



YALE NATIONAL INITIATIVE

to strengthen teaching in public schools®

Curriculum Units by Fellows of the National Initiative

2012 Volume II: Storytelling: Fictional Narratives, Imaginary People, and the Reader's Real Life

Beloved: A Case Study in Storytelling Analysis

Curriculum Unit 12.02.08, published September 2012

by Tiffany DiMatteo

"It was not a story to pass on." *Beloved*

Introduction

I originally encountered the novel *Beloved* about a month before I was to teach it to an International Baccalaureate English 12 class eight years ago. When I read it for the first time, I was instantly struck by the power of the narrative, the complexity of Morrison's style, and absolute fear that I did not understand the novel well enough to teach it. I understood the basic plot ideas: murdered child returns in the flesh to haunt mother and family while they, the living, are attempting to walk a fine line between past, present, and future that will allow them to move forward. However, I needed help in understanding what the subtleties of Morrison's language, symbols, and narrative structure signified and how best to illuminate that for my students. Despite several fevered searches of both internet and library, I struggled to find appropriate strategies and activities for an upper-level high school classroom. This novel has invited many scholarly interpretations; there are also no shortage of summaries aimed at students, like Sparknotes—the bane of every teacher who attempts to encourage students to wrestle with a text independently. However, for a high school teacher working through the many different elements and attempting to convey those elements to my students, I felt the resources available were lacking. I put forth a brave face and a humble attitude and we slogged through the novel as neophytes together, united in our lack of understanding. Since then, I have read and taught this novel several times, increasing my comfort level as the facilitator and providing students with a deeper understanding of its many facets.

Great literature should always include an engaging plot and an innovative approach to literary elements; *Beloved* offers both, and upon every reading of the novel, I find something new that I did not see previously. I am also certain to tell my students this nugget of wisdom, many of whom would rather pull out their own teeth than reread a text. There are so many different lenses that one can use to interpret and critique the novel, which is one small part of its brilliance. There is no question why Morrison won the 1988 Pulitzer Prize in Fiction for *Beloved*, followed by a Nobel Prize for Literature in 1993. It sparks a passionate level of interest for me as both a reader and a teacher, and I know that my students sense my excitement when we delve into the text together. While students don't always love the novel with the same near-fanaticism that I have, (almost)

all of them come to respect and appreciate the novel for its literary value. Approaching the novel from the vantage point of storytelling encouraged me to bring a fresh eye to the text and to reevaluate my understanding of the story it ultimately tells the reader and the ways in which it does so.

Curricular Context and Rationale

For the last two decades, this novel has consistently been one of the most frequently taught on college campuses. As a teacher for both the Advanced Placement (AP) or International Baccalaureate (IB) programs, I know that practically all of these students are college-bound and are voluntarily enrolling in an academically challenging and rigorous course that will prepare them for higher education. Additionally, both programs require that students move beyond comprehension and be able to interpret and analyze rhetorical and thematic elements of writing, also valued skills at the university level. *Beloved* provides ample opportunity for this; it is an appropriate challenge because of the sophisticated writing style, symbolism, and motifs. When students are given parameters for understanding a difficult text like *Beloved*, it can lead to stimulating classroom discussion and the application of significant analysis. I usually approach this novel in second semester for two reasons: it builds up to this novel's difficulty through other works in first semester and because students find this novel incredibly useful as an exemplary text for their exams, which occur in May.

AP English Literature and Composition is traditionally taught in the twelfth grade and is designed for students to think critically about literature and develop analytical skills equivalent to an undergraduate literature course. The students are generally high-achieving, goal-oriented students who are accustomed to being successful at school. The College Board must approve the syllabus of the course, and students are expected to take the AP exam in May; a successful score is one that will gain college credit, typically a 4 or 5 (on a 5 point scale). The exam incorporates a multiple choice section with several fiction-based passages and questions that I have categorized as comprehension, interpretation, analysis, and technical or literary vocabulary. Students also write three essays in two hours; two essays are based on previously unseen literary passages chosen by the College Board, and the third essay is an open-ended question that they will answer and support based on a text read during that year. This is where *Beloved's* usefulness truly becomes evident, because it is a text that can be applied in so many different ways.

The International Baccalaureate Diploma Program takes place during eleventh and twelfth grades. It is a rigorous curriculum that takes a more holistic approach to education; in addition to core academic classes, IB students are required to take Theory of Knowledge, a course designed to evaluate learning processes and illustrate connections amongst disciplines. IB students must also complete an Extended Essay of four thousand words and community service hours in the categories of creativity, action, and service (CAS). In English A1 HL (IB-speak for 12th grade literature, read in English), students are required to examine multiple genres of literature from different cultures, and each work is studied in-depth for a number of weeks. Choosing particularly rich texts that can be critiqued from a variety of stances is an important requisite factor for being placed on the syllabus. In May, IB students take an essay-based exam and received a score of 0-7; when combined with their other IB scores, they may receive an IB diploma or certificates for completed courses.

Objectives

By the end of a four-week unit for a class that meets every other day for ninety minutes, students will have read the novel in its entirety, discussed their evolving understanding of the plot and character development, established an understanding of the non-linear chronology of events, analyzed the significance of storytelling in its multiple meanings, and showcased their ability to critically analyze the novel from various points of view.

My goal as an educator, and particularly as an English teacher, is for students to learn to think critically and to apply those analytical skills throughout their lives. Often students think that all we do in class is read and discuss novels, and they don't see the benefits that the critical thinking and analysis skills they have learned and applied in my class can have in multiple areas of their academic lives and beyond. I know I have been successful, however, when a student tells me that she never thought of something in that way before, or that he brought up our reading or discussion in another class or at home. That shows that the boundaries of the physical classroom have been broken, which is exactly what I want. *Beloved* is the type of novel that encourages this boundary-breaking; I have eavesdropped on students in the hallway arguing over the morality of Sethe's decision and I have been told from other teachers that the students frequently tie in the reading to their other coursework—sometimes to that teacher's chagrin because of a perceived slight to their own classwork, or ignorance about the novel itself. I, however, am delighted that students are making connections.

By the end of this unit, students will have a different concept of the word 'storytelling.' Using the word in a high school setting is tricky because it is associated with much younger children: as in, "story hour" or "tell me a story." There's also a cultural connotation that to "tell stories" is to be lying, and that only leads to trouble and punishment. In the context of this novel, however, storytelling takes on multiple levels of significance that relate to but also diverge from standard associations with the word. In any literary work, there is a narrator telling a story to the reader. In this novel, that is accomplished by an omniscient third person perspective, but there are important moments when the novel's narration is entrusted to its characters—not only through dialogue, but also from a first person point of view. There are also the stories that the characters tell each other—personal stories of physical and psychological trauma that raise the question, what stories should be told, and who decides when, how, or why they are told?

