



"Toni Morrison's *Beloved* : a traumatic book on the trauma of slavery ?"

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Abstract

A work of shocking evocations and stunning poetry, Toni Morrison's *Beloved* has become a must on American literary reading lists, in spite of its bewildering complexity. It has been read as pertaining to various sub-genres: trauma-literature, feminist literature, slave narratives, post-colonialism, post-modernism, the fantastic, the Gothic, the grotesque, the sublime, the beautiful, magical realism, the mystery novel, etc. This essay argues that although *Beloved* is a text-book case of the magical realist (and not the fantastic) narrative mode, which strengthens its grotesque and Gothic aspects but weakens its claims to realism, the book's poetic language and authorial exaltation make it also an illustration of marvelous realism. These various aesthetic facets combine with modernist narrative fragmentation techniques which turn this major poetic exploration of the trauma of African American slavery into a potentially traumatic experience for readers in search of who speaks in *Beloved*?

"Toni Morrison's *Beloved*: a traumatic book on the trauma of slavery?"

Toni Morrison's work has generated an enormous amount

of secondary literature.¹ *Beloved*, in particular, is considered as *the* book that has, more than any other one it seems, written trauma – the one resulting from the “re-memory” of slavery – in 20th century American literature. To the point that this very phenomenon is sometimes perceived as traumatic in itself. While the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 1988 had decidedly helped to put Tony Morrison on the American literary map, the 1993 Nobel Prize unleashed a process of canonization which included, more specifically, the erection of a literary monument, “Toni Morrison's *Beloved*,” hence abbreviated in “TMB.”² This monument looms very large on American literature reading lists and feeds agonizing questions on so many student blogs. It has been perceived as a sort of monster, especially in its 1998 three-hour-long movie adaptation by Jonathan Demme,³ and a huge crown was added to it in 2006, after a survey among 200 critics of the *New York Times* selected TMB as “The Best Novel of the Past 25 Years.”⁴ This essay will argue that a more fitting formulation for the title that TMB deserves could be “most stirring book in American fiction of the last quarter of the 20th century.”

A work of shocking evocations, stunning poetry, and bewildering complexity

When over-viewing the abundant critical literature on Toni Morrison's work (including some statements by the author herself), one is struck by the sometimes vehement

¹ See for instance the hundreds of references in the MLA database alone.

² Page references to the 1988 Penguin USA (Plume) edition.

³ See Charles Taylor's scathing review for *Salon.com*, entitled “The Designated martyr” and subtitled “Jonathan Demme panders to Toni Morrison's guilt mongering in his brutal adaptation of *Beloved*.” <http://www.salon.com/ent/movies/reviews/1998/10/16reviewa.html>.

⁴ A Scott Bradfield expressed his dismay at TMB's transformation into a sacred monument in “Why I Hate Toni Morrison's *Beloved*,” *Denver Quarterly* 38.4 (2004): 86-99.

discussion over the question, whether her art is of “universal merit” or whether it “belongs” to the African-American community because, allegedly, her themes, her specific “voice,” and her targeted public have a privileged link to that part of the American population.⁵ This discussion is somewhat puzzling, because it may be doubted that an averagely gifted Black girl in an American high-school would find *Beloved* more easily decipherable than a Shakespeare play, even if she might recognize Morrison's words and sentence structures much more easily than the Bard's. She *might* feel ten times more interested in the novel for reasons of personal identity, but that is another story and not a necessary one either.

There is an infamous historical event at the core of *Beloved* (based, as we know, on a horror story involving the Garners, a fugitive slave family of Kentucky in 1855, much debated in the press of the time), but the fictional elaboration, the language and the composition of the novel are poetic constructs. The latter aspect and the readability of the book is what this analysis will focus on. Besides the studies devoted to particular thematic, sociological, or linguistic aspects, it is telling that the book has been claimed as pertaining to quite a number of literary sub-genres : trauma-literature, feminist literature, slave narratives, post-colonialism, post-modernism, the fantastic, the Gothic, the grotesque, the sublime, the beautiful, magical realism, the mystery novel, etc. There is no reason why *Beloved* should fit in only one slot. But notwithstanding the number of detectable categories the book might illustrate or draw upon – consciously or not – the ultimate question is: does the book develop its own internal aesthetic coherence and how satisfying – or traumatizing – is it?

⁵ See for instance Marc Conner's introduction “Aesthetic and the African American Novel” in Conner, Marc C, ed. *The Aesthetics of Toni Morrison. Speaking the Unspeakable*. Jackson, UP of Mississippi, 2000.

