History, Postcolonialism and Postmodernism in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*

*Mariangela Palladino*

This paper examines Toni Morrison’s fifth novel, *Beloved*, which, together with *Jazz* and *Paradise*, constitute Morrison’s contribution to the process of re-writing black American history. Postcolonial thought has offered one of the most potent challenges to the notion of the ‘end of history’ posited by postmodernists of both left and right. Focusing principally on *Beloved* (1987), my paper explores how Toni Morrison insists upon the necessity of a conscious and inevitably painful engagement with the past. Uncovering a dense series of correspondences, drawing upon Christological symbols, numerology, and flower imagery, I argue that the principal character is closely identified with Christ throughout the novel, which in its final part refigures the Passion narrative. As a sacrificed black, female Christ, *Beloved* becomes a focus for Morrison’s concern with redemption through memory.

I wish to briefly explore the debate on history between postmodernism and postcolonialism as it constitutes the framework to Toni Morrison’s deployment of Christological imagery in order to engage with history. If the dawn of postmodernism marked the beginning of a ‘posthistoric’ era which ‘stipulated that the segment of human life had ended for which history had claimed to offer explanation and understanding’ (Breisach 2003 10), this has been uncompromisingly contested by postcolonialism. The postcolonial claim for the unacknowledged role of the non-Western world in the constitution of modernity is emphasized by Edward Said in *Culture and Imperialism* (1993) as follows:

> In the West, post-modernism has seized upon the ahistorical weightlessness, consumerism, and spectacle of the new order. To it are affiliated other ideas like post-Marxism and post-structuralism …. Yet in the Arab and Islamic world many artists and intellectuals … are still concerned with modernity itself, still far from exhausted, still a major challenge in a culture dominated by turath (heritage) and orthodoxy. (Said 1993 399)

Said’s attack on postmodernity stresses the enormous differences that characterize the first and the third worlds. It focuses mainly on the postmodern
rejection of historicism and on its deconstructive approach to the self-identical subject. Postmodernity neglects the notion of historical objectivity, but since the only history ever written was conceived in Western terms, postcolonialism questions this denial of objectiveness: there is a past that took place and, despite the advent of post-history, it has to be narrated. Edward Said asserts that:

because the West acquired world dominance, and because it seems to have completed its trajectory by bringing about ‘the end of history’ as Francis Fukuyama has called it, Westerners have assumed the integrity and the inviolability of their cultural masterpieces, their scholarship, their worlds of discourse; the rest of the world stands petitioning for attention at our windowsill. (Said 1993 313)

The ‘othered’ identities envisioned the opportunity to have access to their silent pre-colonial pasts as an emancipation. Hence postcolonialism grants a significant role to fiction and to its narrative weight and it re-formulates the old grand narratives that have othered the non-European world: offering a literature that often navigates the past, it amends past histories that had been silenced or manipulated. Postcolonial literature opens a permanent dialogue with the past: the writing back into history becomes its institutionalized feature.

The fragmented nature of the third world history has to be addressed through the re-writing of that history, bringing together smaller historical accounts into a single segment of time. Whilst postmodernism locates the failure of Enlightenment in the Holocaust, postcolonialism identifies the failure of rationality with the institution of slavery in eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In fact, Toni Morrison’s inscription in Beloved, which reads ‘Sixty Million and more’, raised a controversial debate as it was accused of competing with the Holocaust.

It is in the light of this debate that I will consider Toni Morrison’s writing back into history: insisting upon the necessity of a conscious and inevitably painful engagement with the past, her work attempts to recuperate past memories to sketch a denied history. With Beloved Toni Morrison wants to divulge what has fallen into oblivion. In an interview she affirms as follows: ‘I thought this has got to be the least read of all the books I’d written because it is about something that the characters don’t want to remember, I don’t want to remember, black people don’t want to remember, white people won’t want to remember. I mean, it’s national amnesia.’ (Angelo 1989 257) This national amnesia is what Morrison targets. Through her fiction she challenges the forgetfulness that Eurocentric history has initiated.

