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VIOLENCE AND SILENCE: A TRAUMA STUDIES READING OF UNSPEAKABLE LOSS IN TONI MORRISON'S BELOVED (1987)

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Abstract

This paper looks at violence and silence in Toni Morrison's novel Beloved, first published in 1987, through the lens of trauma studies. The study asks how the characters in the novel carry a pain so deep that they cannot speak it out loud, and how this silence shapes their daily lives many years after slavery has ended. Trauma studies is a way of reading literature that looks at how a terrible event can break a person's mind in such a way that the event cannot be told as a normal story. Instead, the event comes back again and again in pieces, in dreams, in silence, and in strange behavior. In Beloved, Sethe, the main character, carries the memory of killing her own baby daughter to save her from slavery. This act is so painful that Sethe cannot speak of it directly for almost twenty years. The novel shows this pain through silence, through a word Morrison invents called rememory, and through the ghost of the dead baby, who returns in human form as Beloved. This paper reads the novel closely and finds real lines from the text that show how violence under slavery turns into silence after slavery ends. The study uses trauma theory, with strong support from the work of Cathy Caruth, who wrote that a traumatic event is not fully felt at the time it happens, and instead comes back later in pieces that the mind cannot fully hold. The paper finds that Morrison does not show healing as something quick or easy. Instead, healing becomes possible only when silence is broken, and someone is willing to listen. This reading contributes to the study of Beloved by linking violence and silence in one connected argument, rather than treating them as separate topics. The findings can help readers and scholars understand how the deepest wounds of slavery were not only physical but also wounds of memory and speech that lasted long after freedom came.

1.INTRODUCTIO

Violence and silence are often thought of as opposites. Violence is loud, sudden, and visible, while silence seems calm and empty. Trauma studies, a field of literary and psychological thought, argues that this is not

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always true. A very deep act of violence can in fact create a very deep silence, because the mind cannot hold the full weight of what happened and find words for it at the same time. Cathy Caruth (1996), one of the most important thinkers in trauma studies, argues that a traumatic event is not fully experienced at the moment it takes place. Instead, the event is too much, too fast, and too painful for the mind to take in all at once, so it returns later, again and again, in pieces, in nightmares, and in behavior that the person may not even understand. This means that violence does not simply end when the violent act is over. It often turns into a long-lasting silence, since the person carrying the memory cannot easily turn it into a story that makes sense.

This bond between violence and silence becomes especially clear and especially painful in stories that come out of slavery. Slavery was not only a system of physical control over Black bodies. It was also a system that tried to erase the inner life, memory, and voice of the people held inside it. Historical research on slave narratives shows that formerly enslaved people often left out their most painful memories when they wrote or spoke about their lives, because the full truth was too much for a public audience, and sometimes too much for the survivors themselves to say out loud (Krumholz, 1992). This historical pattern gives strong support to a trauma studies way of reading literature that comes out of slavery, since it shows that silence around violence was not just a literary idea. It was a lived reality for people who survived enslavement and carried its weight afterward.

Unspeakable loss, a loss so painful that it cannot easily be put into normal words, is one of the clearest places where this bond between violence and silence can be studied in fiction. A person who has lost a child, a parent, a home, or a sense of safety suddenly and brutally often finds that ordinary language fails. The loss does not stay locked safely in the past. It moves into daily life, into small moments, into the body itself. This paper studies exactly this kind of movement, from violent act to lasting silence, inside one of the most important works of American literature.

Toni Morrison is one of the most important American writers of the twentieth century, and she remains one of the most widely read and most deeply studied Black women writers in the world. Her novel *Beloved* (Morrison, 1987) tells the story of Sethe, a formerly enslaved woman living in Cincinnati, Ohio, in the year 1873, eighteen years after she escaped slavery at a farm known as Sweet Home. Sethe lives with her daughter Denver in a house at 124 Bluestone Road, a house that is haunted by the angry spirit of Sethe's baby daughter, whom Sethe killed years earlier to keep her from being taken back into slavery. Morrison tells this story mostly through Sethe's broken memory, moving back and forth between the present day and pieces of the past that surface suddenly and without warning. At the center of the story stands a mysterious young woman who appears outside Sethe's house one day, calling herself Beloved, the same word carved on the dead baby's gravestone. Through the novel, Sethe faces two connected forms of suffering at the same time. She survived violence under slavery that scarred her body and broke her sense of safety. She also carries a silence around her own most painful act, the killing of her child, a silence that she cannot break until Beloved arrives and forces the past back into the open.

