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Lainey Terfruchte

“Escaping from Myth: Denver’s Reclamation of Love in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*”

Long Analytic Essay

Dr. Burge, ENGL 401

Fall 2023

## Escaping from Myth: Denver's Reclamation of Love in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

In the world of *Beloved*, violence and beauty are intertwined. When reflecting on Sweet Home plantation, Sethe wonders “if hell [is] a pretty place too,” and remembers seeing “[b]oys hanging from the most beautiful sycamores in the world” (Morrison 7). This contradiction lives at the heart of the novel and is strengthened by Morrison’s depictions of love, which are often both beautiful and tragic. Denver’s story emphasizes these themes as Morrison presents her struggle to find beauty in a world of violence. Through fantasy and escapism, Denver tries to navigate a world that she does not have the tools to understand.

Denver holds a unique position in *Beloved* as the only main character who has not directly experienced slavery. Her position as the daughter of an emancipated woman presents its own challenges that have often been sidelined in scholarship on *Beloved*. Denver’s experiences with love are colored by what she has learned from her family and those around her, who hold dysfunctional understandings of love due to their experiences in slavery. This dysfunction both confuses Denver’s understanding of love and leads her to feel uncared for and isolated. Throughout the novel, she reckons with what love should feel like while struggling to function in a household that is stuck in cycles of flawed love. Her relationship with Beloved demonstrates how she has adapted to give and receive love within a dysfunctional system. However, as Denver witnesses Beloved feeding on Sethe, her understanding of love shifts, and she turns to her community for help and care.

These themes connect to the literary climate in which *Beloved* was written. Morrison’s writing was published within a moment of change. Progressing from the functionalism of the Black Arts Movement, black writers in the 1970s and 1980s began to create inner-directed works that uplifted the symbolism and mythology of African American culture and affirmed African

American experiences (Martin 66). This shift is clear in *Beloved*, a novel that explores the lasting trauma of slavery with an unflinching gaze. The novel is rooted in interiority and reflection, largely focusing on how characters react and respond to the past and the present. Morrison deliberately immerses the reader in the characters' experiences by presenting the story non-linearly and writing a section of stream of consciousness narration, among other stylistic techniques. The interiority of the novel allows for in-depth analysis of the characters while also contributing to the fight against the oppressive structures of white-dominated norms.

Morrison also contributed to a new wave of African American literature that centered women. Alongside many other African American female writers including Alice Walker, Octavia E. Butler, and Gloria Naylor, Morrison created space for black women's voices in the 1970s and 1980s. *Beloved* highlights African American women's experiences through Sethe, Denver, Beloved, and Baby Suggs. Using these characters, Morrison explores themes such as a daughterhood through a distinctly African American perspective. Due to the intersectionality of her work, analyses of her novels can provide an entry into more extensive discussions about African American women's experiences. Analyzing Denver provides one such opportunity by opening up an intersectional conversation about the experience of growing up as a young black woman in the United States.

Scholarship on *Beloved* does not often focus on Denver, but several critics have introduced interesting analyses of her character while examining larger topics. Many critics have taken psychoanalytic approaches to *Beloved*, such as Barbara Offutt Mathieson, who argues that Sethe and Beloved are trapped in a problematic mother-child bond that Denver is able to escape by creating new bonds with members of her community. An essay by Su-lin Yu supports this claim, arguing that Denver's relationship with Beloved begins positively but turns threatening.

According to Yu, Denver realizes the danger by witnessing how Beloved feeds on Sethe, which leads her to her community for help, thereby allowing her to develop as a young woman. These works are also connected by their exploration of how slavery prevented African Americans from fulfilling parental roles and the consequences of lacking both parental love and the ability to practice love. As the daughter of formerly-enslaved people, Denver's life is shaped by these realities and her development involves breaking the cycle of distorted love. These analyses touch on important aspects of the novel, but often brush over crucial parts of Denver's story, including her brief deafness, nightmares about her mother, and unique relationship with Beloved.

