

FEAR OF THE PAST IN TONI MORRISON'S *BELOVED* – A NEW HISTORICISM PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

Morrison's 1987 novel Beloved is one of the most prominent recent depictions of the still unhealed wound of slavery which is deeply imbedded into the fabric of American society. Through the literary critical theory of New Historicism, this novel, a fictional piece of literature, can be considered a historical document in its own right, in which the author, although dealing with the 19th century Reconstruction period of the antebellum Civil War, presents, both consciously and subconsciously, her own contemporary notions of this period of America's past. In other words, this novel has inner voices which desire to express a certain political, historical and social stance, both in accordance with the author's wishes, but also "independently" so, as the author cannot help but be influenced, in various ways, by the contemporary views on this topic. Thus, Beloved becomes a document of its time, namely the 1980s United States, and represents sometimes conflicting voices regarding the factual and fictional past of the slavery period in question, but also of the present in which it was created.

Keywords: Morrison; Beloved; Slavery; Civil War; Reconstruction; New Historicism.

Introduction

New historicism is a very appropriate reading strategy to use on Toni Morrison's influential 1987 novel *Beloved*, as the history of slavery in the United States has always been an opaque, controversial, painful and manipulated topic. Although a work of

DENIS
KUZMANOVIĆ*

Pregledni članak

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* dr. sc. Denis Kuzmanović, doc., Filozofski fakultet Sveučilište u Mostaru, denis.kuzmanovic@ff.sum.ba

fiction, the novel could be seen as kind of a historical document where the author aims to reveal, in her own way, the repressed, erased, lost, corrupted and neglected history of African slaves in the United States, more specifically of the 19th century Civil War and the Reconstruction period. New historicism represents a school of literary theory developed in the 1980s which emphasizes “the interaction between the historic content of a work and a modern reader’s understanding and interpretation of the work”¹, or in other words, it is “a method based on the parallel reading of literary and non-literary texts, usually of the same historical period.”² This school arose from several influences: Michel Foucault’s critical theory which views power as the lowest common denominator of people which speaks to us through a text; it also has something in common with the ideas of Hippolyte Taine, who believed that the social aspects of race, milieu and moment have more influence on the creation of a text than the author’s imagination, although New historicism differs somewhat from this as it is concerned more with ideology and political atmosphere, i.e. power structures, which unconsciously influence the author. Also important here is Edward W. Said’s theory that a text represents a self-confirming will to power and possesses a voice which tries to accomplish certain political agenda of the time it was written, regardless of the author’s own intention. Despite trying to create a “historical” document of slavery, Morrison in her creative process deviates from the actual historical narratives written by former slaves in the 18th and 19th century, as well as from Margaret Garner, an escaped slave who committed infanticide and whose true story served as a basis for the novel. In accordance with New historicism tenets, the important aspect to analyse here is that of the political and social attitude to the history and legacy of slavery in the 1980s when the novel was written, where Morrison could also have been unknowingly influenced by different political, social, historical and cultural forces in writing of the novel. Thus, both conscious and unconscious forces inside the author are at play regarding the creative process, and there are, in effect, multiple “histories” in the novel to consider. Thus, several key questions have to be posed and answered in order to summarize the object of this discussion: what was the historical perspective on the

¹ Michael Meyer, *Bedford Instruction to Literature: Critical Strategies for Reading*, Bedford, Boston, 2020, p. 3526.

² Peter Barry, *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Cultural Theory*, Manchester UP, Manchester, 2017, p. 146.

issue of slavery in the 1980s? Does Morrison limit our interpretation of the novel and does she place restraints on readers so as to manipulate or guide us to desired conclusions which are congruous or subversive of the contemporary power structures and attitudes? Are the characters portrayed as realistic and complex, or are they simplified in order to better express a certain moral lesson? Is there an author's personal truth in the text and does it agree with the truth of the State, i.e. the dominant power structure? Furthermore, does *Be-loved* as a text express a kind of will to power, or a moral aim which got away from the author's control? Is there a dominant voice there and if so, what does it try to accomplish? Are there other, less dominant voices in the novel, and do they upon greater reflection actually subvert the dominant one enough to possibly make the novel itself a contradictory, or at least, a very ambiguous text? Finally, which history and how much of it should the novel depict, that of the uncensored and authentic author's research, or a more sanitized version in accordance with contemporary stance regarding slavery?

