

The Symbol of the Female Ghost in Toni Morrison's Beloved

Bičvić, Antonija

Undergraduate thesis / Završni rad

2022

Degree Grantor / Ustanova koja je dodijelila akademski / stručni stupanj: **Josip Juraj Strossmayer University of Osijek, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences / Sveučilište Josipa Jurja Strossmayera u Osijeku, Filozofski fakultet**

Permanent link / Trajna poveznica: <https://urn.nsk.hr/urn:nbn:hr:142:075952>

Rights / Prava: [In copyright](#)/[Zaštićeno autorskim pravom.](#)

Download date / Datum preuzimanja: **2024-02-22**



Repository / Repozitorij:

[FFOS-repository - Repository of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences Osijek](#)



Sveučilište J.J. Strossmayera u Osijeku

Filozofski fakultet Osijek

Studij: Dvopredmetni sveučilišni preddiplomski studij engleskog jezika i
književnosti i filozofije

Antonija Bičvić

Simbol ženskog duha u romanu *Ljubljena*

Završni rad

Mentor: doc.dr.sc. Jasna Poljak Rehlicki

Osijek, 2022.

Sveučilište J.J. Strossmayera u Osijeku

Filozofski fakultet Osijek

Odsjek za engleski jezik i književnost

Studij: Dvopredmetni sveučilišni preddiplomski studij engleskog jezika i
književnosti i filozofije

Antonija Bičvić

Simbol ženskog duha u romanu *Ljubljena*

Završni rad

Znanstveno područje: humanističke znanosti

Znanstveno polje: filologija

Znanstvena grana: anglistika

Mentor: doc.dr.sc. Jasna Poljak Rehlicki

Osijek, 2022.

J.J. Strossmayer University of Osijek

Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences

Study Programme: Double Major BA Study Programme in English Language
and Literature and Philosophy

Antonija Bičvić

The Symbol of the Female Ghost in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

Bachelor's Thesis

Supervisor: Dr. Jasna Poljak Rehlicki, Assistant Professor

Osijek, 2022.

J.J. Strossmayer University of Osijek

Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences

Department of English

Study Programme: Double Major BA Study Programme in English Language
and Literature and Philosophy

Antonija Bičvić

The Symbol of the Female Ghost in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

Bachelor's Thesis

Scientific area: humanities

Scientific field: philology

Scientific branch: English studies

Supervisor: Dr. Jasna Poljak Rehlicki, Assistant Professor

Osijek, 2022.

Prilog: Izjava o akademskoj čestitosti i o suglasnosti za javno objavljivanje

Obveza je studenta da donju Izjavu vlastoručno potpiše i umetne kao treću stranicu završnoga, odnosno diplomskog rada.

IZJAVA

Izjavljujem s punom materijalnom i moralnom odgovornošću da sam ovaj rad samostalno napisao/napisala te da u njemu nema kopiranih ili prepisanih dijelova teksta tuđih radova, a da nisu označeni kao citati s navođenjem izvora odakle su preneseni.

Svojim vlastoručnim potpisom potvrđujem da sam suglasan/suglasna da Filozofski fakultet u Osijeku trajno pohrani i javno objavi ovaj moj rad u internetskoj bazi završnih i diplomskih radova knjižnice Filozofskog fakulteta u Osijeku, knjižnice Sveučilišta Josipa Jurja Strossmayera u Osijeku i Nacionalne i sveučilišne knjižnice u Zagrebu.

U Osijeku, 13.09.2022.

Antonija Bičvić 01222337847

Ime i prezime studenta, JMBAG

Abstract

Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved* is both a neo-slave narrative and a ghost story. With supernatural elements mixing in with everyday life of former slaves, Morrison writes about the experiences of African Americans who had to deal with traumas of slave life even when free. The story unravels in two timelines, with the main plot set in the present and constantly interrupted by fragmented memories. Those memories are usually marked with trauma, and give readers further insight into the backstory of the characters. Morrison uses a female ghost as a tool to link the past and the present, in order to help the characters to cope with and eventually overcome their trauma. This paper will deal with the symbol of a female ghost in Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved* by first analysing the meaning behind the aspects of the ghost itself, and then by taking a closer look at the interactions between the characters and the ghost, as well as her influence on them.

