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Multiple Critical Perspectives™

Teaching Toni Morrison's

Beloved

from

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General Introduction to the Work

Introduction to *Beloved*

BELOVED IS A NOVEL of historical fiction. While what is considered “historical” in fiction is still a matter of debate among critics and writers, one common definition considers historical fiction to include any story in which the setting plays a significant part in the events and is anywhere from 25 years in the past to prehistoric times. The story may portray life in a particular time period or focus on a specific event in history. The key to effective historical fiction is the accuracy of the author’s references to actual events and the authentic portrayal of characters in the time period. Characters in historical fiction may either be imaginary or portrayals of actual historical figures.

Beloved is both a reconstruction of true events and an elaborate, multi-dimensional reimagination of the black slave experience told through a modern lens. Author Toni Morrison was inspired by the true story of Margaret Garner, a slave woman from Kentucky who killed several of her children to protect them from being returned to slavery. Morrison uses the story of Garner’s life as a narrative device to explore the struggle for freedom, and the lasting repercussions of that struggle. *Beloved* is set between 1855 and 1874, thereby incorporating the waning days of antebellum South, the Civil War, and the failure of Reconstruction to right the racial and social ills of America; however, Morrison manipulates the passage of time and the use of point of view to suggest a fluidity of pain and the lasting impact the past has on informing the present. The omniscient narration indicates that the story, though clearly set in a late 19th century milieu, resonates well into the present day.

Though set in the 19th century, *Beloved* has all of the elements of contemporary literary fiction, conventions that reflect the preoccupations of modern America, the author, and the literary community. In particular, these concerns are conveyed through four key traits: the use of multiple narrative perspectives, ambiguity in plot and theme, the mix of the real and unreal, and experimental syntax.

Until the 1970s, most major novels were written from a single or predominant point of view; in recent years, however, it has become common for contemporary novelists to use multiple perspectives, in large part to show the subjectivity of experience and to describe how the actions of a person ricochet throughout the world. What is unique about Morrison’s work is that she often implements multiple narrative perspectives within the span of a single chapter; there are instances in which the change occurs between a mere paragraph or sentence. This narrative construction reflects the intensified and pained inner lives of the main characters, who are struggling to reconcile their past experiences and present emotions with those around them.

As a literary device, **ambiguity** represents the author’s deliberate attempt to construct literary experiences open to multiple interpretations, thereby making the reader aware of both the potential and

Psychoanalytic Theory Applied to *Beloved*



Notes on the Psychoanalytic Theory

THE TERM “PSYCHOLOGICAL” (also “psychoanalytical” or “Freudian Theory”) seems to encompass two almost contradictory critical theories. The first focuses on the text itself, with no regard to outside influences; the second focuses on the author of the text.

According to the first view, reading and interpretation are limited to the work itself. One will understand the work by examining conflicts, characters, dream sequences, and symbols. In this way, the psychoanalytic theory of literature is similar to the Formalist approach. One will further understand that a character’s outward behavior might conflict with inner desires, or might reflect as-yet-undiscovered inner desires.

Main areas of study/points of criticism of the first view:

- There are strong Oedipal connotations in this theory: the son’s desire for his mother, the father’s envy of the son and rivalry for the mother’s attention, the daughter’s desire for her father, the mother’s envy of the daughter and rivalry for the father’s attention. Of course, these all operate on a subconscious level to avoid breaking a serious social more.
- There is an emphasis on the meaning of dreams. This is because psychoanalytic theory asserts that it is in dreams that a person’s subconscious desires are revealed. What a person cannot express or do because of social rules will be expressed and accomplished in dreams, where there are no social rules. Most of the time, people are not even aware what it is they secretly desire until their subconscious goes unchecked in sleep.



Activity One

Examining the Psychological Freedom or Repression of Key Characters in *Beloved*

1. Copy and distribute the handout: *Beloved* Psychoanalytic Activity One Worksheet.
2. Present the class with the following thesis: “Freedom is a psychological, rather than a physical, state, and none of the characters in *Beloved* is truly free.”
3. Divide the class into four to six groups.
4. Assign each group (or allow each to choose) one of the following:
 - Sethe
 - Paul D.
 - Denver
 - Baby Suggs
 - Beloved
 - Stamp Paid/black community of Cincinnati
5. Have each group examine their assigned character and answer questions 1-5 on the handout.
6. Form new groups, forming each new group to represent as many of the above characters as possible.
7. Have each participant share his/her findings on the character, with the remaining group members completing the chart on the handout.
8. Review the chart findings for patterns and conclusions. Discuss the validity of the thesis by examining these patterns and conclusions.
9. Reconvene the class and discuss the groups’ conclusions.

