

DUSTING OFF THE LANGUAGE: IMAGERY AND SYMBOLISM
IN TONI MORRISON'S NOVEL BELOVED

by
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Many critics have examined the works of Toni Morrison, but few in-depth studies have explored her unique use of traditional images and symbols in her novel Beloved. In this thesis I have analyzed Morrison's use of the highly conventional images of blood, color, trees, water, food, light and milk. Through written analysis and through my own artwork, I explore how Morrison manipulates Western biases and assumptions in order to create a new meaning for these traditional images. My written work examines the complexity of the images in relation to the novel's themes. My artwork presents an alternative analysis of individual scenes by focusing on a specific aspect of an image. This analysis leads a reader both to a deeper appreciation of Morrison's skill and to a heightened understanding of the complex themes in Beloved.

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LeClair: "What do you think is distinctive about your fiction? What makes it good?"

Morrison: "The language, only the language. The language must be careful and must appear effortless. It must not sweat."

Interview with Thomas LeClair, Critical Perspectives

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INTRODUCTION

When I finish a novel by Nobel Prize winning novelist Toni Morrison, I find myself asking the same thing over and over again: "How does she do it?" What is it about this woman's writing that can move to such depths, wrench with such power, and affect the senses to such a degree that the reader surfaces blinking back into reality? Imagery is the answer to which I have come. By choosing conventional symbols and images and then contradicting traditional assumptions that these symbols elicit, Morrison heightens meaning to shocking, often horrifying effect, rendering her work extremely powerful and moving.

Her intense images and symbols have created a style new to the printed page, and the imagery and symbolism reach their height in her 1988 Pulitzer Prize winning novel Beloved. Black and female, Morrison paints a world that reflects the often painful, striking elements of the black experience without falling into the critics' limiting category of "black literature." Interestingly, though nearly every critic I have come across mentions her unique use of language and imagery, none have made that the focus of their analysis. Countless reviews praise and condemn the works of Morrison, ranging from a simple rating of the book to a focused examination of the social issues reflected in her lines. Many focus on the ghost-story aspect of the work, the hauntings, the oddity and mystery of a modern novel filled with an angry spirit. Some critics, in their analytic journey toward examining character development, gender roles, racial issues, themes of community, slavery and the past, take

a line or two to reflect on Morrison's writing style. Many criticize Morrison for precisely what makes her so powerful--her atypical, unique use of language. Sale Rogers berates her for using a non-linear plot as does Dean Flower who writes, "Yet in some ways the story disappoints, remains a sequence of puzzling but brilliant vignettes, fails to come together as a single action" (212). These critics seem to assume all literature is based purely in the white, western tradition--Morrison's work is not.

Several critics, such as Philip Page and Barbara Christian, recognize and comment on Morrison's use of non-western, non-white style, the roots of which are grounded deep in the soil of African folkloric tradition. Morrison speaks of her life growing up within a family and tradition steeped with storytelling and explains that folkloric aspect of her writing saying, "I write what I have recently begun to call village literature, fiction that is really for the village, for the tribe. Peasant literature for *my* people..."(LeClair 370). Hence her narratives do not follow the style of Joyce or Wharton.

But there is more to Morrison than an unique handling of plot. A painting, a dance, or a piece of music will not be as moving or effective if it is poorly crafted or performed. Picasso's *Guernica*--the depiction of the terrors of war--would not be so incredibly horrifying if it were done in crayon on an 8 1/2"x11" sheet of paper by an artist who knew little about the elements of visual art. Though the subject matter is serious and horrific, the work would have no power to move, no means to strike the viewer to the core of her being because the way a piece is presented is as important as subject matter. The same holds true for the written work of art. The subject and content

of a piece is at the mercy of the author's ability to craft ideas into words. A topic could be engaging and exciting but fall flat when presented with no style or grace, rendering a potentially electric piece completely powerless. So I have chosen to focus on an author whose work grips the reader in a relentless embrace, denying him/her the right to ignore or forget the content behind each perfectly chosen word, each striking image.

Morrison's language is as tactile as clay. Her images evoke intense mental pictures more moving and vivid than any photograph could be. But Morrison's images in Beloved are more than just aesthetically pleasing; they are vital for conveying complex meaning and themes in the novel. By employing highly conventional symbols but then presenting an atypical meaning for that image, Morrison makes her work more moving and deeply complex. The reader cannot rely on traditional assumptions and a simple analysis of the text; he/she comes to understand a theme on a variety of levels.

Morrison explores themes of violence, life-energy, safety, domesticity and the past through images of trees, milk, blood, color, food, water and light. All of these images are highly traditional, suffused with implications and cultural connotations, but Morrison complicates these themes by twisting convention, surprising the reader out of his/her comfortable assumptions. She does not allow her reader to move through the novel smoothly with no upset. She shocks him/her into thought, provokes him/her into a deepened understanding.

In order to analyze Morrison's ability to create a rich complexity of meaning in a simplified way, I have produced visual

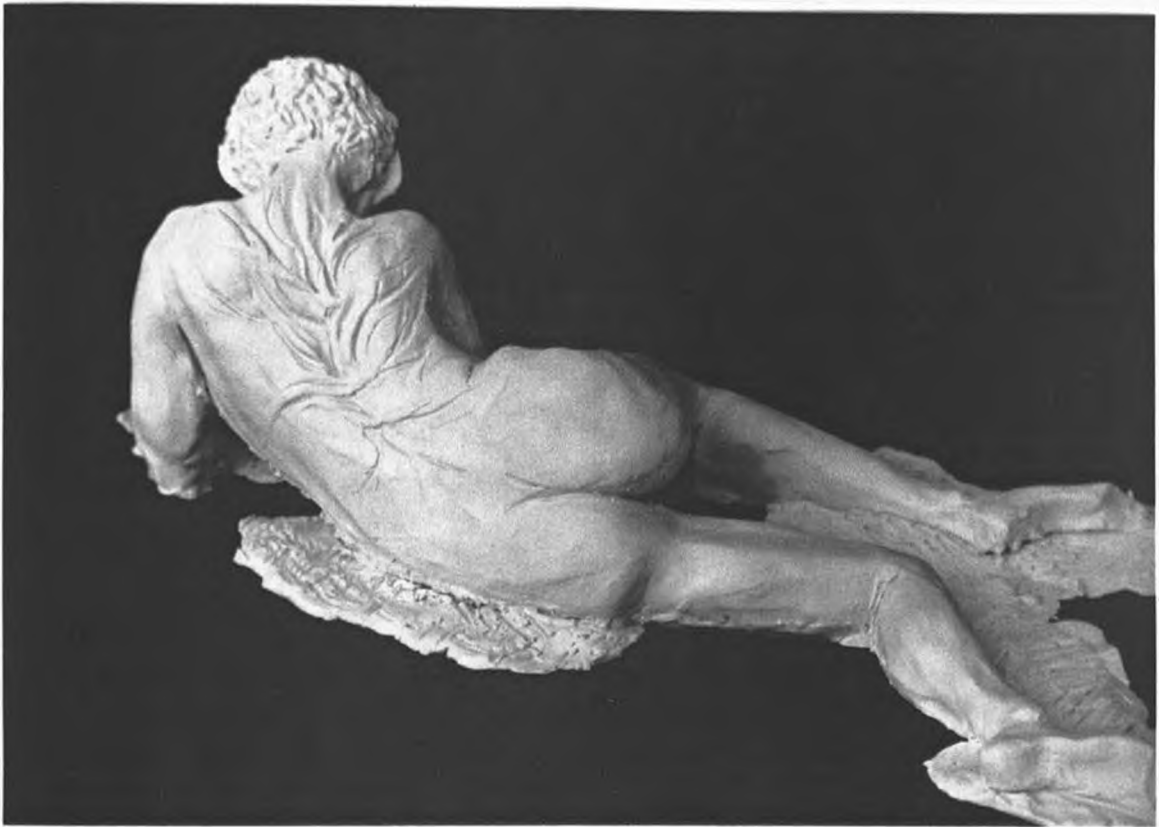
art that functions in a similar fashion. In typical analysis we break down a literary work into its parts, examining them for content and relation to the other parts and as a whole. We look for devices such as irony, tone, imagery, and the significance these things have to the novel, and finally we examine the novel's significance to society.

Usually the analysis comes down to what comment the book is making on life and how well it achieves its goal. Often with this type of examination we run the risk of analyzing a piece to the point that either its freshness and vibrancy are lost in the search for meaning or we overlook important meaning in the scrutiny of detail. What I feel visual art can do is focus on an aspect of the novel, such as the significance of color, and present an analysis that is simple on the surface but has layers of meaning below. A visual work of art can offer a non-traditional form of analysis that is as effective as a written piece in leading the viewer to a heightened understanding of a theme or symbol.

The molded plasticine figure of Sethe ["Brutal/Renewal", Plate 1] which focuses specifically on two aspects of her character is an example of this type of analysis. I have made her pregnant and naked with her back covered in scars and her head hanging. This precise image does not appear as such in Beloved. Rather, I have made a composite of themes in order to give the reader a different understanding than the book alone might produce; the two notions I chose to focus on are the brutality of slavery and rebirth, renewal. The viewer should be struck by her back riddled with twisting

Plate 1
"Brutal Renewal"

9" plasticine figure



grooves and welts and by her heavy belly and breasts. She is beaten and exhausted, and at the same time she is rising up from the ground, her full, pregnant figure clearly visible. By combining these two aspects of Sethe in one physical image I offer an interpretation of the text that affects a viewer differently than written analysis--two notions cannot be discussed at the same time in writing, but in a piece of visual art many themes can be displayed at once. The opposing themes of oppression and birth are seen instantaneously in the figure, leading the viewer to compare these two notions in terms of each other rather than independently, hence coming to an alternative understanding than might have been reached from a written analysis, comprehending paradox through a gestalt experience.

Although I and others contend that visual images in literature are important for understanding meaning and themes, literary criticism today has turned away from the mental image as a valid element in the analysis of literature. This shift is partly a result of a highly empirical philosophy and psychology that developed in this country within the last century. In this tradition, visual imagination is assumed to be invalid to cognitive study because of its intangibility. The argument goes so far as to suggest that a visual image is "make-believe" simply because there is no empirical way to measure a mental picture. Hence for critic's such as William Gass and Rudolph Arnheim the mental image is disregarded as a means of understanding a tangible, written piece of work (Esrock 5).

This tradition also argues that the cultural and personal nature of visual experiences will warp the meaning of a text. The

implication is that an individual cannot help but include his/her own values or beliefs in a mental image, ones that the author did not specify or intend. Moreover, this tradition suggests that because images depict a specific scene or action, visualizing will prevent the reader from understanding the themes an author expresses. Writer and philosopher William Gass, a critic of the visual image in analysis, claims the meaning of a text becomes exaggerated when visual images are incorporated, leading the reader to construe more than the mere words reveal. Rudolph Arnheim, a psychologist of the visual, even goes so far as to say, "readers who feel compelled to supplement the indications of the text by their own imagination cheat themselves out of the literary experience" (Esrock 157). The visual image, to these critics, is an impediment and even a hazard in reading and analyzing a text (Esrock 153).

But not all critics disregard the visual image in textual analysis. A counter tradition exists that values other elements in the process of literary analysis. Psychologist William James claims that colored images are vital for literary appreciation (Sommer 2) and Aaron Marcus suggests that "Literature remains a communication of the logical and expressive powers of language, but to varying degrees it is also a vehicle for the communication of uniquely visual qualities" (Kostelanetz15). Ellen Esrock also supports the importance of imagery in literature. She writes, "Imaging, as a conscious activity, can have functional consequences that are cognitive and affective and that can benefit the reading experience and the study of literature" (203).

Some critics suggest that mental images distort rather than clarify a work. Gass argues that the personal nature of a mental image brings outside biases to reading that change the intended meaning of a text. Yet many studies have affirmed that mental images can have a discernable meaning that relates to and reflects the text as well as have a very personal significance. Esrock quotes researcher Mark Sadowski who finds,

'Students' descriptions of what they saw (or heard, etc.) in their minds varied considerably in detail from person to person. Parts of the imagery reports seemed to have been imported from outside the story, but were consistent with the text and did not distort or contradict it.' (136)

Readers have very similar understandings of the themes or main ideas of a work, yet they are picturing extremely diverse images.

