explorations

Explorations: A Journal of Language and Literature

"Anything dead coming back to life hurts": Spectral and Corporeal Companionship of the Deceased Daughter as a Means to Confront Trauma of the Past in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

DOI: 10.25167/EXP13.25.13.6

Magda Szolc (University of Opole)
ORCID: 0000-0002-5055-5026

Abstract. This article explores the theme of ghostly companionship in Toni Morrison's highly acclaimed novel, *Beloved* (1987), emphasizing how the spectral relationship between the main protagonist, Sethe Suggs, and the spirit of her deceased daughter, Beloved, leads to the confrontation of personal and collective trauma. The paper tries to demonstrate the deep and lasting effects of slavery's oppressive legacy on the character of Sethe. It also delves into the intricacies of the haunting relationship between the woman and her daughter, suggesting that ghostly companionship, which later takes a physical form, acts as an essential means for the protagonist to face her traumatic past of slavery and infanticide. The article also highlights the collective significance of Beloved's arrival in reference to the African American community of Cincinnati. As the paper concludes, the presence and companionship of Beloved act as a driving force for both personal and collective healing, enabling Sethe and the community to confront the traumas of their past and progress into the future.

Key words: haunting past, ghostly companionship, infanticide, trauma, slavery, healing

1. INTRODUCTION

Released in 1987 as the inaugural part of a trilogy, succeeded by *Jazz* (1991) and *Paradise* (1998), *Beloved* is Morrison's highly esteemed novel that earned the writer the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 1988. The narrative draws inspiration from the true story of a slave woman, Margaret Garner, who resorted to infanticide in a desperate attempt to protect her child from the brutal realities of slavery. Regardless of its historical source, though, Morrison's priority in writing *Beloved* was to emphasize the impact of slavery on its victims and discuss it as both an individual and collective trauma. To this end, the novelist created a story about Sethe Suggs, a former slave who killed her two-year-old daughter to save the child from life in slavery. Eighteen years after that tragic event, Sethe is confronted with her painful past when the spectral presence of her daughter, Beloved, appears at 124 Bluestone Road.

The objective of this article is to explore the motif of the spectral and physical presence and companionship in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. The discussion is based on the character of Sethe and her resurrected daughter, whose arrival constitutes a milestone as regards the individual and collective confrontation with the trauma of the past. The article aims to prove how the presence and companionship of Beloved serve as an impulse and catalyst in the process of individual and collective confrontation with the past, healing. and progressing into the future. The theme of spectral and corporeal companionship is also explored in terms of Beloved's relationship with Denver, her younger sister, for whom Beloved constitutes a link with the unknown and hidden past. The exploration of the motif of trauma and its confrontation is grounded in scholarly literature regarding the memory of hunting, guilt, and the generational aspects of traumatic history and its transmission. The article also emphasizes the importance of the community in the process of confronting the painful past and its proper burial.

2. THE HAUNTING PAST

For Sethe Suggs, the past of slavery and its traumas is a closed chapter the woman struggles to put to oblivion as she tries to "keep the past at bay" (Morrison 2016, 51). The practice of "keeping the past at bay" serves as a daily strategy the woman utilizes to sustain a semblance of normalcy in her life. In spite of her attempts to move forward, the trauma of slavery and infanticide remains an ever-present shadow in her life. While a scar on Sethe's back, resembling a chokeberry tree, serves as a tangible representation of her past and physical pain she endured, the most horrific reminder of her trauma, i.e., the infanticide, is manifested by the arrival of the ghost of her daughter, Beloved. The introduction of the ghost to the narrative is a deliberate tactic employed by the novelist to facilitate Sethe's confrontation with her suppressed past and to achieve a sense of reconciliation. According to Kathleen Brogan (1998), the narratives created by African American authors represent a novel genre in American literature, referred to as "the stories of cultural haunting." As she asserts, "cultural ghost stories, which feature the haunting of people by ghosts of its own past, represent one way a group actively revises its relationship to the past" (174). A similar line of thinking is articulated by Jenny Sharpe in *A Literary Archaeology of Black Women's Lives* (2003). Sharpe posits that the enduring impact of slavery on its victims, women in particular, is rooted in the inadequacy of properly confronting and reconciling with the past (45). Sharpe's assertion indicates that slavery resurfaces as a haunting presence, occupying a threshold between the domains of the dead and the living. The lack of sufficient integration in the individual and collective memory of African Americans allows the ghost of the past to influence the present. Following Sharpe's perspective, it can be argued that Sethe's past has not been buried properly, consequently resurfacing in the form of a haunting specter of Sethe's daughter.

