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Jonathan Halper
Denison University

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Misery and Company: Sigmund Freud's Presence in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

Jonathan Halper '14

Toni Morrison's 1987 novel, *Beloved*, while richly eclectic in its subject matter and functions, puts a particular emphasis on Freudian theory and its corollaries. Freud's concepts inform the often frighteningly primal nature of Sethe's relationship with her children in the characteristics of the pre-Oedipal, or the degree of connection between mother and daughter before growth brings about independence. Additionally, repression of memory in several of the central characters contributes to and is shown in the organization of the novel, specifically in how it is geared toward gradual revealing of information. In contrast, the abundance of memory in *Beloved* acts as a counter-device and a segue to a wider relevance of the novel. Allusions to and uses of psychoanalysis help ground the focus of the story in the internal; it resists what would otherwise be a static and pedantic approach to the issue of slavery and how it has affected both the central family and the United States as a whole.

The way Morrison constructs the relationship between Sethe and *Beloved* is enormously indicative of the pre-Oedipal behavior that Freud, along with his students and followers, recognized in young girls. *Beloved*, if she is a specter or a conjuration of the other characters individually, is stuck in a perpetual state of infancy despite her body age of nineteen. She interacts with Denver and Paul D, but her main aim in returning is to get back to Sethe, and Sethe alone. At the time *Beloved* forsakes her sister and adopted father in favor of her mother, she begins to drop off all extraneous traits and degenerate completely into the model of the pre-Oedipal daughter.

Beloved first develops Freud's notion of the oral character, which Craig Chalquist, MS, PhD defines as "forever wanting to suck, to consume, to take in, endlessly hungry and needy;" *Beloved* "made demands" and "never got enough" (283, 282). As she is young as a child can be in essence (albeit one that can articulate herself), Morrison attributes to her Freud's first stage of psychosexual development: oral, which precedes anal, phallic, latent, and genital. Moreover, after Sethe continues to nourish *Beloved* at the expense of her own health, the latter becomes fuller and stronger and takes "the shape of a pregnant woman" (308). The combination of *Beloved*'s spontaneous, egotistical desires and her impregnation as a result of closeness with Sethe is reflective of the innate desire to be a baby and have a baby, certainly at that early age (Flax). This incident correlates with Paul D's desire to impregnate Sethe, because he and *Beloved* both carry a similar motive of claiming that physical connection to Sethe—reasserting the idea of Jeanne Lampl-de Groot, a student of Freud, that girls see "their fathers as

rivals" (Chodorow 472). While Paul D is not actually Beloved's father, he fulfills the role.

Sethe and Beloved's inseparability at this point in the novel stems from a role reversal, not only in Beloved's maternal quality of pregnancy, but in mutual positions of authority: "...the thing was done: Beloved bending over Sethe looked the mother, Sethe the teething child" (294). Inherent in the pre-Oedipal is the same sort of thing, with the idea that daughters under three often confuse whether they are the parent or the child in the relationship (Flax). Though Freudian theory typically neglects to lend the mother's sensibilities much emphasis, Sethe nevertheless perpetuates here the sense of mutual ownership in the face of mutual existence—being the same person—as can be seen in the back and forth declarations of "mine" in the series of monologue chapters (236, 253). It is through the understanding of this double bond that the reader is able to see why Sethe would feel justified to decide the fate of her children under slavery's threat of return (an event which will hereafter be referred to using Stamp Paid euphemism: the "Misery" (201)).

With Denver, Morrison opts for a less literal, more realistic representation of the pre-Oedipal. Denver has nearly as difficult a time establishing her own identity separate from her mother's because she has had barely more contact with the outside world than Beloved. Confined to 124, shunned by a community that her mother liberally shuns back, the eighteen-year-old is as isolated as the one-year-old that was abandoned on the other side for so long. Morrison emphasizes this isolation by presenting something as simple as stepping off a porch as an enormous task for Denver, one that acts as a crucial turning point in her character development.