The very idea of storytelling is rooted in the historical and cultural reality of the novel in two ways, and this will be explored in the curriculum unit. First, the oral tradition of storytelling, a key component of sharing and maintaining African and African-American history and identity at the time of the novel's setting, is a key element in the relationships that exist among the characters. This is further complicated by the idea of oral versus written storytelling, when a newspaper clipping shown to an illiterate man becomes a revelatory and symbolic plot device. Second, the central conflict of the novel is based on a historically true event, which circles back to and questions the idea that storytelling must be fictitious. Punishment in the novel comes from historical truth—the institution of slavery is the root of all pain and each character has suffered from it in some way. Even though the novel is a work of fiction, the emotions that are characterized are realistic. Storytelling is a way of processing and making real that pain and punishment; it also encourages an emotional reaction from the reader. All of these different elements of storytelling will be outlined in the discussion below.

In this unit, students will recognize and analyze the different writing styles and narrative techniques that comprise the storytelling structure of *Beloved*. The novel is considered a cornerstone of postmodernism because of the way that it fuses so many styles that have come before, including stream of consciousness, magical realism, flashback, and the bildungsroman. Evaluating setting and chronology are important when

considering the structure as it relates to and impacts storytelling. The novel shifts in both place and time with minimal cues, creating a beautiful fluidity to the narrative but also potential frustration, as it can be easy to lose the when and where of the plot.

To meet these objectives, reading and discussing the novel should take some time, which is why four weeks for the unit is strongly recommended. I have made the mistake of expecting students to move too quickly through the text, and they end up frustrated and confused. This is especially true for high school students encountering the text for the first time, for whom this may well be the most complex piece of literature they have ever read. By breaking the novel into purposeful sections and working through it as a class, the students are allowed time to process the text, to discuss it with their peers, and to approach and work through its most powerful moments together (my chunking suggestions are in the Strategies and Activities section below).

Background Information

There are many resources available for a standard biography of Toni Morrison, so this short section will focus on the pertinent parts of her background that specifically inform the creation of this novel. As the focus of this curriculum unit is the theme of storytelling, that idea will also serve as the central touchstone biographically.

Toni Morrison, a pen name, was born as Chloe Anthony Wofford in 1931 in Lorain, Ohio; the year of her birth is an important fact because "Morrison was twenty-three years old when the 1954 school desegregation decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* was handed down; she was thirty-seven...when the Civil Rights Act was passed. Thus, the activism, violence, and radical changes of the civil rights era formed the backdrop of almost her entire young adulthood." ¹ This history could not fail to inform her writing and, indeed, her novels grapple with many different aspects of the African American experience, even those that she did not personally live through, like the Middle Passage and slavery in *Beloved*. One critic claims that "Morrison's most revolutionary—and most defining—act has been to write for black readers about black people...[S]he has credited the complexity and originality of African American life by working within its intricate and rich system of meaning, language, and art." ² She achieves this through the representation of dialect, symbols, and a sense of authenticity in her fiction.

Morrison's grandparents were sharecroppers in Alabama; they became part of the Great Migration of African Americans from the South to the North when they moved first to Kentucky, and then settled in Ohio. They brought with them not only their personal experiences, but also the oral tradition of storytelling or "the black vernacular tradition," which was passed down to their children and grandchildren. ³ Morrison has repeatedly highlighted the importance of these stories, most recently in an April 2012 article: "At night her parents told R-rated ghost stories, like one about a murdered wife who returned home holding her own severed head. The following evening, the kids had to retell the tales with variations: Maybe it was snowing, or there was blood dripping from the head." ⁴ This immediately brings to mind the passage in *Beloved* of the childish but disturbing stories that Sethe's children tell each other about their own mother, from Denver's point of view: "[S]he remembered...the pleasure they had sitting clustered on the white stairs—she between the knees of Howard or Buglar—while they made up die-witch! stories with proven ways of killing [Sethe] dead." ⁵ This presents an interesting contrast of familial comfort, found in the physical closeness of the siblings and the unity resulting from the storytelling, and the unsettling plotline of murdering their mother. At this point in the

novel, the reader is unaware why making up stories of Sethe's death would bring "pleasure" to the children, although there is an interesting connection to the idea of "proven ways of killing her dead." The children are aware they live with the ghost of their murdered sister, so death itself is not an end but simply a different kind of existence. The specific phrasing calls to mind the idea of ending a person in both body and spirit—when they "kill" Sethe in these stories, she cannot return to haunt them.

Morrison was in a unique position to marry the oral tradition of stories with the canon of Western literature because of her family's decision to move north in order to provide her with better access to education and, historically speaking, the increase in available avenues for black writers as the twentieth century progressed. "[F]rom a very early age, she had a deep connection to the Western literary tradition even while she maintained her grounding in the black vernacular tradition." ⁶ She went on to graduate from both Howard and Cornell and says she became a writer when "I realized there was a book that I wanted very much to read that really hadn't been written." ⁷ This is a powerful statement in context of the novel *Beloved* because I am not aware of a work that approaches its handling of morality, trauma, and the dangers of memory in such an eloquent and literary manner, while still being accessible to students.

In the quarter-century since the publication of *Beloved*, the novel has developed its own story to tell. While the novel won the Pulitzer Prize in Fiction in 1988, it was not without controversy. The novel failed to win the National Book Award for that year, prompting a large group of renowned, self-identified "black writers" to publish a protest in the *New York Times Book Review*. This group, including such figures as Maya Angelou, Lucille Clifton, and Henry Louis Gates, Jr., "here assert ourselves against such oversight and harmful whimsy" and claim that "the legitimate need for our own critical voice in relation to our own literature...no longer be denied." ⁸ In 2006, a group of writers and critics polled by the *New York Times* voted that *Beloved* was the best work of literature of the last twenty-five years. ⁹

Finally, the novel has a story to tell as a banned or challenged text and a teacher should be aware of that history before assigning it in the classroom. The same year that Morrison's novel was voted to be the best work of fiction, it was also on the top of the American Library Association's list of most challenged books for "complaints [of] offensive language, sexual content, [and] unsuited to age group." ¹⁰ Having taught the novel, I know from experience that there are sections that must be handled cautiously. Prior to any classroom discussion of a delicate passage—for example, the references to human-bestial intercourse in the first chapter—I remind my students that the novel contains adult themes that require us to be sophisticated, mature readers, and that our language and tone must reflect that. ¹¹

Analysis of Storytelling

There are myriad ways to critique, analyze, and interpret this novel, and there is no shortage of academic resources to look at for inspiration. My goal here is to provide high school literature teachers with a departure point for analyzing the novel based on the concept of storytelling, and the following analysis will be broken into "Structure and Culture" and "Narrative Truth, Historical Truth." The categories are neither superficial nor definitive; rather, they provide me with broad parameters in order to guide my students through the novel.

I have structured these sections in a way that will allow teachers to see how the novel can be interpreted in

the classroom. Creating day-by-day lesson plans is not the most effective introduction to this analysis because, as is evident upon reading this unit, teachers will benefit most from having all of these elements in mind when beginning the novel with students.