Beloved's return brings to light the deep-seated wounds of Sethe's past, symbolizing the hidden memories and traumas that the woman, as mentioned before, battles to keep buried. Initially, Beloved comes back to 124 in a spectral form of "the crawling already? baby girl" and transforms the house on Bluestone Road into a dark and gloomy place: "124 WAS SPITEFUL. Full of a baby's venom" (Morrison 2016, 3). The ghost's presence serves to remind Sethe of her atrocious act of infanticide and the trauma of

slavery, the burden of which the woman still carries. The reappearance of the baby ghost and the fury it directs at Sethe and her family can be considered a manifestation of the ghost's desire for retribution for the woman's past actions. Roberto Speziale-Bagliacca, who examines the concept of revenge in *Guilt: Revenge, Remorse, and Responsibility after Freud* (2004), posits that a person who has experienced hardship inflicted by another has the right to pursue retribution, claim their rights, and demand justice. However, to achieve this, it is necessary to attribute responsibility to an individual, as this is a fundamental aspect of revenge (Speziale-Bagliacca 2004, 51). In the novel under discussion, it is Sethe who is to blame, since the ghost of Beloved believes the woman deserves to be punished and must atone for her actions. Sethe's guilt stems from the woman's dramatic decision to take her daughter's life, which she considers the only way to spare Beloved from the harsh realities of existence in bondage. Unlike her sons, Howard and Buglar, who depart 124 in frustration over the spirit's aggressive behavior, Sethe chooses to remain in the house on Bluestone Road. The woman attempts to rationalize the baby ghost's violent behavior by explaining that the infant "wasn't even two years old when she died. Too little to understand. Too little to talk much even" (Morrison 2016, 5). Her decision to stay in the house haunted by the ghost of her daughter may be interpreted as the woman's self-imposed punishment for the infanticide she committed on Beloved. The woman claims she deserves to be punished for what she did eighteen years before and allows the ghost of Beloved to stay at 124 and bother its inhabitants. Kathleen Brogan in *Cultural Haunting: Ghosts and Ethnicity in Recent American Literature* (1998) explains Sethe's decision by stating that it is the woman's guilt and remorse that drive her to grant the baby ghost the right to stay in the house (7). Applying Brogan's perspective to the discussion on Sethe's choice, one could argue that the woman becomes a martyr of her own past. What seems contradictory, though, is the woman's duality in the perception of the infanticide she committed. On the one hand, Sethe cannot forgive herself for what she did. On the other hand, though, she is aware that killing Beloved was the only solution and the right choice to make.

Sethe and her youngest daughter, Denver, continue to be haunted by the ghost of baby Beloved, who is unable to articulate its anger verbally, having died in her infancy. Therefore, the specter turns to rage and violence to show its intense fury toward Sethe. The infant ghost manifests itself as a *poltergeist* – a spectral being characterized by physical disruptions, relocation of things, and other occurrences of inexplicable conduct (German: *der poltergeist* – a ghost that moves furniture – Cambridge Online Dictionary). While it remains invisible, its influence is clear through the physical disruptions it causes: "another kettle of chickpeas smoking in a heap on the floor; soda crackers crumbled and strewn in a line next to the doorsill" (Morrison 2016, 3). Although the ghost is just an infant, its nature is dual, as it is "both the child killed by her mother to spare her from a life of slavery and the haunting memory of all blacks who suffered and died from slavery" (Morey 1988, 140). In essence, the apparition serves as a poignant reminder of Sethe's painful past. From a collective viewpoint, however, it represents all the victims of slavery, the "[s]ixty million and more" of those affected by the institution. Jean Wyatt, in "Giving Body to the Word: The Maternal Symbolic in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*" (1993), analyzes the nature of Beloved in a comparable manner, claiming that "on the personal level, she is the nursing baby that Sethe killed. But in the social dimension that always doubles the personal in *Beloved*, the ghost represents – as the generic name Beloved

suggests – all the loved ones lost through slavery, beginning with the Africans who died on the slave ships" (479).

