorcise the ghost. But while this too is important to the artistic success and coherence of the novel, it is not the book's most innovative aspect.

II

What is most innovative, and most significant, is the way the power and limitations of more all-embracing cultural formulations are viewed, particularly the limitations inherent in stories patterned by the generic formulation of the classic slave narrative. What Toni Morrison does in *Beloved* is to escape from the limitations of the traditional slave narrative by using modernist techniques within the framework of another generic tradition, the gothic, to extend and critique its range.⁵ This is a highly significant enterprise, both artistically and historically, because the classic

⁵ See Marilyn Sanders Mobley, "A Different Remembering: Memory, History and Meaning in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*" in *Toni Morrison: Modern Critical Views*, ed. Harold Bloom (New York: Chelsea House, 1990), 189-93 for Mobley's assessment of Morrison's debt to the slave narrative. Mobley concentrates on the different narrative technique.

slave narrative, as it was shaped in the decades immediately prior to the Civil War, provided a popular template for articulating the horrors of slavery, countenancing resistance, and supporting the campaign for abolition.⁶ It is the slave narratives of these decades which are significant not merely for their numbers, but also for the extent to which they shaped and continue to shape our perception of the horrors of slavery. Earlier slave narratives contained a mixture of forms and intents, including polemic, spiritual narrative, adventure, and exemplary biography, a blend which was not given so intensive a polemical focus as the narratives of the ante-bellum period, which were shaped in large measure by a discourse of victimization. The narratives published in the decades after the Civil War had yet a different agenda, celebrating accomplishments to indicate the progress made since liberation, and appealing for the recognition and full participation that such progress should invite.

The polemics of abolition meant that the narratives of the 1840s and 1850s dwelt on the physical hardship and mental anguish of slavery, discrediting it as a civilizing institution, and emphasizing the extent to which slavery violated all accepted notions of decency. With its catalogue of horrors, Theodore Weld's monumental *American Slavery As It Is: Testimony of a Thousand Witnesses* (1839) helped to shape both the discourse of abolition and the perception of the realities of slavery for a sympathetic audience. In Weld's account, slavery is primarily defined by its effects on the slave, who is conceived as pure victim.⁷ If one looks below the abolitionist discourse, one sees an appreciation of the power of the slave holder, and ultimately of the white man. In this respect, Toni Morrison's comment in *Playing in the Dark* that "the fabrication of an Africanist persona is reflexive; an extraordinary meditation on the self; a powerful

⁶ For a good discussion of the historical background to the development of the slave narrative, see Marion Wilson Starling, *The Slave's Narrative: Its Place in American History*, Second Edition (Washington: Howard University Press, 1988), 1–49. For a discussion of the textual politics of the emerging genre see William L. Andrews, *To Tell a Free Story: The First Century of Afro-American Autobiography, 1760–1865* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988), 1–31 and John Sekora, "Black Message/White Envelope: Genre, Authenticity, and Authority in the Antebellum Slave Narrative," *Callaloo* 10 (1987), 482–515.

⁷ Theodore Weld, *American Slavery As It Is: Testimony of a Thousand Witnesses* (1839; rpt., New York: Arno, 1968). Weld does devote considerable space at the end of his treatise to what he sees as the endemic violence of the slaveholding states. This dueling and "ruffianism of the slaveholding spirit in the 'highest class of society'" (184) is, according to Weld, a natural by-product of slavery which demonstrates the deleterious effects of slavery on the society as a whole, master as well as slave: see Weld, 184–210. Nonetheless, this forms a small part of his argument, the great bulk of which is devoted to the victimization of the slave.