Feminist Theory Applied to *Beloved*



Notes on the Feminist Theory

FEMINISM IS AN EVOLVING PHILOSOPHY, and its application in literature is a relatively new area of study. The basis of the movement, both in literature and society, is that the Western world is fundamentally patriarchal (i.e., created by men, ruled by men, viewed through the eyes of men, and judged by men).

In the 1960s, the feminist movement began to form a new approach to literary criticism. Of course, women had already been writing and publishing for centuries, but the 1960s saw the rise of a feminist literary theory. Until then, the works of female writers (or works about females) were examined by the same standards as those by male writers (and about men). Women were thought to be less intelligent than men, at least in part because they generally received less formal education, and many women accepted that judgment. It was not until the feminist movement was well under way that women began examining old texts, reevaluating the portrayal of women in literature, and writing new works to fit the developing concept of the “modern woman.”

The feminist approach is based on finding and exposing suggestions of misogyny (negative attitudes toward women) in literature. Feminists are interested in exposing the undervaluing of women in literature that has long been accepted as the norm by both men and women. They have even dissected many words in Western languages that reflect a patriarchal worldview. Arguing that the past millennia in the West have been dominated by men—whether the politicians in power or the historians recording it all—feminist critics believe that Western literature reflects a masculine bias, and, consequently, represents an inaccurate and potentially harmful image of women. In order to repair this image and achieve balance, they insist that works by and about women be added to the literary canon and read from a feminist perspective.

Activity One

Connecting Feminism and the Author

1. Pose the following question to the class: “Is Toni Morrison a feminist author?”
2. Copy and distribute the handout: *Beloved* Feminist Activity One: The Feminine Identity in *Beloved*.
3. Divide the class into four groups, or a number of groups divisible by four.
4. Assign each (or allow each to choose) one of the following female characters:
 - Sethe
 - Denver
 - Baby Suggs
 - Beloved or the women of the community (Ella, etc.)
5. Have each student in each group complete the handout.
6. Redistribute the class so that there are now groups of four students, each group containing one student representing each of the above characters.
7. Have members of new groups report their findings on their assigned characters from the previous group.
8. Have new groups develop a thesis (or several theses if there is no strong consensus) that explains the overall portrayal of women in the play and whether or not Morrison meets the criteria of a feminist author. (Tell groups to make certain they have evidence from each character to support their thesis.)
9. Reconvene the class and discuss the various theses and evidence.
10. In full-class discussion, examine the ways in which feminist ideology is represented and reflected in literature.
 - What does it mean to be a feminist author? Are all female authors feminist?
 - How does Morrison represent and rebel against traditional associations of feminism? How might she respond to the label of “feminist writer?”
 - In what ways is Morrison’s feminism concerned primarily with internal, self-inflicted oppression rather than the prevalence of an external patriarchal society?

NOTE: the purpose of this task is not to determine whether or not Morrison can definitively be described as a “feminist” but to understand the relationship of female authors—both intentional and subconsciously—to feminist literary theory.



New Historicism Applied to *Beloved*

Notes on New Historicism

A COMMON TENDENCY IN THE STUDY of literature written in, and/or set in, a past or foreign culture is to assume a direct comparison between the culture as presented in the text and as it really was/is. New Historicism asserts that such a comparison is impossible for two basic reasons.

First, the “truth” of a foreign or past culture can never be known as established and unchangeable. At best, any understanding of the “truth” is a matter of interpretation on the parts of both the writer and the reader. This is most blatantly evident in the fact that the “losers” of history hardly ever get heard. The culture that is dominated by another is often lost to history because it is the powerful who have the resources to record that history. Even in recent past events, who really knows both sides of the story? Who really knows the whole of the Nazi story? Or the Iraqi story? New Historicists argue that these unknown histories are just as significant as the histories of the dominant culture of power and should be included in any world view. Since they often contradict “traditional” (i.e., the winner’s) history, there is no way to really know the absolute truth.

Second, while the text under consideration does indeed reflect the culture in which it was written (and to some degree in which it is set), it also *participates* in the culture in which it is written. In other words, its very existence changes the culture it “reflects.” To New Historicists, literature and culture are born of one another. For example, although Harper Lee’s *To Kill a Mockingbird* certainly reflected the culture of the South during the mid-20th century, it also became a tool to raise awareness of, and change certain elements of, that culture.



Activity One

Examining the Institution of Slavery in *Beloved*

1. Copy and distribute the handout: *Beloved* New Historicism Activity One—Reexamining Slavery in *Beloved*.
2. Divide the class into groups of three or four.
3. Assign each group (or allow each to choose) one of the following characters:
 - Sethe
 - Paul D.
 - Beloved
 - Baby Suggs
 - Ella
 - Stamp Paid
 - Sixo
4. Have each student in each group complete the handout.
5. Reconvene the class and have each group report its findings.
6. In full-class discussion, discuss and draw conclusions about the ways in which *Beloved* has shaped or has been shaped by the debate over how to interpret the institution of slavery.