3. FROM SPECTRAL TO PHYSICAL – BELOVED'S TRANSFORMATION

Sethe and Denver are the only inhabitants of 124 who experience the company of the ghost, as Howard and Buglar, Sethe's teenage sons, choose to flee in fear of the apparition. While Sethe is not that much troubled by Beloved's companionship, as she believes the ghost's fury is a sign of its sadness rather than its evil nature, Denver becomes increasingly bothered by the presence of the specter. With the arrival of Sethe's friend, Paul D, Denver finally releases her emotions, stating, "I can't live here. I don't know where to go or what to do, but I can't live here. Nobody speaks to us. Nobody comes by. Boys don't like me. Girls don't either" (Morrison 2016, 17). Paul D, recognizing the unsettling nature of the ghost's presence, performs an exorcism. However, further in the narrative, Beloved appears again, materializing herself in a human form as a "fully dressed woman" (Morrison 2016, 60). She is not a ghost anymore but a woman possessing the skin of a newborn, "lineless and smooth … flawless except for three vertical scratches on her forehead so fine and thin they seemed at first like hair, baby hair before it bloomed and roped into the masses of black yarn under the hat" (Morrison 2016, 61-62). According to Timothy Spaulding, Beloved's transformation from a spiritual entity to a physical one represents a movement from an ethereal haunting to a concrete engagement with the enduring impacts of slavery and its aftermath (68). In other words, it is Beloved's transition and her constant physical presence at 124 that drive Sethe to confront her painful past.

Initially, Sethe reacts positively to Beloved's return, believing that her daughter's comeback is an opportunity to explain what motivated Sethe to kill her. Such a justification is provided by Gurleen Grewall in *Circles of Sorrow, Lines of Struggle: The Novels of Toni Morrison* (1998). According to the scholar, the arrival of Beloved is Sethe's chance to be finally understood and forgiven for the sins of her past (Grewall 1998, 111). In the beginning, both Sethe and Denver enjoy the presence of the newcomer, as "they played together" (Morrison 2016, 282). The dynamics shift, though, when Sethe notices the scar under Beloved's chin. The scar reminds the woman of the intense measures she took to protect baby Beloved from the horrors of enslavement. It also evokes Sethe's traumatic memories, which the woman repressed for the last eighteen years. Therefore, Sethe is determined to explain the motives behind her decision to Beloved, as she believes this is the only way to earn her daughter's forgiveness. The woman, however, loses her sense of self in the attempt to account for her past to Beloved. As Sethe grows more and more absorbed with Beloved, she neglects her younger daughter, Denver. The girl feels excluded and left to herself, as "she (Sethe) played with Beloved's hair, braiding, puffing, tying, oiling it until it made Denver nervous to watch her. … When it became clear that they were only interested in each other, Denver began to drift from the play" (Morrison 2016, 282-283). Although initially Denver is convinced that it is Beloved who needs to be protected from Sethe, as time passes, she comes to understand that the real danger resides in her resurrected sister. The girl notices that the companionship of Beloved has a negative impact on her mother, as the newcomer becomes increasingly demanding and aggressive in her behavior towards Sethe:

> [s]he took the best of everything – first. The best chair, the biggest piece, the prettiest plate, the brightest ribbon for her hair, and the more she took, the more Sethe began to talk, explain, describe how much she had suffered, been through, for her children … None of which made the impression it was supposed to. Beloved accused her of leaving her behind. Of not being nice to her, not smiling at her. … And Sethe cried, saying she never did, or meant to – that she had to get them out, away, that she had the milk all the time and had the money too for the stone but not enough. That her plan was always that they would all be together on the other side, forever. Beloved wasn't interested. … Sethe pleaded for forgiveness, counting, listing again and again her reasons: that Beloved was more important, meant more to her than her own life. That she would trade places any day. Give up her life, every minute and hour of it, to take back one of Beloved's tears. … Beloved slammed things, wiped the table clean of plates, threw salt on the floor, broke a windowpane." (Morrison 2016, 284, 285)

