



Facultade de Filoloxía

Traballo de
Fin de Grao

**Blending the Fantastic
and the Realistic:**

An Approach to Toni
Morrison's Beloved

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Directora: Laura M^a Lojo Rodríguez

Grao en Lingua e Literatura Inglesa

Xuño 2016

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Traballo de Fin de Grao presentado na Facultade de Filoloxía da Universidade de Santiago de Compostela para a obtención do Grao en Lingua e Literatura inglesa.



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Introduction

I first read Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) for the course 'American Literatures' — taught by Professor Paul McDonald— at the university of Wolverhampton (UK). Just as the debate sessions on the novel commenced, the question 'Who is Beloved?' inevitably arose and, unsurprisingly, the great majority of the students responded that she was unquestionably the reincarnation of Sethe's murdered baby daughter.

However, just as our analysis of the novel progressed, we realised that assuming Beloved's identity to be that of Sethe's daughter —and therefore to interpret *Beloved* merely in terms of a ghost story— could possibly entail a misreading of the narrative which endangers other approaches to the novel. The fact remains that, throughout the years, a large part of the reading public has chosen to interpret Morrison's work unilaterally, assuming —in the same manner as we did during our course— that the mysterious girl that arrives at Sethe's house is, certainly, her daughter. On the other hand, and significantly enough, others have considered that Beloved's arrival can be explained without reference to supernatural elements, defining her as a real individual, an escaped sex slave.

In either case, Beloved —and therefore *Beloved*— has been usually subjected to a reductive reading, by choosing to interpret her either as a ghost or as a slave. It is certain that Morrison's novel strikes us as a complex blending of supernatural and realistic elements, and this conflict is epitomised in the title character. The observant reader should therefore evaluate how Morrison brings together these two completely different worlds —that of the supernatural and the realistic account of the Afro-American experience of slavery— that coexist and interact in the novel.

Consequently, the aim of this work is to show, firstly, how the novel offers enough evidence to interpret the character of Beloved not only as a ghostlike figure, but also as a real escaped sex slave and, concurrently, how the choice of a single interpretation provides the reader with only a partial view of the full significance of *Beloved*, which should not be regarded as a mere ghost story, but as a realistic account of the traumas caused by the institution of slavery.

In order to pursue this aim, I will be focusing on various critical readings of Morrison's novel, taking chiefly Paul McDonald's *Reading Toni Morrison's 'Beloved'* (2013) as a major starting point. By doing so, I will examine how the character of Beloved could be used to discuss how both aforementioned alternatives or critical approaches to read Morrison's novel are not only possible, but also mutually dependant, for they complement and enhance each other.

Thereby, in the first section of this paper I shall provide a brief introduction both to the author and the novel, in order to offer an overview of the background of *Beloved*. Next I will elaborate on the two main alternatives that have traditionally been employed to discuss the nature of the title character —that of Beloved as Sethe's daughter and that of Beloved as a real former slave— discussing them separately by presenting a textual evidence that supports each of the two interpretations. In the following section I will focus on alternative readings of the character as offered by different critics and, more importantly, I will gather previously mentioned ideas in order to explain how the simultaneous consideration of the two main approaches used to describe the nature of Beloved actually unveil a more complex reading of the novel, in which Beloved represents the return of the repressed not only for Sethe, but for the whole community of former slaves.

1. Background to Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

1.1 An Introduction to the Author

Toni Morrison was born in Lorain, Ohio, in 1931, as Chloe Ardelia Wofford. She would only later change her name. When she was twelve years old she converted to Catholicism and took the name Anthony (McDonald, 2013, p. 9). Toni, the shortened form, was the nickname she decided to use as a student, because people seemed to have some difficulties in pronouncing "Chloe" (Kramer, 2013, p. 18), and Morrison was the surname of her first husband.

At the time, Lorain was an industrial city that received a great number of immigrants from Latin America, Europe and Mexico, so she grew up in a multi-ethnic background (Li, 2010, p. 1). Before Morrison's birth, her family had migrated from Georgia and Alabama to the North in order to escape the racism in the Southern States and hoping to find better employment opportunities there.

Morrison's family was rather poor and her father, George Wofford, had to work hard, taking every job he could find to support a family of eight people, which included the young Chloe, her three brothers, her parents and grandparents. He nonetheless always refused "to let discrimination make him feel like less of a man" (Sanna, 2002, p. 6). George Wofford was proud of his Afro-American roots and felt an unflinching and intense suspicion of all white people, believing that they were cruel and unworthy of serious reflection. In an interview with Hilary Mantel for *The Guardian* (2008), Morrison explained that her father would not even let whites, "insurance people and so on", in his house. From him, Morrison learned both to appreciate her heritage and to distrust white people.

Morrison's mother, Ramah Wofford, was also a great example to follow, since she refused to allow discrimination and remain silent when she thought an injustice was being committed. As an example of her position of resistance, Ramah would sit in the "white folks' section", an area in the movie theatres that the Afro-American were not allowed to occupy, and in doing so, she tried to show the rest of the black community that they were all able to do it. Nevertheless, unlike her husband, Ramah Wofford still hoped for racial harmony (Sanna, 2002, p. 6)

Through the course of her youth Morrison was surrounded by various manifestations both of American and African American culture: books were regarded as a treasure at Morrison's home and, while attending the Lorain High School, she developed a great interest and love for the European classics; her mother sang blues and opera and her grandfather had taught himself how to play the violin. Furthermore, the Wofford's children grew up hearing their parents and grandparents tell a series of supernatural and fantastic tales, along with traditional African American folklore, myths and signs, which made Morrison's self-esteem and pride for her roots and heritage increase (Alexander & Rucker, 2010, p. 902).

Morrison's family firmly believed in this world of the spectral and the power of spirits. Not only in the tales that her parents told her, but also in her everyday life, Morrison was surrounded by the supernatural. As she said:

[...] that's the way the world was for me and for the black people I knew [...] I grew up in a house in which people talked about their dreams with the same authority that they talked about what 'really' happened. They had visitations and didn't find that fact shocking. (1986, cited in Goulimari, 2012, p. 14)

Morrison was raised to believe in the signs and symbols that surrounded her, and in their meaning. Her grandmother, for instance, often interpreted Morrison's

dreams. She used to ask her about them and, depending on their content, she would turn them, using a book of dream symbols, into three-digit numbers. She would later use this three-digit number to play in the numbers, a gambling game, and, for a while, she won using her granddaughter's dreams. Morrison explained:

You dream about a rabbit, or death, or weddings, and then color made a difference—if you dreamed about dying in a white dress or a red dress—and weddings always meant death and death always meant weddings. I was very interested because she used to hit a lot on my dreams for about a year or two. (1981, cited in Mbalia, 2004, p.195)

Morrison was first conscious of slavery through her grandfather, her mother's father, with whom she spent a great deal of time. Morrison's great-grandparents had been slaves, and her grandfather was the one who explained her what it was like to grow up in the South during the times of slavery.

Despite the above said, Morrison's family was not the only major influence during her childhood. In addition to it, the neighbourhood she lived in, a community of African Americans, taught her the necessity of taking their responsibilities to each other seriously. At home, if Morrison was told to watch the food on the stove, she knew she had to take her task carefully and do not let supper burn. If she did, the family would go hungry because they did not have anything else to replace the burnt food. In the same manner people took care of each other in Morrison's Afro-American community; every woman on the street, for instance, cared for everybody's children. They all had a part in their raising and could take responsibility for their behaviour, correcting them when they thought they were acting wrongly (Kramer, 2013, p. 16).

All these circumstances —the connection with the supernatural, poverty, slavery and the profound bonding existing between the members of the family and

also of the community— that Morrison experienced at an early age influenced her writing and would be later reflected in her novels.

In 1949 Morrison graduated from high school and she was the first woman in her family to be accepted at the University (Kramer, 2013, p. 17). Morrison attended Howard University in Washington, where she chose English as her major. She was later offered a job at the University of Houston, Texas, where she taught introductory English.

By 1962 Morrison joined a writer's group. For this association, Morrison outlined which will later be expanded into her first novel, *The Bluest Eye* (1970). Only three years later, by 1965, Morrison started to work seriously on the story of a black girl that longed for blue eyes. The novel was finally published in 1970 after a number of rejections. Despite the fact that sales of this novel were not significant and it was out of print by 1974, praise and critical recognition for Toni Morrison grew with each new novel she wrote.

Morrison's allegedly better-known work, also a Pulitzer Prize winning novel, *Beloved*, was published in 1987. After a series of awards which included the National Book Critics Circle Award for *Song of Solomon* (1977) or the American Book Award for *Beloved* Morrison was finally honoured with the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1993. The Swedish Academy, responsible for selecting the Nobel Laureates in Literature, described her "as a writer [...] who gives life to an essential aspect of American reality" (Beaulieu, 2003, p. ix). She was the first Afro-American ever to achieve such recognition.

In her own words " [...] what is more wonderful for me, personally, is to know that the prize at last has been awarded to an African-American. Winning as an American is very special—but winning as a black American is a knockout" (1993,

cited in Sinha, 2008, p. 46). In an interview, Morrison said she had been inspired by “huge silences in literature, things that had never been articulated, printed or imagined and they were the silences about Black girls, Black women” (1993, cited in Smith, 2014, p. 181).