Cut off from influences that would otherwise help define her as a separate human being, Denver's superego is stunted, leaving the id underneath less constrained than it might have been. While Beloved has no superego *or* ego (having no sense of self whatsoever), Denver simply suffers from a deprivation of Freud's normal conditions of identity creation. The mother dominates, and the father is absent. She wishes for Halle to come home so he can protect her from a potential repeat of the Misery. This is presumably underscored by a desire to have access to a penis with which she feels some connection and that she can be sure will provide her with power to face her underlying fear of Sethe. Paul D comes instead, but she recognizes that "he didn't come for [her]; he wanted [her] mother" (245). Because Paul D is not necessarily on her side, his presence does not give her the power she craves.

The presence of the pre-Oedipal creates a context in which Morrison can firmly set her portrayal of slavery, but it is the unconscious mind, where the pre-Oedipal resides, that drives home the extent of slavery's scars. Denver's dream of her mother decapitating her then braiding her hair

condenses the back story and Denver's fear of her mother in the way that Freud claims

dreams do. A Freudian analysis of the dream content gives rise to the dream thought of symbolic castration followed by an ironic reinforcement of the bond between mother and daughter. Denver experiences a transference of the emotional dilemma that plagued her mother at the time of the Misery. The recurrence of the dream, moreover, exemplifies the expression of the unconscious through repetition, an act the underlying id takes to skate around the restricting standards forced upon it by the superego (Freud, "Beyond the Pleasure Principle"). However, because Denver's superego has, as has been stated, not been shaped by normal societal conditions, it has been unable to eradicate the literal knowledge of her near-death experience from the conscious mind.

It is telling that when Morrison first introduces Denver, the eighteen-year-old absolutely makes it clear that she is not interested in any part of her mother's history other than her own birth: "the part of the story she like[s] best" (36). At first, this expressed exclusion seems to demonstrate a childish egotism and desire for a narrative centered on her, characterizing her as self-absorbed and isolated. While the progression of the novel more or less affirms these two traits, it eventually becomes clear that they are the inevitable result of Sethe's overprotection and Denver's natural inclination to avoid thinking about the Misery. This small example of centrism, narrow vision, and aversion to the worst parts of her history is strangely parallel to the American treatment of the institution of slavery.

The author extends the practice of repression out to include most of the main characters. Paul D and Sethe, who have actual painful memories (as opposed to Denver, who only deals with stories), possess more active and refined measures of "keeping the past at bay" (51). Paul D's "tobacco tin" is perhaps the most direct image Morrison provides of this determined avoidance (86, 137-8, 258, 260). The tobacco tin is emblematic of the "higher strata and systems of the mind" that "carr[y] out repression" (Freud, "Pleasure Principle" 434). It is only after Beloved coaxes it open and Paul D goes to live in the church, after the repression fails, that its "contents...float freely" and "plague" him (258, 260). The plain and transparent way the tobacco tin is presented belies the unconsciousness of the resistance to awareness it represents, but it is all in the interest of exposing Paul D's defense mechanisms to everything he lists in his head at the end of part two, everything that was doubtless locked inside the tin to begin with. Even spontaneously, in response to new developments, Paul D takes automatic action to avoid comprehending the truth. In a fit of stubborn insistence, he holds that the woman in the newspaper clipping Stamp Paid shows him cannot be Sethe solely because her mouth does not look like it does in the photograph (181). Even though he allows that there are similarities in every other aspect of the face, he stands firm on that one point.

Paul D's denial through attempted rationalization is one of several steps in the process of setting up the disruption that the revelation of the Misery, as the central event in the novel, causes. Placing this particular denial widely throughout a chapter acts as part of a pacing strategy. Before the narrator or the characters can properly discuss the Misery, they must overcome the obstacles that prevent them from even addressing it. Morrison mirrors this gradual struggle in her suspenseful introduction to the story-defining event. As though it is itself a memory embedded in the unconscious, the event travels previously unutilized avenues of telling.