Esrock continues to explore the importance of these mental images, refuting the tradition that claims mental pictures negatively affect or distort a text. She asserts that an author chooses specific images and words with the reader in mind, using a word that is heavily laden with meaning intentionally, counting on his/her reader to infer several unwritten details and themes (156-60) from the one or two carefully chosen words. Esrock's argument credits an author's intentions and skill. She assumes the writer is fully aware of possible implications words hold and either intentionally chooses words or images that will produce a specific effect, or merely acknowledges the inability to control every interpretation.

It seems to me Morrison uses this technique repeatedly with her imagery in Beloved. Her deceptively simple images are

carefully chosen to cause the reader to infer meanings. These historically and culturally biased images are what make her work so surprising and powerful. By making the reader have specific mental images when reading of the color green or milk, for example, Morrison can then shock to a greater degree when she proceeds to twist or distort those conventional meanings. Hence, the argument that cultural differences will negatively affect an interpretation of the text disregards the intentions of the author, or at least the possible imaginative result a writer can have.

Critic Keith Mano recognizes and comments on Morrison's intentional use of vivid images and words. He writes,

Toni Morrison's language is thick as menstrual flow. Rich as clotted milk..I adduce such images intentionally: the way, I'm sure, Toni Morrison herself did--to shock, to discompose, to trap attention on a vivid sensual plane (154).

He recognizes her use of imagery and the desired effect she wishes to produce with her choice of words.

Not only must imagery be considered a valid part of a readers/viewer's experience when reading or analyzing literature, but it can even be considered a type of teacher. The visual image can reinforce themes and ideas in a way that the written word on its own cannot. Many studies discussed by Irving Sigel (Randhawa 97) explore the importance of pictures as learning aids and the advantages of imagery in teaching children. Children deprived of pictures until the age of two can still relate to and benefit from the use of pictures in their education. While Morrison must use words in

order to create her literature, her language can produce mental images as vivid as a physical illustration.

The importance of this type of imagery as a teaching device is supported by Esrock who writes that "image is a means of knowing and making imaged objects more immediate and comprehensible" (193). Words are abstraction, symbols of reality that the reader must understand on a purely cognitive level. Pictures, Esrock argues, make the vague more concrete, easier to understand, and I would argue, hence easier to analyze. She suggests that images can augment the bizarreness of a scene which makes the affective power of the theme greater (194). Morrison's imagery clearly works to that effect. Scenes such as Paul D walking into a pool of light would not be so memorable if they were not highly imagistic. Morrison uses color and texture in her descriptions, building a clear image in the reader's mind, which, as Esrock suggests, heightens the theme's impact. Notions of death, guilt, sadness are purely abstractions as words--Morrison makes them more tangible when she creates images out of those words.

With this in mind I come to my own visual art, created in response to my understanding of Morrison's text. My work contains a discernable meaning about themes in Beloved shaped by my own personal view, interpreting rather than reflecting Morrison's themes in the novel. I have found support of my endeavor in several critics. Philosopher Flint Schier goes so far as to say, "Pictures...are more apt than descriptions to stand in for what they symbolize or denote," though not from any aesthetic inferiority. Throughout history icons and pictures have stirred a congregation or

rallied a crowd, and it is pictures that steal the soul (1). Suzanne Langer writes about images suggesting that "visual forms--lines, colors, proportion, etc.--are just as capable of articulation i.e., of complex combination, as words." She differentiates between the effect of picture and text saying, "visual images...do not present their constituents successively, but simultaneously so that relations determining a visual structure are grasped in one act of vision" (Kostelanetz intro.).

But not everyone has a mental vision. Some people read a text dense with sensual imagery and see only the words (Sommer 1). The images I am creating as analysis are important for those who do not create visual images in their mind's eye. My art turns the text into images which leads the reader who does not visualize to deeper understandings of a work.

If the world of literary criticism has come to disregard imagery, it could explain many of the book reviews written on Morrison's novels which seem to miss the point of her work entirely. The disregard or devaluing of the imagery in Beloved could lead the reader to misunderstand or at least not fully comprehend all of Morrison's meanings. It seems unlikely that book critic Dean Flower would have written, "[Sethe's] frustration and rage once made her murderous and twisted her love into hate" (212), if he had better understood the text. Neither blood, nor the color red for example, reveal hate, but rather red often symbolizes mental and emotional violence as well as life energy. The color red is not seen in context with passion or hatred. The scene of Sethe in the shed is anything but hate filled. Mental or physical imagery and pictures, if carefully

explored, can lead a reader to a deeper comprehension of the meanings woven intricately into the text.

The following analysis focuses on the elements Morrison uses to create vivid pictures and unforgettable themes in Beloved. Color, blood, light, milk, trees, water and food are vital images in Beloved, and Morrison's unique use of these symbols touches a reader in such a way that this disturbing and thought-provoking novel is not easily forgotten.

COLOR

Morrison's use of color in Beloved goes far beyond mere aesthetic detail. Although some passages are spotted with various colors that have no seeming significance beyond the building of mood and tone, more frequently color has a significant purpose. Red marks both violence and life-energy, green symbolizes safety and security, and pink is paradoxically both peace and disturbance. These images work to convey Morrison's highly complex themes and contribute to the novel's beauty and richness.

When Morrison does use color with no apparent symbolic meaning, the image is still important to the building of beauty in the text. Scenes that contain autumn leaves described as "bottles of blood and gold" (116) use color to enrich the text, building a highly visual image of the written word, hence making the text fuller and more vivid. Just as people fill their lives with color, from flowers in the garden to accessories for clothes or patches in a quilt, Morrison decorates her work with bits of color. Life (or a novel) without color is half-dead, like Sethe's existence with no friends, no family, no color in the house. These flashes of color brighten the novel, making it a pleasure to read from the aesthetic point of view.

But color in Beloved is not always used purely for description; reds and greens often contain more meaning than an initial reading reveals. Morrison presents a color that is loaded with traditional meaning and then shocks the reader with his/her own assumptions when the color marks a theme that deviates from convention.

Morrison's use of the color red, which she uses to convey violence as well as life energy, is perhaps more disruptive of a reader's biases and assumptions than any other color.

In the Western tradition red conjures up images of anger and violence; "makes me see red" suggests being furious, a raging bull chases the red cape, and the painting and sculptures of Christ on the cross have brilliant red blood pouring from hands, feet and side. We are an audience acclimated to bloodshed. From the televising of the Vietnam War to the latest slasher movie, American culture has been swamped with images of the dead and dying, and when color came to the screen, red leapt out as vivid proof of the violence. Morrison is as aware of these connotations as anyone, but rather than trying to shock with *graphic* detail as the media and many writers do, she shocks by departing from a reader's assumptions. The most physically violent scene in the book--which includes the cracking of the boys' heads and the slitting of the baby's throat--is completely void of color. When a reader would expect to see bright red blood spattering everyone, he/she is confronted instead with blood "like oil." Morrison reduces the most violent scenes to calm descriptions and elevates seemingly peaceful scenes to horror with her unique use of the color red.

Morrison often does use red to define violence, but unlike a modern thriller movie, the red comes in little, exceedingly intense doses. Red, which traditionally represents violence, is taken out of the most likely place--the murder--and instead appears in seemingly innocent scenes that become infinitely more powerful with the inclusion of this vivid, meaning-laden color. The cock's comb, the

open-mouthed figurine, the child's ribbon does far more severe violence to these characters than a shovel to the head or saw to the throat (because, as we see in this novel's unusual case, the saw doesn't have lasting effects). Rather than a graphic marker of physical violence, red highlights the subversive, ever-present violence that is a part of slavery or being black in a white world. The characters continually suffer mentally and emotionally, and those wounds do not heal with ointment and a soft bandage. By using a small bit of color to create a *feeling* of violence, rather than explaining it explicitly, Morrison not only calls up all the reader's preconceptions of the color, but she allows the reader's own visual imagination to flourish. This expansive mental imaging can make a much greater impact on emotion than the literal written word can and perhaps can even convey the meaning of a theme more completely and powerfully as well.

This seems to be the case with the scene of the undulating red light of the ghost found in the first few pages of the novel. Morrison does not explicitly show violence, but rather calls upon the reader's imbedded assumptions as well as his/her imagination in order to portray the theme. She uses red to create a feeling that hovers, not quite tangible, beneath the surface of the scene. The glowing light in and of itself is not violent or harmful--it is, in fact, described by Sethe to be just sad, which in this context is a curious color since tradition equates grief with the color blue. But red is surrounded by potent, inescapable associations, and Paul D reveals his own conventional assumptions of the color with his hesitation to enter the house. He feels there is some evil in the red light, and he asks Sethe

about the death to which he believes this pulsing light is connected. He questions Sethe's claim that Baby Suggs died easily, quietly saying, "You said [Baby Suggs] died soft. Soft as cream" (9). Paul D recognizes the underlying violence in the red glow, suggesting that whatever is causing this red undulation did not die softly. Some violence caused the apparition to appear, and the lack of history explaining the source of light forces the reader to imagine the cause of this red glow, perhaps more vividly than a distinct written description could do. Thus Morrison, by calling both upon traditional associations as well as the reader's own imagination, conveys an extremely powerful sense of violence with just a hint of red.

Red is used to portray violence again in an even less obvious way with the scene of the little statue of the black boy in the Bodwins' kitchen where his red mouth represents the emotional and mental violence inflicted on blacks in the white world. The figurine's head is thrown back, flaming red mouth agape, and the words, "at yo service" are printed below his feet. His red mouth is full of money. Red, which could represent the life blood of a human, is reduced to a vulgarity. The black person is reduced to his mere physical existence and consequential usefulness to whites. The subversive brutalization of blacks resulting from a complete dismissal of them as humans is the violence in this scene. That sinister image and its implied violence affects those like Denver who see the figure. Worried about her new job at the Bodwins', Denver seeks reassurance from Janey about the nature of the old brother and sister. Janey says, "'Oh, yeah. They good. Can't say they ain't good. I wouldn't trade them for another pair, tell you that'" (255). But as Denver heads out the door,

she spies the little figurine with his brutalizing message. Although Morrison doesn't specifically say so, we feel that all of Janey's assurances are knocked flat, and Denver leaves the house overwhelmed by that red gaping mouth and its message of her worthlessness as anything but server. The resounding feeling Morrison leaves us with is that physical violence, such as a beating, is not the only kind of hurt a white person can inflict on a black person. A seemingly innocent object belonging to the "good" masters can destroy a spirit with a small but potent image that degrades its subject.

Another and more complete destruction of the human spirit is marked by the brilliant red comb on the rooster at Sweet Home [Plate 2: Further analysis of this plate will follow.] The cock's comb symbolizes an internal violence that does not abate with the abolition of slavery. Paul D describes the rooster, Mister, as "bloody...and evil...comb as big as my hand and some kind of red" (72). The baby rooster had to be saved as hatching, too weak to escape the shell himself. Yet on the day the revolt failed, that red rooster strutted his freedom and strength in front of a collared, enchained Paul D. The brilliant comb is pride, ego, self--something that Paul D, as a slave, either never had or lost when schoolteacher came to Sweet Home. That red symbolizes the death of the other Pauls, the destruction of Halle, and the beginning of the decimation of Paul D's heart. The physical torture of whippings and imprisonment may cease with the end of slavery, but this freedom does not instantly give Paul D a sense of his manhood or his heart back--emotional and mental

violence endures throughout a life time and is much more difficult to heal.

The color red marks an emotional violence again in the child's small ribbon that Stamp Paid finds attached to the bottom of his boat. Neither numerous lynchings of his people nor the abuse to his wife makes Stamp give up some of his vital energy. The red ribbon knotted around a girl's curl of hair causes him to lose heart, to become weary of the world that he has always worked so hard make a better place (180). The implied violence, the destruction of innocence makes him dizzy and tired. He shows just how much this colored ribbon has affected him when he states his hopes that Baby Suggs never got around to pondering red when she laid down to think about color (181)--he acknowledges the overwhelming power and violence of red. The power of this image is similar to the red light of the ghost in that Morrison gives us no intimate, gory details to relate violence. She merely describes a red ribbon and then the weakness that overtakes Stamp. The scene is incredibly shocking because we know the horrors Stamp has already seen, so our minds can only assume that something worse happened to the little girl who lost her ribbon. And as with the red undulating light at the beginning of the novel, our imagination is free to create images far more gruesome than a written description. Morrison presents a snippet of color and induces a wave of horror.