exploration of the fears and desires that reside in the writerly conscious” is an apt description of the dynamics of white expectations, perceptions and desires as they shape the form of the slave narrative, disempowering the slave as the narrator presents the shocking facts of his victimization.⁸ While no slave narrative is as extreme in its portrayal of victimization as Weld’s deliberate catalogue of cruelties, all narratives pander to the abolitionist polemics of victimization. And while slave authors use a variety of techniques to claim back some measure of control over their lives, only rarely do they escape the interpretative framework which bestows meaning on the slave’s life within the context of the institution of slavery, within its power dynamics and unequal relationships. The slave may outwit or overpower his master as do Frederick Douglass (*Narrative* [1845]), Solomon Northup (*Twelve Years* [1853]), and William Wells Brown (*Narrative* [1847]), but their victories focus attention firmly on the struggle against victimization.⁹ Solomon Northup recounts his two battles with his master, both of which are provoked by his master’s murderous attacks. Northup defends himself successfully, but acknowledges the untenable position in which he finds himself: “I dared not murder him, and I dared not let him live. If I killed him, my life must pay the forfeit – if he lived, my life only would satisfy his vengeance. A voice within whispered me to fly.”¹⁰

As William L. Andrews has pointed out in “Dialogue in Ante-bellum Afro-American Autobiography,” verbal sparring allowed safer victories to be depicted within the slave narrative, such as renegotiating the meaning of evocative words like “freedom”, “master”, or “religion” while exposing the hidden power base underlying conventional usage.¹¹ The slave who triumphed on these grounds, however, faced the threat of imminent violence as a potential riposte. The point when the self-liberated slave, in the words of Kimberly W. Benston, “unnames” himself and takes a new name, with a new identity, marks another moment of personal

⁸ Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), 17.

⁹ Frederick Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave. Written by Himself*, ed. Benjamin Quarles (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1960); Solomon Northup, *Twelve Years a Slave*, eds. Sue Eakin and Joseph Logsdon (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1968); William Wells Brown, “Narrative of William Wells Brown, a Fugitive Slave. Written by Himself” in *Puttin’ On Ole Massa*, ed. Gilbert Osofsky (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1969), 175–223.

¹⁰ Northup, 100.

¹¹ William L. Andrews, “Dialogue in Antebellum Afro-American Autobiography” in *Studies in Autobiography*, ed. James Olney (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 89–98.

triumph and self determination, though even here it is not unusual for a grateful fugitive to give a white benefactor the privilege of naming him.¹² Such victories as these tend to be circumscribed by the more all-embracing formal structures of the slave narrative which deny authority to the black speaker. As James Olney has argued in "I was Born," the prototypic slave narrative of the period includes, besides the actual narrative; an engraved portrait, signed by the narrator; a title page which informs the reader of the provenance of the narrative – written by himself, a friend, related to, etc.; a poetic epigraph; a handful of testimonials; and a documentary appendix or appendices.¹³ This supplementary material confers authority on the subject of the narrative, a strategy made necessary by the reluctance of a largely white audience to accept a black writer on his own terms. As William L. Andrews has noted in "The Novelization of Voice in Early African American Narrative," the need to demonstrate reliability influenced the way all formal elements of the slave narrative were handled during this period:

By the early nineteenth century black narrators realized that to assume the privileged status of author in the literary discourse of white America, they would have to write self-authorizing, that is, self-authenticating, narratives. First of all, the raw material of their stories, the who-what-where-when information that constituted the "fable" of their narratives, would have to sound factual. Second, the narrative statements, the structure in which the facts take meaningful shape in what many now call the "sujet" of narrative, would also have to be credible. And finally, the narrating itself, the voice that embodies the "producing narrative action," the storytelling would have to sound truthful or risk suspicion about its sincerity.¹⁴

The slave wanting to tell his story had to follow conventions agreeable to a white audience and shaped by the discourses which defined minority experience within that society.

The opportunities for personal empowerment for the slave, and narrative empowerment for the ex-slave telling his own story were therefore limited by the structure and structuring assumptions of the classic narrative. Quite apart from the insult of authorizing conventions, the slave telling his story in the form of a slave narrative faced the

¹² Kimberly W. Benston, "I Yam What I Am: The Topos of Un(naming) in Afro-American Literature" in *Black Literature and Literary Theory*, ed. Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (New York: Routledge, 1990), 151–72.

¹³ Charles Olney, "'I Was Born': Slave Narratives, Their Status as Autobiography and Literature" in *The Slave's Narrative*, eds. Charles T. Davis and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 152–3.

