

The Water Imagery in Toni Morrison's Beloved

Kikuko MORITA *

The collective downfall depicted toward the end of Beloved (1987) illustrates the novel's most controversial issue of the reconciliation of the past and the present. Similarly, the flood occurring in the tunnel toward the end of Sula (1973) symbolically destroys and reconstructs the value of the community, inducing the meaning of the past for Nell. As Maxine Lavon Montgomery points out, this sense of ending enables the possibility of returning to "the beginning of life, one's origins, and reveals an awareness of a romantic past separate and distinct from the harsh reality of Western society"(135). Similarly, the motif of returning to the beginning seen in Beloved is closely related to the image of water, as both destructions are exacted by the apocalyptic power of water imaginatively associative of birth, death, and rebirth. Actually, in Beloved the circular narrative structure begins and ends with the stream where Beloved emerges and disappears. This stream running behind 124 Bluestone Road assumes the nature of a larger body of water, principally, the Ohio River and the ocean lying between Africa and America. The all-encompassing water imagery both literally and illuminatingly accentuates the moments when the past intrudes into the present and validates the healing process of a slave woman, Sethe.

Although Morrison's ethical perspective toward the mainstream of American literary history bears a strong sense of criticizing its treatment of Africanism¹, in the novel the author declines to romanticize the privilege of being black, instead bestowing the victims of slavery with a capability to assume responsibility for sustaining human nature, which is a perpetual drive of seeking for freedom to choose. The only difference is that African Americans have been burdened with a peculiar sensation of double consciousness to see one's self through the eyes of the others (DuBois 8). It is in this native skepticism in retaining true self-consciousness that Morrison reveals the novel's focal point: Sethe's commitment of infanticide to "save" the spirit of her baby girl from the hands of whitefolks. While the narrative gradually and subtly builds up a certain level of uneasiness, an enigma is disclosed: why Sethe, a representative of victimized people, is emotionally callous against the physical and psychological retaliation apparently exacted by both the spirit of the murdered

*外国語教室・非常勤講師 (Department of Foreign Languages)

"crawling already baby" and Beloved, the fleshed spirit, whereas Denver and Paul D react against the supernatural being with their own needs and their feeling of disgust. Guilt-ridden Sethe has turned inward, loaded with the past, and thus losing a vital interest in the future.

Within a psychological framework, facing the embodiment of one's own remorse is analogous to the process of undergoing the experience of immersing oneself into the realm of the unconscious. As a literal manifestation of the unconscious, water images appearing in the novel symbolically delineate a state of chaos, the divided self, and the inner potential of achieving wholeness. Through her reflection of the adversity of the Middle Passage, Beloved reveals in her stream-of-consciousness-like soliloquy that it is in the depth of darkness of the sea filled with dead bodies where she deplores her own severed psyche, seeking for a "hot thing," the hope of being united with her mother. The bridge under which Beloved rests herself after traveling all the way from the ocean through the Ohio River to the small steam running behind 124 is metaphoric of Beloved herself, who is a mediator between world of the dead and the living and the past and the present: Elizabeth B. House notes, "Several American Indian groups believed that the dead souls of their relatives returned to earth in the form of water turtles" (26). As Beloved is in fact attributed to water turtles (129,165,262), their "chewing and swallowing laughter" is an outcry of the dead; and only through Beloved would their wish to be healed be consummated.

Thus bearing the aspect of the psychological wilderness, water serves as a metaphor for the trials and suffering of Sethe, beginning with a stage of birth. The novel introduces the emergence of Beloved in this mythic dimension. As an agent of water, Beloved reminds Sethe of her wretched suffering in giving birth to Denver, Beloved's sister, along the trail in the woods. In the novel's present Sethe is unable to hold the uncontrollable desire to "water" upon seeing the young slender woman of exhaustion: "The water she voided was endless. Like a horse, she thought, but as it went on and on she thought, No, more like flooding the boat when Denver was born" (63). As some critics notice², the Ohio River into which Sethe's water merges (102) serves as a boundary between slavery and freedom, innocence and experience; right after Sethe and the new-born baby succeed in crossing the river into the free state of Ohio from Kentucky, the state of slavery, her journey to freedom sets in; it is a state which metaphorically marks the stage of infancy.