Structure and Culture

Oral Tradition

There is a beautiful complexity to the novel that is revealed each and every time it is read, but it can certainly be intimidating to a reader of any age. In addition to the specific literary techniques that Morrison weaves throughout are the overarching styles of writing that coalesce and make it such an engaging and challenging read. The modes of storytelling must be examined so that students can comprehend, break apart, and interpret the text in a meaningful way. This is not a novel that can be read just for plot or character or structure because of the way that the elements have been woven together. I will not divorce the author from a text, thus the cultural perspective of African Americans necessarily informs the structure. For example, one notices the use of parallel structure and repetition almost immediately; the first sentence of each of the three parts of the novel are "124 was spiteful," "124 was loud," and "124 was quiet."¹² However, when one recognizes that Morrison embeds the black vernacular tradition into the structure, we see how it contributes strongly to the story that the novel tells and the way that it is revealed. "The vernacular is a complex oral discourse characterized by such tropes as call and response and signifying (a means of repetition and revision)."¹³ In literary terms, we tend to call this repetition or parallelism, but specifically naming it within the African American tradition brings with it the cultural weight and significance that it deserves.

The character of Baby Suggs exemplifies the oral traditions of African Americans. Several of the terms used above, like call and response and signifying, along with witnessing, are directly connected to religious practices. We discover in chapter 9 that after she was purchased from slavery by her son Halle, "she became an unchurched preacher...uncalled, unrobed, unanointed".¹⁴ After Paul D tells Sethe that Halle lost his mind after seeing her violated, Sethe aches for the support that Baby Suggs would have provided and she hears the voice of Baby Suggs saying, "Lay em down, Sethe. Sword and shield. Down. Down. Both of em down. Down by the riverside. Sword and shield. Don't study war no more. Lay all that mess down. Sword and shield."¹⁵ There are several techniques at work in this passage and it is a worthwhile exercise to have students identify them and examine how they work together. First, the characterization of Baby Suggs is as a soothing source of comfort for Sethe, placing Baby Suggs in the mold of a mother figure. The use of dialect reveals class and status, but it also makes her seem approachable and human. This passage serves to connect the techniques of parallelism and repetition to the culturally-rooted terms of witnessing and signifying (defined in the paragraph above). Even though Baby Suggs' comments are just for Sethe, they could easily be used in one of her sermons—the "sword and shield" has biblical connotations—that she delivers in the Clearing to other escaped and former slaves and their children. The imagery, repetition, and structure also create a melodic flow that seems to envelope Sethe and the reader, similar to repeating a mantra or prayer can induce a calming effect.

The story begins *in medias res*, but it quickly establishes the main characters and setting within the first paragraph. Reading this passage aloud is an excellent way of introducing the novel and allowing students the time to process the text and ask questions (not that they will all be answered). Some examples of useful analysis that can be performed on the first paragraph begin with the first sentence: "124 was spiteful." The house has already achieved its own significance by virtue of opening the novel and being personified, and "spiteful" is a loaded word worthy of a brief discussion of connotation and association. The second sentence, a

fragment really, "Full of a baby's venom," contrasts that idea of personification. It opens with an angry house and follows with the image of a dangerous, bestial baby, purportedly the most innocent of all creatures.

I would also ask students to think carefully about the specific number of the house. This is a good time to point out that nothing in the novel is accidental, so why the sequence 124? They will typically point out that the number three is missing, which is a powerful symbol as one continues to read—Beloved, the murdered daughter, being the third of Sethe's children. When asked what the sum of 1+2+4 is, they quickly and proudly shout out "Seven!" The follow-up is, what does the number seven symbolize, particularly in a biblical sense? Some students will point out that God created the world in seven days, which means the number seven is symbolic of completion. This then prompts the final question of, how can the sequence be symbolically complete when it is so clearly missing a component? Revisiting this question at the end of the novel, students recognize that the family is complete without Beloved; she does not belong. Additionally, the numbers may come to symbolize the three characters that can make a new family—Sethe, Denver, and Paul D—by the end of the novel.

Flashback and Time Shifts

That the novel will shift quickly in time is established in the fifth sentence, "The grandmother, Baby Suggs, was dead, and the sons, Howard and Buglar, had run away by the time there were thirteen years old—as soon as merely looking in a mirror shattered it (that was it for Buglar); as soon as two tiny hand prints appeared in the cake (that was it for Howard)." While the third sentence states the present time as 1873, the reader is quickly alerted that events of the past will frequently collide with the present. (One of the most useful activities in the classroom is to have students create a chronological timeline of events; this is elaborated in the "Activities" section.) The teacher can point out cues to the students that a time shift is going to occur in order to give them confidence. A strong example for this is found in the extract: "'No more powerful than the way I loved her,' Sethe answered and there it was again. The welcoming cool of unchiseled headstones..."¹⁶ Through the phrasing, "and there it was again," a careful reader will recognize that as a cue that we are entering a flashback, and those verbal signs are important in identifying moments of time shift.

Flashback has its own narrative significance in the novel, clearly demonstrating the power of the past on the present. "[T]he leveling out of different time frames enable[s] the novel to mimic and reflect the process of memory: the actual act of remembering as well as the incorporation of told memories into the oral tradition."¹⁷ This connection does not just provide background for the novel's events, but is a powerful reminder that past events create memories and memory can be dangerous. Sethe admits that "she worked hard to remember as close to nothing as was safe," indicating a tenuous relationship between remembering, forgetting, and deliberate memory suppression.¹⁸ The danger of forgetting is exemplified for Sethe on the following page as she describes a moment of walking home: "Nothing else would be in her mind...and suddenly there was Sweet Home rolling, rolling, rolling out before her eyes, and although there was not a leaf on that farm that did not make her want to scream, it rolled itself out before her in shameless beauty. It never looked as terrible as it was and it made her wonder if hell was a pretty place too."¹⁹ This is one of my favorite passages to examine and analyze with a class because there is so much power in the use of figurative language, repetition, and allusion, which connects to the characterization of Sethe and the theme of memory.

Breaking down these early passages in the classroom is an important and valid use of time because it shows the students the depth of analysis that is possible while also giving them the benefit of working through it together, even when following a teacher's modeling. It is critical that students understand the importance of flashback as more than just a literary device, but a stylistic element that informs the structure,

characterization, and meaning of the novel as a whole.

Magical Realism

In addition to the subtle flashback, the fifth sentence of the novel also sets up one of the key writing styles, magical realism. "Magic realist novels and stories have, typically, a strong narrative drive, in which the recognizably realistic merges with the unexpected and the inexplicable and in which elements of dreams, fairy story, or mythology combine with the everyday, often in a mosaic or kaleidoscopic pattern of refraction and recurrence."²⁰ It becomes clear in the fifth sentence from the text that while the house is the vessel for supernatural occurrences, the creator of the disturbances is the venomous baby, as displayed through the disconcerting image of the "two tiny hand prints...in the cake." This style is reinforced on the following page when "Sethe and Denver decided to end the persecution by calling forth the ghost that tried them so. Perhaps a conversation, they thought, an exchange of views or something would help. So they held hands and said, 'Come on. Come on. You may as well just come on.' The sideboard took a step forward but nothing else did."²¹ In this passage, the two characters make a conscious decision to communicate with the spirit that they believe is causing "the outrageous behavior of that place," and it is treated matter-of-factly, without any special introduction. "When Morrison recreates these elements in her art, she purposely departs from consensus reality, not to foreground the supernatural as a unique expression of the black community, but as a way to signify the difference between culturally imposed ways of seeing. Morrison's assumption in her writing, her consensus reality, is very different...because the supernatural does exist [and] presumes a truth that is unassailable."²² Morrison is not asking the reader to suspend his disbelief; trust in supernatural occurrences is a cultural truth in the African American community and she will not explain or apologize for it.