So what is violence really? What does Morrison want us to think of violence? Rather than physical beatings or torture, violence is the loss of a red, red heart, the red comb which belongs to an animal that has more self than a man, the red ribbon around a curl of

hair that marks the destruction of innocence. Neither the physical whippings nor the murder is described in terms of red; rather the subversive violence done to the emotions and to the mind is more dangerous, more likely to destroy. Bodies heal or else they come back to life, Morrison contends, but it is much harder to bring back a heart, assure a black girl of goodness in the world, or put life-energy back into an old person's marrow.

In contrast to the Western tradition of red as violence/anger, several scenes in the book reflect an African tradition of red which has extremely different associations. Cultural anthropologist Elsy Leuzinger describes the use of red in the art of many African tribes: "Red implies energy, vitality and joy...it has magical properties" (46). Morrison brings together the Western and African tradition by exploring the issues of freedom and life energy with the same color she uses to define violence. The result is surprising imagery that thwarts any ethnocentric assumptions and intensifies the complexity of the book.

This surprising use of red as joy is found in the description of Sixo. He is the symbol of spiritual freedom. Unlike the gaping red mouth of the figurine, his "flame-red tongue" (21) is a symbol of freedom and rebellion. He still speaks the language of his home country and lets out a ringing laugh as the white slave owners try to burn him at the stake, scorching his feet and legs. They have to shoot him to quell the defiant laughter, to silence the flame-red tongue (224). Sixo's mouth is free, rebellious and anything but at the service of white man even though he is a slave. His tongue is important because we know that though he can speak English, at one

point he chooses to stop. He returns to the language of the past, to Africa, to his family and friends from whom he was stolen. So here Morrison presents us with quite a different image of the traditional Western notions of red. Sixo's tongue is a living flame of freedom and autonomy that can not be controlled by another.

Paul D's red heart, like Sixo's mouth, is the symbol of life energy and freedom, but his demoralizing life has turned it into a rusting tobacco tin(73). The organ that pumps living blood, the pulsing red essence of life is too alive, too raw in Alfred, Georgia. In order to stay alive and sane Paul kills emotion and love, the things that make him human. He is ashamed to tell Sethe that there is no "red heart bright as Mister's comb beating in him" (73). The mention of Mister's red comb--a symbol of the emasculation and destruction done to Paul D and the others at Sweet Home--intensifies the importance and beauty of a bright red heart, symbol of life energy, that Paul D has lost. But eventually another red heart pries open the lid of Paul D's tobacco tin. Beloved's red heart which embodies sex, sensuality, excitement and intimacy frees Paul D(117). These red hearts symbolize the beauty and joy of living.

The issue of life-energy as seen with Sixo, Beloved and Paul D is again explored through Amy and her search for that rich red material, carmine velvet. Red in this instance takes on aspects of both physical and emotional freedom. Amy's quest for the bright material not only results in the salvation of Sethe and unborn Denver from a return to slavery, but the flight also frees Amy from her own abusive environment. Amy runs from a family that beats and mistreats her and helps Sethe from a similar situation. But in her

conversations with Sethe, Amy does not focus on the past with the intensity that she does the future. She speaks of Boston and carmine velvet with awe, excitement and joy for what she will find there, who she will become. Red symbolizes hope and freedom from physical oppression but it also includes a feeling of wonder and exhilaration for living.

Amy's carmine velvet, Paul D's red heart, Sixo's tongue, all deal with freedom from the physically oppressive past as well as the freedom to feel, make decisions, live from moment to moment as one desires without another regulating every move, without another defining one's very being. Thus red becomes a complex symbol which at times has Western connotations relating violence and at others calls upon an African tradition to discuss the joy of life.

Morrison continues the themes of life and violence with the episodes in which Baby Suggs contemplates color. These scenes reveal the emotional and mental violence done to Baby Suggs-- violence so great that she gives up her life-energy. She lies down in her bed and ponders color until her death. Unlike the previously discussed symbols, Morrison does not specify a particular color, but instead uses color in general to relate the nature of Baby Suggs' despair.

Color is an innocuous thing--it is mild, like soda crackers for a flu patient. But the image of Baby Suggs laying down to look at color is rather a disturbing one in spite of its seeming mildness. When the reader first comes across Baby Suggs, he/she has no background on Baby or why she should lay down and ponder color other than the few words and phrases that let us know her life has been

"intolerable" and her reference to the "nastiness" and "meanness" of life and death. So Baby's move to pondering color seems non-violent and safe, unlike life or death. But we come to discover that Baby has lost her desire for the love of life, and it is then that the seemingly innocuous pondering of color becomes a hideous violence. Baby could have had a nervous breakdown, gone catatonic, or continued to trudge through life, but Morrison has her ponder color--an important aspect of the living. When flowers die, they shrivel and lose their color and so do people. Bright colors are associated with festival, parties and as discussed previously, with life. But we don't see any of that joy or excitement in Baby's pondering. In fact, the reader never sees that Baby is thinking anything at all. She has given up on life, but continues to wrap herself in a vital aspect of it which only makes her defeat more poignant. She has only energy to contemplate color rather than actively live, breathe and create it.

Pink, a color Baby asks to look at, is a color that has a complexity similar to red. For one character pink is safety and ease, and for another it conjures up images of death. Baby Suggs lays down all her pain and also all her energy for living when she decides to ponder color. She asks for lavender, or pink if there isn't any. This contemplation of color becomes a type of escape for her and pink (for which Sethe satisfies her craving by showing Baby her tongue) is safety. Baby finds a security and peace in the color. Yet Baby Suggs' call for this seemingly peaceful color also contains an element of violence. For this pondering means that Baby has given up on life, has decided to die rather than fight anymore. Morrison continues to explode the seeming peace of the color pink with the

description of the baby's headstone which is "pink as a fingernail," the "color of the dawn" directly on the next page(4-5). We are repulsed and soothed at the same time. Morrison upsets a reader's assumptions when she makes the headstone pink. Traditionally this pastel color is not a violent one. Pink is the color of baby girls' clothes and toys. Yet the horror of the headstone (which should be restful and final but isn't) which is the result of violence symbolizes the nastiness of life and the meanness of death that Baby Suggs is trying to avoid.

The color green is a salve for the meanness in these characters' lives. Green symbolizes positive aspects of safety and security. Again, Morrison draws on the reader's past and his/her assumptions about the meaning of green. The color is associated with nature, and although Morrison's green is also from the natural world, the image is slightly different from the historical American tradition. The Puritan morality on which our country is based is one of order and control. Nature in American history is a heathen, unknown, uncontrollable force that is equated with sin and evil and therefore must be dominated, structured. Morrison veers away from this tradition, once again employing a non-Western symbology of the image. Nature seems to have no morality. It is neither always evil or menacing, nor is it actively good. Yet nature is one of the only places of safety in this novel. The descriptions of green cannot be separated from trees, but it should be noted that in Morrison's many images of specific trees she never uses the word green. They are huge, lacy, beautiful and so forth, but not colored, because trees in these character's lives are not always safe. They are used for

hangings, and appear as twisted scars on a woman's back. The color green, which is bound to but not inclusive of all nature, is equated with safety and security. Interestingly, neither a fenced yard, a big house, nor a well figured plan makes these characters safe, but rather things of green. The boxwood and the Clearing are places of secluded safety for people who are not whole, whose lives are not easy and smooth.

One such person whose life neither easy nor smooth is the character of Denver. She does not have a carefree childhood. A girl with no friends, lost brothers, and a mother who tried to kill her and her siblings finds solace in the green of the boxwood, nearly the only aspect of her lonely life that gives her a feeling of wholeness--there she can explore her own mind and possibilities. She is free to discover who she is as an individual, to be a friend to herself when she has no other. The green boxwood secludes her which gives her secrecy and safety from the haunted house, the lack of friends and a mother she fears and loves. It is her place, uninterrupted by any other. The green walls keep her hidden and safe.

Unlike Denver's very private sanctuary, the Clearing is communal. Yet similar to the boxwood, Baby Suggs' meadow is nature, and like Denver's green refuge it hides her people allowing them shout their secrets out. Seclusion offers freedom and security. Sethe needs that "green blessed place" (89) when she can't find peace in the everyday world. She travels from worry and frustration through a "bright green corridor" (90) to this other world where Baby Suggs Holy used to free her people through love and words within the safe bounds of the surrounding trees. The Clearing

is a green place of nature that allows freed and runaway slaves to love themselves without fear of the white world that lay beyond the wall of leaves.

Color not only brightens Beloved, creating a richly visual narration, but it also acts as string that leads the reader through a complex and sometimes confusing plot. The repeated images of the red cock's comb lead to the red ribbon, and Paul D's red heart to Beloved's red heart. If Morrison had not used color, she would have been hard pressed to describe pride, life energy, violence and safety in a non-didactic and holistic way. She rarely has to come out and explain these complex emotions. In simple terms the novel is about the effects of slavery. But unlike some other novels about slavery, such as Octavia Butler's Kindred, Morrison rarely shows us slave life directly. In Kindred the reader comes across children actually playing "slavemaster," selling one another. This scene is a way of showing the constant reinforcement of the slave mentality. In Beloved Morrison relates this theme less blatantly. Rather than directly stating how a person adopts a slave mentality, she uses images such as the cock's comb or Sethe's memories of early childhood to lead the reader to discover and contemplate the complex theme on his/her own.

Sethe's brief recollection of her mother and the old language is an example of this understating of a theme. Morrison's subtle explanation of Sethe's acceptance of the slave role is more haunting and eventually more powerful than the blatant statement of slave children "playing" master. We see that Sethe has forgotten her African heritage in the violence of slavery that surrounded her

childhood. Her vague memory resurfaces once she is free of the mind-controlling oppression of slavery. Morrison brings this theme to the pages in a very subtle way. To explain every detail is limiting and often trivializes the text because there is no room for expansion beyond what is stated. Like a joke that must be explained, something dies when the meanings have to be spelled out. Morrison explains this in an interview with Thomas LeClair. She says, "I am not explaining anything to anybody. My work bears witness and suggests" (371). She captures our imagination when she leaves many things explained in an obscure way. As readers we must learn what these colors mean as we progress through the novel. The effect is like a child learning the subtleties of laughter or facial expression. In our lives a snigger, scoff, guffaw and giggle all mean different things, as does the color red in Beloved. There is no straightforward answer, just as with life, and perhaps this is what keeps me as a reader, and also as an artist, so intrigued.

This manner of handling complex themes in an understated way is, in a sense, inherent in visual art which can reach a viewer on a non-rational level. Before our cognitive abilities develop, before logic and reason become the primary elements of thinking, we have our senses. Babies react to bright lights, brilliant colors, loud sounds, and being touched. I feel that a work of art often appeals to us on this more primal level. We see differences in values (lights and darks), in design (the movement and balance of shapes) and the variety of colors, and although there may be a very important message the artist is trying to convey, the initial reaction to a piece has little to do with analysis of content or the use of logical

reasoning. The viewer responds emotionally to the movement, color and values in a work, often as much as or more than to the subject matter. The reader's response to Morrison's work is very similar to a viewer's response to visual art. Morrison paints a picture with her words, using color and images, light and dark, then leaves the audience to decipher the underlying meaning. As a reader I am struck by the shocking connections, the surprising use of color, and after my initial emotional response, which is "below" the cognitive one, I then move on to consider the implications and significance of her work.

As a way of analyzing her style of writing, I have created pieces of art that I feel work in much the same manner--the viewer has a response to the color and movement, then presumably will come to a deeper understanding of the text. One of the scenes I focused on occurred in the novel after the death of Sixo and the Pauls at Sweet Home. This scene has a vital theme in it. But rather than Paul D just blurting out how he felt less than a man, how schoolteacher took away his very self, how slavery prevented him from being whole, he describes a proud rooster on a tub. In my own piece I have made Mister a swirling mass of color and movement ["Less Than, Greater", Plate 2]. The diagonal lines give a feeling of action, and the bright red comb and feet are highlighted because of the surrounding greyed colors which have been mixed with their complementary colors to create a toned, rather than brilliant color. Unlike blues and greens which are cool colors, reds and yellows are colors that



Plate 2
"Less Than, Greater"

9x12 Mixed Media

portray energy and action, representing the boldness, the freeness of Mister. In a lower corner Paul D is done mostly in black and white and is far from the center of focus. Partially hidden by the brightly colored claws of the rooster, Paul D seems flat and lifeless next to the shapes and colors that comprise Mister. I attempted to create a painting that examines a passage in the novel, but also a piece that stand on its own as a work of art and that has the ability to move the viewer emotionally and mentally.

