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GRADO EN ESTUDIOS INGLESES

Trabajo de Fin de Grado

Analyzing Trauma in Toni Morrison's  
*Beloved*

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### Abstract

During centuries several people were oppressed by other cultures, the repercussion of this influence and the consequences such as trauma are the main topic of the following text where it will be explored through the question of what is the science of trauma and how this is shown in *Beloved*. This novel is presented as a paradigmatic example of the emerging genre of trauma fiction what makes it an interesting subject of study, especially regarding the characters who will be analyzed in order to find a better understanding of trauma, how it affects the individuals and how it heals.

*Key Words:* Trauma, Toni Morrison, *Beloved*, Sethe, Traumatic, Wound, Experiences, Slave.

### Resumen

Durante siglos varios pueblos fueron oprimidos por otras culturas, la repercusión de esta influencia y las consecuencias como trauma son el tema principal del siguiente texto donde se explorará a través de la cuestión de qué es la ciencia del trauma y como esto es representado en *Beloved*. Esta novela es presentada como un ejemplo paradigmático del genero emergente que es la literatura del trauma, lo que lo convierte en un interesante sujeto de estudio, especialmente en relación con los personajes los que serán analizados para encontrar una mejor comprensión de lo que es el trauma, cómo afecta a los individuos y como sana.

*Palabras clave:* Trauma, Toni Morrison, *Beloved*, Sethe, Traumático, Herida, Experiencias, Esclavitud.

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## INTRODUCTION

During the decade of 1980, the American Psychiatric Association decided to include in its new edition of the official diagnostic manual the appearance of a new illness, Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder that was presented in subjects who has been exposed to a physical injury or a serious threat that affects the integrity of the individual. With this idea as a topic, a series of writers created what was considered an emerging genre, trauma in literary fiction. Among different authors, Toni Morrison published in 1987 *Beloved*, what happened to be a paradigmatic example of this new genre. The plot of the novel presents the story of Sethe, an African-American woman who was a victim of slavery years ago. The result of her experiences as a slave is what drives her to kill her daughter, in order to save her from her possible destiny in Sweet Home being a slave of the Schoolteacher. The killed baby, named Beloved, appears at the 124 of Bluestone Road in its physical embodiment as the incarnation of Sethe's trauma, representing a challenge for this character, who has to deal and live with her personified trauma.

Overall, the aim of this work is to highlight the issue of trauma in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. For that purpose, the topic will be divided and analyzed in different sections. Firstly, it will be explained the study of trauma, claiming that it is not only a physical wound but also a wound that affects the whole organism, "a piercing or breach of a border that puts inside and outside into a strange communication" (Luckhurst 3). Secondly, as a logical development of the ideas, it will be defined what trauma is, in order to reach a better understanding of the characters' psychology and behavior. Therefore, in this section is developed the idea that trauma is a mental reaction, what creates a physical response owing to a previous shocking and threatening experience. Thirdly, the previous contents will be the basis of an analysis in line with the essence of the novel, the infanticide carried out by Sethe due to a latent trauma created by the

successive abuses during her life as a slave, as well as other characters' experiences, which are also related with vexations in slavery. In the last part, it will be discussed the healing of trauma, how this possibly happen and how it will be showed in the story. All together presents a general picture of how trauma is presented in the novel helping the reader to understand how this illness behaves and the repercussions of it.