It can sometimes be a challenge for students to treat magical realism in the commonplace manner that the author intends; teenagers, not surprisingly, are prone to dramatic interpretations. However, because Morrison has embedded the supernatural from the very first sentence and makes it a common, if complicated, part of the characters' lives, the students are much more likely to develop a way of seeing the supernatural in the way it is meant to be treated. The definition quoted above names "recurrence" as an important element of this style as a way of normalizing it. This is specifically reinforced in this passage in a subtle way, but one that demonstrates Morrison's craft as a writer.

At the beginning of chapter 8, Denver is basking in the joy that Beloved is exuding. Beloved seems to be delighted to have a physical body and performing with it: "Beloved put her fists on her hips and commenced to skip on bare feet. Denver laughed. 'Now you. Come on,' said Beloved. 'You may as well just come on.'"²³ The spoken language here doesn't quite fit, but nor does it stick out as being particularly wrong. The reader has noticed Beloved's language skills developing and the first two fragments seem appropriate, but the last sentence is a developed thought that seems more advanced. In class, I would ask the students about Beloved's use of language here and then point them back to the beginning of chapter 1 and give them the open-ended direction of finding the connection to this extract. Thankfully, the passage appears on the second page, so it doesn't take long for them to find Sethe's original invitation to the ghost form of Beloved (referenced in the paragraph above). The next question is obviously, what does this mean about Beloved and her consciousness? Students then realize that when Beloved's presence in 124 was spiritual, not physical, this proves that she could hear the family and her form of participation was through making objects move or presenting herself as "a pool of red and undulating light."²⁴ It also demonstrates how purposeful Beloved's physical presence is. She does not feel the need to present herself tangibly until Paul D arrives, creates a sense of intimacy with Sethe, fights back against "the screaming house," and gets "rid of the only other

company [Denver] had." ²⁵

Stream of Consciousness

The technique of entering a character's unfiltered thoughts and following wherever s/he may lead is one of the cornerstones of Modernist and postmodernist literature. My students have already encountered *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* by James Joyce and are usually adept at identifying stream of consciousness passages in *Beloved*. There are short examples of this throughout the text but the most significant and difficult are the chapters that are from the points of view of Sethe, Denver, and Beloved respectively, and then the chapter that is the marriage of all three voices. One of my favorite aspects of the novel is the way that Morrison prepares the reader for what will happen next, and this is achieved in the final sentence of the nineteenth chapter: "Mixed in with the voices surrounding the house, recognizable but undecipherable to Stamp Paid, were the thoughts of the women of 124, unspeakable thoughts, unspoken." ²⁶ At this moment the reader may not exactly know what the next few chapters will hold, but the first line of chapter twenty, "Beloved, she my daughter," does not come as a surprise, and clearly defines Sethe as the speaker. The following chapter belongs to Denver as established through its opening sentence, "Beloved is my sister," a parallel to Sethe's. Students usually do not struggle with these two chapters, but it is chapters 22 that tends to need thorough class discussion and analysis.

The first sentence of chapter 22 provides some comfort—it creates a parallel to Sethe and Denver and ends in traditional punctuation—but, alas, it is the only such sentence in the chapter. I will now take this opportunity to freely admit that given the chance, I would ask Toni Morrison to explain every word in this chapter. Short of that, however, I begin by reminding students that this is the strongest example of stream of consciousness in the novel for multiple reasons. First, Beloved still speaks like a child; we have seen many examples of this through the text. Children tend to describe things as literally as possible and she wrestles with her lack of language: "how can I say things that are pictures". ²⁷ Second, we know that Beloved has a divided consciousness. She is here physically, but having come from the other side, part of her self is still connected to the non-physical world. Beloved laments, "there is no one to want me to say me my name I wait on the bridge because she is under it there is night and there is day". ²⁸ Understandably, the "she" that Beloved wants so desperately is Sethe, and this is confirmed through the imagery of Sethe's earrings that she dangled for the baby and that Beloved asks her about in chapter six: "Tell me your diamonds." ²⁹

One strategy to increase student confidence in their understanding of the chapter is to ask them to find examples of imagery that they recognize and to establish its context in the stream of consciousness narrative. There are several examples of repetitive imagery from within the chapter, but none is as dominant as "a hot thing," repeated ten times in five pages. It is always its own complete thought, an image connected to but separate from what is around it. Considering Beloved's lack of vocabulary, "a hot thing" strikes me as something dangerous, requiring caution. It seems, though, that the most common reference surrounding "a hot thing" is Sethe—Beloved's mother, a source of love. For example: "her face is my own and I want to be there in the place where her face is and to be looking at it too a hot thing"; "she wants her earrings she wants her round basket I want her face a hot thing"; and perhaps most conclusively, "Sethe's is the face that left me Sethe sees me see her and I see the smile her smiling face is the place for me it is the face I lost she is my face smiling at me doing it at last a hot thing now we can join a hot thing". ³⁰ Students want a definitive answer: "What is the hot thing??" I have been accosted at my door, in the hallway, and even while getting out of my car after assigning this chapter.

One of the best methods I have found for dealing with this difficult passage is structured small group

discussion. Offering students some comprehension-based questions, like the imagery that they recognized from earlier in the novel, gives them a boost of confidence. In regards to "a hot thing," I tell them that my teacher's edition of *Beloved* just has all of these notes in the margins, and none of them define what "a hot thing" is (the notes, of course, being my own annotations). I admit to having my own theory, but I would like to hear theirs before revealing my own. Despite the lack of a concrete answer, this makes students more comfortable in their own suppositions about the chapter. When they assign meaning to "a hot thing," they must defend their response based on textual support and interpretation, and I have heard some interesting theories. At the end of class, if no one has landed on it, I share my own thoughts: that "a hot thing" is the emotion or relationship that exists between Beloved and Sethe. It is rooted in love, a "hot," powerful, passionate sensation, but it is also tainted with Beloved's anger that Sethe abandoned her. There is a sense of desperation, longing, and control in the image itself and in its repetition.

Bildungsroman

Beloved may seem the obvious choice as the character for whom the novel is a bildungsroman, or coming-of-age novel, but it is actually Denver who rapidly matures and becomes an adult in the year that the text covers (in present tense, spring 1873 to spring 1874). It is a worthwhile activity to have students trace specific moments that showcase Denver's maturation throughout the novel, and what follows is an example of guiding them.

