

The Supernatural and Self in Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved*

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The past and heritage are two common topics in many of Toni Morrison's novels. In her novels *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved*, there are supernatural elements throughout the stories that are connected to both the characters' personal pasts and their culture. Many of Morrison's novels promote the importance of heritage and remembering the past, and in these novels the past is conveyed through supernatural means. The supernatural appears in a number of forms in both novels, but all of them have an irrevocable effect on the characters. Through ghosts and magic, the characters are forced to face pasts that have been forgotten. The connection to the past that the supernatural represents causes the characters to grow as individuals. In *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved*, the supernatural elements force the characters to discover and come to terms with themselves and their role within the African American community.

The lives of many of these characters in the novels are intertwined with the supernatural elements from early in their lives. In *Song of Solomon*, Milkman is linked to the supernatural from birth. He lived because of Pilate and her voodoo or healing. Pilate gives Ruth a "nasty greenish-gray powder...to be stirred into rain water and to be put in food" (131). Pilate later places a poppet on Macon's chair to prevent Macon from harming Milkman. Both of these actions have a supernatural element about them and work to bring Milkman into existence. Pilate and, to a lesser extent, Macon are haunted by the ghost of their father. Pilate lives the rest of her life acting on what she believes to be her father's instructions: "[Pilate] would abide by this commandment from her father herself, and make him do it too. 'You can't just fly on off and leave a body'" (332). Pilate lives her life by following her father's words, though she does not

understand them. Her life and the lives of those around her are changed because of the fragmented comments made by the ghost of Macon Dead I. This “commandment” also helps Milkman to accept his heritage. In *Beloved*, Denver’s life is tainted by the presence of the ghost in 124. The ghost not only caused Denver to lose her brothers, but also caused her world to get smaller. After Nelson asked her about her mother’s actions in school, Denver stopped leaving the house and became fixated on the ghost: “Now it held for her all the anger, love and fear she didn’t know what to do with” (121). The ghost becomes a huge part of Denver’s life because it caused her to lose many things. Denver even resents Paul D for chasing out the ghost off. “Now her mother was upstairs with the man who had gotten rid of the only other company she had” (23). Denver has lost all of her family except for Sethe and the ghost, so she clings to the people or beings that she still has. This loneliness causes her to cling to Beloved later in the novel too. From the beginning, these characters are shaped by their relationship to the supernatural. It is a vital part of their existence, as is the history that the supernatural resurrects.

In the novels, some of the characters seem to have magic or extraordinary powers in addition to the supernatural elements that surround them. Pilate seems to be practiced in some sort of magic. When Ruth asks her for help she produces a powder that causes Macon to lust for Ruth once more, so that she can conceive Milkman. To keep Macon from harming Milkman, Pilate scares Macon with “a male doll with a small painted chicken bone stuck between its legs and a round red circle painted on its belly” and Macon had to burn it nine times to get rid of it (132). This poppet is reminiscent of elements of voodoo or obeah, both are crafts that are linked to African heritage. “Pilate is a true conjurer or conjure woman. Morrison gives Pilate a magical start in the world by describing her as being born without a navel” (Beaulieu 89). Pilate’s “conjuring” is a key part of Milkman’s life, since it brought him into the world, but it is also

through Pilate that he learns about himself and his capacity to love. Circe is the other “witch” that Milkman meets who teaches him of his past. When Milkman first sees Circe he is reminded of dreams he had as a child, “dreams every child had, of the witch that chased him down dark alleys, between lawn trees, and finally into rooms from which he could not escape” (239).

Despite the dark introduction of Circe, she provides Milkman with a wealth of knowledge about his family. Like Pilate, Circe plays an important part in the Dead family, because she delivered both Macon and Pilate and kept them alive by hiding them from their father’s murderers.

According to the *Encyclopedia Britannica* in Greek mythology, Circe was a witch that had the ability to turn men into wolves, lions, and swine. In *Song of Solomon*, Circe does the opposite and helps Milkman to become a man. While both can be seen as witches, they are both healers and help the communities they live in. These so-called witches have a huge impact on Milkman’s identity and his entire existence. They have helped to grant him life, knowledge, and a spiritual connection to his heritage.