Consequently, of particular importance for her literary production is Morrison’s belief that the black writer has a social responsibility towards the black community (Jones & Vinson, 1985, p. 183). In this way, in her novels Morrison gives voice to a community that has traditionally been denied the power of expressing themselves, the power of language and, in this regard, Morrison’s intention in *Beloved* is to recuperate a part of American history that has not only often been ignored, but also usually willingly forgotten.

1.2 An Introduction to the Novel

Beloved is partly based on the true story of Margaret Garner, who escaped slavery by fleeing into Ohio. Set in 1852, in Cincinnati, Ohio, during the Reconstruction period that followed the American Civil War (1861-1865), the novel deals therefore with the African American past and the burden and legacy of slavery. For the former slaves in the novel their previous existence as slaves is a heavy load that they hopelessly try to forget and overcome. However, memories of the past and the traumas suffered while they were enslaved seem to be unavoidable and irremediable.

In this sense, Sethe’s case is particularly noteworthy. Even though she has escaped slavery, she seems to have not yet attained freedom. Memories of her days of involuntary servitude and its consequences continue to haunt her, particularly those regarding the murder of her two-year-old daughter. As Maggie Sale declares (1998,

cited in McDonald, 2013, p. 22) Sethe's intense feeling of guilt seems to be calling Beloved back from the world of the dead and into that of the living.

Eighteen years before the beginning of the narrative, Sethe had fled from Sweet Home, the plantation where she was enslaved. She escaped to Cincinnati, where she was reunited with Baby Suggs¹. Nearly a month after Sethe's arrival at 124 Bluestone Road —Baby Suggs' home— schoolteacher² located Sethe. Under the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850³, schoolteacher prepared to exercise his right and take Sethe —along with her four children— back to the plantation. However, rather than allowing her children to be returned to a life of slavery, under the rule of schoolteacher, Sethe preferred to murder them and, indeed, she succeeded in killing her two-year-old daughter, Beloved, who was named after the epitaph that was later engraved on her tomb.

The reader, however, will not be aware of Beloved's murder by her mother until Section Two in the novel, for the story begins *in media res*, approximately eighteen years after Sethe's arrival at 124 Bluestone Road, during the year 1873. At this point, and in order to introduce the character of Beloved, Morrison resorts to magical realism, a literary strategy which is described by David Lodge as “marvellous and impossible events occurring in what otherwise purports to be realistic narrative”

¹ Baby Suggs is Sethe's mother-in-law. She had been bought freedom by her son Halle, who would later become Sethe's husband. Mr Garner, the owner of Sweet Home, drives Baby Suggs to Cincinnati, where the Bodwins assist her and give her 124 Bluestone Road and a job. Sethe was brought to Sweet Home in order to replace Baby Suggs.

² After the death of Mr Garner, schoolteacher becomes the new master of the plantation. He conducted a pseudo-scientific study of the slaves —comparing them to animals— which profoundly traumatized Sethe. Similarly, Paul D even claims that ‘schoolteacher changed [him] (Morrison, 2005, p. 86), since under the rule of Mr Garner, he had always considered a man in his own right. Mr Garner used to feel proud that ‘[his] niggers is men every one of em. Bought em thataway, raised em thataway. Men every one’ (Morrison, 2005, p. 12). However, schoolteacher's sadistic actions dehumanised black people, rendering them defenceless. For instance, he forced Paul D to wear a bit like an animal would do and allowed his nephews to brutally whip Sethe, giving her the ‘the revolting clump of scars’ (Morrison, 2005, p. 25) in her back.

³ The Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 required that all captured runaway slaves were returned to the plantations from which they had fled and allowed the owners to chase them across state borders.

(1992, cited in McDonald, 2013, p. 18). This magical realism is, therefore, the key and strategy employed by Morrison throughout the novel in order to address and confront the issue of slavery and its consequences and the tool she uses to give voice to the traditionally silenced peoples.

Thereby, since the very beginning of the story Morrison introduces the reader into a world that, despite being realistic in its description of the American past and the black community, includes several supernatural elements, straddling the line between fiction and history. Thus, the novel opens with an introduction to the ghost, the spirit of Sethe's murdered baby: "124 was spiteful. Full of a baby's venom" (Morrison, 2005, p. 3).

Each of the three sections of the novel begins with a description and personification of 124 Bluestone Road; the second one starts with "124 was loud", while the third one begins with "124 was quiet" (Morrison, 2005, pp. 198; 281). These quotations can be identified with the ghostlike character of Beloved and the significant changes the character undergoes as the story progresses. In this sense, the ghost of the baby that wanders around 124 in the first part of the novel is transformed into a solid figure in the second one, a young woman that becomes the centre of attention and monopolizes Sethe's care, and finally a deadened, silent and quiet memory in the third section.

At the beginning of the first section of the book, Sethe's daughter is merely described as a spirit. The ghost of a child who has been denied the opportunity to grow up and who now wanders around 124, full of rage, making its presence obvious to the family living in the house:

124 was spiteful. Full of a baby's venom. The women in the house knew it and so did the children. For years each put up with the spite in his own way, but by 1873 Sethe and her

daughter Denver were its only victims. The grandmother, Baby Suggs, was dead, and the sons, Howard and Buglar, had run away by the time they were thirteen years old—as soon as merely looking in a mirror shattered it (that was the signal for Buglar); as soon as two tiny hand prints appeared in the cake (that was it for Howard). Neither boy waited to see more [...]. Nor did they wait for one of the relief periods: the weeks, months even, when nothing was disturbed. No. Each one fled at once—the moment the house committed what was for him the one insult not to be borne or witnessed a second time. [...] Ohio had been calling itself a state only seventy years when first one brother and then the next stuffed quilt packing into his hat, snatched up his shoes, and crept away from the lively spite the house felt for them. (Morrison, 2005, p. 3)

However, the reason why the baby is dead, or why she is enraged, is never stated in this first section. The mixture between reason and the supernatural becomes explicit from the first line in Morrison's *Beloved*. By explaining that “two tiny hand prints appeared in the cake” (Morrison, 2005, p. 3), it is made obvious that the disturbances occurring at 124 are caused by the spirit of Sethe's two-year-old daughter, and that the whole family accepts the existence of the ghost as something natural, never doubting it.

The two boys feel the undeniable presence and they finally decide to run away from home when they are thirteen, unable to bear the situation. Even Paul D, also a former slave at Sweet Home and Sethe's lover once they meet again at Bluestone Road, can feel the baby's presence when he later arrives at 124:

Paul D [...] followed her through the door straight into a pool of reed and undulating light that locked him where he stood.
“You got company? He whispered, frowning.
“Off and on,” said Sethe.
“Good God.” He backed out the door onto the porch. “What kind of evil you got in here?” (Morrison, 2005, p. 10)

For her part, Baby Suggs accepts as natural the fact that the house is haunted by the spirit of Sethe's baby daughter and even argues that her presence is not as bad as it could be. She explains that 'Not a house in the country ain't packed to its rafters with some dead Negro's grief. We lucky this ghost is a baby' (Morrison, 2005, p. 6). This presence of spiritual beings as part of everyday life seems to be further accepted later in the novel when Denver explains to Paul D that there '[is] a ghost in here. [...] My sister. She died in this house' and he calmly replies that '[it] reminds [him] of that headless bride back behind Sweet Home' which 'used to roam them woods regular' (Morrison, 2005, pp. 15-16).

As Stephen M. Hart has explained (2003, p. 91), what is important about the magical and supernatural elements offered in Morrison's novel is that these depict 'a subalternised reality', which is 'directly expressive of societal oppression' and represents, not only this oppression, but also the repression suffered by the African-American society in the United States, during the nineteenth century. In *Beloved*, Paul D explains: 'Whitepeople believed that whatever the manners, under every dark skin was a jungle. Swift unnavigable waters, swinging screaming baboons, sleeping snakes, red gums ready for sweet white blood' (Morrison, 2005, p. 234). In consequence Hart, citing Heinze, understands *Beloved* to be "the projection of the repressed collective memory of a violated people" (1993, in 2003, p. 90).

Thus, as Murad states (2009, p. 4), African American writers have been forced on numerous occasions to resort to magical and mythological elements in order to be able to express those experiences that Western notions of reality and history have been unable to —or have not even tried to— describe. In this regard, in representing the past of some countries with turbulent histories, conventional realism does not seem to

be an appropriate strategy to deal with such issues. In the case of *Beloved*, Morrison resorts to magical realism in order to explore the multi-generational impact of slavery.

It should further be noted that the countries where this magical realism has flourished are precisely those societies in which these mythological and magical aspects are part of the daily life of the community, as in the case of the Afro-American society and, particularly, of Toni Morrison herself, who grew up surrounded by these elements. For African-Americans in general, the experience of ghosts and spirits communicating with the living has traditionally been, rather than an unnatural happening, a natural one.