Morrison does not hide the fact that Denver is practically a woman in the first chapter; we know that it has been eighteen years since Paul D saw Sethe and, he says to Denver, "Last time I saw your mama, you were pushing out the front of her dress," a reference to Sethe's pregnancy.³¹ It is, however, remarks like Sethe's response that lead the reader to forget Denver's age: "Still is, provided she can get in it." The students I teach are seventeen to eighteen years old, about to enter the world of independence; they cannot imagine either themselves or a peer wanting to crawl into a parent's lap or re-enter the womb. Denver is consistently characterized as being exceptionally childish, even from the first moment she arrives: "the girl who walked down...was round and brown with the face of an alert doll."³² She is also quite jealous of the relationship between Paul D and Sethe, particularly because it creates an intimacy of which she is not a part. Students tend to perceive this as an immature, childish need for attention. Additionally, there is her emotional and seemingly unprovoked outburst that begins with an impudent retort and ends with her "shaking now and sobbing so she could not speak," and lashing out at her mother: "It's not the house! It's us! And it's you!"³³ The idea of fighting with a parent is much more realistic to students, but the way in which Denver handles her emotions seems to infantilize her. Sethe's treatment of Denver encourages the reader's interpretation of Denver's immaturity, as well: "Grown don't mean nothing to a mother. A child is a child. They get bigger, older, but grown? What's that supposed to mean? In my heart it don't mean a thing."³⁴ Denver is the only child of four that Sethe has left, so it makes sense that she wants her to stay a child so that she will not leave like her brothers.

The moment Denver begins to mature hinges on the arrival of the physical Beloved. Denver has been desperate for a companion, especially since Paul D has taken her mother's attention. Once the family takes in this stranger, "Denver tended her, watched her sound sleep, listened to her labored breathing and, out of love and a breakneck possessiveness that charged her, hid like a personal blemish Beloved's incontinence."³⁵ Denver realizes long before Sethe exactly who Beloved is. Once Denver has set boundaries with her mother—"Leave us alone, Ma'am. I'm taking care of her"—Sethe casually wonders where their dog Here Boy is. "'He won't be back,' said Denver. 'How you know?' 'I just know.'"³⁶ The dog has refused to enter the house

since the description in the first chapter when Beloved's spirit "picked up Here Boy and slammed him into wall hard enough to break two of his legs and dislocate his eye".³⁷ Denver's mysterious declaration is a good moment to ask students what she knows, and many animal lovers hold a serious grudge against the ghost for harming the dog and quickly remember that painful description in chapter 1. This moment is a strong indication that Denver knows Beloved's true identity and that she is beginning to act her age. Despite the fact that Beloved is technically older than she is (twenty to her eighteen), she senses that Beloved is developmentally the age she was at her death. This allows Denver to care for and protect Beloved, though still in an immature, possessive way.

Denver's final test of maturity comes in part three of the novel. Once Sethe realizes that Beloved is her child returned to her, "the two of them cut Denver out of the games."³⁸ Sethe is consumed with pleasing Beloved and Beloved refuses to be pleased. The relationship between them becomes dangerous and Denver realizes that "[s]he would have to leave the yard; step off the edge of the world, leave the two behind and go ask somebody for help."³⁹ Asking students why the language in this quotation is so powerful is a good strategy for understanding Denver's characterization and maturity. 124 has been her world because it has been her insulation from the judgment of others about her family, but for the first time, she is not concerned with herself. She is worried about her mother and her sister and is willing to put her own desire, to stay in the confines of the world she knows, aside so that she can save them all. Denver leaves the house and goes to the one person she knows outside of 124: her former teacher, Lady Jones. Denver admits she is seeking work because her mother is ill. "'Oh, baby,' said Mrs. Jones. 'Oh, baby.' She did not know it then, but it was the word 'baby,' said softly and with such kindness, that inaugurated her life in the world as a woman."⁴⁰ Students usually recognize the significance of this moment and I like to ask about the juxtaposition of word choice and impact. Why does the word "baby" make Denver a woman? Is it simply for irony's sake? Rather than the word itself, it is the tone of sympathy that accompanies it that leads Denver to maturity.

Denver's childish loneliness and possessiveness are swept away in this moment, and she realizes that she does not have to be alone in this struggle. The welcoming and support of the women in her community, by way of Mrs. Jones, are what allows her to achieve womanhood. She displays her maturity for Paul D once Beloved is gone. In a conversation about who or what Beloved really was, she proclaims "I have my own" opinion, and Paul D acknowledges that Denver can no longer be treated like a child. It is her final words to him, however, that have the strongest impact: "Paul D, you don't have to stay 'way, but be careful how you talk to my ma'am, hear?"⁴¹ Denver clearly establishes that she is responsible for her mother, reversing the care relationship that has been the basis of the novel. She lets Paul D know that he is welcome as long as he is cautious, making Sethe the child that needs comfort. That Denver is now capable of unselfishly caring for another is strong evidence that her journey into womanhood is complete.

Narrative Truth, Historical Truth

Storytelling is supposed to be fictional, creative, and fantastical. Morrison begins her Nobel Prize lecture with the following: "Narrative has never been merely entertainment for me. It is, I believe, one of the principal ways in which we absorb knowledge. I hope you will understand, then, why I begin these remarks with the opening phrase of what must be the oldest sentence in the world, and the earliest one we remember from childhood: "Once upon a time...".⁴² Those last four words are the cue that we are about to enter a world of fantasy, simultaneously connected to and removed from reality. There must be, however, some form of personal or universal truth to give a story its power and credibility. The characters and world of 124 Bluestone Road are entirely fictional but are rooted in multiple types of historical truth that command the reader to

engage and wrestle with the repercussions of the stories that have been told to and about them, and which they tell to each other and to the reader.

Slavery and its horrors have been well-documented, even prior to its legal end in the United States a century and a half ago. There are firsthand accounts from Frederick Douglass and Linda Brent (AKA Harriet Jacobs) that speak to the violence and fear that slaves experienced even while seeking to find ways to free themselves from their bondage. Slavery has been reimagined in a variety of fictional works throughout the twentieth century; *The Known World* by Edward P. Jones is a recent addition to the canon that adds a unique perspective—the little-acknowledged fact that some blacks owned slaves. Part of the powerful narrative truth in *Beloved* stems from the historical truth of slavery, and in particular, the memory of and psychological trauma inflicted by slavery. I should acknowledge my teaching context: I am from and teach in the South (North Carolina). Despite the long separation of years and generations, there continues to be a different treatment of the history of slavery in states that fought against the Federal Army in the Civil War. I believe this to be true based on conversations with colleagues who were raised in Massachusetts or Indiana. Some students that I teach acknowledge coming from families that owned slaves. Even now, this is delicate territory.

