

**Beloved Toni Morrison Given Name:** Chloe Anthony Wofford **Also known as:**  
Chloe Anthony Morrison **Born:** February 18, 1931; Lorain, Ohio

### Quick Reference

**First published:** 1987

**Type of work:**

Novel

**Type of plot:** Psychological  
realism

**Time of plot:** Nineteenth  
century

**Locale:** Cincinnati, Ohio

### Principal characters

Sethe, a former slave

Beloved, her first daughter

Denver, her second daughter

Halle Suggs, her deceased husband

Baby Suggs, her mother-in-law

Paul D Garner, her lover

Howard and Buglar, her sons

### The Story:

In 1848, at the age of thirteen, Sethe is sold to Mr. Garner and his wife Lillian, who run a plantation in northern Kentucky called Sweet Home. Intended to replace Baby Suggs, whose freedom was purchased by her son Halle by renting out his labor on Sundays, Sethe marries Halle, one of five male

slaves (the “Sweet Home men”) owned by the Garners, in 1849. Each of the other Sweet Home men — Paul A Garner, Paul D Garner, Paul F Garner, and Sixo — wants Sethe for himself, but each accepts her choice and respects her position as Halle’s wife.

Mr. Garner dies in 1853, and his financially strapped, cancer-ridden widow sells Paul F and then brings her cruel brother-in-law, “schoolteacher,” and his equally cruel nephews to Sweet Home as overseers. Fearful that schoolteacher might sell them all, the remaining Sweet Home slaves begin planning an escape in 1855. Before the plan can be effected, the pregnant Sethe is attacked by schoolteacher’s two nephews. One holds her down while the other sucks the milk from her breasts. Schoolteacher watches and takes notes. Unknown to Sethe, her helpless husband sees the entire “mammary rape” from the hayloft, and the event destroys his sanity. Determined to escape, Sethe sends her three children (Howard, age five; Buglar, age four; and Beloved, age nine months) to join the emancipated Baby Suggs in Cincinnati, planning to follow the next day. The four Sweet Home men fail to escape. Sixo is captured and burned alive, Paul A is hanged, Paul D is sold, and the broken Halle, who dies soon after, loses the will to escape. Only Sethe stumbles into the woods toward freedom.

Sethe nearly dies of exposure, but she is found by a runaway white girl, Amy Denver, who doctors her torn feet and helps her to the Ohio River, where they find an abandoned, leaking boat. Before they can cross, Sethe’s water breaks and with Amy as midwife she gives birth prematurely to her second daughter, Denver, in the nearly swamped boat. Amy, also on the run, abandons Sethe and Denver. Stamp Paid, a black riverman, finds mother and daughter and ferries them across the Ohio to the Bodwins, Quaker conductors on the Underground Railroad. The Bodwins deliver Sethe and Denver to Baby Suggs’s house on Bluestone Road outside Cincinnati, where Sethe is reunited with Howard, Buglar, and Beloved.

Sethe enjoys twenty-eight glorious days of freedom before the slave catchers track her down. When the slave catchers approach, Sethe tries to kill her children rather than allow them to be returned to slavery. Three miraculously survive, but Beloved dies. Sethe is arrested and sentenced to hang, but the Bodwins obtain a pardon for her and she is allowed to return to Bluestone Road. The ghost of the murdered Beloved also returns and haunts the house for eighteen years, during which it keeps away all visitors, drives away Howard and Buglar in 1865, and breaks the spirit of Baby Suggs, who takes to her bed and dies just months before the Civil War ends. Paul D, after escaping from a Georgia chain gang and wandering through much of the eastern United States, finds Sethe on Bluestone Road in 1873. He drives out the ghost and moves in with Sethe.

Just as Paul D, Sethe, and Denver begin to bond into a family, a young black woman, calling herself Beloved, appears from nowhere, seeking sanctuary. Sethe takes her in, and Beloved begins disrupting the new family by insinuating herself into the affections of Sethe and Denver and seducing Paul D. In 1874, Stamp Paid tells Paul D about Sethe’s murder of her child nineteen years before, and Paul D leaves Sethe. Shunned by all as they had been since the murder in 1855, Sethe and Denver form a family with Beloved.

The following year Sethe comes to believe that Beloved is her own murdered child and gradually becomes obsessed with her, neglecting Denver as she tries desperately to make up for the murder. The diabolical Beloved soon consumes Sethe entirely. Sethe loses her job, and the starving Denver goes begging for work. Through Denver the community learns of Beloved's presence and determines to help

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the Bodwins, who had rescued Sethe in 1855, rescue Denver from Sethe and Beloved. The women of the community begin praying outside the house just as the elderly Mr. Bodwin arrives for Denver. The deranged Sethe, mistaking Mr. Bodwin for a slave catcher, tries to stab him with an ice pick. Denver and the other women stop her, and Beloved disappears. Broken in spirit by losing Beloved again, the twice-bereaved Sethe takes to her bed as the broken Baby Suggs had done in 1865. At the end of the novel Paul D, who has loved Sethe since she first arrived at Sweet Home twenty-five years before, returns to her. He refuses to let Sethe die and begins trying to heal her wounded heart.