Who's afraid of *Beloved's* ghost? Or a text-book case of a magical realist narrative mode

The mere mention of a ghost in a novel is not sufficient to determine its narrative mode or sub-genre (gothic? fantastic? magico-realist? satire?...) but it is unavoidable to discuss the status of the supernatural here, since the very title of the book refers to both a character and her ghost. If the novel is summed up in something like "this is the story of a house badly haunted by a poltergeist, the ghost of a little girl whose throat was cut by her own mother, a runaway slave," an ignorant library trainee might want to shelve it somewhere between Southern Gothic and horror books à la Stephen King. Of course, there is much more to *Beloved*, which is an exploration of the consequences not only of the main protagonist's (Sethe's) particularly "unspeakable" crime, for herself and the people around her, but also of the crime of slavery as an unspeakably traumatizing social system. But if the issue is so serious – and how could it be otherwise, since the author inscribed her work to "sixty million and more"⁶ – was it wise to resort to a caricature of a haunted house to produce a novel on the topic of slavery? What kind of aesthetics is such a device supposed to help create or illustrate?

Notwithstanding the author's disapproval, Toni Morrison's work has been linked to magical realism and more particularly compared to Garcia Marquez's novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude*.⁷ There are certainly enough

6 A figure presumed to refer to the number of Blacks who died in the Middle Passage, but that is highly problematic since historians estimate that the total number of African slaves carried across the Atlantic was between 9-12 million, of which an estimated 1 million came to what is now US territory; some 4.4 million blacks lived in the States in 1860 (see US Census Bureau population statistics; also Mandel, Naomi. « "I made the ink": Identity, Complicity, 60 Million, and More », in *Modern Fiction Studies* - Volume 48, Number 3, Fall 2002, pp. 581-613).

7 Hart, Stephen M., "Magical Realism in the Americas: Politicized Ghosts

elements of various kinds to make a comparison between those novels interesting – and they do both, indeed have recourse to magical realism – at least in its technical aspect as a narrative mode, as defined by Amaryll Chanady.⁸ In order to distinguish magical realism from the fantastic as narrative modes, Chanady proposed to define them by three distinctive traits, of which they share only two : 1) the presence in the text of two antinomious levels of reality, the natural and the supernatural; 2) unresolved antinomy between those levels in the case of the fantastic, as opposed to resolved antinomy for magical realism; 3) authorial reticence, i.e. the deliberate withholding of information and explanations about the disconcerting fictitious world; this creates uncertainty in the fantastic text, but facilitates the acceptance of incongruities in the magico-realist text, by naturalizing the supernatural (p.11-17).

From a sheer technical point of view then, the way supernatural elements are integrated in *Beloved* conforms fully and consistently to the magico-realist and not to the fantastic narrative mode. For instance, the house at 124 Bluestone road, allegedly in the historic setting of the outskirts of Cincinnati, Ohio, between 1855 and 1875, is systematically presented as haunted, both by the characters and the omniscient narrator, without any authorial distancing ever. In fact, “124” and its moods are part of the most obvious structuring device, since each of the three parts of the novel ostensibly starts with a variation on the same basic formula: “124 was spiteful” (p.3), “124 was loud” (p.169), and “124 was quiet” (p. 239).

Throughout the book, the main female characters and the authorial narrator dispose of supernatural powers of

in *One Hundred Years of Solitude, The House of the Spirits, and Beloved*; *Tesserae: Journal of Iberian and Latin American Studies*, 2003 Dec; 9 (2): 115-23.
8 Chanady, Amaryll, *Magical Realism and the Fantastic: Resolved Versus Unresolved Antinomy*, New York et Londres, Garland Publishing, 1985.

perception. Of course female bonding, and more specifically the mother-daughter relationship, is the main theme, and even male readers might understand that the relationship between Sethe and her surviving daughter, Denver, is likely to be overshadowed heavily by the *specter* of *Beloved*, the earlier daughter who had been "loved to death by her mother," so to speak. That is, *specter* in its metaphorical sense, of the kind that hovers like an unpleasant memory or a feeling of guilt somewhere between one's stomach and one's brain. Not the *specter in the closet*. But here a ghost does enter, as early as page three of the book.