Asking others who have read Beloved how they react to this piece, I found that the first impact was emotional. One of the viewers went on to say that she better understood that scene after looking at my piece. Morrison's complexity of meaning can, on first reading, leave the reader unclear about what a passage is divulging. Often different levels of understanding arise each time the passage is read, and the viewer related my art to a graph or a diagram that helps explain a complex theory. It helped her focus on certain aspects that led her to a different understanding than she had come to from the text alone.

This non-verbal analysis seems fitting for an artist who manipulates and creates such strong visual imagery in her work. Morrison appeals to our emotional, sensual level as well as our rational one. By creating a work of art I come to understand a passage or symbol in Morrison's more deeply. I live with the picture her words create, carrying it with me in my mind's eye, and each day I work on the piece to make it reflect the underlying theme in the passage. Unlike illustration, my work does not attempt to describe or replicate. My visual art is a form of analysis which focuses on

specific aspects of the text, that through elements of design, value and color, tries to bring the viewer to a stronger (or just different) understanding than what he/she might have come to solely on his/her own.

MILK

The image of milk in Beloved, like color, does not always represent the traditional associations one might expect. Milk has the connotations of safety, motherhood and all that is good. It is the stuff that nourishes helpless babies, a pure, unsullied food. And yet Morrison uses this conventionally wholesome substance to mark violence and the destruction of innocence.

Innocence is killed when pregnant Sethe is violated in the barn--milk meant for her babies is instead nourishing cruel, white men. Two young men hold her down and rape her of her milk as schoolteacher looks on taking notes. The superficial brutality in the scene is chilling, but by using the word "nurse" (6) to describe the scene of two boys stealing Sethe's milk, Morrison turns the scene to high horror. The reader is disgusted by the violence behind that one word "nurse" when it is combined with "men." The act of sucking milk from a breast is nursing and the normal image is of a helpless infant and a loving mother. Innocence and beauty are perverted and destroyed when grown men nurse from a powerless woman. These boys, once helpless infants, have grown up and are now in control, tearing the role of nurturer from Sethe. She becomes the one who needs protection from those who are controlling her.

Despite this twisting of roles, there is still the feeling of the mother in this scene. Sethe does not relate her violation in terms of an act of violence done to herself, rather she feels outrage that these men would take the milk that was intended for her child, milk her

body produced so that she could sustain and nourish "her best thing." The nipple that is meant for her baby girl's mouth is sullied by the mossy teeth of schoolteacher's nephew. The milk that her far-away child is in need of is taken by a man who hasn't needed milk for twenty years. This scene depicts a sort of violence that goes beyond any sort of physical beating. The violation of her children, a side-effect of the men's "nursing", is worse than the whipping that planted the tree on her own back. Morrison says more about the brutality of slavery with the image of milk than she could have by describing a horrible beating. The loss of the stolen milk is the loss of innocence stolen by slavery, loss that is felt through generations.

Milk marks the death of innocence again when Denver nurses from a breast covered in her sister's blood. With this taking in of milk, Denver also takes in the violence of Sethe's act, and the violence of history that caused Sethe to kill her own children. Denver literally ingests this violence within the first month, ending the chance at a carefree and innocent life. After the killing, Sethe releases the lost baby and reaches for the infant Denver. Baby Suggs attempts to protect Denver from the horror of her sister's murder, struggling to snatch the child away from her blood-soaked mother. But Sethe overpowers Baby Suggs and with complete absorption and disregard for the blood, she watches her youngest nurse from a nipple covered in Beloved's blood. Morrison disrupts the reader's notions of mother, child and the wholesomeness of milk by creating a chilling paradox by depicting Sethe's desire to protect and nurture the child in her arms immediately after protecting the older one by destroying her. This giving and taking of milk results in the

breakdown of both the traditional notion of mother and also of Denver's childhood innocence.

Milk imagery once again contains violence and marks the corruption of innocence when Beloved chokes Sethe in the Clearing. The smell of milk on Beloved's breath is combined with aggression, and the result is a paradoxical image of an innocent baby with the strength and anger to kill. Beloved, full of vengeance, strangles Sethe nearly to the point of suffocation as she rests on a stump in the Clearing. But later Beloved kisses the marks made on Sethe's throat and her breath "was exactly like new milk" (98). Morrison creates a startling and terrible image with this mention of milk which seems misplaced in this scene, for milk is associated with a mother and child bond of love, not of brutality. Yet Beloved's milky breath also recalls the innocent baby that was destroyed by Sethe's action in the shed. Once again Morrison twists tradition, presenting the image of new milk in a scene of continuing struggle, anger and violence.

Violence and loss are connected with milk once more when Halle soothes himself with butter that reminds him of Sethe's stolen milk. His innocent love and his mind is destroyed in this scene. Unable to act, Halle watches the men turn his wife into a farmyard animal. Powerless to stop the violation of the woman he loves, Halle loses that love in a wash of madness. Lack of power recalls infancy, and he returns to milk as he smashes cold clumpy butter into his face and hair, forgetting Sethe and his children, remembering only milk. Ironically, Halle's loss of manhood and his mind is marked with the image of the most wholesome and benevolent thing possible--milk. This traditionally peaceful image contains a violence

that costs Halle not only his freedom, but his mind and ultimately his life.

Morrison continues this conflict of image and meaning with the words she uses to describe Baby Suggs' death. Sethe tells Paul D Baby Suggs died "soft as cream." Since the notion of cream being soft and harmless is completely blown apart by the scene of Halle spreading himself with butter, we must reconsider the phrase and reevaluate how Baby Suggs really died. Baby, like Halle, was unable to stop a monstrosity from taking place. She is an intelligent, powerful, grown, free woman and yet is as helpless as a child or a slave to stop white men from coming into her yard. Morrison recalls the despair that is a result of powerlessness by using the same image to describe Baby's death as was used in the appalling scene of Halle gone mad.

In contrast to these violent images are the scenes where milk is the stereotypically wholesome life-giver. One such scene is Baby Suggs' first meal out of slavery. Freedom makes her hungrier than she has ever been in her life and her first meal is milk and corn bread. Milk satisfies her voracious hunger. Like an infant, Baby Suggs' new life and freedom begins with milk.

Scenes where milk is a symbol of new life act to highlight the brutality of previous milk imagery, and they also make the reader reassess the complexity and depth of an issue or theme. If milk can be both wholesome and deadly, then clearly more than one level exists to an idea, and it is this dichotomy that makes Morrison's work so thought-provoking and powerful.

This complexity of meaning can be seen in the milk that is both Sethe's violation and the cause of Halle's destruction and, at the same time, is life for their children. The recurring images of Sethe's overabundance of milk seem to suggest a sort of defiance against or triumph over the violence done to her in the barn. Though her milk was stolen and her husband returned to infancy, Sethe and her body continue to not only survive, but bring new life and nourishment to the world. When Sethe finally brings the milk she has been guarding to her baby the two are joined in love despite the mother's physical pain. The nursing in the barn did not drain Sethe of life. The quantity of her milk and her determination to get that life-giving substance to her children is proof that the savage act did not dry up her soul, body or mind.

Life and connectedness are explored once more when Sethe feeds her grown girls milk after a day ice skating in the cold. The three women are together, skating and falling, filling the air with their laughter--the day is magical. When they return to the house Sethe warms milk for her girls. When Denver suggests they "roast some taters" (175) for dinner Sethe just gives them some more milk and sends them to sleep. The tableau is lovely; the image is of infancy returned. The two girls are nourished only from the milk their mother gives them, and the bond between the three is pulled tight. The drinking of milk marks a new life opening up for these women, without Paul D, without community, just with each other. But the image is not purely wholesome as it may seem--there is a slightly sinister feeling lurking beneath the surface of this scene. The women's relationship is abnormal. Beloved has never grown up

and neither in a sense has Denver because of her isolation, so when Sethe serves her daughters warm milk eighteen years disappear and Beloved becomes that demanding baby once again, but this time with a hunger that can not be appeased with only milk.

Both a marker for violence and a symbol of nourishment and life, milk, like blood, is a complex image in Beloved. Morrison forces her reader out of a passive role, demanding he/she contemplate and strive to understand themes on multiple levels with her use of such symbols. Complex images such as blood and milk defy simple explanations and so help to create a work of complicated, multifaceted themes.

LIGHT

Light is another complex image that Morrison uses in her work to portray specific emotions and feelings. She calls upon the reader's assumptions about the role and meaning of light as she has with the use of color and milk. She does not always use light in the traditionally Western sense, equating it with Christian holiness, purity of soul, or joy. Light in Beloved is not always good. For a running slave daylight is the worst time to be moving. Light becomes the enemy, night the savior, and here the assumptions of the "goodness" of light are blown apart--"[Sethe] is not so afraid at night because she is the color of it, but in the day every sound is a shot or a tracker's quiet step" (78). Morrison makes the reader reassess his/her conventional notions of light and dark.

Morrison does use light in a conventional way in some instances to describe a character's joy, but more often a complexity exists that is not readily seen on the surface. Light, by its nature, is in constant flux--sunlight fades every evening, leaving a glow between the darkening earth and sky. In many passages the inherent paradox of light--that its existence creates its opposite, darkness--reflects a paradox or complexity in a relationship. Morrison uses the inherent instabilities of light as a symbol for the liminal (a space of time that is betwixt and between normality) that directly reflects the instability of the characters' lives. Characters feel and act on levels sometimes unknown even to themselves which results in complicated relationships that are not always what they

seem on the surface. Morrison, as she has with other images, prevents the reader from hasty assumptions with this complication of meaning seen in light and dark.

Light takes on a complexity of meaning with the scene of Paul D and his life in Alfred, Georgia. The ambiguity of his life and the tenuousness of his existence are explored through the paradoxical role of light. Sunlight does not bring joy in the traditional sense. When Paul D comes from the darkness of the underground cages and into sunlight, which could be the image of a redemption from hell into heaven, we find he emerges for "the sole purpose of breaking rock..." (40). Morrison repeatedly explodes our assumptions of the meaning of an image--hard labor and slave-driving men with guns are what sunlight brings, rather than the freedom one might expect. But she twists meaning once more when we see that this hellish life in the sun is indeed a sort of liberation. Light is freedom from shaking hands, frozen blood and the possibility of losing one's mind. Light allows Paul D to kill life each day, crushing it with every blow of his hammer which paradoxically enables him to survive. He manages to remain sane and alive, but his life is liminal with no connection to society, no connection to the past. Morrison captures the ambiguity and disconnectedness of Paul D's life with the sunlight that is his slave-driver and also his rescuer.

Light marks a paradoxical relationship when the flicker of Beloved and Sethe's shadows on the kitchen ceiling reflects the characters' conflicting feelings and actions. Sethe is in the kitchen with Beloved: "In the lamplight, and over the flames of the cooking stove, their two shadows clashed and crossed on the ceiling like black

swords" (57). Though Sethe enjoys Beloved's presence and the young woman's adoration of the older is clear, this scene is awash with light and dark that shows a deeper level filled with conflict. Light and dark battle in this scene, and below this level is the battling of the two women's wills. Within this contrasting scene of light and shadows, Morrison shows us the complex relationship between mother and daughter where love and vengeance coexist.

Conflicting emotions also exist within Denver, Paul D and Sethe's relationship, and light mixed with shadow reflects the multiple layers of feeling. The "family" goes on an outing to the carnival, and though they themselves do not hold hands, their shadows do. Denver is angry at Paul D for his intrusion into their lives and Sethe is nervous about venturing out into public again, yet their shadows reflect a sort of connectedness. As with Sethe and Beloved's relationship, unity and connectedness exist in some respects that do not exist on the surface. The bond that light and shadow suggest runs through the novel on a deeper level, surfacing in the end.

