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April 13, 2026

Toni Morrison Asks the Question—How Will You Survive?

Scholars and critics have claimed that Toni Morrison is writing in an epic tradition (African, Greek, etc.). My view is that she is writing anti-epics, borrowing from the tradition, but bringing new voices and points of view forward. Does it matter if we consider her work from the place of epics? Does it change how we see it? How does magical realism fit into her stories? How does gender, age, class and race seep into the narrative? Are the themes of Milton: the fall, demons in the garden or women falling prey to evil, present in *Beloved*?

To explore these questions, we must consider the nature of epic. From a European perspective, Spenser, Milton and the anonymous poet(s) who wrote *Beowulf*, wrote epics in the form, content and thrust (big battles, long time span, heroic deeds, moralizing, etc.). Spenser was writing an ode or tribute to Queen Elizabeth. As a painter might do a portrait for a royal, Spenser was writing an epic poem. Milton intentionally left interpretation open as a hallmark of his epic voice; here, I do see a correlation with Morrison. In *Beowulf*, we get heroics, saga, tribalism, the rise and fall of kingdoms. There is often a virtuous and warding (who or what must be kept away?) aspect to epics. In Spenser's case, we also have dozens of characters introduced.

Morrison gives us the opposite of many of the items above (although warding is certainly in her work—Sethe and Sula are held at bay by the community): immoral at times, certainly no odes to royalty here, anti-heroes. I do, however, see tribalism in the way she portrays community. To build on this anti-epic idea, in *The Bluest Eye*, Cholly goes searching for his father in Georgia. We have a more modern epic voyage where he travels by bus and walks, eventually reaching the town where he thinks his dad lives. But, it's anti-climactic to say the least. The father rejects him and Cholly ends up on the side of a river wondering what to do next, flattened by his father's harsh mood towards him.

In some ways, scenes like this make one wonder if Morrison is attempting to show us the other side of epic, that is: the housekeepers, lost children (Sethe's two boys run away early in *Beloved*; in fact, everyone seems to be running all of the time in this narrative), escapees of slavery, communities desperately trying to join together with so many forces tearing them apart. No princesses or fairies or dragons or knights here, but there are monsters—primarily the white man. The evil here is of our own making; the garden is being turned into hell. Morrison does use magical realism, most saliently with the ghost of Beloved.

As an aside, when Ursula LeGuin was asked why she writes sci-fi/fantasy, she said, [paraphrased quote] that she needed those tools. I have to believe Morrison would answer similarly. She needed the tool of magical realism in order to bring her themes and story forward in *Beloved* in an impactful way. If the child had been introduced perhaps through Sethe's dreams, the haunting feeling would not have been established as strongly. As a ghost, Beloved takes possession of Sethe while simultaneously becoming a sister to

Denver. Denver tells Beloved, “Don’t go back.” (Beloved 123) The possession and sisterhood are powerful aspects of the book.

Although it’s hard to know which epics influenced Morrison (her interviews give some clue), she was a scholar, so we can assume a high level of awareness. Certainly, the Greek tragedy where family members attack one another is buried in her work (e.g. Eva Peace lighting Plum on fire in *Sula*, Sethe attacking her infant, etc.).

However, there is pride in the traditional epic: conquering evil and reigning triumphant (even when Beowulf is killed at the end, the dragon has still been slain!). Whereas in *Beloved*, Morrison represents shame, an unwanted part of our history, something that we can’t seem to reconcile, that we would rather cover-up, internalized self-hatred. Morrison’s message, certainly in *Bluest Eye*, but also other works, is one of self-love to little black girls. It’s as if the characters must get through the shame (Paul D. in the slavers crate, the candy store shopkeeper who looks through Pecola in *Bluest Eye*) in order to arrive at self-love.

Feelings of inferiority and of being stalked permeate throughout *Beloved*. There is danger everywhere. Even in the free black community where Sethe lands at Baby Suggs’ house (“124”) in Cincinnati, it’s not safe. When the sheriff and schoolteacher come to reclaim their slaves, the pivotal event of the book begins. Where are the heroics? Where is the saga? Where is the multi-generational story that we so often get with epics?

The answers seem to come with Denver, who comes of age during the novel, and becomes the hero, but in a different sort of way. Denver’s loneliness is heartbreaking: her

brothers gone; Baby Suggs dead; never leaves the house until the end; fear of Sethe.

Although Stamp Paid refers to 124 as a house of voices, it is Denver's isolation that we feel so starkly in a Bell Jar manner. Baby Suggs' ghost, who kept Denver company, is driven out by Paul D early on. Although Beloved becomes the sister she never had, Beloved is a possessing spirit, who wants to takeover Sethe's body and turn Sethe into the child. The community finally stands up for Sethe at the end, extricating, dispossessing the spirit in an exorcism.

There are other heroes, too. Stamp Paid is heroic in his turning the Ohio River into a kind of underground railroad where he scoops up slaves -- running and swimming for their lives -- into his boat and saves them. There is charity along the way in the form of Amy Denver, a white woman, an indentured servant herself, heading to Boston to find velvet, who helps deliver Sethe's baby who she then aptly names Denver. And, Sixo is heroic in his defiance of the slavers; despite his demise, he has preserved his legacy with the 30-mile woman who escapes pregnant, so Sixo laughs at death.