While Sethe and her daughter Denver are casually pushing the kitchen sideboard back against the wall (after the ghost had made it "step out" upon the women's invitation to "talk") the narrator gives a flashback that sketches in rough and shocking traits the origin of the trouble: Sethe had to offer her body to the engraver, under the eyes of the man's son, for her baby's name to be engraved on her tombstone, and those ten minutes were "longer and more pulsating than the baby blood that soaked her fingers like oil" (p.5). In the midst of a stunning paragraph, we learn that the haunting of her house was due to the "fury of the baby at having its throat cut." Reasons enough to unleash anger, surely. But lest we readers were tempted to question the reality of Sethe's perception of these surprising living conditions, we are given a full quote by her mother in law, Baby Suggs, who let's her know flatly that there is no point to move out of the house, and that Sethe is "lucky" her ghost is only a baby, and what is she complaining about anyway, since she still has three children left?

As one can tell, the supernatural could hardly be naturalized more efficiently from the very beginning, while creating at the same time an atmosphere of Gothic horror and trauma. What is left out - or not quite spelled out - and

that creates a sense of mystery and suspense for the first-time reader, are the questions: “Who done it?” and “Why?” Thus the authorial reticence to comment about the unusual mingling of the realistic and the supernatural codes of events in the narrative, which is required in the implementation of a magico-realist mode, combines with another form of authorial reticence, evident in the suspense-creating withholding of the answer to the question: why is there a ghost in the house?

While the reader and most characters in the story know from the beginning, this is not the case for Paul D. who shows up at #124, eighteen years after the tragedy, is first baffled by the ghost and then drives it away through his manly presence. But very soon, just after Sethe and Paul D. have had fun for the first time at a social event, a carnival, “it” makes a sly comeback in the shape a lovely young woman rising all dressed out of the river, calling herself Beloved and being welcomed with open arms by both Sethe and Denver. This new flesh-and-blood presence soon pushes Paul D. first out of Sethe's bed and then out of the house. While, incredibly enough for at least some of us, Sethe and Denver had come to terms with living in the haunted house during eighteen years, Paul D.'s arrival forces Sethe to face again her “unspeakable deed.” She actually never tells it in so many words, but after old Stamp Paid, the only living Black witness of the scene, alerted Paul D. to the tragedy by handing him over an old newspaper clipping about the crime, Paul D. figures out what happened and during a talk with Sethe tells her that what she did was wrong. This sets up a wall of incomprehension between them. Exit Paul D. at the end of Part One, two thirds into the book, leaving the field again to supernatural powers, in magico-realist fashion.

For any reader and even more for the literary critic, the deeper question is what to make of this text-book case of a

magical realist mode by an African American writer tackling the enormously sensitive terrain of slavery. Does a comparison with Garcia Marquez's use of the same mode actually help? No matter what the points of contacts are, it should be rather obvious even after reading only a few pages of *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and *Beloved*, that both the worlds described in these novels, and even more so their styles, are extremely different. Whereas the Latin-American novel is about a mythical place and told in an incessant stream by a babbling, humorous, and macho narrator, in a style allying erudition, fantasy and baroque fullness, *Beloved* is clearly set in history and both its bewildering structure and heterogeneous style reflect the immense problem – for the narrator and most of the characters – of how to *tell* about mostly traumatic experiences involving people who were usually illiterate, whose memories of the past and control over existential choices had to a large degree been erased by slavery in the South, and whose present lives in post-Civil War Ohio were still heavily restricted by racial prejudice and social marginalization.

Magical realism, then, does strengthen the grotesque and Gothic aspects of this tale⁹ – with the unavoidable side effect of weakening its claims to realism – but it accounts only for a fraction of the poetics at work.

Who's charmed by the poetic language and exaltation of *Beloved's* authorial narrative voice? Or the case for marvelous realism

Whether or not authorial reticence may seem justified in a book dealing with the difficulty of “speaking the unspeakable,” *Beloved* confronts the reader with a number

⁹ For a refined discussion of *Beloved* and trauma as a trope for recovered history, see Spargo, R. Clifton. “Trauma and the specters of enslavement in Morrison's *Beloved*,” *Mosaic* (Winnipeg), March 1, 2002.

of features which are of quite an opposite, affirmative, nature: a true kaleidoscope of various passages (both in content and style), for which the *quilt* offers a convenient enough and recurrently thematized image. Quilts may come in a staggering variety of aspects and qualities, and in more or less evident patterns. From a poetics point of view, the textual quilt of *Beloved* demonstrates rather clearly that beyond an involvement in African American history, Morrison has had a strong interest in modernist literary techniques, particularly as developed by Virginia Woolf and William Faulkner, the two authors about whom she wrote an M.A. study.

