THE GHOST IN TONI MORRISON'S BELOVED: PARANORMAL OR PSYCHOLOGICAL PHENOMENON?

Irina-Ana Drobot
Lecturer, PhD, Technical University of Civil Engineering Bucharest

Abstract: The purpose of this paper is to analyse whether the poltergeist in Toni Morrison's novel is a paranormal or a psychological phenomenon. The paper will argue that the so-called ghost is just an element of grief according to Freud's theory, a symbol of Sethe's past. The name Beloved suggests an attachment of Sethe to the ghost, alluding to her affection for what she has lost. At the same time, Sethe needs to accept the loss, in order to be healthy. The ghost is also a part of Sethe herself, of what she was then, in conflict with what she is now. The past of Sethe is the past of her entire race, which becomes traumatic at a personal level not just at a public, historical level. Sethe needs to reconcile past and present in order to reconcile her own past and present identity and come to terms with her own present situation. Sethe's situation reminds of that of the PTSD patients who are constantly disturbed by an imaginary repetition of the traumatic incident.

Keywords: grief, past, trauma, attachment, loss.

Introduction

One of the main topic in the novel *Beloved* is the relationship between Sethe and the ghost of her daughter, with which she needs to come to terms. Sethe has killed her baby when she was about to be caught again as a slave. At the time, she believed she had saved her and had given her freedom from slavery. At present, she feels remorse for what she has done. Her psychological turmoil is seen by herself as well as by other members of her family and of the community in the manifestations of the ghost Beloved. The question is, to what extent is this a novel about paranormal phenomena and to what extent is it about psychological traumas that extend from personal level to the level of a whole community which shares the same history? Sethe lives her trauma at a personal level, while through her the entire family and community realize that they all share the same trauma due to their shared history.

Features of magical realism had been found in the novel by Lobodziek (2012) and Tarawneh (2017), yet the whole purpose of its use is "making reality more real" (Tarawneh 2017). According to Lobodziek (2012: 103):

> Morrison believes that this classification is an overgeneralization of her work. […] Beloved, while indeed manifesting certain features and subject matters typical of that literary mode, on the other hand redefines the concept of the magic by using it as a marker for the characters' extraordinary powers of endurance and resistance, thereby insisting on the uniqueness of the African American experience.

The elements of magical realism just draw more attention to the trauma and help present it in an understandable way to the readers and to the community. In this way, the trauma acquires a physical form; it is no longer a simple inner experience. It grabs attention in a way that makes it have a greater impact on readers and those around Sethe. By making her inner turmoil into a concrete image, everyone understands her issues in a more sympathetic way, as they confront it themselves.

BDD-A30494 © 2019 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-10-30 04:01:34 UTC)

The ghost that literally haunts Sethe's house and family can be regarded as a projection of the idea that Sethe was psychologically haunted by her past deed of killing her baby in order to save her. Her feelings of guilt haunt her in the novel both literally and psychologically. The novel uses the ghost as a magical realist and paranormal device in order to underline the intensity of the trauma. The fact that the other members of her family and of her community can see and feel Beloved shows that the trauma is shared by them all. Razmi and Jamali (2012: 11) believe that magical realism is a way of expressing a different perspective than the dominant, Eurocentric one over reality and history. It is an alternative way of expression of what had actually happened in history with the episode of slavery. Beloved is thus a part of this different perspective which had the power to convince everyone how real the sufferings of the slaves had been and to make them sympathize with them.

At the same time, Sethe goes through universal stages of overcoming grief in her personal experience with Beloved: in the early stages, we rebel against the loss and refuse to accept it, while in the later stages we come to terms with the reality of our loss and accept it. These stages could describe the action of the novel as far as Sethe is concerned. However, she is not alone in her loss, as the other members of the community see themselves and their own reaction to loss in hers and in the materialization of the ghost Beloved. The magical realist elements can be regarded as part of her emotional reaction which reminds of post traumatic stress disorder, where there are perceptions which look magical realist, such as the appearance of the ghost Beloved which represents the unwanted, recurrent thoughts about the traumatic incident, reliving the event in flashbacks, and the severe emotional discomfort of guilt. The ghost Beloved serves as a purpose to illustrate all these symptoms and to make them all the more powerful for the reader and for the others around Sethe, as they also experience them directly together with her when Beloved appears and reacts.

Sethe's Personal Progress

McNeely Pass (2006: 117) analyses *Beloved*

> using the framework of human emotions in response to grieving and death as developed by Elisabeth Kubler-Ross. Through her studies of terminally ill patients, Kubler-Ross identified five stages when approaching death: denial and isolation, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. These stages accurately fill the process that the character Sethe experiences in the novel as she learns to accept her daughter's death.

