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**“A Little Jelly-Jar Smile:” How *Beloved*’s Amy Denver Rebukes Sambo, Nat, and the Cultural Dictates of White Poverty**

Sarah Amthor ‘13

A *To Kill a Mockingbird*, set during the Great Depression in a small Alabama town, engrained into the American memory the long history of the use of law and justice in the South to persecute blacks. If a black man was accused by a white woman of a crime, regardless of the evidence, he would almost certainly be pronounced guilty, and conversely, there was certainly no place where he could seek redress for injustices and crimes committed against him by a white. For even if the white came from a poor, disreputable background, the underlying tenet of the law in the South, beginning with slavery in the 1600’s and continuing until the last quarter of the twentieth century, was the positioning of blacks at the bottom of the social ladder. In the Southern legal system no white person, regardless of their economic or social status, could be decided against if their interests or claims conflicted with those of a black person. As W.J. Cash argues in “The Mind of the South,” wealthy southern planters utilized this prejudice as a political tool, stirring up prejudice against blacks to create an illusion of kinship with poor whites and thereby obtain their acquiescence in their poverty and exploitation (344). Thus, in spite of Atticus Finch’s convincing legal defense of Tom Robinson, a black man falsely accused of rape by a low class, poorly spoken white woman in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Tom’s conviction is predetermined by the Southern legal system’s elevation of the word of a white woman above a black man.

Racial allegiance and prejudice trouncing class prejudice is also the norm in the pre- and post-emancipation world depicted in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*. *Beloved* is set in the mid-nineteenth century in three places: a house on the outskirts of Cincinnati, Ohio, a plantation in Kentucky called Sweet Home, and the wilderness surrounding the Ohio River dividing the two states. The novel opens in Cincinnati after the Civil War, where Sethe, a former slave, lives with her grown daughter, Denver. They have been left by her mother-in-law, Baby Suggs, who passed away from heartbreak, and her two sons, who fled her home, haunted as it was by the ghost of Sethe’s other daughter, the baby girl who Sethe killed upon seeing slave-catchers and her old master approaching her home. Sethe, we learn, was driven to this unspeakable action by the belief that death was preferable to a half-life in slavery. Grieving and grappling with the memory of this unspeakable action as well as the horrors of slavery dominate the characters of the novel. Soon after the opening of *Beloved*, two characters arrive to push Sethe and Denver out of the eighteen years of frozen time since Beloved’s death: Paul D, the last of the Sweet Home men, and Beloved, the grown-up embodiment of her dead baby girl and the namesake of the novel.

Throughout the novel, Toni Morrison explores how the enslavement of blacks and the social construction of blackness have dug into the psyche of whites and blacks, eroding the humanity of both. As George Fredrickson argues in “White Images of Black Slaves,” in the last thirty years of slavery the Southern aristocracy, to justify slavery as a benevolent institution in the face of the growing strength of the Northern abolitionist campaign, increasingly represented slaves through the image of “Sambo,” the simple-minded but loyal slave who worshipped his master and depended on him for survival. However, while Sambo the slave was emphasized, he lived alongside Nat Turner (the leader of an 1831 slave rebellion) in the white imagination, writhing and seething in his chains, waiting for the opportunity to break free and kill his masters (38-39). The allegiance of whites against blacks, fuelled by the mindset that slaves needed a master—for Sambo’s helplessness and Nat’s violent urges warranted a pater familias and a slavedriver, respectively—is a much stronger determinant of behavior than resentment between different classes in *Beloved*, although divisions between whites and blacks of different classes are also evident in the novel. Thus, low class whites in *Beloved*, rather than uniting with blacks on account of their exploitation by the same group, use the accepted inferiority of blacks as an opportunity to feel a semblance of power in identifying with upper class whites. This is perhaps because class hegemony, as Raymond Williams argues in “Marxism and Literature,” is deeply entrenched in our culture: “the lived dominance and subordination of particular classes” infuses the “whole of our living,” affecting “our senses and assignments of energy” so that we accept class differences as natural and inherent (110). By contrast, the racial “Other” is a visible outsider to the “dominant culture,” and accordingly, poor whites saw themselves as having more differences from poor blacks than white plantation owners even though they shared more life experiences with the former (Mahoney 331). In fact, Morrison draws more attention to class resentment within the black community than the white: no former slave woman should hold her “head... too high” or her “back... too straight”; we learn, or make it known that she is doing better than getting by, as Baby Suggs does by hosting an impromptu feast for her entire community (Morrison 161, 179). In the tumultuous racial setting before and after the end of slavery, we are provided with one surprising and significant exception to the poor white tendency of exploiting rather than commiserating with blacks: Amy Denver, whose unexpected, socially deviant kindness toward Sethe draws our attention to the way that racism was in a sense the opium of the poor, disenfranchised white masses.

