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Beloved: Amy Denver vs. White Power
Maeve Quinn

Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved* is full of white characters who all own something—particularly, they own the black characters in one way or another. Mr. and Mrs. Garner own Sweet Home plantation and therefore, they own the slaves that work there. Schoolteacher owns the slaves of Sweet Home in that he uses his position as teacher in order to control how the slaves learn to think of one another. The only white character in the book who does not own a black character is Amy Denver, an indentured servant who breaks the stereotypes of race relations in the book. She challenges the norms of dominating, controlling white power and interacts with Sethe in a way that instead suggests mutual healing. Despite the insurmountable barrier race creates between Amy and Sethe, the two women bond through a shared sense of motherhood.

Amy and Sethe share many similar life experiences. As a white woman, yet also an indentured servant, Amy is owned by another white person instead of owning herself. Sethe is a black woman running for her life in order to escape slavery, where she, too, was owned by a white person. When Denver describes Amy as having “fugitive eyes,” the word “fugitive” suggests that Amy is running from something and trying to escape some sort of imprisonment (92). Amy's eyes must have mirrored Sethe's, as Sethe is running to escape slavery when Amy finds her. Thus, there is clearly a sort of parallel between Amy and Sethe in their shared lack of ownership over themselves. And, although both women have different skin colors, they are similar in that they are both trying to escape the control of white people and take control of their own lives. Amy is determined to get to Boston in order to buy “carmine velvet” (41). She tells Sethe, “They don't believe I'm a get it, but I am” (40). This shows that she is determined to

prove that she has the power over her own self, that she can make her own decisions and achieve her own goals—essentially, she is attempting to prove that she is her own person. In a way, this is also what Sethe is trying to do. She is pregnant with her fourth child when she runs across Amy, and is also running from Sweet Home, spurred by a desire to own herself instead of allowing white people to own her and her children. Furthermore, when Sethe saw Amy, she said, “she needed beef and pot liquor like nobody in this world. Arms like cane stalks and enough hair for four or five heads. Slow-moving eyes. She didn’t look at anything quick. Talked so much it wasn’t clear how she could breathe at the same time. And those cane-stalk arms, as it turned out, were as strong as iron” (39). Amy is not a rich, well-fed white person. Based on her appearance, she is underfed and malnourished, and her poor condition is another parallel between her and Sethe. Sethe’s feet “were so swollen that she could not see her arch or feel her ankles.... Milk, sticky and sour on her dress, attracted every small flying thing from gnats to grasshoppers” (36). Her back has been slashed open in a whipping by schoolteacher, and the wound is raw and festering. Both have been neglected and mistreated by white people, even though one woman is black and the other is white. Yet, Amy clearly has some strength hidden within her, with arms “strong as iron,” just as Sethe demonstrates the same inner strength, pushing through her journey on foot despite her extremely uncomfortable conditions.

The bond between Amy and Sethe is made even more interesting by the fact that the two women are of differing skin colors, which is otherwise considered a large source of tension in the majority of the book. Sethe is aware that there is danger in trusting a white girl, because “you could get money if you turned a runaway over, and she wasn’t sure this girl Amy didn’t need money more than anything, especially since all she talked about was getting hold of some velvet” (90). Amy has reason to want money so desperately. She is determined to get to Boston and buy

that carmine velvet; it is one of the first things she tells Sethe. As a white woman, she could easily use the power behind her race to turn Sethe in, which would have been the easiest way to get the velvet. But the fact that she does not, and that she even helps Sethe instead and essentially brings her and her baby back to life, is a strong testament to the difference between Amy and the stereotypical white American of that time. Even though there is an opportunity for Amy to exercise her inherent power over Sethe like every other white person previously mentioned in the novel has, she does not take that opportunity. Instead, Amy acts in more of a motherly manner towards Sethe. She shows Sethe compassion—she is a white woman massaging a black woman's feet back to feeling, feeding her, tending to her raw back, delivering her baby. Essentially, Amy saves Sethe's life, and not only that, but she also saves Denver's life—this white woman saves the lives of two black girls in a time when racism and slavery is the general state of mind. And, the whole time, Amy talks to Sethe like a normal person, “about Boston and velvet and good things to eat” (41). Sethe claims that it is this voice that keeps her alive and “made her think that maybe she wasn't, after all, just a crawling graveyard for a six-month baby's last hours” (42). Amy's voice gives Sethe hope instead of making her feel like she needs to escape, as schoolteacher's did that day she found him in the barn teaching the Sweet Home men about her animal characteristics. Although race is still a very prominent division between the two women—Amy refers to Sethe in derogatory ways, calling her a “nigger woman” (39) and claiming “she wouldn't be caught dead in daylight on a busy river with a runaway” (100)—Amy still sees herself in Sethe and wants to help her in her own journey. She reveals herself to be a white woman who offers hope for freedom instead of taking it away through control. That is where Amy truly breaks the stereotypes of white characters in the novel.

