

Myths and Archetypes in *Beloved*

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Abstract: Toni Morrison is a famous contemporary American writer and the first Africa American woman who win the Nobel Prize for literature. *Beloved* is regarded as the best work ever written by Morrison. In this novel, Toni Morrison uses a large number of myths and archetypes. Through the myths and archetypes, the complex religious and cultural identity of African Americans as an ethnic group is revealed.

1. Introduction

Toni Morrison (1931-) is a famous contemporary American writer and the first Africa American woman who win the Nobel Prize for literature. Her works are many: *The Bluest Eye* (1970), *Sula* (1973), *Tar Baby* (1981), *Beloved* (1987), *Jazz* (1992), *Paradise* (1999), etc. In 1988 Morrison won The Pulitzer Prize as the author of *Beloved*. *Beloved* is regarded as the best work ever written by Morrison.

Beloved tells a tragic story about the infanticide of Sethe, a female slave. Due to the unbearable bullying of the slave owner, Sethe planned to escape. She successfully arrived at Baby Suggs's house. She stayed at the House for 28 days as a real free woman. On the 28th day, the slave owner found her. She did not want her daughters to be slaves, so she killed one of the daughters with a saw. Sethe was put in prison, but she didn't regret doing it. She thought it was love, and she engraved the word "beloved" on the child's tombstone. Eighteen years later, slavery was abolished in the United States, the daughter Sethe had killed returned to life, and punished her mother endlessly.

Beloved offers a detailed description of the lives of the slaves in the United States, revealing the ugliness and cruelty of slavery and misery of the slaves. In the depiction of black slaves seeking freedom, Morrison uses many myths and archetypes, so as to show the inhuman living condition of the slaves and great spiritual pressure of women slaves. Through this novel, the neglected black women are valued by American culture and play an important supplementary role to American history. This novel also shows people's respect for freedom and motherhood. Toni Morrison's *Beloved* plays an important role in modern people's understanding of American culture and history.

In this novel, Toni Morrison uses a large number of myths and archetypes, and this essay aims at making a detailed interpretation of them.

Archetypal criticism argues that archetypes determine the form and function of literary works and that a text's meaning is shaped by cultural and psychological myths. Archetypes are the unknowable basic forms personified or concretized in recurring images, symbols, or patterns which may include motifs such as the quest or the heavenly ascent, recognizable character types such as the trickster or the hero, symbols such as the apple or snake, or images such as crucifixion-all laden with meaning already when employed in a particular work.

Archetypal criticism gets its impetus from psychologist Carl Jung, who postulated that humankind has a "collective unconscious," a kind of universal psyche, which is manifested in dreams and myths and which harbors themes and images that we all inherit. Literature, therefore, imitates not the world but rather the "total dream of humankind." Jung called mythology "the textbook of the archetypes".

2. Sweet Home and Eden

In Morrison's novel *Beloved*, Sethe, the heroine, lived happily in "Sweet Home", a slave owner's

plantation. Although the male slaves in the Sweet Home had very strong sexual desires, they treated Sethe gently.

At least it seemed so. A few yellow flowers on the table, some myrtle tied around the handle of the flatiron holding the door open for a breeze calmed her, and when Mrs. Garner and she sat down to sort bristle, or make ink, she felt fine. Fine. Not scared of the men beyond. The five who slept in quarters near her, but never came in the night. Just touched their raggedy hats when they saw her and stared. And if she brought food to them in the fields, bacon and bread wrapped in a piece of clean sheeting, they never took it from her hands. They stood back and waited for her to put it on the ground (at the foot of a tree) and leave. Either they did not want to take anything from her or did not want her to see them eat. Twice or three times she lingered. Hidden behind honeysuckle she watched them. How different they were without her, how they laughed and played and urinated and sang. All but Sixo, who laughed once-at the very end. Halle, of course, was the nicest. Baby Suggs' eighth and last child, who rented himself out all over the country to buy her away from there. But he too, as it turned out, was nothing but a man. (Morrison 27)

The Garners, the owners of the plantation, were friendly to the slaves. Mr. Garner was liberal and tolerant, calling his niggers "real men."

"Y'all got boys," he told them. "Young boys, old boys, picky boys, stropin boys. Now at Sweet Home, my niggers is men every one of em. Bought em thataway, raised em thataway. Men every one." (Morrison 12)

Garner was gentle and virtuous, and never beat or scolded slaves. Sweet Home was like the Eden in the heaven, and Mr. Garner was like the God. Due to the slavery in America, slaves on other plantations lived miserable lives. The slaves of Sweet Home were as free and happy as Adam and Eve, isolated from the atmosphere of abuse of the slaves.