¹⁴ William L. Andrews, "The Novelization of Voice in Early African American Narrative." *PMLA* 105 (1990), 23.

restricted focus of the narrative's discourse of victimization. The limitations of such a focus show most clearly in the depiction of marital ties and family bonds. In the classic slave narrative, it is the pathos of separation which receives attention rather than the personal relationships themselves, thus sacrificing the rich complexity of the slave's experience to the needs of propaganda. William Wells Brown's account of his last interview with his mother clearly shows the close bond between them and their anguish at parting, but the relationship itself is not given extended treatment.¹⁵ Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl Written By Herself* (1861) is unusual in the extended attention given to character development and the depiction of relationships.¹⁶

Not only does the classic slave narrative aggrandize white power, it also bows before the dominant middle class sensitivities and sensibilities of the period. The classic slave narratives were written at a time when the domestic ideology held sway and the fallen women of the sentimental novels paid for their seductions with pain and often with death. As Molly Abel Travis points out in "Speaking from the Silences of the Slave Narrative: *Beloved* and African-American Women's History," for the slave narratives of this period, the oft alluded to, but unspeakable subject was the rape of the slave by a white man who had her in his power.¹⁷ Not infrequently, narrators discussing their parentage mention having white fathers of considerable standing within the community, but this relationships is unspeakable, as William Grimes's comment in his narrative of 1825 dramatically illustrates: "My father, —, was one of the most wealthy planters in Virginia."¹⁸ Henry Bibb feels compelled to complain about the insults suffered by his wife by speaking in conditional terms in his *Narrative* (1849): "If my wife must be exposed to the insults and licentious passions of wicked slavedrivers and overseers; if she must bear the stripes of the lash laid on by an unmerciful tyrant; if this is to be done with impunity, which is frequently done by slaveholders and their abettors, heaven forbid that I should be compelled to witness the sight."¹⁹ Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents* deals with the forbidden subject of sexual

¹⁵ Brown, 207–9.

¹⁶ Harriet A. Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl Written by Herself*, ed. Jean Fagan Yellin (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987).

¹⁷ Molly Abel Travis, "Speaking From the Silence of the Slave Narrative," *Texas Review* 13 (1992), 73.

¹⁸ William Grimes, "Life of William Grimes, the Runaway Slave, Brought Down to the Present Time. Written By Himself" in *Five Black Lives*, ed. Arna Bontemps (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1987), 62.

¹⁹ Henry Bibb, "Narrative of the Life and Adventures of Henry Bibb, an American Slave. Written by Himself" in *Puttin' On Ole Massa*, 80.

harassment at length, making it more acceptable by drawing on motifs from the sentimental novel, as Jean Fagan Yellin points out in her introduction to the scholarly Harvard edition of the text. Nonetheless, its first editor, Lydia Maria Child, felt compelled to apologize: "I am well aware that many will accuse me of indecorum for presenting these pages to the public; for the experiences of this intelligent and much injured woman belong to a class which some call delicate subjects, and others indelicate. This peculiar phase of slavery has generally been kept veiled; but the public ought to be made acquainted with its monstrous features, and I willingly take the responsibility of presenting them with the veil withdrawn."²⁰

Clearly the classic slave narrative suffers from a blinkered and partisan perspective which hampers its expressive range. The point of view chosen for the classic narrative also has its limitations; it is the story of a single individual and is told from a single point of view, that of the escaped slave; we are given only a small amount of information about others who are important to that individual, or whose stories add to the graphic depiction of the horrors of slavery. In order to overcome the limitations of a first person perspective with its limited personal experience, the narrative is often broken by testimony concerning the fate of other slaves whom the individual has known or heard about. This allows the slave narrative to feast upon a wider range of horrors. The narrative structure of the classic narrative introduces more limitations; the plot tends to be linear with the events arranged chronologically and related simply, telling the story of learning the full horror of slavery, either following captivity, growing up, or on being sold.²¹ The narrator establishes that slavery is unendurable, then attempts to escape, either by running away or by purchasing freedom. It may take several attempts before the narrator succeeds, for the narrative makes it clear that escape from slavery is fraught with danger. Freedom is often bought at the cost of isolation, for friends and family have been left behind. When the narrator finally does escape, he – or less often she – tells what it is like to be free, and how desperate he is to retain his hard-earned freedom.²² Nonetheless, such odes to freedom, articulated in heightened language and stock sentimental tropes, can seem oddly grafted to the story, for the narrative structure of

²⁰ Jacobs, 3–4.

