
The Effects Of The Supernatural And Self In Toni Morrison's Song Of Solomon And Beloved

Toni Morrison's novels normally have 2 common themes of heritage and the past effects which are clearly represented in her novels *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved*. In these novels, if evaluated closely one can see the effects of the supernatural elements throughout the story. These supernatural effects allow for the characters to develop and gives them the ability to move on and develop themselves with reference to their past. Examining the two evaluate and understand how the novels make the connection with the characters' personal pasts and the effect that their culture have and the way communities have played a role in creating the effect past.

Heritage plays an important role when remembering how the past has a role in the portrayal of characters within Morrison's novels. This effect is perceived through the depiction of the development as supernatural means and changes. The supernatural can be seen in many different ways in both *Song of Solomon* and *The Beloved*. The supernatural and past have an enormous effect on the characters. Seen through the portrayal of ghosts and the illusion of magic. In her novels, the characters have to face the pasts which they don't want to remember. The growth of the characters in her novels is directly linked to the connection between the past represented by the supernatural.

In *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved*, the mystic powers of side characters lead the main characters to discover and accept their roles within the African American community and its heritage. The supernatural has been involved and connected to the supernatural elements for many years. For example, Milkman the main character in *Song of Solomon* has had a connection to the supernatural presence since he was an infant. When he was born he was dead, but he lived because Pilate used voodoo and healing. Pilate uses "nasty greenish-gray powder...to be stirred into rainwater and to be put in food" (131) on Milkman which she gave to Ruth for continued use. Pilate to scare Macon creates and places a poppet on his chair. This act helped prevent Macon from harming Milkman when he was an infant. A supernatural element was critical to Milkman's life because it is what allowed him to be born and live. Without that supernatural presence engraved into Milkman's life from the beginning, he would cease to exist. Even though Milkman was helped by the supernatural it's not always a helping hand. Pilate and Macon are haunted by the ghost of their father whom they saw die when they were children. Pilate forms a life to live based on what she thinks is the wishes and instructions from her father: "[Pilate] would abide by this commandment from her father herself, and make him do it too. 'You can't just fly on off and leave a body'" (332). Pilate's life is lived in an odd manner because she has followed her father's words even though she didn't fully understand what they meant. What has confused her the most of the year was when he said "you can't just fly on off and leave the body. Because of the life she lives and it affects the people in her life and their lives have forever changed. This also helps Milkman to accept his heritage because he learns more and more about his grandfather and what happened to him.

In *Beloved*, Denver's life is heavily affected by the presence of the ghost within in their life. She is haunted by this ghost because it's what caused her to lose her brothers resulting in her world around her to decrease. After Nelson, Lord Denver's schoolmate who ends Denver's education

by asking her about Sethe's past was the reason that Denver became obsessed on the ghost and stopped leaving the house: "Now it held for her all the anger, love and fear she didn't know what to do with" (121). The ghost has caused her to lose many important people in her life, therefore forever being apart of her. It was the reason that her life was falling apart right before her eyes. Denver develops resentment for thought life Paul D because they were chasing out the ghost. "Now her mother was upstairs with the man who had gotten rid of the only other company she had" (23). Everyone in Denver's family was gone except the believed ghost and Sethe. So she begins to latch on to the people she still has. Having such loneliness this results her to rely on Beloved later in the novel too. Each of the characters shaped and depicted by their connection to the supernatural. The supernatural is a vital part of what they stand for but it also is important to the history that is reborn because of it.

Her novels don't just portray the supernatural as an essence it is also demonstrated in the people. Pilate, for example, is seen using some sort of magic. She gives Ruth the power that essentially causes Macon to want her once again. This allows for the Creation of Milkman. Ruth uses a puppet to prevent Macon from harming Milkman. This doll is created using voodoo which is a craft that is linked to the African heritage. "Pilate is a true conjurer or conjure woman. Morrison gives Pilate a magical start in the world by describing her as being born without a navel" (Beaulieu 89). Pilate is important in Milkman's journey because her "conjuring" was what brought Milkman in to this world and through her he grasps things about him and the love he has in his life. Through Milkman's journey, he begins learning things about himself he hadn't known and began making connections to aspects in his life. On his journey he came in to contact with a woman named Circe who is another "witch", she teaches him about what happened in his past and told him things that happened before his time. Circe is a trigger for one of Milkman's past dreams he had as a child: "dreams every child had, of the witch that chased him down dark alleys, between lawn trees, and finally into rooms from which he could not escape" (239). Circe gives Milkman knowledge about his family he hadn't known. Circe was the woman that delivered Macon and Pilate, but she was also the reason they lived after their father was murdered. According to the Encyclopedia Britannica in Greek mythology (find a better source), the "Circe was a supernatural being who possessed a "talent" for shifting men into wolves, lions, and swine". Her character is a little different in Song of Solomon. What Circe does in this novel was help Milkman in his journey to becoming a man. Supernatural beings in general have had a huge impact on discovering identity in the reason for Milkman's existence. They are the reason that he is alive, granted him knowledge, and strengthened his spiritual connection to his heritage.

