CYCLICAL TIME AND THE PLEASURE PRINCIPLE IN TONI MORRISON’S

*SONG OF SOLOMON AND BELOVED*

by

SHERIETTA FARRON MURRELL

(Under the Direction of R. Baxter Miller)

ABSTRACT

Beyond the most literal meaning of pleasure, the novelist represents pleasure as both the opportunity for and the eventual attainment of racial freedom. Such a reach encapsulates the near-miracle in personal and communal rebirth of the individuals who quest for it. Hence the stages of pleasure are 1) those initially of loss, 2) then of recognizing the loss, subsequently of 3) seeking a recovered happiness and eventually 4) accepting the peace of self-transformation. In her metaphors, the processes mean the same as attaining gold and flight, the metaphors of self-completion. Morrison’s new inclinations for the African American community in *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved* provide a psychological depth to her literary form.

INDEX WORDS: Beloved, Bluestone Road, Cyclical Time, Death, Flight, Freedom, Ghost, Pleasure Principle, Re-birth, Sigmund Freud, Slavery, Song of Solomon, Toni Morrison
CYCLICAL TIME AND THE PLEASURE PRINCIPLE IN TONI MORRISON’S

SONG OF SOLOMON AND BELOVED

by

SHERIETTA FARRON MURRELL

B.A., Johnson C. Smith University, 2003

A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the University of Georgia in Partial Fulfillment of
the Requirements for the Degree

MASTER OF THE ARTS

ATHENS, GEORGIA

2006
© 2006

Sherietta Farron Murrell

All Rights Reserved
CYCLICAL TIME AND THE PLEASURE PRINCIPLE IN TONI MORRISON’S

SONG OF SOLOMON AND BELOVED

by

SHERIETTA FARRON MURRELL

Major Professor: R. Baxter Miller
Committee: Barbara McCaskill
Carolyn Jones Medine

Electronic Version Approved:

Maureen Grasso
Dean of the Graduate School
The University of Georgia
May 2006
DEDICATION

I would like to first give thanks to God for making the completion of this manuscript possible. Secondly, I would like to thank my parents, James and Henrietta Murrell for being patient these past three years as I completed my degree. A huge appreciation goes to Dr. R. Baxter Miller for his words of encouragement and endless advice. I would not have developed into the professional woman I am today without his support. I extend gratitude to Dr. Barbara McCaskill and Dr. Carolyn Jones Medine for agreeing to be members on my committee. I cannot come to a close without thanking my sister Candace Murrell, my brother Thomas Pattman, and my niece Baby Heiress for taking time out of their busy schedules to come and visit me on various occasions.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to acknowledge the following people: Nathaniel and O’Cynthia Simmons and Family, Geraldine Smalls and Family, Edna Mae Edwards and Family, Louquina Dillard, Monique Phillips, Reshaun Finklea, Kyla Fields, Amber Washington-Anderson, and my entire extended Athens family. I thank each of you for your prayers and endless words of encouragement.
TABLE OF CONTENTS

Page

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.............................................................................................................v

CHAPTER

1 INTRODUCTION ...............................................................................................................1

2 SONG OF SOLOMON....................................................................................................9

3 BELOVED...................................................................................................................20

4 CONCLUSION..............................................................................................................31

WORKS CITED ..................................................................................................................33

WORKS CONSULTED .......................................................................................................35
CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Cyclical time can represent an imaginary site of cultural memory and unfulfilled pleasure. However, most of Toni Morrison’s works are a way of bridging the gap between the rural realities of the African American community and a more formal American literary tradition. African American literature does not follow the standard views and concepts of the dominant culture in American literature because African American literature focuses on the past, present, and future as well as on slavery and redemption. Texts such as Morrison’s provide a naked insight into the familial space of her community. *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved* propose a new avenue in the literary canon. Working within the historical contexts such as the Great Depression of the nineteen thirties and the Civil Rights movement of the late sixties and early seventies, and sub-narratives of slavery during the earlier 1860s, she uses experimental narrative devices to work out various functions of the pleasure principle in her novels. When I refer to the pleasure principle, the phrase means more than sex in this instance. I am considering anything that provides human satisfaction or creates a highly emotional state of release—from material objects to feelings of euphoria. Beyond the most literal meaning of the concept, the novelist represents pleasure as the opportunity for and the eventual attainment of racial freedom. Such a reach encapsulates the near-miracle in personal and communal rebirth of the individuals who quest for it. Hence the stages of pleasure are 1) those initially of loss, 2) then of recognizing the loss, subsequently of 3) seeking a recovered happiness and eventually 4) accepting the peace of self-transformation. In her metaphors, the processes mean the same thing as attaining gold and flight, those metaphors of self-
completion. Morrison’s new inclinations for the African American community in *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved* provide a psychological depth to her literary form.

According to Freud, there are two fundamental doctrines, the “pleasure principle” and the “reality principle.” *Psychoanalysis: A Critical Introduction* defines psychoanalysis in terms of “originally a comprehensive dynamic theory proposed by Freud to account for human personality, motivation, dreams and mistakes, based on the assumption that motives are determined by the libido and that their expression by unconscious forces” (Craib 1). The pleasure principle, such as sexual activity, causes individuals to desire experiences of euphoria. But Freud asserts that individuals cannot receive sexual pleasure routinely or continuously since sexual gratification would interfere with everyday work. According to Freud, such desires must be channeled elsewhere. Hence, the pleasure principle overlaps with the reality one, both infusing the *ego* that must reconcile them.

Mary Klages, author of “Psychoanalysis and Sigmund Freud,” states, “subordinating the pleasure principle to the reality principle is done through a psychological process Freud calls sublimation, where you take desires that can’t be fulfilled, or shouldn’t be fulfilled, and turn their energy into something useful and productive” (Klages). Often Freud’s principles of pleasure and reality infuse Morrison’s novels. In addition to *Beloved* (1987), and *Song of Solomon* (1977), *The Bluest Eye* (1970), one of Morrison’s earlier works, illustrates the lack of fulfillment through her portrayal of the Breedlove family. The central subject matter of the novel is Pecola Breedlove, an insecure black girl, who seeks having the bluest eyes of anyone in the world. She realizes that her lack of beauty may result in her being an outcast in the community forever. Technically, she may never experience a sexual relationship with a man because of her lack of beauty. She desires to have blue eyes so that she will be considered unique among blacks.
Morrison presents icons such as Shirley Temple and the Mary Jane candies to represent the beauty this little black girl strives for. The novelist is commenting about iconic white figures, including the impact on black children and their identity crisis. She uses the Dick and Jane primer to introduce the novel. Each layer gets more compact and intense as the punctuation and situation on the page change.