"Shaping the Tales in the Tale" by Trudier Harris provides a unique perspective on the relationship between Sethe, Beloved, and Denver. She argues that the three form a small storytelling collective and become bound by their family folklore (Harris 165). The stories have power through their ability to provide self-definition for both Denver and Beloved by allowing them to understand their history and place in the world (Harris 168). Harris' argument highlights storytelling, a prominent theme of *Beloved*, and asserts its importance in the development of the characters. Rather than focusing on the dysfunction of the characters' relationships, Harris focuses on how their storytelling interactions actually aid Denver's development.

However, much of Denver's story reveals the struggles of loving as a black woman in a society that devalues the black female experience. Scholar Keguro Macharia argues that policing love is one of the primary ways in which difference is constructed and maintained (68). As an example, he notes how men and women were treated as "breeders" within chattel slavery, prohibiting them from forming loving bonds with one another and creating loving families (Macharia 68). This situation appears in *Beloved*, as Sethe is offered the illusion of family

through her relationship with Halle, but her main value to the dominant white population is her ability to produce children.

Sethe's ability to understand motherhood is inhibited by the domination of slavery. As a child, she was not taken care of by her mother, who was forced to work: "She never fixed my hair nor nothing" (Morrison 72). Her mother nursed her for "two or three weeks" before another woman, whose job was to take care of children, began nursing her (72). The role of daughter was taken from Sethe, who was nursed only for survival and not for love. The only important interaction Sethe remembers having with her mother is when she showed Sethe a cross burnt into her skin, and Sethe told her mother to mark her too (72). At this moment, Sethe was reaching out to her mother, asking to be irrevocably connected to her. However, the pain and trauma associated with the mark led Sethe's mother to slap her for the question. The violence of slavery caused Sethe's mother to commit violence against her, a cycle that Sethe continues.

From the beginning of Denver's life, love has been mixed with violence. As an infant, she "took her mother's milk right along with the blood of her sister" (Morrison 179). Sethe compares her love for her dead child to the "powerful spell" the ghost enacts on 124 Bluestone Road, demonstrating the danger of powerful love (5). However, Sethe also "work[s] hard to remember as close to nothing as [is] safe" about her runaway sons, and Grandma Baby only remembers that her firstborn "loved the burned bottom of bread" (6). Denver's household fluctuates between desperate, dependent love and detached, protective isolation in response to a society that treats black lives as subhuman and expendable. The way Denver has been taught to love by those around her is confusing at best, dangerous at worst.

There are moments in which Sethe and Denver attempt to find a loving mother-daughter relationship, but they are overshadowed by Denver's fear of the cycle of violence created by

slavery being enacted on her. “All the time,” Denver says, “I’m afraid the thing that happened that made it all right for my mother to kill my sister could happen again” (Morrison 242). Denver worries about loving her mother too much, because Sethe’s motherhood is linked with violence. She wants to warn Beloved: “Don’t love her too much” (Morrison 243). This fear is corroborated by her brothers, who told her that Sethe would “cut [her] head off” (Morrison 243). Even the loving act of Sethe brushing Denver’s hair is violent—in Denver’s nightmare, Sethe cuts off her head then combs and braids her hair (Morrison 244). Despite Sethe and Denver being free to have a mother-daughter relationship, the violence of slavery follows them and disrupts their freedom.

As a young girl, Denver attempts to join her community but is rejected because of her family’s past. Due to Sethe’s act of infanticide, community members avoid 124 and largely distrust the people who live inside. When Denver is seven, she has “almost a whole year of the company of her peers and along with them learn[s] to spell and count” (Morrison 120). This opportunity is important to Denver not only because of the community and education it provides, but also because it brings pleasure to her mother and brothers (Morrison 120). Denver’s actions are often motivated by her desire to please others and gain loving attention from them. However, this connection is severed when one of her classmates asks about her mother being locked away for murder. Denver never goes back to the “house-school,” as she can’t face her classmates or the confusion and fear she feels towards her mother (Morrison 121). When Denver gathers the courage to ask Sethe about the murder, her hearing is cut off and she becomes deaf for two years. Denver’s escapism begins at this moment, when she is so unable to bear reality that a part of her body becomes cut off from it.

