chapter 15
Approaches to *Beloved*,
by Toni Morrison

Toni Morrison, winner of the Nobel Prize for literature in 1993, is one of America's most respected living authors. Her work is also part of a broad phenomenon in which African-American literature (especially that produced African-American women writers) has come to be recognized as one of the most vital and exciting forces in contemporary American culture. Morrison's work is marked not only by its intense engagement with important social and political issues but also by its literary complexity and sophistication. *Beloved*, a work of genuine artistic brilliance that addresses some of the most profound (if unpleasant) issues in American history, is possibly Morrison's most important work to date. It is no surprise, then, that literary critics have shown a great deal of interest in *Beloved* and Morrison's other work or that recent criticism of Morrison's work has tended to be informed by a strong theoretical element. This section presents discussions of potential critical approaches to *Beloved* through the use of New Critical, psychoanalytic, Marxist, and feminist approaches. Multicultural criticism (perhaps the most obvious approach to *Beloved*) is not discussed per se, both because the applicability of multicultural criticism to Morrison's work is so obvious and because all of the discussions presented here are already informed by multicultural perspectives. Of course, other approaches could be used as well. For example, the issues of power and domination and the mixtures of different literary genres and modes that inform *Beloved* would be of great interest, respectively, to Foucauldian and Bakhtinian critics.
THE NEW CRITICISM

_Beloved_ is an extremely complex work of art that employs a number of sophisticated, self-conscious literary strategies. These strategies powerfully interact with the content of the book to make a statement about slavery and its effects; the impact of this statement potentially exceeds any that might be achieved through a direct "scientific" account of the historical facts. In the depiction of Schoolteacher's attempts to construct a scientific description of the behavior of slaves, Morrison suggests a direct relationship between scientific uses of language and the ideology of domination that made slavery possible. Morrison's own highly literary language then serves as a counter to the dehumanizing scientific discourse employed by Schoolteacher and his pupils.

In many ways, then, _Beloved_ seems ideally suited for analysis by the techniques of the New Criticism. Nevertheless Morrison's book directly challenges the most fundamental assumptions on which the New Critical approach is based. _Beloved_, whatever its formal brilliance, derives its power from the importance of its historical context and from its intense engagement with that context. Morrison's major project in the book is to provide reminders of the genuine horrors of slavery and of the immense human suffering that institution entailed. The significance of this project clearly cannot be appreciated by purely formalist analysis. Moreover Morrison's depiction of the human consequences of slavery radically undermines the New Critics' vision of the antebellum South as an idyllic paradise free of the alienation they associate with modern industrial capitalism.

Probably the most obvious literary strategy employed by Morrison in _Beloved_ occurs in the construction of the plot of the book. Following a distinction made by the Russian formalists, the New Critics emphasize that there is a strict difference between a story—as a sequence of events in chronological order—and a plot, which is the "structure of the action as presented" in a piece of fiction (Brooks and Warren 80). This presentation may involve a great deal of artistic intervention and restructuring of the action in nonsequential order. The fictional story of Sethe and her children is based on the real historical experiences of Margaret Garner, a slave who escaped from a Kentucky farm in 1856 and crossed the Ohio River to take refuge in Cincinnati. Recaptured there by slave hunters, Garner cut the throat of her young daughter to prevent the child from being returned to slavery. In transforming these events into fiction, Morrison changes a number of the details to enhance the impact of her narrative. Perhaps most important, she relates the story not in chronological sequence, as might a conventional historian, but in a highly complex and nonlinear form. The plot functions as a kind of puzzle, with bits and pieces of the story gradually falling into place as the reader makes her way through the book. Rather than present the narrative from the single objective point of view typical of most conventional histories, Morrison narrates different parts of the story from the perspectives of different characters, allowing readers better to appreciate the human dimension of the events she is describing rather than simply seeing them as a sequence of "facts."
Morrison's complex narrative can sometimes be disorienting, or even confusing, but even this confusion serves a positive function. Morrison herself has suggested that the sudden shifts and changes that her readers must negotiate are intended to give them something of the flavor of the experience of the original slaves, snatched from their homes in Africa and then transported inexplicably into slavery in America ("Unspeakable" 228). In addition, Morrison's disavowal of chronological sequence challenges the linear models of history typical of Western culture. In that sense, her plot structure clearly shows the influence of alternative cultural perspectives, including both African and African-American oral storytelling traditions.

Nonlinear plots are also typical of the modernist literature that was so central to the work of the New Critics. Such plots were often employed by modernist authors precisely as challenges to rational Western models of linear history. One of the most striking aspects of *Beloved* is its effective combination of elements and techniques from the African-American oral tradition and from European and American modernism. The plot of *Beloved*, which is revealed to readers in nonlinear fashion, is particularly reminiscent of the work of William Faulkner, whose technique is sometimes referred to as "plotting by discovery." Peter Brooks describes the plot of Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* (a text also very much concerned with both history and historiography) in a manner highly relevant to *Beloved*: "The novel becomes a kind of detective story where the object of investigation—the mystery—is the narrative design, or plot, itself" (294).