Kubler-Ross' theory counts five stages of the process of grief work: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. McNeely Pass (2006: 117) notices states that

> Toni Morrison, whether intentionally or unintentionally, structures her novel around the steps Elisabeth Kubler-Ross perceives as the typical order in which human emotions evolve regarding grieving and death. Thus, the reader of *Beloved* travels with Sethe through the Kubler-Ross steps of grieving as Sethe moves from denial and isolation to final acceptance of her Beloved's death.

Throughout the novel, Sethe is in denial about the disappearance of Beloved when she reappears as a ghost, then she is angry at how she had to take the decision to murder her baby in order to save her, she bargains with Beloved for forgiveness, she is depressive about her past and finally she accepts the help of the community together with the fact of what had

BDD-A30494 © 2019 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-10-30 04:01:34 UTC)

happened. Paul D and the community save Sethe by bringing her back to reality, to a reality where Beloved's disappearance is accepted and she is no longer haunted by the ghost.

The problem with Sethe was that she had tried to suppress her trauma of killing her own baby. Due to this self-defence process, her trauma comes back in the form of the ghost, and she needs to negotiate with it in order to come out sane of the experience:

> When traumatized, it is very normal to close the memory and for self-defence to suppress the terrible emotional experience. Sometimes this neglecting and abandoning might be the best way to forget, and so do the characters Sethe and Paul D in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. Trying to ignore their past and to avoid any related confrontations, they try to forget their terrible memories in Beloved. But, I think this forgetting is very temporary and it lasts only until the smallest event prompts the memory and then the formidable past is experienced once again as
> painful as it once was. Toni Morrison carries Sethe on a kind of journey from being a woman who identifies herself with motherhood, to a woman who begins to identify herself as being a human being. (Kocabiyik 2016: 343)

However, in order to maintain sanity, Sethe needs to reconcile her two aspects of herself: her past and her present self, which she can do through discussions and explanations with the ghost Beloved. In fact, she is trying to deal with a discussion with herself. She does not benefit from specialized help, from a therapist, yet she has the members of her community on her side. They will understand what is going on and help her out of her grief. Even Beloved, as a ghost, tries to help Sethe:

> After moving easily into the family Beloved "has eyes only for Sethe" (p. 121). And Sethe opens herself to her since she is part of herself and, therefore, "didn't even have to see the face burning in the sunlight. She had been dreaming it for years" (p. 132). The guilt-ridden mother is set up from within herself to be played off "like a rag doll, broke down, finally from trying to take care of and make up for" (p. 243). She tried "to persuade Beloved, the one and only person she felt she had to convince, that what she had done was right because it came from true love" (p. 251). But Beloved "looked at her. Uncomprehending everything except that Sethe was the woman who took her face away ..." (p. 252). Shut up in 124 with Beloved, that is, with herself, "it was as though Sethe didn't really want forgiveness given; she wanted it refused. And Beloved helped her out" (p. 252). (Sarinjeive 1998: 293)

Sethe's feelings of guilt make her unable to accept forgiveness. She hesitates to accept the forgiveness from Beloved. This is a typical reaction of neurotics, who want, paradoxically, their wishes never to be satisfied.

The problem with Sethe's denial is that it affects the entire community. Sethe cannot be a functional member of their community and she even keeps a ghost in her house, affecting her relationship with Paul D. The community needs functional members and she will be made to choose between Beloved and the community. This will prompt her to go through the phase of accepting her loss from her mourning and grief work.

Values of Collectivist Cultures

The situation of the ghost in Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved* has been analysed as "a parallel between the individual processes of psychological recovery and a historical or

BDD-A30494 © 2019 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-10-30 04:01:34 UTC)

national process. […] Sethe's process of healing […], her process of learning to live with her past, is a model for the readers who must confront Sethe's past as part of our own past, a collective past that lives right here where we live." (Krumholz 1992: 395). The novel creates a strong connection between individual and community, in relation to their past. The personal past of Sethe coincides with the collective past of the slaves:

> In *Beloved* Morrison, like Du Bois in *Souls*, negotiates the legacy of slavery as a national trauma, and as an intensely personal trauma as well. Both works challenge the notion that the end of institutional slavery brings about freedom by depicting the emotional and psychological scars of slavery as well as the persistence of racism. (Krumholz 1992: 396)

From this point of view, readers are faced with the values of a collectivist culture in Geert Hofstede's terms. The story of Sethe in this novel has as a purpose to exemplify through an individual's story the story of a whole community, and of a whole nation. It is, however, easier to exemplify by using not the image of an entire community but the image of one single individual. The story of one particular individual impresses more than the story of a whole group, as huge numbers of suffering individuals make anyone feel less sensitive towards their issues. It is a process of psychological self-defense, as otherwise we would collapse mentally with pity.