The nature of Beloved's companionship, originally beneficial for both Sethe and Denver, undergoes a significant transformation, as it becomes toxic and destructive. Denver recognizes in Beloved a genuine threat, since she depletes Sethe both emotionally and physically, resulting in the woman's deteriorating condition. Out of concern for her mother's life, Denver decides to leave 124 and seek communal help. The girl, so far alienated and shielded from the outside world by her mother, takes a step outside the house on Bluestone Road in an attempt to emancipate Sethe from the weight of the woman's sorrowful past. The fact that is crucial for the discussion to highlight is that prior to Beloved's arrival, initially in a ghostly form and thereafter in a corporeal dimension, Sethe intentionally isolates Denver, "as for Denver, the job Sethe had of keeping her from the past that was still waiting for her was all that mattered" (Morrison 2016, 51). The woman fears that her tragic past may resurface, reawakening all the emotional wounds she strives to leave behind. Therefore, she refuses to reveal the traumatic experience of enslavement, along with the dramatic circumstances that led her to killing baby Beloved, to Denver. It may be argued that although Denver did not directly experience the adversities of slavery, her life is shaped by her mother's turbulent history, as she seems to linger in the shadow of Sethe's repressed past. Evelyn Jaffe Schreiber (2010) categorizes Denver as a second-generation trauma survivor, asserting that trauma permeates Denver's existence, as she was born during Sethe's escape from Sweet Plantation and was an unconscious witness of the infanticide and Sethe's capture by the schoolteacher (2010, 48). Schreiber, in her article "Shared Memory: Slavery and Large-Group Trauma in Beloved and Paradise" (2010), examines the generational nature of trauma and its transmission, which ultimately creates a cultural past that is indelible despite attempts to repress or detach from it (32). Therefore, as Schreiber asserts, it is crucial to confront the trauma, regardless of its severity, rather than suppress it, as suppression only strengthens the drama of the past within both the individual and the community.

As argued above, before Denver's decision to leave 124 and seek help, the girl experiences joy and fulfillment resulting from Beloved's unexpected arrival in a physical form, as a grown-up woman. Finally, there is someone with whom Denver can converse and play: "Beloved took Denver's hand and placed another on Denver's shoulder. They danced then. Round and round the tiny room and it may have been dizziness, or feeling light and icy at once, that made Denver laugh so hard. A catching laugh that Beloved

caught. The two of them, merry as kittens, swung to and fro, to and fro, until exhausted they sat on the floor" (Morrison 2016, 87-88). What is more, for Denver, the presence of Beloved provides the girl with the opportunity to understand the past, which was so far "kept at bay" by her mother. In this context, Denver views the companionship of Beloved as a link connecting the girl's unknown past with the present. This point is discussed by Marianne Hirsch in "Maternity and Rememory: Toni Morrison's *Beloved*" (1994). According to Hirsch (1994), Denver's devotion to Beloved offers the girl the most precious thing she knows, which is the narrative of her own (101). When Beloved repeatedly inquires about Denver's birth on the boat, Denver's desire to be heard is fulfilled, as "[t]his was the part of the story she loved. She was coming to it now, and she loved it because it was all about herself" (Morrison 2016, 90). While her need for storytelling is satisfied, the girl also experiences a sense of rejection upon receiving the explanation for Beloved's return. Beloved's primary concern and the reason for her comeback is Sethe, about whom she feels possessive, viewing the woman as her property. Her remarks to Denver are indicative of Beloved's strong sense of possessiveness toward Sethe, as she asserts that "[s]he is the one I need. You can go but she is the one I have to have" (Morrison 2016, 89). Consequently, as previously stated, Denver, recognizing the threatening and controlling character of Beloved, resolves to seek help from the African American community of Cincinnati. Her decision to leave the walls of 124 Bluestone Road marks a significant milestone for the girl, as she steps out of her comfort zone and confronts the reality from which Sethe has sheltered her throughout her life.