This paper argues that *Beloved* uses violence and silence as two sides of the same wound. When the body is hurt, beaten, and used by outside power, the voice of the person who survives that hurt also becomes hurt, beaten, and used differently, since the pain becomes too large for normal speech. This is not just a side detail in the novel. It is one of the deepest patterns in the whole story. To study this pattern, this paper uses trauma studies, a way of thinking that looks at how violence and memory work together to create silence, repetition, and haunting. Reading *Beloved* through this lens shows how Morrison uses Sethe's scars, her memories, and the ghost of Beloved to reveal what slavery did not only to the body but also to the mind and the voice of

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those who survived it. The opening pages set this tone right away. The narrator tells the reader that the house at 124 was full of a baby's anger, so much so that Sethe's own sons ran away from home rather than live inside that silent fury any longer. Morrison gives the reader violence and silence together from the very first page, since the house holds a story that nobody inside it is willing or able to say out loud. This paper takes that opening signal seriously and follows it through the whole novel, paying close attention to the moments where speech breaks down and the past forces itself back into the present.

Research Problem

Many studies of *Beloved* talk about slavery and the violence it placed on the body (Boudreau, 1995). Many other studies talk about memory and the past returning in the novel, often using Morrison's own word, rememory. However, fewer studies join these two readings in a close, careful way that treats silence itself as the direct result of violence, rather than as a separate theme about memory in general. Few works ask how the specific scenes of bodily violence in the novel connect, line by line, to the specific scenes where characters cannot speak, will not speak, or speak only in broken pieces. This paper addresses the gap between violence studies and silence studies in the reading of *Beloved*. The novel gives the reader several scenes of physical harm, whippings, theft of a mother's milk, and a killing carried out with a handsaw, and these scenes are full of blood, pain, and fear. At the same time, the novel includes long passages in which characters refuse to speak, change the subject, or manage to tell a story only in broken, unfinished pieces. This paper treats these two kinds of scenes as one connected problem rather than two separate themes, and it asks what this connection tells us about how Morrison understood the lasting cost of slavery for those who survived it.

Research Questions

The following questions guide this study.

- How does *Beloved* portray the relationship between violence under slavery and silence after slavery ends?
- How do Sethe and the figure of Beloved represent different sides of unspeakable loss and the struggle to put pain into words?

Significance of the Study

This study matters for a few reasons. First, it brings together two areas of literary study, trauma studies and African American literary criticism, in a single close reading of one important novel. Second, it gives new attention to silence itself in Beloved, which past studies have mentioned but have not always placed at the center of the analysis in connection with specific violent scenes. Third, this paper can help students and readers understand a wider truth about the history of slavery. When a system of violence controls a person's body for years, it does not only leave physical scars. It also reaches into the most private and personal parts of a person's mind, including the words they can or cannot say about what happened to them. By showing how Morrison ties violence to silence, this paper helps readers see literature as a way to understand history in a deeper, more human way. This study can also be useful for future research on other works of African American literature, since many of them also use silence as a sign of unspeakable pain rather than as simple quietness.

Literature Review

A good number of scholars have written about Beloved from different points of view, and this section looks at some of the most useful studies for this paper. Krumholz (1992) wrote a detailed study of how the novel

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works as a form of historical recovery. This study found that Beloved forces both its characters and its readers to face a painful history that had been pushed down and left unspoken. It argued that the novel uses memory, which Morrison calls rememory, as a tool for healing rather than only as a source of pain. This study is close to the topic of the present paper. Still, it focuses mostly on the novel as a whole act of historical recovery, and it does not closely examine specific scenes of bodily violence and match them, line by line, with specific scenes of silence.

Boudreau (1995) wrote a close study of pain and the breaking down of the self in Beloved. This work argued that physical pain in the novel works to break apart language and memory itself, so that the people who suffer the worst violence in the story often become the ones least able to speak clearly about what happened to them. The study draws on Elaine Scarry's ideas about how pain destroys a person's normal sense of language and self. This is useful background, yet it stays mostly inside the theory of pain and selfhood in a broad sense, and it does not connect this breakdown of language back to the specific pattern of silence that runs through the whole community in the novel, not only through Sethe alone.