The psychological equivalence of the state of birth can be seen in the hypocritical lives on the plantation, Sweet Home. Located in the slave state of Kentucky, south of the Ohio River, Sweet Home is evocative of an Edenic garden, the facade of which is blinded by the deceptiveness of innocence. As Terry Otten points out, Morrison "transforms the orthodox garden in the conventional fall myth into settings that describe or caricature the

white-constructed world where black characters are physically or psychologically bound and maimed" (96). Slaves in the beguiling garden appear to be treated respectfully: regarding them as paid laborers, Mr. Garner, for example, allows Halle to purchase freedom for his hip-bone-broken mother; and this is a situation which provokes a certain amount of anger and disharmony from neighboring slave owners. When Sethe chooses Halle for her husband and asks Mrs. Garner for a wedding ceremony, the mistress allows Sethe to make a wedding dress and presents a pair of diamond earrings at that. The ensuing ritual of their mating in the "loose and free" corn field is evocative of sorrow resulting from the luxuriousness of human senses filled with lust, ecstasy, love, and jealous admiration: "He [Paul D], Sixo and both of the Pauls sat under Brother [a magnificent tree which grants them a fraternal bond] pouring water from a gourd over their heads, and through eyes streaming with well water, they watched the confusion of tassels in the field below. It had been hard, hard, hard sitting there erect as dogs, watching corn stalks dance at noon" (33-34).

The naiveté and undeveloped sentiment depicted in the lives of slaves in Sweet Home can still be traced in the relationship between Sethe and Paul D, even after the eighteen years of hardship for both of them: the years of remorse, forgetfulness, occasional recollections of Sethe's past's misery, signaled by the baby ghost; the years of suffering and the long lost faith symbolized by the tobacco tin buried in Paul D's chest. As Sethe's anima ("Her story is bearable because it was his as well--to tell, to refine and tell again" 121), Paul D initiates Sethe's healing process, thereby sustaining a moral as well as social function. By exorcising the spirit of the baby ghost and taking Sethe and Denver to the carnival in celebration, he actively performs as a husband, father, and member of black community. In this role Paul D's presumed superiority to Sethe allows him to blame her in a subtle and manipulative manner: by disclosing the appalling fact that Halle, Sethe's husband, become insane when witnessing the humiliating scene where Sethe was raped "like a cow"--which is why he failed to join her in escaping from Sweet Home--, Paul D implies that it is her fault to have been treated as a subhuman. His perfectly excusable explanation is too morally honest to withstand:

"Did you speak to him? Didn't you say anything to him? Something!"

"I couldn't, Sethe. I just...couldn't."

"Why!"

"I had a bit in my mouth." (86)

At the end of part one, when he comes to notice that the photo of an accused in the newspaper clipping Stamp Paid shows him is Sethe herself, Paul D becomes more vocal and

less able to withhold moral judgment about what she has done to her "crawling-already baby." Applying animal traits to her, Paul D accuses Sethe of being obsessed with "too-thick love," and thus reveals an attitude ironically similar to that of the schoolteacher and his nephews, who list her "animal" traits: Paul D says, "You got two feet, Sethe, not four" (202). Like Sethe, who cherishes her own freedom "to get a place where you could love anything you chose" (199), Paul D, inspired with the same desire, reveals himself as still yielding to the psychological garden of ignorance and limitation.

Playing the role of replacement of Paul D, who has attempted to create a social unity with Sethe and Denver, Beloved, on the other hand, leads them to the world of the drowned people whose unconsummated desire for freedom is projected onto the idyllic past, as they symbolically descend through water and darkness. The repetition of the phrase, "Nobody saw them falling [into such a realm]" (213-14) when skating on the ice is effective in terms of regarding Beloved as a precursor of the dead.

At this point in the novel, water contributes to sustain the aspect of double-edgedness: consuming and regenerative. This water's contradictory power is epitomized by Paul D's escape from the abysmal plantation in Alfred, Georgia, which was a deadly enterprise against which justice is exacted by the destructive and redemptive power of the flood which delivers slave workers and essentially breaks the buried box where they are detained. The analogy of water's redemptive and destructive power illuminates further the nature of Beloved who is an embodiment of evil and at the same time a Christ figure: when Ella criticizes the intrusion of unearthly Beloved into the corporeal world, saying "You [Stamp Paid] know as well as I do that people who die bad don't stay in the ground"(231), Stamp Paid, not denying Ella's comment, recollects the ambiguous nature of Christ: "Jesus Christ Himself didn't" (231).