Let us turn to Beloved, a Pulitzer Prize winning book set in antebellum America. Usually classified as a neo-slave narrative, it deals with slavery and the myriads of traumas inflicted by such a horrifying institution on the
survivors. The novel, set in the free state of Ohio and the slave state of Kentucky, relates the true story of the infanticide slave Margaret Garner who killed her daughter rather than giving her away to slavery. The sequence of events is non-chronological and it takes the readers repeatedly from freedom to slavery and backwards. *Beloved* revolves mainly around Sethe Suggs, one of the several narrative voices, who, through flashbacks and a non-linear narrative, recounts her painful story.

Sethe runs away from Sweet Home, the slave house, and, once she has gained freedom, gives birth to Denver on her way to Ohio with the help of a fugitive white girl. Traced back by her previous master in her new home, Sethe’s maternal love turns into a horrific crime: the killing of her older daughter. Left in 124 Bluestone Road house with her eighteen-year-old daughter Denver, Sethe lives in a real isolation. Her two sons abandoned the house as they were tired of living with the ghost of their sister violently killed by Sethe, and her mother-in-law, Baby Suggs, had passed away leaving the house empty and quiet. Sethe, guilty of infanticide, finds herself still enslaved by her sorrowful past and her atrocious crime that intrude in her life through the spiteful spirit of her baby and later, through her return in flesh and blood.

The novel is all about Sethe’s recuperation of a past that she has attempted to forget. Memory plays a pivotal role in *Beloved*, not only in that is used as a mode of narration, but in being what the novel is about. Although the reader comes across numerous stories, the key issue of the novel is narrating, recounting and recollecting; dealing with memory is what the characters mainly do. The process of the novel corresponds to Sethe’s repossessing of her most repressed memory whose recollection will work as a healing ritual. The traumatic experience of slavery and the infanticide had been consciously eradicated by Sethe’s will to move on, by a desperate wish to forget something too weighty to be remembered. The presence of the baby ghost in 124 Bluestone Road house is an evident sign of Sethe’s past still possessing her present: what the woman refuses to remember chains her and her daughter Denver to an impossible life; isolated from the rest of the community Sethe’s and Denver’s present is possessed as well as their future.

The narration is dense with powerful eruptions from the past that culminate with the return of the killed baby in the form of a girl called Beloved, after the inscription on her tombstone, whose age corresponds to the one of the baby she had lived. This objectification of the past will slowly induce the characters to recuperate their memories, to narrate their stories. The baby’s return is an emblematic example of the past that, triggered by the present, comes to be reworked. As Plasa observes, this re-envisioning of the past is defined in Freudian terms as Nachträglichkeit, literally translated as ‘belatedness’, the term signifies a ‘deferred action’ or a ‘retroaction’ (Plasa 1998 135). Freud formulated this notion in relation to the reworking of traumatic experiences through memory where the act of remembering works not only
as a connection with the past, but also a means to re-possess forgotten experiences. In *Beloved* past memories are often awakened by the present, thus the subject re-experiences past traumas in the light of later events. The advent of present incidents confers to the past its full significance: the subject, although traumatized after the fact, reaches a closer and complete understanding of his/her memories.

The return of Beloved and her role within the novel has been interpreted by criticism in several ways. Otten writes as follows:

> Beloved is both Sethe’s doomed infant and one of the “Sixty Million and more,” a victim both of Sethe’s “rough love” and the manifest cruelty of slavers. What is more, she becomes a demonic force returned to punish and to redeem Sethe, a remarkably ambiguous force able to free Sethe at last from her past, but only by exacting an enormous price; she is on one hand “an evil thing,” on the other a Christ figure come to save.’ (Otten 1989 84)

This is the only fleeting critical reference to Beloved as Christ figure. My interest is to see to what extent Christological imagery is used and what its significance is. Morrison’s text is in fact dense with references to Christ; further, as I intend to demonstrate in this paper, the final part of the novel refigures the Passion of Christ which is represented not only through Christological imagery, but also through significant use of numerology and flower imagery.