These magical hand-holding shadows that tie Sethe, Denver and Paul D together also mark a liminal stage in these character's lives. They have stepped out of the everyday world of work, loneliness and fear, into an outrageous social gathering that defies the normal ties of responsibility and culture. Here Paul D, Sethe and Denver are free of their past for a few moments, living a day of joy. The light and darkness of the hand-holding shadows reflect spiritual connectedness as well as physical disunity. Morrison highlights the

oddity of these characters' relationship with the paradoxical image of the impossible shadows cast in the late afternoon light.

Ambiguous relationships are explored again in the scene marked by light and dark in the cold house. Here is a place, more than any other, that exists out of time, out of space, a place where Beloved exists between the world of the living and the dead. There in the cold house light and dark play against one another, setting the scene for paradox and liminality. In the cold house "A few cuts of sun break through the roof and walls but once there they are too weak to shift for themselves. Darkness is stronger and swallows them like minnows" (122). Beloved's tenuous physical state--a spirit made flesh--in this world is revealed here in the cold house. Denver opens the door and "cold sunlight displaces the dark" (122), and she finds the room empty. Beloved returns when the door is shut, and pointing to the "light minnows" that slant into the room she says, "'look...I'm like this'" (124). Her hold on the world of the living is like the bits of light that disappear into darkness, small and faint. And as easily as darkness is displaced by the opened door, Beloved can be displaced back to the other side. Denver is also in a state of dissolving. With the disappearance of Beloved, Denver's desire to exist also flees, and she cries "because she has no self" (123). Before Beloved came, Denver was all alone, and her sister's disappearance is the absence of companionship and joy of community. Morrison gives us a place filled with light and darkness to describe the ambiguity of these two girls' lives. Amongst the minnows of light the girls are in a liminal stage between living and death, being and non-being.

But light in the novel is not always used to describe or mark ambiguity and paradox. Sometimes light describes the fullness of life. Morrison uses phrases and brief images of light to signify scenes of joy. At the carnival people are joyous and "lit like lamps" (47). Sethe thinks on the few months of happiness with Paul D, "the sun-splashed life that the shadows holding hands on the road promised her" (173). This sentence follows her remembrance of the 18 years of solitude and disapproval--the light that Paul D brings into her life is sun after an interminably long period of overcast days. The "luminous white" (11) stairs that rise up out of the gloom of 124 are another aspect of brightness. These stairs, which the baby loved so much, are literally the one brilliance in a house of dimness. They are also a symbol of that new and curious life of the baby that wanted to climb and explore.

When the baby returns later, as an adult, she is still full of that life--she shines. Paul D sees Beloved's glowing as arousal, but "he had never known a woman who lit up for nobody in particular, who just did it as a general announcement. Always in his experience, the light appeared when there was focus" (64-5). Her light is a sign of excitement over Sethe, and sexuality aroused by Paul D. These passions are like those of a child, filled with energy and life. This shining, as Paul D describes it in *Thirty Mile woman*, is beautiful--the thing that transforms her from mere smoke into "starlight" (65). But a complexity exists in Beloved's light. Her shining puts the household in tension, draws Paul D away from Sethe, and something that could be beautiful is twisted and warped by Beloved's obsession with

Sethe. This light represents the joy and energy of life and yet is destructive at the same time.

This complexity of light and dark exists in the Clearing as well--life is celebrated and violated in the same milieu. The place "where Baby Suggs had danced in sunlight" (86) is perhaps the most sun-filled, and life filled place in the novel. In the sun people danced, shouted, prayed and cried; "the people let go" (94). In her quest for a return to Baby Suggs' peace, Sethe hurries to the Clearing in the late-afternoon before the light changes, "while it was still the green blessed place she remembered" (89). The light of the place is a reflection of the light Baby Suggs preached to her people--she taught them to love their bodies and their lives. Sethe seeks that light which would bring comfort and ease into her own life. But the fact that Sethe must hurry before the light changes is a comment on the liminality of the place as well as a reminder of the corruption of Baby Suggs Holy's heart. The light is not permanent. It is not an unchanging fixture of the community. For, as we see later, merely one day of feasting changes the Clearing from a Holy Church back to a simple meadow surrounded by trees. Baby Suggs' light makes the Clearing a sanctuary, and when the light changes, when the community turns its back on Baby Suggs' heart, the Clearing ceases to be that special place out of space and time.

Light, like previous images discussed, is vital in portraying intricate, detailed issues in a simple and understated way. This simplification is something Morrison works hard to achieve. In an interview she describes her process of writing saying, "What is hard for me is to be simple, to have uncomplex stories with complex

people in them, to clean the language, really clean it" (Critical Perspectives 372). Again, as with color, she leaves much up to the imagination of the reader, rather than carefully spelling out every issue she wishes her audience to think about. The intricacies of the text are below the surface, hidden in assumptions and the nature of the image. The tenuousness of these characters' lives is described in terms of light, an element that is fluctuating by nature, and the joy of life is reflected in the inherent brilliance of light.

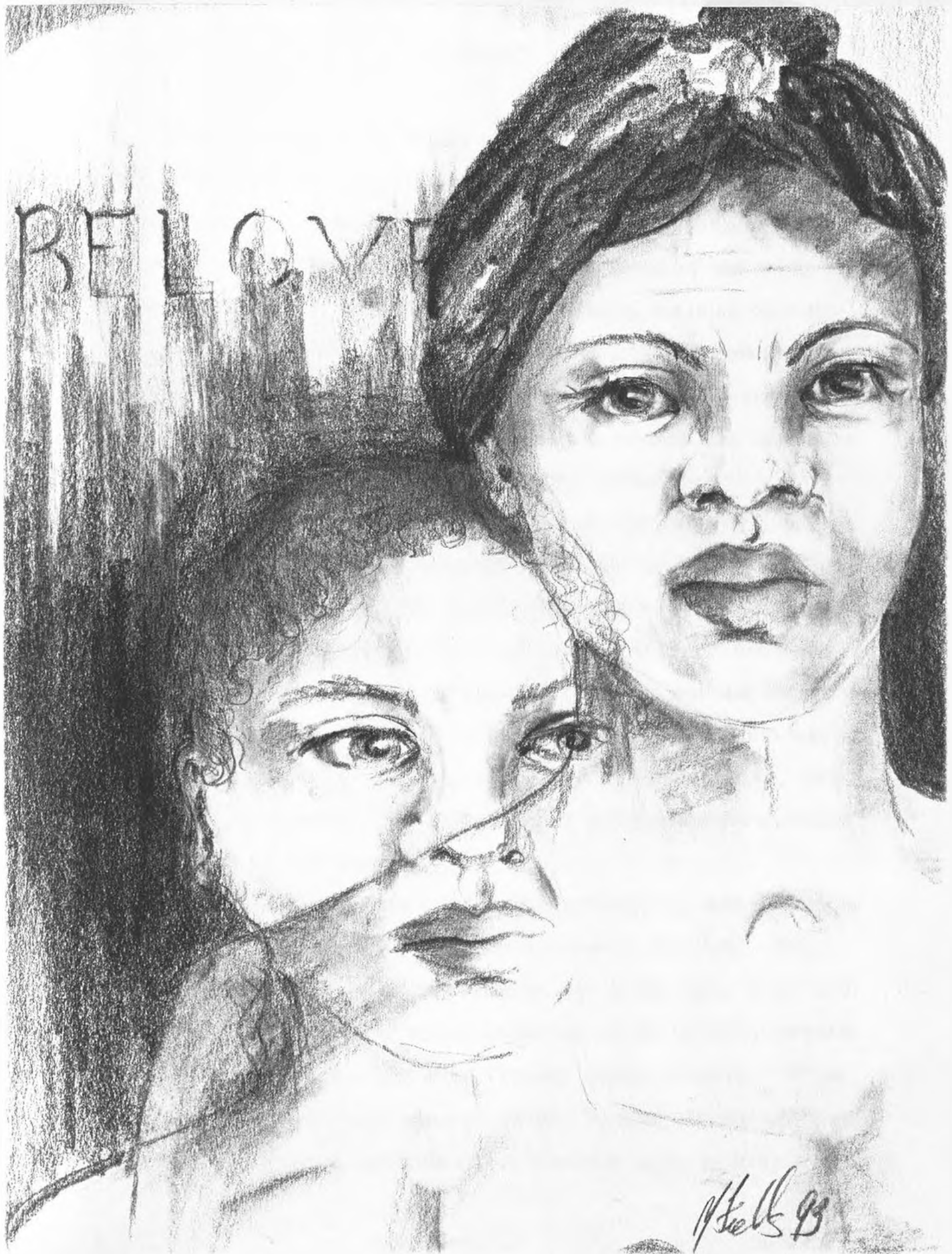
I have tried to capture this complexity of feeling in a charcoal drawing of Denver and Beloved in the cold house ["I'm Like This", Plate 3]. The technique is lift-off where the paper is darkened with charcoal, and lights are discovered by lifting off with an eraser. The result is a rather out of focus image, with striking bits of whiteness in the surrounding black. The two women have their hands lifted toward the light. Denver's pose is beseeching, on her knees, head down. Beloved's posture is exploring, reaching and looking toward the shafts of light. The light is not bright enough to make out the women completely, but rather it catches bits and pieces of an arm, hand, skirt, and the light reveals the transparency of Beloved who is dissolving in the darkness. I strove to have this piece capture the paradoxical mixture of joy and despair in life that Morrison relates with her use of light.

The graphite drawing of Sethe and a transparent Beloved ["Overlap", Plate 4] and her headstone attempts to instill the feeling of liminality that is pervasive in Morrison's scenes of light. Beloved exists some where between the grave and the living world. She is not fully in either place, rather she overlaps and fades into both.



Plate 3
"I'm Like This"

11x12 Charcoal on paper



BLOOD

Morrison uses blood differently than images of color, light and milk. She does call on a reader's preconceived notions about the image but unlike with other images she also creates a set of assumptions about blood within the first few pages of her work. The initial image of the baby's blood holds a deeper meaning than the mere physical violence, but it nonetheless shocks and horrifies in its sudden violent appearance. Blood arrives, disconnected and violent, amidst images of domesticity. Though blood is used less often than other images, it still manages to affect the reader deeply.

The initial encounter with blood in the first few pages of Beloved colors any other mention of blood later in the novel. The blood imagery throughout the novel cannot be examined without recalling the "blood like oil" that soaks Sethe's fingers. The first time I started to read this novel that passage made me put the book down and not pick it up again for five months. When I finally did read the book in its entirety and then again and then for a third time, that image was still horrific. Blood imagery is perhaps the most violent and powerful in the novel.

The violence of baby's blood is summoned up when Morrison uses blood as an adjective to describe a scene or situation. For example, Morrison writes of "the bloody side of the Ohio River" (30) to describe the slave state where Sethe lies in the grasses, pregnant, beaten and hunted. But the word "bloody" takes on more than one meaning. She suggest the place is bloody because slavery and the men who perpetuate it are killers. A run-away slave is hung from a

tree, burned in a fire or whipped until maimed. But blood cannot be mentioned without causing a reader to think of what happened on the free side, in Ohio. Recalling the blood like oil that pumps down Sethe's dress makes the reader wonder which really is the bloody side of the river, or if indeed both are. One assumes that violence and death exist only in Kentucky, on the side of the river where slavery is legal. But the killing crosses the river right into Baby Suggs' yard and into the wood shed. And the blood is not spilled by a slave master punishing a run-away slave, but by the slave herself, the victim her own sweet child. Both sides of the Ohio are bloody.

Morrison uses the adjective again when she describes Mister as hateful, "bloody too, and evil" (72). Is he described as such because he fights with other roosters, because he is ruthless and vicious and protective of his brood? Or is he bloody because he witnesses the killing of the Pauls in the trees, the destruction of Paul D's heart and the wrecking of Halle's mind and then displays his superiority to these men? The use of the word "bloody" leaves the reader recalling the initial violence of the shed, so the word is more than the mere description of a bird's behavior. Bloody describes the atrocities of slavery, the violence that allow Paul D to be less free, less whole than a rooster strutting on a tub.