²¹ On the plot conventions of the slave narrative see Frances Smith Foster, *Witnessing Slavery: The Development of Ante-bellum Slave Narratives* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1979), 85–7; Olney, "'I Was Born,'" 153; and Mobley, 191–2.

²² There are very few extant slave narratives written and published by women during this period.

the classical slave narrative is centered on action rather than feelings or perceptions, on externals which can be verified and which are in effect submitted as evidence in the case against slavery.

In *Beloved*, Morrison covers the area with which the classic slave narrative is concerned, but in a way which circumvents the limitations of the action-oriented classic narrative, as well as its single point of view. The reader must reconstruct the story line gradually in *Beloved*, as more and more of the past is revealed through memories evoked by present situations. In *Beloved*, as in Faulkner's work, this emphasizes the way the past intrudes on and shapes our reactions to and feelings about the present. In the various narrative strands associated with different characters' points of view, Morrison uses psychological time rather than real time, and memory rather than lived experience, to emphasize the importance of perception. The most obvious way in which Morrison reworks the slave narrative, then, is in the narrative strategies she employs, which add considerably to the richness and texturing of the story, especially when compared with the flat, one dimensional handling of plot in the slave narrative, and which allow feelings, perception, and psychology to be given more emphasis.

The most significant implication of this shift in focus concerns the depiction of violence. By restoring the largely unexplored area of interior experience to the story of the slave narrative, and by giving fuller attention to relationships, Morrison alters the context in which violence is viewed. On the one hand, this shift allows an acknowledgment of the psychological trauma which can be as significant as physical injury; on the other, it allows Morrison to recognize the supporting and healing powers within the black community. Taken together, these make it possible for Morrison to recount scenes of appalling brutality without pandering to white self-aggrandizement or encouraging the reader to become a voyeur. Instead, Morrison undertakes a much more complex examination of the interpersonal dynamics of violence. She directly confronts the issue of sexual violation in *Beloved*, an unspeakable subject for the slave narrative, but does so in a way which refuses to encourage the salacious attention courted by the description of rape in Alex Haley's *Roots*.²³ Instead we have the repeatedly evoked scene of the theft of Sethe's milk, a scene which allows Morrison to deal with the consequences of violation in terms of the effect it has on the ability of the mother to nurture her child. In this respect, this central scene of violation is echoed by Baby Suggs's inability

²³ Alex Haley, *Roots* (London: Picador, 1977), 396-7.

to love the child she carried in return for a broken promise not to sell one of her other children. It is echoed in Ella's bitterness, and more indirectly, by Halle's madness and Stamp Paid's pain.

Morrison's handling of violence and victimization breaks the limited, partisan, and voyeuristic perspective of the traditional slave narrative, transforming a discourse of victimization into a narrative of the capacity of individuals and communities to support and heal those subjected to brutality. It is surprising, really, that a book which describes or alludes to hanging, rape, shooting, beating, sexual assault and harassment; which has its characters bound, collared, mistreated in a variety of gruesome ways; which depicts the murder and attempted murder by bloody means of four small children by their mother; it is surprising that one does not feel that the material has been treated in a way which sensationalizes the violence.

But Morrison never focuses on the act of victimization for very long; instead, she quickly shifts her attention to the way characters deal with – and even more importantly – help one another to deal with the pain, anger, and sense of shame brought about by victimization. After Paul A has been shot, Sixo burned, and Paul D shackled and restrained with an iron collar, the following conversation takes place. Sethe has come to see Paul D and ask for news:

“You saw Sixo die? You sure?”

“I'm sure.”

“Was he woke when it happened?” Did he see it coming?”

“He was woke. Woke and laughing.”

“Sixo laughed?”

“You should have heard him, Sethe.”