Let us begin with an analysis of the title. Morrison’s text definitely has a relation to the way God the Father addresses his Son; in Luke the Evangelist we read: ‘This is my Son, the Beloved’ [Luke 9:36] and in the Gospel according to Matthew: ‘This is my Son, the Beloved; my favour rests on him’ [Matthew 3: 16]1, passages where the word ‘Beloved’ is capitalized signifying the term as a proper noun. Furthermore, Morrison often portrays Beloved through Christ’s most vivid emblems, such as the vine: ‘vines of hair twisted all over her head. Jesus. Her smile was dazzling’ (Morrison 1987 261). In Saint John we read Jesus’ words: ‘I am the true vine and my father is the vinedresser. … I am the vine, you are the branches’ [John 15: 1,5]. It should be noted that Morrison’s reference to women’s hair is an essential feature to describe their physical and symbolic status. Hair is a main signifier of black identity, and in *Beloved* the author adopts it to assert the character’s metaphorical identity: Morrison depicts Beloved as a Jesus through her hair bearing an evident Christological symbolism. At the end of the novel, Beloved, thought to be disappeared, was seen cutting through the woods as ‘a naked woman with fish for hair.’ (Morrison 1987 267) This reference validates the assumption of Beloved being a re-figuration of Christ, as ‘from very early times a fish was a symbol of Christ’; the letters of the Greek word for fish,

---

1 Further validations of this biblical reference can be found in The Gospel according to Matthew [17: 6]; Mark [1: 11], [9: 8].
ichtus, ‘were ingeniously seen to be the initial letters of the Greek words “Jesus Christ, Son of God, Saviour”’ (Newton et al. 1996 31). Therefore the image of fish is largely identified in Christian art as an icon for ‘Incarnation, Redemption, Resurrection- the whole scheme of Christian salvation’ (Newton et al. 1996 31).

The use of numerology runs throughout the text, something that is evident from the format of the very first sentence since it is written all in capital letters: ‘124 WAS SPITEFUL.’ (Morrison 1987 3) 124 is not only the number of the house where Sethe moved escaping from slavery, but each cipher is pregnant with meaning: this is a sequence of numbers with a missing figure. The number three, defined by Pythagoras as the ‘number of completion, expressive of a beginning, a middle, and an end’ (Ferguson 1954 276), is missing; its absence is perceived from the very first line implying a dominant incompleteness that governs the entire story. The novel, structured in three sections, is all about the manifestation of the missing figure; it is a celebration of its completeness; therefore Beloved becomes the return of the missing figure, of the ghost, the completion of an unfinished sequence. The sequence 1 2 4 that misses the third figure, signifies the absence of Sethe’s third child: Sethe has four children, Howard, Buglar, the little killed baby, and Denver. Beloved has been excluded from the family, from life and from being enumerated among Sethe’s children; she has been left out and consciously forgotten for being a heavy and unbearable memory.

The correspondence of Beloved with the number three and its Christian heritage is not accidental: suggesting the Trinity, the number three signifies the idea of Oneness in which more entities perfectly coexist; it is the figure of perfection where the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost are One and Three. Hence, as I suggest, Beloved’s presence in the novel corresponds to the three parts of the One, the Trinity. Being a Christ, she is one of three and, at the same time, One.

Flower symbolism, occurring throughout the novel, not only further reinstates Beloved’s association with Christological symbolism, but it also functions as a presage of The Passion of Christ re-figured in the last sections of the narration. For instance, when Beloved offers Sethe some flowers, “[s]he filled basket after basket with the first things warmer weather let loose in the ground—dandelions, violets, forsythia—presenting them to Sethe, who arranged them, stuck them, wound them all over the house” (Morrison 1987 241). According to Ferguson’s Signs and Symbols in Christian Art, the dandelion, ‘one of the “bitter herbs,”’ was used as a symbol of the Passion, and as such appears, among other flowers, in paintings of the Madonna and Child, and the Crucifixion’ (Ferguson 1954 36); similarly Levi D’Ancona