The novelist chronicles the life of Pecola Breedlove through the eyes of the young adult Claudia MacTeer, a childhood acquaintance. Claudia begins this narrative after seeing Pecola in a state of depression. Claudia also serves as the foil to Pecola. Claudia, who explains the happenings of the Breedlove household, particularly speaks of Cholly Breedlove, Pecola’s father. She explains that Cholly was abusive to everyone in the family. He and his wife have a love – hate relationship that involves a cycle of abuse and sex. The most abrasive example of his abuse is the rape of his daughter, Pecola. As a result of the rape she becomes pregnant. After maturing, Claudia reflects on the life of Pecola and remarks that Cholly is the only person that found her attractive enough to touch her. She also brings to light his traumatic childhood, explaining his current state of mind. This explanation justifies somewhat Cholly’s quest for pleasure.

Morrison also intertwines the lives of other characters in this story. She tells the story of Soaphead Church, the neighborhood pedophile who thinks he is God’s gift to man. He is the only person who is able to convince Pecola that she has blue eyes. Meanwhile, she tells the story of Geraldine, a single mother, who loves her cat more than her son. Finally, she incorporates the stories of three prostitutes who all have friendly relationships with Pecola. By the conclusion of the story, Claudia thinks that all of the community has failed Pecola.
The novel portrays the Breedloves as one of the town’s outcast families; each member seeks pleasure in some form or fashion. Morrison uses the father, Cholly Breedlove, to exemplify most the duality of happiness and reality. He rapes his daughter on a Saturday afternoon after he has come home inebriated.

She was washing dishes. Her small back hunched over the sink. Cholly saw her dimly and could not tell what he saw or what he felt. Then he became aware that he was uncomfortable; next he felt the discomfort dissolve into pleasure. The sequence of his emotions was revulsion, guilt, pity, then love. His revulsion was a reaction to her young, helpless, hopeless presence. Her back hunched that way; her head to one side as though crouching from a permanent and unrelieved blow. Why did she have to look so whipped?

She was a child-unburdened-why wasn’t she happy? (Morrison 161)

Cholly does not sublimate his needs. His excessive drinking is a way for him to channel his sexual desires, but he lusts for the actual gratification of them: “He became aware that he was uncomfortable; next he felt the discomfort dissolve into pleasure” (Morrison 161). In his perverted perception, perhaps the rape provides Pecola with the love and pleasure that she lacks within her family and community, therefore rationalizing away the obscene crime. His is a queer form of sublimation.

Unlike The Bluest Eye, in which ultimate fulfillment is sexual gratification, Song of Solomon and Beloved both expand the implications of the premise. In Song of Solomon, the development of the idea appears when Milkman hears the Reverend’s story about his family’s history, Pilate’s nobility, Milkman’s and Hagar’s relationship, Milkman’s discovery of the family’s history, and his and Pilate’s cycle of Death and Re-birth. By the cycle I mean that history repeats itself. Beloved provides an in-depth look at African
American and female rewriting of the Freudian concept initially in Sethe’s journey from slavery to freedom, then Beloved’s emergence into American history and ultimately Beloved’s state of death to be challenged eventually by Sethe’s rebirth. My exploration of each of these situations in *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved* will show how Morrison’s structure of the novels depicts the interrelationship between pleasure and cyclical time, the constant turns from enjoyment to sorrow, and then back again. The relationship between pleasure and cyclical time is important because most of the time, the two are incompatible. Freud concurs by emphasizing that, “everyone knows that in order to enjoy the benefits of living in civilized groups we must all sacrifice, to some degree, the satisfaction of personal interests and passions.” Both Milkman and Sethe make several personal sacrifices (i.e. Milkman’s spiritual rebellion against his materialistic father, Milkman’s willingness to let his friendship with Guitar diminish, Sethe’s quitting her job to spend more time with her daughter Beloved, Sethe’s lack of male companionship) in order to enjoy long-term pleasure of a fulfilling life. Their modern concept of happiness, in other words, presumes a linear sense of time.

But the African American moment is not a monolith. As Joseph Adjaye writes in *Time in the Black Experience,*

*Monolithic constructions of time cannot be depicted for all of Africa in view of the enormous range of diversity that exists in thought and belief systems, political structures, economic systems, and language forms that undoubtedly influence and shape the development of temporal perceptions and demarcations, even though some degree of congruence may be found among some systems.* (Adjaye 8)
Just as Adjaye dispels the allegory of African American time’s being monolithic, Morrison represents in *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved* that time is cyclical. Both novels represent cyclical time rather than linear time simply because in many ways the goal of freedom existed partly in an ancient past. Since history repeats itself, time is continuous.

We must keep in mind that space is not a cycle; rather it’s a dimension. “Time for the Kongo is a cyclical “thing.” It has no beginning and no end” (Fu-Kiau par. 13). Abstractly speaking, time is vast. According to Fu-Kiau, time “exists on its own and flows by itself, on its own accord” (Fu-Kiau par. 13). At the concrete level, however, there are certain events that make temporality perceptible along with certain periods and events.

So many Africans, captured and taken from their homeland and forced to work as slaves, sought ways to return home. It was said that some slaves walked back to the continent across the waters. Folklore fantasizes that slaves flew back to Africa. According to one myth, a young African slave, a witch doctor, said, “Now! Now! Everyone!” With the utterance of the strange word, all of the Africans dropped their hoes, stretched out their arms, and flew away” (Lester 152).

In *Song of Solomon* space and time intersect in the moment that Milkman hears his family history. As he watches the community children play, the narrator reveals,

> He closed his eyes and concentrated while the children prove inexhaustible in their willingness to repeat a rhythmic, rhyming action game, performed the round over and over again. And Milkman memorized all of what they sang.

*Jake the only son of Solomon*

*Come booba yalle, come booba tambee*

*Whirled about and touched the sun*
Come konka yalle, come konka tambee....

Solomon done fly, Solomon done gone

Solomon cut across the sky, Solomon gone home (Morrison 303)

Solomon renounces his status as a slave and metaphorically takes flight. The children’s dancing makes time collapse. Though the children are in the same place physically, while dancing in a circle and singing, they summon the sacred conjure that enables them to relive an ancient narrative. The children, who are descendants of Solomon, find a liberating gratification in the legendary tale. They are preserving legendary custom. The pleasure of the song may indeed be immediate, but the delight of African American liberation recurs.

At the beginning of the novel Beloved, the central character, Sethe, makes the conscious decision to relinquish her past to evolve into the future. In order for her to advance, however, she must first retreat even further into the past. Her goal is to find personal fulfillment, which she is seeking through sex with Paul D. Ironically, she can only live a future life without past burdens by her engagement with and liberation from psychic history. Baby Suggs, her mother-in-law, had held meetings in which she encouraged men and women to discard a “slave mentality” to embrace their new found freedom.