Keywords: Toni Morrison, *Beloved*, ghost, slavery

Table of contents

Introduction	1
1. Creation of Beloved	2
2. Similarities Between Beloved and Spirits of Folklore	5
2.1. Poltergeist	5
2.2. Domovoy	7
2.3. Haltia	8
2.4. La Llorona	9
2.5. Succubus	10
3. Interactions Between Beloved and Other Characters	12
3.1. Mother-daughter Relationship Between Sethe and Beloved: The Poltergeist	12
3.2. Sisterly Relationship Between Beloved and Denver: The Domovoy and Haltia	14
3.3. Relationship Between Beloved and Paul D: La Llorona and Succubus	16
4. Exorcism of Beloved	18
Conclusion	20
Works Cited	21

Introduction

The novel *Beloved*, written by an African American writer Toni Morrison, deals with experiences of African Americans who were previously enslaved, but now need to cope with and find their way in a life outside of bondage. The story of these characters unravels within two different timelines, the main part of the plot happens in Cincinnati, Ohio, in 1873. This first timeline is then frequently interrupted with fragmented memories of events that took place within the previous twenty years, most importantly those that happened in Kentucky about eighteen years ago during their life in slavery. What connects the past and the present is the ghost, a child murdered by her own mother in a desperate attempt to spare her and her siblings from a life of slavery. The aim of this paper will be to analyse the symbolism of the female ghost within the novel by examining the background and ghostly aspects as well as her influence on other characters within the story.

The first chapter of this paper will give a brief overview of the ghost's background and how she came to be. The second chapter will take a closer look at her ghostly aspects and compare them to some of the ghosts from folktales and legends in an attempt to clarify the symbolism behind them. The third chapter will analyse the relationships between *Beloved* and other characters within the novel, namely Sethe, Denver and Paul D, to show the influence *Beloved* had on them, as well as her impact on their relationships amongst themselves. The fourth chapter will deal with *Beloved*'s exorcism and the influence her existence had over the black community. The paper will conclude with a summary of *Beloved*'s influence within the novel and the symbolism of a female ghost within the story.

1. Creation of Beloved

Sethe, one of the main characters within the novel, attempted to escape her life as a slave on a Kentucky plantation by running to her mother-in-law who lived in Cincinnati, Ohio. Sethe first sent her three children to her mother-in-law, and then she herself followed after them, heavily pregnant with her youngest daughter who she gave birth to along the way. She lived in freedom for twenty-eight days with her four children before the Schoolteacher, her cruel master at the time, and his nephews caught up to her. In a desperate attempt to spare her children from a life of pain and suffering, Sethe attempted to kill them, but only succeeded in killing her third child, the older daughter. When she was found by those who hunted her “right off it was clear, to schoolteacher especially, that there was nothing there to claim” (Morrison 149). The scene within the shed where Sethe hid to execute her crime was described as a gruesome sight, and at first all three of the older children were assumed dead:

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... (Morrison 149)

And, although the name of the murdered girl was never mentioned, it is implied that she had a name different than the “Beloved” that Sethe had had engraved on her headstone. The word “Beloved” was a result of a traumatised Sethe who wanted to immortalize her love for her daughter and engrave one of the few words of the Priest’s speech that she heard on her gravestone:

I believe a lot of folks were there, but I just saw the box. Reverend Pike spoke in a real loud voice, but I didn’t catch a word—except the first two, and three months later when Denver was ready for solid food and they let me out for good, I went and got you a gravestone, but I didn’t have money enough for the carving so I exchanged (bartered, you might say) what I did have and I’m sorry to this day I never thought to ask him for the whole thing: all I heard of what Reverend Pike said. Dearly Beloved, which is what you are to me... (184)

This backstory of a human child that was posthumously named Beloved is only revealed through fragmented flashbacks, mostly by Sethe, but also by other characters like Stamp Paid who saved Denver, the youngest child, from Sethe’s murder attempt in the shed:

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. (149)

Despite the full story of her older daughter’s death only being revealed later in the novel, the ghost of the child is present throughout the story, from the very first page, where Morrison writes that “124 was spiteful. Full of a baby’s venom. The women in the house knew it and so did the children. For years each put up with the spite in his own way...” (3).

Namely for eighteen years the ghost of a murdered child haunted the house 124, and its members dwindled until only Sethe and Denver remained. Baby Suggs, Sethe’s previously mentioned mother in law, died eight years before the main plot of the novel began, and her two older children ran away, unable to cope with the 124’s haunting:

...and the sons, Howard and Buglar, had run away by the time they were thirteen years old—as soon as merely looking in a mirror shattered it (that was the signal for Buglar); as soon as two tiny hand prints appeared in the cake (that was it for Howard). Neither boy waited to see more; another kettleful of chickpeas smoking in a heap on the floor; soda crackers crumbled and strewn in a line next to the doorsill. (3)

Shortly after Paul D, a fellow slave from the Kentucky plantation Sweet Home, shows up he and Sethe start a relationship. It seems that Paul D’s appearance, and his integration into Sethe and Denver’s little family, is what prompts the ghost to manifest into a physical form:

A fully dressed woman walked out of the water. She barely gained the dry bank of the stream before she sat down and leaned against a mulberry tree. All day and all night she sat there, her head resting on the trunk in a position abandoned enough to crack the brim in her straw hat. Everything hurt but her lungs most of all. Sopping wet and breathing shallow she spent those hours trying to negotiate the weight of her eyelids. The day breeze blew her dress dry; the night wind wrinkled it. Nobody saw her emerge or came accidentally by. If they had, chances are they would have hesitated before approaching her. (50)

During their walk around the local carnival Sethe has thoughts that obviously imply that she is hoping for a future with Paul D, a family, it is clear in the way Morrison writes that “they were not holding hands, but their shadows were. Sethe looked to her left and all three of them were gliding over the dust holding hands. Maybe he was right” (47). The fact that this is the moment right before they find Beloved on their return home implies that the ghost, who is assumed to be Beloved herself, is very much against this arrangement, and that just haunting the house is not enough anymore. The ghost has seemingly decided to take a much more physical approach towards her goals:

“What might your name be?” asked Paul D.