There is no room here to detail the extensive use of stream of consciousness on the one hand, and of a fragmented, elliptical, and multifaceted narrative discourse on the other. It is more important to stress that beyond such notably demanding techniques in terms of reader participation, Morrison was keenly bent on developing something like a new language, capable of expressing the *historical trauma* of slavery as experienced by the characters she placed in her fiction (beyond what slim stories were collected in the form of slave narratives), from the point of view of a contemporary African American woman, fully aware of the *cultural trauma* still affecting her community today – because of the memories involved and what is perceived as a lack of testimonies and recognition. This complex task was approached by Toni Morrison with particular energy but also in a sometimes experimental way, it seems to me, in *Beloved*. The energy expresses itself in myriads of poetic moments that concentrate mostly on aspects of female bonding – between mother and daughter, sisters, or larger communities of women, sometimes led by a charismatic leader, like Baby Suggs – and include the transcription of songs, poems, or games, sometimes of a childish or girlish nature.

Combined with the ghost factor, this aspect of the text strikes me as representative of "marvelous realism," an aesthetic and/or cultural notion developed in the Caribbean which I have redefined as a narrative mode distinct from magical realism.¹⁰ In marvelous realism, a realistic code and a mystery code are constantly fused in a poetic, often lyrical discourse, that is permeated by "authorial exaltation." In TMB, such a poetic exaltation is palpable even in some of the gore scenes. Beauty and horror coexist, like in this image of Sweet Home, the Kentucky farm where the protagonists used to work as slaves, before fleeing to the North, which also haunts Sethe: "*and suddenly there was Sweet Home, rolling, rolling, [...] rolling out before her eyes in shameless beauty. [...] Fire and brimstone all right, but hidden in lacy groves. Boys hanging from the most beautiful sycamore trees in the world...*" (p.7). It is also present, of course, in the splendid image of the "chokecherry tree," used by Morrison to refer to the ghastly scar covering Sethe's back as a result from the savage whipping she suffered as a runaway.

The height of authorial exaltation in *Beloved* coincides with the elation experienced by the Bluestone-Road community on the occasion of the memorable feast improvised by Baby Suggs, when Stamp Paid showed up with several pails of delicious wild berries, a scene which can be likened to the literary *tour de force*, in the same marvelous realist vein, of the banquet described by Jean Giono in his 1935 novel, *Que ma Joie demeure*, which unites the rural community of Plateau Grémone. And a final such exalted episode occurs towards the end of the book, when the group of chanting neighborhood women converge on Sethe's house to help her. Clearly, *Beloved* activates the authorial exaltation of marvelous realism as much as it has

10 Charles W. Scheel, *Réalisme magique et réalisme merveilleux. Des théories aux poétiques*, Préface de Daniel-Henri Pageaux, Paris, L'Harmattan, 2005.

recourse to authorial reticence in its construction of a magico-realistic plot.

Who speaks in *Beloved*? From a sketchy vernacular to the power of imaginative fiction couched in a sublimated "Black English"

Combining the requirements of *authorial reticence* typical of magical realism or the fantastic, with the *authorial exaltation* wanted for marvelous realism, might sound like a hopeless antinomy, but it is not. Good examples of such alloys are *One Hundred Years of Solitude* but also Simone Schwarz-Bart's *The Bridge of Beyond (Pluie et Vent sur Téliumée Miracle)*, which shares many concerns and traits with *Beloved*, since it is all about the survival power of uprooted African women in Guadeloupe, and the passing on of founding memories and means of resistance to traumas past and present.

The language in Schwarz-Bart's 1972 novel is a standard French where grammar and most of the vocabulary are concerned, but both the dialogues and the narrators' discourse, are full of local images, proverbs and turns of phrases, translated from the African-based Creole spoken on the Island. The text conveys thus a high level of homogeneous poetry, which drew some criticism for being overall "too pretty": the next generation of French-Caribbean writers produced much more jarring texts in their juggling with the vexing question of *diglossie*. For Toni Morrison, Creole was obviously not an issue, but the question of the vernacular spoken by African Americans, of the authorial language, and of their combination within a literary frame certainly was her top concern. The resulting quilt named *Beloved* is definitely a wild one rather than a classical one. It offers neither comfortable reading nor comfortable bedding.