When warm weather came, Baby Suggs, holy, followed by every black man, woman and child who could make it through, took her great heart to the Clearing—a wide-open place cut deep in the woods nobody knew for what at the end of a path known only to deer and whoever cleared the land in the first place. In the heat of every Saturday afternoon, she sat in the clearing while the people waited among the trees. (Morrison 87)
In a sense, all would seem to benefit from her sacred enjoyment of the moment. Given the family happiness for the moment, the family cycle has turned from slavery to freedom. Though the sacred gratification of the sermon takes place in the clearing, the satisfaction exists even more in the memory of African American time. Although their home is their immediate space, it is not the center of cyclical time for them. The center is or rather would be the place of origin wherein the space and time of African American freedom intersect. In *Song of Solomon* the place is Africa, but in *Beloved* it is the homestead, 124 Bluestone Road. By now, space is no longer the primary concern to the characters, but time is.

My argument covers initially the search for a rediscovered self, then the spiritual transcendence over sexuality and materiality as a process of deeper fulfillment, and, eventually, a spiritual release of characters as facilitated by death. Therefore, I shall demonstrate a literary process in which her narrative seekers discover a self that encapsulates but transcends death. Within the broader pattern, American history marks a turning cycle through slavery to a re-turn to a greater freedom. For all social classes such a quest would not be exactly the same, and it could even become corrupted. It would all have so much to do with a hierarchy of needs. On the turn of the cycle, a working-class desire for food and clothing would precede a middle-class goal of being integrated or even assimilated into the white collar world. At the final turn of the cycle would emerge either a character’s spiritual rejection of white patriarchal power of corporations or the delightful embracing of it. In a sense, Morrison’s novels really become a question about what ultimate desire should be.
CHAPTER 2

SONG OF SOLOMON

Pleasure is often associated with several things. Pleasure can be linked with race, class, gender; the list goes on. In *Song of Solomon*, I will associate pleasure with the Dead family history. I will show that the search for delight spans the entire novel, which expresses the concept within a pattern of cyclical time.

Morrison’s *Song of Solomon* discusses the issue of heritage. The protagonist, Milkman, finds himself on a quest for self-actualization. Once the novel opens with the suicide of a man who thinks he has the ability to fly, it is apparent that Morrison employs the “flying motif” to place events within a context of cyclical history. The ancient Africans, according to folk mythology, flew figuratively. Milkman made the powerful metaphor his own during his efforts to transcend American middle-class materialism. Bird imagery and folk source enriches the suggestiveness of the text.

Morrison interweaves Milkman’s desire to fly and the materialistic impediments of his family tradition. The reader learns that his father Macon and his aunt Pilate are foils. Varying beliefs of greed and selfishness separate the siblings, depicting them in a stark relief of conflicting values. Furthermore, Milkman learns that he does not differ much from the father he criticizes. Finally, his failed and somewhat perverse relationship with Hagar, his first cousin, reveals his selfishness as well as male arrogance.

The shift in the novel occurs when he begins a journey to find the gold of his great-grandfather. While he initially journeys for his self-fulfillment, he soon encounters persons who had helped constitute the supportive community of his ancestors. Soon he begins to develop a connection with the ancients, particularly his grandfather Jake and his
great-grandfather Solomon. Then he learns a song, as inspired by the grandfather, the figurative meaning of which inscribes his family magic to transcend materialistic history. Morrison leaves the ending open for the reader to determine whether the transcendence is physical or mental—more likely, spiritual—but we do know that his quest promises to achieve a final solution.

The novel opens as follows: “At 3:00 p.m. on Wednesday the 18th of February, 1931, I will take off from Mercy and fly away on my own wings. Please forgive me. I loved you all. (signed) Robert Smith,” an insurance agent for North Carolina Mutual (Morrison 3). The note remains for the community after Mr. Smith has decided to commit suicide by jumping from his employment building. Metaphorically, he flies back to Africa. Morrison attempts to depict suicide as a new beginning, Mr. Smith’s being happy to pass on to a higher plane of existence. According to the novelist, “his flight is a symbol of “self-interest and abandon” (Morrison 225). Later Porter, a fellow of the militant group known as the Seven Days, becomes intoxicated, going into the attic to demand sex from those below. Though he contemplates suicide, he has one precondition. "I want to fuck! Send me up somebody to fuck! Hear me?" (Morrison 25). Not finding solace in his alcohol, he hopes to receive satisfaction by demanding sex. But often such sex would be a means rather than an end for happiness. He would have to be open and receptive to a consequent peace of mind. Even if the sexual act were to happen, he would still have felt unfulfilled and have returned to drinking. The cycle of his discontent would have repeated itself.

Our first encounter with the Dead family's search for self-completion appears through the eyes of Ruth Dead and her son Milkman. She breast feeds him until he is approximately four or five years old. Given a lack of intimacy within the marriage, she
tries to hold on to her son forever. Therefore, she chooses to prolong breast feeding so she can continue to feel like a woman.

For Milkman the incestuous subplot does not provide him with any real solace. Instead, he grows up with the desire to know true pleasure, which leads him in turn to commit incestuous acts with his cousin Hagar, hence repeating the cycle into the current generation. Just as with his mother, his queer form of satisfaction provides an immediate gratification, but it does not fill the void for a deeper communion of spirits. Milkman's life may be occupying space in Michigan, but it does not represent progress in either personal or African American time. He has failed, in other words, to learn the spiritual lessons of the African American past, and this is the reason that Pilate can guide (pilot) him to a deeper understanding of things. Later in the novel, by researching the family's history, he advances from a level of abstractness to one of concreteness. The figurative gold, he discovers, means only what he must learn to value within his family and within himself.

Each member of the Dead family finds gratification in a different value system. For Pilate, it is the love of nature and of the liberating family history. Macon Dead places much emphasis on the money that never completely fulfills him. In keeping with the spiritual values of aunt Pilate while rejecting his materialistic father, Milkman advances from a materialistic values to spiritual concerns.

Meanwhile, his contemporary narrative points back to the sub-narrative of the earlier generation. It is Macon who has so figuratively made the family dead. As young children, he and Pilate discovered several bags of gold. Immediately he thought of the secure future that he and Pilate would have, but Pilate thought of how immoral it was to steal the gold. “...Macon piled the sacks of gold into the tarpaulin. Let's go, Pilate. Let's get out of here. We can't take that. ...That's stealing” (Morrison 171).
Even as a child Pilate exemplifies a moral delight that transcends historical time. Beyond her views on morality, she is content with what she has and with what nature provides. The novel provides several examples of her connection with natural time. According to Gay Wilentz, “her house resembles one in a traditional African village compound; she has forgone gas and electricity by using candles and kerosene, and she cooks over a three-stone fireplace” (Wilentz 66). Pilate lives “pretty much as though progress was a word that meant walking a little further down the road” (Morrison 27).

Pilate and her home express communal relief within the context of ancestral time. Just as in an African village, “Pilate offers both food and hospitality to all who enter” (Wilentz 66). “Even Macon, who deserted his sister, sees the house as place of music, warmth, and caring” (Wilentz 66). Her contentment with nature allows her to be a source of strength for the Dead family. “Pilate has been called a “primal mother goddess.” Revealingly, she is also one who attempts to rebuild her extended family as well as pass on the knowledge of her heritage to her nephew/son so that he can recover their roots” (Wilentz 66).