## TRAUMA STUDIES INTRODUCTION.

“Trauma studies conducts research into the psychological consequences of mass trauma – including wars, political violence, torture and natural disasters- and develops effective treatments for survivors.” (King’s College London) Trauma studies are now considered an important part in the field of psychology; however, it is a recent incorporation if we think about the history of this young discipline. It is just in 1980 when trauma disorder starts being recognized as a new illness, before was part of the medicine and it was related to physical wounds. Because of the lack of the existence of this term, during the First World War, a new term was used in order to describe not only the physical injuries but also the soldiers’ reaction or behavior that obeys to a mental injury, the “shell shock”. This new term represents the lack of terminology for this emerging discipline where the experiences of the subject affect their behavior and mental health, not just physical wounds where the skin was the main affected. The healed scars in the skin can represent a traumatic situation that heals outside but not inside. Therefore, it could be assumed that, as Roger Luckhurst claims in his book *The Trauma Question*, “Trauma is a piercing or breach of a border that puts inside and outside into a strange communication”

## WHAT IS TRAUMA?

Trauma, a word that comes from the Greek “τραῦμα” means wound, what can have two different but related meanings. If we look at the definition of trauma in a medical dictionary, what we find out is that the trauma question is still in between different disciplines, medicine, and psychology. The first acceptance is “injury” appealing to a physical affection, the second one is a “psychological or emotional damage” and goes further in this acceptance:

Psychic trauma a psychologically upsetting experience that produces an emotional or mental disorder or otherwise has lasting negative effects on a person's thoughts, feelings, or behavior. (Trauma)

The same term is associated with both physical injury, the original meaning of the word, and a long-term neurosis. It is very difficult to delimit both conditions since the effects of a physical injury can affect the organism as a whole as it may be the case of the victims of terrorism or genocides, where the survivors may not be only physically affected but also mentally disturbed. This is the case of the main character, Sethe, who was a victim of slavery, what conditioned the rest of her life.

Trauma is a negative and last emotion that puts at risk the wellbeing of a person. It implies a disequilibrium on the mental system of the subjects and their point of view related to the emotions. It appears as a cause of a fear of a huge intensity or the lack of control of a situation. It is common to appear when the subjects are the witnesses of a fact linked to danger or the death of another human being.

Beyond the different currents of psychology, there exists a consensus related to the idea that a trauma is a fact that generates an unmeasured stress that goes beyond the common experiences: a person that was choked while eating might be affected by that



experience to the point of being scared of ingesting solid food. This person has been traumatized and is creating a physical response due to a neurosis created by a traumatic experience or mental shock.

Therefore, while physical wounds can be healed, the mental shock can remain in the brain creating also a physical response. This notion of trauma is clarified by Freud as what:

We apply [...] to an experience which within a short period of time presents the mind with an increase of stimulus too powerful to be dealt with or worked off in the normal way, and this must result in permanent disturbances of the manner in which the energy operates. (Freud 315)

## WHY BELOVED AND TRAUMA?

After a better agreement by the medical society about the definition of what was PTSD (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder), a general idea of this illness was spread in society; therefore, many authors were inspired to write by the public memory of a traumatic past, the anxiety of the survival or post-traumatic sequelae. In order to find a way of healing traumatic events, many stories in relation to this topic were created. Writing trauma implies a way to understand and get over the distress. In La Capra's words:

[It] involves processes of acting out, working over, and to some extent working through in analyzing and "giving voice" to the past – processes of coming to terms with traumatic "experiences", limit events, and their symptomatic effects that achieve articulation in different combinations and hybridized forms. (La Capra 186)

Together with Margaret Atwood, Pat Barker, Anne Michaels or Benjamin Wilkimirski, Toni Morrison opened a path in literature with trauma fiction in 1987 with the publication of *Beloved*.

*Beloved* is a paradigmatic example of writing trauma due to some essential characteristics that relate the novel with trauma:

[I]ts disarticulation of linear narrative, its figuration of trauma in the ghost, and its closing reflections on the transgenerational transmission and the complex accommodations communities need to make with such traumatic history. (Luckhurst 91)

## ANALYSIS TRAUMA IN THE NOVEL

In *Beloved*, Morrison examines the trauma derived from slavery. According to Lukhurst, ‘Trauma is a piercing or breach of a border that puts inside and outside into a strange communication’ (Lukhurst 3.) Taking this quote as a reference, we can assume that in traumatic situations there are two main important factors, “breach a border” and a “strange communication”. Therefore, the purpose of this section will be to analyze these ideas in *Beloved* and develop how the characters have breached a border through hard experiences and how these experiences need to be expressed in a strange way, either actions or “afterwardsness”

Firstly, to talk about the idea of breaching a border, it is necessary to specify what it means. The breach of a border could be the same as breaking through the wall of sanity due to a negative and stressful happening that remains in the unconscious of a person.