Despite the two women's differing races, they overcome that boundary in the ultimate way—they have a child together through the process of Amy helping Sethe give birth to her daughter. This is an incredibly intimate act usually shared by two people who love and care for one another. It is important for the woman giving birth to be in safe hands, to know and trust the person who is helping her through it. In the novel, however, Amy and Sethe share the experience. This suggests that although the two women who had just met the day before, there is something about Amy that leads Sethe to trust her with not only her own life, but also the life of her newborn daughter. Birth itself is a basic human experience, regardless of race, and so it is significant that a black woman and a white woman share in it together. Birth is also a vulnerable experience, as Sethe is allowing Amy access to the most intimate parts of her:

Spores of bluefern growing in the hollows along the riverbank float toward the water in silver-blue lines hard to see unless you are in or near them, lying right at the river's edge when the sunshots are low and drained. Often they are mistook for insects—but they are seeds in which the whole generation sleeps confident of a future. And for a moment it is easy to believe each one has one—will become all of what is contained in the spore: will live out its days as planned. This moment of certainty lasts no longer than that; longer, perhaps, than the spore itself. (99)

The words “spores” and “seeds” likewise suggest intimacy and fertility, as they are the parts of the plant that allow it to reproduce, paralleling Sethe's pregnancy and alluding to mothering. The birth is important not only because it symbolizes the temporary eradication racial barriers and a foreshadowing of improved race relations, yet also because it is the pinnacle of unity between the two women: they share in the mothering of Denver. Amy tells Sethe before she leaves her, “She's never gonna know who I am. You gonna tell her? Who brought her into this here world? . . . Say Miss Amy Denver” (100). Typically, the woman giving birth to the child is said to have “brought the child into the world.” By placing herself on that same level, Amy shares in the kind of responsibility of being a mother to Denver. Throughout their relationship, Amy acts a mother to Sethe, singing lullabies to her, nursing her back to health so that she can continue her journey.

Now, in this tender moment on the water, the theme reaches a pinnacle as Amy helps the woman she has mothered become a mother herself. Even more symbolic is the fact that Sethe names her daughter after Amy Denver—the two women are thus united forever in the birth.

The aforementioned passage on page 99 is not only a symbol of an intimate unifying event across races, but it also speaks to what I believe Morrison is partly suggesting through the relationship between Amy and Sethe—that new beginnings for race relations are on the horizon. As I argued before, the diction Morrison employs in the passage suggests intimacy, as well as reproduction, which is the start of a new life, full of possibilities. The image of spores as they “float toward the water.... seeds in which the whole generation sleeps confident of a future” speaks to the potential for something to change in the coming years. It seems that the passage is a metaphor for Amy and Sethe in that moment of childbirth: they are “hard to see unless you are in or near them, lying right at the river’s edge” literally because they are hidden in the reeds, but also figuratively, because such compassionate relations between a black woman and a white woman at the time was difficult for many people to watch or to grasp. Likewise, the women could be “often... mistook for insects” in that both are insignificant parts of society at the time—a black, pregnant runaway slave and a malnourished, indentured woman servant—in the same way that insects are often looked at as small, insignificant, and unimportant annoyances to be squashed underfoot and never given a second thought. And yet, these women are also the “seeds in which the whole generation sleeps confident of a future.” They “will become all of what is contained in the spore.” It is a fleeting moment, that unity across race found through the birth of a child—a “moment of certainty [that] lasts no longer than that”—but it is one that is significant in that it hints that the relationship between the races has the possibility to grow, in the future, into something beautiful and blossoming.

Amy Denver is a kind, compassionate, motherly white woman to a black slave who formerly encountered only mistreatment by white people. In this way, Amy breaks the novel's theme of control through white power, instead building a companionship with Sethe. Sethe even names her daughter Denver after Amy, which seems could possibly suggest new beginnings for race relations in the future. Sethe named her black daughter after the white woman who helped her survive, affirming that although race is still a clear issue between the women, they bridge the gap through their shared sense of motherhood.