This notion of legacy is an important one for Morrison, and is part of what brings her into the epic tradition in some fashion. Morrison explores backstories and jumps time with a fragmented narrative that we piece together along the way. On a personal note, I remember reading *Song of Solomon* some years ago and not being able to relate, especially regarding Milkman's desperate search for gold. When I interrogated this, within myself, I found my disconnect was partly related to understanding legacy. My white middle-class upbringing was getting in the way of seeing that life after slavery basically equated to black poverty and no legacy. This dream of gold, also found in *A Raisin in the*

Sun, speaks to how blacks were considered 3/5 human, post-slavery, and often came north with nothing. We see this in *Beloved* (and Morrison's other books) where the women are always working, doing chores and never rest. Gold. A child. To finally have some security, some sense of the future. These are psychological aspects of the black experience in the late 1800s.

From a feminist point of view on epics, one might say that while the men are off fighting dragons and talking to angels, the women are toiling in the garden or the kitchen or taking care of the children. Here, a very interesting analogy related to feelings of inferiority cropped up in *Beloved*. Sethe speaks of tying a rope around the ankle of her child because there are threats everywhere. There's a well and a fire in the yard. This idea of putting a leash on a child makes them dog-like and this analogy is carried on (along with the hummingbird one) throughout the book.

Slaves were constantly reminded of their inferiority directly and subtly; and children are often unseen. Although the belittling is of a different brand now, it still goes on, cloaked in policy statements and the disguised language of oppression. Blacks and women are closer to nature and the animal; whites are closer to royalty and the heavens.

It's hard to face these aspects of our history, to take responsibility for them; perhaps that was part of my own initial alienation from Morrison's work. It's hard to consider the evil that our society was built on. It's difficult to really grasp the long-term psychological impacts of slavery. We tend to think of slavery in the abstract, for those of us who never

directly experienced a human market, the checking of teeth. Morrison makes this concrete and shows us the many shades of slavery from pure evil to benevolent slavers.

The Garners, for instance, were the “good” slavers—of course, they were still slavers. There were the truly sadistic slavers. There was a whole system of broken love and intermingled procreation, of rape, of breeding labor for the fields, which the book speaks directly to. Sethe is valuable to the slave market as a producer, a breeder of children and she knows this. But she rejects that role even if it involves committing infanticide. She rejects the legacy of slavery.

Women can create; they can heal; they can come together in solidarity; they can blend with nature like Eve in the garden. These things make them dangerous to an extent, make them seen. These are epic struggles: Against women, against the ungodly and against one’s self. Sethe is truly at war with herself; Sethe was living in the past. She had all but given up until Paul D. enters the picture and reminds her of love.

Naturally, Beloved is at odds with Paul D. because both want to possess Sethe in different ways. Beloved has no fingerprints and she can disappear: “The room is just as it was when they entered—except Beloved is not there.” (Beloved 122) Beloved comes from the river with no memory. She has a scar on her neck from when Sethe murdered her. Beloved wants the childhood that was stolen from her; she wants Denver as her sister and Sethe as her mom; she wants to be free and at home. These are things she can never have because the past must stay in the past as the community explains.

This tension between how much to remember or to forget is key to *Beloved* and other epics. For instance, in Milton's *Paradise Lost*, Eve wonders about her past and future. Adam is living in the moment. His view is straightforward—follow the word of God, be content. Although we see a bit of curiosity from Adam in his discussion with Raphael, basically Adam is an open book. Whereas Eve, is introspective, most notably during the reflection scene. She is willing to listen to the voices of the garden, the snake, the plants. She is willing to cast off into a new future.

Do we accept evil? Are we beasts? The references to walking on all fours versus two or Baby Suggs on three legs, speaks to these questions of humanity. Paul D is being forced to “sleep in a cellar like a dog.” (*Beloved* 186) Do we use evil to fight evil? These are open questions in *Beloved*. Sin, Satan's daughter, is half snake, half woman. We have Medusa from the Greek epics. In a contemporary sense, we have Mrs. Garner telling Sethe that she has lice in her hair. Morrison tells us of “vines of hair twisted all over [Sethe's] head,” (*Beloved* 261) as well as a “naked woman with fish for hair.” (*Beloved* 267) Woman, nature and creation. Morrison is tapping into feminine powers.

Related to this connection to nature, women seem to have a connection to the spirit world. It is a group of maybe 30 women who extirpate *Beloved* at the end and free Sethe. They use prayer and the word of God, similar to what we saw in *Beowulf* where he could only defeat Grendel's mother with the help of God. *Beowulf* uses a giant's sword to deal the final blow.

Was Grendel a beast, a giant? Was Grendel's mother an underwater beast, an underwater giant? What is the connection to water? Is it linked to childbearing, the breaking of the water? The water that Stamp Paid fishes the slaves from? The water that Beloved emerges from? The whirlpool at Mrs. Breedlove's foot in *Bluest Eye*?