Fresh from the optimistic image of a united Paul D and Sethe in Sethe's bed, the book shifts its perspective to Baby Suggs, whom it never before visited. In the face of Sethe's and Paul D's stubborn contentment, it is as though the narration is forced to deviate to other sources to deliver the necessary information. After that, the reader meets with the four white men—an even more unfamiliar perspective, but one that is necessarily first-hand of the event in question. With this viewpoint, Morrison establishes a crucial paradox in the reader's relation to the Misery. She shows the scene directly, but she simultaneously distances it using the relative lack of emotional investment shared by schoolteacher and his companions. One of Paul D's chapters then follows, making for a reaction opposite of the last: Paul D, of the principal characters, is the only one who was not at the scene of the murder, yet it impacts him far more than the impassive white men, who mourned only the loss of perfectly good working hands.

These final four chapters of part two culminate in Sethe's explanation of and justification for the Misery. Morrison hints throughout the novel that Sethe has inside her some sort of wall she must breach, a "point beyond which she [will] not go;" and it is clear that even now, with Paul D confronting her and demanding an answer, she will not break this barrier to her unconscious easily (45). Morrison begins the chapter with dialogue—something she does only twice—briefly removing Morrison's presence as a narrator and lessening the visible control in the writing for the sake of the transition. Sethe's emphasis of irrelevant details is the final defense against actually having to revisit her heinous act; details spoken freely and carelessly while she keeps "spinning" as though "circling the subject" (189). Although Sethe seems to be fully aware of the Misery by this point, she still takes deliberate action to avoid mentioning it directly, sustaining the suspense a little longer. The payoff then comes not in what the Misery was (which is clear as early as the schoolteacher chapter), but why Sethe did it. She did it because she wanted to save them from slavery. It was the institution of slavery that caused the act. It dehumanized Sethe enough to make her direct her maternal instincts in such a perverse way, and it drove her to shut out the experience.

With so many of the characters displaying symptoms of repression, it is interesting to note that Beloved often fulfills the opposite function, as a

device of memory. She recalls them from Paul D when she busts open his tobacco tin. She is a source of them for Sethe, an antithesis to her mother's repression; because she is a storage place for memory, Sethe can say: "Thank God I don't have to rememory or say a thing because you know it" (226). Even independently, she is a wealth of recollections from a distant and extensive past; she remembers experiences on a slave ship, which have only the slightest correlation to Beloved's (as Sethe's daughter) specific circumstances. Though Beloved in her physical body epitomizes the pre-Oedipal, she as something "more"—otherworldly, spiritual, whichever—is made less human, in Freudian terms, by her complete access to memory (314). Without repression, her id is utterly unlimited, and she is reduced to pure consciousness.

Beloved's "largeness" as compared to the scope of other characters allows her to broaden the novel to fit her scale of relevance. Her expansiveness and ambiguity together are the main elements that raise the book to heights of national proportions. Her vast memory becomes synonymous with the American experience, as do others' memories of her. For the people who witnessed her to have "forgot[ten] her like a bad dream...made up their tales, shaped and decorated them" is typical of the way history is treated in the public eye (323). National history, often told in the form of a narrative with good guys, bad guys, and neat and tidy endings, is partially fueled by a repression of the ugliest and messiest parts of that history. Much like the practical reason for repressed sexual desires or traumatic experiences, the constructed narrative is favored over the multi-faceted picture of history because it is easier to live with the defense mechanisms in place, with the hard truth tucked away. Morrison strives in her relentless scrutiny of the human psyche to undermine this approach to our past in favor of one that is all-inclusive. Whether this change is possible is dependent on our, as patients, "sense of conviction" to achieve "therapeutic success," and on the taming of our patriotic ego (Freud, "Beyond the Pleasure Principle" 434).

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