

“Can’t Nothing Heal  
Without Pain”  
PTSD and Trauma in  
*Beloved*

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### "Can't Nothing Heal Without Pain:" PTSD and Trauma in *Beloved*

Toni Morrison's *Beloved* tells the complex story of Sethe, her daughter Denver, and their life at 124 Bluestone Road. What makes this story so complicated is the role of the past in their present life. Sethe has the memories of her life of slavery at Sweet Home, the things she needed to do to survive, and the lengths she went to in order to protect and save her children once she got out. The past plays a huge role throughout the entire story and becomes interwoven with the stories that unfold. What becomes clear throughout *Beloved* is that trauma from the past does not simply disappear on its own, and specifically, in this story, the trauma of the past comes back in physical form. Through the character of Beloved, the past comes back to haunt the characters beyond the ghost that appears on the first pages of the novel. This reincarnation of the past and of Sethe's dead baby girl is what allows the characters to face their trauma head-on, to eventually accept their pasts, and to start their journeys towards healing. What stands out in Morrison's *Beloved*, is the ways in which different characters are haunted by their past, but specifically, the way Sethe carries herself through her trauma, is almost broken by it, but eventually is able to come out the other side. *Beloved* offers a complicated demonstration of the ways trauma affects the present, the way PTSD operates in life following trauma, and ultimately how facing trauma allows you to heal from it, albeit in a painful way.

To understand moments of trauma and of healing in *Beloved*, like the gathering of women, the moments in the clearing with Baby Suggs, and even the moments with Beloved that resemble talk therapy, it is first important to understand both trauma itself and the presentation of

PTSD. The American Psychological Association defines trauma as “an emotional response to a terrible event,” where the reactions immediately after the event are typically “shock and denial.” (“Trauma and Shock.”) The longer-term impacts of trauma can include “unpredictable emotions, flashbacks, strained relationships, and even physical symptoms like headaches or nausea” (“Trauma and Shock”). Trauma becomes understandable as the emotional response to horrific moments, but only some people develop the ongoing trauma of PTSD. PTSD consists of the triad of symptoms “intrusion, avoidance, and arousal” but it is the “intrusion symptoms [that] are PTSD’s characteristic phenomenological feature.” (Pitman, 222). Intrusion symptoms can be seen in “unwanted memories of the traumatic event, in the form of intrusive recollections, nightmares, or flashbacks.” (Pitman, 223).

What makes PTSD so painful is that “many sufferers continue to live in the emotional environment of the traumatic event, with ‘enduring vigilance for and sensitivity to environmental threat.’” (Van der Kolk). Bessel A. Van der Kolk, in his work *Psychological Trauma*, defines 5 key characteristic features of PTSD and the human response to trauma: “1) a persistence of startle response and irritability, 2) proclivity to explosive outbursts of aggression, 3) fixation on the trauma, 4) construction of the general level of personality functioning, and 5) atypical dream life.” These 5 characteristics, specifically the fixation on trauma, the impact of functioning, and perhaps an atypical dream life, as well as the more vague symptoms of intrusion are present in *Beloved’s* Sethe. While Sethe may not fit every defining characteristic of PTSD, her past haunts her present, disrupts her mind and her life, and creates a complex way of dealing with her trauma.

*Beloved* can be classified as a trauma novel, defined as one in which “the transformation of the self is ignited by an external, often terrifying experience, which illuminates the process of

coming to terms with the dynamics of memory that inform the new perceptions of the self and world" (Balaev, 150). In *Beloved*, Sethe goes through a tremendous transformation because of the trauma she experienced, relived in the present. Sethe is shown to be a character who puts in a continuous amount of effort to keep the past at bay, yet with the emergence of people from her past, like Paul D, and then the coming of *Beloved*, it becomes impossible to keep the past fully removed. Sethe "becomes emotionally debilitated and even psychotic at one point, but eventually recovers with the help of her community" (Balaev, 158). The emergence of her past almost breaks Sethe to the point of psychosis, but it is through this direct facing of the past that she is able to move forward. This occurs in the ultimate moment of healing as the community gathers outside the steps of 124 to join with her in her process, to provide the support she needed, and to face *Beloved* together.

