The Role Of Slavery In *Beloved*: A Haunting

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Slavery is an atrocious system that still haunts American history a century and a half later. Hundreds of thousands of Africans were kidnapped from their homeland, brought to the United States of America, dehumanized, and forced to work in harsh conditions. In this light, haunting can be seen not just as a bad presence or evil energy, but also as something difficult to ignore or forget, which terrorizes a person, place, or nation. Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved* is an American Gothic novel that introduces a mother named Sethe and her daughter, Denver, and their struggles of living in a home haunted by the spirit of Sethe's dead baby. Guilty and ashamed of her actions from many years ago, Sethe finds herself haunted, much like how slavery haunts the lives of black people in America. *Beloved*, Agnieszka Soltysik Monnet’s “The Poetics and Politics of the American Gothic: Gender and Slavery in Nineteenth-Century American Literature,” and Ellen J. Goldner’s “Other(ed) Ghosts: Gothicism and the Bonds of Reason in Melville, Chestnut, and Morrison” demonstrate how themes typical of Gothic Literature, such as physical and mental isolation, painful memories, and irrational behaviors, parallel the experiences of enslaved people in America.

A major theme of Gothic literature found in *Beloved* is the isolation of its main characters, not only when they are slaves on the plantation, but also when they are free people, isolated from others in the community. Sethe and Denver have limited interaction with the community around them because the house they reside in, 124, is notorious for having an evil spirit within it. Denver voices frustration about how the presence of evil is detrimental to her life, because “nobody speaks to [them]. Nobody comes by” (Morrison 17). Separated from the rest of the community, Denver is desperate to connect with someone, anyone. She is aware that the reason why her peers do not like her and want to interact with her is because of the dead baby’s spirit. The loneliness and mental strain from evil within the home causes Denver to shake viciously and cry heavily. When the idea of moving the family somewhere else comes up, they quickly dismiss it, saying that every house in the country has “some dead Negro’s grief” (Morrison 6). This means that, even though the family may move away from the haunting of the dead baby, the negative energy that comes with slavery’s history will follow them wherever they go.

Culture studies professor Agnieszka Soltysik Monnet examines the relationship between slavery and American Gothic Literature in “The Poetics and Politics of the American Gothic: Gender and Slavery in Nineteenth-Century American Literature”. She writes that one of the main functions of slavery and a motif in American
Gothic literature is to make people feel unsafe and uneasy through “geographical and psychological isolation” (Monnet 25). Sethe and Denver are isolated geographically, meaning that they are isolated within their home because of their status as slaves. Additionally, however, they are isolated psychologically, because of the baby's ghost haunting them. As the story unfolds, the reader learns that Sethe is haunted by the horrors of slavery. Years ago, in order to save her child from being enslaved, she killed her infant. The spirit of the baby and the spirit of slavery haunts Sethe and her family, causing them to hide from, and be avoided by, the rest of society.

Sethe finds it difficult and painful to talk about her past, as a mother who killed her own baby and as a former slave. Two decades after killing her baby, Sethe returns home one night to find a young woman on her porch in need of help. Sethe takes her in and later learns that the woman, Beloved, is her baby reincarnated. Beloved asks Sethe questions about her past life, and “Sethe learned the profound satisfaction Beloved got from storytelling,” despite the fact that “every mention of her last life hurt” (Morrison 69). Beloved is deliberately taking any opportunity to poke around Sethe's past to cause her emotional pain and discomfort: having been murdered, she wants her mother to reopen the wounds that Sethe has been trying to cover up and hide for years. Beloved does not want to be forgotten and left in the dark. Retelling stories and having to relive those memories haunts Sethe, causing her to suffer from psychological pain and emotional distress.

Ellen J. Goldner in “Other(ed) Ghosts: Gothicism and the Bonds of Reason in Melville, Chestnut, and Morrison” describes how it can be difficult to talk about slavery in comparison to gothic literature, because of the personal nature of it. Goldner explains how “gothic images of slavery defy reasoned descriptions of that social institution, and imply that the truth of slavery is unspeakable within normative terms” (Goldner 59). Much like Sethe's stories, slavery is a strenuous subject to talk about. The pain and suffering of slavery and infanticide is extremely difficult to express; however, although shocking, it is a big part of one's identity as an enslaved person and must be dealt with. The truth of slavery haunts Sethe's life no matter the attempts of escape, and has a distinctive voice and spirit in today's society and gothic literature as well.

In times of need and survival, slaves were often pushed to commit desperate acts. Sethe commits the horrifying act of killing her baby because of the threat of slavery. She does not want to lose control of what was hers, and more importantly, does not want her girls to have to go through the struggles she did. She knows what it was like to be a slave: answering to her masters, having no sense of personal self, and being pushed to her physical and mental limits. When the slave catchers come around to the scene of the murder, they find her “holding a blood-soaked child to her chest with one hand and an infant by the heels in the other” (Morrison 175). Horrified from Sethe's actions, the slave catchers quickly snatch Denver from Sethe's violent swing, preventing her from beat to death like the other baby. As a mother, Sethe's natural instinct is to do anything to protect her baby. Her actions goes to show the negative mark slavery had on her, pushing her to murder her own children, protecting them from the evils of it.

Ellen J. Goldner writes about how slavery is represented in gothic literature as a systemic institution. She describes slavery as “a social evil that has not been laid to rest” (Goldner 59). As a society, it must be made clear that the pain those who were
enslaved experienced will never be forgotten. The author cleverly uses Beloved as a literary device to symbolize the fear slaves felt in that time, but in a gothic context; in this way, though readers may be far removed from these concepts, they still can empathize with the horrors of that time.

Through reading *Beloved* alongside Agnieszka Soltysik Monnet and Ellen J. Goldner’s pieces, we can see how Toni Morrison represents the haunting of slavery, and its effect on Sethe, through gothic literature. Being haunted can symbolize both an evil spirit and the memories of the past, which is how Morrison demonstrates the parallels between typical Gothic themes and the experiences of enslaved people in America. Haunted by her past and her own experience of being enslaved, Sethe was driven to murder Beloved and almost murder baby Denver as well. She did not go unpunished for her deed, as she and her family were haunted by the reincarnation of her baby years later.

Works Cited