“Beloved,” she said, and her voice was so low and rough each one looked at the other two. They heard the voice first—later the name.

“Beloved. You use a last name, Beloved?” Paul D asked her.

“Last?” She seemed puzzled. Then “No,” and she spelled it for them, slowly as though the letters were being formed as she spoke them. (52)

It is here where readers first get an inkling that something is not right with Beloved. Not only is she lacking a last name, but “her skin was flawless” and “her feet were like her hands, soft and new” (51-52). Considering the appearance of the other black characters in the novel, Beloved seems to have completely skipped her earlier years in life, it is as if she only just came into existence, unblemished, unmarred. Her unusual state is one of the first indications that this being is, in fact, a spirit. Therefore, in any further mention within this work both the ghost and the woman would be referred to as “Beloved”.

2. Similarities Between Beloved and Spirits of Folklore

As the story progresses and Beloved keeps interacting with the characters it becomes more and more clear that she is not a normal human being. She displays many aspects that ghosts of folklore, myths and legends also have:

Beloved is much more complexly characterized than most fictional ghosts, but she shares many features of traditional manifestations of phantoms in human form who inhabit haunted houses. She has "new skin, lineless and smooth" (50), except for the tell-tale scars of her violent death. She knows things no human being could know. She has supernatural strength and the ability to change shape and to appear and disappear at will. (Schmudde 409)

A ghost's nature often symbolises events that transpired during their life, as well as the moment of their death. The ghostly aspects that Beloved exhibits underline the symbolism of this character within the story, and to understand them this paper will draw a comparison between those features in Beloved and within spirits of popular ghost stories.

2.1. Poltergeist

The word "poltergeist" comes from German words "Polter," meaning noise or racket, and "Geist," meaning spirit ("Poltergeist"). As the words suggest, this is a rather noisy type of being that is considered "in occultism, a disembodied spirit or supernatural force credited with certain malicious or disturbing phenomena, such as inexplicable noises, sudden wild movements, or breakage of household items" ("Poltergeist"). This type of ghost form is what Beloved manifested as for the first eighteen years of her haunting 124, as already mentioned

"124 was spiteful. Full of a baby's venom" (Morrison 3). Poltergeists are angry spirits, often born from violent deaths, usually violent themselves and highly vindictive. They tend to torment a family within a house, often fixating on one person, but their antics are often nowhere to be seen when company is over, usually leading their victims to believe that they are crazy and that it's "just in their head":

According to popular belief, a poltergeist's activity appears to concentrate on a particular member of a family, often an adolescent, its object being harassment or, rarely, physical harm. When strangers are present, the unusual phenomena often cease. A large portion of those reported to be victimized suffer from hysteria. ("Poltergeist")

We can recognize this behaviour in the way that Beloved, as quoted in the first chapter of this paper, moved things, usually in a destructive manner, "merely looking in a mirror shattered it", in order to torment her living family (Morrison 3). Out of all the characters, it would seem that, in poltergeist form, Beloved mostly fixated on Denver (Sethe's youngest child), as Denver was the one who felt the spirit's presence the strongest. This could, however, also be explained by Denver's loneliness, as she was an isolated child yearning for a connection:

Hot, shy, now Denver was lonely. All that leaving: first her brothers, then her grandmother—serious losses since there were no children willing to circle her in a game or hang by their knees from her porch railing. None of that had mattered as long as her mother did not look away as she was doing now, making Denver long, downright long, for a sign of spite from the baby ghost. (12)

Of course, Denver's loneliness was amplified after the ghost chased away her brothers when she, in true poltergeist fashion, left disturbing signs of her presence within the house, as already mentioned previously in this work:

...and the sons, Howard and Buglar, had run away by the time they were thirteen years old—as soon as merely looking in a mirror shattered it (that was the signal for Buglar); as soon as two tiny hand prints appeared in the cake (that was it for Howard). Neither boy waited to see more; another kettleful of chickpeas smoking in a heap on the floor; soda crackers crumbled and strewn in a line next to the doorsill. (3)

Beloved was created after a violent death of a child, and for eighteen years she tormented her family by haunting the house they lived in. Her anger taking form in a destructive and sometimes mischievous way. The similarities between her and a poltergeist suggest that she is motivated by revenge, and wishes to inflict suffering upon the residents of 124. Later in the novel the ghost's focus shifts from Denver to Sethe. In the form of Beloved, she sucks the life

out of Sethe, leaving her frail and malleable. It is apparent that Beloved wishes to exact her revenge on Sethe:

Denver thought she understood the connection between her mother and Beloved: Sethe was trying to make up for the handsaw; Beloved was making her pay for it. But there would never be an end to that, and seeing her mother diminished shamed and infuriated her. (251)

It seems that the poltergeist-like ghostly aspect of Beloved wants to take her revenge, and make Sethe pay for killing the daughter the ghost was presumed to be. She is doing it slowly, by making Sethe give all of herself to Beloved in a parody of motherhood, a twisted version of the relationship Sethe had with her baby, before she killed her.