*Beloved* begins with a haunting. While the reader is unclear about who the ghost is at the beginning of the book, it is clear that there is the angry spirit of a baby haunting the house that Sethe and Denver inhabit. This ghost drove off Denver's brothers Howard and Buglar. What becomes clear once it is revealed that the ghost is of the daughter that Sethe killed in order to protect her from a life at Sweet Home, is that this baby is a presentation of trauma and also of PTSD. Andrew Hock Soon argues in "Toni Morrison's *Beloved*: Space, Architecture, Trauma." that the haunting Sethe experiences is actually the intrusion of trauma into her everyday life." Because trauma can also be viewed as "the delayed uncontrolled appearance of hallucinations and other intrusive phenomena," it becomes evident how this ghost is a version of trauma. Because this trauma is haunting the present and intruding on normal life functioning, it can also be a presentation of PTSD in Sethe. The baby becomes Sethe's trauma and her traumatic choices sticking around against her will and impacting her present life. Sethe, at the beginning of the

novel, is literally haunted by the choices she made in her past and is unable to live a normal life because of this. Sethe is unable to control her life and her environment is saturated with the trauma from her past.

One of the most important concepts of memory, trauma, and PTSD that Morrison provides in *Beloved*, is Sethe's concept of "rememory." In a conversation with her daughter Denver, Sethe begins to explain this concept of the way she views memory, and ultimately trauma. Sethe tells her "Some things go...Some things just stay. I used to think it was my rememory. You know. Some things you forget. Other things you never do. But it's not. Places, places are still there. If a house burns down, it's gone, but the place—the picture of it—stays, and not just in my rememory, but out there, in the world." (Morrison, 75). In this moment, Sethe comments on the way her memory of events stays with her in the physical sense, in the form of "rememory." Denver asks her "Can other people see it?" and Sethe continues "Oh, yes. O...Someday you be walking down the road and you hear something or see something going on. So clear. And you think it's you thinking it up. A thought picture. But no. It's when you bump into a rememory that belongs to somebody else. Where I was before I came here, that place is real...if you go there and stand in the place where it was, it will happen again; it will be there for you, waiting for you." (Morrison, 75). Here, not only does Sethe's rememory exist for her, but it impacts other people.

This concept of rememory is similar to that of PTSD in the ways in which the past stays with you in the present. Her memories do not stay in her history but become living beings that inhabit her life as she lives it. This explanation of how her trauma memory works also begins to explain for Denver and for the reader, why she felt she had to kill her children. She continues to Denver saying, "So, Denver, you can't never go there. Never. Because even though it's all

over—over and done with—it's going to always be there waiting for you. That's how come I had to get all my children out. No matter what." (Morrison, 75-76). In this explanation, it is not just that the place existed, in Sethe's version of memory (and rememory), it is still present. In Sethe's version of memory, this place is still as big of a threat as it was when she was physically there, because for her it seems places can never fade. This gives the reader insight into the crucial flashback of the novel when Sethe remembers taking her children into the shed to save them from schoolteacher. Morrison writes that Sethe, "if she thought anything, it was No. No. Nono. Nonono. Simple. She just flew." (Morrison, 271). So haunted by her past that is still present in her mind, Sethe barely needs a moment to think before she flies to save her children. Sethe then "Collected every bit of life she had made, all the parts of her that were precious and fine and beautiful, and carried, pushed, dragged them through the veil, out, away, over there where no one could hurt them. Over there. Outside this place, where they would be safe." (Morrison, 271). In this moment, Sethe's logic, combined with her previous description of rememory, begins to explain how in her mind she came to the conclusion she did. For Sethe, this was their only way out. In Sethe's description of rememory it seems that the past does not fade on its own with the passage of time. This begs the question of how Sethe would ever heal from her trauma.