Shortly after Paul D arrives at 124 Bluestone Road he decides to take Sethe and Denver to the carnival in town, which is hosting a special day for blacks to attend, called “Colored Thursday” (58). The narrator tells us repeatedly of different ways the performers, who are not black, slight their
black audience and give them less for their money, although insisting that these intended slights actually enhanced the festival. “The Barker called them and their children names (‘Pickanninies free!’) but the food on his vest and the hole in his pants rendered it fairly harmless;” the “One-ton lady spit at them” but the audience “got a big kick out of the helpless meaness in her little eyes;” and the “Arabian Nights Dancer cut her performance to three minutes instead of the usual fifteen” but this “won the gratitude of the children, who could hardly wait for Abu snake charmer” (58). According to the narrator, “Two pennies and an insult were well spent if it meant seeing the spectacle of whitefolks making a spectacle of themselves” (58). These low class carnival performers, the narration implies, consented to be gawked at and provide entertainment for their white audience even though their performance would necessarily put their inferior social class on display, but when forced to perform for a black audience, many of whom are their economic equals, they balked and protested because performing was an act of subservience which on Colored Thursday translated to their demotion below blacks on the social ladder. Thus, the performers were able to accept their position as the “subjugated class” relative to the white carnival-goers, having “internalized” the system of “class rule” within the white race as a natural state of affairs. This internalization was possible because hegemony is not simply a “pure and simple” ruling class “ideology” which people are made to accept through “manipulation or indoctrination,” but a “practical consciousness” which is felt and perceived as “simple experience” and “common sense” (Williams 110, 109). It was tolerable to perform and act for whites on the regular carnival days, but Colored Thursday went too far in suggesting the radical and threatening possibility that the white performers could exist as subservient to blacks.

According to W.J. Cash, the imagined brotherhood of the poor white man with the plantation owner in the South arose from the fact that the plantation owner’s excess of slave labor “exempted him [the poor white man] from all direct exploitation” and “left his independence totally unimpaired” (Cash 344, 340). Strikingly, the plantation owner was in fact responsible for pushing the poor yeoman into “the marginal lands of the South” where either the “poorness of the soil” or the “great inaccessibility of markets” would ensure that he was “completely barred off from escape or economic and social advance” (Cash 344, 340). Additionally, the “master group” of Southern aristocrats to which he belonged possessed a “high pride of birth,” attached great importance to their “claim to gentility,” and privately valued their ability to distinguish themselves from the common white man of the “backcountry” (343). However, they were able to prevent the “twinges of class awareness” from becoming the primary determinant of the common white man’s “deepest loyalties and hates” through the institution of slavery (343). The tool at the white aristocracy’s disposal was the “vastly ego-warming and ego-expanding distinction between the white man and the black:” slavery not only meant that the white man was “not exploited directly, he was himself made by extension a member of the dominant class” (345). The lower class white performers at the carnival on Colored Thursday unsurprisingly seize this “ego-warming” distinction between themselves and their black audience as an opportunity to ease the humiliation of poverty, as do all white characters in Beloved except for one.