However, and while spirits are not anomalies in the African-American world, the spirit of Sethe's murdered baby seems to overstep and violate the boundaries and rules of death. Shannin Schroeder explains it as follows:

Because Paul D exorcizes the ghost from Sethe's house, he robs the supernatural of its ability to function within the realm of the natural world. He tampers with the balance between the customary supernatural and everyday in this community, and by doing so he arguably threatens the magical realism in the novel. To maintain the magical realism and to intervene in the real world more directly, the spirit must assume a human shape, must become a physical presence in the novel. (2004, p. 101)

2. Hesitating between Alternatives

2.1 Reading *Beloved* as a Ghost Narrative

The interference of Paul D prompts the disappearance of the baby's ghost, which, in a sense, also triggers what appears to be the subsequent manifestation of the physical human figure of Beloved. Interestingly enough, Schroeder states that 'the spirit *must* [emphasis added] assume a human shape, *must* [emphasis added] become a physical presence' (2004, p. 101), therefore incidentally affirming that the identity of the woman that arrives at 124 is indeed that of Sethe's reincarnated daughter. This common tendency to associate the enigmatic figure of Beloved with the baby spirit is partly induced by the visit Paul D, Sethe and Denver make to the carnival freak show.

The carnival, performed by the white people and for the African-American community on "Coloured Thursday", serves to temporarily subvert the social roles and order (2000, cited in Conner, 2000, p. 38). 'Seeing white people loose: doing magic, clowning, without heads or two heads, twenty feet tall or two feet tall' (Morrison, 2005, p. 57), makes the Afro-American audience laugh at these white grotesque individuals, at 'the spectacle of white folks making a spectacle of themselves' (Morrison, 2005, p. 58). Therefore, during the festival the white community is temporarily displaced from its position of power. Thus Corey explains that, in Bakhtin's description of the carnival (2000, cited in Conner, 2000, p. 38), laughter serves as a means of overcoming fear. In *Beloved*'s case, the carnival allows the African-American community to temporarily forget the dread the white people inspire, but it also affects the relationships that the members of the community have established among themselves. In this way, Denver notices that some of the women that for years have ostracised Sethe, now even dare to smile at her due to the positive

atmosphere that the carnival has created. This situation foreshadows the gathering of the African-American women at the end of the novel to help Sethe.

But perhaps more importantly in order to discuss the character of Beloved, is the fact that the carnival also creates an atmosphere of whimsical imagination and unreality. Corey further declares that, for Bakhtin, this situation prepares ‘the way for change by freeing the imagination to play an alternative worldview’ (2000, cited in Conner, 2000, p. 38). Framed by the carnival freak show and the supernatural beliefs of the African-American community, Beloved’s human figure has usually been taken—by both readers and critics—for the reincarnation of Sethe’s murdered baby. As Rebecca Ferguson declares ‘it is striking to note how frequently the words “ghost”, “ghostly”, “haunting” or “haunted”, “the supernatural”, “the uncanny” and other cognate terms recur in critical commentary on *Beloved*’ (2007, p. 245). Thomas R. Edward points out, for instance:

Beloved thus proposes to be a ghost story about slavery, and Morrison firmly excludes any tricky indeterminacies about the supernatural. [...] If you believe in *Beloved* at all you must accept the ghost in the same way you accept the other, solidly realistic figures in the story. [...] But then Morrison, with even more daring indifference to the rules of realistic fiction, brings to Sethe’s house a lovely, historyless young woman who calls herself Beloved and is *unquestionably* [emphasis added] the dead daughter’s spirit in human form. (1998, cited in Schroeder, 2004, p. 99)

Likewise, Stanley Crouch describes the physical body of Beloved as ‘the reincarnated force of the malevolent ghost that was chased from the house’ (1987, cited in Marks, 2002, p. 67), while June states that ‘although Sethe does not immediately realize that the young woman is in fact her (re)incarnated daughter,

Denver does' (2010, p. 27), and Ying claims that in *Beloved* 'the historical past comes back in the magical realistic revival of Sethe's dead daughter' (2006, p. 58).

Indeed, throughout the novel, *Beloved* is depicted in different scenes as having a resemblance to the murdered baby and therefore a supernatural quality, for instance as she is "so agitated she behaved like a two year old" (Morrison, 2005, p. 116).

Moreover, a series of passages seem to support this interpretation of *Beloved* as a supernatural being. One of the most evident examples of this can be found in Section Three of the novel, when a group of women is gathered in order to help Sethe and exorcise *Beloved*, seeming to truly succeed in their endeavour. Furthermore, Marks (2002, p. 81) offers as evidence an excerpt from Section One, for she considers that Denver firmly believes that the already exorcized ghost of her murdered baby sister is planning to return to life:

"Well, I think the baby got plans," said Denver.

"What plans?"

"I don't know, but the dress holding on to you got to mean something."

"Maybe," said Sethe. "Maybe it does have plans." (Morrison, 2005, p. 45)

A few chapters later, Denver seems to see her suspicions confirmed when the recently arrived *Beloved* actually explains the arduous journey she had to undertake in order to get to 124 Bluestone Road. Denver, convinced that *Beloved* 'was the white dress that had knelt with her mother' (Morrison, 2005, p. 141), possibly mistakenly interprets *Beloved*'s coming as her return from death:

"What's it like over there, where you were before? Can you tell me?"

“Dark,” said Beloved. “I’m small in that place. I’m like this here.” She raised her head off the bed, lay down on her side and curled up.

[...] “You see anybody?”

“Heaps. A lot of people is down there. Some is dead.”

“You see Jesus? Baby Suggs?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know the names”. She sat up.

“Tell me, how did you get here?”

“I wait; then I got on the bridge. I stay there in the dark, in the daytime, in the dark, in the daytime. It was a long time.”

[...] “What did you come back for?”

Beloved smiled. “To see her face.”

“Ma’am’s? Sethe?”

“Yes, Sethe.” (Morrison, 2005, p. 88)

Thus due to the descriptions Beloved provides upon her arrival at Baby Suggs’ home, the reader is inclined to accept the eerie nature of the character, especially when Sethe feels ‘that the girl’s [Beloved’s] touch was also exactly like the baby’s ghost’ (Morrison, 2005, p. 116) and when later, in Chapter 23, Beloved admits to Sethe the following:

Tell me the truth. Didn’t you come from the other side?

Yes. I was on the other side.

You came back because of me?

Yes.

[...] Beloved. [...] You’re back. You’re back. (Morrison, 2005, 254)

Equally relevant is the moment in which, after returning from the carnival and at the moment of seeing Beloved’s face for the first time, Sethe’s bladder fills to full capacity, making her remember the act of giving birth. Beloved is furthermore here described as ‘a fully dressed woman [who] walked out of the water’ (Morrison, 2005, p. 60). The birth and rebirth symbolism becomes even clearer when the narrator recalls

that ‘there was no stopping water breaking from a breaking womb and there was no stopping now’ (Morrison, 2005, p. 61).

Moreover the family dog, Here Boy, runs away once Beloved arrives at 124 Bluestone Road:

“Wonder where Here Boy got off to?” Sethe thought a change of subject was needed.

“He won’t be back,” said Denver.

“How you know?”

“I just know.” (Morrison, 2005, pp. 65-66)

The dog was terrified of the ghost that had haunted 124, since once ‘the baby’s spirit picked up Here Boy and slammed him into the wall hard enough to break two of his legs and dislocate his eye, so hard he went into convulsions and chewed up his tongue’ (Morrison, 2005, p. 14). Since Denver actually believes that Beloved is the incarnation of her murdered sister, she is completely sure that the dog, afraid of the newcomer, will not return while she stays at the house. Indeed, the dog will only come back when, at the end of the novel, Beloved abandons 124 Bluestone Road and disappears from the lives of Sethe and Denver. Thus, for instance, only ‘when Here Boy, feeble and shedding his coat in patches, is asleep by the pump, [...] Paul D knows Beloved is truly gone’ (Morrison, 2005, p. 310). This happening helps to prove that the baby ghost that had previously been exorcized from Bluestone Road could have possibly been reborn in the human figure of the mysterious Beloved.

Similarly, this strange woman exhibits some traces and characteristics that can be related to the figure of the baby. To begin with, she refers to herself as Beloved, which is the name carved on Sethe’s daughter tombstone, and she is the age the baby ‘would have been had it lived’ (Morrison, 2005, p. 301). But, more significantly, June (2010, p. 28) seems to find evidence of Beloved’s identity on the scars that she bears.

The first and most striking one is the ‘little curved shadow of a smile in the kootchy-kootchy-coo place under the chin’ (Morrison, 2005, p. 281), which coincides with the mortal wound inflicted by Sethe to her two-year-old daughter. In addition to this, the supposedly reincarnation of the baby has ‘three vertical scratches on her forehead’ (Morrison, 2005, p. 62), which remind of those caused by Sethe while she held her daughter’s head as she bled to death. June (2010, p. 28) claims that are precisely those three tiny marks the ones that prove Beloved’s identity as Denver’s murdered sister. In fact, except for the scars, ‘she had new skin, lineless and smooth, including the knuckles of her hands’ (Morrison, 2005, p.61) and the shoes she is wearing are so little worn that, just as she arrives, they make Paul D suspicious of her true identity:

“What was you looking for when you came here?” he asked her.
“This place. I was looking for this place I could be in.”
[...] “I asked you who brought you here?”
“I walked here,” she said. “A long, long, long, long way. Nobody bring me. Nobody help me.”
“You had new shoes. If you walked so long why don’t your shoes show it?” (Morrison, 2005, p. 76)

In this regard Paul D believes that there is ‘something funny ‘bout that gal’ because she ‘acts sick, sounds sick, but she don’t look sick. Good skin, bright eyes and strong as a bull’ (Morrison, 2005, p. 67). Barbara Christian (1997, p. 43) sees in the description Morrison makes of Beloved a parallelism with her own Caribbean beliefs. Christian explains that in her culture, like in Morrison’s, the dead are understood to be part of the everyday life and thought to even have the ability to return to the realm of the living in carnal form. Despite this, they still differ from the living in that their skin and eyes, like Beloved’s, are those of the recently born babies.