Morrison's echoes of European modernism (and especially of the white southerner Faulkner) may seem ironic, but it is not really surprising given that Morrison wrote her master's thesis at Cornell University on the work of Faulkner and Virginia Woolf. The complex plot structure of *Beloved* is also highly reminiscent of Robert Penn Warren's New Critical suggestion that a successful work of fiction should delay resolution of the plot as long as possible, gaining energy by forcing the reader to work through conflicts and contradictions to reach a final conclusion about the text. *Beloved* seems directly to verify the New Critical perception that an artistically constructed plot, with its various delays, digressions, and violations of chronological sequence, can ultimately make a far more powerful statement about human experience than can a mere retelling of facts in linear order.

In *Understanding Fiction*, Brooks and Warren (in typical New Critical fashion) insist on the importance of "the relation of plot to the resources of language which the writer uses" (84). Here again Morrison's text seems to respond well to New Critical analysis. She frequently uses figurative, connotative language, often taking particular advantage of the potential multiple meanings of language. For example, a key image that runs throughout the text is that of "possession," but Morrison carefully builds on the multiple meanings of this word. In *Beloved*, "possession" may mean ownership (especially the ownership of slaves), it may refer to the notion of possession by a ghost, or it may mean the kind of possession indicated by the term *self-possessed*, as in Baby Suggs's suggestion that white people simply "don't know when to stop" (104).
In a similar fashion, the last chapter of *Beloved* repeats three times the declaration that Beloved's story "was not a story to pass on" (274-275). At first glance, this declaration seems to mean that the story is too horrific to be retold, that Sethe, Paul D, Denver, and the others involved in it need to put it behind them once and for all to get on with their lives. Yet this meaning seems directly to contradict the whole project of Morrison's book, which is to assure that stories like this one are not forgotten. Moreover the triple repetition of this passage suggests that we should look at it with special care. A closer look reminds us that to "pass on" a story can also mean to decline to tell it or listen to: in short, to ignore it. The declaration can also mean that the story should not be allowed to expire or be forgotten because to "pass on" also means to die. Indeed early in the text Sethe suggests just this sort of meaning in relation to stories from the past when she tells her daughter Denver that some things from the past simply disappear from memory, or "pass on," while others can never be forgotten (35-36). The clear tension between the potential meanings of this final declaration—that Beloved's story should not be told and that it must be told—makes the declaration more powerful, even as it also evokes the entire history of slave narratives, which have traditionally revealed many of the conditions of slavery while repressing (through censorship, either overt or subtle) some of its more horrific aspects.

The impact of Morrison's text is often enhanced by literary uses of language that deviate significantly from ordinary "standard" language use. For example, Morrison often uses African-American dialects in depicting the speech of her African-American characters. She also links her narrative to African-American storytelling traditions through the use of colloquial language that flows in the text with oral, sometimes musical, rhythms. Numerous critics (Linda Krumholz, Ashraf H.A. Rushdy) have thus emphasized the importance of oral elements in the narration of *Beloved*. This technique is probably most obvious in the chapters directly narrated by the characters, as when Sethe begins her section: "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" (200). Similarly the later section narrated by Beloved, with its broken syntax and lack of punctuation, reflects through the texture of its language the agony and confusion of the slave experience of which Beloved is an allegorical marker (210-213).

For the New Critics, metaphor is a crucial element of literary language, just as for the Russian formalists the use of striking metaphors can be an effective technique of defamiliarization. But one of Morrison's more interesting linguistic strategies involves a defamiliarization of metaphor itself. She sometimes reverses the normal relationship between literal and figurative language in *Beloved* when she employs in a literal sense words or expressions that are normally used metaphorically. For example, in the first encounter between Paul D and Sethe, he tenderly cups her breasts from behind, giving her a feeling of relief that, for once, "the responsibility for her breasts... was in somebody else's hands." She thus feels relieved of the "weight" of her breasts (18). Here both the phrase *in somebody else's hands* and the phrase *relieved of the weight* would normally
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In such passages, Morrison renews worn and clichéd metaphors by causing us to look at them in new and different ways—as Jean Wyatt puts it, to do a "double take" (478). In this sense, Morrison's innovative play with the tension between metaphorical and literal language corresponds closely to the kinds of techniques typically privileged by the New Critics. Also of particular interest from a New Critical perspective is the way Morrison directly opposes the literary language of her text to the language of science. Schoolteacher's brutal humiliation of the slaves in his charge is presented very much as a matter of language, the notebooks in which he records his observations about slave behavior serving as a central image of his domination of the slaves. Schoolteacher himself is very well aware that his control of language and its "proper" use is a key to his control of the slaves on Sweet Home Farm. Thus Sethe, who had personally made the ink used by Schoolteacher for his notes, directly identifies his notetaking as a central element of his brutality. "I made the ink," she tells Paul D in their crucial encounter at the end of the book. "He couldn't have done it if I hadn't made the ink" (271). In a key scene, the slave Sico cleverly defends his theft of a pig from the farm on the grounds that he needed the meat for his nutrition and therefore for the improvement of Schoolteacher's property, thus echoing an episode in Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass in which a slave wins emancipation by successfully defeating his master's argument for slavery (83). But in Beloved, freedom is not so easily won: Schoolteacher beats Sico anyway, as a reminder that "definitions belonged to the definers—not the defined" (190). In response, the defiant Sico turns away from the use of English altogether, refusing to endorse the language of his white masters.