Milkman, “acquires the knowledge and motivation for his self-creation and self-definition as a black man. In the process, the reader also learns both the pleasure in and the need for a creative and critical engagement of the imagination, based in black history...” (Krumholz 552). In the beginning, Milkman experiences feelings of disengagement and disassociation. His mother breastfeeds him past the normal age requirement, which causes him to feel as if he is in the middle of a war between mother and father. Meanwhile, his sisters are significantly older than he, so he lacks a sibling connection. During his early thirties, he has no interest in forging links to his heritage; he seeks gold and all of the wealth, pride, and individual satisfaction that gold signifies. On his quest, he 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 a sense of himself” (Krumholz 553). Milkman connects pleasure with his family’s origins, but he does not realize that fulfillment and pleasure are part of cyclical time. In other words, he must continuously rediscover happiness.

Among Macon, Pilate, and Milkman, all three have their own value systems. Macon’s desire for monetary wealth causes him to forget about his family’s rich history and turn his back on his community. Over time the Dead family’s history has not been passed down to newer generations. To a degree, the decision has minimized the self-esteem of nearly every family member. But Pilate is the sacred exception who has the agency of restoring the family past. Her sense of time is cyclical, restoring the past to the present. She passes on her story, in other words, to Milkman.

Her connection with natural time is a bridge that links her with her immediate family as well as her family’s history. Her communication with the Dead family’s ancestors and descendants shows that she is not only considered noble among the living, but among the dead as well. She is the link that keeps the family cycle going, connecting death with life, letting the family history continue. Her life exemplifies true completeness.

Throughout the novel, Morrison helps readers identify subliminally with Pilate’s various acts of nobility. When it comes to Milkman, however, her dignity is no longer concealed. It is especially evident when he and Guitar are arrested for breaking into Pilate’s home. “Moreover, after Milkman and Guitar steal the bones they believe to be gold, Pilate goes to the police station and weaves a ‘sambo’ story to save them, incorporating knowledge to which she should not have been privileged.” Later, Macon remarks to Milkman: “Who knows what Pilate knows” (Morrison 206). “To get her bag of bones back, Pilate takes on the changeable characteristics of Legba, the African deity worshipped throughout the Caribbean and parts of the American South. Almost the height of Macon, she shrinks herself in front of the police, turning her strong powerful African presence into a stereotypic imitation of Aunt Jemima”(Wilentz 67).
Morrison offers this depiction of Pilate as noble so that readers can see her nobility, along with her displays of African heritage and values, which interrelates with the Dead family’s history. In the police station, Pilate forfeits her stance as the powerful goddess to take on a more subversive role for the sake of her family’s prosperous continuance. If she denies relations or the connection, she knows that the family’s history cannot continue. The cyclic search for the understanding of the Dead family’s history would end abruptly. Morrison makes sure that readers recognize that she claims kin to Milkman and Guitar, not Macon. “In fact, when asked if she knew them, she pointedly said, ‘Not this man, here,’ looking at her brother, ‘but I do believe I’ve noticed this fella around the neighborhood.’ Here she motioned toward Guitar...” (Morrison 207). Her actions are a precursor to what is to come. She knows that by her suffering this humility, the family’s history will continue, be re-birthed through a newer generation. Her lack of acknowledgement of Macon already projects those concerns beyond the past generation.

Meanwhile, the bond between Milkman and Hagar cannot break with the historical cycle of African American sexual abuse and exploitation. There are three key elements that suggest that the relationship will not last. Ironically, all three of them intersect each other. Firstly, the relationship does not last because it is an incestuous one; secondly, Hagar confuses love with the need to stalk her lover. Finally, the connection depends on momentary gratification instead of long-term happiness.

Perhaps Morrison is exploring the biological fact of the way that inbreeding increases the likelihood of genetic flaws. If so, how much cultural or racial restriction allows for the necessary diversity without diluting a powerful African tradition? It is, of course, one of the fundamental questions of diversity and racism. According to Gay Wilentz, “the sexual relationship between Milkman and his cousin Hagar is doomed at the start since it breaks this African cultural practice. Our perceptions of this relationship which destroys Hagar and Pilate's dream of an extended family are shaped by this taboo in
many African cultures; it is that reality which determines the breakdown.” “Pilate foreshadows the disastrous end to their relationship by referring to Milkman as Hagar’s brother rather than cousin” (Wilentz 67). Milkman’s lack of deeper emotions for Hagar is the reason it is essential that he learn the family’s history, so that he can distinguish the difference between happiness and sexuality.

Milkman’s initial intentions are not to rediscover his family's delight, but to find instead the gold his father and Pilate had discovered as children. He desires, in other words, to repeat the traditional materialism of the American long-ago rather than explore the deeper spirituality of the African past. What “begins as a selfish quest for gold, for material success and escape,” however, “becomes a quest for knowledge of his family history and an identity based on that history” (Lee 110). On his journey, Milkman encounters Reverend Cooper, who knows about the Dead family: “Milkman felt a glow listening to a story come from this man that he'd heard many times before but only half listened to. Or maybe it was being there in the place where it happened that made it seem so real” (Morrison 231). The narrator emphasizes that the information that Reverend Cooper provides is not new. Indeed, Milkman has heard it so many times before. But, coming from the Reverend, it has a new impact on him. Now it is told of those who admired and still admire his family’s history. Instead of seeing his father as a driven capitalist, the locals offer a very different image: “These men remembered both Macon Deads as extraordinary men” (Morrison 234). The Dead family’s history is a rich testimony to the entire community of Danville, Pennsylvania. Milkman learns that his grandfather is a martyr for the community. “They talked on and on, using Milkman as the ignition that gunned their memories. The good times, the hard times, things that changed, things that stayed the same—and head and shoulders above all of it was the tall, magnificent Macon Dead, whose death, it seemed to him, was the beginning of their own dying even though they were young boys at the time” (Morrison 235). I like to think of Milkman as a
reincarnation of his grandfather. For years Milkman hears his family’s history, but until he actually encounters locals, the story never pleases him. Once he has learned that his grandfather’s life has become such an inspiration for others, he wants to situate himself within the familial cycle. Hence, his grandfather’s death becomes a rebirth for him.

Even Shalimar, Virginia, provides another substitute gratification—literal gold rather than the figurative freedom—desired. Since Hagar is no longer around to provide Milkman with sexual gratification, he sublimates his desire by hunting for the gold. By the time that he and his fellows kill a bobcat, he feels at home. “Milkman is at first overwhelmed by the respect and acceptance the people of Danville show him. Right away, past, present, and future become interwoven as his connection with friends of his ancestors awakens him to the importance of his present living relatives” (Tidey 63). The actual “discovery” takes place while he is hunting in the woods. His “hunger” signifies his need for self-fulfillment.