Characters that are connected in a deep way to the supernatural are effected by it. While they are effected by it it also gives them some sort of supernatural abilities. The illusion of these "abilities are seen in Milkman and Paul D throughout their novels. During the Beloved, Paul D has the ability to evoke intense emotions in the people who is around him. His abilities don't help him but they help others in his life. He uses these abilities to help Sethe after Beloved left. As the novel wraps up his abilities grow and he evokes emotions meant to be kept in. His gift is a crucial part of the healing process for the people in his life. Sethe feels safe when around him, she was able to face what was lying in the past which allows her to move on with her life.

In Song of Solomon, Milkman's abilities are more alluded to and vague. When Hagar (Milkman's cousin) tries to kill Milkman at Guitar's apartment, there is something unnatural in the way that she freezes and is unable to move until after he is gone. There is a suggestion, that Milkman used his will to force her to stop, and in his words he "won" (130). This ability allows him to

continue living, but it is not until after he has learned of his past that he can fully accept this and then he is able to “fly.” Both characters have abilities that become essential to their survival and identity. Ghosts are another common element of both novels that weigh on the characters. Beloved first appears as an unseen force present in 124, then appearing in a fleshly form that allows her to get closer to Sethe. Ghost stories are present in cultures around the world: “ghost stories told within the African tradition often insist that the natural and the supernatural intertwine” (Beaulieu).

This tradition applies to *Beloved*, because the family learns to live with the presence of the ghost in 124 and it becomes a large part of their lives. The same applies to the ghost of Macon I in *Song of Solomon*, Pilate lives her life with the presence of her dead father influencing some of her actions, but not harming her in any way. The amalgamation of Western and African ghost story traditions work to show the importance in knowing of one's heritage, as the ghost works to aid in the character's construction of the past. David Lawrence points out that “in portraying the capacity of the past to haunt individual and community life in the present, *Beloved* brings into daylight the “ghosts” that are harbored by memory and that hold their “hosts” in thrall, tyrannically dictating thought, emotion, and action” (Lawrence). The past haunts the characters, both in their minds and in a physical form, which causes the characters to face their pasts and construct their own identities free from the haunting past. Morrison herself has said “I am very happy to hear that my books haunt. That is what I work very hard for, and for me it is an achievement when they haunt readers” (qtd. in Anderson). Morrison uses ghosts to make characters realize and accept their pasts. Many of the supernatural elements have ties to African heritage and the collective past that many of the characters have little connection to.

According to *The Toni Morrison Encyclopedia*, “these mythic elements root the novels in the African tradition and provide a spiritual and cultural bridge between the history of her characters' ancestors and the lives of the characters at the times the novels are set in the United States” (Beaulieu). In *Song of Solomon*, one of the most prevalent myths is that of the flying African. There are various myths that speak of flying Africans, many of them telling of slaves flying to freedom. According to David Carrasco, “Morrison has partially hidden in her narrative thread of magical flight one of the key meanings of shamanic transport and elevation, namely, the vital importance of finding a spiritual ally who enables the seeker to transcend the terror of one's historical condition” (148). Not only does this legend act as a reminder of slavery, it also suggests the importance of the mystical in moving past the horrors of slavery. Milkman discovers his own family's connection to this myth on his quest, which strengthens the affect it has on him. In the novel, Susan Byrd, a relative of Milkman's grandmother, describes the flying African myth as “some old folk's lie they tell... Some of those Africans they brought over here as slaves could fly. A lot of them flew back to Africa” (323). This knowledge in conjunction to the fact that the story Susan Byrd tells Milkman is about his own family grants insight into his past and self that he never knew before. The supernatural elements are tied to African heritage and a collective past, as well as the characters' personal pasts. The most notable example of this is *Beloved's* connection to the slavery. *Beloved* becomes an embodiment of the trauma and history of slavery through her experience in the limbo state she describes, “I cannot lose her again my dead man was in the way like the noisy clouds when he dies on my face I can see hers she is going to smile at me” (250). *Beloved* bridges both life and death. Melanie Anderson describes *Beloved* as “an intense spectral appearance of traumatic history in a physical form, a 'becoming-body,' and through her very 'spectrality' she merges and undoes rigid barriers between life and death and past and present” (Anderson). She remembers the death and horror of the Middle Passage and helps others remember, as she helps characters remember their

personal past as well. Characters like Sethe and Paul D have to face the horrors of their slave past to come to terms with themselves and *Beloved* helps to facilitate that. History plays an integral part in the construction of identity. Morrison includes this history because she believes that it is crucial for people to know. Morrison argues that her novels are important and necessary to African Americans because “we don’t live in places where we can hear those stories anymore, parents don’t sit around and tell their children those classical, mythological, archetypal stories that we heard years ago. But new information has got to get out, and there are several ways to do it” (qtd. in *Awkward* 68).