2.2. Domovoy

In Slavic mythology a Domovoy is a household spirit usually meant to protect the family and watch over the house (“Domovoy”). It is a guardian spirit connected with ancestor worship and often regarded as a member of the family. Denver seemingly regards Beloved more like a domovoy, rather than a poltergeist:

Shivering, Denver approached the house, regarding it, as she always did, as a person rather than a structure. A person that wept, sighed, trembled and fell into fits. Her steps and her gaze were the cautious ones of a child approaching a nervous, idle relative (someone dependent but proud). (Morrison 29)

They can often show their displeasure “in troubles with the farm animals or in strange knocks and grating noises in the house” (“Domovoy”). Similar to how a poltergeist acts, only with a lot less malice. But one defining aspect that Beloved shares with domovoy can be seen in her prediction of future events, as domovoys can “foresee the future, and his groans and weeping or singing and jumping are interpreted as portents of evil or good” (“Domovoy”). This aspect can best be interpreted when considering Beloved’s actions after the arrival of Paul D. It seems that his presence was a catalyst to Beloved’s physical manifestation. Denver herself also notes that “well, I think the baby got plans” and that Paul D made Beloved change those because “whatever they were or might have been, Paul D messed them up for good”

(Morrison 37). It leads readers to conclude that Beloved, like a domovoy, foresaw the change in the family's future that Paul D's appearance brought and acted accordingly, by taking a physical form. This, in turn, is supposed to allow her to influence the characters towards her desired goal.

2.3. Haltia

A haltia is a Balto-Finnic domestic spirit, that guards the house and those who live in it ("Haltia"). When it comes to ghostly aspect there is little similarity between a benevolent haltia and the malicious poltergeist. However, the one feature that they do share is pretty significant:

In Finland the haltia was usually the spirit of the first person to lay claim to a site either by lighting a fire on it or by building a house on it or, in some cases, the first person to die there. The haltia was believed to resemble such a person in every way, including sex, age, dress, and mannerisms. The dominant idea was that a person, once laying claim to a piece of land, would always remain in charge of it. ("Haltia")

From this we could take away that, due to being the first member of the family to die in 124 (although, technically, the murder took place in the shed and not within the house itself), Beloved lay claim to the house. And later, when she takes physical form of a woman, she looks like what Sethe's daughter would have looked, had she lived. Even Sethe acknowledges this, convinced that her dead daughter came back to her:

Beloved, she my daughter. She mine. See. She come back to me of her own free will and I don't have to explain a thing. I didn't have time to explain before because it had to be done quick. Quick. She had to be safe and I put her where she would be. But my love was tough and she back now. I knew she would be. Paul D ran her off so she had no choice but to come back to me in the flesh. (Morrison 200)

It would seem that Beloved resembles what a living version of her should have been to a point that Sethe is convinced that she is, indeed, her real daughter, instead of a spirit.

2.4. La Llorona

When it comes to Beloved's darker aspects she shares a trait of seduction with the spirit of La Llorona, The Weeping Woman:

One of the most widespread Mexican folktale themes is about La Llorona, The Weeping Woman, a nocturnal being who is crying for her lost children. The antiquity of the story cannot be determined, but it is evident from early Colonial texts that the theme is pre-Hispanic in the central highlands. It apparently existed in two forms: La Llorona crying for her children and La Llorona as a seducer of men. (Kearney 199)

And while the contemporary version of La Llorona is the mix of the two, Beloved mostly resonates with the second version, as she is a seemingly beautiful young woman, who charms everyone around her, but also manages to seduce Paul D:

What? A grown man fixed by a girl? But what if the girl was not a girl, but something in disguise? A lowdown something that looked like a sweet young girl and fucking her or not was not the point, it was not being able to stay or go where he wished in 124, and the danger was in losing Sethe because he was not man enough to break out, so he needed her, Sethe, to help him, to know about it, and it shamed him to have to ask the woman he wanted to protect to help him do it. God damn it to hell. (Morrison 127)

Here we can clearly see that Beloved has some kind of a supernatural hold over Paul D, seducing him against his will. Just like La Llorona does with her victims, she leaves him little choice but to comply and go along with her own wishes, which in this case is a sexual encounter between the two. She even goes as far as moving his body out of Sethe's bed, and then out of the house altogether, to make a divide between them and make room for her own advances:

She moved him. Not the way he had beat off the baby's ghost—all bang and shriek with windows smashed and jelly jars rolled in a heap. But she moved him nonetheless, and Paul D didn't know how to stop it because it looked like he was moving himself. Imperceptibly, downright reasonably, he was moving out of 124. The beginning was so simple. One day, after supper, he sat in the rocker by the stove, bone-tired, river-whipped, and fell asleep. He woke to the footsteps of Sethe coming down the white stairs to make

breakfast. “I thought you went out somewhere,” she said. Paul D moaned, surprised to find himself exactly where he was the last time he looked. “Don’t tell me I slept in this chair the whole night.” Sethe laughed. “Me? I won’t say a word to you.” “Why didn’t you rouse me?” “I did. Called you two or three times. I gave it up around midnight and then I thought you went out somewhere.” (114)

The La Llorona aspect of the ghost causes Beloved to seduce Paul D, even against his will, despite knowing he is with Sethe. Perhaps because he is with Sethe, Beloved sets out to make him hers in a calculated and malicious manner, mostly by playing with his mind and relocating him away from Sethe as seen in the quotes above.

2.5. Succubus

Beloved also incorporates certain traits of a dark creature known as a succubus. Often portrayed in paintings as a creature leaning above a sleeping mortal a succubus is:

A demon spirit that has sexual intercourse with mortals. The concept may have arisen from the idea of the commerce of gods with people, which was rife in pagan times. The male demon said to have intercourse with women is called the incubus and the female demon who seduces men the succubus. The demons were generally believed to appear most frequently during sleep or in nightmares. (“Incubus/Succubus”)

With Beloved the sexual aspect of succubus that occurs during a mortal’s dream is especially active in her relationship with Paul D, when she rapes him while he sleeps:

In separate assaults, Beloved drains Paul D of semen and Sethe of vitality; symptomatically, Beloved's body swells as she also feeds off her victims' horrible memories of and recurring nightmares about sexual violations that occurred in their enslaved past. (Barnett 418)

Beloved as a succubus drains her victims, Sethe and Paul D, of their energy, vitality, but also of their memories. And she does so by actively triggering those memories, and often the darkest and most powerful of them are linked to rape which brings us back to the sexual aspect of Beloved as a succubus but also points out that rape, among all other horrible experiences of slavery, holds the most power over the characters:

Morrison uses the succubus figure to represent the effects of institutionalized rape under slavery. When the enslaved persons' bodies were violated, their reproductive potential was commodified. The succubus, who rapes and steals semen, is metaphorically linked to such rapes and to the exploitation of African Americans' reproduction. (419)

Morrison's use of a succubus-like spirit of Beloved points out the fact that, if slavery was a trade, then rape was a part of that trade. It was not discouraged, and was in fact as stated above institutionalized, in order to produce, crudely said, "new stock". The spirit of Beloved symbolises the darkest aspects of not only slavery, but human nature in general. And as such "By representing a female rapist figure and a male rape victim, Morrison foregrounds race, rather than gender, as the category determining domination or subjection to rape" (419). Thus the link between rape and slavery isn't gender, but race, which is exactly what Beloved is symbolising.

3. Interactions Between Beloved and Other Characters

Once Beloved takes physical form she begins to truly interact with the other characters of the novel, namely Sethe, Denver and Paul D who all live in the house 124 that Beloved previously haunted in an incorporeal form. She begins to develop a distinct relationship with each of them. It seems like Beloved becomes a different type of the previously mentioned ghosts with each of the characters, depending on the relationship she has with that character she can go from a malicious Poltergeist to an almost protective Haltia:

In a conventional ghost story, the haunted house is a setting in which the characters confront and attempt to defeat a frightening external force. For Denver, Paul D, and Sethe, who all live for a time with Beloved in 124, the force is both external and internal; the house shapes and the ghost gives expression to their own repressed inner conflicts. (Schmudde 412)

In other words, Beloved acts as a link between their past and their present, forcing them to face their trauma and their past actions that they are trying to suppress.

3.1. Mother-daughter Relationship Between Sethe and Beloved: The Poltergeist

As the title suggests the relationship that forms between Sethe and Beloved is similar to that between a mother and a daughter, but with a supernatural twist. It is with Sethe that Beloved exhibits most of her poltergeist-like behaviour, where her ghostly aspects are connected to malice and revenge. This is not visible at first, but becomes more prominent later in the novel. Instead of acting similarly to Denver, who is moderately independent as a young woman, Beloved reverts to a role of a baby. This means that she depends on Sethe heavily, and given her ghostly nature, she drains Sethe's life force as well in a parasitic parody of a motherdaughter relationship. We first see a hint of this during the initial encounter with Beloved:

When she was finished a little water was on her chin, but she did not wipe it away. Instead she gazed at Sethe with sleepy eyes. Poorly fed, thought Sethe, and younger than her clothes suggested—good lace at the throat, and a rich woman's hat. (Morrison 51)