I have found one of the novel's strengths to be the focus on the psychological, rather than physical, scars left on the characters. A strong example to use with students that iterates the dominance of the psychological over the physical is in the first chapter as Sethe explains to Paul D what she means when she says, "I got a tree on my back."⁴³ This off-hand remark intrigues Paul D, but for Sethe, the real story is what came prior to the whipping that produced the tree-like scar. Sethe tells him that she was still nursing her third child while pregnant with the fourth and that "those boys came in there and took my milk. Held me down and took it." This is a physical desecration on par with rape—to be restrained and suckled like an animal—but for Sethe, it violates her ability to be a mother to her child and that is what continues to haunt her. She tells her mistress what happened and while the white owner's "eyes rolled out tears, [t]hem boys found out I told em. Schoolteacher made one open up my back and when it closed it made a tree." As Paul D hears the story, he cannot believe that a pregnant woman was whipped: "They used cowhide on you? They beat you and you was pregnant?" Sethe repeats, "And they took my milk!" Many students will react similarly to Paul D; they will not fail to recognize the physical and even emotional toll that this event has on Sethe, but a teacher's guidance through the psychological territory will help them understand the heavy maternal burden that she continues to carry.

Perhaps the most significant historical reality in the novel is not addressed until the sixteenth chapter, in which the reader finally learns how Sethe's two year old child was killed. The background of the murder is now one of the more famous historical connections in modern literature. As Morrison writes in the foreword to *Beloved*, "A newspaper clipping in *The Black Book* (one of the books I had published back when I had a job) summarized the story of Margaret Garner, a young mother who, having escaped slavery, was arrested for killing one of her children (and trying to kill the others) rather than let them be returned to the owner's plantation."⁴⁴ While Margaret Garner's story was sensationalized and well-known at the time, it was forgotten over the years. When I first read the novel, I had no idea of the historical reality or the parallels that Morrison built into the narrative.

It is of particular interest from a writer's perspective that, in the foreword, Morrison goes on to say, "The historical Margaret Garner is fascinating, but, to a novelist, confining...So I would invent her thoughts, plumb them for a subtext that was historically true in essence, but not strictly factual." Morrison, however, embeds several historical truths from Margaret Garner's story in the novel that lend a tone of gravity. Sethe and Denver do not reveal last names, but Paul D introduces himself as "Paul D Garner," after the masters at Sweet

Home. ⁴⁵ In Levi Coffin's autobiography, published in 1876, the man hailed as the "President of the Underground Railroad" wrote that "no case...attracted more attention and aroused deeper interest and sympathy than the case of Margaret Garner." ⁴⁶ He goes on to give details about the escape, including the fact that the slaves were "living in Kentucky, several miles back from the [Ohio R]iver" and that they planned to escape to a free state, which would be Ohio. Sweet Home is in Kentucky and Sethe gives birth to Denver on the banks of the Ohio River before being ferried across by Stamp Paid, where she is reunited with her three other children, who are already with Baby Suggs. Once "the fugitives were surrounded by pursuers, Margaret Garner, seeing that their hopes of freedom were in vain, seized a butcher knife that lay on the table, and with one stroke cut the throat of her little daughter, whom she probably loved the best." ⁴⁷ There is no exact parallel of language in Morrison's novel, but when the slavecatchers enter the woodshed, Sethe is "holding a blood-soaked child to her chest" so "her head wouldn't fall off." ⁴⁸ At the end of the novel when Beloved has disappeared again and Sethe has taken to her bed, much like Baby Suggs, she says, "[Beloved] was my best thing." ⁴⁹

These are all powerful connections that students are fully capable of perceiving, and it truly deepens the significance of the novel. The historical truth is so strongly intertwined with the narrative truth that the impact is compounded, not in any way lessened, because it is a work of fiction. After students have read this chapter, they come into class, expecting an immediate discussion. Many of them have clearly formed judgments about the justice of Sethe's decision. As students walk through the door, I hand them the passage from *Reminiscences* with directions to read the selection and write a response to two questions prior to discussion: Paragraph 1) What similarities are present between Margaret and Sethe? Does reading this change your opinion of Sethe at all?

Paragraph 2) How do you personally deal with the situation in ch. 16, morally and/or ethically. (Philosophically, 'morality' speaks to the character, actions, and/or values of an individual; 'ethics' is the set of standards that governs a particular group.) The discussion that follows is more serious and grounded in the text, which respects the historical reality of the situation (see the Appendix for the text from *Reminiscences*).

Strategies and Activities

The reading pace of the novel is, I believe, critical to guiding students and keeping them engaged. I generally expect my students to read at least 25 pages a night, but a text this dense requires a bit more time. There are important moments that students need to read about prior to one class period and there are others that necessitate a bit of time and space between them. My chapter-chunking suggestions for a class that meets every other day are as follows: 1; 2-3; 4-7; 8-9; 10-12; 13-15; 16-18; 19; 20-23; 24-25; 26-28.

Teachers have developed many different methods for checking that students have read and tried to understand the text. While many upper-level teachers check text annotations, I ask students to create a reader's journal. For the journal, students must pull a designated number of quotations from the chapters assigned and respond to them. The quotations that they choose should illuminate some significant element: plot development, symbol, characterization, motif/theme, writing technique/style, etc. They are reminded that their responses are NOT a summary or paraphrase but an explication of meaning. Below is the example that I give to my students:

- QUOTE: "The splash of water, the sight of her shoes and stocking awry on the path where she had flung them; or Here Boy lapping in the puddle near her feet, and suddenly there was Sweet Home rolling, rolling, rolling out before her eyes, and although there was not a leaf on that farm that did not make her want to scream, it rolled itself out before her in shameless beauty. It never looked as terrible as it was and it made her wonder if hell was a pretty place too." (7)
- RESPONSE: The string of clauses at the beginning of this long sentence reinforces the idea that *anything* can trigger a painful flashback to the plantation where Sethe was a slave; the length of the sentence also shows how her present life is inextricably linked to her past. The repetition of the word "rolling" seems to emphasize how unstoppable a force memory is—like a bulldozer. There's also obvious irony in the name "Sweet Home;" while it was beautiful, just the memory of the sight causes her pain and invokes an allusion to hell. While most people think of "home sweet home" as a tired but accurate cliché, this is obviously an example of harsh discrepancy between naming and reality, an important theme. I wonder what other elements in the novel are not what they seem?

I have tried to embed analytical modeling in the previous pages as a primary strategy of working through the text. In addition, however, small group work can be extremely effective in working through multiple chapters, improving comprehension, and encouraging students to think independently about interpretation and analysis.

Below are questions that students address in small groups regarding chapter one. The questions are a mix of comprehension and interpretation, and students must provide evidence for all of their answers, which requires them to interact closely with the text.

1. Who took the iron from Sethe's eyes? How is that character associated with the tree on her back?
2. What makes Sethe choose Halle over the other Sweet Home men?
3. What does the passage on p. 14 add to Sethe's characterization? From whose perspective is it?
4. What does the audience learn about the ghost in this chapter, and what is each person's relationship to the ghost (Sethe, Denver, Paul D)?
5. How does Denver feel when meeting Paul D? What makes her feel this way? Interpret the following: "Denver burst in from the keeping room, terror in her eyes, a vague smile on her lips" (21).

In order to have students thinking about the structure and literary qualities of the novel from the beginning, I also assign each small group a writing style and a theme, motif, or symbol to trace within the chapter. The students must provide two examples of each, think about its significance, and present it to the class. The pairings I have are: nature and flashback; iron and stream of consciousness; bestiality and repetition; home and Gothic Romanticism; memory and magical realism (bildungsroman isn't evident yet).