When he and the men return the next morning, he delights in the communal story of the event. His discovery allows him to feel closer to the people of Shalimar. The feelings he experience when they re-convened are new to him because he never expressed them back on Doctor Street, the signatory home of Dr. Foster, his maternal grandfather. The gathering provides Milkman with a sense of pleasure. Not only does he feel closer to the people of the community, but they feel closer to him as well. His presence pleases them. To reciprocate their feelings, they tell Milkman how he can satisfy his sexual appetites. “Milkman continues to enact the lessons he has learned on the road. That he has grown in his relationship to women is clear in his interactions with Sweet, the young woman who takes him in, feeds him, bathes him, and later makes love to him. Her care is matched in him by a new sense of reciprocity” (Branch 80). Milkman experiences pleasure mentally and physically. He is able to communicate with Sweet in ways that he is never
able to do with Hagar because he has discovered who he is and where he comes from. Since he feels complete, he can share his happiness with others.

    Such discoveries are the beginnings of his pride about his background. Certainly, he delights in his rediscovery of himself within the cycle of the Dead family’s history. But he is an agent as much as an object of this history. By understanding it, he liberates himself from the less desirable parts of it. He can choose, in other words, to advance in an imaginatively new direction beyond the cycle or, indeed, to redirect the cycle itself. Eventually he exemplifies how proud he is to be part of a family that is so historically rich. He delights in telling his story to others as much as in having them hear it.

    He hardly expects that his new discoveries will foster communal displeasure. Upon his arrival he is disappointed with the casual reception of him. According to Theodore Mason, Jr., Milkman, “notes a significant difference in his response to the telling of a familiar story”(Mason 578). Macon Dead loves to hear how the people remember him and his father, but he is disinterested in the tales of flying. For the moment, his focus is still too materialistic. His ancestors have already paved the way so that a much richer reward derives from the richness of the family’s chronicles.

    Danville has set the Southern quest into stark relief. Macon never discovers sibling pleasures in his relationship with Pilate. Nothing more than a competing concept of values—material and spiritual—separates them. In many ways the differences are both gendered and racial. Since Macon refuses to accept that he already possesses those ancestral sources needed to survive, Milkman tells his story to Pilate instead. The nephew knows that she will appreciate the narrated history. Eventually aunt and nephew return to their ancestral grounds, but the father Macon remains entrenched in white male ways.

    Material and spiritual pleasures are therefore not the same thing. Milkman’s great-great-grandfather is referred to as one of the flying African children. Milkman asks a relative why they call him so. “Oh, that’s just some old folks’ lie they tell around here.
Some of those Africans they brought over here as slaves could fly. A lot of them flew back to Africa”(Morrison 322). Solomon was unhappy with his status as a slave. In Africa he had a better life and was a member of a tribe. Being a slave took away his freedom. Perhaps, in having more than twenty children, he was only sublimating of the deeper gratification of his own lost liberty. His literal death becomes a spiritual release.

Milkman relives a similar flight. To return to the hunting scene, his metaphorical death becomes suspended. In the woods, he contemplates his true intentions for coming to Shalimar. He wonders if he is here for the gold or to rediscover ancestral wisdom. According to Catherine Lee, he sits in the woods, and “experiences a metaphorical death that releases him from an alienating self-centeredness, and provides for the concomitant acceptance of his responsibility for sharing both the joys and the sorrows of his family and friends”(118). His figurative death allows him to experience a sense of flight from his old self to his new one. He sheds all of his selfish characteristics to experience a re-birth. His “liberating discovery” of family and past “parallels Solomon's return to Africa, to origins and to freedom”(Lee 119). Both occurrences signify death as spiritual release. Solomon's flight back to Africa inspires him with a sense of liberation and miracle.

By the end of the novel, Milkman completes the cycle of release that Robert Smith, the insurance agent, had initiated. With Pilate, he completes a pattern from flight through death to rebirth. According Wilentz, his desire to fly derives from his having witnessed Robert Smith’s flight. In addition, I think that Milkman’s desire comes from his seeking ultimate pleasure, the pursuit of death. Just like his grandfather, Milkman desires to experience the ultimate joy of freedom. Wilentz states that Pilate, “bequeaths to Milkman, not only his birthright but a legacy which allows him, too, to fly: She had told him stories, sang him songs, fed him bananas and cornbread, and on the first cold day of the year, hot nut soup”(Wilentz 72). They retrace the historical past so as to bury their grandfather’s bones. Through the burial of the dead, she initiates a new turn on the family cycle.
Obviously, Milkman’s friend, the jaded Guitar, cannot understand the spiritual return. So much of his mission with the Seven Days has been a mission of retribution. Once the bones are buried, Guitar shows up, angry at his friend who he thinks has found the gold and kept it for himself. Therefore Guitar pulls out a gun and shoots Milkman. Guitar’s subsequent killing of Pilate only releases her to become the metaphoric blackbird soaring into the sky and one whose spirit will inspire the next incarnation of the family cycle. Pilate was born without a bellybutton, a trace of an umbilical cord connecting the individual to the earth mother. She is figuratively the life-line that continually turns or flies. As Milkman holds the dying Pilate in his arms, he knows why he loved her so: “Without ever leaving the ground, she could fly” (Morrison 336). Though she is the foundation of the family's history, it takes Milkman’s journey to complete the cycle. Unlike her grandfather, who took flight and left to others the ritual of rediscovering history for themselves, she dies—flies away—having revealed the family truth.
Chapter 3

BELOVED

Toni Morrison’s Beloved, often categorized as a ghost story, draws inspiration from the Margaret Garner source in which the protagonist, a slave, kills her child so that the youngster will not also live as a slave. The novel concerns itself with a moral dilemma about infanticide (and by extension suicide) if conditions are insufferably dehumanizing. Morrison combines fiction with the actual slave experience from a woman’s perspective.

The central character of the novel is Sethe, a former slave, who grieves over her benevolent murder of a baby girl. When an unknown child who would be the age of the lost baby appears, Sethe assumes the figure is the reincarnation of the lost child. Asked about her name, the girl replies “Beloved,” the inscription on the dead child’s tombstone. Sethe, her daughter Denver, and Beloved forge a relationship, creating the central focus on the novel.

The narrator, who begins with a discussion of the present state of Sethe’s home, describes the place as having a ghostly presence. Later she returns the reader to the earlier plantation to explain Sethe’s link to the master and the teacher who have caused her inferiority complex. Morrison’s sporadic moves in time underscore the discomfort of the slave experience.

To Morrison, personal success emerges from retracing the paths, or indeed the metaphorical flights, of the ancestors. History becomes a ghost to be faced and transcended or even banished. Hence, she emphasizes and reveals the principle of re-memory, of retracing history to its origins. Seemingly, Sethe suffers from a re-memory that actually can become quite liberating, but, first, she must face the repressed history within the African American self and therefore within American civilization. Despite the power of its
historical sources, the work shifts from the importance of history to the persistence of memory. The narrative pendulum projects the objects, events, symbols, and rituals of the past into the future, therefore creating sites of communal memory.