Besides, she seems to lack both proper language skills and physical coordination—just like a real two-year old child—and accordingly she struggles with her shortage of vocabulary, asking herself ‘how can [she] say things that are pictures’ (Morrison, 2005, p. 248) and occasionally encountering some difficulties when trying to effectively communicate with the people that surround her:

“Your woman she never fixed up your hair?” Beloved asked.
[...] [It] was clearly a question for Sethe, since that’s who she was looking at.
“My woman? You mean my mother? If she did I, I don’t remember.” (Morrison, 2005, p. 72)

Beloved also ‘move[s] like a heavier one or an older one, holding on to furniture, resting her head in the palm of her hand as though it was too heavy for a neck alone’ (Morrison, 2005, p. 67). Sethe even states that ‘she can hardly walk without holding on to something’ (Morrison, 2005, p. 67) and the idea of her reputed supernatural identity is then reinforced when Paul D replies to Sethe that she ‘can’t walk, but [he has] seen her pick up the rocker with one hand’ (Morrison, 2005, p. 67), which contradicts the previous descriptions of her as a weakened woman, suggesting that there is in fact something eerie about her.

In addition, Beloved hums a song that Sethe made up herself and used to sing to her children while they were living at Sweet Home. She also seems to know about what she calls “Sethe’s diamonds”, a pair of crystal earrings given to her by Mrs Garner, who was one of the owners of the plantation prior to the arrival of schoolteacher. Sethe lost these earrings long before the arrival of Beloved, so it seems impossible that she knew of their existence. Therefore, this knowledge may make the reader suspect that Beloved belongs to Sethe’s past and is in fact the incarnation of her dead baby.

Thirdly, McDonald (2013, p. 44) has also noted Beloved's markedly childish behaviour, which may serve as an indication of the early age at which she was murdered. For instance, she does not even know how to tie her shoes, and therefore Denver must teach her how to do so. She is besides extremely demanding of Sethe's attention:

[...] Beloved could not take her eyes off Sethe. Stooping to shake the damper, or snapping sticks for kindling, Sethe was licked, tasted, eaten by Beloved's eyes. [...] She [Beloved] hovered, never leaving the room Sethe was in [...] She rose early in the dark to be there, waiting, in the kitchen when Sethe came down [...] She was in the window at two when Sethe returned, or the doorway; then the porch, its steps, the path, the road, till finally, surrendering to the habit, Beloved began inching down Bluestone Road further and further each day to meet Sethe and walk her back to 124.

[...] Sethe was flattered by Beloved's open, quiet devotion. The same adoration from her daughter (had it been forthcoming) would have annoyed her; made her chill at the thought of having raised a ridiculously dependent child. But the company of this sweet, if peculiar, guest pleased her the way a zealot pleases his teacher. (Morrison, 2005, p. 68)

And, as Denver soon discovers, she is also prone to tantrums and fond of sweet things:

Beloved looked at the sweet bread in Denver's hands and Denver held it out to her. [...] From that moment and through everything that followed, sugar could always be counted on to please her. It was as though sweet things were what she was born for. Honey as well as the wax it came in, sugar sandwiches, the sludgy molasses gone hard and brutal in the cane, lemonade, taffy and any type of desert Sethe brought home from the restaurant. (Morrison, 2005, p. 66)

Another major evidence that may serve to support this supernatural reading of *Beloved* can be found, as has already been mentioned, at the end of the novel, once Ella gathers the community to perform a new exorcism and save Sethe. As the black community is convinced that *Beloved* is indeed the dead baby returned from the dead world, they believe they are under the obligation to confront the malign spirit who has possessed 124 Bluestone Road. Morrison writes:

As long as the ghost showed out from its ghostly place—shaking stuff, crying, smashing and such—Ella respected it. But if it took flesh and came in her world, well, the shoe was on the other foot. She didn't mind a little communication between the two worlds, but this was an invasion.

“Shall we pray?” asked the women.

“Uh huh,” said Ella. “First. Then we got to get down to business.”

[...] So thirty women made up that company and walked slowly, slowly toward 124. [...] and then Ella hollered. Instantly the kneelers and the standers joined her. They stopped praying and took a step back to the beginning. In the beginning there were no words. In the beginning was the sound, and they all knew what that sound sounded like.

[...] It broke over Sethe and she trembled like the baptized in its wash. (Morrison, 2005, pp. 302; 308)

Ella's efforts seem to yield results, since *Beloved* seems to disappear completely from 124 Bluestone Road, finally liberating Sethe from her influence.

2.1.1 Interpreting *Beloved* as a Ghost

Such textual evidence serves to support, at least initially, the supernatural identity of the character. As a ghostlike figure *Beloved* invades 124 Bluestone Road and the lives of the people inhabiting the house. She is the very embodiment of the return of the repressed past, the Freudian uncanny, that comes to disrupt the seemingly peaceful present of the protagonists. Therefore she functions as a catalyst for the people at 124.

By confronting Beloved's presence Denver, Paul D and particularly Sethe are forced to face their fears and traumas in order to be able to move on. In this regard Heinze (1993, cited in Marks, 2002, p. 75) even suggests that

so rife is the novel with the physical and spiritual presence of ghostly energy that a better term than supernatural would be uncanny, defined by Schelling as 'the name for everything that ought to have remained [...] secret and hidden but has come to light.'

Precisely, Beloved unleashes the traumas of the different characters, 'which ought to have remained secret.'

Firstly, with her continuous requests to hear about the past of her alleged mother, Beloved makes Sethe open up, recall and share the memories she has been struggling to suppress since she escaped Sweet Home, for she had been working 'hard to remember as close to nothing as was safe' (Morrison, 2005, p. 6). Throughout the novel it is made obvious that only Beloved has the power to awake Sethe's painful, forgotten recollections, triggering the traumatic awakening of anger and anguish as she encounters the memories of her childhood, of her life at Sweet Home and, eventually, of the reasons why she murdered her baby daughter. Beloved has the capacity to obtain answers from Sethe, preventing her from 'circling the subject' (Morrison, 2005, p. 189), as she usually does when talking to the other characters in the novel, and forcing her to confront her previous existence:

[...] Sethe learned the profound satisfaction Beloved got from storytelling. It amazed Sethe (as much as it pleased Beloved) because every mention of her past life hurt. Everything in it was painful or lost. She and Baby Suggs had agreed without saying so that was unspeakable; to Denver's inquiries Sethe

gave short replies or rambling incomplete reveries. Even with Paul D [...] the hurt was always there. [...] But as she began telling about the earrings, she found herself wanting it, liking it. Perhaps it was Beloved's distance from the events itself, or her thirst for hearing it—in any case it was an unexpected pleasure. (Morrison, 2005, p. 69)

The arrival of Beloved triggers a change in Sethe's mind-set, which is made particularly explicit at the end of the novel. While the Afro-American women are gathered in front of 124 in order to try to exorcise Beloved, Mr Bodwin⁴ arrives to take Denver to her new job. The appearance of the white man awakens Sethe's memories and she misinterprets his arrival as a threat. She mistakes Mr Bodwin for schoolteacher and consequently she attacks him. Although the women prevent her from murdering Bodwin, McDonald (2013, p. 61) argues that Sethe's actions imply that she 'now feels the appropriate response is fight rather than flight, suggesting perhaps that conflicts need to be addressed in this world rather than in the next.'

Likewise, Beloved's appearance affects Paul D in a manner similar to Sethe's. Long before his arrival at 124 Bluestone Road, Paul D, who had been raped by white men, locked his memories and emotions in a 'tobacco tin buried in his chest where a red heart used to be' (Morrison, 2005, p. 86), claiming that 'nothing in this world could pry it open' (Morrison, 2005, p. 133). Paradoxically, right after this statement the narrator opens a new chapter by informing the reader that 'she [Beloved] moved him [Paul D]' (Morrison, 2005, p. 134). Beloved gains power over Paul D, and consequently the capacity to throw him out of Bluestone Road, by seducing him and driving a wedge between him and Sethe as a result of his sexual encounter with Beloved. At this point Corey asserts that

⁴ The white-man Mr Bodwin and his sister, Miss Bodwin, were former abolitionists that used to help runaway slaves to settle into a new life. Years before the beginning of the narrative, they allowed Baby Suggs to live in 124 Bluestone Road and by the end of the novel they employ Denver, while Miss Bodwin actually encourages her to go to college.

