The Character Beloved Depicts the Loss of Cultural Identity That Occurred During Slavery

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In Beloved Toni Morrison explores the ways in which slavery damaged black people, not only while it was occurring, but into the present, suggests Williams in the following viewpoint. The character Beloved is used to symbolize the suffering that occurred during the passage from Africa to America as well as the suffering under slavery, Williams writes. Not only did the institution of slavery physically harm blacks, she states, but it also extinguished their language, culture, and racial identity.

In a 1988 interview with Marsha Darling, Toni Morrison states that the character Beloved represents Sethe's murdered child as well as the collective grief of the Middle Passage. Beloved is a ghost, a child returned from the dead, and yet she is also, as Morrison says, “another kind of dead which is not spiritual but flesh, which is a survivor from the true, factual slave ship. She speaks the language, a traumatized language, of her own experience, which blends beautifully in her questions and answers, her preoccupations, with the desires of Denver and Sethe.” Sethe’s personal loss is tied to the loss of those who died on the slave ship since, as Morrison says, “the language of both experiences, death and the Middle Passage—is the same.”

The Voice of Historical Loss

The “traumatized language” Beloved speaks, blending beautifully with the desires of Denver and Sethe, becomes the voice of historical loss that has been severed brutally from both mother and country. Beloved is the dead girl Morrison describes in a conversation with [writer] Gloria Naylor, the forgotten and silenced black girl Morrison will bring back to life through language. At the same time, she encompasses all those unrecorded people who died en route to America. Morrison explains:

The gap between Africa and Afro-America and the gap between the living and the dead and the gap between the past and the present does not exist. It’s bridged for us by our assuming responsibility for people no one’s ever assumed responsibility for. They are those that died en route. Nobody knows their names, and nobody thinks about them. In addition to that, they never survived the lore; there are no songs or dances or tales of these people. The people who arrived—there is lore about them. But nothing survives about . . . that.

By creating a character that is a ghost, Morrison incorporates into her novel African beliefs in the continuing presence of the dead. Beloved represents the unvoiced horrors that took place on the slave ship. She emerges from water; her fragmented language that finds form in poetry and monologue comes from the voices of the drowned. . . . While Beloved is the vengeful child returned from the dead seeking mother love, Sethe becomes both mother and daughter in the act of killing Beloved, since she was the only surviving child; the rest were thrown overboard by her mother. As a small girl, Sethe had been told by Nan, the woman who cared for her: “She threw them all away but you. The one from the crew she threw on the island. The others from more whites she also threw away. Without names, she threw them.” Sethe’s mother remained nameless also, identified only by the mark on her