The strong bond between individual and community is also emphasized through the help Sethe receives from the community to exorcize the ghost of Beloved:

> Beloved is finally driven away by thirty of the community's women; some of them "stood holding in a fixed glare 124" (p. 258). With their singing they break the spell Beloved, or the destructive part of herself, has cast over Sethe – "it was a wave of sound wide enough to sound deep water and knock the pods off chestnut trees. It broke over Sethe and she trembled like the baptized in its wash" (p. 261). To complete the exorcism Sethe runs "into the faces of the people out there, joining them and leaving Beloved behind" (p. 262). (Sarinjeive 1998: 293)

Sethe is encouraged to do what is best for the society she is part of: by healing herself of her guilt surrounding Beloved, her house will no longer be a danger for the whole community. Sethe will be psychologically healed, by accepting what she had done in the past and by coming to terms with herself and with the relationship with Beloved. The community supports her to come out of her destructive psychological state and focus on the present life with her present family. One trait of collectivist culture is their encouragement of the family and the community to play a central role in the lives of individuals. Other traits include encouraging the individuals to do what is best for society, not for themselves, and functioning as a group to support others. Sethe is encouraged to feel part of the community, which helps her with her emotional healing.

The question is, why would the community intervene in the case of an individual, besides the strong connection among individuals in the group? The answer is because Sethe's case is representative for the whole community. Every single individual in the community empathizes with Sethe since each and every one sees themselves in her case:

> Although critics typically conceive of the character Beloved as the return of Sethe's daughter who was killed eighteen years prior to the action in the novel's opening, Beloved's identity extends beyond this single time and this single child: she embodies the "Sixty Million and more" captive Africans who died before they reached the

BDD-A30494 © 2019 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-10-30 04:01:34 UTC)

> shores of America (Clemons 75) as well as those who survived the Middle Passage to join the generations of the enslaved (O'Reilly 87; Horwitz 157; Bouson 152). (Lillvis 2013: 453-454)

The community sees their own history through Sethe and her relationship with Beloved. The name Beloved suggests that it can become a symbol for every lost loved one of the other members of the community. Through healing Sethe, there could be a healing of the whole community. The whole community could come to accept their history and their loss. The loss of Sethe is a symbol for a collective sense of loss. She is not the only one who has gone through hardships in her personal life. The historical circumstances have led to the whole community to have gone through a similar type of loss. Through healing Sethe psychologically and emotionally, the community heals itself. What is more, the harmony in relationships among individuals is a priority of collectivist cultures. We can see this trait illustrated in the way Sethe tries to establish a harmonious relationship with herself through the relationship with Beloved, then in the way the community tries to help her and then to establish a good relationship with Sethe and through this the community members try to deal with their own past and traumatic experiences. The community establishes a relationship of trust with Sethe, which leads to the harmonious relationships among all members of the community with exorcising or coming to terms with Beloved.

Sethe also tries to make her other daughter understand Beloved, which is the beginning of establishing a harmonious relationship with the ghost:

> "You forgetting how little it is," said her mother. "She wasn't even two years old when she died. Too little to understand. Too little to talk much even."
> "Maybe she don't want to understand," said Denver.
> "Maybe. But if she'd only come, I could make it clear to her."
> Sethe released her daughter's hand and together they pushed the sideboard back against the wall. Outside a driver whipped his horse into the gallop local people felt necessary when they passed 124.
> "For a baby she throws a powerful spell," said Denver.
> "No more powerful than the way I loved her," Sethe answered and there it was again. The welcoming cool of unchiseled headstones; the one she selected to lean against on tiptoe, her knees wide open as any grave. Pink as a fingernail it was, and sprinkled with glittering chips. Ten minutes, he said. You got ten minutes I'll do it for free. (Morrison 1987: 5)

Sethe seems more empathic towards the ghost than her daughter Denver, who needs to be explained about what had happened. Through these explanations, Denver would also get a better understanding of her mother and, by extension, of her whole family's and community's history. Understanding the others and sympathizing with them is a theme that runs throughout the whole relationships in this novel. The fact that Beloved is exorcised comes as a result of understanding and establishing harmonious relationships in a collectivist community. Sethe is healed psychologically due to her acceptance of her own doings.