He grew up thinking that, of all the Blacks in Kentucky, only the five of them were men. Allowed, encouraged to correct Garner even defy him. To invent ways of doing things; to see what was needed and attack it without permission. To buy a mother, choose a horse or wife, handle guns, even learn reading if they wanted to-but they didn't want to since nothing important to them could be put down on paper. Was that it? Is that where the manhood lay? In the naming done by a whiteman who was supposed to know? Who gave them the privilege not of working but of deciding how to? No. In their relationship with Garner was true metal: they were believed and trusted, but most of all they were listened to. He thought what they said had merit, and what they felt was serious. Deferring to his slaves' opinions did not deprive him of authority or power. (147)

However, no matter how kind Mr. and Mrs. Garner are, they could not change the antagonistic relations between whites and blacks. This relationship became more obvious after Mr. Garner's death. Mrs. Garner sold Paul D's brother to repay her debts. Then "schoolteacher" became the owner of the slaves in Sweet Home. His brutal mistreatment of slaves made it a bloody hell.

According to Genesis of *Bible*, the God built a garden in Eden in the east. He created Adam with the dust of the earth. And he put Adam in the gardens where there are every kind of fruit for food. God commanded Adam not to eat the fruit of tree of the knowledge of good and evil. God made Adam fall into a deep sleep. He took a rib from his body and created a woman Eve for his company. Adam and Eve lived in the garden of Eden, innocent and carefree. One day the serpent told Eve that by eating the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, her eyes would be opened, and she would know good and evil. Eve ate of the fruit of the tree, and gave it to Adam. God was furious, and he drove them out of Eden.

Sweet Home is a parody of the biblical myth of Eden. Sweet Home's schoolteacher is the biblical equivalent of the snake. They are saboteurs, evil personified, who shatter the simple good life of others. They are also intruders, and their presence awakens the consciousness of the invader. Before eating the forbidden fruit, Adam and Eve were integrated with the outside world without the concept of subject and object, the definite egocentrism and the boundary between themselves and the outside world. The moment they ate the forbidden fruit, their eyes were opened, and they knew that they were naked. They took leaves and made skirts for themselves. Before schoolteacher's arrival, the slaves of sweet home were treated well by the Garners. Five young black men and one

black girl, Sethe, lived in an Edenlike “Sweet Home”, unaware of their vast differences from the whites. Sethe chose Halle, who had given up five years of Sabbath day to buy his mother’s freedom and bore him two boys and a girl. Ever since, Sethe believed that feeding the baby was her greatest pleasure. At this time Sethe was in perfect harmony with the outside world, comfortably living in an “imaginary state” with no concept of subject and object, not realizing that she was different from the white (Huang 53). But after Mr. Garner’s death, schoolteacher took over Sweet Home, and it turned into a bitter hell. One day, Sethe overheard the teacher guiding two nephews to record her properties. Suddenly her racial consciousness awakened, she could see the real situation of the slaves. She suddenly understood, in the eyes of white, blacks were animals not human. Mr. Garner was merely an ordinary white man, he could not be the god of the black.

The slaves of Sweet Home were as ignorant as Adam and Eve in the *Bible*. They all go from innocence to distortion, distortion to maturity. After leaving the garden of Eden, Adam and Eve began a real life. Although life was full of hardships, but they could rely on their own hard work and sweat to obtain life knowledge and wisdom, they did not have to obey the God. Similarly, after the distortion, the slaves in Sweet Home saw through the nature of the white slave owners and realized their own situation. They became the subject of their own spirit and fight for the freedom, even at the cost of their lives.

3. Escape from Sweet Home and Exodus

Due to the unbearable torture given by the Whiteman to them, Sethe, her husband Halle, and some other slaves planned to escape to the North. In the novel, the brutality and mercilessness were shown by the miserable experience of Sethe and other five slaves in Sweet Home. Moreover, after Baby Suggs became an unchurched preacher, who “visited pulpits and opened her great heart to those who could use it” (Morrison 102), what she said in the Clearing is worthy of attention for it was the accusation of the brutality of some of white slaveholders.

Finally, she called the women to her. “Cry,” she told them. “for the living and the dead. Just cry.” And without covering their eyes the women let loose. (Morrison 103)

“Here,” she said, “in this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard. Yonder they do not love your flesh. They despise it. They don’t love your eyes; they’d just as soon pick em out. No more do they love the skin on your back. Yonder they flay it. And O my people they do not love your hands. Those they only use, tie, bind, chop off and leave empty. Love your hands! Love them. Raise them up and kiss them. Touch others with them, pat them together, stroke them on your face ’cause they don’t love that either.” (Morrison 103-104)

According to the *Old Testament*, there was a famine in the Middle East. Jacob (also known as Israel), the father of the Jews, and his eleven sons take refuge in Joseph, the younger son and also Egypt’s prime minister. His twelve sons became the fathers of the twelve tribes of Israel. The new king of Egypt became jealous of the Israelites and ordered the killing of all newborn Israeli boys. And one of the Levites hid her son for three months and could not hide himself anymore. So, she placed him in a basket of rushes, among the reeds by the river. The child was rescued by pharaoh’s daughter and was named Moses. The children of Israel laboured in Egypt and cried out unto God. God was sympathetic to their plight and asked Moses to lead the Israelites out of Egypt to Canaan, the land God had promised Israel’s forefathers.