Sethe's dress steams before the little fire over which she is boiling water. It is hard to move about with shackled ankles and the neck jewelry embarrasses him. In his shame he avoids her eyes, but when he doesn't he sees only black in them – no whites. She says she is going, and he thinks she will never make it to the gate, but he doesn't dissuade her. He knows he will never see her again, and right then and there his heart stopped. (228)

You can see Sethe and Paul D assessing Sixo's pain and defiance. You can see Paul D's own sense of degradation. Considering the situation in which Paul D finds himself – his concern for Sethe's feelings, his sense of Sixo's triumph, his own humiliation and his acknowledgment of his love for Sethe – the combination of all these into his reaction reveal him to be a sensitive and complex character. It is interesting that when, years later, Paul D recalls the incident, he recalls it in the context of recognizing how important Sethe is to him. As he watches Sethe, recovering in bed from

the ordeal of Beloved's exorcism, his mind goes back to the first hours of their reunion at 124, and he remembers her "wrought-iron back". Then, after noticing again her mouth "still puffy" from Ella's fist, he returns to the moments before Sethe ran away from Sweet Home:

The wet dress steaming before the fire. Her tenderness about his neck jewelry – its tree wands, like attentive baby rattlers, curving two feet into the air. How she never mentioned or looked at it, so he did not have to feel the shame of being collared like a beast. Only this women Sethe could have left him his manhood like that. (273)

What one is shown is the crudity of treatment set against the sensitivity and complexity of human interaction: we have the man who maintains his dignity despite being treated like a beast, and whose dignity and worth are affirmed by another person even while he suffers humiliation.

In *Beloved*, the warping power of the white man's domination is acknowledged; his power to cripple, to maim, to abuse, and to humiliate. The horror of white domination, as Stamp Paid, Baby Suggs, Ella, and Sethe realize, is "That anybody white could take your whole self for anything that came to mind. Not just work, kill or maim you, but dirty you. Dirty you so bad you couldn't like yourself anymore. Dirty you so bad you forgot who you were and couldn't think it up." (251) This warping power is set against the redemptive possibilities within the black community; its ability to care, to heal, and to shield its members. The preaching that Baby Suggs does in the clearing is part of that healing process, though the redemption preached by Baby Suggs is significantly different from the redemption on offer within the spiritual narratives of such writers as Jarena Lee (1836), Zilpha Elaw (1848), and Julia A. J. Foote (1863).²⁴ Unlike the religious spiritual narratives, Baby Suggs "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." (88) Hers is a more humanistic message; what she tells them is that they must learn, not only despite all that the whites have done to them, but because of all that the whites have done to them, to reclaim themselves and to love themselves and each other. Baby Suggs's healing gift in the clearing brings the community together, as she provides a

²⁴ All these narratives are included in William L. Andrews's collection, *Sisters of the Spirit: Three Black Women's Autobiographies of the Nineteenth Century* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986). See Andrews's introduction, defining the genre and linking it with the slave narrative. See also Olive Gilbert, *Narrative of Sojourner Truth*, ed. Margaret Washington (New York: Vintage, 1993). The *Narrative of Sojourner Truth* is both slave narrative and spiritual biography.

narrative of pride, love and acceptance in place of the heritage of degradation and shame imbibed from their slavemasters.

III

Morrison's revisions and reworkings of the slave narrative in *Beloved* effectively critique the restrictiveness of the generic formulation, exposing the narrowness of its conception and agenda. To escape from these restrictions, Morrison uses the gothic as the main structuring framework for her novel.²⁵ This allows her to move from a level where the characteristic elements have a great deal of specificity to a more broadly conceived and less restrictive level.²⁶ The "master formula" for the gothic – with its plot which features the threat of physical, spiritual or psychological violation; its settings of claustrophobic isolation; its twin themes of the burden of past guilt and the power of irrational forces, whether preternatural or psychological; and its configuration of characters arranged to explore unequal power dynamics and the psychology of "otherness" – is easily tailored to suit Morrison's needs. Indeed, the gothic had proved to be protean enough to support the work of both Hawthorne and Faulkner, and Morrison appears to have taken lessons from both these predecessors, learning from Faulkner the benefits of using modernist techniques to explore the interior life of her characters, and from Hawthorne the benefits of using allegory to focus different points of view and to propose and explore a historical typology.