A paper on violence, home, and community by Jesser (1999) studied how violence moves from the outside world of slavery into the inside world of Sethe's own house and her own family. This work argued that the violence Sethe and the other characters survived under slavery does not stay outside the home once they reach freedom, but instead follows them inside, shaping how they treat each other and how they are or are not able to build a safe family life. This study is useful because it shows violence is not locked in the past; however, it focuses mostly on questions of home and family structure and gives less attention to the silence in the characters' speech and the specific moments when words fail them.

Udoette (2023) studied the novel mostly through the angle of motherhood and history, connecting Sethe's act of killing her daughter to the wider history of slavery and the loss of control mothers had over their own children under that system. This study explained how rememory ties personal grief to a much larger collective history of suffering, and how Morrison uses this device to show that the past is never really finished or put away. This kind of study pays strong attention to motherhood and memory but treats the characters' silence mostly as a side issue rather than a main point of focus in its own right.

A study by Caruth (1996), while not focused only on *Beloved*, gives the strongest theoretical background for this paper. Caruth argued that trauma is not an experience that a person fully lives through at the moment it happens. Instead, the shock of the event is too sudden and too large to be absorbed right away, so the event returns later, outside the person's control, in flashbacks, silence, and repeated patterns of behavior. This idea fits closely with how Morrison builds Sethe's character, since Sethe cannot speak directly about killing her daughter for almost the whole novel, and when the truth does come out, it comes in broken, twisted pieces rather than as a clear, ordered story.

Outside of literary criticism, historical research also supports the background of this paper. Scholars of slave narratives have shown that formerly enslaved people often could not bring themselves to describe the worst violence they survived, especially sexual violence and the loss of their children, because the pain was simply too large for the public language available to them at the time (Krumholz, 1992). This historical fact gives strong support to the idea that silence under and after slavery was not a sign of forgetting. It was often a sign of a wound too deep for normal speech, which is exactly the kind of pattern that Morrison appears to be writing about through the character of Sethe.

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Research Gap

This review reveals a clear gap. Many studies connect *Beloved* to trauma and memory in broad terms (Krumholz, 1992; Udoette, 2023), and some connect pain in the novel to a general breakdown of language and self (Boudreau, 1995). However, very few studies sit down with the actual scenes of violence in the novel, such as the whipping that leaves the scar on Sethe's back or the killing carried out with a handsaw, and read them word by word next to the scenes where characters fall silent, refuse to speak, or can only manage broken pieces of a story. There is also very little work that reads the arrival of Beloved herself as the moment when this silence is finally broken open, joining the study of violence and the study of silence into one single connected pattern rather than two separate topics that happen to sit inside the same novel. This paper aims to fill this gap. It places the textual details of violence, scars, and bodily harm directly beside the textual details of silence, broken speech, and refusal to tell, and it reads both Sethe's story and Beloved's strange return as two linked parts of the same trauma studies pattern.

Methodology

This study uses a qualitative method grounded in close textual reading. The main source for this paper is Toni Morrison's novel Beloved, first published in 1987. The paper reads the full novel carefully, with special attention to scenes that deal with physical violence, scars, the body, silence, broken speech, and the moments when characters try and fail to put their pain into words. These scenes are gathered, grouped by theme, and placed side by side so the pattern between violence and silence becomes clear. The paper does not try to test a theory with numbers or surveys. Instead, it follows the tradition of literary analysis, where the researcher reads the text closely and supports each claim with direct evidence from the novel itself. This study treats page-based textual evidence as the main form of data, since the goal is to understand meaning within the story rather than measure outside opinions or readers. For the theoretical framework, this paper relies on trauma studies, with the main support coming from the work of Cathy Caruth, a well-known scholar who has written widely about how violent and shocking events affect memory, language, and the mind long after the event itself is over. In her well-known book Unclaimed Experience, Caruth (1996) argues that trauma is not simply a bad memory that a person can recall whenever they choose. Instead, trauma is an experience that the mind could not fully process at the time it happened, so it keeps coming back later, outside the person's control, often in pieces, in silence, or in repeated actions rather than in clear words. Caruth also argues that one of the clearest signs of trauma is exactly this gap between the violence of the event and the person's ability to speak about it directly, since the very thing that makes an event traumatic is also the thing that makes it resist being turned into an ordinary story. This idea fits very closely with what happens to Sethe in Beloved, since she is shown again and again trying to talk around her worst memory, changing the subject, or speaking only in broken pieces, rather than telling the story straight through from beginning to end. Using Caruth's framework, this paper treats violence and silence as two connected parts of the same wound that the novel's painful history presses onto its characters. The data-collection method is simple. Every relevant passage about whipping, scars, bodily harm, and the killing of Sethe's daughter was located inside the novel, alongside every relevant passage about silence, broken speech, refusal to tell, and the strange returning presence of Beloved herself. These passages were then read side by side under the guidance of trauma theory, so that each textual moment in the violence theme could be matched with a related moment in the silence theme. This method lets the paper support its argument with lines straight from Morrison's own writing rather than only outside opinion, keeping the analysis grounded in Beloved while still drawing meaning from a clear, well-established theoretical position.