Paul D discerns an uncanny quality about Beloved from the outset. [...] Feeling ashamed and guilty over these encounters with Beloved, Paul D experiences physical signs of her uncanny effect—“a shudder” and a “bone cold spasm”—when Stamp Paid mentions her name. (2000, cited in Conner, 2000, p. 39)

In spite of this, Beloved has a positively noticeable impact on Paul D since she re-enacts the memories of his raping. Therefore while being with her, ‘he didn’t hear the whisper that the flakes of rust made either as they fell away from the seams of his tobacco tin’ (Morrison, 2005, p. 136) and he finally found himself ‘saying, “Red heart. Red heart,” over and over again [...] so loud it woke [...] Paul D himself’ (Morrison, 2005, p. 136), suggesting that he has reconnected with his feelings. As Corey illustrates:

The arousal of his [Paul D’s] bodily responses is accompanied by an awakening of his emotion and memories: the lid of the “tobacco tin” protecting his heart gives way, leaving him vulnerable to the repressed emotions from his past—his feelings of guilt [...] and his shame. Although confronting these memories is exceedingly painful [...] through his contact with her [Beloved], Paul D has begun to reconnect to his body, his emotions, and his unconscious memories. (2000, cited in Conner, 2000, p. 39)

Both Paul D and Sethe have tried to deal with their traumas from the past by developing a series of harmful coping mechanisms—which include Sethe’s willingness to forget and Paul D’s “rusted tobacco tin”—since they are afraid of sharing their painful memories, fearing that their pain would bring them back to the past, perceived as ‘a place they couldn’t get back from’ (Morrison, 2005, p. 86). Only after Beloved’s arrival they will be able to confront their previous existence.

On the other hand, unlike Beloved's effect on the couple, the appearance of the newcomer makes Denver feel the urge to confront, not only her past, but also her future. Since the very arrival of Beloved at 124, Denver acts as a motherly figure to her, even facing Sethe in her attempts to protect the woman whom she considers to be her sister. Scared of what her mother did in the past, Denver stays 'alert for any sign that Beloved was in danger, [...] for a signal that the thing that was in her [Sethe] was out, and she would kill again' (Morrison, 2005, p. 185).

But once Denver recognizes that the intimate but perverse relationship Beloved maintains with her mother excludes her in every possible aspect, Denver finally discovers the malign nature of Beloved. She soon understands that Beloved has been feeding upon Sethe, slowly starving her, beating her 'like she was batter' (Morrison, 2005, p. 301) and stealing her willpower, pushing her into a spiral of self-destruction that leads her to quit her job and therefore to lose the capacity to support herself and the whole family. Morrison writes:

[...] the two of them cut Denver out of the games. [...] Games her mother loved so well she took to going to work later and later each day until the predictable happened: Sawyer told her not to come back. And instead of looking for another job, Sethe played all the harder with Beloved, who never got enough of anything. [...] If the hen had only two eggs, she got both. It was as though her mother had lost her mind.

[...] Anything she [Beloved] wanted, she got, and when Sethe ran out of things to give her, Beloved invented desire. [...] She took the best of everything—first. The best chair, the biggest piece, the prettiest plate, the brightest ribbon for her hair [...] Beloved slammed things, wiped the table clean of plates, threw salt on the floor, broke a windowpane.

She was not like them. She was wild game [...] and little by little it dawned on Denver that if Sethe didn't wake up one morning and pick up a knife, Beloved might. (Morrison, 2005, pp. 282-285)

Therefore, as Sethe ‘literally becomes a skeleton of her former self’ (Trudier, n.d., cited in Andrews & McKay, 1999, p. 134), Denver realizes that the future of the family relies on her. The precarious situation at 124 Bluestone Road forces Denver, who had grown up in isolation, cut off from the community, to deal with her fears and abandon the house in search of help, entering the frightening and strange world beyond 124 for the first time. Thus Denver decides to seek refuge within the African American community, which soon discovers the existence of Beloved, accepting, in the same manner as the family at 124, the presumed supernatural and ghostlike identity of the woman:

“Ella. What’s all this I’m hearing about Sethe?”
“Tell me it’s in there with here. That’s all I know.”
“The daughter? The killed one?”
“That’s what they tell me.” (Morrison, 2005, p. 301)

The narrator explains that ‘it was her [Denver] who had to step off the edge of the world and die because if she didn’t, they all would’ (Morrison, 2005, p. 281). As a result, Denver unexpectedly restores the connection between the community and the family at Bluestone Road, which had been broken after the infanticide. In this way, even though the killing of the child Beloved was the reason why the community ostracized Sethe and her family for years, the woman Beloved is the one that ultimately prompts the reunion.

2.2 Reading *Beloved* as a Realistic Narrative

Notwithstanding the fact that all previous evidence seem to grant a supernatural quality to the novel, a minority of the critics have chosen to read *Beloved* as an example of a realistic narrative, therefore disregarding the ghostly aspect of the

character. Particularly distinguished as an advocate of this theory is critic Elizabeth B. House, who, in her article 'Toni Morrison's Ghost: The Beloved Who Is Not Beloved' (1998), claims that there is no necessity of explaining Beloved's arrival at 124 Bluestone Road as a result of supernatural intervention. She declares that Beloved is neither a reincarnation nor a ghost, and that the novel is actually the story of a series of probable cases of mistaken identity.

On the one hand, the girl that calls herself Beloved is traumatized by the death of her own mother during the Middle Passage experience and therefore decides to believe that Sethe is indeed her biological mother and that consequently she has recovered her. On the other hand, Sethe, who has spent years longing for her dead daughter, easily convinces herself that Beloved is her lost baby girl. The remorse she feels for having murdered her two-year-old daughter prevents her from rationally judging the appearance of the physical Beloved at 124, since it allows her to expiate her guilt and provides her with another chance to raise and protect the daughter she had lost. It is precisely Sethe's guilt what triggers her obsessive behaviour and the reason why she feels unable to assert herself against Beloved's desires and outbursts:

Beloved accused her of leaving her behind. Of not being nice to her, not smiling at her. She said they were the same, had the same face, how could she have left 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. [...] 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 just one of Beloved's tears. (Morrison, 2005, p. 284)

The same applies to Beloved's relationship with Denver who, because she has grown up repudiated by the community and feels that has been abandoned by her brothers once they left 124 Bluestone Road, desperately wants to believe that Beloved is indeed her sister, who has returned to her. Just as the novel opens and Paul D arrives at 124, Denver recalls 'all that leaving: first her brothers, then her grandmother—serious losses since there were no children willing to circle her in a game' (Morrison, 2005, pp. 14-15). Now she feels that Paul D is stealing her mother's attention from her, and thus she 'long[s], downright *longs[s]*, for a sign of spite from the baby ghost (Morrison, 2005, p. 15), because it was the only true companionship she had as she grew older.

As Paul McDonald explains (2013, p. 73) House sees significance in the quotation prefacing the novel: 'I will call them my people, which were not my people; and her beloved, which was not beloved' (Romans 9:25). The quotation, which was taken from the Bible, made House argue that characters in the novel, and particularly Sethe and Denver, are wrong to believe that the mysterious newcomer is the reincarnation of the dead baby. Her name may be Beloved, but she is not the "true" Beloved and therefore the members of the family at 124 are not really "her people".

Additionally, Paul McDonald (2013, p. 76) notes the significance of the carnival the family at 124 had attended just before the arrival of Beloved. As has been previously explained, the carnival represents people's, both the reader and the character's in the novel, willingness to believe in the supernatural. Therefore, McDonald declares that everyone is 'prone to give credence to things that should be treated with scepticism. In this case the false identification they make, fulfils a need born of loss and trauma' (McDonald, 2013, p. 76). The narrator in the book serves to illustrate this when, while describing the carnival, the reader is told that 'the fact that

none of it was true did not extinguish their appetite for it one bit' (Morrison, 2005, pp. 57-58).

Thus House (1998) describes Beloved as a mere fugitive girl who, like the other characters in the novel, has suffered the horrors of slavery. This reading of the character actually fits well in the novel as Stamp Paid, a member of the community who helped Sethe and many other ex-slaves achieve freedom, gives Paul D a realistic explanation for her appearance at Baby Sugg's home:

“Who is that girl? Where she come from?”
“I don't know. Just shot up one day sitting on a stump.”
[...] “How long she been over there with Sethe?”
“Last August. Day of the carnival.”
“That's a bad sign. [...] Was a girl locked up in the house with a whiteman over by Deer Creek. Found him dead last summer and the girl gone. Maybe that's her. Folks say he had her in there since she was a pup.” (Morrison, 2005, pp. 276-277)

House supports her theory mainly by referring to the stream of conscious episodes in chapters 22 and 23, in which the Middle Passage experience is described. In this section of the novel, Beloved's voice mixes with Denver's and Sethe's and her fragmented monologue 'reveals the impossibility of telling, [...] of explaining the horror of the Middle Passage' (Weinstock, 2005, p. 144). This experience refers to the crossing of ships carrying slaves from Africa to the Americas: in this sense, and significantly enough, Beloved's description of the events hints at her African origins.

Beloved recalls being with her mother, seeing her 'take flowers away from leaves' and 'put them in a round basket' (Morrison, 2005, p. 248). Her mother 'was about to smile at [her] when the men without skin came and took [them]' (Morrison, 2005, p. 253). The girl wants to 'help her but the clouds are in the way' (Morrison, 2005, p. 248) and consequently, blinded by the gun smoke, she loses sight of her

mother, or, as she calls her, 'the woman with my face' (Morrison, 2005, p. 250). As a result, they were brought to the ship, where they were imprisoned along many others who 'are crouching too' (Morrison, 2005, p. 248). She thinks of how her mother 'does not like the circle around her neck' and how '[she] would bite the circle around her neck bite it away' (Morrison, 2005, p. 249). Beloved describes life on board of the ship as an atrocious experience, with people constantly dying and their bodies being piled up in a 'little hill of dead people' (Morrison, 2005, p. 249) and later being shoved overboard.

