Another slavery novel? We already had Frederick Douglass and Harriet Jacobs,” a student complains as she walks into my room. Another says, “Is this novel gonna oppress me like all those other black novels they made us read last year?” If you’re thinking that these voices must belong to white students, think again. Because I invite students to respond honestly to any books we read, they’re prepared to be direct when, two-thirds of the way through the semester, we begin to read Toni Morrison’s Beloved. One or two hate and resist the novel, and they make no bones about that. However, during the six years I’ve taught the book, I’ve seen most of my students claim the novel as their favorite of the year, or perhaps of their entire high school reading experience. No one reacts with indifference, and I attribute the spectrum of fierce responses to the powerful imagery Morrison seeds throughout the tale. I base my approach to the novel in the senior course on imagery and transcendence, investigating how characters live through devastation to find hope.

When I first decided to include Beloved in my senior course, I sought a different approach; I’ve seen many teachers rely upon a historical reading, viewing the novel entirely in the context of slavery. There’s much in the novel that speaks to this approach: Morrison bases her narrative on a newspaper clipping about “Margaret Garner and seven others,” fugitive slaves who fled to Ohio. In 1856, the newspaper detailed Garner’s story: she tried to kill three of her children, but only one died (Andrews and McKay 25, 26). Beloved can be read as a prolonged meditation on slavery as the root of this act, and many writers have generated essays to this effect (see Andrews and McKay, Bloom, and Plasa). In a chapter entitled “Beloved’s Intertexts,” Carl Plasa suggests that “the intertextual relationship between Beloved and the slave narratives—the genre that began the African-American literary tradition in prose—” provides the main port of entry to understanding this work. “Morrison uses the trope of memory to revise the genre of the slave narrative and thereby to make the slave experience... more accessible to contemporary readers” (50). This writer speaks for a host of academics who see tales focusing on someone’s traumatic memory as the gateway to understanding history. Plasa claims that Morrison interweaves threads of actual history (“intertextual”) within this fiction. But he goes further, insisting that the story isn’t linear because the psychological effects of history aren’t linear (51), and there I agree with him.

Other writers, while using history as the main route to understanding Beloved, also diverge slightly into other interpretive paths. For instance, a number of writers choose to read Beloved as a novel about motherhood and women’s experiences—feminist readings, for the most part. Some choose to look at the psychology of Sethe’s murderous act, showing how history—slavery—shaped her feelings and thinking. Each of these readings seems, to me, to leave certain layers of meaning out of consideration. That’s why I decided to push past the historical readings and their various trajectories in my own teaching of the book.
I see the novel’s characters achieving a powerful transcendence of slavery’s pain through linked images that unite human beings, implicitly attacking racist assumptions. So when I began to teach the novel I started with archetypes and images—trees, rivers, cows, colors, mothers and daughters, journeys, ghosts—looking at the various meanings possible as a result of juxtapositions in the text. I wanted to read the novel the way a painting may be read. I went far back in literary studies, to Aristotle’s idea that the artist “does not describe the thing that has happened, but the kind of thing that might happen . . . hence poetry is something more philosophic and of graver import than history, since its statements are of the nature rather of universals, whereas those of history are singulat” (qtd. in Abrams 36). Thus, images reflect truths about the world, mirroring layers of complexity, human feeling, and effects that go far beyond the “real” or concrete equivalents. With my students, I look at how images evolve out of ancient sources—the Bible, Greek myths, African folktales—gaining new meanings along the way. Authors borrow from their forebears (Bloom says they write against them, but I think this process remains open to less combative ways of reading), consciously or unconsciously, to create new pictures of human situations. Toni Morrison, I think, succeeded in using resonating images to make poetry out of the awful history of slavery, and, in so doing, she makes her tale subsume history and transcend: “This is not a story to pass on” (Morrison 275).

The book functions like memory, and I encourage students to rethink the uses of memory as they read.