1. The author in her time

We should start with investigating the political and social climate of the 1980s concerning the history of slavery in the United States, as “[n]ew historicists attempt to read a period in all its dimensions, including political, economic, social, and aesthetics concerns.”³ This is important in ascertaining not only the historical setting of the novel but also the various circumstances that affect and influence the critics evaluating it and the attitudes they in turn create themselves: “Moreover, critics are not merely the alchemical translators of texts into circumstantial reality or worldliness; for they too are subject to and producers of circumstances, which are felt regardless of whatever objectivity the critic's method possess.”⁴ There are some inherent dangers in New historicism critical theory when evaluating a text, as it may do so through the eyes of the State, effectively becoming a revision of history to agree with the political climate of the time: “literary theory has a most particular relevance to the political system: it has helped, wittingly or not, to sustain and reinforce its assumptions.”⁵ Things have changed since the pivotal event of the Ameri-

³ M. Meyer, op. cit., p. 3526.

⁴ Edward Said, *The World, the Text, and the Critic*, Harvard UP, Cambridge, 1983, p. 35.

⁵ Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, Minnesota UP, Minneapolis, 2008, p. 171.

can Civil War (1861-1865) when the Union defeated the Confederacy and outlawed slavery in the entire US territory. Despite this breakthrough, racism, discrimination and segregation were still very much present as there were many racist justifications in society about the need for a white man's guidance of black people. A lot of the research on slavery in the first half of the 20th century was focused more on lives, motives, actions and attitudes of the slaveholders themselves as their perspective was considered more important; they also left more written records, while slaves were mostly illiterate and their personal accounts were few in comparison and thus mostly neglected. Even in the early 1970s there was still major research with that focus, such as Fogel and Enderman's controversial *Time on the Cross* published in 1974, where they analyzed Southern slavery from a purely economic perspective, also arguing that slaves had a better living standard than the contemporary free industrial workers in the North, although they emphasized that they used slaveholders' narratives for their research. Partly in reaction to research such as this, Morrison modifies the historical account of Margaret Garner's story, emphasizing those areas which were historically neglected or outright omitted:

Whereas Margaret Garner was sentenced for escaping, and thus depriving her owner of his property, rather than for infanticide and was never freed, in Morrison's rendering the slave woman is charged with infanticide and eventually prevented from hanging and released. The novel de-emphasizes the economic implications of Sethe's escape, focusing on the human cost of her ordeal. Morrison 'rips the veil' to shed light on what has been silenced in the history of black people, as well as in the isolated testimonies of black people themselves.⁶

In the 1980s, however, the official truths, or as Foucault would say, ideology, has somewhat changed. Thanks to the renewed interest in slavery, improved research technology, uncovering of more archaeological records, more research on black folklore and most importantly, greater visibility and acceptance of civil rights ideas in society as a whole, the focus has shifted much more on the life and psychology of the slaves. Instead of being often stereotypically presented as bewildered, naïve and incapable "negroes", research has shown that slaves displayed great resilience, survival and adaptability, that

⁶ Lourdes Lopez Roper, "Beating back the Past: Toni Morrison's 'Beloved' as Historiographic Metafiction", *Philologia Hispalensis*, 13 (1999) 2, p. 177.

they were in some ways independent in their activities and even able to preserve some cultural practices.

However, all of these positive steps still did not have a significant impact on the improvement of black people in society. Morrison's novel, known for complex and richly detailed characters, is mostly in accordance with these popular contemporary sociological aspects, namely, as mentioned, in the research of the life of slaves and renewed interest in the 19th century especially, but the same literary elements were also present decades before in the writings of other African-American authors such as Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston from the Harlem Renaissance period of the 1920s and 30s. Morrison was part of the newer African-American literary generation which included famous award winning authors such as Ralph Ellison and Alex Haley, who with greater depth depicted themes relevant for black people, such as slavery, racism, discrimination, segregation, perception of black people on themselves and on the society around them, sense of loss, moving forward, etc. Morrison had a good reason for setting the story in the 1870s, with extensive flashbacks, while still addressing the problems of the present, as the readers would otherwise become immediately defensive or excessively opinionated regarding contemporary civil rights leaders, their politics and controversies had the story been placed in contemporary time. Black civil rights leaders from 1950s onwards ranged from almost universally popular and mainstream Rosa Parks and Martin Luther King, to very controversial and divisive Malcolm X and Louis Farrakhan. This is especially true when portraying the splits in the black community and ways to repair them.⁷