Beloved is also Sethe's shadow and first leads her to the awareness of the fact that she is imbedded in the painful tradition of their maternal line by asking about her diamond earrings which Beloved is not supposed to know about³. Beloved reminds Sethe of the brutal reality that she is not only one who is destined to discard the object of one's own love. The ultimate escape for both Sethe and her mother from being victimized by slavery is to kill their babies: Sethe's mother throws them all away from the slaveship into the sea except Sethe as they the products of rape by white slavers; Sethe cuts Beloved's throat. The narrative further reveals Sethe and her daughter, Beloved, are identical in a sense that they are both motherless. The fatal scar on Beloved's neck is therefore symbolic of the mark of a vicarious desire of the unmothered Sethe's longing even for the stigma of slavery, i.e., the circled cross on the right on Sethe's mother's rib: Sethe says to her mother, "How will you

know me? Mark me, too" (76).

Later, *Beloved* devours Sethe's psyche in an act of revenge for "the hand saw," Sethe's pride, by which *Beloved* was killed. After Paul D's desertion, Sethe becomes degenerate, parasitic to *Beloved*. She even yields herself to continue her symbiotic reliance on *Beloved* to the extent that she abandons the actual way to earn her livelihood: "It was as though Sethe didn't really want forgiveness given; she wanted it refused. And *Beloved* helped her out" (310). At this point *Beloved* takes on a destructive mother figure controlling Sethe. She and *Beloved* compensate to each other to create an archetypal mother who, on one hand, is unconditionally giving (Sethe); and, on the other, is unconditionally predatory (*Beloved*). The process of Sethe's downfall parallels that of *Beloved*'s physical development. Secluding herself with *Beloved* and Denver in the literal ghost house, Sethe gradually becomes tired and withered, while on the other hand, the emotionally two-year-old, slender girl with the flawless baby skin grows into a beautiful pregnant woman, which is a symbolic manifestation of *Beloved*'s revengeful absorption of her mother.

The evil aspect of *Beloved* is underscored by her relationship with Baby Suggs, Paul D, and Denver. Before associating with flesh, the spirit of *Beloved* affects a great influence on Baby Suggs, a clairvoyant and spiritual leader of the black community. As an unchurched preacher, Baby Suggs assumes the pains of the townsfolk and grants them the power of a self-reliant, self-loving perspective, thereby sacrificing her own heart, the last and only part of her body, the rest of which has been destroyed by slavery. Her peculiar inclination to any of the colors except red, which occurs immediately after the Misery until her deathbed, explains her ultimate rejection of herself and human hope, because the redness of the heart is reminiscent of the moment of the loss of her belief in the affirmation of life (247). Paul D, capable of sensing some malevolence in *Beloved* and thus conducting a second attempt of exorcism, becomes instead victimized being literally chased away from 124. *Beloved*'s sexual intrusion emasculates Paul D; harshly damaged, he demands as compensation the reinforcement of a spiritual tie with Sethe, asking her to give birth to baby for him. Similarly, Denver becomes assured that Sethe might kill her as well in order to protect her from slavecatchers when *Beloved*'s parasitic preoccupation of Sethe becomes more obvious; Denver therefore tries to make her sisterhood with *Beloved* even more dependable and stabilized. The blood of *Beloved* that Denver swallows right along with her mother's milk emphasizes her bizarre and unnatural relationship with *Beloved*.

The possibility of the venomous and malevolent invasion of *Beloved* into the communal mind as such has been already foreshadowed by Sethe's inclination to become indifferent toward the community's benevolent treatment of her. While Sethe is under detention, they

petition that she be exempted from the death sentence, which is granted. Mr. Bodwin, an abolitionist, provides a restaurant job so she will not be engaged in prostitution. However, Sethe cannot accept these fortunate circumstances, shrewdly sensing her own incapacity to face the meaning of Beloved's death.

Later, Sethe denies Stamp Paid's right to go in the self-closing 124. As the name suggests, Stamp Paid lives in service to the community in order to repay his psychological debt of offering his wife to his master's son by saving the lives of colored people. It is his desperate feeling in need of charity that makes him save the lives of Sethe and Denver; first when he is fishing in the Ohio River; second when Sethe is about to kill the second child: "Sethe, you take my armload [of blackberries] and gimme yours [Denver]" (186). His later act of showing Paul D the newspaper of Sethe reveals that his inclination to generosity results from his own selfish wish to justify his deed by disclosing the secret of Sethe. However, his inclination to a linear solution based on his cause-and-effect perspective is not at all effective when relating to Sethe.