Sethe starts noticing other baby-like aspects of Beloved as well, like her unsteadiness when she walks, lack of memory, and her inability to support her own head (like a new-born), which at first she attributes to a fever:

They believed the fever had caused her memory to fail just as it kept her slowmoving. A young woman, about nineteen or twenty, and slender, she moved like a heavier one or an older one, holding on to furniture, resting her head in the palm of her hand as though it was too heavy for a neck alone. (55-56)

Then there is the moment on the clearing, when ghostly fingers choke Sethe, and at first she thinks it's Baby Suggs:

The fingers touching the back of her neck were stronger now—the strokes bolder as though Baby Suggs were gathering strength. Putting the thumbs at the nape, while the fingers pressed the sides. Harder, harder, the fingers moved slowly around toward her windpipe, making little circles on the way. (96)

But afterwards she corrects herself, thinking:

...when she was feeling so fine letting Beloved massage away the pain, the fingers she was loving and the ones that had soothed her before they strangled her had reminded her of something that now slipped her mind. But one thing for sure, Baby Suggs had not choked her as first she thought . . . Sethe remembered the touch of those fingers that she knew better than her own. (98)

Sethe begins to suspect that it was the baby that tried to strangle her instead, because “for eighteen years she had lived in a house full of touches from the other side. And the thumbs that pressed her nape were the same” (98). She even briefly entertains the idea that Beloved may be the ghost but “Like a faint smell of burning that disappears when the fire is cut off or the window opened for a breeze, the suspicion that the girl’s touch was also exactly like the baby’s ghost dissipated” (98-99).

Eventually Sethe begins to whole-heartedly believe that Beloved is her daughter, and her chance for redemption. She is finally ready to face the past because she gained a second chance to fix her mistakes, at least that’s how she sees it:

I’ll explain to her, even though I don’t have to. Why I did it. How if I hadn’t killed her she would have died and that is something I could not bear to happen

to her. When I explain it she'll understand, because she understands everything already. I'll tend her as no mother ever tended a child, a daughter. (200)

But the more Sethe gave, the more Beloved took:

She took the best of everything—first. The best chair, the biggest piece, the prettiest plate, the brightest ribbon for her hair, and the more she took, the more Sethe began to talk, explain, describe how much she had suffered, been through, for her children, waving away flies in grape arbors, crawling on her knees to a lean-to. None of which made the impression it was supposed to. Beloved accused her of leaving her behind. (241)

Denver is the one to notice that, the more her mother nurtures Beloved, the more Sethe herself begins to fade away. It is as if Beloved is feeding from Sethe, taking her life so she herself could live. A greedy, yet dependent thing masquerading as Denver's dead sister:

The flesh between her mother's forefinger and thumb was thin as china silk and there wasn't a piece of clothing in the house that didn't sag on her. Beloved held her head up with the palms of her hands, slept wherever she happened to be, and whined for sweets although she was getting bigger, plumper by the day. (239)

Towards the end of the novel Sethe is seemingly completely within Beloved's thrall. Enchanted by the idea of having her daughter back, and blind to the ill effects that the presence of this being has on her.

3.2. Sisterly Relationship Between Beloved and Denver: The Domovoy and Haltia

At first, during Beloved's days as a poltergeist haunting 124, Denver is the one who feels the strongest connection towards the spirit. Lonely and isolated, yearning for a history and a connection, all Denver has of her past is the ghost of her dead sister. This is largely due to Sethe's refusal to speak much about her past, and so Denver is holding on to frayed threads of connection to what little of her past she knows, building her identity with gaping holes in the middle. So Denver found kinship with someone equally trapped and isolated within the walls of 124:

Beloved is my sister. I swallowed her blood right along with my mother's milk. The first thing I heard after not hearing anything was the sound of her crawling up the stairs. She was my secret company until Paul D came. He threw her out. Ever since I was little she was my company and she helped me wait for my daddy. (205)

And after Beloved takes physical form Denver is seemingly the first to be charmed by her. Her sister returning means a fulfilment of her life-long yearning, the end of her solitude. But despite being the one most attuned to the ghost, Denver is not Beloved's centre of attention. Instead, Beloved focuses on forming an unhealthy, parasitic relationship with Sethe, almost killing her in the process of draining her strength for her own use. Her relationship with Denver seems to be one born of kinship, an understanding between two women yearning for their past that will provide them with an identity. In her interactions with Denver the ghost can be considered as a Domovoy, or a Haltia, as she exhibits similar traits to them.