Given the close New Critical association between science and modern industrial capitalism, we could read Schoolteacher's function as a New Critical allegory of southern history. From this point of view, Sweet Home Farm could be read as a utopian image of southern agrarian culture of the kind celebrated by the New Critics in their Southern Agrarian phase. Schoolteacher's arrival then brings science and modernization to the farm, bringing misery to the inhabitants. He disrupts the utopian setting of Sweet Home Farm much as (according to the New Critics) the coming of science and modern capitalism after the Civil War brought about the decline of traditional agrarian culture in the South. It is also clear that Morrison regards Schoolteacher not as the antithesis of the attitudes of the antebellum South but as their quintessential representative, and the overall thrust of the book provides a powerful rejoinder to the historical vision typical of the New Critics.
Morrison's opposition of metaphorical to literal language is central to the political oppositions that inform her book, something the New Critics could well appreciate. But for Morrison, this opposition has powerful political implications that contrast sharply with the political predilections of the New Critics. In particular, *Beloved* does not oppose the domineering language of science and modern capitalism to the more poetic and genteel language of traditional southern culture. These two poles are collapsed into one, submerged under the general category of white male Western culture, which is then opposed in her more rhythmic and flexible language to alternative cultural perspectives associated with African and African-American cultures and with the particular perspectives of women within those cultures. And Morrison's choice of the opposition between literal and figurative language as the grounds on which to stage this confrontation is highly appropriate.

As Eric Cheyfitz points out, the opposition between literal and metaphorical language was quite central to the ideology of early European colonial expansion in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries—and of American slavery up until the Civil War. Cheyfitz observes that the notion of the literal in that ideology privileges the written (European culture) over the oral cultures of Native Americans and Africans. Cheyfitz echoes Morrison's strategy of literalizing conventional metaphors when he argues that the literal and metaphorical poles of language cannot be separated and that one continually tends to spill over into the other. He also emphasizes that in the ideology of slavery and of colonial domination these poles were kept strictly separate, with clear cultural and political implications. Cheyfitz discusses the 1845 *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* to note how this opposition between linguistic poles functioned as a technique of domination of black American slaves: "The literal and the figurative aspects of language become hierarchized into absolute and oppositional entities, with the masters occupying the territory of the literal or proper and consigning the slaves to that of the figurative" (39). By challenging the strict polar opposition between metaphorical and literal language, and by using conventional metaphors to produce literal meanings, Morrison breaks out of the linguistic territory traditionally assigned to slaves and launches a direct assault on the linguistic domain of their white male masters.

In the final analysis, *Beloved* provides an emphatic rejoinder to the New Critical notion that genuine art must be informed by an "ironical ambivalence," that in the world of such art there is "neither black nor white, neither right nor wrong which can be defined with absolute certainty" (Brooks and Warren xviii-xix). Interestingly, Cleanth Brooks and Robert Penn Warren follow this call for ambivalence with reminders that in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, an important antislavery text, one of the most reprehensible characters is Simon Legree, "a Yankee," and that what they regard as the greatest brutality in Ernest Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls* is committed not by fascist forces against the leftist loyalists but vice versa. Brooks and Warren characterize these examples as instances of irony that intensify the conflicts portrayed by Stowe and Hemingway, but these critics are also betraying their own political prejudices, which require
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But the examples provided by Brooks and Warren are themselves highly ironic, given that they call attention to American slavery and European fascism, probably the two most forceful historical arguments against the southern conservative ideology of the New Criticism. Of all the events in history, these two examples are among those in which the distinction between moral right and wrong is most clearly defined. For the millions of Jews (and numerous other "marginal" peoples) exterminated in the Nazi concentration camps and for the tens of millions of black Africans who died miserably on slave ships or who experienced, along with their descendants, almost unthinkable suffering and degradation as slaves in America, the New Critical argument against clear delineation of right and wrong in art rings hollow indeed. Beloved makes a powerful and unambiguous moral statement about the evils of slavery, even as it demonstrates (contrary to the arguments of the New Critics) that literature with such a clear moral and political message need not be simplistic or formulaic.

Works Cited


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PSYCHOANALYTIC CRITICISM

Beloved deals more directly with the public world of politics and history than with the private world of individual psychology. Nevertheless one of the book's major points is that these two worlds are not necessarily separate. Morrison