In *Beloved*, in fact, all the characters could be analyzed through the idea of having a “breach of border”, because all the characters have suffered a traumatic event through their experiences as slaves or the memory of these experiences. Although the most representative characters of this idea could be Sethe and Beloved. Obviously, Sethe is the principal one because of her tempestuous past. She had to deal with such a traumatic event earlier on in her life surrounding slavery and we discovered how this trauma led her to kill her children. We then see the consequences of the isolated life that this event brought along for the whole community. Beloved also shows a symbol of breaching a border, in fact, the character of Beloved is in itself the symbol of a breach of a border. Beloved is the border that is breached in this particular instance of trauma. She was a baby and someone took the decision to kill her, and when she comes back, she remembers it. But as Luckhurst affirms “In Morrison, trauma take discordance to

the very limits of coherence.” (Luckhurst 93) All these characters have been exposed to a psychological threat that has broken a margin, and as a consequence of those threats and traumas, they will show a strange communication.

Secondly, there is the idea of “strange communication” which could be interpreted as a way of expression of these earlier traumatic events. In *Beloved*, the expression of a trauma is shown as an act in itself. However, “strange communication” could be confused because it is not only originated by a trauma, but a trauma in itself too. The fact that Sethe tried to kill her children could be a way of expressing her trauma because this situation was the result of a previous psychological threat. Therefore, it was a way to express fear and discontent to her earlier situation, but again this way of expression will be traumatic for her. In the book, it is also presented the idea of “afterwardsness” (original from Freud: *Nachträglichkeit*). As R. Eaglestone presents in his essay, afterwardsness is a concept that affirms that the exposition of an earlier traumatic event can reappear in the present acquiring a purpose (Eaglestone 16, 17). Therefore the mixed of times is a way of express trauma. This idea of “afterwardsness” is shown in *Beloved*, actually is one of the aims. The reader is constantly exposed to flashbacks and memories to Sweet Home or the shed. The fact that the story revolves around a ghost is another indication of it. It is a story developed in the present but deeply affected by the past:

You know. Some things you forget. Other things you never do...

Places, places are still there. If a house burns down, it's gone but the place – the picture of it – stays, and not just in my memory, but out there, in the real world. (Morrison 36).

Sethe feels possessed by her “rememory”, by the revivence experiences tremendously painful, what takes us to the concept of traumatic memory. The vexations suffered by Sethe are so overwhelming that she tries to disremember, but the emotional wounds caused by the suffered trauma are too deep. The trauma is still there, as the fired house.

However, the idea of trauma is not only represented in Sethe, but in all the characters of the story inasmuch as in one way or another they have been traumatized. Even Babby Suggs who predicated in the Clearing suffered a trauma, especially after the murder of the baby when she decided to give up. She was fading out every day more, just asking for colors.

Contrary to Sethe or Babby Suggs, Denver and her traumatic experiences take a different way. She represents the next generation, those who did not suffer any physical abuse but suffer the consequences and another way of discrimination.

Paul D. is another character who shows his trauma to the reader through afterwardsness. It is common to find horrible experiences in his dialogues that go constantly back to the period of his time as a slave.

DOES IT HEAL AT THE END?

In relation to this topic, the isolation of Sethe during the plot is essential. There is a contrast between the period when Babby Suggs lived and after the incident.

