

ESSAY: *Beloved* by Toni Morrison

Morrison's *Beloved* is the story of two ex-slaves, Sethe and Paul D, who must come to terms with themselves about their pasts. They are pasts that are ugly and brutal. Underlying this, much like Hawthorne's Hester Prynne, Sethe must not only come to terms with herself, but she must also come to terms with the community, and they with her. Though the community is a distant voice and appears not to be a strong element in this story, it is actually a crucial element because the lives of Sethe, Denver, and Baby Suggs pivot around the actions and reactions of the community in which they live.

A community can have both a positive or a negative effect on the individuals who live within it. Like individuals, a community is dynamic. It can change its attitude unpredictably. We see one of the more positive aspects of the community after Sethe is rescued by Stamp Paid. Many people within the community came to help Baby Suggs take care of Sethe and the four children. They offered physical comforts as well as moral support.

Sethe recalls how valuable this contact with the community was for her when she first came to Cincinnati. She says that the time spent with the people was "days of healing, ease and real talk... [and] days of company" (95). She explains further how important it was for her to know forty or fifty other Negroes, to know their views, their habits, what they had done, and their feelings of joy and sorrow. They taught her things, like the alphabet and stitching. More importantly, for the first time she was able to talk to other women about raising children. Being with these people also helped her get through the waiting for her husband.

So, in the beginning, contact with the community was a warm and positive experience for Sethe. The members accepted her without question and extended their hands of friendship and support. She was able to learn from them and to be comforted by them. Being part of a neighborhood and having female friends was a new experience for Sethe, and for the first time she learned how meaningful it was to have the support of so many others around her.

But almost as quickly as Sethe learned the positive aspects of a community, she also learned about its unpredictable negative nature. It was the jealous actions of this same community which triggered the tragic events that irrevocably changed and scarred her life forever. What began it all was innocent enough: a gift given by Stamp Paid to celebrate the survival of Sethe's newborn. This act of love grew into a community feast. But, strangely, out of this grew an evil jealousy from the community.

The feast given by Baby Suggs, wasn't originally intended to be a feast. She intended only to bake some pies with the blackberries Stamp brought them and to share them with a couple of friends. However, because of Baby's usual generous nature, sharing some pie with a couple of friends grew into a feast for ninety people. After the feast, however, instead of feeling grateful for the bounty of food and the enjoyment they had all experienced, the people became angry. They remembered all the food and called it "reckless generosity on display at 124" (137).

Just as the feast grew, so did the jealousy. It grew in intensity like a chain reaction, one thought leading to another as they talked over their fences the next day:

Where does she get it all, Baby Suggs, holy? Why is she and hers always the center of things? How come she always knows exactly what to do and when? Giving advice; passing messages; healing the sick, hiding fugitives, loving, cooking, cooking, loving, preaching, singing, dancing and loving everybody like it was her job and hers alone. (137)

This jealousy then changed to hateful spite. When Schoolteacher and the other white men came to find Sethe, those same neighbors saw them coming, and they knew who they were coming for. However, they maliciously ignored sending someone to warn Sethe and Baby Suggs. Because they had not been warned, Sethe and her four children were alone and unprotected when the white men came to take them back to slavery. This, then, precipitated Sethe's act of desperation to kill her own children, to "save" them from a horrible life of slavery. So, for Sethe, the chain-reaction that started as a gift of love and grew into a feast, then turned into jealousy and spitefulness, tragically led to the death of one of her children and a life of disdain and contempt towards her.

This spiteful act by the community also profoundly effected the lives of Baby Suggs and Denver. Baby had dedicated her life as a shield of love for anyone who needed it. She had experienced so much heartache under slavery, that when she was made a free woman, she decided to give of what she had to the Negroes in her community. All she had was love, so she gave it. But when the Negroes she had loved turned their backs on her because of her generosity and love, she simply couldn't understand this kind of cruelty. She felt she had nothing else to believe in and gave up on life completely. She went to bed to concentrate on something which was harmless: color. Stamp Paid says of her:

After sixty years of losing children to the people who chewed up her life and spit it out like a fish bone... to belong to a community of other free Negroes—to love and be loved by them, to counsel and be counseled, protect and be protected, feed and be fed—and then to have that community step back and hold itself at a distance—well, it could wear out even a Baby Suggs, holy. (177)

Although this tragic act marked the beginning of the end of Baby Suggs' life, it was, sadly, the beginning of Denver's life. Denver grew up knowing only contempt and scorn from the outside world. For her, anything that lay beyond her own yard was a world full of anger, scorn, and danger. As a result, she grew up in almost total isolation from the outside world. Her fear of that world prevented her from leaving her house for eighteen years, except on three occasions.