A deeper meaning exists again when Denver "gives blood" to her mother's and grandmother's stories. On the surface this phrase merely means she is filling in the details that the older women left out. But Sethe and Baby purposely leave out the "blood" when they tell the stories. Their histories are filled with literal blood, their own and their children's. Too much life-blood of their loved ones, of their

people, has been spilled, and tales of this violent loss are too horrible to pass on, too hard for a child to hear.

Violence is recalled again when Paul D admires Sethe for her protectiveness toward her girls. She is described as having "blood in her eye" (115). In a figurative sense this blood is just her pride and flaring anger--perhaps her eyes widen to show veins in the whites. But this phrase conjures up images of the literal blood that covered Sethe when she defended her children from slavery. Ironically the defense of her children, the actual blood in her eye, is what Paul D cannot comprehend or accept.

Along with the figurative uses of blood, at certain points in the novel blood seems merely the literal substance without the connotations of violence or essence of life. But on closer reading these scenes can be seen as little reminders of the violence that surrounds the characters' lives. We read of a bloody Here Boy after he's been beaten by the ghost(12), Denver drowning in her mother's blood at birth (84), and "Roses of blood blossom[ing] on the blanket" after Baby had bathed and bandaged Sethe (93). These passages instill a feeling of the fragility of the body and the vulnerability of the characters.

Though Morrison creates a history that affects the reader's impression of blood, conventional assumptions also play a part. As I mentioned before when discussing the color red, our culture is swamped with physical violence. The cover of magazines and newspapers flash images of bloody bodies strewn across public squares and battlefields, across the globe. We are bombarded daily with such images of violence. Hence, on first reading, the blood of

the baby might only be seen as representing the physical violence that is a result of desperation. Though that element is certainly present, perhaps the more significant is Morrison's use of blood to comment on violence done to emotions and the mind.

The overwhelming use of blood in this novel is connected to this type of violence--overwhelming, not in amount, but in magnitude and force. Traditional assumptions of physical violence that are tied to blood are not seen in many passages. Rather, blood becomes a study of mental and emotional anguish and brutalization. In looking at the places in Beloved where baby's blood is discussed, the words themselves are not violent; they are calm, removed, disembodied. This detached narration has a more horrifying effect than if the passage screamed with death and destruction.

The first introduction to baby's blood in the novel comes from Sethe's "rememory" of trading her body for the engraving on her baby's headstone. She recalls that the ten minutes of prostitution were "longer than life, more alive, more pulsating than the baby blood that soaked her fingers like oil" (5). This disembodied remembrance of the killing is horrific--what could cause a person to be so disengaged, so disconnected from self that the moments of killing her children have so little substance or reality? Her calm recollection implies that there was lucidity at the point of the killing; she works carefully and thoroughly. The revulsion then is not in the physical violence itself which holds no hate, insanity or passion, but rather in the underlying force that caused this type of reaction initially. The baby's oily blood marks the creeping, sneaking, violence that causes Sethe's twenty-eight days of free, happy life to

end. The spilling of baby blood marks the evils of slavery that drove Sethe to this act not the killing itself. Sethe's decision to draw her own children's blood rather than allow them to be taken back to Sweet Home by schoolteacher shows the emotional and mental violence done to slaves--the brutality that scarred Paul D's red heart, the emotional rape that caused Halle to lose his mind, the cold-blooded listing of Sethe's animalistic traits that makes her shiver and back away in horror. Emotional and mental outrage causes Sethe to kill her children. She refuses to let their parts be listed on paper, to have their minds destroyed by cruelty. The baby's blood marks the violence slavery does to the soul.

We see the embodiment of this violence in the distanced, detailed account of the killing, made terrifying because of schoolteacher's detached point of view. He is a manifestation of subversive violence that corrupts a person's mental health, destroys his/her humanity. Not only is he the reason for Sethe's action, but his view of the action is brutal and almost impossible to stomach. He describes the dead and dying as economic losses. "Right off it was clear, to schoolteacher especially, that there was nothing there to claim..." (149) He sees that the children are gone, and that the "main one" had gone wild. The view of the baby's dying is almost a description of a machine--"a third pumped blood down the dress of the main one" (149). His view is unattached, disconnected. The baby is just pumping blood down a dress, not losing her life with every weak heart-beat. Juxtaposed to that image is one of schoolteacher recalling the chastisement of the over-rough nephew. Schoolteacher equates the violation of Sethe (he refers to over-beating, not the

stealing of her milk) to the mishandling of a horse or hound, telling the boys that if one mishandles an animal it will never be fully tame again. This sort of brutal apathy is what Sethe wants to keep her children from at any cost. Yet the power of Sethe's choice is trivialized by the sheer stupidity, blindness, indifference of the slave owners. Their explanation for the killing, that it was the result of a whipping, makes Sethe's decision seem petty. The whites' understanding of the murder disregards the outrageousness of the mother's choice--to kill what she loves best with her own hands, or see it taken from her and slowly destroyed, sullied. She chooses their freedom through blood.

As with the initial reference to baby blood, this scene of blood does not mark a purely physical act of violence. It highlights the insane, inhuman reaction of those who perpetuate slavery and the results of this violence on the victim. Schoolteacher's reaction to the baby's blood is far more horrific than the blood itself. His cruel detachment and economic calculations override the violence of the saw. This focus on emotional violence is reinforced when Sethe describes the torture of killing her baby. She relates

what it took to drag the teeth of the saw under the little chin; to feel the baby blood pump like oil in her hands; to hold her face so her head would stay on; to squeeze her so she could absorb, still, the death spasms that shot through that adored body, plump and sweet with life (251).

This is one of the most moving, poignant, horrible scenes in the novel and the pain lies not so much in the baby's death, as in Sethe's emotional anguish--anguish that is a result of knowing what slavery

consists of and having to make a choice to protect her children from that cruelty.

Blood marks the violence of slavery again when Stamp recalls the smell of the fire in which lynch victims were burned . "He smelled skin, skin and hot blood. The skin was one thing, but human blood cooked in a lynch fire was a whole other thing. The stench stank" (180-1). The smell pervades the newspaper, legal documents, letters of friends and family, even the mouths of witnesses. The magnitude of the stench is what makes this image so violent--the inescapable, ubiquitous smell of human blood "poured out" and burnt as a result of trying to escape the torture of an oppressive, life-stifling existence.

Blood as an image takes on a complexity when it becomes a representation of the violent existence that most of the characters endure. Stamp talks to Baby Suggs about blood after she has decided to ponder color, asking, "Nothing left for us but pour out our own blood?"(179). On one level he refers to Sethe's action in the shed, the violence that takes place, the loss of life. But "pour out our own blood" can also refer to a community that allows itself to be invaded and conquered by slave catchers, a community which forces one of its members to be destroyed because of petty vengeance. His reference can also have an even smaller, more personal connection to Baby and Stamp. What Baby Suggs has decided to do is give up on a world that allows men to come into her yard. She pours her love, energy, feeling, desire for life onto the ground--she pours out her blood.

But blood in Beloved is not always a sign of violence; it is also a symbol of life-energy and the vital desire to exist that makes a person whole. As with other images, Morrison once again creates a complexity of meaning, preventing the reader from maintaining limiting personal or cultural assumptions that might affect understanding of an issue or theme or make for an oversimplified grasp of them. Morrison highlights the importance of both violence and life by juxtaposing these two contradictory meanings. Images of blood as life become more striking when they follow scenes filled with bloody brutality.

One such scene is Denver's ingestion of her murdered sister's blood. This passage, on first reading, may seem merely a savage and disgusting act, but blood in the end becomes a bond that unites the lives of the sisters in this world and the next. Disgust is the initial reaction to Denver's nursing from the bloody breast, partly because the scene follows a reference to white folks' responsibility to protect the Negroes from the "cannibal life they preferred" (151). Denver is cannibalistic in her drinking of human blood. But Morrison does not leave us with this image of Denver as cannibal. She twists this initially disgusting and violent scene into a reaffirmation of life. Denver's later pride in the act turns it away from the physically gruesome. Rather than a sick and cannibalistic action that the white, slave-owning world suggests, the ingestion of blood becomes an unbreakable bond between sisters. She takes the violence from the blood and turns it into an affirmation of connectedness saying, "Beloved is my sister. I swallowed her blood right along with my mother's milk....she was my secret company until Paul D came...ever

since I was little she was my company" (205). Here blood is neither physical nor emotional violence; it celebrates the connection of lives.

Blood indicates life once more with the thawing in Paul D's veins. Paul D's blood contains emotion, passion and the vulnerability of humanness. After his confrontation with Mister, Paul D starts to shake with the unthawing of his blood that has been frozen for twenty years. Ironically, so soon after discovering this life-energy coursing through his body, he is forced kill it in order to stay sane. Every day in Alfred, Georgia he stops the shaking with a sledge hammer. He hammers to still the trembling, turning his red, living heart into a tobacco tin sealed with rust. He stops his roiling blood and so stops any sort of feeling. Later, his blood flows once again, his life-energy returns with the restoration of his red, red heart. The flowing blood and beating heart allows him to return to and remain with the woman he loves.

Love and a celebration of life-energy is also seen when Stamp picks blackberries. Because he is so filled with life, exuberance and the beauty of the world, Stamp goes to untold lengths to gather berries that "taste like church" (136). His act is nearly religious. He is raked by the thorns and with the spilling of his blood he becomes a sacrificial figure. His blood is a trade off for the beauty and goodness that he finds in baby Denver and her mother's safe arrival to Ohio.

Morrison surprises the reader and invigorates the text with her unique use of blood in the novel. The themes of violence and life-energy are intensified and enriched when the same image is used to describe these two, opposing issues. Because blood is the

essence of life, it can become an ultimate symbol of violence done to an individual, a symbol of the violation and suppression of that life force. But Morrison prevents the reader from maintaining solely traditional assumptions about the image, turning blood into a symbol of joy and life-energy as well as death and violence.

TREES

Trees, like other images in Beloved, are ambiguous, complex symbols, made so not because of their inherent traits but because of the varied interactions each character has with trees. They are holy but amoral, timeless but closely rooted to the past. They are sinless killers and thoughtless protectors. Morrison uses this multifaceted image to describe safety, community and the inability to escape the past.

Trees provide safety in many ways as I discussed when analyzing the color green. For Denver, the boxwood is a safe, secret place where she is able to be whomever she wants. The tall trees protect her from the hurt of the outside world, from her mother (and her secrets), from loneliness that "Wore her out. Wore her out." She is "Veiled and protected by the live green walls, she felt ripe and clear, and salvation was as easy as a wish" (29). The trees surrounding The Clearing serve nearly the same purpose though they are less intimate than Denver's boxwood. They hide and protect the people that come there to worship, who gather in semi-secret (not from each other but from the white community). The people wait in the trees, protected, until Baby calls them forth (87). The trees are a sort of silent, non-judging audience that "rings" with the sound of the people's voices. Later the path to the Clearing becomes popular, but the feel of the place is still safe, "still arched over with trees dropping buckeyes onto the grass below" (89). Trees continue to shelter the place to which Sethe can return.

Trees continue to be a sheltering force when Sethe, Beloved and Denver skate on the frozen pond. The trees hide them from the outside world and the women are left together to make a connection, build a bond without scrutiny from the community or any other. "The live oak and soughing pine on the banks enclosed them and absorbed their laughter" (174). Morrison repeats the phrase "Nobody saw them falling" four times, enforcing the notion of isolation and security that the trees provide, a contrast to all that has previously been seen and judged.

The safety and shelter Paul D finds in trees probably ties him more closely to this aspect of nature than any other character in the novel. Trees--until he comes across the one on Sethe's back--have only been friends and guides through a life of pain and fear. Trees offer safety to Paul D when he is on the run, hiding him when there is no one else who is able or willing, and guiding him as he flees north from slavery. The Cherokee tell him to "Follow the tree flowers" (112). He makes his way north "rac[ing] from dogwood to blossoming peach. When they thinned out he headed for the cherry blossoms, then magnolia, chinaberry, pecan, walnut and prickly pear" (112). Trees are his map to freedom.