Two of the characters who are deeply affected by the supernatural seem to have some sort of extraordinary abilities themselves. Milkman and Paul D both exhibit unnatural abilities throughout the two novels. From the beginning of *BeLoved*, Paul D is described as having the ability to evoke emotions in the people around him and while it does not help him, he is able to use it to help Sethe heal after Beloved has left. At the end of the novel, this gift becomes, “the blessedness that has made him the kind of man who can walk into a house and make the women cry” (320). Paul D’s gift becomes important to the healing and growth of those around him.

Around him it is safe for Sethe to face her past and she can move past it. In *Song of Solomon*, Milkman shows signs of also having some ability. When Hagar tries to kill Milkman at Guitar’s apartment, there is something unnatural in the way that she freezes and is unable to move until

after he is gone. There is a suggestion, that Milkman used his will to force her to stop, and in his words he “won” (130). This ability allows him to continue living, but it is not until after he has learned of his past that he can fully accept this and then he is able to “fly.” Both characters have abilities that become essential to their survival and identity.

Ghosts are another common element of both novels that weigh on the characters. *Beloved* first appears as an unseen force present in 124, then appearing in a fleshly form that allows her to get closer to Sethe. Ghost stories are present in cultures around the world: “ghost stories told within the African tradition often insist that the natural and the supernatural intertwine” (Beaulieu). This tradition applies to *Beloved*, because the family learns to live with the presence of the ghost in 124 and it becomes a large part of their lives. The same applies to the ghost of Macon I in *Song of Solomon*, Pilate lives her life with the presence of her dead father influencing some of her actions, but not harming her in any way. The amalgamation of Western and African ghost story traditions work to show the importance in knowing of one’s heritage, as the ghost work to aid in the character’s construction of the past. David Lawrence points out that “in portraying the capacity of the past to haunt individual and community life in the present, *Beloved* brings into daylight the “ghosts” that are harbored by memory and that hold their “hosts” in thrall, tyrannically dictating thought, emotion, and action” (Lawrence). The past haunts the characters, both in their minds and in a physical form, which causes the characters to face their pasts and construct their own identities free from the haunting past. Morrison herself has said “I am very happy to hear that my books haunt. That is what I work very hard for, and for me it is an achievement when they haunt readers” (qtd. in Anderson). Morrison uses ghosts to make characters to realize and accept their pasts.

Many of the supernatural elements have ties to African heritage and the collective past that many of the characters have little connection to. According to *The Toni Morrison Encyclopedia*, “these mythic elements root the novels in the African tradition and provide a spiritual and cultural bridge between the history of her characters' ancestors and the lives of the characters at the times the novels are set in the United States” (Beaulieu). In *Song of Solomon*, one of the most prevalent myths is that of the flying African. There are various myths that speak of flying Africans, many of them telling of slaves flying to freedom. According to David Carrasco, “Morrison has partially hidden in her narrative thread of magical flight one of the key meanings of shamanic transport and elevation, namely, the vital importance of finding a spiritual ally who enables the seeker to transcend the terror of one’s historical condition” (148). Not only does this legend act as a reminder of slavery, it also suggest the importance of the mystical in moving past the horrors of slavery. Milkman discovers his own family’s connection to this myth on his quest, which strengthens the affect it has on him. In the novel, Susan Byrd, a relative of Milkman’s grandmother, describes the flying African myth as “some old folk’s lie they tell... Some of those Africans they brought over here as slaves could fly. A lot of them flew back to Africa” (323). This knowledge in conjunction to the fact that the story Susan Byrd tells Milkman is about his own family grants insight into his past and self that he never knew before.

The supernatural elements are tied to African heritage and a collective past, as well as the characters’ personal pasts. The most notable example of this is *Beloved*’s connection to the slavery. *Beloved* becomes an embodiment of the trauma and history of slavery through her experience in the limbo state she describes, “I cannot lose her again my dead man was in the way like the noisy clouds when he dies on my face I can see hers she is going to smile at me” (250). *Beloved* bridges both life and death. Melanie Anderson describes *Beloved* as “an intense spectral

appearance of traumatic history in a physical form, a "becoming-body," and through her very "spectrality" she merges and undoes rigid barriers between life and death and past and present" (Anderson). She remembers the death and horror of the Middle Passage and helps others remember, as she helps characters remember their personal past as well. Characters like Sethe and Paul D have to face the horrors of their slave past to come to terms with themselves and *Beloved* helps to facilitate that. History plays an integral part in the construction of identity. Morrison includes this history because she believes that it is crucial for people to know. Morrison argues that her novels are important and necessary to African Americans because "we don't live in places where we can hear those stories anymore, parents don't sit around and tell their children those classical, mythological, archetypal stories that we heard years ago. But new information has got to get out, and there are several ways to do it" (qtd. in *Awkward* 68). Morrison teaches history and these stories through her novels. The knowledge of the past is vital to these characters, but many of them are ignorant or in denial of it, so it is important for them to learn of the past and the legacy of slavery. *Beloved's* connection to the Middle Passage is just one connection to past that influences identity in the novels. The painful memories that Morrison evokes with her use of the supernatural are important elements of the character's lives. The characters have to face these memories to grow.