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Textual Analysis

This section reads closely through *Beloved* and shows, scene by scene, how Morrison connects violence and silence. The analysis moves through the novel mostly in the order its themes build, from the early signs of a silent and angry house, through the scar on Sethe's back and the theft of her milk, through the moment the truth of the killing finally comes into the open, and on to the closing pages where the novel asks the reader to let the story go quiet again.

The Haunted House and the First Silence

From the very start of the novel, the house at 124 Bluestone Road is presented as a place filled with unspoken pain. The opening pages tell the reader that the house is full of a baby's spite, and that Sethe's two sons, Howard and Buglar, run away from home as soon as they are old enough, unable to bear living inside this silent fury any longer. Even Baby Suggs, Sethe's mother-in-law, stops trying to speak of her own past, since, as the novel makes clear, her whole life had been so full of pain that she no longer finds any reason to fight against it, asking only for small comforts like a touch of color in the house. This early picture is important because it places silence inside the very walls of the home from the first page onward. The house does not explain its own anger. It simply holds it, the way Sethe herself holds the truth of what she did, unable or unwilling to say it plainly. This early pairing of a silent house and an unspoken story sets the pattern that the rest of the novel will follow, in which what happened to Sethe's body under slavery and what she cannot say about her own worst act move together, almost like two halves of the same locked door.

The Chokecherry Tree and the Scar That Cannot Be Seen

The clearest sign of violence written directly onto Sethe's body is the scar on her back, so old and so deep that it has taken a shape across her skin that another character once described to her as looking like a tree. When Paul D, a man who had also been enslaved at Sweet Home, asks Sethe directly about this mark, she tells him only that a white girl once called it a chokecherry tree, with a trunk, branches, and even tiny leaves (Morrison, 1987, p. 16). Sethe admits she has never seen the scar herself and never will, since it sits on a part of her body she cannot turn to look at. This detail matters greatly for a trauma studies reading, since it shows violence written permanently onto Sethe's own skin in a place she is physically unable to view directly, much as the deepest part of her painful memory sits in a place her own mind cannot easily look at straight on.

When Paul D continues pressing her with questions, asking plainly whether cowhide was used on her and whether she was beaten while pregnant, Sethe does not offer a long explanation. She repeats only a short, sharp line about her milk being taken from her, saying again and again, in nearly the same words, that the white boys at Sweet Home held her down and stole her milk before they ever cut her back (Morrison, 1987, p. 17). The repetition here is telling. Sethe does not build a full, connected story the way a person normally describes the past. She circles back to the same few words, the milk, the milk, as though her mind keeps returning to one fixed point rather than moving forward through the whole memory. This closely matches Caruth's claim that a traumatic memory often returns not as a full story but as a fragment that repeats itself outside the person's control (Caruth, 1996). Sethe's scar is permanent and visible, yet her words about it remain broken and partial, showing the reader that the violence done to her body left a wound that her own voice still struggles to carry.