Trees are Paul D's comfort while a slave in Kentucky. He names a tree "Brother" in Sweet Home, finding his family and community in a sycamore. Morrison comments on the need for stability with this image. Paul D finds something unchanging and seemingly timeless that gives him comfort in a life where nothing is stable, nothing is his own, not even himself. Paul D describes his love as like a tree in Alfred, Georgia, not a huge one like Brother, but

small and secret like the tiny aspen sapling that confirms the life he is trying to kill with a sledgehammer. He finds protection, community, safety and love in trees.

These emotions are in stark contrast to Paul D's after-sex repulsion of Sethe's tree-like scar. He refuses to recognize the twisted tangle of healed slashes as a tree. Only the shape reminds him of the beauty and ease of real trees which are so different from the one that is filled with pain on Sethe's back. He remembers that "trees were inviting; things you could trust and be near; talk to if you wanted to" (21), and the clump of scars on Sethe's back are far from inviting or peaceful. This juxtaposition of Sethe's twisted tree to the memory of Paul D's lovely trees makes both images more striking, highlighting the variety of experiences that these characters have been through. For Paul D trees are symbols of safety, security and a type of community in a world that offers no stability. For Sethe, trees are something quite different.

Sethe remembers the beauty of the Sweet Home trees as does Paul D, but the image is tainted by the horrors of the past. The branches, leaves and roots of the many trees in her life bind her inescapably to the life of slavery and all its pain. She remembers her lost boys who once played in the trees and the Paul's who were hung in those trees. She dreams of her boys half hidden in the boughs, only their legs showing, recalling that "she saw only their parts in trees" (86), a phrase which conjures up images of the decapitated, mutilated Pauls that hang in the sycamores after the failed revolt. Sethe's remembrance of trees bring guilt; "It shamed her-- remembering the wonderful soughing trees rather than the boys.

Try as she might to make it otherwise, the sycamores beat out the children every time" (6). Her memories of trees are painful and filled with self-reproach. These trees are not the helpful, loving, protecting beings that they are for Paul D. Trees commit a kind of murder because of their use in the hanging of the Pauls. Trees tie her to the past which haunts her, "made her wonder if hell was a pretty place too. Fire and brimstone all right, but hidden in lacy groves" (6). Morrison uses trees as a way for Sethe to recount the past that she wishes to hold at bay. The trees bind her to her life at Sweet Home despite the horror they incur, despite the fact that "there was not a leaf on that farm that did not make her want to scream" (6), and her inability to forget these trees reflects the potency of the past.

The tree on Sethe's back ties her more tightly to her life of slavery than any other character in the novel. The chokecherry tree of scars are perhaps the most powerful symbol of the past in the novel and which can be seen in a diversity of ways. Like a real tree, it is ancient--the beating and scarring of slaves lasted two hundred years. Its roots tie her to the past of pain. The weight of the scars holds her in one place, preventing her from making a permanent escape from the slain baby, the memories of Baby Suggs, or the sweet recollection of twenty eight days of happy life. Sethe tells Paul D, "'I got a tree on my back and a haint in my house, and nothing in between but the daughter I am holding in my arms. No more running'" (15-6). She cannot, will not escape the past. But the tree also seems a sort of pride. Sethe never refers to her back as covered with scars, only ever as a tree. When Paul D takes her literally and

tries to insist there is nothing growing on her back Sethe retorts, "it's there all the same" (15). The scars that tie her to the past, recalling a nightmarish existence, also give her an odd sort of stability, a root structure that allows her to withstand horrors to come.

Trees are deadly once again when Morrison uses them to describe the mental and emotional separation of Sethe and Paul D. The image is as striking and horrible as the indifferent sycamores that hung the Pauls, or the chokecherry tree on Sethe's back. A forest comes between Paul D and Sethe and it is much more efficient at separating them than a wall. A wall can be scaled, shouted over, knocked down. But this forest "sprang up between them; trackless and quiet" (165). It is huge, ancient, immovable. To traverse it is impossible; there are no trails and one would lose oneself forever. To cut it down would also be unimaginable--it would take weeks to chop one tree. Climb a tree to see over the top and the green would go on like an infinite sea. These trees have no care for the people whom they separate--they exist independently of any human. And just as the literal trees cause pain at Sweet Home, these figurative trees do so as well by destroying a relationship, dividing a whole in two.

These tree images are not as graphically shocking as blood or milk, but like these other images, trees are an important unifying image. As with repetition of shapes and colors in a painting, the recurring image of trees, and other images, give a coherence and unity to a highly complex, non-linear novel. Specifically, trees instill a feeling of security and solidity while paradoxically are also involved in killing. More importantly they are a device Morrison

uses so that her characters can recall the past against their will--most of the images of Sweet Home are filled with trees, as are the memories of Alfred, Georgia and Paul D's flight north. Trees with their ancient roots tangle these characters inextricably with the past.

In my charcoal drawing I have represented this aspect of trees ["Root Bound", Plate 5]. I chose black and white for several reasons. The work is not in color because Morrison clearly excludes color in the majority of her descriptions of trees--they are blossoming, lacy and huge, but rarely green. As I discussed in my previous analysis of the color, green represents safety and the trees in Sethe's life are anything but safe. I also chose to use charcoal on white in order to reinforce the feeling of the past, rather than a vibrant life in the present, and aesthetically black and white produce a more stark and startling effect because of the contrasting lights and darks. In the work I attempt to represent a Sethe who is trying to forget, trying to be autonomous from community and the past that continues to haunt her. But her personal tree is a constant reminder of the stolen milk, the following loss of Halle and the eventual killing of her own child. It connects her, with its roots, to the things of the past. She can pull as hard as she can from those memories, but is inevitably reminded by the ghost, by the return of Paul D, by the rebirth of Beloved, by the rejoining of the community. In my work I have left her in ambivalence, neither separated from, nor reunited with the community and the past. This liminal stage has been her existence for eighteen years, and I symbolized this by creating an ambiguity about whether or not she will be able to either break the roots, or incorporate them into her present life.



Plate 5
"Root Bound"

36x50 Charcoal on board

FOOD

Food in Beloved is frequently used as a mark of change. When something in the lives of these characters is disrupted--either positively or negatively--they often highlight it with a meal. Food has the connotation of domesticity, safety and the nurturing of home and hearth but Morrison uses these assumption as she has with other images to make the issue of change more marked and jarring. A slave's life is hardly stable, and nearly never includes a family and a home--Baby Suggs only gets to keep one of her many children and Sethe pretends to make a home out of her mistress's things by attaching a sprig of flowers to the handle of the iron. Hence, when these characters do find family and home, the importance of domesticity is heightened. By tying food (with all its positive connotations of the home) to change, Morrison increases the impact of disruptions. Nearly every image of food is related not to the comforting stability found at the hearth, but rather a tearing apart of the fragile home that exists.

This is certainly the case when Paul D first arrives at 124. Paul D's appearance is marked with food, and during this welcoming meal the strange type of familial order that had existed in the house for eighteen years is torn apart. Sethe tells Denver to fire up the stove, explaining, "Can't have a friend stop by and don't feed him" (14). Sethe has not seen Paul D for eighteen years, and his sudden appearance into their lives changes all relationships in the house. Denver is displaced, confused and becomes even more isolated than

before by her mother's new relationship with a strange man from the past. The ghost, her companion during the lonely, silent years, is suddenly removed. Denver's existence in her home is upset, like the pan of burnt biscuits dumped on the floor which Denver gathers and eats "slowly, methodically, miserably" (19). Her distasteful meal is a mark of the disruption brought to her house. Her home is literally torn apart; the food that should nourish and support her is burnt and broken on the floor. Paul D's arrival and the subsequent departure of the ghost disrupts domesticity and family stability and the food that is typically a sign of welcome and the home becomes the symbol of disruption and change.

Denver eats during a time of upheaval again when she is sent from the room and must finish her meal outside. In this scene she is still miserable and unwilling to deal with the disruption Paul D brought to the house. Sethe scolds her daughter for being rude to Paul D, telling her to leave the room, and "Denver picked up her plate and left the table but not before adding a chicken back and more bread to the heap she was carrying away" (43). Here she heaps her plate with food, attempting to hold on to the comfort of the kitchen during a frightfully unstable time. Denver is literally sent from the hearth probably the first time in her life. This sudden dismissal is a shocking change, and she tries to restore the safety, warmth and normalcy with the food she carries away with her.

Food again marks a shift from the normal when corn is eaten at Sweet Home after Sethe and Halle's marriage. The breaking and then roasting of corn marks the long awaited decision that Sethe makes in terms of her domesticity--she chooses a husband. Sethe remembers

the smell of roasting corn when talking about her "honeymoon" with Halle. Not only is this food a marker to her marriage and move to Halle's pallet, but the corn becomes a metaphor for sex, passion and "initiation." The ripping of the "tight sheath," exposing of the "shy rows" and "how quick the jailed-up flavor ran free" (27) all conjure up images of virginity, consummation and passion let loose. There is physical change, and Sethe moves into the world of home and family by becoming a wife.

Eighteen years later Sethe marks her bonding to another man she loves with food. She thinks about a new life with Paul D, indicating the change with plans for a special dinner, "something she would do just so--to launch her newer, stronger life with a tender man" (99). Her excitement at the change is clear in the detailed descriptions of the dinner she will prepare with "litty bitty potatoes browned on all sides, heavy on the pepper; snap beans seasoned with rind; yellow squash sprinkled with vinegar and sugar" (99) and she goes on. Before this day, she thinks very little of cooking. The food she and Denver usually eat are left-overs from the restaurant where she works. She prepares food everyday that has absolutely no meaning, no significance except to keep their bodies alive and healthy. But when she dreams of the meal she wants to make it becomes a celebration of a change in the routine of life and again this divergence is into the realm of domesticity, a family life with her new man.

Paul D makes a similar shift into domesticity. He leaps from life on the run, to months of sheets, a widow woman and home life. This shift is marked with the eating of pork sausage. The food fills

Paul D and changes him. "He vowed that night, full of pork, deep in luxury, that he would never leave her" (131). This statement comes from a man who had never been grateful to a woman before, a man without family or home. Paul D claims sausage is the worst thing to give a starving man. This may be because the meat is too rich, heavy and upsetting for a stomach that has eaten nothing but berries and roots for who knows how long. Or it could be that precisely because the sausage is so hot, juicy, and rich that it causes the wandering, starving man to stay in one place for eighteen months, and is therefore bad because of its ability to change a roving man into a housed one. Pork sausage signifies both the softness of domesticity and Paul D's consumption of this rich food marks a change from the hard scrounging life he had been living.

Safety and domesticity is overturned at the end of the novel when Sethe feeds the adult Beloved exclusively--to the point of her own starvation. A sort of role reversal takes place with Beloved in charge and Sethe as pleaser, like a child. Yet Beloved is still the selfish one and Sethe like the mother that she is, supplies nourishment for her daughter. She spends all the savings on "fancy food" and dresses to please Beloved, grows thin while Beloved grows fat. Domesticity is twisted and the image of the home is corrupted with this imbalance of food.

The introduction of "outside food" breaks this unhealthy ritual and restores a sort of stability to the demented home. Denver's search for food out into a world that has been foreign and untouchable to her for years results in her emotional growth. Venturing away from the familiarity of 124, she brings back white

beans, rabbit and eggs (248-9). She halts the destruction of her home with food, restoring order to the two older women's relationship by changing the control of power--Beloved no longer has the ability to slowly starve her mother into a child, change her into the powerless one. Through her quest for food, Denver makes friends, finds a job and grows into the woman she might have been in a happier house.

Perhaps the most significant change marked by food in the novel is the after the feast given by Baby Suggs. The dinner celebrates a shift in family structure with the new arrival of Baby's grandchildren and her son's wife. But food that is meant to be a mark of joy becomes the destroyer of the hearth--overabundance alters the people's attitudes and behaviors. Baby Suggs offers the safety of the hearth, nourishment, laughter and togetherness for the whole town for one day, but her "loving, cooking, cooking loving" cannot go together to such an extent; the community equates the supply of food with the miracle of the loaves and fishes and Jesus, not with an old ex-slave. The people resent her unearthly ability, and the result is white men in Baby Suggs' yard and a blood-filled woodshed. Giving, intended to be saving, is instead damning, and the miracle of feeding hundreds turns into a nightmare. Here, more than anywhere else in the novel, food is a demarcation of the destruction of family, domesticity, and the safety of the hearth--It is a change of the worst order.