The story of Israel’s enslavement in Egypt made the African American people feel the same, so they took the Exodus, Moses as their hymn to convey the strong desire of the black people to escape the bondage of slavery and run to freedom. The collective exodus of slaves from Sweet Home in *Beloved* followed the thematic pattern of Exodus (Huang 54). After “schoolteacher” came to Sweet Home, the slaves suddenly woke up and realized their humble racial and social status. So, the slaves planned to escape together. They were all wiped out, except for Sethe and her children, who managed to escape temporarily from slavery. Some of the male slaves died, some disappeared, and finally Paul D became alone.

After decades in the wilderness, the Jews who fled from Egypt finally reached the Promised

Land of Canaan. Sethe, on her way to escape, went through the same ordeal. She took the children to safety, then fled to Sweet Home without her husband, Halle or other slaves. When escaping Sethe who was pregnant with her back was mangled by slaves, walked alone in the wilderness. The bumps of the journey speed up the birth of the baby, and in the wilderness, she gives birth to Denver with the help of Amy, a white girl. Stamp, the Negro, carried the weary Sethe across the Ohio river in a boat and took her to number 124 bluestone road, where her mother-in-law, Baby Suggs, lived.

Beloved and Exodus are both concerned the theme of escaping, freedom and new life. The slaves' life at sweet home after the schoolteachers was similar to what happened to the Jews in Egypt after the new king came to the throne. Sethe's thrashing in the wilderness corresponds to the wandering of the Jews in the wilderness, and the Ohio river in *Beloved* is in equivalent for the Jordan river in Exodus. Across the river was the ideal place to start a new chapter of life, the longing of the Jews and the slaves of Sweet Home.

4. Sethe and Seth

Sethe was the name of the beautiful and proud black slave in the novel, the protagonist of the text narrative, and the character that Morrison tried to depict vividly in the novel. Through careful study of the text, it could be confirmed that the name of Sethe is a parody of the biblical character Seth. The *Bible* tells us that when the third son came, Adam named him Seth and believes god gave them another son to take the place of Abel. Abel is a person who justifies by faith, who knows how to offer a sheep and fat as a sacrifice to the God, and thus receives God's special favor. Therefore, if the savior comes to the world, it should be because of Abel. In order to thank God, Adam named the child Seth, which means "instead of Abel", hoping to get more God's favor.

In ancient Egyptian mythology, Set, or Seth, was the archetype of the Greek figure Typhon. Osiris was the son of Geb and Nut. He married her sister Isis. Out of jealousy, his younger brother Seth tricked him into a silver chest, welded it to death and threw it into the Nile river. Wise and faithful, Isis searched finally found the body of Osiris. God was moved by her grief and brought him back to life. But once more Seth caught hold of Osiris, and this time he cut Osiris's body into fourteen pieces and threw them all over the country. Isis went through all kinds of hardships to find her husband's body, with the help of the sun god, Horus, Osiris resurrected and became the god of the dead. Later, selfish and cruel Seth was castrated by Horus. The cold, selfish, murderous Seth personified evil. In later works of art, Seth was depicted as a beast with a head and a body and a square nose and ears.

Obviously, Morrison makes Sethe as the name of Seth, aiming to give her double split personality of "good" and "evil": kindness, piety, nobility and greatness; indifference, violence, and cruelty (Shi 110). When Seth lived at the Sweet Home with her mother-in-law's house at 124 bluestone road in Cincinnati, the slaveowner, schoolteacher, hunted after her. There are only two choices Seth can make for herself and her children: a life of humiliation or a noble death. Only has the mother with great maternal nature, did not want her daughter to fall in the slaveholder's hand, suffering all her life. Only cruel one, will not hesitate to use a hand saw cut his daughter's throat to preserve daughter's dignity. Only someone with a double personality, like Seth, can act extremely irrational in an instant. Infanticide perfectly expresses Seth's dignity and determination. The cruelty and violence of infanticide just makes maternal kindness and greatness.

Inside, two boys bled in the sawdust and dirt at the feet of a nigger woman holding a blood-soaked child to her chest with one hand and an infant by the heels in the other. She did not look at them; she simply swung the baby toward the wall planks, missed and tried to connect a second time, when out of nowhere-in the ticking time the men spent staring at what there was to stare at-the old nigger boy, still mewling, ran through the door behind them and snatched the baby from the arc of its mother's swing. (Morrison 175)

In *Beloved*, Toni Morrison has penetrated deep into the minds of African Americans via the *Bible* and African culture, which becomes collective unconscious. Through the myths and archetypes, the complex religious and cultural identity of African Americans as an ethnic group is revealed.

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