Throughout the beginning of *Beloved*, Sethe's conversations with others reveal how she handles the pain of the past. Not only does Sethe not plan to face her trauma, she actively spends her time trying to avoid it. At one point, Sethe says to Baby Suggs when talking about their pain, "That's all you let yourself remember," but it becomes clear that this is also how Sethe functions: "she worked hard to remember as close to nothing as was safe." (Morrison, 26). Sethe, and Baby Suggs, both choose to put their pain in the past and leave it there. They work hard to keep the past behind them. This message is communicated to the other characters who learn to respect

Sethe's boundaries of the past. Denver at one point pushes Sethe to talk about moments from her life before but quickly stops, recognizing the signs that her mother was through. Morrison writes that "Denver knew that her mother was through with it...signs that Sethe had reached the point beyond which she would not go." (Morrison, 77). These signs, like "The single slow blink of her eyes; the bottom lip sliding up slowly to cover the top; and then a nostril sigh, like the snuff of a candle flame," indicate to Denver that she has reached the wall that Sethe has built between herself and her trauma and that Denver will get no more information out of her. Through moments like this, the walls Sethe has built between herself and her past impact the life of her daughter. Denver is not able to have access to her mother's past and is unable to understand her fully. Another character, Paul D, encounters this wall, but pushes Sethe to "go inside" and talk to him about it. Sethe responds "I don't go inside," Paul D says to her "Sethe, if I'm here with you, with Denver, you can go anywhere you want. Jump, if you want to, 'cause I'll catch you, girl. I'll catch you 'fore you fall. Go as far inside as you need to, I'll hold your ankles." (Morrison, 91). While Sethe isn't ready to take this leap, it becomes clear that Paul D also plays a pivotal role in her journey towards healing.

What is important about Sethe's experience with trauma is her own explanation of what it is like. Trauma is not just revealed in her conversations with others, but in the moments alone with her own thoughts. At one point, she reflects on her own brain and how it functions with the trauma she has gone through. "She shook her head from side to side, resigned to her rebellious brain. Why was there nothing it refused? No misery, no regret, no hateful picture too rotten to accept?" (Morrison 127). Her brain acts "Like a greedy child it snatched up everything. Just once, could it say, No thank you? I just ate and can't hold another bite?" (Morrison, 127). She continues to think to herself, "God damn it, I can't go back and add more. Add my husband to it,

watching, above me in the loft—hiding close by—the one place he thought no one would look for him, looking down on what I couldn't look at at all. And not stopping them—looking and letting it happen. But my greedy brain says, Oh thanks, I'd love more—so I add more. And no sooner than I do, there is no stopping.”(Morrison, 127). In this encounter with her own thoughts, Sethe notices the lack of control she has over her own thoughts. Her brain is described as “rebellious,” seeming to do what it wants without her own input, will, or control. In this particular moment, it becomes evident how Sethe may be facing and experiencing PTSD, with a collection of intrusive thoughts regarding her trauma. As she learns more information about her past from Paul D, her intrusive thoughts increase, become harder to control, and almost break her. This moment she describes as “my greedy brain says, Oh thanks, I'd love more—so I add more.” Here, she is almost feeding a beast by learning more information about her own past, and her own experiences.

Her brain continues to function on its own accord later in the story, with Sethe thinking “her brain was not interested in the future. Loaded with the past and hungry for more, it left her no room to imagine, let alone plan for, the next day.” (Morrison, 128). Here, not only does the past impact her present, but it seemingly destroys her concept of a future. Sethe continues, thinking to herself “other people went crazy, why couldn't she? Other people's brains stopped, turned around and went on to something new, which is what must have happened to Halle.” (Morrison, 128). This is the moment where her past seems to not only impact her life at 124, but it is actively taking away from her future and her sanity. But because of Sethe's reservations about facing the past actively, it would be hard for her to heal from this point, to move forward, and to have a future, without some drastic action. In this way, *Beloved* becomes a painful form of healing for Sethe.