4. COMMUNAL SOLIDARITY AS A MEANS TO CONFRONT TRAUMATIC PAST

According to Sandra Bloom (1999), a trauma theorist and psychiatrist, "confrontation with the spiritual, philosophical, and/or religious context – and conflicts – of human experience is impossible to avoid if recovery is to be assured" (12). Bloom also claims that the sole means to achieve healing is through a discussion of a traumatic event, since "for healing to occur, we know that people often need to put the experience into a narrative, give it words, and share it with themselves and others. Words allow us to put things into a time sequence – past, presence, future" (12). In Sethe's case, the woman's reluctance to address the past and "give it words" perpetuates the ongoing haunting of the present. Although the arrival and companionship of Beloved allow Sethe to confront her past, the woman's explanations and justifications encounter Beloved's denial. As the narrative progresses, Denver emerges as the only person who is capable of liberating her mother, Sethe, from the weight of her past. However, the process of Sethe's liberation is possible only with the collective help of the African American community of Cincinnati. Although it is Sethe's act of infanticide that fractures her connections with the community, eighteen years after that tragic event, it is the same community that exorcises Beloved and rescues Sethe from her haunting past. Nevertheless, the question that arises when discussing the community's abandonment of Sethe is the reason for their passive reaction to Sethe's capture and arrest. It may be concluded that their passivity stems from their internal conflict to suppress the trauma of slavery, which they as well experienced. Such a mechanism of abandonment and the suppression of trauma is taken under discussion by Sandra Bloom. Bloom posits that in the absence of verbal communication about an individual's state of being, it is through their actions that their behavior is

assessed. Rather than empathizing with Sethe and acknowledging her actions, the community chooses to withdraw and remain silent. As Bloom (1999) elucidates, there exists a prevalent inclination to assess, condemn, and alienate individuals who display asocial and self-destructive behaviors, often without grasping the importance of their underlying message (13). In the context of Morrison's novel, Sethe's act of infanticide resurrects the most horrific memories within the local community. In their desire to conceal their painful history, they engage in a collective act of suppression. Consequently, they leave Sethe and the rest of the Suggs family behind, as it represents the easiest way to cope with their traumas of slavery.

Eighteen years following the tragic event, the community receives another chance to save Sethe. This time, however, the African American people rescue the woman from her destructive past, which must be buried properly to facilitate the process of healing. In doing so, they confront their own, so-far-repressed traumas, which emerge with the arrival of Beloved. As Irina-Ana Drobot posits, Beloved signifies more than just Sethe's individual loss and sorrow. The daughter represents the collective suffering of other victims of slavery who, akin to Sethe, endured unspeakable tragedies of losing their beloved ones (Drobot 2019, 431). Therefore, the community's exorcism of Beloved can be regarded as the collective effort of slavery victims to confront their past and bury it properly. The importance of the proper burial is also emphasized by Ashraf H. A. Rushdy in "Daughters Signifyin(g) History: The Example of Toni Morrison's *Beloved*" (1992). The scholar claims that the character of Beloved is the embodiment of the past, which must be remembered in order to be forgotten. What is more, Rushdy (1992) argues that Beloved is a symbol of what must be revived to ensure a proper burial of the past, regardless of its severity (571). As the community ultimately recognizes that Beloved constitutes a crucial part of their shared history, they exorcise the woman to confront their past and bury it properly with the intention to prevent its return as a haunting presence. When the thirty women of Cincinnati assemble together to exorcise Beloved, they show their solidarity and reconnection with Sethe, whom they abandoned eighteen years before. Through this process, they come to recognize Sethe and embrace her as a member of their community:

> [t]ogether they stood in the doorway. For Sethe it was as though the Clearing had come to her with all its hear and simmering leaves, where the voices of women searched for the right combination, the key, the code, the sound that broke the back of words. Building voice upon voice until they found it , and when they did it was a wave of sound wide enough to sound deep water and knock the pods of f chestnut trees. It broke over Sethe and she trembled like the baptized in its wash. (Morrison 2016, 308)

The whole process of Sethe's liberation is witnessed by the community of Cincinnati for whom Beloved serves as the catalyst for bringing to light their troubled history, along with "the denied ghosts of the American past" (Brogan 1998, 8). Their presence will endure as long as the past remains suppressed and silenced. To put an end to the haunting, one must engage with the past and recognize it, as progress and healing are unattainable without reconciling with history, no matter how traumatic it is.