Through his interaction with the supernatural on his quest, Milkman is able to construct his identity by getting in touch with his history and heritage. Ultimately, Milkman embraces his heritage and grows beyond his selfish, ignorant existence. His quest was originally for gold, but ultimately he finds connection and history that leads him to build his sense of self. As Linda Krumholz states, "On his quest, Milkman learns the "discredited knowledge" of African American history and spirituality, and for the first time he sees some connection between

obtaining knowledge, interpreting signs in the world, and constructing his sense of self' (Krumholz 203). In response to this knowledge, Milkman shows respect to his family and heritage by helping Pilate return the bones of her father to their rightful burial ground. Learning the history and culture of his heritage plays a large part of his identity. The story ends with his realization and acceptance of his heritage: "For now he knew what Shalimar knew: If you surrender to the air, you could *ride* it" (337). His journey leads him to learn and grow and stop merely floating through life. His discovery of his relationship to the Solomon of the song causes a drastic change in Milkman: "He was grinning. His eyes were shining. He was an eager and as happy as he had ever been in his life" (304). Without the knowledge that he gained through his interaction with myth and the supernatural, Milkman would not have been able to grow and become aware.

Though the supernatural elements of *Beloved* tend to be more violent and malicious than those seen in *Song of Solomon*, they still ultimately have a positive effect on the characters. While Milkman's quest brings him in touch with his heritage and more supernatural elements, it does not force revelations on him like the presence of Beloved. The revelations of identity and self that happen due to Beloved's presence are forced and painful to the characters. Beloved is a painful reminder of the past, and forces memory or "rememory" on the characters. After having sex with Beloved for the first time, Paul D is forced face his past: "She moved closer with a footfall he didn't hear and he didn't hear the whisper that the flakes of rust made either as they fell away from the seams of his tobacco tin" (137-138). Paul kept the memories of trauma in the "tobacco tin" of his heart, which he thought was rusted shut, so he would not have to face the memories again, but Beloved forces the tin open and brings the past to the present. Sethe is also forced to face her past and her actions, including the murder of her child and the abuse that

happened at Sweet Home. Beloved is a reminder that Sethe is a murderer, but her presence also forces her to remember the horrors of schoolteacher that caused her to murder her child. At the end of the novel, both Sethe and Paul D are in the process of coming to terms with their pasts and learning to move on together. Paul D tells Sethe, "Me and you, we got more yesterday than anybody. We need some kind of tomorrow" (322). They are ready to move beyond the memories that Beloved brought back and that have haunted them. Denver is also changed by Beloved's presence. At the beginning of the novel, Denver was not a member of the community and resented that lack of connection, but Beloved's presence forces her to seek out the connection that she has been missing. Initially, Denver welcomed Beloved's presence, because even before Beloved has a corporal form, the ghost was her only friend, so she welcomed the opportunity to spend time with Beloved. But as Beloved began to ruin their lives, Denver learns to act for herself. According to Ella, Denver "appeared to have some sense after all. At least she had stepped out the door, asked for the help she needed and wanted work" (302). Though Beloved causes harm to the family she also forces Sethe and Paul D to face their pasts and for Denver to discover her past, resulting in all three of them being able to heal and thus rejoining the community and moving on with their lives.

Both the positive and the negative aspects of the supernatural cause the characters to change for the better. Morrison uses the supernatural as an embodiment of the past that characters must face in order to grow. By learning of and connecting to their pasts through these supernatural means, the characters are able to understand who they are and the importance of their pasts. An understanding of their heritage is vital to these characters' identity and their ability to function in their communities. The supernatural allows the characters to become spiritually connected their heritage, which allows them to become a member of their

communities and move past their painful memories. In these two novels, many of these characters need supernatural intervention to resurrect the past in order for them to grow.

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