Another useful activity that requires students to think critically is to have them create their own questions. This works best when you can divide the class in half and then put each half into small groups of 3-4. Side A will create questions for chapters 11-12 and side B will create questions for chapters 13-14. Once they have crafted their questions, they must switch and answer the questions created by the other half. This also cleverly serves to have students review a large section of text because they must think carefully during both parts of the activity. In order to ensure the students are creating quality questions, I assess the questions and not the answers, though they count for participation. Also, I have found that giving the students question stems/verbs based on Howard Bloom's taxonomy of higher order thinking skills leads them to create stronger questions. Students must create five questions; two may be comprehension (knowledge or comprehension in Bloom's language) and three should be interpretation or analysis (analysis, synthesis, or evaluation).

Finally, one of the most useful activities is the timeline. This is best done after chapter 18, at the end of part I. I made some changes for my own classes, but the original idea comes from Teachit, a copyright-protected website originally created for British teachers, but which has many valuable resources for the literature classroom. I strongly encourage teachers to visit the website (www.teachit.co.uk) and evaluate the materials for themselves.

Conclusion

Beloved is a novel that has been and will continue to be a central piece of literature in the literature classroom for so many reasons. This curriculum unit is just a small window into some of its elements; there were many times during the writing when I thought I could not possibly do justice to the complexity of the text in the time and space allowed. However, the theme of storytelling has allowed me to center the focus on ways in which the incredibly powerful story gets revealed to the audience. While I was aware of the importance of the African American experience in the novel, examining it as storytelling has only magnified that significance—especially since I researched the particular modes of African American storytelling that inform the text. I now have a renewed respect and passion for this novel, and see myself teaching and learning it for a long time to come. My goal here is to provide teachers with a pathway into analysis that doesn't come from a summary-based perspective, and I hope that is useful.

Appendix: Margaret Garner Activity

Read the following historical account on which *Sethe* is based and respond on a separate sheet of paper to the following questions; it should be about a page.

Paragraph 1: What similarities are present between Margaret and *Sethe*? Does reading this change your opinion of *Sethe* at all?

Paragraph 2: How do you personally deal with the situation in ch. 16, morally and/or ethically. (Philosophically, 'morality' speaks to the character, actions, and/or values of an individual; 'ethics' is the set of standards that governs a particular group.)

The Story of Margaret Garner from Levi Coffin's *Reminiscences*

Levi Coffin was born in Guilford County, North Carolina, in 1798; he moved to Cincinnati, Ohio, as a young man. He was a Quaker and abolitionist, and is called "the President of the Underground Railroad" for his efforts to save thousands from the institution of slavery. He wrote his autobiography in 1876 and died in 1877.

Perhaps no case that came under my notice, while engaged in aiding fugitive slaves, attracted more attention and aroused deeper interest and sympathy than the case of Margaret Garner, the slave mother who killed her child rather than see it taken back to slavery. This happened in the latter part of January, 1856. The Ohio River was frozen over at the time, and the opportunity thus offered for escaping to a free State was embraced by a number of slaves living in Kentucky, several miles back from the river. A party of seventeen, belonging to different masters in the same neighborhood, made arrangements to escape together. There was snow on the ground and the roads were smooth, so the plan of going to the river on a sled naturally suggested itself. The time fixed

for their flight was Sabbath night, and having managed to get a large sled and two good horses, belonging to one of their masters, the party of seventeen crowded into the sled and started on their hazardous journey in the latter part of the night. They drove the horses at full speed, and at daylight reached the River below Covington, opposite Wester Row. They left the sled and horses here, and as quickly as possible crossed the river on foot. It was now broad daylight, and people were beginning to pass about the streets and the fugitives divided their company that they might not attract so much notice.

An old slave named Simon and his wife Mary, together with their son Robert and his wife Margaret Garner and four children, made their way to the house of a colored man named Kite, who had formerly lived in their neighborhood and had been purchased from slavery by his father, Joe Kite. They had to make several inquiries in order to find Kite's house, which was below Mill Creek, in the lower part of the city. This afterward led to their discovery; they had been seen by a number of persons on their way to Kite's, and were easily traced by pursuers. The other nine fugitives were more fortunate. They made their way up town and found friends who conducted them to safe hiding places, where they remained until night. They were put on the Underground Railroad, and went safely through to Canada....

In a few minutes...[Kite's] house was surrounded by pursuers—the masters of the fugitives, with officers and a posse of men. The door and windows were barred, and those inside refused to give admittance. The fugitives were determined to fight, and to die, rather than to be taken back to slavery. Margaret, the mother of the four children, declared that she would kill herself and her children before she would return to bondage. The slave men were armed and fought bravely. The window was first battered down with a stick of wood, and one of the deputy marshals attempted to enter, but a pistol shot from within made a flesh wound on his arm and caused him to abandon the attempt. The pursuers then battered down the door with some timber and rushed in. The husband of Margaret fired several shots, and wounded one of the officers, but was soon overpowered and dragged out of the house. At this moment, Margaret Garner, seeing that their hopes of freedom were in vain, seized a butcher knife that lay on the table, and with one stroke cut the throat of her little daughter, whom she probably loved the best. She then attempted to take the life of the other children and to kill herself, but she was overpowered and hampered before she could complete her desperate work. The whole party was then arrested and lodged in jail.

The trial lasted two weeks, drawing crowds to the courtroom every day....The counsel for the defense brought witnesses to prove that the fugitives had been permitted to visit the city at various times previously. It was claimed that Margaret Garner had been brought here by her owners a number of years before, to act as nurse girl, and according to the law which liberated slaves who were brought into free States by the consent of their masters, she had been free from that time, and her children, all of whom had been born since then—following the condition of the mother—were likewise free.

The Commissioner decided that a voluntary return to slavery, after a visit to a free State, reattached the conditions of slavery, and that the fugitives were legally slaves at the time of their escape....

But in spite of touching appeals, of eloquent pleadings, the Commissioner remanded the fugitives back to slavery. He said that it was not a question of feeling to be decided by the chance current of his sympathies; the law of Kentucky and the United States made it a question of property.

After being remanded to her owner, William Garrison's newspaper The Liberator reported that she and her youngest child were sold and were traveling by riverboat to Arkansas when their boat collided with another. Both Garner and her child were thrown overboard; the child drowned, and Garner expressed pleasure that her child died. She was sold again and moved to New Orleans, where she died of typhoid fever in 1858.