The nephew of the schoolteacher of Sweet Home, “the one who had nursed her while his brother held her down,” had used the enslavement of Sethe to transfer the ample abuse which he received from his uncle to someone below him. The nephew is enacting the cultural norm of poor whites treating their inferiors, both slaves and free blacks, as badly as they had been treated, and then some. His conformity to this norm is evident in his thought process upon witnessing Sethe’s murder of her other baby as one of the four men on the mission to bring her and her children back to Sweet Home: “What she go and do that for? On account of a beating? Hell, he’d been beat a million times and he was white” (176). The narrator of this account of the four men who arrive to return Sethe and her children to slavery speaks from their perspective, illustrating the white man’s expectation of Sambo and Nat to be bound up in the slave, the latter especially in a slave reckless enough to try to escape. The narrator describes the caution needed to catch a slave, for he or she, “caught red-handed,” might “smile even, like a child caught dead with his hand in the jelly jar,” but “even then you couldn’t tell” for “the very nigger with his head hanging and a little jelly-jar smile on his face could all of a sudden roar” and “commence to do disbelievable things” (174). The slave-catcher’s readiness to see Nat emerge out of sweet Sambo is illuminated as such: “The more coloredpeople spent their strength trying to convince them of how gentle they were, how clever and loving, how human, the more they used themselves up...and the deeper and more tangled the jungle grew inside,” the jungle which the “whitefolks had planted in them” but which also turned back around and “invaded the whites who made it” (234). As Fredrickson argues, the idea of “silly” Sambo and “bloody” Nat were the reflection of the very elements whites saw growing in themselves via the practice of enslaving others (234).

Although Mr. and Mrs. Garner, the masters of Sweet Home, are not as poor as the carnival performers or the orphaned nephew, and view and treat blacks as better than a Sambo or Nat, they adhere to the social distinction between white and black and thus render their benevolent treatment of their slaves a source of pride, assuaging their consciousness as slaveholders. Lilian Garner “never pushed, hit, or called [Baby Suggs] mean names,” and Mr. Garner’s slave men were “allowed, encouraged to correct Garner, even defy him,” to “invent ways of doing things,” and to consider themselves “men” worth “listening to” (147). But Mr. Garner’s boasting upon delivering Baby Suggs to Ohio of his fine treatment of her, as well as Mrs. Garner’s laughing at Sethe’s naive desire to have a wedding ceremony, together illustrate that Mr. and Mrs. Garner subscribed to the ego-
warming distinction, allowing them feelings of self-righteousness regarding the good treatment of their slaves (31, 172). The narrator tells us that the white brother and sister, friends of the Garners, who are charged with introducing Baby Suggs into freed life, “two angels” in Mr. Garner’s eyes, did so because they “hated slavery more than they hated slaves” (162). This is a bizarre statement on the surface, but it implies that even the whites who opposed “even Garner’s kind” of slavery are affected by the culturally defined “Otherness” of blacks, unable to see them as fully human as themselves (162). However, this norm of whites mistreating blacks and/or deriving pride from treating them decently has one exception in *Beloved* in the form of Amy Denver.