When we read Beloved, my students and I begin together on the first page because, for some, the novel seems too daunting to read alone. “124 was spiteful.” The reader can see an image of a house, with a personal identity, encapsulating the lives within. I invite students to notice that the first sentence of each section in Beloved makes reference to the house, which may be read as not merely a shelter, but a world, and a receptacle for memory. Other issues of meaning arise as we read; for instance, students might be unsure about how to pronounce Sethe’s name until they come to page thirty where we share her memory of her mother calling her name. Small problems of decoding arise to be explained; much of the meaning in the novel emerges as students make connections between a half-finished thought on one page and its completion one, five, or fifty pages later. The book functions like memory, and I encourage students to rethink the uses of memory as they read. I suggest keeping a chart of images with pages noted beside them, showing how each reference works like a puzzle-piece to create a whole picture later on.

Moving through the novel, students discover that added layers emerge to be read when they consider meanings between and behind the images as well. In class after class, students are entranced by the interpretive possibilities behind Morrison’s imagery. For instance, the “Die-witch!” (19) story is a kind of folktale about magic being overcome by men who kill the witch to save themselves from death. Some students need to take a second look in order to understand that when Denver listens to her older brothers tell “Die-witch” stories, they’re huddling against the fear of death at their mother’s hands. Of course Howard and Buglar leave 124 because they’re afraid of sharing the fate of their youngest sister whom Sethe killed, but the added layer deepens Paul D’s response to the ghost in 124: Sethe and Denver invite the ghost to conversation, calling “Come on. Come on. Why don’t you just come on.” (4), yet Paul D chases the ghost out: “Get the hell out . . . You want to fight, come on!” (18). “124” can be seen as an image of a person and a boundary between worlds, as Denver realizes. I invite my students to consider the ancient idea that witches and ghosts, like Greek gods, inhabit the boundaries between seen and unseen worlds; for instance, Olokun, a female orixa (goddess in the Yoruba tradition) rules the watery world below, while Olorun rules the sky (Courlander). Also, Greek myths contain resonating images in the rivers of the underworld, including the river of forgetfulness, Lethe (echoed by the sound of “Sethe”). Spirits drink of the river Lethe in order to forget their lives in the human world. I find it interesting that Sethe dwells in the boundaries between memory and forgetting: her “rememory” sweeps out like a tide, sometimes bouyng, sometimes drowning her and her loved ones.
Memory usually seems to dwell within the head of one person, unless it’s shared; Morrison shows how Sethe thinks of memory as another world:

What I remember is a picture floating around out there outside my head. I mean, even if I don’t think it, even if I die, the picture . . . is still out there . . . and what’s more, if you go there—you who never was there—if you go there and stand in the place where it was, it will happen again; it will be there for you, waiting for you. (36)

This kind of memory resembles Jung’s concept of a shared collective memory that all people can enter into and experience. Thus, memory is no longer the preserve of the individual alone but of relatives or even strangers who can journey to it as to another reality. Northrop Frye’s concept of archetypal images in literature draws from Jung’s thinking, and so the images woven throughout this novel can be read archetypally, as I show my students. As Morrison delineates it in *Beloved*, memory exerts a peculiar force, taking on a life of its own.

**Water Imagery**

Boundaries and memory connect with the water imagery Morrison uses throughout the novel. This imagery can show how people leave a world when they need to escape, as classical mythologies hint by giving porous boundaries to the world. Hope exists when the protagonist can flee and find a new place to live. Dangers also exist in boundary crossings, because new forces threaten and old ones might pursue. Both hope and danger resonate with the experiences of Sethe and Paul as they leave the South and cross the Ohio River to freedom. Stamp Paid, like Charon, serves as ferryman, inviting comparisons to the River Styx. Images of womb-water mingle in our reading when Sethe’s water breaks the first time, “flooding the boat when Denver was born,” and gushing out again, propelled by memory when Beloved reappears (51). Sethe flees Kentucky, the underworld of slavery and memory, ferried by Stamp, but memory sometimes tries to pull her back. Beloved emerges from the river—“a fully dressed woman walked out of the water” (50)—and disappears there, also. She may be read as a force from Sethe’s memory or as an actual “crazy woman” whose own memories are twisted and become surreal. Usually, water invites connections to the imagery of cleansing and drowning, but Morrison plants these subtly in the background, using creative variants. For instance, Denver imagines herself as the “ice cake torn away from the solid surface of the stream” (123), when she fears that Beloved has “gone back” to the underworld from whence she came. Also, Paul D feels how “his blood, frozen like an ice pond for twenty years, began thawing, breaking into pieces that, once melted, had no choice but to swirl and eddy” (106). While ice covers the river in winter, melting brings rebirth in springtime. When Beloved finally does leave, she’s seen “down by the stream, cutting through the woods, a naked woman with fish for hair” (267), looking like an old and dangerous earth-goddess. Blood and milk are also connected to water and make us think of life forces, motherhood, sex, and death; Denver took in her dead sister’s blood with her mother’s breast-milk, an image ripe with associations to communion, kinship, sustenance, life, and death. The ocean imagery in Chapter 22 evokes the crossing in slave ships, along with images of the watery womb, the underworld, and the collective unconscious, which writers following Jung connect with waves of memory to the sea.