Bibliography

- Allen, Robert, Maya Angelou, et al. "Black Writers in Praise of Toni Morrison." *The New York Times*, January 24, 1988. <http://www.nytimes.com/books/98/01/11/home/15084.html> (accessed July 13, 2012).
- Atkinson, Yvonne. "'I Been Worried Sick About You Too, Macon': Toni Morrison, the South, and the Oral Tradition." *Critical Insights: Toni Morrison*. Ed. Solomon O. Iyasere and Marla W. Iyasere. Salem Press, 2010.
- Bowers, Susan R. "A Context for Understanding Morrison's Work." *Critical Insights: Toni Morrison*. Ed. Solomon O. Iyasere and Marla W. Iyasere. Salem Press, 2010.
- Coffin, Levi. *Reminiscences of Levi Coffin, the reputed president of the Underground Railroad: being a brief history of the labors of a lifetime in behalf of the slave, with the stories of numerous fugitives, who gained their freedom through his instrumentality*. Cincinnati, 1880. *Slavery and Anti-Slavery*. Gale. Yale University Library. 17 July 2012. 557-567.
- Denard, Carolyn C. "Beyond the Bitterness of History: Teaching *Beloved*." In *Approaches to teaching the novels of Toni Morrison*. Ed. Nellie Y. McKay and Kathryn Earle. New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1997. 40-47.
- Drabble, Margaret, ed. "Magic Realism." *The Oxford Companion to English Literature*. 6th ed. London: Oxford UP, 2000. 629-30.
- Heinze, Denise. *The Dilemma of "Double-Consciousness": Toni Morrison's Novels*. Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1993.
- Holland, Sharon P. and Michael Awkward. "Marginality and Community in *Beloved*." In *Approaches to teaching the novels of Toni Morrison*. Ed. Nellie Y. McKay and Kathryn Earle. New York: Modern Language Association of America, 1997. 48-55.
- Kachka, Boris. "Who Is the Author of Toni Morrison?." *New York Magazine*, April 29, 2012. <http://nymag.com/news/features/toni-morrison-2012-5/> (accessed July 13, 2012).
- Metcalf, Stephen. "Why Is *Beloved* Beloved?." *Slate Magazine*, May 18, 2006. http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/the_dilettante/2006/05/why_is_beloved_beloved.html (accessed July 13, 2012).
- Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*. New York: Vintage International, 2004.
- . *Lecture and Speech of Acceptance, Upon the Award of the Nobel Prize for Literature, Delivered in Stockholm on the Seventh of December, Nineteen Hundred and Ninety Three*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1995.
- . "10 Questions for Toni Morrison." *Time*. May 7, 2008. <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,1738507,00.html> (accessed July 13, 2012).
- "Most Challenged Books Include 'Beloved' and 'The Chocolate War'." *Washington Post*, March 24, 2008. <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/03/23/AR2008032301503.html> (accessed July 13, 2012).
- Raynaud, Claudine. "*Beloved* or the shifting shapes of memory." *The Cambridge Companion to Toni Morrison*. Ed. Justine Tally. Cambridge University Press, 2007. 43-58.
- Reinhardt, Mark. *Who Speaks for Margaret Garner?*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010.
- Rothstein, Mervyn. "Toni Morrison, In Her New Novel, Defends Women." *The New York Times*, August 26, 1987.

[Http://www.nytimes.com/books/98/01/11/home/14013.html](http://www.nytimes.com/books/98/01/11/home/14013.html) (accessed July 13, 2012).

Implementing District Standards

My district—and state, for that matter—has just transitioned to the Common Core State Standards, which represents a nationwide effort to provide high quality and engaging classroom practices for all students. The English Language Arts Common Core is delineated in five key standards, or strands: reading, writing, speaking and listening, language, and media and technology. The Common Core represents a shift in expectations, because all students are to meet the rigorous standards as outlined in 2012-2013.

This unit meets the criteria for a strong Common Core unit in several ways. For example, according to expectations from the Reading strand, students should "read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text." This is an essential part of this curriculum unit because students must be able not only to comprehend the plot of the text, but to engage in class discussions with both small and large groups, which will be based on providing textual support for their opinions and explaining their interpretations and conclusions. Students will also "assess how point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of a text," which is another foundational element of this unit, especially due to the theme of storytelling which shapes the interpretation and analysis of the novel.

This unit was also designed for an Advanced Placement class, which must also adhere to rigorous nationwide standards. AP classes are designed to provide a college-level course experience in a high school setting; students are introduced to demanding critical thinking and interpretation skills and are expected to apply them to their literature study. An AP English Literature and Composition course includes expectations like "students reflect on the social and historical values it reflects and embodies. Careful attention to both textual detail and historical context provides a foundation for interpretation." As stated, this unit will include biographical, social, and cultural background so that students will understand and appreciate the context that plays an important role in the novel. The College Board also notes that "the approach to analyzing and interpreting the material involves students in learning how to make careful observations of textual detail, establish connections among their observations, and draw from those connections a series of inferences leading to an interpretive conclusion about the meaning and value of a piece of writing." This is a necessary component of the unit because students are expected to note details that occur throughout the text, creating a cumulative interpretation that must be open to change as the novel progresses.

Endnotes

1. Bowers, "A Context for Understanding Morrison's Work," 5.
2. Ibid., 2.
3. Ibid., 3.
4. Kachka, "Who Is the Author of Toni Morrison?," 4.
5. Morrison, *Beloved*, 23.
6. Bowers, 4.
7. Morrison, "10 Questions for Toni Morrison."
8. Allen, "Black Writers in Praise of Toni Morrison."
9. Metcalf, "Why Is *Beloved* Beloved?"
10. "Most Challenged Books Include 'Beloved' and 'The Chocolate War'".
11. Morrison, *Beloved*, 12-13.
12. Ibid., 3; 199; 281.

13. Bowers, 3.
14. Morrison, *Beloved*, 102.
15. *Ibid.*, 101.
16. *Ibid.*, 5.
17. Raynaud, "Beloved or the shifting shapes of memory," 44.
18. Morrison, *Beloved*, 6.
19. *Ibid.*, 6-7.
20. Drabble, "Magical Realism," 629.
21. Morrison, *Beloved*, 4.
22. Heinze, *The Dilemma of "Double-Consciousness"*, 159-160.
23. Morrison, *Beloved*, 87.
24. *Ibid.*, 10.
25. *Ibid.*, 23.
26. *Ibid.*, 235.
27. *Ibid.*, 248.
28. *Ibid.*, 251.
29. *Ibid.*, 69.
30. *Ibid.*, 248; 250; 252.
31. *Ibid.*, 13.
32. *Ibid.*, 13.
33. *Ibid.*, 17.
34. *Ibid.*, 54.
35. *Ibid.*, 64.
36. *Ibid.*, 66.
37. *Ibid.*, 14.
38. *Ibid.*, 282.
39. *Ibid.*, 286.
40. *Ibid.*, 292.
41. *Ibid.*, 314.
42. Morrison, *Lecture and Speech of Acceptance*.
43. Morrison, *Beloved*, 18-20.
44. *Ibid.*, xvii.
45. *Ibid.*, 13.
46. Coffin, *Reminiscences*, 557.
47. *Ibid.*, 559-560.
48. Morrison, *Beloved*, 175; 177.
49. *Ibid.*, 321.

<https://teachers.yale.edu>

©2023 by the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute, Yale University, All Rights Reserved. Yale National Initiative®, Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute®, On Common Ground®, and League of Teachers Institutes® are registered trademarks of Yale University.

For terms of use visit https://teachers.yale.edu/terms_of_use