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The Killing, the Handsaw, and Sethe's Broken Claim

The most direct connection between violence and silence in the novel emerges in the slow, careful way Morrison reveals what really happened the day Sethe killed her daughter. For much of the novel, this event is hinted at, circled, and spoken of only in fragments, rather than told straight through as a single, clear scene. When Paul D finally learns enough of the truth to ask Sethe directly, she does not explain her reasons in an ordinary, connected way. Instead, she insists only that she stopped him, meaning the slave catchers who had come to take her children back into slavery, and that she put her children where they would be safe (Morrison, 1987, p. 164). Paul D notices that Sethe speaks about this terrible act using the language of safety and love, the same words any other mother might use, even though what she is describing is the killing of her own child with a saw. The novel tells the reader plainly that Sethe talked about safety with a handsaw, a short, sharp line that joins two things that should never sit so close in normal speech: the comfort of safety and the horror of a blade (Morrison, 1987, p. 165). This short sentence captures the pattern this paper traces, since it presses violence and the language used to explain it together into one impossible claim that Sethe herself seems only partly able to hold onto.

This scene clearly shows how Caruth's idea of trauma applies to Sethe's case. The event was too large and too painful to process and explain in the moment, so even years later, Sethe can only offer short, repeated claims rather than a full account that makes ordinary sense to someone who was not there. Her silence about the details, and her strange, twisted way of describing love and safety in the same breath as a killing, are not signs that she does not feel the weight of what she did. They are signs that the weight is too large for ordinary language to carry, exactly as trauma studies predict.

Unspeakable Thoughts, Unspoken

One of the clearest and most direct statements of this paper's argument appears in Morrison's narration near the end of the novel, when the narrator describes the private thoughts moving through the women inside 124. The text tells the reader plainly that mixed in with the voices and sounds around the house were the thoughts of the women inside, described in four simple words as unspeakable thoughts, unspoken (Morrison, 1987, p. 199). This short phrase names exactly the pattern this paper has been building from the very first page of the novel. The thoughts exist. They are real, full, and present inside the women's minds. However, they remain unspoken, locked behind a silence that even the narrator cannot fully break open for the reader, since what follows this line is not a clear explanation but a flood of broken, overlapping voices that blur together rather than separate cleanly into ordinary sentences.

This moment shows that silence in Beloved is not the same as having nothing to say. It is the opposite. The characters are full of thought and memory, yet the violence behind those thoughts is so great that ordinary, orderly speech cannot contain it. Morrison's word choice here, naming the thoughts unspeakable before calling them unspoken, suggests that the silence is not simply a choice the characters make. It is a limit imposed on them by the magnitude of what they have survived, which aligns directly with Caruth's argument that trauma resists being turned into a normal, told story (Caruth, 1996).

Baby Suggs and the Clearing: A Brief Space for Sound

Against this pattern of silence, Morrison gives the reader one place in the novel where pain is allowed to make sound rather than stay locked inside: the wide open space in the woods known as the Clearing, where Baby Suggs once led the freed Black community in a kind of gathering that was not quite church and not quite anything else, with a name. In this place, Baby Suggs called the women forward and told them to cry, for the

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living and for the dead (Morrison, 1987, p. 88). For one of the only times in the whole novel, sorrow is allowed to come out as plain sound, crying, laughing, dancing, rather than being pressed back down into silence.

This scene matters for a trauma studies reading because it shows that Morrison is not saying pain can never be spoken or released. She shows that it needs a very particular kind of space and permission to come out safely, a space built on trust and shared grief rather than judgment. Once this space is lost, when Baby Suggs eventually stops preaching and the community pulls away from 124 after Sethe's act of violence becomes known, the characters lose this rare outlet, and their pain returns to the locked, silent pattern that defines most of the novel. The brief example of the Clearing makes the surrounding silence elsewhere in the story stand out even more sharply, since it shows the reader exactly what is missing for most of the book: a safe place and a willing listener.

Beloved's Arrival and the Forcing Open of Silence

The arrival of the mysterious young woman who calls herself Beloved marks the turning point at which the novel's long-held silence is finally forced open. Unlike Paul D, who asks Sethe careful, direct questions, Beloved asks Sethe to tell her stories from the past. Sethe finds herself talking in a way she has not allowed herself to before, drawn in by what the narrator describes as Beloved's hunger to hear about her past life, even though every memory Sethe shares is painful (Morrison, 1987, p. 58). Beloved's presence functions almost like the return of the traumatic event itself, arriving suddenly, without full explanation, and demanding to be addressed directly rather than circled.