Beloved becomes one of the most important characters in the novel, not simply because of the mystery of who she is, but because of the role she plays in a complex healing process Sethe must go through. Before things take a bad turn, Beloved provides a form of therapy for Sethe. "Sethe learned the profound satisfaction Beloved got from storytelling. It amazed Sethe (as much as it pleased Beloved) because every mention of her past life hurt. Everything in it was painful or lost." (Morrison, 109). This moment is where Sethe begins to expand her relationship with Beloved, and where it becomes clear that Beloved will be immensely important in the way Sethe heals. Sethe reveals her way of functioning in the past noting that "She and Baby Suggs had agreed without saying so that it was unspeakable; to Denver's inquiries Sethe gave short replies or rambling incomplete reveries. Even with Paul D, who had shared some of it and to whom she could talk with at least a measure of calm, the hurt was always there—like a tender place in the corner of her mouth that the bit left." (Morrison, 109). It is clear that the past is, and has always been, a source of immense pain that Sethe protected both herself and others from. But this moment and many others with Beloved become an "unexpected pleasure" (Morrison, 109). Beloved in this way becomes almost a therapist for Sethe, getting her to open up about her past in a way she has been unable to with other people. Beloved allows her to crack open a door to her trauma that has been sealed shut. This only becomes more true when Sethe, along with the other characters in the book become convinced that Beloved is Sethe's killed daughter returned to her.

As Sethe comes to the conclusion that Beloved is her dead daughter come back to her, the wave of relief that encircles her is huge. Not only does she feel forgiven from the crime she committed, but more importantly, she feels she no longer has to remember what she did. "She even looked straight at the shed, smiling, smiling at the things she would not have to remember

now. Thinking, She ain't even mad with me. Not a bit." (Morrison, 296). Because she believes that Beloved was there herself, Sethe feels she no longer has to carry the weight of remembering exactly what happened on her own. Sethe was "excited to giddiness by the things she no longer had to remember," (Morrison, 298). In the chapter that comes from Sethe's own voice, she speaks directly to Beloved, saying "Thank God I don't have to rememory or say a thing because you know it. All. You know I never would a left you. Never. It was all I could think of to do. " (Morrison, 312). Here again, not only does Sethe not have to remember alone, but she doesn't have to "rememory" it either. This concept was tied with the existence of PTSD and her past physically haunting the present: but Beloved has allowed her the forgiveness of herself to move forward.

While Beloved is immensely important in Sethe's healing process, things take a turn towards the end of the book. Beloved begins to seemingly take life away from Sethe, overwhelming her and Denver with her presence, pushing Paul D out, and growing and glowing herself. The relationship between Sethe and Beloved by the end has changed, with Beloved becoming the powerful one. Things have obviously changed when "once or twice Sethe tried to assert herself—be the unquestioned mother whose word was law and who knew what was best—Beloved slammed things, wiped the table clean of plates, threw salt on the floor, broke a windowpane." (Morrison, 391). Here, Beloved has taken over the house and Sethe has lost her way again. This is when Denver leaves to collect the help of the community who come together to save Sethe, although some more reluctantly than others. The women of the neighborhood gathered outside the steps and "recognized Sethe at once and surprised themselves by their absence of fear when they saw what stood next to her. The devil-child was clever, they thought. And beautiful. It had taken the shape of a pregnant woman, naked and smiling in the heat of the

afternoon sun." (Morrison, 423). Following this encounter with the women and after Sethe runs to attack who she believes is the schoolteacher again, Beloved is gone as quickly as she appeared. Sethe struggles with this loss, but Paul D stays with her and when Sethe says she has lost "her best thing," Paul D alters her thinking, telling her "You your best thing, Sethe. You are." (Morrison, 442). While it is evident that Sethe still has a journey of healing to go on, she has undergone an immense transformation from the woman unwilling to face her past that is introduced at the beginning of the story.

Toni Morrison's *Beloved* complicates the ideas of trauma and how they play out in the characters' lives, specifically in Sethe's. All of the characters come with their own baggage from the past, especially the adults coming from Sweet Home, but they each face them in their own way. Sethe takes on the concept of blocking off her past from her present and doing everything in her power to keep the past at bay. She struggles to imagine a future, to imagine a life beyond the haunting she experiences from page one of the book. It is not until the past comes back physically that she is able to heal. First through the ghost, then through Paul D, and finally through the emergence of Beloved. Sethe, while she may always carry her past with her, is able to imagine a life beyond that by the end of the story. She goes through an immense transformation because of the help and impact of the other people she encounters. Sethe is able to heal with the help of her community and the appearance of her past. Without being forced to attack her past head-on, Sethe was trapped in her own mind. She is able to get closer to healing by the end of the story because she is able to let herself and others into her past with her, rather than keeping it as far away as possible.

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