The loss of Denver's hearing is a physical manifestation of her inner turmoil, and this situation is one of many ways that Denver is uniquely connected to the symbolic and mythic. Sethe describes her as a "charmed child," referring to her unlikely survival through extreme circumstances (Morrison 50). The story of Denver's birth is told and retold as if it is a myth, becoming a story that is created as it is spoken and constructed specifically for its audience. In one instance, Denver constructs the story as "a net to hold Beloved" (Morrison 90). Trudier Harris asserts that "The story of Denver's birth is as much rumor and conjecture as it is fact, or so the townspeople believe. It is too fantastic to be taken at face value and thus borders on folktale" (Harris 165). The mythic quality of Denver's birth is affirmed by how other characters talk about it, such as Ella, who says: "[Sethe] [s]aid a whitewoman come out the trees and helped her. Shoot. You believe that? A *whitewoman*?" (Morrison 220). Ella cannot believe the story and instead suspects that there is a darker force involved in Denver's birth that Sethe is keeping hidden. Sethe also acknowledges the unlikely circumstances of Denver's birth: "Even when I was carrying her, when it got clear that I wasn't going to make it—which meant she wasn't going to make it either—she pulled a whitegirl out of the hill. The last thing you'd expect to help" (Morrison 50). Notably, Sethe attributes the appearance of Amy to Denver, ascribing magical qualities to her even before her birth.

Between Denver's lack of external support and her connection to the mythical, it is unsurprising that she turns to the ghost of 124 for companionship. She only regains her hearing when she catches the sound of "thunder crawling up the stairs" (Morrison 121). While other characters argue over the noise, Denver immediately identifies it as the baby trying to get upstairs. Denver believes that the haunting evokes "the downright pleasure of enchantment" and she appreciates "the safety of the ghost company" (Morrison 45). "In her loneliness," Yu argues,



“Denver creates a fantasy alliance with the ghost” (412). Denver says, “Ever since I was little [the ghost] was my company and she helped me wait for my daddy” (Morrison 242). Denver’s connection to the ghost is fueled by her desire for closeness and the ability to express her feelings. For nine years, Denver has not cried. After expressing her sorrow for the loss of Baby Suggs and her brothers, she bottled up her emotions. Through the ghost’s sorrow and anger, Denver can see her own emotions expressed.

The ghost also demands attention from Sethe, which Denver is unable to demand for herself. Denver lives vicariously through the ghost—if Sethe is paying attention to the ghost, she can pretend that her own emotions are being taken care of. This dynamic becomes evident when Paul D arrives and steals Sethe’s attention from the ghost. When Sethe gives attention to Paul D, it “makes Denver long, downright *long*, for a sign of spite from the baby ghost” (Morrison 15). Denver admits that the ghost’s anger “used to wear her out,” but when she notices its absence, she desires it (Morrison 15). Despite the exhaustion of overwhelming emotions, Denver misses the emotional outlet the ghost provided. She mourns the ghost’s loss after Paul D pushes it out, thinking that “even a ghost’s company was denied her” (Morrison 123). She feels betrayed by her mother, who spends time alone with “the man who had gotten rid of the only other company she had” (Morrison 23). Denver sinks deeper into loneliness after the ghost disappears and takes her anger out on both her mother and Paul D, whom she blames for this most recent loss.

Since Denver cannot turn to her family to understand love, she turns to her imagination. Morrison writes, “... Denver’s imagination produced its own hunger and its own food, which she badly needed because loneliness wore her out” (35). Denver’s imagination helps her escape from the “hurt of the hurt world”; it feeds her and helps her stay alive (Morrison 35). Harris emphasizes how Denver’s isolation has shaped her worldview, writing, “Left with an

imagination uninformed by the reality beyond her porch, she can create whatever monsters she wishes” (167). Due to Denver’s lack of worldly knowledge, she relies on her imagination to fill in the gaps. The mythic tale of Denver’s birth is a demonstration of how imagination and storytelling shape her identity. Harris argues, “Denver is a tablet upon which her own life can be written. The stories of her birth are the chalk for that creation” (168). Denver’s secluded life is largely based around stories and storytelling, which help create her identity.