5. CONCLUSIONS

In the novel, Toni Morrison skillfully uses the motif of spectral and physical companionship of Beloved as a way to confront the trauma of the past and recover from it, both individually and collectively. Although the narrative "is not a story to pass on", as it provides the unspeakable truths on the reality of slavery, the novelist decides to bring the past to life by creating a story about difficult choices and unimaginable steps one needs to take to prevent their loved ones from suffering. By doing so, Morrison demonstrates that even the most horrific experiences can be faced and dealt with. What is more, the introduction of a ghostly character to the plot seems to be the author's deliberate strategy, as the presence of a spectre is to elicit a sense of unease and the uncanny in the characters of the novel. The haunted house at 124 Bluestone Road, the *poltergeist* troubling its inhabitants, and the dead daughter resurrected to life constitute a Gothic character of the novel. In terms of genre classification, *Beloved* is identified as a postmodern slave narrative that incorporates Gothic elements.

The inclusion of these elements expands the original slave narrative and indicates the horrific aspects of the institution of slavery. According to A. Timothy Spaulding (2005), the aim of the hybridization of a slave narrative with a gothic tradition is to address the issues that have been largely overlooked and sidelined in a mainstream literary discourse (61). However, it is important to emphasize that the gothic elements in *Beloved* do not stem from the supernatural. Although it may appear that the ghostly presence, along with other eerie aspects of the story, defines its gothic nature, the authentic gothic character lies within the painful truths of slavery and the traumas of those affected by the system. Therefore, in order to confront the trauma and achieve healing, one must resurrect the painful nightmares of the past, as "[m]ore it hurt, more better it is. Can't nothing heal without pain, you know" (Morrison 2016, 32).

REFERENCES

Bloom, S. 1999. "Trauma Theory Abbreviated." In *Final Action Plan: A Coordinated Community Response to Family Violence*. Accessed October 19, 2024. https://iheartenglish.pbworks.com/f/Trauma+Theory+Explained+14+pages.pdf.

Brogan, K. 1998. *Cultural Haunting: Ghosts and Ethnicity in Recent American Literature*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia.

Drobot, I. A. 2019. "The Ghost in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*: Paranormal or Psychological Phenomenon?" *Journal of Romanian Literary Studies* 18: 427-432.

Grewal, G. 1998. *Circles of Sorrow, Lines of Struggle: The Novels of Toni Morrison*. Baton Rogue: Louisiana State University Press.

Hirsch, M. 1994. "Maternity and Rememory: Toni Morrison's *Beloved*". In *Representations of Motherhood* Bassin, edited by Donna Bassin, Margaret Honey, and Merle Mahrer Kaplan, 92-110. New Haven: Yale University.

Morrison, T. 2016. *Beloved*. London: Vintage.

Rushdy, A. H. A. 1992. "Daughters Signifyin(g) History: The Example of Toni Morrison's *Beloved*." *American Literature* 64(3): 567-597.

Schreiber, E. J. 2010. “Shared Memory: Slavery and Large-Group Trauma in *Beloved* and *Paradise*.” In *Race, Trauma, and Home in the Novels of Toni Morrison*, edited by Evelyn Jaffe Schreiber, 32-65. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press.

Sharpe, J. 2003. *A Literary Archaeology of Black Women’s Lives*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota.

Spaulding, A. T. 2005. “Ghosts, Haunted Houses, and the Legacy of Slavery: Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* and the Gothic Impulse.” In *Re-Forming the Past: History, the Fantastic, and the Postmodern Slave Narrative*, edited by A. Timothy Spaulding, 61-76. Columbus: Ohio State University Press.

Speziale-Bagliacca, R. 2004. *Guilt: Revenge, Remorse, and Responsibility after Freud.* New York: Brunner-Routlege.

Wyatt, J. 1993. “Giving Body to the Word: The Maternal Symbolic in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*.” *PMLA* 108(3): 474-488.

AUTHOR’S BIO: Magda Szolc is a PhD student at the University of Opole. Her research concentrates on twentieth-century African American female literature, particularly on Toni Morrison’s postcolonial output. In her analyses, she focuses on the problems of otherness, internalised racism, and the trauma of slavery, with its effects on marginalised black women.

E-MAIL: magdaszolc@op.pl