This was perhaps what saved Denver, as well as gave her room to grow and gain independence. Denver is the one that notices how harmful Beloved really is. It prompts her to leave 124, which she seldom did, and seek help from the community:

Her sister's appearance is at first perceived by Denver as an opportunity for increased companionship, but as the ghost focuses more and more demandingly on Sethe, Denver draws away and defines herself in opposition to Beloved. It is Denver, finally, who breaks the spell Beloved has woven inside 124; she does it by leaving the yard, which she thinks of as stepping "off the edge of the world" (243), and going for help. (Schmudde 413)

Here we witness Denver's character growth as she takes responsibility, makes a tough choice, and acts according to her duty towards her mother. She decides to go to Lady Jones, her old teacher, and ask for help, mainly food. It's difficult for her to actually leave the house, but remembering Baby Suggs and their conversations makes it easier:

Remembering those conversations and her grandmother's last and final words, Denver stood on the porch in the sun and couldn't leave it. Her throat itched; her heart kicked It came back. A dozen years had passed and the way came back. (Morrison 245)

After Denver's attempt to reach out for help, members of the community begin to bring them food daily:

Two days later Denver stood on the porch and noticed something lying on the tree stump at the edge of the yard. She went to look and found a sack of white beans. Another time a plate of cold rabbit meat. One morning a basket of eggs sat there. (248-249)

It is that moment of growing up that caused Denver to, most likely, save her mother's life. Beloved's presence was at first a blessing to Denver, but in the end it made her turn away from the haunted house towards the community, and ask for help. Beloved, in a way, pushed Denver over the edge that separated girls from women.

3.3. Relationship Between Beloved and Paul D: La Llorona and Succubus

At the beginning of the novel Paul D's appearance seemingly forces away the ghost of the baby, and he instead takes her place within 124. Beloved's reappearance makes Paul D suspicious from the start, and her presence makes him uncomfortable, largely due to his attraction towards her:

Beloved was shining and Paul D didn't like it. Women did what strawberry plants did before they shot out their thin vines: the quality of the green changed. Then the vine threads came, then the buds. By the time the white petals died and the mint-coloured berry poked out, the leaf shine was gilded tight and waxy. That's how Beloved looked—gilded and shining. Paul D took to having Sethe on waking, so that later, when he went down the white stairs where she made bread under Beloved's gaze, his head was clear. (64)

She begins to seduce him, going as far as to physically manipulate his body, forcing him to sleep in a chair instead of going upstairs with Sethe:

She moved him. Not the way he had beat off the baby's ghost—all bang and shriek with windows smashed and jelly jars rolled in a heap. But she moved him nonetheless, and Paul D didn't know how to stop it because it looked like he was

moving himself. Imperceptibly, downright reasonably, he was moving out of
124. (114)

Eventually they do end up sleeping together, but Paul D is obviously against it and tries to find comfort in Sethe, clinging to her in hopes that it will ward off Beloved's advances "The threads of malice creeping toward him from Beloved's side of the table were held harmless in the warmth of Sethe's smile" (131). Here Beloved shows traits of La Llorona in the sense that she shows malicious intent towards a man, mainly through his unwilling seduction. But despite her efforts, his and Sethe's relationship manages to persevere. She also shows traits of a succubus as she continues sexual advances against Paul D's will and she moves him in his sleep and "drains Paul D of semen" (Barnett 418). The fact that Paul D is asleep is especially important because it creates a clear difference between her succubi and incubi aspects. The malice and need to take revenge upon a man can be attributed to her La Llorona aspects, but the rape and manipulation of Paul D's sleeping body are purely succubi aspects of Beloved:

The succubus figure, which is related to the vampire, another sexualized figure that drains a vital fluid, was incorporated into African American folklore in the form of shapeshifting witches who "ride" their terrified victims in the night (Puckett 568), and Beloved embodies the qualities of that figure as well. (418)

This difference between La Llorona and succubi implies that her relationship with Paul D is supposed to symbolise both the suffering of women, as La Llorona is born of betrayal and violence, as well as rape that is linked with race rather than gender, because the succubus is a female rapist with male victims.

4. Exorcism of Beloved

After Denver goes to Lady Jones to seek help, the community is alerted that something is going on with the residents of 124. One of the women of the community, Ella, who shunned Sethe all those years ago, now convinced the others to help deal with the entity living in 124:

She understood Sethe's rage in the shed twenty years ago, but not her reaction to it, which Ella thought was prideful, misdirected, and Sethe herself too complicated. When she got out of jail and made no gesture toward anybody, and lived as though she were alone, Ella junked her and wouldn't give her the time of day. The daughter, however, appeared to have some sense after all. At least she had stepped out the door, asked for the help she needed and wanted work. When Ella heard 124 was occupied by something-or-other beating up on Sethe, it infuriated her... (256)

This is when the community comes together, and reaches out to Sethe for the first time after her crimes, in a joined effort to exorcize the ghost of Beloved. Thirty women gathered in front of 124 "They grouped, murmuring and whispering, but did not step foot in the yard. Denver waved. A few waved back but came no closer" (258). They prayed for the ghost to release 124 and its inhabitants. In an ironic twist of faith, while Beloved's murder ostracized Sethe and Denver from the community, Beloved's exorcism brought them back.