This was confirmed again by a recently published dissertation on the language of Toni Morrison in *The Bluest*

Eye and Beloved, which "demonstrates the wealth of complexity in Toni Morrison's language and the need for increasingly sophisticated scholarship" (p.95). Before reaching that stern and somewhat disheartening conclusion for anyone tempted to teach *Beloved* in class, it included statements such as these : "Beloved develops and expands the capacity of the narrative to shape the silence of a passage;" or : "unspoken thoughts of the characters are given fuller expression and greater control of the narrative;" and : "Beloved (the ghost?) represents the memories of Sethe's past that never have to be spoken aloud: it is recorded in the unspeakable unspoken language mentioned at the apex of the novel."¹¹ It seems to me that such statements – certainly well-meant in their effort to explain (or justify) what is often baffling in the book – verge on mystification and are likely to stretch one's belief in scholarship about as much as pots of beans, flying through Sethe's kitchen for no recognizable physical cause, make one question the status of such enunciations, even in the context of fiction.

Another notion in Toni Morrison criticism that tends to make one uneasy, is "the author's voice," which is often used instead of "the author's style." In the case of *Beloved*, even the notion of the *authorial voice* is troubling because the book is made up of so many facets, disjointed fragments of narratives focused by various characters, inserts, recourse to metaphors, and tentative written representations of "thought pictures," or "unthought" things.¹² Thus the "synthetic voice," mentioned in the conclusive paragraph of Raghavendra Rao's article "In search of an authentic voice: Toni Morrison's *Beloved*," strikes me as valid as a metaphor

11 Simpson, Ritashona. *Black Looks and Black Acts: The Language of Toni Morrison in The Bluest Eye and Beloved*. New York, NY: Peter Lang, 2007.

12 See Alliott, Benedicte. "Images de l'Amerique noire dans *Beloved* de Toni Morrison: la representation en question, in *Revue Francaise d'Etudes Americaines* 89 (juin 2001): 86-97.

only.¹³

Whatever qualities the book has and whatever efforts its author put into crafting various oral discourses for its main protagonists (many of the dialogues are simply great in their terseness, imagery and sometimes also humor, highly representative of a distinct Black culture indeed), I believe that on account of its modernist textual characteristics alone, its art cannot be reduced to an elaborate *narrative*. Can one seriously hope to put together the pieces of the chronological and geographical puzzle of the overall action, or to decipher many of the images or situations arising in this book, by merely listening to the text being read aloud, for instance?

The room for the omniscient narrator has indeed been reduced. Perhaps at a high cost, in readability and aesthetic coherence, even if some effects are partly brilliant. Thus for instance, the three sections of Part 2, in which "*the thoughts of the women of 124, unspeakable thoughts, unspoken*" are expressed in turns: first by Sethe ("*Beloved, she my daughter. She mine....*"), then by Denver ("*Beloved is my sister. I swallowed her blood right along with my mother's milk...*"), and then by Beloved who starts with "*I am Beloved and she is mine...*". Gershwin might have composed a marvelous trio of female voices with such material. But here, Beloved's alleged thoughts turns into four pages of a dislocated text made of a succession of mostly gore images without punctuation. For the puzzled and curious reader, dissertations explain that this is a representation of the horrors of the middle passage. Perhaps. But only partly, and why here and in this shape? From a mere stylistic point of view, this

13 *Indian Journal of American Studies* 23.2 (Summer 1993): 91-93: "In *Beloved*, through a multivocal narrative, Morrison achieves a synthetic voice without, however, subverting the distinct identity of an African-American aesthetic, pervasive and personified in memory as relived experience, and trauma as means of rebirth" (p.93).

could be compared to the musicians of the Chicago Orchestra interrupting the finale of Gustav Mahler's *Resurrection Symphony* to tune their instruments: suddenly one hears weird sounding unconnected bits and pieces.

**Conclusion : Who's afraid of "Toni Morrison's *Beloved*"?
Or the case for the flawed masterpiece**

A great amount of attention has been given to what is perceived as the single most revolting act, the infanticide by the mother, around which the book's plot develops. Plenty of the critical discussion turns around the question: "to be a slave or to die?" The phrase "Sethe's choice" comes up repeatedly in the critical literature on *Beloved*. There is a certain cleverness about it, no doubt, but come to think of it, Sethe did not *choose* to kill her children. For when the scene is finally described, it is clear that she acted in a split second when seeing Schoolteacher's hat (the master she had run away from) appear above the hedge and grasping immediately that she couldn't outrun those four horsemen of the Apocalypse. In other words, she acted in the heat of panic and not at all with any benefit of thought or time to weigh any pros and cons.

