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“He Wants to Put His Story Next to Hers”:

Gender in Toni Morrison’s Beloved

Toni Morrison’s Beloved is a novel about the transformation of individual identities and of the communal identity of African American Ohioans, a transformation most closely connected to a new understanding of gender relations. Morrison explores the power relations between male and female masters and male and female slaves, paralleling the individual stories of two former slaves--Sethe and Paul D--in order to highlight the common pain in their experiences. Linking these stories together through the threads of sexual exploitation and exclusion from the typical gender roles of whites, Morrison criticizes the traditional values associated with white male dominance. Out of this critique, she offers a new model of gender for African Americans, a model based on shared suffering of an enslaved past and the shared struggle for a future of freedom and equality.

The history that Morrison offers in Beloved crosses geography and generations as she brings two new characters into an African American community in Ohio. Sethe is attempting to start a new life there, and Paul D returns to Ohio after being imprisoned at a forced labor camp for runaway slaves. Soon Beloved, the matured ghost of Sethe’s infant daughter (the baby girl that Sethe murdered rather than see re-enslaved) appears. Sethe and Paul D begin to recall their memories of slavery, as Sethe attempts to explain her

murder of Beloved to Paul D and, more important, to Beloved herself.

Much of the history of racial suffering that Morrison retells includes episodes of sexual violence, as Pamela Barnett's work on Beloved has emphasized (73-75). This history is consistent with the larger body of literature written about and by enslaved African American women. For example, Harriet Jacobs's Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl (which according to "Judgment Day" on PBS Online's Africans in America Web site, was "one of the first open discussions about the sexual harassment and abuse endured by slave women"), offers a firsthand account of the sufferings caused by sexual



Fig. 1. Virginian Luxuries, Abby Aldrich Rockefeller Folk Art Center, Williamsburg. This painting illustrates the combined gender and race power that white males had over African American women and men like Sethe and Paul D.

exploitation. The anonymous, colonial-era painting called Virginian Luxuries depicts sexual harassment and physical violence as common liberties taken by slave owners (Fig. 1). Thus, the descriptions of sexual violence in Beloved have very real historical precedents (Morrison 74).

In the lives of African American women, violence made motherhood a double burden: they not only had to watch their children suffer under slavery or see them sold off at young ages, but they also knew that many of their children were conceived through hate instead of love. While Beloved is not conceived through rape,

Sethe does offer the fear of white rape and the desire to protect her children as an explanation for her decision to kill. “Whites might dirty her all right, but not her best thing, her beautiful magical best thing--the part of her that was clean” (Morrison 296). Morrison suggests, moreover, that motherhood is only one of many conventional gender roles that were denied to African American women.

In her depiction of Paul D, Morrison points out that African American males suffered abuse similar to that of African American females. Paul D’s memory of the homosexual favors he and the other African American men were forced to perform upon white labor prison guards suggests that the dominant male role often depended on racial difference instead of mere sexual difference. In other words, Paul D’s encounters with sexual violence illustrate that in a white-male-to-black-male scenario, the black male is often gendered feminine while the white male takes on the dual position of male dominance and white supremacy.

Unlike Sethe’s struggle with womanhood under slavery, which focuses on exclusion from specific feminine roles, Paul D’s struggle is marked by a confusion over what it means to be a man. Paul D increasingly questions the worth of the ideals of manhood--such as independent action, self-sufficiency, physical strength, and eloquence--since these are denied to him by slavery.

In recalling the maxim of the slave owner named Schoolteacher that “definitions belonged to the definers--not the defined,” Paul D decides to define his own conditions for manhood instead of allowing a white man to name them for him (Morrison 225). First, he decides to turn inward, shutting out the white-dominated world that threatens and diminishes his existence. Soon, however, Paul D’s love for Sethe begins to soften these protective measures as he imagines that they might be able to live a conventional

married life together. Yet the confusion caused by Beloved and the anger and pain caused by Sethe's story of murdering Beloved force Paul D to reconsider both white ideals of manhood and his own self-protective attempts to maintain a separate sense of African American manhood.

Struggling under the power that Beloved has over him, Paul D attempts to convince Sethe to bear a child with him, as "a solution: a way to hold on to her, document his manhood and break out of the girl's spell--all in one" (Morrison 151). For Sethe, however, the idea of pregnancy is a sign of Paul D's jealousy and a desire to expand his control over her, her daughter Denver, and Beloved.

When Paul D finally can accept Sethe's actions and Beloved begins to disappear back into the spirit world, Sethe and Paul D undergo a final transformation that resolves these conflicts over gender power. In the end, when Paul D returns to Sethe and offers to both care for and to listen to her, Morrison writes that "his coming is the reverse route of his going," suggesting both a careful retracing of steps or revisiting of mistakes and a healing erasure of pain (Morrison 318).

Beloved's final depiction of Sethe and Paul D is remarkable for the two ways it reenvisions gender. First, Morrison establishes a plane of gender equality and mutual respect, as suggested by the narrator's voicing of Paul D's thoughts: "He wants to put his story next to hers" (Morrison 322). Second, Morrison folds the values of self-knowledge, self-worth, self-love, and self-respect into the gender roles of Sethe and Paul D. After the pain of his past, Paul D realizes that "only this woman Sethe could have left him his manhood," and Sethe finally stops fighting her past as she hears the words that only Paul D would speak: "You your best thing, Sethe. You are" (Morrison 322). Through these deeper understandings of one another's gendered histories, Sethe and Paul D transform

the agony of the past into the knowledge necessary to order the present and the power to shape the future.

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