Although Morrison won the Pulitzer, and later the Nobel Prize as the first African-American woman to do so, a question remains how much these recognitions, together with the novel's big impact of being the New York Times bestseller, contributed to the national conversation of dealing with this dark, some would say the darkest chapter of American history. This was not only because of racism and the establishment, but also because many African-Americans were reluctant or unable to face the past, even when they were not slaves themselves but still carried that burden of a legacy. That is why in *Beloved* we have major characters with different ways of dealing with the past, either trying to embrace positivity and self-appreciation, striving to repress it

⁷ See Missy Kubitschek, *Toni Morrison: A Critical Companion*, Greenwood Press, London, 1998, p. 56.

in order to have a chance of normal life, or being obsessed with and unable to escape it, as we will later see from the examples of Baby Suggs, Paul D and Sethe respectively. In Morrison's time the situation has improved from the segregation in the previous decades, but racial profiling, greater poverty among black people, discrimination, higher incarceration percentage and limited access to health were very real and prominent issues then and now:

The 1980s saw an analogous political backlash. No new approaches to poverty or racism developed in national political discussion; instead, presidential campaigns invoked stereotypes of black men as criminals and black women as lazy, irresponsible 'welfare mothers.' In both Reconstruction and the Reagan era, black communities had to rely entirely on their own resources.⁸

As for the power structures and the official government's stance on slavery, progress has been frustratingly slow. In fact, it was only recently, in 2008, about 150 years since slavery was declared illegal, that the United States House of Representatives passed a resolution apologizing for American slavery and subsequent discriminatory laws, and the U.S. Senate unanimously passed a similar resolution in 2009. It is important to note that these resolutions cannot be used for restitution claims, which remains a hotly contested issue.

Morrison's mission with this novel seems obvious: to portray the true horrors of slavery in order to face it, deal with it, achieve understanding and peace, contribute to the healing of racial wounds in the American society, and ultimately, to bring about reconciliation and equality. This moral aim seems to dominate the novel's tone: "Few narratives since Uncle Tom's Cabin are as tendentious as *Beloved*; Morrison has a palpable design to impose upon her readers, and nothing in the book seems accidental or incidental."⁹ Nevertheless, Morrison with her modernist influences, primarily that of Faulkner, then Ellison, weaves a multi-layered and complex story where time, place and character perspective are convoluted and intertwined, simultaneously stretching the limits of interpretation. Past blends with the present, thoughts flow into one another, from one character to another, the line between cause and effect is blurred. Symbols abound, enriching and emphasizing important themes: "Like a cubist painting, notions of time and space are interrupted and reconceived. The past is omnipresent and yet invisible; it can only be understood

⁸ Ibidem, p. 133.

⁹ Harold Bloom (ed.) *Bloom's Guides: Toni Morrison's Beloved*, Chelsea House, Philadelphia, 2004, p. 7.

and seen through pictures that reside in the mind and connect the wounds of the past to the present.”¹⁰

2. Real characters and fictional people

The most notable example of stretching these limits is the ambiguity of the character of Beloved herself. Her nature and purpose, at first glance, appears clear:

The ghost’s major function is to metaphorically represent the past and the way that the traces of the past persist in the present. Morrison’s focus upon the struggles of ex-slaves during the post–Civil War period of the ‘Reconstruction’ is sufficient to suggest an allegorical interpretation of the ghost’s presence, as a representation of the persisting, haunting presence of slavery in the collective consciousness of Americans, and more particularly, of African Americans.¹¹