Blending the gothic with the slave narrative is more natural than might immediately seem apparent. The supernatural intrudes into slave narratives with surprising regularity with fortune-tellers (Wells-Brown), conjurers (Bibb), ghosts (Grimes and Northup), and visions (Sojourner Truth). The extreme behavior and terrible passions which form the basic subject matter of the slave narrative bear a striking resemblance to the unspeakable deeds and lusts found in the gothic. More significantly, the gothic brings with it the theme of the burdens of the past and provides

²⁵ It was Margaret Atwood's review of *Beloved*, "Haunted by Their Nightmares," *New York Times Book Review*, 13 Sept. 1987, 1, 49–50, which first recognized that Morrison had made significant use of the gothic. See also Carol E. Schumde, "The Haunting of 124," *African American Review* 26 (1992), 409–16.

²⁶ For a fuller discussion of different levels of specificity in genre definition and the possibility of layering formulas, see Cynthia S. Hamilton, *Western and Hard-boiled Detective Fiction in America: From High Noon to Midnight* (London: Macmillan, 1987), 36–49; for an indication of the wide range of possibilities within the gothic tradition see Hamilton, "American Genre Fiction" in *Modern American Culture: An Introduction*, ed. Mick Gidley (London: Longman, 1993), 314–16.

ready access to a psychological study of “otherness”.²⁷ What a gothic framework allows, therefore, is coverage of the same general area as that of the slave narrative, but in a manner which highlights the significance of aspects of experience slighted by the slave narrative: the psychology of violation, victimization and scapegoating. It is this alternative perspective which transforms a back-handed celebration of white power and black degradation into an examination of the pathology of slaveholding.

To appreciate the way *Beloved* builds on the richest possibilities of the American gothic tradition, it is particularly instructive to compare the technique and themes of *The Scarlet Letter* with those of *Beloved*. Both novels explore the social dynamics of otherness through case studies of individual women who are outcasts. In both cases, the woman has a child who is associated with the sin which justifies her ostracism. In both cases this daughter is used to explore the consequences of the sin, and is endowed with symbolic import as her nature and significance are defined from a number of different points of view.

Just as the scaffold scene becomes a repeated motif of *The Scarlet Letter*, the scene in the woodshed becomes the central touchstone of *Beloved*. Even the physical description of Sethe “holding a bloodstained child to her chest with one hand and an infant by the heels in the other” (149) echoes the description of Hester who stands in the midday sun “with the scarlet token of infamy on her breast; with the sin-born infant in her arms.”²⁸ The shared pose is more significant than is initially apparent. It echoes with the iconography of the anti-slavery movement. As Jean Fagan Yellin points out in *Women and Sisters*, “in *The Scarlet Letter*, as in the speeches, writings, and images of the antislavery feminists, enchaining and exposure signify woman’s oppression.”²⁹ Not only was an anti-slavery medallion bearing the image of a chained, supplicant female slave and the words “Am I Not a Woman and a Sister?” borrowed as a design to head the “Ladies’ Column” in the *Liberator*, but it was also used as a decorative motif, and design for needlework.³⁰ Furthermore, as Yellin also tells us, there was a well publicized case in 1845 of a ship’s captain being arrested for aiding fugitive slaves. He was chained, displayed on a pillory and branded with the letters SS for slave stealer.³¹ Exposed and all but chained, the image of Sethe recalls this powerful heritage, and the

²⁷ See also Harris, 151–64 for a discussion of the female as other.

²⁸ Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter. An Authoritative Text, Backgrounds and Sources, Criticism*, Second Edition, eds. Sculley Bradley, et al. (New York: Norton, 1978), 50.

²⁹ Jean Fagan Yellin, *Women and Sisters: The Antislavery Feminists in American Culture* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989), 126.

³⁰ Yellin, 14–15.

³¹ Yellin, 129–30.

question, “Am I not a Woman and a Sister?” demands the traditional affirmation, an affirmation which bridges racial boundaries and recognizes sisterhood despite Sethe’s murder of her child.