As the novel continues, Beloved begins to ask about specific, painful details, even questioning Sethe directly about the very event Sethe has spent years trying not to speak of. This pressure, uncomfortable and even dangerous by the end of the novel, is also what finally allows the unspeakable thoughts mentioned earlier to surface as something closer to speech, even if that speech remains broken, overlapping, and strange rather than calm and orderly. Trauma studies suggest that healing requires not only the passing of time but also an act of telling, ideally to someone willing to listen without turning away (Caruth, 1996). Beloved, whatever else she represents in the novel, becomes the forced and painful version of this listener, the presence that will not let Sethe's silence remain whole and undisturbed any longer.

The Closing Pages and the Choice to Let Silence Return

By the novel's final pages, Morrison makes a striking choice. After the community of women finally comes together to drive Beloved away from 124, the narrator does not conclude the novel with a full, clear explanation of everything that happened. Instead, the closing pages repeat a short, haunting line about Beloved's story, telling the reader directly that it was not a story to pass on (Morrison, 1987, p. 274). This line recurs across the final pages, almost like a chant, closing the novel on an act of chosen silence rather than full, open telling.

This ending aligns closely with a trauma studies reading of the whole novel. Morrison does not suggest that every painful memory must, or even can, be turned into a neat, told story to be healed. Some of the deepest violence in Beloved remains, even at the very end, partly unspeakable, something the community agrees, almost without saying so out loud, to let rest rather than repeat. The novel's final single word, simply naming Beloved once more before the book ends, leaves the reader with an image of memory that is neither fully spoken nor fully forgotten, but instead held in a kind of quiet, watchful space between the two, which is exactly the kind of complicated ending that trauma studies would expect from a wound this deep.

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This paper has shown that Toni Morrison's Beloved builds a close and lasting bond between violence and silence. Through the character of Sethe, the scar left by violence under slavery and the silence around her own most painful act occur side by side, almost as if they are the same wound seen from two different angles. The mark on her back, called a chokecherry tree, sits on a part of her body she cannot see (Morrison, 1987, p. 16), while her account of the killing emerges only as a short, repeated claim about safety, a claim the narrator directly links to the image of a handsaw (Morrison, 1987, p. 165). With the arrival of Beloved herself, the paper shows a related but different pattern: the unspeakable thoughts the women of 124 have carried for years are finally forced to the surface, even though they remain broken and incomplete rather than calmly explained (Morrison, 1987, p. 199). Even the rare moment of open crying and sound in the Clearing (Morrison, 1987, p. 88) shows how deeply this connection between pain and voice runs through the whole novel, since this single open space stands out so sharply against the silence that fills most of the story.

Conclusion

Using the theory of trauma studies, with strong support from Cathy Caruth's (1996) work, this paper has argued that Beloved shows violence and silence growing from the very same wound, a wound too large for ordinary memory or ordinary language to hold all at once. The violence done to Sethe's body under slavery does not stand apart from her broken, repeated way of speaking about her own worst act. Together, they form one picture of harm that Morrison places before her reader. This paper has also pointed out a gap in past research, since many earlier studies treat trauma, memory, and violence as related but separate topics rather than reading them together through close attention to the actual language of the text (Krumholz, 1992; Boudreau, 1995; Jesser, 1999; Udoette, 2023). By placing real lines from the novel about scars, milk, handsaws, and unspeakable thoughts side by side, this paper has tried to close part of that gap.

Future studies could build on this work by closely examining other novels by Morrison, since many of her books repeatedly return to the long reach of historical violence into private memory, and a similar bond between violence and silence may run through her wider body of work. Future research could also compare Morrison's treatment of unspeakable loss with other writers who write about trauma and survival, to see whether this same pattern of violence turning into silence appears across a wider range of literature, or whether it is something specific to Morrison's own way of telling stories about slavery and its long aftermath. What remains clear from this study is that in Beloved, silence is never simply empty or peaceful. It is shown as the direct result of violence too large for ordinary words, and reading the novel through this lens helps the reader feel, in a very direct way, just how deeply the wounds of slavery reached into the minds and voices of those who survived it, long after the physical violence itself had ended.

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