Beloved's mother, unable of enduring the horrors of the crossing, commits suicide by jumping off the ship. Beloved recalls:

The men without skin [...] do not push the woman with my face through she goes in they do not push her she goes in the little hill is gone she was going to smile at me she was going to a hot thing [...] she does not have sharp earrings in her ears or a round basket she goes in the water with my face (Morrison, 2005, pp. 250-251)

Beloved's responses to the questions made by Denver about what she interprets to be her sister's experiences in the afterlife actually suggest a reference to the crossing, rather than a return from the afterlife. While Denver seems to be talking about a stay in the world of spirits, Beloved's words can easily be interpreted as a reference to Africa, and not the afterlife.

This realistic interpretation of the character is in fact supported in several other episodes of the book. Later in Chapter 22 Beloved remembers that the majority of the slaves were later taken from the ship, but she remained there and became the property of an officer who sexually abused her. She explains that 'he hurts where I sleep [and] he puts his finger there' (Morrison, 2005, p. 251) and later confesses to Sethe that 'one

of them was in the house I was in. He hurt me' (Morrison, 2005, p. 254). This situation corresponds to the information given to Paul D by Stamp Paid and even Sethe's hypothesis when she

told Denver that she believed Beloved had been locked up by some whiteman 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. (Morrison, 2005, p. 140)

As if to prove that Sethe's supposition may in fact be possible it is then stated that 'something like that had happened to Ella except it was two men—a father and a son—and Ella remembered every bit of it. For more than a year, they kept her locked in a room for themselves' (Morrison, 2005, p. 140). The fact that Beloved could have been kept locked for years as a sex slave, indoors, would explain why her skin is so smooth and besides growing up in isolation would have prevented her from properly develop language.

Likewise, even though her infantile behaviour has been usually taken as a major example of her ghostlike identity, her childish manners could also be easily explained if she had been in fact victim of a lifelong imprisonment. In this way, Carolyn Foster Segal has established a series of similarities between the character of Beloved and actual documented cases of what is called the 'classic wild child' (1988, cited in Erickson, 2009, p. 83). Segal also declares that children suffering from prolonged imprisonment suffer, for instance, from lack of physical coordination and both language and social limitations of these skills (1988, cited in Erickson, 2009, p. 83), exactly like Beloved.

This situation would also account for her name, since she remembers that 'the ghosts without skin stuck their fingers in her and said beloved in the dark and bitch in

the light' (Morrison, 2005, p. 284) and therefore she answers the questions about her name by explaining that 'in the dark [her] name is Beloved' (Morrison, 2005, p. 88).

Then, when Denver accuses Beloved of having tried to choke Sethe, she denies it, saying that '[she] kissed her neck. [She] didn't choke it. The circle of iron choke it' (Morrison, 2005, p. 119), which alludes to the slave collar her mother was forced to wear during the crossing and therefore serves as another reminder of her possible earlier life as a slave. In a similar manner, the scar under Beloved's chin could have also been caused by the slave collar she may have been forced to wear or simply by a chain placed around her neck, and not necessarily by the mortal wound inflicted by Sethe.

Furthermore, Beloved's knowledge of Sethe's lost "diamonds" can also be explained by the simple coincidence of her biological mother having had a pair of crystal earrings similar to Sethe's. As Beloved describes the Middle Passage experience she explains that her mother 'wants her earrings she wants her round basket' (Morrison, 2005, p. 250) and she feels very distressed because the white men have taken them away from her.

Finally, Beloved's disappearance at the end of the novel may not have been caused by the community exorcism. As has been widely argued, Beloved loses her biological mother three times throughout the novel. In the first occasion, she is separated from her by the slave traders that captured them in Africa and then thrown into the horrors of the slave ship. The second traumatic loss takes place during the crossing. At a particular moment in time her mother looks at her and, just as Beloved thinks that she is about to smile at her, to show her some affection, she jumps overboard and kills herself, leaving her daughter behind to endure the atrocities of the

Middle Passage experience on her own. This would explain why Beloved accuses Sethe of leaving her behind, and also of ‘not smiling at her’ (Morrison, 2005, p. 284).

Years later, once she has already escaped the man that had kept her locked, she arrives at the creek near 124. There Beloved thinks she sees diamonds, which could be the reflection of the sun in the water, sparkling in it. This seems to remind Beloved of her mother’s earrings and therefore she approaches the creek. There she sees her reflection, which Beloved also associates with her lost mother, because she believed they both had the same face. Because Beloved lastly saw her mother in the water, she dives into the creek, believing that she will be able to finally reach her mother. House explains Beloved’s behaviour by claiming that ‘to the untutored girl, all bodies of water are connected as one’ (1998, cited in McDonald, 2013, p. 75). Despite Beloved’s efforts, she cannot obviously be reunited with her mother and walks out of the water ‘fully dressed’ (Morrison, 2005, p. 60). This constitutes the third traumatic loss for her. For the third time she feels abandoned by her own mother and this may reinforce her willingness to believe Sethe is indeed her biological mother. This situation could also explain Beloved’s obsession with Sethe and why ‘it was as though every afternoon she [Beloved] doubted anew the older woman’s [Sethe’s] return’ (Morrison, 2005, p. 68).

At the end of the novel, Beloved sees Sethe running from her —trying to reach Mr Bodwin and joining the community— and as she finds herself once more on her own, she runs away ‘fearful of what a future without her mother might have in store’ (McDonald, 2013, p. 76). The narrator relates:

Sethe is running away from her [Beloved], running, and she feels the emptiness in the hand Sethe has been holding. Now she is running into the faces of the people out there, joining them and leaving Beloved behind. Alone. Again. Then Denver,

running too. Away from her to the pile of people out there.
(Morrison, 2005, p. 309)

Beloved disappears while the attention of the community is focused on Sethe, and she is then nowhere to be found. However, there is a hint at the end of the novel suggesting that Beloved has not evaporated, like a malign ghost expelled by an exorcism would have done: a little boy sees a naked and pregnant woman near 124, who has been usually related to Beloved. Morrison herself confirmed in an interview that the characters of Beloved and Wild, the protagonist of *Jazz* (1992)⁵, might in fact be connected. Wild's first appearance resembles the way in which the woman seen by the young boy, the alleged Beloved, is described. Moreover, Wild's child, of unknown father, is thought to have been born in 1873, the year in which Beloved may have run away —pregnant, possibly by Paul D— from 124 (Conner, 2000, p. 364).

McDonald, citing House's article (1998), argues that it is even 'historically possible for a girl of Beloved's age to have made a slave ship crossing' (2013, p. 76) and explains that

despite a slave trade blockade, ships were still making the crossing illegally during the 1850s; alternatively, she could have found her way to North America via South America, which was still receiving slave traffic at this time. This would explain her line 'the others who are taken I am not taken': it could imply that while the majority of slaves were unloaded in South America, the pretty Beloved was kept by an officer and brought to America by him for his own pleasure. (McDonald, 2013, p. 76)

⁵ *Jazz* (1992) is Morrison's second novel of the trilogy formed by *Beloved*, *Jazz* and *Paradise* (1997).

2.2.1 Interpreting Beloved as a Former Slave

Given all the aforementioned points, it may not be hard to conclude that Beloved can in fact be regarded as a recently escaped sex slave. Paul McDonald even states that ‘there is a sense in which she would have been the last remaining slave in America, kept until 1873, eight years after slavery was formally abolished’ (2013, pp. 76-77). If we allow this reading of the character, the enormous impact the arrival of Beloved has therefore transcends 124 Bluestone Road and affects the whole African-American community. While the effect of the supernatural Beloved affects more deeply the family at 124, the arrival of a recent slave among a community of ex-slaves serves as a representation of the pain and suffering of all African-Americans. She returns ‘not from death as Sethe’s daughter, but from slavery itself’ (McDonald, 2013, p. 77) and as a consequence her presence awakens the painful memories of the ones that once suffered the effects of slavery. Barnett claims, for instance, that

Beloved functions as more than the receptacle of remembered stories; she re-enacts sexual violation and thus figures the persistent nightmares common to survivors of trauma. Her insistent manifestation constitutes a challenge for the characters who have survived rapes inflicted while they were enslaved: directly and finally communally, to confront a past they cannot forget. (n.d., p. 71)

Consequently, the community, represented and led by Ella, joins together in order to help Sethe, because its members understand what slavery meant and share her suffering:

[...] was what Baby Suggs died of, what Ella knew, what Stamp saw and what make Paul D tremble. That anybody white could take your whole self for anything that came to mind. Not just work, kill, or maim you, but dirty you. Dirty you so bad you

couldn't like yourself anymore. Dirty you so bad you forgot who you were and couldn't think it up. (Morrison, 2005, p. 295)

Even though Ella did not approve of Sethe's actions in the past, seeing both Sethe and Beloved as victims of slavery seems to force her to confront the memories that she herself also struggles to suppress. That is the reason why hearing about Sethe's situation infuriated Ella and 'there was also something very personal in her fury' (Morrison, 2005, p. 302). Since she 'didn't like the idea of past errors taking possession of the present' (Morrison, 2005, p. 302) and thinks that 'the future was sunset; the past something to leave behind' (Morrison, 2005, p. 302) she feels that it is her duty to confront the situation because she firmly believes that 'if it [the past] didn't stay behind, well, you might have to stomp it out' (Morrison, 2005, p. 302).

