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Time Shifts in *Beloved*

“I never found out. It was a lot of them,” she said, what was getting clear and clearer as she folded and refolded damp laundry was the woman called Nan who took her hand and yanked her away from the pile before she could make the mark. Nan was the one she knew best, who was around all day, who nursed babies, cooked, had one good arm and half another. And who used different words. Words Sethe understood then but could neither recall nor repeat now. She believed that must be why she remembered so little before Sweet Home except singing and dancing and how crowded it was. (Morrison 73-74).

Time itself can be considered a character in Toni Morrison’s novel *Beloved*. It saturates the entirety of the novel—every character is aware of its existence and interacts with it as if it is a separate entity, something more than just a natural occurrence of daily life. Because of this, each character has no choice but to also confront time; flashes of the tortured past, the seemingly stagnant present, and the unknowable future almost attack the characters in varying degrees, and even characters such as Sethe, who are determined to live in the immediate present, must face the inevitability of time. However, the intensity of certain events calls for a blending of past and present; thus, Morrison uses time shifts as a way to show how intertwined these elements are in *Beloved*.

Of all the characters in the novel, Sethe poses the most resistance against time, though it is clear that she believes in the power of memory (*i.e.* the past). Until *Beloved*’s arrival, she is content to disremember her childhood and to an extent, her daughter, Denver, is content with living like Sethe’s life did not begin until her birth. Nonetheless, *Beloved*’s intrusion into their lives causes painful memories to bubble to the surface, and there is something so traumatic about

the destruction of identity and family at the hands of slavery that it cannot be encapsulated through simple recollections of events, nor can it be bound to a single moment in time—Morrison uses this idea and forces the reader in and out of memories, the past, and the present to help depict a clearer picture of these pains, consequently creating more realistic characters. The appearance and growth of Beloved's dominance opens doors to Sethe's memory that she thought had sealed shut, and soon, she can remember more than just Sweet Home and "singing and dancing and how crowded" life was before the Garners. She remembers her mother, the dehumanization caused by schoolteacher, and all other events that have led her to the present.

The jumps in time are also Morrison's way of both telling and showing the emotions of the text. If the novel had been laid out in a linear fashion, much of the jarring juxtaposition between passion and fear, betrayal and love, etc. would be lost. The time shifts also help make Beloved's anachronistic existence a believable influence of the plot: if the ghost of a dead baby can materialize as an adult woman and act as a living embodiment of the past, then the readers can naturally weave throughout the timeline of the novel.

If anything, the time shifts in *Beloved* serve as not only a window to the past, but also an opening to the future; they are Morrison's figurative manifestation of the past attacking the present to make way for the future.

Works Cited

Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*. New York: Vintage International, 2004.