Still, many critics and readers alike offer more interpretations, and think that this young girl represents the ghost of Sethe’s murdered daughter, Sethe’s mother, the ghost symbolizing the burden and unhealed wound of slavery itself, or an actual unknown amnesiac girl who was held captive and escaped, resulting in some form of mistaken identity, or wilful or not delusion by Sethe herself who projects her lost love on this new mysterious girl. There are passages in the novel to favour either of these explanations. Clearly this ambiguity enables the reader to contemplate the novel’s themes in a more complex and detailed way in which there are no easy and definitive answers. Each of the major characters have life stories of their own and there is no clear divide between moral and immoral characters. They are not caricatures and do not represent a singularly good or bad aspect of their personalities; like the story itself, they are also multi-layered, i.e. they are humans with their virtues and flaws. The only exception is the schoolteacher who does not have any good qualities in him, no redeeming feature whatsoever, and who embodies the worst aspects of slavery itself. It is difficult to find an explanation for the

¹⁰ Lisa Williams, *The Artist as Outsider in the Novels of Toni Morrison and Virginia Woolf*, Greenwood Press Westport, London, 2000, p. 153.

¹¹ Daniel Erickson, *Ghosts, Metaphor and History in Toni Morrison’s Beloved and Gabriel Garcia Marquez’s One Hundred Years of Solitude*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2009, p. 16.

schoolteacher's psychopathic cruelty even with Stamp Paid's notion of the "jungle", a word representing the dark urges of anger and violence in black and white people alike. Cruelty shown towards slaves dehumanizes and makes them brutal, and the slavers subsequently become afraid of their own slaves, so they react with even more brutality; in short, slavery makes both the oppressor and the oppressed dehumanized and lesser.

Thus Morrison escapes the universal vilification of white and praising of black characters, instead choosing to be realistic, so we can find white people doing good things, like Amy Denver who helps Sethe with her birth and the sheriff who allows her to feed her child while in custody; and black people doing bad things, such as the jealousy of certain members of the black community of Baby Suggs' generosity and who later fail to warn Sethe about the arriving slavers. Morrison endeavours to portray slaves as real people, painfully aware of the situation they were in and how they were dehumanized in different ways, sometimes even non-violently, who were desperate to have respect and a normal life and who organized escapes and support structures for runaway slaves. That's why Sethe's husband Halle, for example, recognizes that there is really no difference between the racism of their former master Garner, who did not resort to brutality but instead treated them extremely condescendingly, thus harming them psychologically, and the schoolteacher who was brutal and treated them like animals and experiments: "What they say is the same. Loud or soft."¹² That is why the schoolteacher whips Sixo the slave when he uses witty arguments to justify taking of a chicken: "Clever, but schoolteacher beat him anyway to show him that definitions belonged to the definers—not the defined."¹³ These characters have diverse opinions and perspectives on slavery and life in general; this allows us to grasp the greater picture of society in those times and to combine the stories of each of them into a greater whole. For instance, in case of slaveholders, Mr. Garner, a seemingly benevolent master, is of the opinion common at the time that African-Americans are unable to act and think for themselves, that they are like children who need supervision for their own good and thus treats them as such. Although he does not punish them physically, such treatment is detrimental to their psychological development as people. For example, Mr. Garner condescendingly calls Baby Suggs Jenny, a name slavers gave her, and

¹² Toni Morrison, *Beloved*, Random House, New York, 1987, p. 195.

¹³ *Ibidem*, p. 190.

Mrs. Garner laughs at Sethe's inquiries about her wedding, as if such things are for adults, i.e. white people only. This "benevolent" justification of slavery was still present in the first half of the 20th century in many Southern states. The schoolteacher, on the other hand, represents a despicably racist slaveholder, a man who resorts to brutal punishment and who thinks of black people as more animals than human and treats them like experiments. An especially striking and distressing scene is when Sethe overhears him asking his students to name human and animal characteristics of the slaves. Mr. and Mrs. Bodwin are a white slave abolitionist brother and sister who help black people, but they also show some worrying traits in their behaviour, and there is a figurine of an offensive caricature of a black boy Denver sees in their home, depicting a servile African-American which symbolizes their position in society even as free people, a truly prophetic image considering the perception of black people in times to come; for example, it was common for white people to call any black man "boy" no matter how old he was. This shows that for many white people, the best thing black people could hope to achieve in life is to be servants to their privileged race:

With those assurances, Denver left, but not before she had seen, sitting on a shelf by the back door, a blackboy's mouth full of money. His head was thrown back farther than a head could go, his hands were shoved in his pockets. Bulging like moons, two eyes were all the face he had above the gaping red mouth. His hair was a cluster of raised, widely spaced dots made of nail heads. And he was on his knees. His mouth, wide as a cup, held the coins needed to pay for a delivery or some other small service, but could just as well have held buttons, pins or crab-apple jelly. Painted across the pedestal he knelt on were the words 'At Yo Service.'¹⁴

These people were like many other white abolitionists of that time, for they were, however good their intentions, fighting for an issue they did not experience first-hand, and there is a question how much of a condescending attitude was in their actions, what some would today call 'the white saviour complex'. Nevertheless, it has to be said that their help was crucial for securing Sethe's release from jail. Stamp Paid, a former slave who helped many of his people obtain freedom, talks of power corruption and the already mentioned "jungle" idea. Baby Suggs, freed thanks to her son's sacrifice of extra years of labour, once served as an anchor to the black community by offering

¹⁴ Ibidem, p. 255.

spiritual guidance. But after some members of that community deliberately failed to inform her family of the slave catcher's arrival and being also traumatized by Sethe's infanticide, she sank into depression and died. With these examples Morrison wants to address the fact that in the black community there is friction and lack of unified action, something which has continued to be the case not only in the 1980s, but in current times as well: "Beloved opens with a divided, leaderless community; debilitated families; and exhausted, isolated individuals. This 'stuck' emotional and political state roughly parallels the predicament of the African American community of the 1980s when Toni Morrison wrote and published the novel."¹⁵ Sethe's story is especially tragic as it testifies to the overreaching trauma of slavery and of her resolve not to allow her children to be abused like she was, hence the infanticide of the baby daughter and attempted murder of her other children. She, like many other former slaves, at first tried to keep the past buried and forgotten, but past unresolved always resurfaces and haunts people, preventing them to have a chance at a normal life; she then went the other way to the extreme and desperately clung to the past trauma in the form of the girl Beloved, thus sacrificing her future. Ella, another former slave, also desperately suppressed her traumatic experiences when her master and his son raped her repeatedly. With these stories Morrison wants to express the very powerful spectre of slavery looming over black people, just like the living breathing ghost of Beloved looms over Sethe and people around her.

3. Describing the indescribable

In relation to the novel's congruity with the political climate of the 1980s, it can be said that Morrison's chief departure from power structures, i.e., from conventional opinion, is that she does not run away from describing the brutal and disturbing facts of slavery; on the contrary, she uses graphic descriptions, maybe even excessively, in order to deliberately oppose downplaying horrors such as infanticide, rape, various physical and psychological abuse done with impunity, torture, murder, burning, etc., atrocities which have been repeatedly suppressed so that the general public could do without the ugly truths, truths which the establishment really does not want to be a part of public

¹⁵ M. Kubitschek, op. cit., p. 134.

discussion that much, if at all. Among the disturbing descriptions of Sethe being raped and whipped, Sixo's burning, Paul D's torture device of a bit in his mouth rendering him unable to speak, there is an even more universal image where Beloved speaks of dark, cramped places, piles of dead bodies and skinless men, which can be interpreted as a cargo hold of a slave ship; here we again see Morrison's uncompromising attitude towards describing the horrors of slavery on a massive scale, that of the Atlantic slave trade and the inhuman conditions slaves were kept in:

We are not crouching now we are standing but my legs are like my dead man's eyes I cannot fall because there is no room to the men without skin are making loud noises I am not dead the bread is sea-colored I am too hungry to eat it the sun closes my eyes those able to die are in a pile I cannot find my man the one whose teeth I have loved a hot thing the little hill of dead people a hot thing the men without skin push them through with poles the woman is there with the face I want the face that is mine they fall into the sea which is the color of the bread she has nothing in her ears...¹⁶

The novel thus contains brutal and appalling scenes which are meant for instigating a shocking reaction from readers in order to make them aware of the powerful extent of influence slavery had on black people, then and now. In a society where dealing with the hard and unpleasant facts of history is avoided and the emphasis is put on superficial things like political correctness and not offending anyone, the real issues remain unresolved. Morrison recognizes that both white and black people need education and awareness of these dark times in American history; otherwise, ignorance holds sway over people's minds and prevents them from dealing in a proper manner with their history. This is why she goes further than original narratives written by former slaves from the 18th and 19th century: "most original authors of slave narratives did not reveal the true horror of slavery for fear of offending the white abolitionists, or because they themselves did not want to dwell on the painful memories. Bowers argues that Morrison's revision of the slave narrative 'is one way of giving African Americans back their voices.'"¹⁷ Morrison fictionalizes, or better said, enhances, known history to make that same history more authentic and real, however absurd that sounds; her 're-inscribing' of history serves the novel's ostensible moral purpose:

¹⁶ T. Morrison, *op. cit.*, p. 211.