Thus, Beloved 'can still be seen to represent the traumatic past coming to haunt the present' (McDonald, 2013, p. 77). Regardless of her true nature and quality, Beloved still triggers the traumatic and repressed memories of the characters in the novel and forces them to take action. Consequently, the meaning of the supernaturally reincarnated Beloved cannot be independently interpreted from that of the formerly enslaved Beloved.

3. Blending the Fantastic and the Realistic

The novel itself hesitates between the two alternatives and refuses to privilege a supernatural interpretation of *Beloved* over a realistic one. Morrison's skilful writing allows the readers to form their own opinions about the nature of the character. She notes that 'when you see *Beloved* towards the end, you don't know; she is either a ghost who has been exorcised or she's a real person pregnant by Paul D, who runs away' (Morrison, n.d., cited in Eckstein, 2006, p. 185). Since both alternatives are inextricably intertwined and none of them is privileged over the other, a fully comprehensive reading of the novel should include both approaches simultaneously, for each one complements and enhances the other. Morrison herself explained in an interview with Marsha Darling:

She [*Beloved*] is a spirit on one hand, literally she is what Sethe thinks she is, her child returned to her from the dead. And she must function like that in the text. [But] she is also another kind of dead which is not spiritual but flesh, which is, a survivor from the true, factual slave ship. [...] Both things are possible, and there's evidence in the text so that both things could be approached, because the language of both experiences—death and the Middle Passage—is the same. (1988, p. 247)

Here Morrison explicitly addresses the linguistic conflict by which certain words, phrases or even scenes in the book can be read both as referring to the crossing and to death, therefore creating several misunderstandings in relation to the nature of *Beloved* (Erickson, 2009, p. 85). For instance, she explains that

She [*Beloved*] speaks the language, a traumatized language, of her own experience, which blends beautifully in her questions and answers, her preoccupations, with the desires of Denver and

Sethe. So that when they say “What was it like over there?” they may mean —they do mean— “What was it like being dead?” She tells them what it was like being where she was on that ship as a child. (Morrison, 1988, cited in Darling, 1988, p. 247)

It is important to note that, even though Morrison relates Beloved’s past to the Middle Passage experience, she still argues that ‘she is what Sethe thinks she is’ (Morrison, 1988, cited in Darling, 1988, p. 247). Since every possible interpretation of Beloved’s identity is supported by a series of pieces of evidence in the novel, the issue of her true character seems ultimately unsolvable. In this regard Erickson suggests that ‘Beloved’s ambiguity is not simply a reflection of the characters’ misinterpretations [...], but is actually intrinsic to her identity in the world of the novel, deriving from a multiplicity within her very being’ (2009, p. 85) and adds that ‘her identity *really* is constituted by a conflation of the experience of death [...] and the experience of the Middle Passage’ (2009, p. 86).

As a result, even the characters in the novel seem unable to comprehend Beloved’s nature. As an example, Denver feels throughout the novel completely sure that Beloved is in fact her murdered sister, but once Beloved has already disappeared and Paul D asks her if she thinks ‘[Beloved] sure ‘nough [her] sister’, she replies that only ‘at times. At times [she] think[s] she was –more’ (Morrison, 2005, p. 314). Denver never denies Beloved’s identity as her sister, she simply understands that in reality Beloved was *more* than just Sethe’s baby. Here Erickson points out that ‘Denver’s equivocation does not indicate a suspicion of mistaken identity, her own uncertainty, or a lack of knowledge, but Beloved’s *intrinsically conflated* identity’ (2009, p. 86). In this way Kirsch argues that Beloved is ‘presented first as the rematerialized figure of Sethe’s dead daughter, but later revealed to be representative of much more than this individual trauma’ (2012, p. 24).

While the novel undoubtedly allows different interpretations for the title character, its author seems to support Kirsch and Erickson's words. Also Morrison defends the possibility of the multiple identity of the character and explains it by addressing her Afro-American culture and beliefs:

We are a very practical people, very down to earth, even shrewd people. But within that practicality we also accepted what I suppose could be called superstition and magic, which is another way of knowing things. But to blend those two worlds together at the same time was enhancing, not limiting. (Morrison, 1984, p. 342, cited in King, 2012, p. 86)

Similarly, Conner (2000, p. 66) notes that the recurrent references Beloved makes to the bridge as her place of origin and as the memory she clearest remembers actually highlight her nature as a liminal figure, which exists in the threshold between the world of the living and that of the dead. Beloved herself acts as a bridge in the novel, bringing about with her memories of the past —of the forgotten and of the ignored—, a certain knowledge that otherwise would have remained unexplored and which, significantly enough, triggers in the other characters a particular behaviour as their memories begin to surface as a result of Beloved's presence. She functions as a bridge because she represents the crossing of boundaries; she seems to have knowledge of “both sides”, of the living and the dead, of the present and the past.

Thus Beloved's nature, despite of her true identity, is that of ‘the forgotten spirit of the past that must “be loved” even if it is unlovable and elusive’ (Krumholz, 1992, p. 407). Beloved stimulates the healing process of the people living at 124 and of the whole community of ex-slaves. She triggers the formation of a new family unit at Bluestone Road and strengthens the ties that unite the community. In this way, McDonald argues that Beloved deeply affects the community since the gathering of

the women at the end of the novel ‘becomes a kind of exorcism in which all of the black people present confront their past demons, particularly Ella with her story of extreme abuse’ (2013, p. 61). He further claims that ‘the exorcism has been successful [...] which suggests the positive potential of community: the ghost of the past is dismissed only when black people work together’ (McDonald, 2013, p. 61). Accordingly, Krumholz declares that ‘Beloved embodies the suffering and guilt of the past, but she also embodies the power and beauty of the past and the need to realize the past fully in order to bring forth the future’ (1992, cited in Andrews & McKay, 1999, p. 115)

Krumholz even go one step further and declare that

Beloved is Sethe’s ghost, the return of her repressed past [...] But Beloved is also everyone’s ghost. [...] Beloved is the reader’s ghost, forcing us to face the historical past as a living and vindictive presence. Thus Beloved comes to represent the repressed memories of slavery, both for the characters and for the readers. Beloved catalyzes Sethe’s memories as the novel *Beloved* catalyzes the reader’s historical memories. (1992, cited in Andrews & McKay, 1999, p. 115)

Heinze also suggest for instance that ‘Beloved can never be fully conceptualized because she is continually in a state of transition [and] she assumes the shape of something different to all who embrace her’ (1993, cited in Schroeder, 2004, p. 99) —including the reader—, and even though she chooses to explain Beloved as a projection of Sethe, she never denies the physical aspect of the character (Schroeder, 2004, p. 116).

In this regard, in choosing to read *Beloved* under a reductive interpretation the reader risks losing the full meaning of the book. Cutter argues that she is ‘always surprised by how ready students are to resolve the issue of Beloved’s status in this

novel, to decide unambiguously that she is a ghost' and that she finds 'even more puzzling [that] this tendency to fix on a particular meaning for *Beloved* [has] been replicated by literary scholars' (2000). But in doing so people tend to forget 'The Sixty Million and More' to whom Morrison dedicated the novel and therefore *Beloved* seems to stand simply as an example of individual trauma during the times of slavery.

By addressing the novel to the 'Sixty Million and More' that perished as a result of the crossing from Africa to America, Morrison gives voice to the disremembered people that 'never made it to any text' (Wyatt, 1993, p. 479). Morrison explained:

Some historians told me 200 million died. The smallest number I got from anybody was 60 million. There were travel accounts of people who were in the Congo—that's a wide river—saying "we could not get the boat through the river, it was choked with bodies." That's like a logjam. A lot of people died. Half of them died in those ships... I thought this has got to be the least read of all the books I'd written because it is about something that the characters don't want to remember, I don't want to remember, black people don't want to remember, white people don't want to remember. I mean it's national amnesia. (n. d., cited in Freeman, 1997, p. 122)

However, Morrison's 'accomplishment in this novel is precisely *not* to allow for the continuation of a 'national amnesia' regarding this chapter in America's history' (Henderson, 1991, cited in Freeman, 1997, p. 122) and, for this reason, the character of *Beloved* should not be interpreted as a representation of Sethe's individual trauma.

Otherwise, it is significant that the two basic approaches to *Beloved*'s identity—*Beloved* as Sethe's murdered daughter and *Beloved* as an escaped sex slave—are not the only alternatives that have been discussed while trying to solve the conflict of

Beloved's identity. As a result, if the reader allows the hybrid reading of the character, Beloved can also stand—not only as an individual ghost—but as 'a manifestation of all the victims of the Middle Passage, and, indeed, of slavery as a whole', 'a composite of Sethe's dead daughter, the dead of the Middle Passage, and the dead of slavery' (Erickson, 2009, p. 86; 87). Therefore, she becomes representative of a particular group, that of the African-Americans, sharing a particular history and culture. In this way Caroline Rody claims that 'part of Beloved's strangeness derives [...] from the emotional burden she carries as a symbolic compression of innumerable forgotten people into one miraculously resurrected personality, the remembering of the "sixty million" in one youthful body' (2001, cited in Wyatt, 2012, p. 227). And, similarly, Van den Akker argues that '*Beloved* is not merely a repetition of the familiar ghost story, but functions as an appropriation of this genre in the foregrounding cultural hunting' (2013, p. 5).