Amy Denver is a poor young white woman, a runaway servant who, en route to Boston and the dream of carmine velvet, encounters the fugitive, pregnant Sethe, lost and near death in the Kentucky backwoods. Amy brings Sethe to an old shed for shelter, massages Sethe’s feet and back, and finally helps Sethe deliver her baby before sending her off to freedom, saving Sethe and baby Denver’s life. The narrator makes clear that Amy comes from a position of servitude under an unkind master, Mr. Buddy, who “had a right evil hand” and would “whip you for looking at him straight;” once Mr. Buddy “threw the poker” at Amy for just that offense (93). Amy uses uncouth and ugly language to describe blacks that she likely learned in Mr. Buddy’s house. Amy reminds Sethe that she “don’t know nothing,” just like the “old nigger girl” who sewed “real fine lace” for “Mrs. Buddy but who could “barely stick two words together,” and also warns Sethe that if she must die she better “go on off somewhere” because Amy doesn’t want to see her “ugly black face hankering over me” (94, 97). Amy leaves Sethe shortly after delivering her baby, swearing that “she wouldn’t be caught dead in daylight on a busy river with a runaway” (100). Yet in spite of these rude jibes and reminders of the white perception of Sethe, Amy Denver doesn’t rely on Sambo or Nat to understand Sethe, neither expecting childishness nor savagery out of her, and, importantly, she doesn’t use fear or cruelty as a guide in her treatment of Sethe. When Amy comes across Sethe lying in a wretched heap in the Kentucky backwoods, she makes loud exclamations about Sethe’s pathetic state before quickly determining to lead her to a haphazard wooden shelter in the woods. Amy then “rearranged the leaves for comfort” so Sethe could lie down, “knelt down and massaged the swollen feet” which are preventing Sethe from walking, and then examined the effect of a terrible whipping on Sethe’s back, first “struck dumb” out of horror at this distortion of flesh and then convincing Sethe that the scar looks just like a “chokecherry tree” with a “mighty lot of branches” and “little cherry blossoms” (96, 93). Amy scolds Sethe when her water breaks—“What you doing that for?...I said stop it, Lu. You the dumbest thing on this here earth. Lu! Lu!”—only to use her “strong hands” to single-handedly deliver Sethe’s baby on the banks of the Ohio (98, 99). Here are two people, “two throw-away people...a slave and a barefoot white woman with unpinne hair” who, rather than replicate the prejudice and fear which their culture dictates between white and blacks, deliver a baby “appropriately and well” (100). Amy, a poor white woman who has long suffered abuse under Mr. Buddy’s roof and the grief of losing her mother, treats this exhausted, nearly brain-dead slave with care and devotion as she would have treated her mother, neglecting an opportunity to be, for once, the perpetrator of exploitation and cruelty. Amy differs wildly from the carnival performers, the nephew, and even Mr. and Mrs. Garner, because although she recognizes that she is “good at sick things” and that Sethe and her baby owe their lives to her—“You gonna tell her? Who brought her into this here world?”—it is an indebtedness which has little to do with Sethe belonging to an inferior race or Amy utilizing a rare feeling of superiority for all that it is worth (97, 100).

Across the United States, most markedly in the Southern slave states like Kentucky, defining blackness as Otherness, specifically as paradoxical childishness and blood-thirstiness, was a way for whites to project their negative qualities onto an Other and thereby define themselves as the innately superior norm. Many Americans clung to this definition of blacks, slave or free, as a way of identifying themselves in an ego-nurturing way, and as W.J. Cash argues, the comforting self-definition which the existence of the slave allowed was integral to the pacifying of the large class of poor whites, blocked out of the economic market and the political arena by the plantation owners who they nonetheless considered their brothers, cousins and friends. But as evident in the behavior of the white carnival performers on Colored Thursday, one did not have to be a backwoods farmer to see the benefits of the planter’s propaganda regarding the character of blacks, of relying on it when dangerous situations arose in which a poor white felt economically or socially threatened by a black. Furthermore, *Beloved* suggests that both kindly slaveholders and abolitionists utilized the distinction between white as rational and civilized and black as lacking common sense and gentility for the purpose of moral self-aggrandizement—this ranking of the white naturally above the black in God’s hierarchy of creatures propped them up even as they outwardly protested the treatment of slaves as animals. The exception to this rule lies in the reaction of a poor, jobless white girl, Amy Denver, to a pregnant, fugitive slave woman being placed in her hands. Many in Amy’s position would have turned Sethe in for money or kept walking, refusing to worry themselves over the fate of a black woman. The few who might have helped Sethe, like the Garners’ abolitionist friends, would have offered themselves congratulations for treating Sethe as a human being as she deserved. Perhaps it is some combination of Amy’s inherent goodness, the loving mother who raised her, and her sense of shared womanhood with Sethe—whatever it is, something has obstructed the planting of the jungle in Amy Denver in spite of her obvious immersion in the racist climate of Mr. Buddy’s household. Toni Morrison illustrates that Amy Denver is a remarkable exception to the terrible and abusive ways which whites are stipulated to treat blacks, serving
as a figure of hope for the dismantling of racial categories in America and the erosion of the misunderstanding and violence which these categories have bred and continue to breed.

Works Cited