Why then did Morrison unleash so much social opprobrium in her community (and Paul D.'s uncharacteristically unkind disapproval, 18 years down the road), when the mere horror of the action should have been plenty of penitence for its perpetrator? Rather than question Sethe's choice, then, it might be interesting to ponder *Toni's* which is much weightier, since it is Morrison who imagined to let Sethe kill the children she had born to *a loved fellow slave*, while in the historic source, Mrs Garner killed the three children that her *white master* had fathered on her - to the latter's immense grief, it seems.¹⁴

14 Steven Weisenburger. *Modern Medea: A Family Story of Slavery and Child-*

Also, what often seems to get lost, because of the emphasis on Sethe's desperate act on the one hand, and because of the dislocated narrative on the other, are the numerous other traumas depicted or alluded to in the book. Several of the Sweet Home fugitive men suffered ignominious treatments, as the iron collar marks on Paul D.'s neck testify. Like in the already mentioned harrowing sex scene on the tombstone, at the book's beginning, other scenes mix torture and sex, life and death, love and animal lust in a grotesque manner. Morrison doesn't shy away from crude or graphic descriptions, whether to unmask particularly brutal aspects of slavery and its aftermath, or to mention sexual mores perverted by the social restrictions imposed on the slaves. Thus this down-to-earth description of the Sweet Home farm "nigger men": "*all in their twenties, fucking cows, dreaming of rape, thrashing on pallets, rubbing their thighs and waiting for the new girl [Sethe]*" (p.11). So much has been said about Sethe's "unspeakable" act in the book,¹⁵ that the question arises, especially with respect to the adaptation for movies, how much of the so-called "unspeakable" scenes or events can actually be *shown* on screen. From the reviews, it seems that the full spectrum of horror film tricks (wild poltergeist actions, blood pulsating out of slashed arteries or baby throats...) has been used in Jonathan Demme film version of *Beloved*. But, more than violence, in the mainstream American film industry, censorship is likely to hit the explicitness of sex scenes, and not only for box office reasons. Thus one may wonder, if the following shocking scene of *Beloved* – unspoken in criticism

Murder from the Old South. New York: Hill and Wang, 1998. 352 pp.

15 See for instance McDermott, Ryan P. "Silence, Visuality, and the Staying Image: The 'Unspeakable Scene' of Toni Morrison's *Beloved*." *Angelaki* 8.1 (Apr. 2003): 75-89. Also: Fritz, Angela DiPace. "Toni Morrison's *Beloved*: 'Unspeakable Things Unspoken' Spoken." *Sacred Heart University Review* 14.1-2 (1993 Fall-1994 Spring 1993): 40-52.

it seems – would have any chance to hit a screen. It is about the chain gang, that Paul D. was forced to join in Virginia, after he had tried to kill his new “owner”: “All forty-six men woke to rifle shot. Three whitemen walked along the trench unlocking the doors one by one.[...] Chain-up completed, they knelt down.[...] They waited for the whim of a guard, or two, or three. 'Breakfast? Want some breakfast, nigger?'/ 'Yes, sir.' / Here you go.' / Occasionally a kneeling man chose gunshot in his head as the price, maybe, of taking a bit of foreskin with him to Jesus...” (p.107-108). Had Morrison found mentions of this type of *unspeakable* abuse in slave narratives?

The episode just referred to is only one among hundreds that require an effort in “making sense” of what goes on in the book in terms of plot, beyond appreciating the poetry of its enunciation. It raises fundamental questions about the aesthetics of a work, widely considered as Morrison's masterpiece, at least by those critics who favor difficulty. And when it comes to *Beloved*, one wishes Toni Morrison had filled the space of her book with a more *readable* account of time, rather than produce a version of Barthes' “*texte scriptible*.” When a writer tackles so weighty a historical matter as the consequences of the ghastly 1850 Fugitive Slave law – it is mentioned in the text – and deals so powerfully with the issues of memory, linguistic translation, and fictional representation of all that matter, it is a bit sad that so many of the links and connections are lost because of narrative fragmentation. With its rich polyphony – both in the dialogues and in the interior monologues – and with its tremendous poetic style, *Beloved* is undoubtedly one of the most stirring books of twentieth century American literature. Instead of being a daunting monument to most, it could have been Sethe's bright orange quilt and *the* masterpiece of the African American novel, accessible to “sixty million and more” – readers.

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