The affirmation of sisterhood forces the reader to critically reassess the social values, along with their ideological underpinnings, which allow the dominant social group to sanction, to ostracize and to justify their thinking and behavior. In the case of *The Scarlet Letter*, Hester’s plea of sisterhood is placed against the demands of a harsh and rigid Puritan order. If the reader judges those who judge, it is because the spontaneity and insouciance of nature appear preferable to the Puritan’s life-denying ideology of human depravity. Sethe’s ostracism from the black community as the result of the murder of her child and her display of unacceptable pride is explained by “human nature,” by petty jealousy and social scapegoating, both of which play a part in the punishment of Hester Prynne as well. But Sethe’s otherness as a slave is treated in a way which brings in more ideologically resonant social values as well. This “otherness” expands the scope of the slave narrative by exposing the ideology which makes the physical violence and inhumanity of the slaveholder toward the slave explicable. By suggesting this wider context as a frame for understanding victimization, Morrison provides a critique of the inhumanity of slavery which is more profound than that offered by the slave narrative. Where the basic appeal of the slave narrative is sentimental, seeking to make us weep for particular instances of cruelty and asking us to multiply this inhumanity many fold, an examination of otherness within a gothic framework allows for the exposure of the racism which generates and justifies such cruelty. It is Schoolteacher in *Beloved* who provides insight into the racist worldview of the slaveholder. Like Chillingworth in *The Scarlet Letter*, Schoolteacher is a gothic villain whose coldly calculated experiments and scientific measurements violate, in Hawthorne’s terms, “the sanctity of the human heart.”³² Again, the shift from the basically sentimental frame of the slave narrative to the more complex psychological frame of the gothic is significant, for it shifts attention from the act of victimization to the perverse desires of a flawed personality. Using the gothic as a basis for a critique of slavery has a degree of psychological power, therefore, which the slave narrative as a form lacks.

The gothic also lends itself to allegorical expression. In *The Scarlet Letter*, Hawthorne uses this potential to expand and add resonance to his discussion in two ways. First, he uses it to proliferate meanings within the

³² Hawthorne, 140.

text through the inclusion of multiple interpretations. Second, he uses allegory to postulate and explore a historical typology. In Hawthorne's novel, Pearl, "the scarlet letter in another form; the scarlet letter endowed with life," attracts multiple layers of meaning, for she is the focal object of multiple, defining points of view, the focal object which allows the reader to differentiate and assess the different points of view.³³ In *Beloved*, the ghost of the dead child provides the same function. And like Pearl, *Beloved* is a constant reminder of the burdens of the past. It is fairly obvious that *Beloved* forces Sethe to come to terms with the guilt of murdering her child, but she forces Sethe to confront more than this. She forces her to remember all the horrors of her experience of slavery. And *Beloved*'s influence is not confined to Sethe. When Paul D arrives at 124, he is unable to acknowledge his past. *Beloved* forces him to open the rusted box which contains his feelings and so to free his heart. Indeed, *Beloved* comes to represent, for each character, the warping power of a past connected with racism and slavery, a past which must be confronted and exorcised. And for the reader, *Beloved* comes to personify the whole experience of American slavery.

As meanings proliferate, both novels highlight the partisan nature of exercises in interpretation. Because both writers include multiple historical time frames, this lesson is given added significance: a historically referenced typology concerned with the creation of heroes and scapegoats is established and explored. In *The Scarlet Letter* we have references to Jacobean England (the murder case of Sir Thomas Overbury), the Antinomian Crisis (1636–7), the Massachusetts General election of 1642, and the New England of the 1840s. As Michael J. Colacurcio has argued in "The Footsteps of Ann Hutchinson" and "The Woman's Own Choice: Sex, Metaphor, and the Puritan Sources of *The Scarlet Letter*," Hawthorne's construction of Hester's fictional Boston using carefully selected historical details and mistakes allows him to develop parallels which themselves yield an ironic commentary, exposing the partisan nature of historical narrative as heroes and scapegoats are created out of very similar clay.³⁴ Bellingham, Colacurcio reminds us in "'The Woman's Own Choice'", was voted out of office in the election of 1642 "for conduct not so different from Hester's own."³⁵

³³ Hawthorne, 76.