In the story of her life, Denver positions herself in the center. Harris remarks, “Denver’s fantasy, like those of many children, locates her squarely at the center of value in her family portrait” (168). Not only does Denver hate when Sethe’s stories do not concern her, she also likens herself to a fairy tale heroine in many ways. At the beginning of the novel, Denver aligns herself with maiden-like femininity. Her refuge is an “emerald closet” of seven-foot-tall bushes, where she sprays herself with lily-of-the-valley cologne and uses her imagination to deal with her loneliness (Morrison 35, 45). She loves sweet things, and even her secrets are sweet (Morrison 34). Harris notes that Denver positions herself as a “passive princess waiting to be rescued” by her missing father (168). Denver spends “all of [her] outside self” loving Sethe so that she will not be hurt by her, while secretly waiting for her father to come save her (Morrison 245). She idolizes her father, calling him “an angel man” (Morrison 246). Her brothers also support this fairy tale narrative by calling Sethe a witch and telling Denver “die-witch! stories” in order to show her how to kill Sethe if she ever needs to (Morrison 242). Through this story, Denver becomes a passive maiden waiting to be rescued from her violent mother by her virtuous father. This story lacks nuance and traps Denver in a place where she cannot ever reconcile with her mother or truly take control of her own life.

For a brief moment in the novel, a happy familial relationship between Sethe, Paul D, and Denver seems possible. After fighting back against Denver's antagonism, Paul D stays at 124 and insists the three of them go to a carnival. Despite Denver's assurance that she will not have fun, she ends the event "swaying with delight" (Morrison 59). At the carnival, Denver is treated kindly by the other people in the crowd, not seen as "the main attraction" (Morrison 58). Part of this kindness stems from the safety of what appears to be a stable family—when people see Sethe, Paul D, and Denver as a family unit, their stares are "kind, gentle, something Denver did not remember seeing in their faces" (Morrison 58). However, this comfort and safety is interrupted by the appearance of Beloved.

To different characters in the novel, (and different scholars of *Beloved*), Beloved takes on a multitude of meanings. To Denver, Beloved can be seen as a symbol of the mythic ideal. Denver describes Beloved by saying, "Nothing was out there that this sister-girl did not provide in abundance: a racing heart, dreaminess, society, danger, beauty" (Morrison 90). Denver alone sees a sign that Beloved will arrive—she witnesses a white dress embracing her mother. The connection between Denver and Beloved is instant; she recognizes Beloved as her sister come back from the dead, the physical incarnation of the ghost she had kept as company. Beloved becomes the most important figure in Denver's life immediately.

Despite her desire to portray a passive fairy tale heroine, in reality, Denver often takes on the role of an active caretaker. Even before the arrival of Beloved, she helped Sethe take care of Baby Suggs, and after Baby Suggs' death, she and Sethe attempted to call forth the ghost haunting 124. As a result, Denver views Beloved as "[r]eady to be taken care of; ready for me to protect her" (Morrison 243). Denver describes Beloved as a "sleepy beauty" and adopts the role of a devoted fairy tale prince (Morrison 63). Denver tenderly nurses her back to health, finding

pleasure in bringing Beloved joy by showing her the orange patches in the quilt or giving her sweets that she eagerly devours. Denver becomes dependent on taking care of Beloved, becoming “a strategist” as she tries to keep Beloved happy so that she will pay attention to her (Morrison 142). Similarly to how she desired for Sethe to pay attention to her, Denver longs to be looked at by Beloved.