**Tree Imagery**

Images of trees resonate throughout the novel in different, powerful ways, linking Greek myths, African folktales, and biblical stories. Students often become familiar with trees as images of nature and fertility—the Tree of Life, the Tree of Knowledge from the Bible, or the World Ash from Norse mythology. Morrison extends the image by showing caught slaves hanging in trees, Sweet Home men taking refuge in them, Paul D calling a tree Brother, and a tree etched on Sethe’s back with a whip. Sethe’s tree resonates with the tree of life and the tree of knowledge from the Garden of Eden, showing the fruit of good and evil, showing the “iron” Paul D sees in her, and allowing her to seem like a living metaphor for the force of life. While the overseer’s whip etched this tree, the image can be read as a hope that the product of slavery’s evil has been conquered by the force of life, in the person of Sethe. Because this hopeful interpretation must be read into the graphic image, students can see the importance of the reader’s role in seeing possibilities.

For instance, jungle imagery of vines and greenness sends a mixed message about fertility, hope, and danger. The Garden of Eden in the Bible is a paradise from which humans fell, but the jungle is associated with danger, primal instinct, even
cruelty. The boundaries of these different readings blur within the novel. Students are interested to learn that snakes stand not only for temptation and poison in the garden of biblical fame, but also as totems of healing and wisdom in African folk stories. Seeing that images whose meanings and implications we take for granted can be viewed with another set of implications makes these students more aware of how experiences like slavery can be transformed within the world of a novel.

**Animal Imagery**

Animal imagery, read deconstructively, calls the dichotomy between animals and humans into question. Often authors show the evils of treating people (slaves, for instance) like animals, but Morrison deepens the patterns of association here. She juxtaposes the cruelty of the “bit” and the “collar” tormenting Paul D with the freedom of “Mister” the rooster (72), who “was allowed to be and stay what he was,” unlike Paul D. Detailing the precise torments of Paul D at the hands of various cruel white men who treat slaves like animals, Morrison sets up a juxtaposition backwards and forwards, so to speak. Various images hark back to the “manhood” of the Sweet Home men who were “allowed” this by Mr. Garner and took it for their own. Other images point forward to the comment Paul D visits on Sethe when he hears of how she tried to kill her children: “You got two feet or four?” In this juxtaposition my students confront the question, What makes a human? Is it up to humans to make each other human? Aren’t humans often more evil than animals after all?

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Student papers are thick with quotations and interpretive ideas.

Sethe’s killing of her children can be read as an animal act of desperation or as a desperate human solution to the problem of saving beloved children from torment. Keys to the second reading appear in Sethe’s memories of her mother and the others who “danced the antelope.” I tell my students that the reference here is to an African dance where people imitate animals they hunt, showing their oneness with the beasts who sustain them and whose powers—in this case, swiftness and grace—they wish to attain: “They shifted shapes and became something other. Some unchained, demanding other whose feet knew her pulse better than she did” (31). This shape-shifting carries a subtextual clue about human nature, readable as seeking for connection with each other and the natural world.