¹⁷ H. Bloom (ed.) *op. cit.*, p. 16.

Although slave narratives were representations of a subversive historical consciousness, authors repressed the inner life of their characters and the bleakest realities of slavery in order to avoid censorship while preaching their abolitionist gospel. In turn, Morrison's job as a writer is 'to rip the veil ... to extend, fill in and complement slave autobiographical narratives' ('The Site of Memory' 110; 119). Toni Morrison, like many other postcolonial writers and critics, demands that the author should be committed to the task of ripping the veil and reinscribing what has been silenced in the history of black people. The text of *Beloved*, therefore, reinscribes the story of the fugitive slave Margaret Garner, Sethe in the novel.¹⁸

As Morrison is modifying authentic slave narratives, she also de-emphasizes the relevant major historical events in favour of the personal, inner lives of slaves themselves; she exchanges objective, general history with her own "personal" history to suit the novel's purpose:

The novel dives deep into the slave's subjectivity, putting forward disturbing events that have had a strong psychological impact on the character; we thus learn about Sethe's sexual harassments, and we are given a breathtaking description of how Sethe sliced her baby's throat (251). The emphasis shifts away from the institution of slavery onto the individual. This shift of emphasis is revealed in the way Morrison avoids or deals obliquely with known historical events within the novel's time span—such as Lincoln's assassination (1865), President Grant's administration (1869-77), or the Fifteenth Amendment (1870).¹⁹

Still, a question arises whether Morrison's artistic, rhetoric and aesthetic choices for the atrocities presented are too much for readers to imagine and think about, instead of simply putting the book away and stop thinking about slavery, thereby severely numbing, or even nullifying her moral and reformist aim:

And yet there are virtually insurmountable aesthetic problems in the representation of any Holocaust, whether of six million Jews or of the 'sixty million' African Americans to whom Morrison dedicates *Beloved*. Something in our psychic defenses is activated by a litany of atrocities that comprehends mammary rape, a mother's cutting of her baby's throat, whippings, dreadful prison treatment on chain gangs—I stop arbitrarily, rather than complete the catalog. However veiled by indirect style or supernatural intercessions, this profusion of torments may numb any reader's sensibilities.²⁰

¹⁸ L. L. Roper, op. cit., p. 174.

¹⁹ Ibidem, p. 176-177.

²⁰ H. Bloom (ed.) op. cit., p. 8.

As we will later see, Morrison, whether consciously or unconsciously, is aware of this difficulty, and she herself expressed reservations of the moral and reformist effectiveness of *Beloved*: “Toni Morrison was certain that *Beloved*, her fifth novel, would be the least read of all her works. She reasoned this because of the silent phenomenon she calls ‘national amnesia’ that surrounds the history and details of slavery.”²¹ There is a poignant and prophetic, but as we will later see, very ambiguous phrase repeated several times at the end of the novel: “This was not a story to pass on”²², which of course not only refers to the story of the girl *Beloved*, but on the issue of slavery itself, considering for how many decades the horrifying realities were suppressed. In relation to the Said’s theory of a central voice in a text which can dominate or suppress other voices²³, that voice could be her uncompromising desire to meet the darkest aspects of slavery, to shine a light on how far people’s cruelty to each other can truly go. The main motivation for writing the novel in the first place was precisely not to forget and practically forcefully deal with the darkest period in history of the black people in the United States: “Morrison sensed a ‘national amnesia’ surrounding the details of slavery and its aftermath. Not the blacks, not the whites wanted to remember.”²⁴ At the same time, that phrase could have the opposite effect, perhaps subconsciously agreeing with the ideology of the State in avoiding to uncover and discuss the true horror of slavery, but also with the experiences of the former slaves themselves, who quite understandably found talking and writing about their terrible ordeal to be simply too painful. Thus we have the ending of the story where everybody, some sooner than others, forgets about the spectre of *Beloved*, and maybe it is the right thing to do, as the darkness is too deep, the reality too horrific:

So they forgot her. Like an unpleasant dream during a troubling sleep. Occasionally, however, the rustle of a skirt hushes when they wake, and the knuckles brushing a cheek in sleep seem to belong to the sleeper. Sometimes the photograph of a close friend or relative— looked at too long—shifts, and something more familiar than the dear face itself moves there. They can touch it if they like, but don’t, because they know things will never be the same if they do. This is not a story to pass on.²⁵

²¹ Ibidem, p. 13.

²² T. Morrison, op. cit., p. 274.

²³ See E. Said, op. cit., p. 55.

²⁴ Karen Carmean, *Toni Morrison’s World of Fiction*, The Whitston Publishing, New York 1993, p. 81.

²⁵ T. Morrison, op. cit., p. 275.

However, the novel's complexity and ambiguity involve having other voices as well which contradict the dominant one, and this contradiction is expressed, for example, in the way Baby Suggs, Paul D and Sethe deal with their painful past. Although now free, the physical and psychological scars remain, and their minds had to create self-defence mechanisms to deal with this ever-present burden. These characters do feel the need to talk about their experiences, but there is careful navigation that has to be performed, as if on a minefield. The healthiest way seems to be exemplified in Baby Suggs' preaching in the Clearing where other black people gather: "It started that way: laughing children, dancing men, crying women and then it got mixed up. Women stopped crying and danced; men sat down and cried; children danced, women laughed, children cried until, exhausted and riven, all and each lay about the Clearing damp and gasping for breath."²⁶ Even though her sermonizing appears spiritual at first, she actually tells them to love themselves as physical people, their bodies, their scars, wounds and missing parts; she invites them to embrace their corporeal form, so despised by slaveholders who think it appropriate to brutalize and exploit it:

'Here,' she said, 'in this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard. Yonder they do not love your flesh. They despise it. They don't love your eyes; they'd just as soon pick em out. No more do they love the skin on your back. Yonder they flay it. And O my people they do not love your hands. Those they only use, tie, bind, chop off and leave empty. Love your hands! Love them.'²⁷

Nonetheless, this regular catharsis is ruined for Baby Suggs by the arrival of the schoolteacher's posse; this breach of slaveholders into the black community of peace and tolerance, along with the angry ghost of house 124, proves too much for her: "No low conversations after supper. No watched barefoot children playing in the shoes of strangers. Baby Suggs, holy, believed she had lied. There was no grace—imaginary or real—and no sunlit dance in a Clearing could change that. Her faith, her love, her imagination and her great big old heart began to collapse twenty-eight days after her daughter-in-law arrived."²⁸ Paul D goes for the understandable path of repression and forgetfulness; the biggest trauma he had experienced was the iron bit in his mouth which pre-

²⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 88.

²⁷ *Ibidem*.

²⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 89.

vented him from speaking, from behaving like a human, and his dignity as a person was severely eroded. Add to that was another painful memory where Paul D had an impression that a farm rooster soon after started to behave more brazenly and loosely when around him, something that did not happen before. Even farm animals, it seemed to him, were not giving him respect as a human being. There was nothing else but to operate on almost pure survival: “After Alfred he had shut down a generous portion of his head, operating on the part that helped him walk, eat, sleep, sing.”²⁹ Despite attempts to talk about his experiences and maybe eventually exorcise them, Paul D’s repression is still very strong, symbolized in the tobacco tin: “He would keep the rest where it belonged: in that tobacco tin buried in his chest where a red heart used to be. Its lid rusted shut.”³⁰ Sethe herself, wracked by the guilt of infanticide, projects her enormous unused love, regret and a desire to justify her act to the unknown girl, despite already having a daughter Denver, and two sons; Harold and Bugler, who escaped the haunted house earlier because they were so afraid of her. Sethe dangerously lives in the “timeless present” which is both the past and future, in a way, as the past is exorcised by the hope of living in a future life with her “resurrected” daughter Beloved. She pushes away her loved ones, Denver and Paul D, as she wants to live entirely with and in Beloved, to the point of losing a sense of Self; as Paul D urges her: “‘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?’”³¹ As we have seen with these three characters, these other voices go against the dominant one, where dealing with slavery as a trauma of an entire people is for some, even after initial optimism, a bitter and crippling disappointment, an overpowering repression and inability to fully feel alive, and most dangerous of all, an intense obsession with exorcising this trauma where it becomes the defining characteristic of one’s identity, a consuming shadow from which there is no escape. It could be said that all of the three in their own way resist truly dealing with the horrors of slavery, with Baby Suggs preaching bodily self-love as a cure, almost forcing oneself to artificially be content, Paul D choosing to forget and move on, as if it would be that simple,