To Sethe, freedom means contentment. As we mentioned before, “Sweet Home” marks a transition in which characters advance from being the objects of pleasure to the agents of it. Sethe recalls to Paul D how Schoolteacher and his pupils receive pleasure from her body: “After I left you [Paul D], those boys came in there and took my milk. That’s what they in there for. Held me down and took it” (Morrison 16).

Once this form of degradation has scarred Sethe, she no longer finds the thought of freedom pleasurable. She only desires to find her newborn child to feed:

Schoolteacher made one open up on my back, and when it closed it made a tree. It grows there still.

“They used cowhide on you?”

“And they took my milk.”

“They beat you and you was pregnant?”

“And they took my milk!” (Morrison 17)

Morrison reiterates that Schoolteacher and his pupils took something from Sethe that was extremely precious (Morrison 17). He experiments on her as if she were a cow. What he proposes as the link between humans and animals may be real, but the actual will to live derives from a higher purpose. Sethe no longer cares about the risks of escaping. She chooses her personal freedom over his unethical science. Indeed, she supplants his emphasis on experimentation with her own privileging of spirit.

Another subplot exists within conflated and cyclical time, as the narrative flashes into past time again. Once Sethe escapes, the atonement of being reunited with her children seems almost unattainable. Even when she meets a white girl named Amy who assists her with the birth of Denver, she immediately tells the acquaintance that she is
“running” (Morrison 32). Despite Sethe’s status as a runaway slave, Amy still helps. Subsequently, Denver is born to Sethe.

Sethe’s journey ends in Ohio at the street address of 124 Bluestone Road, wherein she is reunited with her children. According to Nancy Jesser,

when Sethe crosses over to freedom after her escape from Sweet Home, the possibilities of love are transformed. The connections between mother and child had been under threat, torn and broken by the flux of ownership. When she sees her children at 124 Bluestone, ‘looked like I loved em more…Or maybe I couldn’t love em proper in Kentucky because they wasn’t mine to love.’ We know that Sethe loved her children in Kentucky, but this outpouring is the sign of freedom’ (Jesser 329).

The reunion between Sethe and her children is a joyous occasion; however we soon learn that this reunion provides temporary fulfillment just as did Denver’s birth (Morrison 93-94). Sethe’s overwhelming affection for her children shows that she is embracing her freedom. Morrison even writes that the children question the mother about their father. So as not to alarm them, she answers their questions lovingly. But she knows that he is possibly dead. Until the arrival of Paul D, she no longer seeks sexual gratification:

It was some time before she let Baby Suggs shoo the boys away so Sethe could put on the gray cotton dress her mother-in-law had started stitching together the night before. Finally she lay back and cradled the crawling already? girl in her arms. She enclosed her left nipple with two fingers of her right hand and the child opened her mouth. They hit home together.

(Morrison 94)

Once “the crawling already baby” receives milk from Sethe, a bond is formed. Her journey becomes complete because she has achieved her goal in more ways than one. First, she completes a journey which during several instances seems impossible. Secondly, once
reunited with her family, she loves them freely, as was impossible at “Sweet Home.”

Finally, she feeds her crawling little girl. Bluestone Road has become a home in which she embraces the joys of freedom and her milk.

In Beloved Morrison leads readers to believe that the spirit of Sethe’s murdered baby haunts the address. Because the mother chooses infanticide over slavery, the “crawling-already” child’s spirit remains restless, creating chaos throughout the home:

“God damn it! Hush up!” Paul D was shouting, falling, reaching for anchor.

“Leave the place alone! Get the hell out!” A table rushed toward him and he grabbed its leg. Somehow he managed to stand at an angle and, holding the table by two legs, he bashed it about, wrecking everything, screaming back at the screaming house. “You want to fight, come on! God damn it! She got enough without you. She got enough!” The quaking slowed to an occasional lurch, but Paul D did not stop whipping the table around until everything was rock quiet. (Morrison 18)

After the altercation, the spirit vanishes momentarily. Until Paul D challenges the ghost, it has dominated the protagonist and the house. The spirit has caused people not to visit for fear of being harmed. When Paul D challenges the ghost, he enables Sethe to find pleasure in the future.

Judith Thurman writes that the young stranger “calls herself by the name of the dead baby--Beloved--so there isn’t much suspense, either about her identity or about her reasons for coming back”(Thurman 178). Morrison offers a biblical depiction of Beloved as a thief. As John 10:10 states, “The thief cometh not, but for to steal, and to kill, and to destroy.” Beloved’s mission is to steal her joy, destroy her hopes for a peaceful future, and eventually kill her. Elizabeth B. House writes:

When Beloved first comes to live with the family Sethe tells Denver, “that she believed Beloved had been locked up by some white man for his own
purposes, and never let out the door. That she must have escaped to a bridge or someplace and rinsed the rest out of her mind. Something like that had happened to Ella…” (p.119). In addition, Beloved’s own words suggest that she has been confined and used sexually. The girl explains to Denver that she “knew one white man” (p. 119), and she tells Sethe that a white man “was in the house I was in. He hurt me” (p. 215). (House 20)

By forcing her mother to become locked in historical time, she prevents the cycle from turning forward to the future. Beloved has cynical views about self-fulfillment because she has become ruthless. First as a child, she was stripped from her mother so she could escape the horrors of slavery. Then she was reunited with the same mother who had helped her escape to freedom—a consummate pleasure. Denied the euphoria of self-delight, she was abused by men. Beloved provides sexual pleasure for these men at night, but in the daylight they ignore her. Rather than continuing to seek such male appreciation, she perverts sexuality into vengeance.

In fact, Sethe compares Beloved to her friend Ella who has also been abused. Except for cyclic age and time, the friend and dead daughter are the same type. Moreover, Beloved’s tale about abuse from a white man recalls what she herself once suffered from schoolteacher and his pupils at Sweet Home. Mother and daughter encounter similar experiences in the search for ultimate fulfillment. Though their stories vary over time, the underlying structure of them remains remarkably the same. The atrocities of slavery and sexual abuse hinder both women from advancing into personal freedom. Indeed, it is the inclusive story of the female community.

Beloved decides to implement her tactics of vengeance when Sethe was beginning to love again and had finally decided to forgive herself for the murder of her “crawling-already baby.” In stream-of-consciousness the protagonist decides, “It was time to lay it all down. Before Paul D came and sat on her porch steps, words whispered in the keeping
room had kept her going. Helped her endure the chastising ghost; refurbished the baby faces of Howard and Buglar and kept them whole in the world because in her dreams she saw only their parts in trees; and kept her husband shadowy but there-somewhere” (Morrison 86). Sethe decides to channel her guilt about the infanticide into a new beginning with him. “She knew Paul D was adding something to her life-something she wanted to count on but was scared to” (Morrison 95). As she begins to have sex with him, and finds their intimate interlude to be quite fulfilling, she even finds an ambivalent satisfaction with the bizarre presence of Beloved who provides company for Denver.