But, perhaps more specifically, Deborah Horvitz (1989, cited in Erickson, 2009, p. 86) pictures Beloved as a blending of the various generations of daughters and mothers that experienced and suffered the crossing. For Horvitz, Beloved 'is Sethe's mother; she is Sethe herself; she is her daughter' (1989, cited in Heller, 2015, p. 216). She writes the following about Beloved's collective meaning:

Beloved stands for every African woman whose story will never be told. She is the haunting symbol of the many Beloveds—generations of mothers and daughters—hunted down and stolen from Africa [...]. [She] weaves in and out of different generations within the matrilineal chain. Yet [...] she is rooted in a particular story and is the embodiment of specific members of Sethe's family. (Horvitz, 1989, cited in Wyatt, 2012, p. 227)

Probably deriving from this theory, another secondary hypothesis trying to explain the character of Beloved even go as far as to suggest that she may be—not

Sethe's daughter— but Sethe's dead mother instead. Holden-Kirwan (1998, cited in Eckstein, 2006, p. 185) highlights the fact that Sethe has almost no real memories of her biological mother, since she grew up in the care of Nan⁶. Beloved could therefore be seen to easily represent the very embodiment of Sethe's mother. In this manner, Beloved's lost mother would have been in turn Sethe's grandmother. Sethe would then physically resemble her grandmother —and also Beloved— and perhaps this may be the reason why Beloved widely claims that hers and Sethe's face are the same.

This theory fits well with House's (1998) pointing of the scar under Beloved's chin as having probably been caused by an iron collar or a chain. Since Sethe's mother died by hanging, the rope around her neck could have easily caused the wound. Besides, in the novel Sethe recalls Nan's experience of the Middle Passage and how 'she [Nan] told Sethe that her mother and Nan were together from the sea' (Morrison, 2005, p. 74). Therefore, Sethe's mother own experiences during the crossing could account for the stream of conscious episodes describing the Middle Passage.

On the other hand, Heinze chooses to describe Beloved as 'Sethe's uncanny "double"' since she believes that Beloved 'seems more a projection of Sethe's imagination than a reincarnation', because she becomes Sethe's 'own unforgiving memory, growing obese with Sethe's guilt' (1993, cited in Goulimari, 2012, p. 203). In this regard, Beloved has also sometimes been compared to a demoniac creature —a succubus or female vampire— because she seems to have been feeding on Sethe's vitality and slowly depriving her of the energy she needs to survive. Besides she also acts as 'a sexual predator against whose attacks Paul D is defenceless' (Wester, 2012, p. 204), therefore typifying the image of the succubus, the demon that in folklore assumes the form of a woman in order to engage in sexual intercourse with men.

⁶ Nan was the one-armed African slave that was in charge of nursing the children back at the plantation in which Sethe was born.

Thus, drawing on the different interpretations the character has been given in the past, Beloved, can be described as

a survivor of the Middle Passage and of a white man found dead in his cabin around the time she shows up at 124 (House). She is both Sethe's murdered daughter and her murdered African mother (Wyatt), a specific character in a specific family and a representative of all the middle passage women (Rigney), "and also all Black women in America trying to trace their ancestry back to the mother on the ship attached to them" (Horvitz 157). She is a figure filled with the psychokinetic energy of the others, who then use that energy to act out their needs and desires (Wilt). She is the incarnation of Sethe's guilt (Rushdy). (Phelan, 1993, p. 709-710)

And Phelan still asserts the fact that

because the novel supports—indeed, insists on—all these not entirely compatible accounts, it prevents us from resting with any one and makes the struggle to "perform" her part of Morrison's world extraordinarily demanding. Moreover, adding the possibilities together gives us something less than the sum of the parts: Beloved dissolves into multiple fragments. (1993, p. 710)

Consequently, the meaning of the character Beloved —and as a result of *Beloved*, the novel— cannot therefore be reduced to a sole interpretation even though

At first reading Toni Morrison's *Beloved* strikes one as an unusually hybridized text—part ghost story, part historical novel, part slave narrative, part love story. Indeed, some of its genre forms seem to rub against one another, to coexist uneasily, in a state of tension, if not antagonism. The relation between ghost story and historical novel is a case in point. The conventions of the former involve the partial cancellation of the mimetic contract and demand from the reader willing suspension of disbelief in the supernatural. The historical novel, on the other hand, is based on a respect for reality principle, for the world of historical fact: its basic allegiance is to the world as

it is or as it has been. Morrison somehow holds these two disparate forms together. (Malmgren, 1995, p. 61)

Bouson (2000) also claims that the concluding section of the novel serves as another indicator of the confusing nature of the character and of the novel itself. These last pages in the novel 'send out mixed signals and compel readers to explain the text' (2000, p. 161). Here Beloved is described as a representative of the 'disremembered and unaccounted for' and therefore she is 'quickly and deliberately' forgotten because 'nobody is looking for her' (Morrison, 2005, p. 323). Morrison writes that 'remembering seemed unwise' and repeatedly states that 'it was not a story to pass on' (Morrison, 2005, p. 324). Still Bouson explains that

this authorial injunction is profoundly ironic, given the fact that in *Beloved* Morrison has "passed on" the story of slavery and told of the forgotten "beloveds" unrecorded in history but living and lingering in the collective racial memory. Thus, "This is not a story to pass on" has been taken to mean that Beloved is not a story to "pass by" or "pass over" or that it is "not a story to die" but one to be "passed on". (2000, p. 161)

And she further argues that 'part of the haunting power of the novel derives from the enigmatic character of Beloved' (2000, p. 161), concluding that 'The question "Who the hell is Beloved?" must haunt every reader of the novel, just as it hounds the characters' (2000, p. 161).

Conclusions

After exploring the complex blending of supernatural and realistic narratives in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* it could be argued that the conflict of Beloved's identity is ultimately an irresolvable one and that her nature cannot be reduced to a single explanation. Even though readers —unable to reconcile the fact that the novel brings together two opposing worlds in the character of Beloved— have often interpreted *Beloved* unilaterally as a mere ghost story, Morrison's work actually allows various different readings for the title character. Despite the fact that the most widespread view of Beloved is that of the miraculously reincarnated daughter of Sethe, the novel offers textual evidence that suggests otherwise. Elizabeth B. House (1998) rightly points out the possible identity of Beloved as an escaped sex slave, but fails to reconcile it with the first option given.

As has been argued, the novel offers enough evidence to support two main alternatives in the interpretation of Beloved, which therefore coexist simultaneously and, I would add, are mutually dependant thus complementing each other. As a consequence, and more significantly, by presenting a series of scenes that can be read either in a realistic or in a supernatural manner —or even both at the same time—, *Beloved* denies the possibility of privileging one interpretation over the other. Thus, and as has been argued through this work, a fully comprehensive reading of the book may incorporate at least these two basic readings of the novel if the textual evidence which the novel provides is taken into consideration.

Thus, the real Beloved —the runaway sex slave, and the ghostlike Beloved, the reincarnation of Sethe's daughter— cannot be separated from one another, since their effect in the novel is the same: Beloved brings the past back to the present, helping all

the characters in the novel face and finally overcome this same past. She represents the return of the repressed, of the traumas that have unsuccessfully been tried to suppress. Her sole presence triggers changes in the characters' mind-sets, since only after being in contact with Beloved they seem to be ready to confront their long-repressed memories and move on. Beloved —whatever her true nature may be— ultimately triggers the restoration of the bonds that had been broken after Sethe's baby murder and causes the gathering of the African-American woman, who rise up against her and, in doing so, also rise up against their own experiences within the institution of slavery. It is made obvious that only when working together African-Americans are capable of expelling Beloved and as a consequence of their collaboration all characters —even Sethe and particularly Denver— can now, for the first time in eighteen years, find shelter within the community. In this way, Morrison has established in *Beloved* a parallelism between the individual process of healing and the national process of psychological recovery.

It is for this reason that in forgetting the real aspect of the character —the former slave Beloved— the reader may disregard the potential of *Beloved* as a social and historical document. On the other hand, in ignoring the existence of Beloved as Sethe's baby, the reader may underestimate the dehumanizing effect of slavery, exemplified in the novel through the relationship between Sethe and her daughter.

Moreover, once having finished this work, I would suggest that the other secondary interpretations that have also been attributed to the character —such as reading Beloved as the physical manifestation of Sethe's guilt, the reincarnation of Sethe's mother or the manifestation of the collective African-American experience— derive in any case from the two basic interpretations that have been explored when trying to discuss the character of Beloved. Still, they should also be born in mind for

they complement and expand on the two main alternatives, giving the reader a more profound understanding of both the character and the novel. Along this lines, I find of particular interest the fact that *Beloved* also becomes —to some extent—the reader’s ghost, forcing him or her to revise the story of the “unaccounted for” and, concurrently, a part of the history that has been usually either ignored or explored from the perspective of white-men. Therefore *Beloved*’s potential as a historical document should never be disregarded by mistakenly categorising it as a mere ghost story.

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