In Christianity exorcism is considered as an act of "expelling an unwanted spiritual entity from a person or place" and is mostly mentioned in stories related to Jesus within the Bible (Twelftree). While Jesus often performed exorcisms with his charisma alone, priests in Christianity usually read the exorcism prayer in Latin. Today exorcism is mostly seen in horror movies and tends to be connected to witchcraft. We see elements of that in the novel, where only women are the ones praying, and thus doing the act of exorcism. Their method seems to be a blend between prayer and charisma, or in this case sheer force of will. Their words call to god "Denver saw lowered heads, but could not hear the lead prayer—only the earnest syllables of agreement that backed it: Yes, yes, yes, oh yes. Hear me. Hear me. Do it, Maker, do it. Yes" (Morrison 258). Their version of exorcism seems more like a prayer, or a spell, of invoking, rather than banishing. A similar method is often used in witchcraft, where the caster invokes a circle of protection to ward against demons and evil spirits:

A magic circle is a circle of space marked out by practitioners of some branches of ritual magic, which they generally believe will contain energy and form a sacred space, or will provide them a form of magical protection, or both. It may be marked physically, drawn in a material like salt, flour, or chalk, or merely visualised. The Sumerians called the practice of using ritual circles Zisurrû. (“Magic circle”)

In the novel the women do not form an actual physical circle, but the idea of the community of women coming together to aid one of their own can be seen as a symbol of a circle. There is strength and safety within a community, and the circle is likewise supposed to represent a safe place reinforced against evil. Therefore, we can say that the exorcism of Beloved happens through the symbolic circle of women invoking God in order to make the house and its surroundings a safe space, and in turn banishing the ghost.

Conclusion

The ghost of Beloved within the novel symbolizes a link between the past and the present. The characters that interact with the ghost are all former slaves trying to overcome their past traumas and adapt to a free life. Beloved's appearance re-opens old wounds, and makes them face their traumas and past actions. For Sethe Beloved represents healing, and coming to terms with her past actions, including learning to forgive herself for killing her daughter. With her she mostly resembles a poltergeist that mercilessly forces Sethe to gradually face her actions, and their consequences. In doing so, Sethe is freed of her past burdens once she is freed of the Beloved's ghost. For Denver, Beloved represents ceasing to hold on to a past she does not know and starting to build her identity in the present, as well as turning towards the future. Beloved pushes Denver to grow up, become independent, and become a part of the community. Although Beloved takes a form of a more benevolent spirit with Denver, Denver is still aware of the ill effects Beloved has on her mother. The final step Denver makes into adulthood is when she leaves her fears behind her and dares to venture past her yard for the first time in years in order to find help to get rid of Beloved and save her mother. For Paul D, Beloved forces him to turn to love, which he stubbornly avoids, by making him cling to Sethe. The more Beloved tries to seduce him, the more Paul D is determined to bind himself to Sethe instead. He ends up envisioning and building a life with her. For the community, Beloved breaks the years-old barrier between the residents of 124 and the rest of the community, which started when Sethe came back from jail without showing remorse for what she did. All the women within the community gather together in order to embrace Denver and Sethe within their circle of protection, thus banishing Beloved from their home and lives. The symbol of the female ghost represented within Beloved not only acts as a link between the past and the present, but she also signifies healing from that past, in order to live in the present, and possibly build a future.

Works cited

- Barnett, Pamela E. "Figurations of Rape and the Supernatural in *Beloved*." *PMLA*, vol. 112, no. 3, 1997, pp. 418–27. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.2307/462950>. Accessed 12 Sep. 2022.
- "Domovoy." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, The Editors of Encyclopaedia. 6 Aug. 2019, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/domovoy>. Accessed 27 June 2022.
- "Haltia." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, The Editors of Encyclopaedia. 20 Jul. 1998, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/haltia>. Accessed 27 June 2022.
- "Incubus/Succubus." *Encyclopedia of Occultism and Parapsychology*. 25 Aug. 2022, <https://www.encyclopedia.com>. Accessed 11 Sep. 2022.
- Kearney, Michael. "La Llorona as a Social Symbol." *Western Folklore*, vol. 28, no. 3, 1969, pp. 199–206. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1499265>. Accessed 27 Jun. 2022.
- "Magic circle". *Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia*. 26 Aug. 2022, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Magic_circle&oldid=1106699236. Accessed 5 Sep. 2022.
- Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*. Vintage, 2004.
- "Poltergeist." *Encyclopedia Britannica*, The Editors of Encyclopaedia. 5 Apr. 2021, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/poltergeist-occultism>. Accessed 26 June 2022.
- Schmudde, Carol E. "The Haunting of 124." *African American Review*, vol. 26, no. 3, 1992, pp. 409–16. *JSTOR*, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3041913>. Accessed 27 Jun. 2022.

Twelftree, Graham H. "Exorcism." *Oxford Bibliographies*, 15 Jan. 2020,

[https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-](https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780195393361/obo9780195393361-0272.xml)

[9780195393361/obo9780195393361-0272.xml](https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780195393361/obo9780195393361-0272.xml). Accessed 5 Sep. 2022.