The first occasion was to attend Lady Jones' school. She was happy going there, but the other children avoided her. They would make "excuses and altered their pace not to walk with her" (252). Then when a boy asked about her mother's dark secret, the one they had always tried to hide from, she retreated into the safety of her home again. She felt the same disdainful attitude from the children that she had known from their parents.

The second time she left home was years later when she went to the carnival with her mother and Paul D. Denver was angry at her mother for allowing Paul D into their lives, so she went to the carnival with the attitude that she would do nothing to have fun. But at the carnival, Denver discovered that she was not being looked on with contempt by others, nor was her mother. In fact, some of the people gave greetings to her and nods of acknowledgement to Sethe. The narrator says, "Soothed by sugar, surrounded by a crowd of people who did not find her the main attraction, who, in fact, said, 'Hey, Denver,' every now and then, pleased her enough to consider the possibility that Paul D wasn't all that bad. . . the stares of other Negroes [were] kind, gentle, something Denver did not remember seeing in their faces." (48)

Although Denver's experience from the neighborhood people at the carnival was positive, she had spent so much of her life at home in isolation that she still feared the world beyond her yard. But, eventually, the need for survival forced her to go out to seek help. This was the third time she left the house, but this time the effort changed her life, as well as others, forever.

After Sethe lost her job and became ill and crazed by her obsession of Beloved, Denver realized that it was up to her to find a way to save her mother and sister from starvation. She was forced, then, to consider going out into the community for help. If she didn't, they would all die. Even though her recent experience at the carnival was good, she was fearful of going out because the bulk of her life had been lived in the shadow of the community's scorn. She was, then, unprepared for the kindness she received.

Denver's unselfish act of reaching out beyond her own fears to save her mother and sister was rewarded. It was a turning point for Denver, Sethe, and the community. Denver found an inner strength she never knew she had. For the first time, she was looking out for herself, as well as for others. "It was a new thought, having a self to look out for and preserve" (252).

Denver discovered that the people were very willing to help her. The knowledge that Denver and Sethe needed help traveled through the community. The people quickly responded by giving her food, and she also found work. But, surprisingly, the people went beyond this and took action to save Sethe when they learned she was being consumed by her murdered daughter's ghost. The narrator relates:

Maybe they were sorry for her. Or for Sethe. Maybe they were sorry for the years of their own disdain. . . . In any case, the personal pride, the arrogant claim staked out at 124 seemed to have run its course." (249)

At last the community's emotions had turned and this time the people were there to save Sethe from herself. Thirty people gathered together and walked to 124 to do something about the ghost. When Sethe saw them standing in her yard, she felt:

"it was as though the Clearing had come to her with all its head and simmering leaves, where the voices of women searched for the right combination, the key, the code, the sound that broke the back of words. . . . It broke over Sethe and she trembled like the baptized in its wash. (261)

For Sethe, the return of those who had so long ago befriended her was like a wonderful dream. Unfortunately, at the same moment, Mr. Bodwin drove up to pick up Denver. In Sethe's dazed and unbalanced state of mind, she was thrown back eighteen years before when she saw another white man with a hat drive up in a wagon. When in her delirium she flew out after him with an ice pick, the people in the crowd seized her before she could get to him; and thus, ironically, this time to save her from further disaster. A double irony is that Mr. Bodwin was the man who kept her from the gallows eighteen years before.

After eighteen long years of scorn and contempt, Sethe finally experienced the full circle of the community's emotions towards her. This time they saved her from harm and scared away the ghost of Beloved. Although the story's ending is left open, it seems likely that Sethe would recover and live a more satisfying life with Paul D, and in harmony again with the community. More significantly, when Denver reached out to the people for help, she received it. In doing so, she found power within herself and discovered that she could be self-sufficient. And by her call for help, the community finally realized it was time to put away their jealousy and resentment. Denver's unselfish act was the medication needed to treat this community infected with pride, arrogance, and hatred.

So, the community that Denver, Sethe, and Baby Suggs lived in had a large impact on their individual lives. The collective actions of a group of individuals can be a powerful force, both positive and negative. Although, in the end, it was the actions of one individual that changed the mindset of the community. Thus, as we see through Denver's experience at the end, an individual can likewise exert a force over a community. They are not mutually exclusive of one another; and each needs to come to terms with the other to seek harmony for their individual lives as well as for the community at large.