Before the event, Babby Suggs carried out a series of community rituals in the Clearing, where the important was the communal meeting. These rituals are presented in the book as a moment of freedom, joy, and relief, a way in which trauma heals through songs and weeping:

It started that way: laughing children, dancing men, crying women and then it got mixed up. Women stopped crying and danced; men sat down and cried; children danced, women laughed, children cried until, exhausted and riven, all and each lay about the Clearing damp and gasping for breath. In the silence that followed, Baby Suggs, holy, offered up to them her great big heart. (Morrison 76)

However, after Sethe perpetrates the assassination of Beloved and Babby Suggs gives up and dies, she is isolated by the community who think she is insane and dangerous. This fact, along with her traumatic experiences makes Sethe, and Denver consequently, enclose herself in her haunted house being prisoner of her dead baby without new experiences to heal: “her brain was not interested in the future. Loaded with the past and hungry for more, it left her no room to imagine, let alone plan, for the next day” (Beloved 70)

This situation will end with the powerful exorcism from the women of the surroundings. Since Sethe and Beloved are absorbed by each other, Denver needs to seek for external help, once the story is known by Janey Wagon she convince the rest

of women. When this story is shared and divulged among the community, a miracle happens. A group of women walks slowly towards 124 carrying out a sort of exorcism.

This exorcism symbolizes the power of community, a community that has also suffered traumatic situations

In the end, Sethe is consumed by Beloved, she is on the edge of insanity when Denver tells her that Mr. Bodwin will come around to pick her up for work, but Sethe is too concentrate chopping ice. When the chorus of women interrupts Sethe in her activity, both Beloved and Sethe come out of the house when suddenly Mr. Bodwin appears to pick Denver up, Sethe revives her traumatic experience but with a difference. This time Sethe react in a different way, instead of attack Beloved, she attacked what she considered the threat, Mr. Bodwin. In this way, Sethe this time faced her trauma by reacting in a different way.

However after the departure of Beloved, when Paul D. pass by to see Sethe. She is in bed, and for the first time without the will to do anything like Babby Suggs did. The book ends in the uncertainty of whether Sethe will carry on with Paul D. by her side facing the upcoming events and the past, or whether she decides to give up and fade out as Babby Suggs.

The only certain thing is that trauma affects each individual unpredictably, what could be applied to the healing too. Each person has a different ability and different capacities of face trauma and its own way to go through it.

## CONCLUSION

Overall, the aim of this work is to show the cruciality of trauma in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* that is present throughout the story. In order to find a better understanding of this specific aspect of the novel, firstly, it has been developed a context related to trauma studies and what trauma is. In these sections, it has been explained how trauma is in between two disciplines, however the studies of trauma focus on the idea of an invisible wound provoked by an unpleasant experience, what might provoked physical reactions implying that a trauma affects the whole organization of a body. Going deeper in this idea, in the next section it has been discussed a possible definition of trauma as "a piercing or breach of a border that puts inside and outside into a strange communication" (Luckhurst 3). The use of this aspect as a leitmotif of the novel is what makes *Beloved* a paradigmatic example of this new genre, together with how this is exposed with the narrative. This traumatic experience is around slavery, and mainly about the tempestuous past of Sethe, what will traumatized her for the rest of her life. People who have suffered an event that deeply threatens their life or their well-being is taking the risk of breaking the wall of sanity and entering into a deep trauma, as in Sethe or Beloved, who meet each other after the death of the last one. The reaction to the trauma that has been studied in the characters who have experimented slavery, it is what it has been called a "strange communication" that basically means a way of express that trauma, how the characters react against these previous events, just repeating through "afterwardsness" in order to understand or either to relieve or heal. Human psychology is very complex, but if in addition, people are exposed to extreme situations their sanity could be at risk. The behavior under a traumatic mind it is what leads us to the healing. In line with trauma, the healing acts in mysterious ways, it does not obey to any scheme or formula. The healing can be reached through the most simple things such as songs,



laughs or cries, or never leave. What we find at the end of the story is a defeated Sethe, with the support of an old friend and the uncertainty of a new and an unwritten future.

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