

## Point of View in *Beloved*

Toni Morrison is an expert at writing beautiful narration. *Beloved* is told in third person omniscient, but also from a switching third person limited perspective. The narration switches between the points of views of many different characters in the novel, and as it switches it often adopts that character's tone of voice.

The most obvious example of the narration adopting a character's voice is when the narrator switches to Schoolteacher's point of view when he comes to kidnap Sethe. Suddenly the narrator is calling the colored people slurs, talking about Sethe as if she's an animal, and using the n-word in nearly every sentence.

When the narration switches to Paul D's perspective, the language becomes harsher and sharper. When it goes to Denver's point of view, it becomes more emotional and immature.

Toni Morrison uses this third person limited switch very carefully. We'll often begin by learning about a character (like Baby Suggs, for instance) through another character's point of view, and after a while the narration will go to that character's train of thought and we'll get some really interesting insight into that character.

## The Omniscient Narrator in *Beloved* by Toni Morrison

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## Introduction to *Beloved*

Toni Morrison's *Beloved* is a contemporary work of fiction set just before and directly after the abolition of slavery. While this period in time seems somewhat perfect for classic theme of alienation, Morrison goes deeper than simply a literal representation of the alienation that comes with slavery and even racism.

Central to *Beloved* is a sense of alienation of the self, which often arises out of traumatic experience. Morrison explores this idea through a delicate balancing act of shifting points of view. While there are many traumatic events that occur in the book, the core issue that needs resolve is the violence that happened with Sethe and her infant daughter, Beloved, when a group arrived to bring them back to slavery. The adult character of Beloved is the manifestation of the trauma, while Sethe is the one with whom the resulting scars of it reside.

## Fragmented Narratives

Psychology tells us that the retelling of a traumatic event or memory often becomes increasingly disjointed or fragmented as it approaches the crux of the event. Writes Carolyn Forché, “The narrative of trauma is itself traumatized, and bears witness to extremity by its inability to articulate directly or completely.”

Within *Beloved*, this sense of fragmentation is echoed not only in the prose-like structure of the work, but also in the point of view. Largely third-person omniscient, with an anonymous and unobtrusive narrator embodying more the character in the spotlight than a narrative persona, the focus shifts rapidly from one character to the next.

Likewise the temporal placement of the story shifts from past to present and all points in between, hovering and unfixed. As the story fragments into a kaleidoscope of viewpoints and narratives, it all the while alludes to and moves closer towards the central defining trauma.

Because of the inherent difficulty in articulating trauma directly or completely, when the main traumatic event is revealed, it comes from the white perspective, specifically the peripheral characters who have come to return Sethe and her children to slavery. Because they are the only ones *not* traumatized by the event they are the only ones able to give a coherent rendition.

Significantly this is one of the only instances within the book when the white perspective is taken, the other exception being in the final dramatic scene. Though there are other white characters, even sympathetic ones, the somewhat limited omniscient does not go into the minds of these characters, but provides a more objective view. The white perspective is only needed in this scene because Sethe, and even the other black characters, would be incapable of narration.

## Sethe's Story

Sethe’s narrative always seems to fragment when approaching anything painful. In the remembering of another traumatic memory Sethe thinks, but is unable to articulate, “There is also my husband squatting by the churn smearing the butter as well as its clabber all over his face because the milk they took is on his mind.” It is only through repetition of this scene in memory that enough detail is able to come forth for the reader to understand what is happening.

Sethe has become alienated from the core traumatic event as a coping mechanism, and is thus unable to describe it. The closer that Sethe moves to the defining event, the more that words and memory begin to fail her. The adult Beloved represents the initial trauma, and once Sethe embraces her as such, "Beloved, she my daughter, and she is mine," she begins to descend into madness.