---

2 The major examples in Renaissance paintings can be found in Raphael’s ‘Deposition’ and Bernardo Parentino’s ‘Christ carrying the Cross’ where a dandelion appears as a symbol of
calls the violet ‘a well known symbol of humility because it is a small plant, grows on low places, has a sweet fragrance and has a dull colour. Hence the violet symbolized the Crucifixion of Christ, which was the greatest sign of humility’ (Levi D’Ancona 1977 398-9). These flowers, presages of death, appear as anthropomorphic in Morrison’s text: they are stuck, pierced and wounded just as a body under flagellation.

In the last section of the novel Beloved, who has turned out to be evil, is finally exorcised; this form of ‘clearing’, carried out by the women of the community, bears a significant connection with the Passion narrative: in fact unmistakable similarities recall and re-figure the flagellation and the Crucifixion of Christ. ‘So thirty women made up that company and walked slowly, slowly toward 124. It was three in the afternoon on a Friday’ (Morrison 1987 257). At three in the afternoon, thirty women walked toward 124 to exorcise Beloved. As the reader learns that it is a Friday, this undoubtedly echoes the day Christ was killed: at the age of thirty-three Jesus was condemned to death and crucified, and from the New Testament we learn that he died on a Friday on the ninth hour, which corresponds exactly to three post meridian. Thus the Friday in question is indubitably Good Friday observed by Christians:

They could have been going to do the laundry at the orphanage or the insane asylum; corn shucking at the mill; or to clean fish, rinse offal, cradle white-babies, sweep stores, scrape hog skin, press lard, case-pack sausage or hide in tavern kitchens so whitepeople didn’t have to see them handle their food. But not today. (258)

On Good Friday, the Catholic Church prescribes that one should not bake, cook, eat meat or clean the house; abstention and fast should be observed as a sign of respect and mourning for the death of Jesus.

The scene then shifts to a very minor character, Edward Bodwin, the old white man whose arrival echoes that of slavers. Indeed his presence re-awakens memory for Sethe, who attempts to kill him. On the other hand in this same passage, Bodwin’s past is also recalled: 30 years ago, he used to live in 124 Bluestone Road as a child: ‘There was a time when he buried things there. Precious things he wanted to protect’ … Where, exactly, was the box of tin soldiers? The watch chain with no watch?’ … Now he just wanted to know where his soldiers were and his watchless chain’ (260).

To Bodwin are connected the main symbols of Christ’s Flagellation: chains, even known as fetters, ‘are one of the symbols of Passion, referring to the Flagellation of Christ by the soldiers.’ (Ferguson 1954 310) Bodwin is also portrayed holding ‘a whip in his hand’ (Morrison 1987 262); this image can only confirm the previous assumption as the whip, also called scourge, is

---

Passion; while in Perugino’s ‘Crucifixion with S. Jerome and Mary Magdalene’ and Signorelli’s ‘Christ on the Cross’ a violet appears.
another symbol of the Passion. (Ferguson 1954 321) As we learn from the New Testament, Jesus, by order of Pilate, is delivered to the soldiers ‘to be first scourged and then handed over to be crucified’ [Matthew 27:26]; this passage is known as the Flagellation of Christ, a usual prelude to crucifixion. Although Bodwin was never a slaver, here we have a metonymic displacement in Sethe’s eyes in which he re-calls the arrival of her slave master to 124 which resulted in Beloved’s killing.

When Sethe hears the music sung by the thirty women assembled outside 124 she was ‘wringing a cool cloth to put on Beloved’s forehead’ as the girl was ‘sweating profusely’ (Morrison 1987 261); this image is, unquestionably, a clear reference to one of the fourteen stations of Christ’s journey to Calvary. The Apocryphal Gospels of Nicodemus tell that ‘when Jesus was on his way to be crucified’ Veronica ‘took pity on his sufferings and wiped the sweat from his brow with her veil.’ (Ferguson 1954 264) This episode belongs to the legends of Christianity, in fact, the same Evangelium Nichodemis reports a variant of the story where Veronica is in ‘possession of a piece of cloth which the Virgin Mary placed upon Christ’s face while he was hanging on the cross’ (Cross 1996 68-69). No matter what variant of the episode we take into account, its connection with Morrison’s text is still evident: Beloved, who in this section becomes the girl Jesus, is on her way to be crucified.