The mermaid of Greek mythology began as half bird, half woman then became half fish, half woman. This is interesting given the many references to birds in *Beloved*. To connect this to Beowulf, it is his swimming ability that is challenged in the mead hall. Will Beowulf be able to traverse the watery depths to win this battle? seems to be the question. Will men be able to shape the world, create safety, conquer the beasts (perhaps including nature and woman) that lurk in the night?

Aside from magical realism, Morrison employs a magical point of view, especially regarding her child characters. Unschooled in science as of yet, and not fully understanding cause and effect, children make up their own realities. In many cases, they create the reality that they would prefer. Some of it involves wishes: if only the world were like this... *if I had blue eyes, I would be beautiful*. If cats could drive, it would be fun, and so on. Morrison's writing gives us a dose of realism with this because it is true to life.

A particularly poignant analogy, which is also a kind of reference to magic, comes when Beloved says she is like the lights coming through the cracks of the shed. "I am like this," (Beloved 124) she says, in one of the most powerful lines of the book in my opinion. Children want to be seen, yet, so often, they are ignored or discounted or talked-over or

told to go away. Denver and Beloved are desperately trying to break through in this story, to become themselves.

How will they do it? Morrison only partly answers this question. She decenters men from the grand narrative in this anti-epic. The central characters here are all women. It's as if Morrison is saying: *Well, that is how African Americans and women and children feel reading these epics of old about European male heroes. We haven't been able to relate for years! This is what it's like.*

I appreciate that message. The tension between portraying what's real versus what is sought, comes through in fiction in so many forms. As an aside, on TV, we portrayed the Huxtables and Arnold and the Prince of Bel-Air because it was aspirational, I guess. Black people who are rich, doing well in America; it sat well with white America. But then, the reality for so many was the ghetto and 3/5 human. Was it escapism? What was it?

Morrison is the antithesis to this TV portrayal of blacks, women and youth. She tells us in excruciating detail the many nuanced aspects of slavery from objectification to forcibly pushing Africans onto ships where many drowned in chains, to rape and having your master's child, to being pushed into boxes during floods and made to wear a metal bit in one's mouth, to working the fields until your body breaks. How did we survive? she asks, again and again, how?

Suggs is almost worshipped as a moral and spiritual voice in *Beloved*. She is a survivor. She found a way to survive despite all odds. Sixo is in the same category. Defy the slavers. Go out screaming. Kill your children if you have to; if it will make you free.

Denver is finding her own voice, her own way in this confusing world. She is scared of what Sethe is capable of; she is conflicted about Beloved because she loves having a sister, but sees how she drains Sethe's energy while casting Paul D. out. Denver wants to work; she wants community. She wants to quiet the voices in the house, the voices of the past, and to live, not in fear. She wants a full home, not an empty shell filled with terror.

What's getting in the way is a psychosis brought on by slavery. This is described in animal terms. Sethe's head feels like "little hummingbirds [are sticking] their needle beaks right through..." (Beloved 163) Then, Sethe has a beak, "... snatching up her children like a hawk on the wing; how her face beaked, how her hands worked like claws..." (Beloved 157) "Sethe rose to her hands and knees." (Beloved 175) And Baby Suggs "rested her hip" (Beloved 179), the hip that causes her to hobble. Baby Suggs smells the air when the slavers are coming, which is also very animalistic. The language and metaphors take us to the female protector; the broken worker; the constant nagging of things for attention.

On page 180 of *Beloved*, Paid refers to Suggs as a mountain with him as the sky. Paid thinks he sees a cardinal feather, but it's actually a red ribbon that had been tied to the scalp of a dead slave girl in the river. Sethe talks about being "divided back into plant life." (Beloved 188) Later, Morrison tells us, "under every dark skin is a jungle," (Beloved 198) a direct reference to the turmoil whites created in the soul of Africans in their quest for free labor after the Native Americans were dispatched with.

Morrison's choice of main characters who are cast out women seeking redemption is of note—both Sula and Sethe fit this description. Morrison gives an intricate look at what

caused the women to fall in the first place. In *Paradise Lost*, some say Eve's ambition brought the fall while others say it was her desire to be closer to god, god-like, to know more. When Adam and Raphael have their talk, Raphael is constantly remarking that he will *try* to explain, but he doesn't have the human words to tell Adam the truth about the angels, the cosmos or man's place in it.

I mention this because epics really are trying to grasp at something larger than ourselves. Morrison takes a look inward while other epic writers seem to be pushing outwards. Morrison exchanges magic for magical realism and gives the point of view of the other—the victims. She asks the questions that others shy away from, or, in our modern society, that others would try to cover-up or portray aspirationally.

Rebellion is costly against a patriarchal system; Sixo tells us this. Many voices and people and experiences have been left out of history and epics. The value of human life comes in shades.

What would people do if they could get away with it? What would they do without laws or rules or punishment? How would you survive in a world that has turned against you? Have you been left out of the grand stories?

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