**Critical Evaluation:** In 1993, Toni Morrison became the first African American to receive the Nobel Prize in Literature. A great American novelist, Morrison has garnered numerous awards for her fiction, including a National Book Award nomination in 1975 for her second novel, *Sula*, the National Book Critics Circle Award in 1977 for her fourth novel, *Song of Solomon*, and the Pulitzer Prize in 1988 for *Beloved*. Morrison is responsible for helping bring African American literature and culture into the consciousness of the mainstream reader, not only through her fiction but also through an influential, best-selling volume of literary theory.

A modernist writer who has been compared to William Faulkner and James Joyce, Morrison crafts novels that are complex and absorbing. They are also difficult to categorize. Multiple narrators in *Beloved* give the novel a veneer of realism. They reveal Sethe's story in fragments, a technique that closely emulates reality in the way in which people ordinarily learn about each other. However, the novel includes two ghosts as main characters, the infant Beloved and the adult Beloved. Some readers consider it a bildungsroman, or coming-of-age novel, because at its close Sethe, with the help of Paul D, finally begins to discover a sense of self-worth. Still others consider it a historical novel because it is based on a historical incident, detailed in Middleton Harris's *The Black Book*, which Morrison edited in 1974, and because it examines the horrors of slavery and racism in excruciatingly frank detail.

Attempts to interpret Morrison strictly within the Western literary tradition, however, fail because Morrison is intent on building an African American canon of literature, perhaps influenced by the Western tradition but always in rebellion against it. Differentiation between physical ownership and psychological possession is a key theme; the characters in *Beloved*, particularly Sethe, must learn to judge themselves and each other according to their own values rather than those imposed on them by the dominant white culture. Few succeed. After Baby Suggs's feast, the community punishes her for being pretentious or "uppity," just as a white slave owner might have done, by refusing to warn her about the approaching slave-catchers. Stamp Paid, perhaps, is one who has been owned by the slavers but never possessed, who has performed their forced labor but has never internalized their forced values. However, even

Stamp Paid gives in to the values of white society when he reveals Sethe's crime to Paul D.

Those white values, in a sense, are represented by the poltergeist, the tantrum-throwing ghost of the murdered baby, Beloved, because neither white society nor its courts can understand Sethe's crime, which springs from her deep conviction that her children are better off dead than enslaved. Her guilt haunts the house on Bluestone Road and demands that Sethe and her family appease it. Buglar leaves home when the ghost has achieved such power that he can no longer look into a mirror without shattering it. Metaphorically, the African American past, dominated by subjection, has forced the African American to internalize the white judgment of black inferiority. Howard departs when the baby's handprints appear in a cake; the past taints even the spirit of celebration represented by the cake. Baby Suggs, who consecrates her emancipation by preaching self-love and pride to the other freed slaves, takes to her bed the day after Beloved's death, dying some time later in the belief that all her preaching has been a lie, that black people deserve neither love nor pride. Sethe must remain, appeasing the guilt, vivified as a ghost, that haunts her life.

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When Paul D arrives in 1873, Sethe begins to experience love and hope for the first time since Beloved's death in 1855. Paul D drives away the ghost, but she returns several days later as a young woman of nineteen or twenty — the age Beloved would have been — and disrupts the bonding process that has nearly made a family of Sethe, Paul D, and Denver. Upon seeing her, Sethe runs to the outhouse but does not make it; she finds herself urinating on the ground in a scene reminiscent of her water breaking at Beloved's birth. This symbolic rebirth of Beloved destroys Sethe's chance at happiness. This new Beloved — threatening, demanding, controlling, destroying — eventually possesses Sethe, enslaving her again. Once again, she must be emancipated.

Perhaps the most striking example of Morrison's genius in this novel is her treatment of the adult ghost. The reader naturally is suspicious of this new Beloved, who may be Sethe's slain infant somehow brought to life, but the characters treat her as real. The reader experiences vicariously what Sethe experiences. Fear, guilt, shame, and self-loathing live in Sethe's mind and heart, and Beloved lives for the reader. The reader can never be sure, even after Beloved vanishes, if she is flesh or spirit and so shares Sethe's self-doubt. Paul D's return reminds Sethe and the reader of that most Morrisonian of themes, self-affirmation as the key to life.