Denver wants Beloved to admire her. She describes the feeling of Beloved’s gaze, “Having her lips, nose, chin caressed as they might be if she were a moss rose a gardener paused to admire” (Morrison 139). When Beloved looks at her like that, Denver needs nothing else (Morrison 139). The desire Denver feels for Beloved often appears romantic, even as she identifies Beloved as her sister. In the story that Denver has told herself, she is missing the romantic love of fairy tales. Beloved perfectly fills this role, being “dreamy-eyed” and graceful (Morrison 65). Denver pays attention to Beloved’s body in a way that other characters do not, describing her as “beautiful,” noticing the movement of her eyes and limbs, and gazing on her naked body when she goes to bed (Morrison 124). Denver is aware of her own body in comparison to Beloved, yet feels “light as a snowflake” when Beloved calls her up to dance with her (Morrison 87). Around Beloved, Denver is often shy and approval-seeking, desiring only for Beloved to look at her enough to satiate her hunger for love.

“To return to love,” bell hooks writes in *All About Love: New Visions*, “to get the love we always wanted but never had, to have the love we want but are not prepared to give, we seek romantic relationships. We believe these relationships, more than any other, will rescue and redeem us” (169). Denver is reliant on Beloved because she both desires the love she has not received and believes that Beloved can rescue her from the sorrow, loneliness, and violence of her circumstances. Her attachment to Beloved is intense. Denver would “forgo the most violent

of sunsets, stars as fat as dinner plates and all the blood of autumn and settle for the palest yellow if it comes from her Beloved” (Morrison 143). These descriptions evoke the interconnection of violence and beauty, but Denver ignores Beloved’s own connection to violence. After Denver witnesses Beloved choking Sethe, Morrison writes, “Denver was alarmed by the harm she thought Beloved planned for Sethe, but felt helpless to thwart it, so unrestricted was her need to love another” (123). Instead, Denver becomes caught up in the idea that she must protect Beloved from Sethe.

Denver’s need for Beloved is most evident when they enter the cold house and Beloved momentarily disappears. When Beloved is “eaten alive by the dark,” Denver begins to cry “because she has no self” (Morrison 145). While some critics read this moment as evidence that Beloved serves as a double for Denver, it can also be read as a display of how Denver defines herself in relation to other people. Denver needs someone to love and take care of, a position that Beloved fills. Without Beloved, Denver must rewrite the story that she is telling herself: the story that creates her identity. Denver relies on Beloved to provide her with a purpose, as she constantly strategizes about how to hold Beloved’s attention and to protect her from Sethe.

While Denver lives in a mythic world—populated by an evil witch, a righteous man who will save her, and a dream-like romantic partner—she is denied the role of the fairy tale heroine. The stories she is attempting to reenact are not possible within her world. Grimm fairy tales largely associate blackness with negative attributes, and characters are often punished by being made “black,” whether by being covered in pitch, transformed into a black poodle, or another mythical act (Schmiesing 210). German literature scholar Ann Schmiesing writes about Grimm tales, “... the emphasis is placed on the moral inferiority, behavioral transgressions, and/or physical undesirability that blackness signifies—traits, however, that at the time the Grimms

published their tales were not only symbolized in an abstract sense by blackness but also literally associated with black people” (214). In a society that viewed blackness as antithetical to the constructed purity and virtue of whiteness, Denver, as a young black woman, could not become the heroine of a fairy tale.

Another issue is the way in which women usually achieve safety and happiness in fairy tales. Marcia R. Lieberman’s “‘Some Day My Prince Will Come’: Female Acculturation through the Fairy Tale,” describes the role of fairy tale heroines by writing, “They wait, are chosen, and are rewarded” (386). These heroines are often passive and obedient, relying on someone to save them rather than being independent (Lieberman 387). In 1848, writer George Burnap published *The Sphere and Duties of Women: A Course of Lectures* in which he claims that a true woman “feels herself weak and timid” and “needs a protector” (Welter 159). The ideal woman of the 19th century would marry into a domestic life of stability and passivity, but Denver does not have that option. Instead, she is forced to provide for herself, Sethe, and Beloved and to directly face her family’s trauma. Denver’s fairy tale is one based on the horror and trauma of slavery. Without the cycle of violence established by the institution of slavery, there would be no unpredictable mother, no absent father, and no ghostly sister. Therefore, Denver’s story cannot be concluded as fairy tales usually are.