Nevertheless, the ghost, who has her own agenda, decides to strip Sethe of her newfound pleasure by sleeping with Paul D and forcing him out of the house. Daniels asserts that “the seduction by Beloved in the cold-house culminates her effort to rid the household of Paul D and to assure the needy child’s dominance in Sethe’s life. From another perspective, its goal is to restore the past’s control over any possible future” (Daniels 352-353). Beloved hopes to assert her agency once again over Sethe’s life. Her sexual escapade with Paul D provides a queer pleasure. First, she hopes to hurt Sethe just as Sethe hurt her as a child. Secondly, she intends to experience sexual euphoria. But she really hungers to experience the deeper love that makes him so much the subject of Sethe’s affection.

Fortunately, Sethe never discovers the sexual betrayal, but the mutual satisfaction of the sexual coupling ends abruptly. Once again she is alone. Even Paul D cannot fathom his actions, but knows that Beloved has some hold on him (Morrison 114). The departure of Paul D from 124 Bluestone Road allows Beloved to dominate the house once again. Jesser says, “Sethe and Paul D cannot secure the future for each other because neither has yet integrated their whole pasts into their presents” (Jesser 338).
When it comes to stealing Sethe’s joy, Beloved’s ploys are gradually subliminal. When she decides to destroy Sethe’s hopes of having a fulfilling future, she becomes narcissistic. By then Paul D no longer resides at the literally cold house at 124. He announces that he is considering marrying Sethe. Stamp Paid, a family friend, decides to show him the newspaper article reporting the infanticide of Sethe’s child. At first Paul D refuses to believe the story but offers, nevertheless, a justification for her actions. Asked about the article later, she eventually confesses the truth of it. Once he departs from the home, her exorcizing of the ghosts of the past seems to leave with him. So does her increasing happiness. When she shifts her attention from herself to Beloved, she ultimately initiates her own death.

Once Paul D has left, the isolated home becomes a perfect stage for murder. Before the ghost attempts to kill Sethe, the three family members—Beloved, Sethe, and Denver—all enjoy each other’s company for a brief second, a “moment so pleasurable that the most basic connections to life, like eating, are set aside” (Jesser 339).

In an attempt to remove the “ugly” from the past and to redeem her love, Sethe surrounds Beloved with sweetness. The three women ice-skate, drink cocoa, and dress up in bright colors and ribbons. Somewhat contrary to Baby Suggs’s dictum, they do everything in excess. Indeed, the lavishness bestowed upon Beloved leads to privation for Sethe and Denver. Beloved becomes an all-digesting Evil, swallowing “everything, absorbing them into her ever larger body” (Jesser 339). Each of the three living women promotes the interests of her counterparts. Each redirects her desire for sexual gratification into social activities. In fact, their encounters with each other reenact the communal rituals that Baby Suggs, Sethe’s mother-in-law, had performed when Sethe herself came to live at Bluestone Road.
Baby Suggs had decided to host a picnic that was worthy of the fruit that Stamp Paid brought her. She invited people from the community to join her and the family for food and fellowship. But the possible delight of such an event deteriorated into jealousy. Just as in the case of the relationship with Beloved and Sethe, the communal feast turned into consumption without sacred spirit. The people in the community began to despise Baby because she had power to heal that they believed only God should have:

Now to take two buckets of blackberries and make ten, maybe twelve, pies; to have turkey enough for the whole town pretty near, new peas in September, fresh cream but no cow, ice and sugar, batter bread, bread pudding, raised bread, shortbread—it made them mad. Loaves and fishes were His powers—they did not belong to an ex-slave who had probably never carried one hundred pounds to the scale or picked okra with a baby on her back. Who had never been lashed by a ten-year-old whiteboy as God knows they had. (Morrison 137)

Baby Suggs is promoting the interests of people within the community. Her efforts are misunderstood. She tries to share her pleasurable freedoms with others, but many thought she was trying to prove herself superior to them. Her home becomes an ostracized place.

Beloved seeks to destroy Sethe’s path to self-fulfillment by collapsing the triad—the spiritual return—of mother and daughters. By excluding Denver from shared experiences, she provides herself the isolated opportunities to consume Sethe’s health. As I have suggested, Beloved becomes an all-consuming appetite, a negative energy. Only the narrator seems aware of the disintegration:

Then the mood changed and the arguments began. Slowly at first. A complaint from Beloved, an apology from Sethe. A reduction of pleasure at some special effort the older woman made. Wasn’t it too cold to stay outside? Beloved gave a look that said, So what? Was it past bedtime, the
light no good for sewing? Beloved didn’t move; said, “Do it,” and Sethe complied. She took the best of everything—first. (Morrison 241)

Until now Beloved’s temporary promotion of communal satisfaction had distracted the family women from her wicked purpose to spin the cycle of good back to evil. Denver, who had mistaken her as a friend, had determined to watch over her. Sethe had felt redeemed, she thought, to have the murdered daughter forgive her. Then the prose streams into a nearly incomprehensible vernacular: “Beloved, she my daughter. She mine. See. She come back to me of her own free will and I don’t have to explain a thing. I didn’t have time to explain before because it had to be done quick. Quick. She had to be safe and I put her where she would be. But my love was tough and she back now. I knew she would be” (Morrison 200).

Beloved’s gratification with death displaces everyone else’s quest for life. Though each of the others wants to spin the cycle forward to happiness, she insists on restoring it to historical despair. Baby Suggs, Sethe’s mother-in-law, has tried to share the wealth of freedom with others. But Beloved has become both the anti-Christ and anti-Suggs, the same type. Sethe’s need for redemption deteriorates from possible euphoria to certain dysphoria. According to Emma Parker, “Beloved’s desire for sugar is matched only by her craving for the sweetness of mother love. Her hunger for food and affection soon merge as she develops a cannibalistic appetite and begins to devour Sethe metaphorically. Beloved cannot take her eyes off her mother. ‘Sethe was licked, tasted, eaten by Beloved’s eyes’ (57). Beloved draws her sustenance from Sethe and grows ‘plumper by the day’ (239), while her mother becomes physically and emotionally emaciated: ‘Beloved ate up her life, took it, swelled up with it, grew taller on it. And the older woman yielded it up without a murmur’ (250) (Parker 5). Hence, Beloved represents the latent death that consumes the living host. She is the national guilty—slavery—that consumes the living conscience. She reverses the life’s cycle toward a kind of historic death.
Denver’s place on the turning wheel is less certain. Though somewhat chaotic, 124 Bluestone has been a haven for her. She knows about her mother’s past. Though she is wary of Sethe at the beginning, she feels close to her too. Denver, like Baby and even Beloved, represents a recurring outcast in the family lines. Hence, she represents what seeks to break with the very cycle of which she is so much a part. She recognizes that (figuratively speaking) Sethe is dead. As Paul D has done, she must also challenge Beloved. She seeks to resuscitate Sethe into the redeemed spirit she could become once freed of the ghost—historical regret and repression. Denver creates her own history.