It is essentially Beloved who atones for the abuse of the fallen community, coercing them to recollect a forgotten past which they yearn for. Eighteen years ago, they demonstrated their meanness by refusing to inform Sethe and Baby Suggs about the coming of the slavecatchers because of their disapproval of the copiousness of the feast Baby Suggs offered. In the novel's present, their cruelty has been purged. When they approach to exorcise Beloved in the yard of 124, where Denver is sitting on the porch waiting for Mr. Bodwin to take her to his home for work, without envy they "saw" themselves, not her, in a vivid recollection of the festivity:

Younger, stronger, even as little girls lying in the grass asleep. Catfish was popping grease in the pan and they saw themselves scoop German potato salad onto the plate. Cobbler oozing purple syrup colored their teeth. They sat on the porch, ran down to the creek, teased the men, hoisted children on their hips or, if they were children, straddled the ankles of old men who held their little hands while giving them a horsey ride. Baby Suggs laughed and skipped among them, urging more. (317)

The image of the festive gathering is reminiscent of Baby Suggs's affirmation of the human heart sublimated in her teaching in the clearing. Furthermore, this image of bountifulness and beatitude extends to the romantic past of the motherland of Africa.

Beloved then conjures an apocalypse, leading both Sethe and the neighborhood women to the experience of alienation and redemption. The ominous approach of Mr. Bodwin assumes the exact moment of that of Schoolteacher. Whereas she had once turned inward, acting upon naive and prideful resolve to acquire freedom against the brutality of slavery

epitomized in Schoolteacher, this time Sethe turns outward, attempting to murder Mr. Bodwin at all costs. And it is an act which requires self-sacrifice. The subsequent precipitation into which Sethe acquiesces herself, assisted with the mass of the women, severs the symbiotic tie with Beloved, and assumes a tableau in which the ghostly hierarchy of slavery long shattered in the collective memory of the uncelebrated survivors of the ruthless system now reappears: "Now she is running into the faces of the people out there, joining them and leaving Beloved behind. Alone. Again. Then Denver, running too. Away from her to the pile of people out there. They make a hill. A hill of black people, falling. And above them all, rising from his place with a whip in his hand, the man without skin, looking. He is looking at her" (322).

Sethe's transcendence occurs in the baptismal element of water. The breaking of such an hierarchical hill of slavery is all the more illuminative of the slaveship disaster when Beloved's mother abandons her by throwing herself into the sea where the pile of dead people are floating, so huge an amount that they break up the hill of the dead bodies previously discarded (261-62). This is a reversal of Seth's "flying" into Mr. Bodwin in attempting to kill him: the experience of the decent into the darkness of the unconscious, a process which is heralded by the primeval, mythic voice of the black women: "They stopped praying and took a step back to the beginning. In the beginning there were no words. In the beginning was the sound, and they all knew what that sound sounded like" (318). The image of attaining oneness by engaging with water in the realm of darkness, it seems, resembles a return to the womb, a harrowing journey to resurrection.

The sense of returning to the beginning is symbolized as well by the idea of primitivism, as personified by Sixo. As Linda Krumholz argues, with the image of a heroic slave resisting slavery to his dying breath Sixo serves a trickster figure: "One basic function of the trickster as a deconstructor is to bring about role reversals in which a weaker animal or character outwits and outtalks a more powerful one--although the trickster's success is never guaranteed" (401). Replacing the concept of stealing with that of "improving your [schoolteacher's] property"--which ironically tells of the truth--, Sixo defies being categorized by the socioeconomic value which requires "definitions belonged to the definers--not the defined" (234). Later in the stampede from Sweet Home, this value of white society reveals the brutal reality that Sixo is nothing when valued as merchandised goods. Choosing to act insane and therefore to be exempted from being stigmatized by way of dying in the fire of redemption, he is capable of sustaining his grace and the spiritual virtue of Africanism.

It is due to this ancestral nature of Sixo that Paul D come to reconcile with his soul

mate, Sethe. As a spiritual mentor⁴, Sixo affects the defense mechanism of Paul D, making him feel ashamed of having been righteous about what he has done (328). His love toward Sethe turns out to be a little like "a tree, of course, but not like Brother [with which Sixo feels affinity]--old, wide and beckoning" (272). He also guides Paul D to awareness of the fact that without a soul mate, one cannot reach the state of wholeness and integrity. As Sixo cannot hold himself without Thirty-Mile Woman, so Paul D cannot put his story next to Sethe's. Rebuking Sethe, who is dying on him after the drama of the fatal engagement with her shadow, Beloved, Paul D assists Sethe to collect bits and pieces of her disintegrated self: remembering Baby Suggs's healing ritual of cleansing her body, Sethe wonders, "Will he do it in sections [too]? First her face, then her hands, her thighs, her feet, her back? Ending with her exhausted breasts? And if he bathes her in sections, will the parts hold?" (334). Through the blessing of the cleansing ritual, Sethe becomes her own "best thing," which used to be her children.