“How hokey!” students react if handed this interpretation bluntly; however, when they discover this through reading and discussing the imagery in class, the novel interrupts this reaction by showing the horror of the alternative: men chained like beasts. Stamp Paid 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 their sweet white blood. . . . But it wasn’t the jungle blacks brought with them to this place from the other (livable) place. It was the jungle whitefolks planted in them . . . In, through and after life, it spread, until it invaded the whites who had made it. Touched them every one. Changed and altered them. Made them bloody, silly . . . The screaming baboon lived under their own white skin; the red gums were their own. (199)

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**Student Reaction**

My students, white and black, burdened by guilt and questions, sometimes read this as a reassurance that you reap what you sow and the choice of images may, despite the idea of collective unconscious, belong to them. Any person, white or black, may choose their mode of response, as Bodwin does in the novel when he persistently helps Sethe and other black fugitives. Also, if the unconscious belongs to everyone, then so does the burden of choice, which, I like to think, is a more effective burden than guilt. The “screaming baboon” doesn’t live under every white skin or under every black skin. (Stamp may be read as saying that it doesn’t live under any black skin but elsewhere Morrison implies otherwise.) The jungle can be read as an image of possibility, not destiny. When Sethe goes out with an ice pick to kill Edward Bodwin, the man who “kept Sethe from the gallows in the first place,” (265) we see that “the hurter” she’s trying to “outhurt” (234) doesn’t reside in any one person or race, any more than it resides in Bodwin or in the image of the hat that becomes a lethal code for Sethe’s re-memory. Animals and humans have double edges:
hurter and healer, baboon and antelope, “schoolteacher” and Bodwin. Yet even this statement risks oversimplifying the many edges that can be read in Beloved. Ultimately, perhaps, the slavery that human beings, especially the white southerners in this novel, inflict on one another is an echo and a result of the slavery they inflict on themselves.

Seniors with whom I read this novel have experienced a broad spectrum of reading and teaching during their high school careers, so they’re articulate about what they think. Also, because we explore different lenses for reading in my senior English class, they know there’s more than one way to read a book. That’s why I decided to teach Morrison’s novel to seniors. By October of senior year they have the tools to come to terms with the novel, using the New Critical and deconstructive lenses. While we start with reader response (see the first paragraph of this article), by the time we write the final essay on the novel, they actively engage with the layered interpretations available to them as readers. Student readings vary widely, but they engage fully with possible readings. One student writes, “When Morrison finally reveals the death of Beloved, the natural opposition between motherhood and murder explodes into a pile of deconstructed shrapnel.” Another student writes compellingly about physical and metaphysical imagery in the novel:

If the physical and metaphysical realms are unified by a permeable boundary like water and share the same haunting qualities, Sethe’s whole argument for infanticide goes to hell. In deconstructing the barrier that Sethe created between two realms, Morrison might suggest that troubles aren’t just swallowed up into the ether like the corpse of a dead baby. For every black person in Cincinnati that turned their back on Sethe, another will find that their feet fit the footprints of Beloved.

Student papers are thick with quotations and interpretive ideas. Because the novel is demanding, I find that lots of experienced teaching is necessary at the outset. As we move through the novel, students are usually able to take center stage in our discussions, leaving me to add tidbits of information when the going gets difficult. However, this is not a book for students to tackle easily alone, nor is it a novel easily taught by a first-year teacher. The novel is difficult, and many hard issues—all along the spectrum of violence and sexuality, for instance—emerge to be dealt with by teacher and students. But the rewards, according to my students, are worth the difficult reading.

As Denver says, “Anything coming back to life hurts” (35), so it’s no wonder that the hope of rebirth comes with the pain of transcendence. My students and I hope, along with Sethe and Paul D, that there’s a way past memory into freedom, and that there is a way to live in some kind of harmony despite the way the “footprints come and go, come and go” (275). My students and I share the challenge of living with the “footprints” of history, slavery, and racism. Paul D’s words to Sethe, “You your best thing” (273) teach us lessons, and we need to give heed to the injunction, “We got more yesterday than anybody. We need some kind of tomorrow” (273).

Works Cited


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