Essay by: Craig A. Milliman

### **Further Reading**

Bloom, Harold, ed. *Toni Morrison: Modern Critical Views*. New York: Chelsea House, 1990. Includes general essays on Morrison, plus Marilyn Sanders Mobley's essay identifying the source of Sethe's story and arguing that Beloved, rather than partaking of Western literary tradition, employs the "trope of memory to revise the genre of the slave narrative."

Evans, Mari, ed. "Toni Morrison." In *Black Women Writers, 1950-1980: A Critical Evaluation*. Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1983. Two critics, Dorothy Lee and Darwin Turner, plus Toni Morrison herself discuss and evaluate Morrison's novels. In "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation," Morrison discusses the traditional role of the African American ancestor and the folk tradition of orality in her fiction. In "The Quest of Self: Triumph and Failure in the Works of Toni Morrison," Lee reveals Morrison's consistency of vision about the human condition. In "Theme, Characterization, and Style in the Works of Toni Morrison," Turner comments on Morrison's style, images, and lyricism.

Ferguson, Rebecca Hope. *Rewriting Black Identities: Transition and Exchange in the Novels of Toni Morrison*. Brussels, Belgium: Peter Lang, 2007. Examines Morrison's first eight novels, including *Beloved*, focusing on her depiction of the complex layers of African American identity. Analyzes these novels from the perspectives of feminism, poststructuralism, and race-related theory.

Gates, Henry Louis, Jr., and K. A. Appiah, eds. *Toni Morrison: Critical Perspectives Past and Present*. New York: Amistad Press, 1993. In a notable essay in this useful collection, Trudier Harris discusses physical ownership versus psychological possession. Most of the former slaves in the novel, Harris argues, were both owned and possessed, accepting the dominant white culture's evaluation of them rather than developing their own sense of self-worth.

Harding, Wendy, and Jacky Martin. *A World of Difference: An Inter-Cultural Study of Toni Morrison's Novels*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1994. Argues that Morrison's fiction should be analyzed at the "cultural interface," the territory where the dominant culture and the dominated collide and a new culture arises.

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Harris, Trudier. *Fiction and Folklore: The Novels of Toni Morrison*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1991. Maintains that African American folklore is the basis for most African American literature and that Morrison transforms historical folk materials in her novels, creating what Harris terms "literary folklore," allowing no dichotomy between form and substance. The study examines *The Bluest Eye*, *Sula*, *Song of Solomon*, *Tar Baby*, and *Beloved* based on this theory.

Heinert, Jennifer Lee Jordan. "Re-Membering Race: Realism and Truth in *Beloved*." In *Narrative Conventions and Race in the Novels of Toni Morrison*. New York: Routledge, 2009. Explores the relationship between race and genre in selected novels, demonstrating how Morrison broke with traditional narrative forms in order to subvert and rewrite the American literary canon.

Peterson, Nancy J. *Beloved: Character Studies*. New York: Continuum, 2008. Aimed at students, this book offers a concise analysis of the novel's characters, themes, issues, historical context, and depiction of the mother-daughter relationship, black manhood, and whiteness.

Samuels, Wilfred D., and Clenora Hudson-Weems. *Toni Morrison*. Boston: Twayne, 1990. Argues that *Beloved* is a historical novel that reshapes the slave narrative for a modern audience, omitting the conventional antislavery polemics, now unnecessary, and delving more deeply into the horrors of slavery than nineteenth century slave narrators dared.

Simpson, Ritashona. *Black Looks and Black Acts: The Language of Toni Morrison in "The Bluest Eye" and "Beloved."* New York: Peter Lang, 2007. Analyzes how Morrison uses language to create the effect of "black English."

Spaulding, A. Timothy. *Re-Forming the Past: History, the Fantastic, and the Postmodern Slave Narrative*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2005. Analyzes *Beloved* and other modern adaptations of the slave narrative that use elements of fantasy to redefine the historic and literary depiction of American slavery.

Tally, Justine, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Toni Morrison*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007. Collection of essays examining all aspects of Morrison's career. In addition to analyses of individual novels, including "Beloved or the Shifting Shapes of Memory" by Claudine Raynaud, other essays provide more general discussions of the language and narrative technique in her novels, the critical reception for her work, and her works of social and literary criticism.

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**Works Cited** Milliman, Craig A. "Beloved." *Masterplots, Fourth Edition*, Nov. 2010, pp. 1–3. *EBSCOhost*, [search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lfh&AN=103331MP411799820000031&site=lr](http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lfh&AN=103331MP411799820000031&site=lr) c-live. <!--Additional Information: Persistent link to this record (Permalink): <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=lfh&AN=103331MP411799820000031&site=lr> c-live  
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