Morrison teaches history and these stories through her novels. The knowledge of the past is vital to these characters, but many of them are ignorant or in denial of it, so it is important for them to learn of the past and the legacy of slavery. *Beloved*’s connection to the Middle Passage is just one connection to past that influences identity in the novels. The painful memories that Morrison evokes with her use of the supernatural are important elements of the character’s lives. The characters have to face these memories to grow. Through his interaction with the supernatural on his quest, Milkman is able to construct his identity by getting in touch with his history and heritage. Ultimately, Milkman embraces his heritage and grows beyond his selfish, ignorant existence. His quest was originally for gold, but ultimately he finds connection and history that leads him to build his sense of self. As Linda Krumholz states, “On his quest, Milkman learns the “discredited knowledge” of African American history and spirituality, and for the first time he sees some connection between obtaining knowledge, interpreting signs in the world, and constructing his sense of self” (Krumholz 203). In response to this knowledge, Milkman shows respect to his family and heritage by helping Pilate return the bones of her father to their rightful burial ground. Learning the history and culture of his heritage plays a large part of his identity. The story ends with his realization and acceptance of his heritage: “For now he knew what Shalimar knew: If you surrender to the air, you could ride it” (337). His journey leads him to learn and grow and stop merely floating through life. His discovery of his relationship to the Solomon of the song causes a drastic change in Milkman: “He was grinning. His eyes were shining. He was an eager and as happy as he had ever been in his life” (304). Without the knowledge that he gained through his interaction with myth and the supernatural, Milkman would not have been able to grow and become aware. Though the supernatural elements of *Beloved* tend to be more violent and malicious than those seen in *Song of Solomon*, they still ultimately have a positive effect on the characters. While Milkman’s quest brings him in touch with his heritage and more supernatural elements, it does not force revelations on him like the presence of *Beloved*. The revelations of identity and self that happen due to *Beloved*’s presence are forced and painful to the characters. *Beloved* is a painful reminder of the past, and forces memory or “rememory” on the characters. After having sex with *Beloved* for the first time, Paul D is forced face his past: “She moved closer with a footfall he didn’t hear and he didn’t hear the whisper that the flakes of rust made either as they fell away from the seams of his tobacco tin” (137-138). Paul kept the memories of trauma in the “tobacco tin” of his heart, which he thought was rusted shut, so he would not have to face the memories again, but *Beloved* forces the tin open and brings the past to the present. Sethe is also forced to face her past and her actions, including the murder of her child and the abuse that happened at Sweet Home. *Beloved* is a reminder that Sethe is a murderer, but her presence also forces her to remember the horrors of schoolteacher that caused her to murder her child. At the end of the novel, both Sethe and Paul D are in the process of coming to terms with their pasts and learning to move on together. Paul D tells Sethe, “Me and you, we got more yesterday than anybody. We need some kind of tomorrow” (322). They are ready to move beyond the memories that *Beloved* brought back and that have haunted them. Denver is also

changed by Beloved's presence.

At the beginning of the novel, Denver was not a member of the community and resented that lack of connection, but Beloved's presence forces her to seek out the connection that she has been missing. Initially, Denver welcomed Beloved's presence, because even before Beloved has a corporal form, the ghost was her only friend, so she welcomed the opportunity to spend time with Beloved. But as Beloved began to ruin their lives, Denver learns to act for herself. According to Ella, Denver "appeared to have some sense after all. At least she had stepped out the door, asked for the help she needed and wanted work" (302). Though Beloved causes harm to the family she also forces Sethe and Paul D to face their pasts and for Denver to discover her past, resulting in all three of them being able to heal and thus rejoining the community and moving on with their lives. Both the positive and the negative aspects of the supernatural cause the characters to change for the better. Morrison uses the supernatural as an embodiment of the past that characters must face in order to grow. By learning and connecting to their pasts through these supernatural means, the characters are able to understand who they are and the importance of their pasts. An understanding of their heritage is vital to these characters' identity and their ability to function in their communities.

The supernatural allows the characters to become spiritually connected their heritage, which allows them to become a member of their communities and move past their painful memories. In these two novels, many of these characters need supernatural intervention to resurrect the past in order for them to grow.