We could look at Beloved as a scapegoat. Girard claimed that all societies have a violent dimension, since their members desire what the others have, they like what the others like, briefly, they imitate the others' behaviour. Inevitably, conflicts will arise in any society. The scapegoat is the solution to bring back peace, as it can help get rid of the mimetic desires and of conflicts. The conflict in this novel is an interior one mostly, as Sethe needs to come to terms with herself and the whole community goes through the same process after the issues with slavery. Beloved is sacrificed in order to keep the community together. The community

BDD-A30494 © 2019 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-10-30 04:01:34 UTC)

establishes a common connection in response to the same traumatic events they had all gone through and support each other in the healing process, Sethe included:

> In the realm of Morrison's novel, Sethe's mother, a woman who died a violent death on the plantation where she was enslaved, must be included in this number which means that Beloved represents not only the unnamed millions who suffered because of slavery but, for Sethe, both child and mother. Sethe thus uses her relationship with the mysterious Beloved to resuscitate her role as a mother and her identity as a daughter. Through her return to the position of daughter, Sethe discovers a strength and forward-looking vision that allow her to begin building a future. (Lillvis 2013: 453-454)

Thus Sethe goes through a transformation in her healing process, by going through her roles and identities and becoming aware of who she really is. She is a member of the community and she needs to get over their shared, traumatic history which is intertwined with her personal tragic loss. She had lost both her daughter and her mother as a result of historical events.

Conclusions

The ghost Beloved appears as a result of the attachment Sethe feels regarding her lost dear ones, her daughter and her mother, who both died violent deaths. Sethe goes through the mourning process in order to heal, which is a universal experience everyone who had lost dear persons goes through. At the same time, the experience is shared with the entire community as they all share the same history of slavery and violence.

The ghost is not a magic realist feature, nor a paranormal phenomenon, but a psychological one. Anomalistic psychology studies such cases where apparently paranormal phenomena have nothing paranormal about them. Through this framework, rational explanations can be found, just as a rational, psychological explanation for the appearance of the ghost, an apparently magic realist element, has been found for this novel. The novel presents a very deep and tragic experience which, through the ghost, can be much better and more powerfully illustrated. Ghosts, a psychological study claims (Klemperer 1992), are the result of waking dreams, which bring transition to and from sleeping states. Thus, hauntings by ghosts can be the result of delusions arised from emotional experiences, as is the case in this novel.

The magical realism in the novel is, thus, from an anomalistic psychology framework, just an illusion. However, as a literary device, it helps readers better grasp the inner reality of Sethe and of the other members of her community. We face her and her community's inner reality directly, and it has a higher emotional impact than if it were presented to us just as an inner reality belonging to herself.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Devi Sarinjeive (1998) Reading Paradigms, Toni Morrison, Beloved , Journal of Literary Studies, 14:3-4, 281-298, DOI:10.1080/02564719808530204

Klemperer, Frances (1992) *Ghosts, Visions, And Voices: Sometimes Simply Perceptual Mistakes*. BMJ: British Medical Journal, Vol. 305, No. 6868 (Dec. 19–26).

Kokabiyik, Orkun (2016) The Concept of Memory, Forgetting and the Past in Toni Morrison's Beloved, Mediterranean Journal of Humanities, VI/2, DOI:10.13114/MJH.2016.302

BDD-A30494 © 2019 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-10-30 04:01:34 UTC)

Kristen Lillvis (2013) Becoming Self and Mother: Posthuman Liminality in Toni Morrison's Beloved, Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction, 54:4, 452-464, DOI:10.1080/00111619.2011.626814
Krumholz, Linda (1992) *The ghosts of slavery: Historical recovery in Toni Morrison*, in African America Review, Volume 26, Number 3.
Łobodziec, Agnieszka. (2012). Toni Morrison's Discredited Magic – Magical Realism in Beloved Revisited. Brno Studies in English. 38. 103-121. 10.5817/BSE2012-1-7.
McNeely Pass, Olivia (2006) Tony Morrison's Beloved: a Journey Through the Pain of Grief, J Med Humanit, 27, Springer Science, DOI 10.1007/s10912-006-9010-0
Morrison Toni (1987) *Beloved*. Plume, New York.
Razmi, Mehri, Jamali, Leyli (2012) Magic(al) Realism as Postcolonial Device in Toni Morrison's Beloved, in International Journal of Humanities and Social Science, vol. 2, no.5, Center for Promoting Ideas, USA.
Tarawneh, Mohammad (2017) Magic Realism in Toni Morrison's Beloved, Research Paper, available at: https://www.academia.edu/34796492/Magic_realism_in_Toni_Morrisons_Beloved

BDD-A30494 © 2019 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.216.75 (2026-10-30 04:01:34 UTC)