The madness occurs because the character of Sethe starts to become lost as she remembers the event. There has been a dichotomy created between the everyday self and the traumatized one. Moving closer to the traumatic side of this dichotomy, Sethe is alienated from the self that exists outside of the event; the two have become mutually exclusive. Interestingly, "the more she [Beloved] took, the more Sethe began to talk, explain, describe how much she had suffered," writes Morrison. The things that Beloved is taking are material; they are things that are of the world and its reality. Beloved (the trauma) is removing these things from Sethe, who is then left little recourse but to retreat from the world into her own narrative of suffering, creating madness.

The chapter in which Sethe claims Beloved as her own is the first time that the point of view has shifted from third-person to first, beside in the relation of thought. Sethe's narrative becomes increasingly fragmented, almost unintelligible, as she appears to lose her grip on reality. For the first time we hear the story direct from Sethe's mouth, yet at this juncture she has become alienated from the world at large. It is however necessary to hear directly from Sethe, to make this trip into her mind rather than simply have her thought retold, in order to understand how her mind is breaking.

## **Denver's Tale**

The first-person point of view continues in the next chapter with Sethe's daughter Denver's story. "Beloved is my sister. I swallowed her blood right along with my mother's milk." It is not just Sethe who is affected by the traumatic event. Denver, in embracing Beloved, is similarly unable to cope due to the fact that she inhabits the same world of pain and alienation as her mother.

Denver here is also losing her grip on reality. She relates how her mother, whom she'd previously had a close and loving relationship with, used to "cut off my head every night" when Denver was a child. Denver continues, "Then she carried it downstairs to braid my hair. I try not to cry but it hurts so much to comb it." A normally maternal act of hair combing has become something grotesque and horrific, not unlike the effect that trauma has had on what could have been otherwise functional lives, albeit pain-filled and scarred.

## **A Dance With Perspective**

Morrison uses point of view to adeptly navigate the affects of trauma on the psyche, interweaving closeness and distance to the event with ever-shifting viewpoints and narrative styles. She dances around it in such a way that it is implied that to come too close to the event for her characters would be a mental breaking point, causing a rupture with reality.

The psyche must alienate itself from the trauma, lest the trauma cause an inevitable alienation of the self or the mind from the world at large, which is exactly what happens for Sethe and Denver once they attempt to tell their story firsthand. Progressing out of this increasing fragmentation of reality and narrative, for the story to regain a sense of coherency, the narration must then move to those less directly affected by the trauma, those who function more as bystanders, and back to the third-person limited, as the first has served its use.

The narrator does not inhabit the minds of Sethe after we have heard her account, and relies less on Denver as well. Sethe and Denver, while never entirely clear, have become less reliable as sources of information. It is neighbor's friends, Sethe's former lover, and a white man who fill in the majority of the story remaining to be told, who bear the responsibility almost to translate subsequent events in a manner that the reader will be able to grasp.

### **Narration/Point of View**

For the most part, *Beloved* uses a third-person narrator—one who tells the story by describing the action of other people (“he said” “they did”). Because the narration describes what various characters are thinking and doing, it can also be classified as omniscient (“all-knowing”) narration. This third-person narration remains fairly constant throughout the novel, but the point of view (or perspective) from which the story is told changes from section to section. In the first chapter alone, for instance, the point of view switches from Baby Suggs (“Baby Suggs didn’t even raise her head”) to Sethe (“Counting on the stillness of her soul she had forgotten the other one”) to Paul D (“He looked at her closely, then”) to Denver (“Again she wished for the baby ghost”). The changing point of view is important to the novel for several reasons. First, by including the thoughts and memories of several different characters, the narrator allows the reader to witness the various ways slavery can violate a person’s humanity. Second, the changing point of view allows the reader to gain fuller portraits of each of the characters than if the focus was on a single person. These portraits are made even more intense when Morrison changes the narrative style. In the middle of Part Two, the narration switches from the third person to the first (“I”) in four consecutive sections that are told directly by the characters. In these sections, Sethe, Denver, and Beloved contemplate how Beloved’s arrival has changed their lives. By adding these first-person sections late in the novel, the author enhances her portrait of these characters, deepening the reader’s understanding of them even further.