³⁴ Michael J. Colacurcio, "'The Woman's Own Choice': Sex, Metaphor, and the Puritan 'Sources' of *The Scarlet Letter*" in *New Essays on The Scarlet Letter*, ed. Michael J. Colacurcio (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 101–35 and "The Footsteps of Ann Hutchinson," *ELH* 39 (1972): 459–94.

³⁵ Colacurcio, "'The Woman's Own Choice,'" 109.

Beloved is a similarly layered examination of the historical record, with a similar agenda of exposure and re-evaluation. While some of the historical time frames are less precisely fixed than in *The Scarlet Letter*, there are references to the foreign slave trade, the underground railroad, and the dislocations of Reconstruction, and the time frame is implicitly extended into the contemporary world. Morrison does introduce one set of highly specific historical resonances, however. Sethe's enforced choice is based on Margaret Garner's unsuccessful flight from slavery in January 1856. Garner's flight ended when, threatened with imminent recapture, she killed her daughter and was overpowered before she could take the lives of her other three children and kill herself. As Ashraf Rushdy has pointed out in "Daughters Signifyin(g) History: The Example of Toni Morrison's *Beloved*," what is significant about Margaret Garner's story is that it has been told so many times by different people in a variety of contexts. Accounts of the murder and of the trial which followed appeared in the Cincinnati papers, in *The American Baptist*, in the *Liberator*, and in the *Annual Report of the American Anti-Slavery Society for 1856*.³⁶ Rushdy explains that the Garner case attracted lasting attention which eventually endowed it with symbolic import. Garner became a heroine praised by Frederick Douglass; the anecdote became a synecdoche for the unspeakable horrors of slavery and the consequent imperative of resistance. What Morrison does is to reverse the process of symbolic reductiveness, confronting the horror of the deed, re-endowing the murderess with personal responsibility, and restoring complexity to the issues involved. In the process, we get a parallel as fully endowed with irony as any in *The Scarlet Letter*.

It is in its use of allegory that *Beloved* makes significant use of the ghost story. Far from offering a trivializing solution to the problem of slavery, *Beloved* offers a profound, many-faceted exploration of the possibility of exorcism as it explores the politics of narrative construction. On this level it is important that the meaning of the ghost of Beloved becomes complexly linked to perception, point of view, and history as layers of meanings are built up associatively, as happens in *The Scarlet Letter*. On this level, the statement that Beloved is not a story to pass on is as teasing and summary as the epigrammatic epitaph which ends *The Scarlet Letter*.

Numerous articles have tried to explain the dynamics and resonances of Toni Morrison's *Beloved* in terms of the novel's relationship to various

³⁶ See also Toni Morrison, "Rediscovering Black History," *New York Times Magazine*, 11 Aug. 1974, 14, 16, 18, 20, 22, 24 and Amanda Smith's interview with Toni Morrison, "Toni Morrison," *Publishers Weekly*, 21 Aug. 1987, 50-51.

traditions and literary genres. Its debt to the fantastic, the ghost story, the gothic, and the slave narrative have all been the subject of scholarly attention, as has Morrison's use of modernist techniques. Left unanswered by such approaches is the question of how these different forms and techniques work together within the novel, and what allows such seemingly diverse borrowings to work in harmony. It is my contention that the primary generic template for *Beloved* is the gothic, which Morrison uses to overcome the limitations of the slave narrative, the genre which provides the generic focus of interest in the novel. Morrison has imported the techniques of multiple points of view and stream of consciousness narration, often associated with modernism, but nicely compatible with the gothic concern with perception, psychology, and psycho-pathology, into a gothic framework to overcome the limitations of the traditional slave narrative, and to expose its highly partisan agenda. The result is a full examination of the storytelling process, in personal terms, historical terms, and generic terms, which reconstructs the story of slavery, reclaiming excluded areas and testimonies, and exorcising the ghostly presence of confining narrative voices.