²⁹ Ibidem, p. 41.

³⁰ Ibidem, p. 72-73.

³¹ Ibidem, p. 273.

and Sethe embraces the all too alluring power of delusion, a fantasy life where the most horrible wrongs are redressed and a happy life achieved.

Conclusion

The main message of the novel states that dealing with the past is the crucial step of overcoming the loss of identity, culture and history black people have suffered, and wrestling with it must be the first decisive and also the hardest step in the long path of restoration. This struggle must lead to education of the past, so that this atrocious history does not repeat. This cathartic process is Morrison's intention and the underlying message she wanted to convey in *Beloved*, the truth representing a story that undeniably needed and needs to be passed on: "To deal with the crisis of the present, *Beloved* invokes the heroic ordinary lives of the past. Its hopeful picture shows both individual people and the community overcoming divisions caused by slavery and its legacy."³² As mentioned earlier, there is a will to power in a text and the enticing danger of looking at a text on its own, ignoring the historic reality and all the circumstances that affected its creation and the author's message that can be found in them: "My thesis is that any centrist, exclusivist conception of the text... ignores the self-confirming will to power from which many texts can spring."³³ If there is a will to power of this text, an aim to be achieved, then it is not to be in concordance with the truth of the State, or to achieve some specific, limited political goal. Instead of this kind of will to power, there is a potential power to heal an entire nation. Nonetheless, the sacrifice for that healing could be too much to bear, the price too high, and the natural instinct of people to forget the worst parts of our inhumanity and try to move forward, whatever lingering burden remaining, is also a viable path, something that the novel suggests as well. This perfect balance of how much should a society address the simultaneously healing and gaping wound of slavery is still a societal problem. In other words, how much of history of slavery should we reveal remains an ongoing challenge, and the novel's complexity and ambiguity certainly reflect that.

³² M. Kubitschek, op. cit., p. 136.

³³ E. Said, op. cit., p. 50.

STRAH OD PROŠLOSTI U VOLJENOJ TONI MORRISON – PERSPEKTIVA NOVOGA HISTORICIZMA

Sažetak

Voljena, roman spisateljice Toni Morrison iz 1987. godine, jedan je od najistaknutijih prikaza ropstva, još uvijek nezaliječene rane duboko utaknute u tkivo američkoga društva. Kroz prizmu kritičke književne teorije novoga historicizma ovaj je roman, koji je naravno fikcija, također i svojevrstan povijesni dokument u kojemu autorica, iako se roman bavi razdobljem rekonstrukcije nakon Američkoga građanskog rata, također, svjesno i podsvesno, prikazuje njezino suvremeno poimanje ovoga razdoblja američke prošlosti. Drugim riječima, ovaj roman ima i svoje nutarnje glasove kojima želi izraziti određene političke, povijesne i društvene stavove u skladu s autoričnim namjerama, ali i neovisno o njima, jer autorica ne može a da ne bude na različite načine pod utjecajem suvremenih pogleda kada je posrijedi ova tema. Tako roman postaje dokument svoga vremena, Sjedinjenih Američkih Država iz 1980-ih godina, te ponekad predstavlja i oprečne glasove kada je riječ o činjeničnoj i fikcionalnoj povijesti ropstva u određenome razdoblju, ali i istih tih ideja u sadašnjosti.

Ključne riječi: *Morrison; Voljena; ropstvo; Američki građanski rat; rekonstrukcija; novi historicizam.*