Beloved takes over 124, claiming everything to fill her insatiable appetite. At first, Denver joins in the games, going ice-skating, drinking sweet milk, and watching her mother play with Beloved’s hair (Morrison 282). She becomes distant after realizing that Sethe and Beloved are only interested in each other. She continues to observe them, waiting for something to go wrong, waiting for “a signal that the thing that was in [Sethe] was out, and she would kill again” (Morrison 283). However, it is Beloved who breaks the fragile peace, Beloved who makes Sethe

pay for her unresolved pain. The three become “limp and starving but locked in a love that wore everybody out” (Morrison 286). Denver recognizes that her job has shifted—now she needs to protect Sethe from Beloved. Denver is left with no choice but to “step off the edge of the world, leave the two behind and go to ask somebody for help” (Morrison 286). Denver breaks out of her passive role, ready to move on from the distorted love she has been surrounded by.

Denver stands on the porch and contemplates her fear of the outside world; she has witnessed first-hand how traumatic encounters with the outside can be and knows there are even more unspeakable things lurking beneath the stories she has heard all her life. She hears her grandmother’s voice, who reminds her that there is “no defense” against the pain that can come from the outside, but tells her she must go forward nonetheless (Morrison 288). Denver has been trying to avoid pain the entire novel, always being cautious and protecting both herself and others. In this moment, she has to accept the unknown. Despite her fears, Denver arrives at the door of Lady Jones unscathed. Denver asks for a job, but instead receives help and care from members of her community, who leave baskets of food at 124 throughout spring. For the first time in the novel, Denver receives care rather than providing it for someone else.

As she becomes immersed in her community, Denver begins to develop a new form of selfhood. Nelson Lord tells her, “Take care of yourself, Denver” (Morrison 297). This prompts a realization in Denver that she *has* a self to care for. “It was a new thought,” Denver remarks, “having a self to look out for and preserve” (297). In order to protect both her own wellbeing and aid Sethe and Beloved, Denver decides to find a job with the Bodwins. This experience appears to be a positive one for her; Miss Bodwin teaches Denver “book stuff” and tells her she might be able to attend Oberlin, a coeducational college (Morrison 314). Denver’s entire life has been focused on taking care of other people, but at the end of the novel she begins to imagine a future

in which she is the most important figure. Morrison also hints that Denver begins to develop a relationship with Nelson. This is a significant display of growth in Denver, who was afraid of talking to people outside of her family for many years after Nelson asked her difficult questions about her mother. Through her interactions with her community, Denver demonstrates an ability to move forward despite the events of the novel, her past wounds, and her generational trauma.

Throughout the novel, the reader watches Denver suffer through dysfunctional love as she tries to find the love she never had in her childhood. bell hooks writes the following about her own experience of seeking love:

All the years of my life I thought I was searching for love I found, retrospectively, to be years where I was simply trying to recover what had been lost ... I was not ready to love or be loved in the present. I was still mourning—clinging to the broken heart of girlhood ... When that mourning ceased I was able to love again. (x)

Like hooks, Denver has to move past her mourning in order to truly love others and be loved by others.

By escaping the dysfunctional bonds of stories and stepping into the real world, Denver moves towards liberation. Writer Frantz Fanon argues that love cannot prosper within structures of racial domination, and bell hooks argues that love cannot flourish within patriarchal structures (Macharia 69). Denver's desire for love could never have been fulfilled by living inside fairy tales, which have a basis in racial and patriarchal oppression. By turning to her community at the end of the novel, Denver chooses a love outside of racist and sexist structures. Her community provides love in the form of kindness and aid, loving freely and openly rather than in a racialized and gendered way. hooks writes, "Domination cannot exist in any social situation where a love ethic prevails" (98). Denver only begins to embrace true love when she lets go of the stories that



tell her how to love and accepts a love that is not dominating, but freeing. Liberation requires love, and Denver's journey in *Beloved* helps her start on the path to justice.

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