Rebirth by the redemptive nature of water assumes an anticipation for the next generation to come. Of all the main characters Denver is only one who comes to genetically realize the importance of self-reliance. Since thunderstruck by Nelson Lord's crucial words, "Didn't your mother get locked away for murder?" (128), Denver has been withdrawn and emotionally neglected. But at the same time she is clairvoyant and serendipitous: she foretells the advent of Beloved--"I saw a white dress holding on to you [Sethe]" (43)--; she deciphers Beloved's plan to strangle Sethe at the Clearing; and she senses Beloved is something more than her sister. Taking after Halle's intellectual sensibility and wisdom, and believing Baby Suggs's self-fulfilling prophesy, Denver comes out and seeks the knowledge for the future (327). The floating of the spores of bluefern over the Ohio River, observed after the birth of Denver, already foreshadows her potential:

Spores of bluefern growing in the hollows along the riverbank float toward the water in silver-blue lines hard to see unless you are in or near them, lying right at the river's edge when the sunshots are low and drained. Often they are mistook for insects--but they are seeds in witch the whole generation sleeps confident of a future. And for a moment it is easy to believe each one has one--will become all of what is contained in the spore: will live out its days as planned. (103-04)

Interestingly enough, the stream into which the elusive Beloved has returned must be a tributary to this life-giving, life-creating Ohio River, an ultimate truth which tells the resonance of the circular and recurrent emergence of Beloved. The novel's closing statement, "this is not a story to pass on" (337), is therefore antithetical and paradoxical, virtually affirming the prospect of a future.

In Beloved water imagery delves into the meaning of the past, resolves the stagnated timeless present, and sets it into motion. The characters' literal and imaginative experience with water is oscillating: destructive and generative, a process of revision and recreation. Revolving around the story of Sethe's reconciliation with her repressed past, the novel explores and purges other slaves' consciousness projected onto the original, mythic past, and acts as a springboard by which they can assure themselves as those who must be celebrated and beloved.

Notes

1. In Playing in the Dark Morrison traces in literature especially produced by male American writers that Americans' process of creating their identity is due to the fact that they have used African Americans as a kind of mirror against which they can assure themselves as a superior race: the author says, "Africanism is the vehicle by which the American self knows itself as not enslaved, but free; not repulsive, but desirable; not helpless, but licensed and powerful; not history-less, but historical; not dammed, but innocent; not a blind accident of evolution, but a progressive fulfillment of destiny" (52).
2. Comparing the Ohio River to the River of Jordan, the boundary the children of Israel crossed to enter the Promised Land, Carol E. Schmudde suggests that "Crossing the river into the promised Land is also an analogy for dying and entering the promised happiness of heaven" (410). Terry Otten further explores the meaning of crossing the river as the committing of a crime such as falling from the Eden, namely Sweet Home (87).
3. Literally, as a matter of fact, the diamond earrings Beloved seeks in the sea are not the same ones as those Sethe was given as her wedding souvenir; symbolically, however, these earrings are identical in the sense that through them Beloved and Sethe could sustain their wish to pursue happiness.
4. Deborah Ayer Sitter explores Sixo's differences from other Sweet Home men: the critic says, "by accentuating Sixo's 'Africanness' and by establishing him as a primary example of manliness, Morrison suggests he represents an African ideal of manhood" (23).

Works Cited

- Du Bois, W.E.B. The Souls of Black Folk. New York: Vintage Books, 1990.
- House, Elizabeth B. "Toni Morrison's Ghost: the Beloved who is not Beloved." Studies in American Fiction 18 (1990): 17-26.
- Krumholz, Linda. "The Ghost of Slavery: Historical Recovery in Toni Morrison's Beloved." African American Review 26 (1992): 395-408.
- Montgomery, Maxine Lavon. "A Pilgrimage to the Origins: The Apocalypse as Structure and Theme in Toni Morrison's Sula." Black American Literature Forum 23 (1989): 126-37.
- Morrison, Toni. Beloved. New York: Signet, 1987.
- Morrison, Toni. Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination. London: Pan Books Ltd (Picador), 1993.
- Otten, Terry. "Beloved." The Crime of Innocence in the Fiction of Toni Morrison. Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 1989. 81-98.

Schmudde, Carol E. "The Haunting of 124." African American Review 26 (1992): 409-16.

Sitter, Deborah Ayer. "The Making of a Man: Dialogic Meaning in Beloved." African American Review 26 (1992): 17-29.