As with Morrison's use of other images, food as a symbol relies heavily on a reader's conventional assumptions. The disruption of the home is more startling when connected to food because

traditionally food is closely tied with domesticity and safety. Just as the reader begins to feel a sort of security in the preparation of a healthy and celebratory meal, the scene is shattered with a sudden shift in structure--a character makes a significant change, or the family is torn apart in some way. Morrison complicates her scenes with this and other images, stunning the reader, forcing him/her to reconsider, rethink an issue or theme. Morrison does not allow her audience to move smoothly through the book, but rather upsets, surprises and shakes them into thought.

The mixed media piece ["Disrupted Home", Plate 6] depicts a world of domestic order moving to disorder. In the center Sethe and Paul D embrace, representing the change that comes to 124, to Denver, change that affects the balance of the home. Like in the novel, change in my picture is reflected in food. On the right half of the paper the neatly stacked jars of jam represent the safety and security of the home. But this order leads into disruption and destruction on the left side of the work, with Denver kneeling before the shattered jars, her back to the central figures, her back turned away from the domestic calm of the stacked jars.

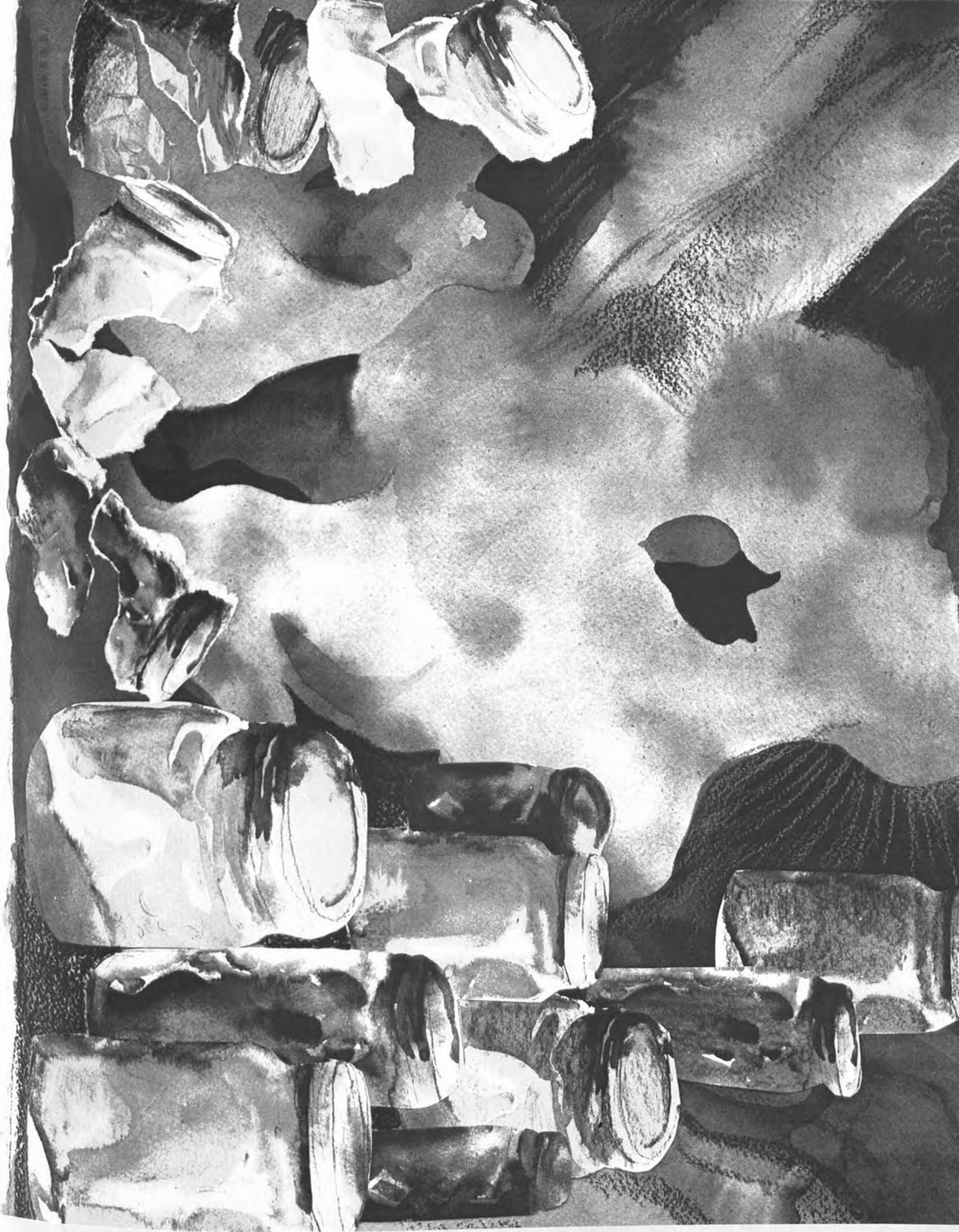


Plate 6
"Disrupted Home"

10x12 Watercolor/collage

WATER

Water, like trees, is an amoral aspect of nature. But unlike water, it is less actively involved as a force in characters' lives. Water is less morally ambiguous than trees--no one is killed by water or emotionally held to the past by water, there isn't the close personal connection by characters. In most cases, water is a distanced symbol for birth, baptism and renewal.

Beloved is the character most closely linked to water which, in a sense, gives birth to her in her adult form. She comes from the world of the dead, back into the one of the living, emerging from the river "fully clothed" (50) and streaming with water. Like a newborn, Beloved is nearly helpless, "Sopping wet and breathing shallow she spent those hours trying to negotiate the weight of her eyelids" (50). Having come from the water, Beloved returns to it repeatedly. She stands in the stream with Denver to watch mating turtles and "the hem [of her skirt] darkened in the water" (105). The image of renewal is continued by these water turtles, and the clothes soaking up water reminds the reader of Beloved's earlier "birth" from the river.

Water is closely tied to Sethe and to birth as well. Beloved's "birth" back into the world of the living causes Sethe in a sense to relive the original birth. Suddenly and uncontrollably, she has to urinate, "and the water she voided was endless" (51). The image is of a pregnant woman's water breaking. The flood she creates reminds Sethe of Denver's birth and the river water that nearly filled

the boat in which she and Amy crouched. Sethe literally laid in the dark Ohio, the water she had to cross in order to attain freedom, a rebirth into a new life and "her own water broke loose to join it" (83). Water imagery pervades this scene of literal and figurative birth.

Again there is the symbol of rebirth associated with water when Paul D is released by the rain in Alfred, Georgia. The seemingly endless baptism of rain leads to the prisoners escape from hell. Chained in his box, Paul D is surrounded by rain and mud, "the water was above his ankles, flowing over the wooden plank he slept on" (110). When the mud collapses the men's cages, they fight, blind as newborns through the thick and unyielding substance. They dove "down through the mud under the bars, blind, groping...fighting up, reaching for air" (110). They eventually emerge into the cleansing rain, no longer prisoners, born again into life that need not be despised.

Water is a cleansing agent once more when Sethe wants to "lay it all down" (86). Water is a figurative cleanser, and image that washes away Sethe's hurt and burdens. "[Sethe's] heavy knives of defense against misery, regret, gall and hurt, she placed one by one on a bank where clear water rushed on below" (86). It's holy water associated with Baby Suggs Holy that clears Sethe of her pain, washing away the old life's struggles, making room for a new life.

Baby Suggs is also reborn, at the age of sixty, into a new life in the "city of water" (142). Freed, on the other side of the river, she feels her heart beating for the first time, enjoys her first free meal better than any other before.

Water continues to be an agent for joy in the novel when Sethe and her girls make the frozen stream their playground. They fill the air with their exuberant laughter and "holding hands, bracing each other, they swirled over the ice" (174). The water brings them together, rebuilding a bond between mother and children.

The bright, color pencil drawing ["Travels", plate 7] depicts both joy and the themes of birth that Morrison relates with her water imagery. The bright contrast between oranges and blues, as well as the strong diagonal movement gives the piece a feeling of vibrancy and joy. The notion of rebirth is examined with the repetition of Beloved in various stages of growth. She is on either side of the river, on the left in the world of pre-birth and death, on the right in the world of the living. Between these two worlds runs a river. From this river Beloved emerged into adult form--she is a fetus, a baby, an adult that is in turn with child. My piece relates the notions of cyclical birth that fills Morrison's novel as well as highlights the importance of water imagery to the notion of rebirth.



CONCLUSION

Morrison's Beloved is a work not easily forgotten. Much of the power of her writing lies in her ability to shock the reader out of his/her apathy. Morrison surprises the reader with her unique working of images and symbols, highlighting a theme or notion in such a way that he/she cannot overlook, or ignore its significance. In an interview with Nellie McKay, Morrison expresses her desire to affect the reader, saying, "I don't want to give my readers something to swallow. I want to give them something to feel and think about" (404). One cannot remain safely distanced from this novel.

Morrison's uniqueness results, first, from the vividness of her images which are made so in part by their repetition and connection throughout the novel. For example, a reader comes in contact with violence and baby's blood in the first few pages of the novel and having encountered baby's blood first, the reader then must recall the horrific "blood like oil" with every new mention of blood. Morrison uses blood throughout the work with a variety of seemingly conflicting meanings, to denote violence, life-energy or merely to describe a color. This repetition not only gives the novel a coherence, it makes images such as blood more vital, more brilliant because of the interesting and unique connections a reader must make--all blood gains an element of violence while also containing aspects of life-energy.

Morrison's writing, second, gains power and uniqueness from her ability to surprise the reader. One of the ways she does so is by manipulating, twisting what the reader is comfortable with. Morrison relates her attempt to play with convention in an interview

with Thomas LeClair saying, "I like to work with, to fret, the cliché, which is a cliché because the experience expressed in it is important...I like to dust off these clichés, dust off the language" (371). Ancient issues are examined in a shocking, new way, such as with the image of food. Food, heavy with conventional notions of domesticity, the hearth and safety, becomes the symbol for disruption and destruction of the home. Milk as an image works in a similar way. Traditionally, milk is associated with motherhood and nurturing, but Morrison perverts this convention when Sethe is raped of her milk and when Halle smears his face with butter. Morrison "frets" with the norm, creating vivid and unforgettable scenes with the manipulation of traditional assumptions.

Understatement is the third element that adds power to Morrison's work. She presents extremely important and painful scenes in a distanced, distracted manner. The result, rather than making a scene less significant, is a scene turned to high horror, such as in the passage where Sethe attempts to slay her children. Where the reader would expect to find gore and violence, he/she is instead stunned by both the gruesome calm of Sethe's actions and the business-like response of schoolteacher. For a society acclimated to physical violence, this understatement is extremely effective. The reader cannot be passive, simply letting the scene wash over him/her; the reader is engaged by Morrison's unique handling of an inherently violent passage.

With these aspects of Morrison's literature in mind, I come to my own art, conceived in response to Beloved. The process of creating art has lead me to a heightened understanding of the

devices Morrison uses to make her work so powerful. I must think, some times for days, about a particular scene when planning a painting or drawing. The most striking elements of the passage are generally what eventually dominate my work--the red in Mister's comb [Plate 2], the contrast of light and dark in the cold room [Plate 3], the ambiguity in Beloved and Sethe's relationship [Plate 4]. My hope is the same as Morrison says she has for her own work, to affect the viewer on multiple levels. Of this she says, "I want a very strong visceral and emotional response as well as a very clear intellectual response" (Critical Perspectives 404). On first impact, my work should engage the reader's emotions and then on closer and prolonged examination, the viewer should find Morrison's themes imbedded in the picture causing him/her to reassess a particular scene, its meaning and its implications toward the text as a whole.

In coming to the end of my work, I found I have answered my original question, "How does Morrison create such a powerful, evocative work?" Morrison's frequent non-conventional use of images such as color, blood, milk, light, trees, food and water, her shocking manipulation of cultural biases, and her surprising use of understatement lead to the profundity and power of her work. Through these devices she forces the reader to reassess his/her own assumptions and ponder the deeper meanings hidden behind an image. Morrison's arts calls upon the reader's imagination, engages his/her mind in such a way that Beloved is not soon or easily forgotten. Long after the cover is closed and the book returned to the shelf, Beloved continues to haunt.

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