Before being nailed on the cross Christ was stripped of his clothes, Beloved, similarly, is naked: ‘[Beloved h]ad taken the shape of a pregnant woman, naked and smiling in the heat of the afternoon sun. Thunderblack and glistening she stood on long straight legs, her belly big and tight. Vines of hair twisted all over her head.’ (Morrison 1987 261) The adjectives ‘thunderblack’ and ‘straight’ deserve further attention as they have significant implications. ‘Straight’ might in fact allude to the unbroken legs of Christ: the Jews asked Pilate to break the legs of the crucified bodies to hasten their death, but when the soldiers ‘came to Jesus they found he was already dead … this happened to fulfil the words of scripture’ [John 19: 33-36]. In fact, in the Psalms one can read: ‘taking care of every bone, Yahweh will not let one be broken’ [Psalms 34: 20] and, similarly, in Exodus ‘nor must you break any bone of it’ [Exodus 12: 46]. Furthermore, the adjective ‘thunderblack’ is Morrison’s first mention of Beloved’s blackness in the novel. Beloved is a black, pregnant-like woman, progenitor of eternal life, ‘crucified’ by her community.

After Beloved has been exorcised, the community is depicted as ‘a pile of people out there. They make a hill. A hill of black people falling’ (Morrison 1987 262). The image of a hill is strictly connected to the Passion of Christ as it is the place where he was crucified: it was on the Calvary, the Hebrew Golgotha, a hill, where his cross was erected between those of two thieves who were crucified at the same time.
Once Beloved is gone, 124 Bluestone Road is a realm of silence. Denver goes off to work every day, while Sethe lies in bed indolent, wanting to let herself die. Paul D, who had been Sethe’s lover, hears from Denver and the rest of the community about her so he decides to pay her a visit. When he gets to 124 the house looks rather surreal as if Beloved’s leaving has left a mark. The description of the house is filled with symbols and allusions to the preceding events. ‘Faded newspaper pictures nailed to the outhouse on a tree’ (Morrison 1987 270) are like discarded past memories; this unsettling image evokes Christ nailed on the cross. Similarly, the ‘dead ivy twines around bean poles and door handles’ (270) seem to be embracing the house, like a spider web; it holds it as in a deadly grip. Indeed the ivy ‘was symbolic of the Cross of Christ because, like the ivy, it had firm roots and could not be destroyed or uprooted by any persecution’ (Levi D’Ancona 1977 191). Although the chrysanthemum blooms in November, Morrison has strangely included it in ‘the riot of late-summer flowers’ (Morrison 1987 270) in the back of 124 Bluestone Road. This seems to be pregnant with meaning since, in catholic symbolism, the chrysanthemum is ‘the flower of the Dead.’ All the above denotes an absence, everything signifies that something is over, somebody is gone.

The place is ‘stone quiet’ (270), and when Paul D wanders around the house visiting each room he realizes that ‘something is missing from 124.’ (270) It is not only the missing child, it is ‘something larger than the people who lived there. Something more than Beloved or the red light’ (270). What has changed since the last time Paul D visited 124? ‘In the place where once a shaft of sad red light had bathed him, locking him where he stood, is nothing’ (270); whatever was locking him is now over. With Beloved the burden of past is gone, the ghost of slavery, Paul D’s inability to remember, and his reluctance to tell. He feels that something is missing, but ‘he can’t put his finger on it’ (270); this phrase, whilst idiomatically expressing Paul D’s failure to identify what is missing, constitutes an eloquent reminiscence of the legendary biblical episode when Mary of Magdala, visiting Jesus’ empty tomb, saw the first Appearance of Christ. When the woman recognized the spirit she attempted to touch it and Jesus spoke the notorious words ‘Noli me tangere (touch me not), because I have not yet ascended to the Father’ [John 20: 16].