According to Jeanna Fuston-White, “stepping outside of 124 Bluestone Road brings community to Denver. Offerings of food, work, and friendship liberate her, granting her confidence, dignity, and presence in a world that has all but forgotten her” (Fuston-White 469).

Unlike her mother who refuses to embrace the community simply because the community abandons her, Denver seeks its help so that Sethe may be reborn. Ella, an old friend of Sethe, leads the community to 124 Bluestone to rebuke the evil spirits embodied there. It is poetic justice for Ella to redeem Sethe from Beloved simply because both Ella and Beloved suffered sexual degradation at the hands of a white man. Therefore, Ella and Beloved share a bond. Though both experienced the same fate, the one, Beloved, is haunted by it, while the other (Ella) has freed herself from the psychic chains of the event. Ella stubbornly refuses to let Beloved replace or displace her in the present moment. As parts of the same violated female self—but of different centuries—they cannot occupy the same place and time. In banishing Beloved to the past, Ella reclaims the present that both she and Sethe occupy. Therefore, she frees Sethe at the same moment. Indeed, Ella attempts to turn the family cycle, once more, forward to the future.
Edward Bodwin, owner of 124 Bluestone and Denver’s new boss, comes to the home to pick up Denver for work. Ella and the communal women who circle the yard rebuke Beloved in attempts to save the mother. Meanwhile Sethe has a relapse while mistaking Mr. Bodwin for Schoolteacher and his pupils. In attempting to kill him, she lunges at him, but Ella intercedes. Here the death cycle ends.

No one knows what happened to Beloved on that day. It is said that she disappeared or exploded. Whatever the method, her death frees Sethe to live a pleasurable life. As the novel concludes, Paul D even returns to help her in the healing process, hinting about a future that can be fulfilling: “Sethe,” he says, ‘me and you, we got more yesterday than anybody. We need some kind of tomorrow.’ He leans over and takes her hand. With the other he touches her face. ‘You your best thing, Sethe. You are.” His holding fingers are holding hers. “Me? Me?” (Morrison 273)

During Sethe’s recovery, Paul D seeks to redeem himself. Morrison leaves some ambiguity to the relationship between the two. Yet, we can assume that the both of them are looking towards a pleasurable future. As for the story about the figurative American house—the metaphor of psychic slavery—Morrison writes, “it was not a story to pass on” (Morrison 274). History, but not the pain of it, must be re-cited. Hence the novelist directs the turn, for the cycle of death ends here.
CHAPTER 4
CONCLUSION

From the beginning, each character in *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved* seeks a variety of fulfillment. Often, for the characters in the earlier novel, the quest appears mostly through a desire for material things. In *Beloved*, by contrast, it exists even more directly through the remembrance of things past. Objects provide momentary gratification, but not the ultimate fulfillment the characters seek. This “Dead” end cycle would have continued if Milkman had not gone on an expedition to rediscover the gold of the ancestral self, or if the African American community had not intervened to defend Sethe against the ghost of her slain daughter.

It does not matter that each character’s initial intentions were elsewhere. Milkman, Sethe, and so many communal others are the reason the cycle continues, but with a new perspective. Milkman and Pilate know that material goods are not the sole source of importance, more so for Macon Dead. As for Sethe, she realizes that the remembrance of things past initiates a future of freedom. She must forgive herself, let go, and live. She comes to recognize that life itself is priceless.

*Song of Solomon* and *Beloved* remind us that the search for pleasure has always been in the African American community. I think back to the slavery days when African Americans were forbidden to read or write. Eventually, when it was legal for them to acquire the skills of literacy, they were still in many ways so illiterate as to be unable to appreciate the opportunity and to benefit from it. Even literacy has become a cherished pleasure. Culturally speaking, happiness means therefore the abolition of slavery, the acquisition of literacy that assures the narrator’s self-determination of freedom, and her rich opportunities to profit from a cultural learning marking a cyclic turn toward freedom.
Eventually, the authentic vernacular of the work’s prose gives way to the novelist’s own uncompromising mastery of a beautifully standard, if not superior English—a complementary and diverse one. Morrison writes within and beyond the tradition.

Whatever the situation, past or present, African Americans have been searching for ultimate freedom and the pursuit of happiness in their lives. It has been a cycle that has gone on for generations. Although many slaves died trying to uncover the secrets of sexual or material pleasures, fortunately Milkman’s acceptance of his family’s history ends the cycle of incompleteness. And therefore a new possibility for figurative flight emerges.

In some queer distortions of surreal and magical reality, Morrison suggests that death can mean spiritual release. Beloved must return to the grave so that Sethe can eventually complete the journey there. According to human life, Sethe too has her time, but, as in the words of the movie *Gladiator*, it is “not yet.” Sethe and Beloved, Life and Death, Good and Evil, are the structural complements of the same African American self, indeed, of American memory.

Once the history of Solomon’s family is rediscovered, some characters identify with the history (Milkman and Pilate) while others ignore it (Macon Dead). Especially for the latter, the time lapse has been too long. Sethe nearly dies trying to restore the joy that she once experienced when moving initially into 124 Bluestone. It was the early time of her delight in the abolition of slavery. Through the help of the almost magical women who know the history of her house, she resists the American death that is all too “Beloved.”

Despite all literary sense to the contrary, the grim novel *Beloved* emerges somewhat curiously as a touch more hopeful—life *amidst* death rather than life *within* and *with* death. The awareness surprises me as I write. Morrison’s great triumvirate—Pilate, Milkman, and Sethe—realizes that true delight transcends any material price. Self-fulfillment is, indeed, who we are.
WORKS CITED


WORKS CONSULTED

Byrne, Dara. ‘Yonder they do not love your flesh.’ Community in Toni Morrison’s
Beloved: The Limitations of Citizenship and Property in the American Public

Carden, Mary Paniccia. “Models of Memory and Romance: The Dual Endings of Toni

Cutter, Martha J. “The Story Must Go On and On: The Fantastic, Narration, and
Intertextuality in Toni Morrison’s ‘Beloved’ and ‘Jazz’.” African American Review
34.1 (2000): 61-76.


Eppert, Claudia. “Histories Re-imagined, Forgotten and Forgiven: Student Responses to

Foreman, P. Gabrielle. “Past-On Stories: History and the Magically Real, Morrison and


Freud, Sigmund. Beyond the Pleasure Principle; Group Psychology and Other Works.

Garbus, Lisa. “The Unspeakable Stories of Shoah and Beloved.” College Literature 26.1
(1999): 52-68.