Paul D realizes that it is impossible for him to ‘finger’ this presence, and later he perceives that ‘beyond his knowing is the glare of an outside thing that embraces while it accuses.’ (271) I believe that this glare that, at the same time, accuses and embraces, evokes the final dramatic episode of Christian history, the Last Judgment. In this scriptural event the Resurrected Christ rewards or punishes the living and the dead. Northern medieval art and High Renaissance painters3 portray this event including ‘representations

---

3 See Michelangelo Buonarroti’s ‘Last Judgement.’
of Mary and John the Baptist to the right and left respectively of Christ’ (Apostolos-Cappadona 1994205-6) who, as the Presiding Judge, separates the sheep from the goats. In Beloved we read:

To the right of him, where the door to the keeping room is ajar, he hears humming. Someone is humming a tune. Something soft and sweet, like a lullaby. Then a few words. Sounds like “high Johnny, wide Johnny. Sweet William bend down low.” Of course, he thinks. That’s where she is—and she is. Lying under a quilt of merry colors. Her hair⁴, like the dark delicate roots of good plants, spread all over on the pillow. Her eyes, fixed on the window, are so expressionless he is not sure she will know who he is. There is too much light here in this room. Things look sold.

“Jackweed raise up high,” she sings. “Lambswool over my shoulder, but- tercup and clover fly.” She is fingering a long clump of her hair.’ (Morrison 1987 271)

Just to the right of Paul D, who is the reader/viewer’s eye of this final picture, lays Sethe humming a lullaby.⁵ In the frame of the Last Judgement, she is on the right, among the safe souls: the lambswool over her shoulder is therefore a signifier of her being safe, among the lambs, the pure souls. Sethe is freed from the slavery of her memories, and she has been redeemed by her guilt of killing her memories. Toni Morrison has placed a matricide among innocents, ‘yet in the human drama, Morrison reminds us, innocence is neither possible nor desirable’ (Otten 1989 92): here the binary structure upon which western culture is based, the perennial dichotomy of innocence and guilt, has been dismantled.

The homecoming of Beloved as memory is an opportunity for Sethe to work through her past in order to reclaim the present and look at the future. With these premises I would interpret the role of Beloved, the sacrificed black Christ, as a redeemer for the community, for the readers, for white and black people who don’t want to remember. Beloved becomes a story of redemption based on memory; as Morrison says: ‘the characters don’t want to remember, I don’t want to remember, black people don’t want to remember, white people won’t want to remember.’ (Angelo 1989 257) The ritual of exorcism on the body of Beloved represents an act of awareness of the back-kick of history on the part of the community: the Flagellation, the Passion, the Crucifixion is a conscious act of working through the past, in Freudian

---

⁴ Sethe’s identity is stressed through hair symbolism (see footnote 2). The reader perceives a positive image of the character.

⁵ This representation of Sethe as an innocent maid evokes Ophelia in Shakespeare’s Hamlet. Before dying, the young Ophelia, known to be mad, sings refrains of popular songs of death and love. Indeed Ophelia’s song ‘For bonny sweet Robin is all my joy’ (Shakespeare, [iv, sc. v, 184] seems to be echoed by Sethe’s ‘high Johnny, wide Johnny. Sweet William bend down low. […] Jackweed raise up high. […] Lambswool over my shoulder, buttercup and clover fly’ (Morrison 1987 271). Names of flowers are woven into Sethe’s song expanding its multiple allusions; likewise Ophelia’s discourse is dense with flower symbolism.
terms, of dealing with it. By positing Beloved as a Christ-figure, Morrison insists upon the enormity of the betrayal of collective memory implicit in the postmodernist isolation of the Holocaust as the single defining moment that horribly illuminates the bankruptcy of the Enlightenment project. Fusing an (inverted) version of the Christian tradition with the narrative of African-American history, Morrison thereby problematizes our notions of postcoloniality.

Works Cited


