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Critical Perspectives on Mythological Motifs in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

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Abstract

The paper explores critical perspectives on the functions of myth and elements of cultural and oral traditions in Toni Morrison's fifth novel *Beloved*. We try to demonstrate how scholarship has understood Morrison's embedding of African mythological motifs and classical European and Judeo-Christian tropes into her story of slavery. Although *Beloved* has traditionally been read as Morrison's literary reconstruction of African-American history, a substantial body of criticism has also recognised the subtler layer of meaning within this work. Such readings have largely focused on cultural roots the writer exploited to create a unique storyline of her people and community, making *Beloved* a novel that delves into the very fibre of *the black experience and essence*, Morrison's keen topic of interest over the years. According to academics such as Therese E. Higgins, K. Zauditu-Selassie, Marylin Sanders Mobley, Daniel Erickson, Trudier Harris, Shirley A. Stave, and Tessa Roynon, Morrison's narrative magic appears to have been drawn from intertwining of historical fact and collective wisdom of the ancients, which even the great author herself said she wished recognised in her work by more than a few patient scholars. *(примљено: 7. фебруара 2022; прихваћено: 11. априла 2022)*

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All gods who receive homage are cruel. All gods dispense suffering without reason. Otherwise they would not be worshipped. Through indiscriminate suffering men know fear and fear is the most divine emotion. It is the stones for altars and the beginning of wisdom. Half gods are worshipped in wine and flowers. Real gods require blood.

Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

1. Introduction: The wise old woman Morrison

As early as the foreword to her fifth novel, *Beloved*, the proverbial *wise old woman*[1] Toni Morrison (1931–2019) demonstrates her unquestionable talent for stories larger-than-life:

> I sat on the porch, rocking in a swing, looking at giant stones piled up to take the river's occasional fist. Above the stones is a path through the lawn, but interrupted by an ironwood gazebo situated under a cluster of trees and in deep shade.
> She walked out of the water, climbed the rocks, and leaned against the gazebo. Nice hat.
> So she was there from the beginning, and except for me, everybody (the characters) knew it—a sentence that later became "The women in the house knew it." (Morrison, 2007: *xiii*)

Not simply an example of a successful work motivated by otherworldly inspiration, Morrison's *Beloved* has long occupied literary critics (notably referred to in this paper: Therese E. Higgins, K. Zauditu-Selassie, Marylin Sanders Mobley, Daniel Erickson, Trudier Harris, Shirley A. Stave, and Tessa Roynon) prompting the finest possible sifting and readings ranging from engaged and political, to those proposing an African-American mythopoeia and magic realism. Indeed, layers of meaning in Toni Morrison's work may well be far too numerous to outline in a book, let alone a more condensed piece of writing, and therefore for the purposes of this paper, we shall focus on the aspect perhaps less insisted on[2] in the critical body on *Beloved*. Namely, this novel has more often than not been discussed and interpreted as Morrison's revisioning of the US history, an activist piece calling for social change and acknowledgement of the genocide against the blacks[3] - and rightfully so, given

1 Our reference to Morrison's 1993 Nobel Prize Lecture which draws on more mythical literary tradition: "Once upon a time, there was an old woman. Blind, but wise." (Morrison, 1993)

2 In the interview with Nellie McKay Morrison herself supports the claim that culture-oriented readings of *Beloved* have been less dominant: "Critics of my work have often left something to be desired, in my mind, because they don't always evolve out of the culture, the world, the given quality out of which I write [...] I tend not to explain things very much, but I long for a critic who will know what I mean when I say 'church', or 'community', or when I say 'ancestor', or chorus'." (cited in Higgins, 2010: *ix*)

3 Despite an extensive body of critical work dealing with issues of race, ethnicity, politics and history in *Beloved*, which we do not disregard in any way, we have decided to follow in the footsteps of the

that the writer herself insisted in her numerous interviews on being placed among those African-American writers intent on achieving the end of white oppression through their work (Bloom, 2005). Notwithstanding that, our main goal is to explore criticism focusing on the fantastical dimension of the novel and tracing its roots in the African, European, and Judeo-Christian myths and oral traditions that Morrison managed to lay out for us with such dexterity that at times it seems they cannot be precisely identified. If her purpose was to offer a transformative and regenerative experience for the black and white alike, it may be claimed that in *Beloved* she undoubtedly achieved it by tapping into *the finer tunings* of the readers, regardless of their race and ethnicity.

Before we venture into the realm of mythical forces underlying Morrison's writing, it would be convenient to make note of reasons for any writer's (Morrison included) need to incorporate myths, legends, and oral traditions into their work. The most obvious answer to the question may well be the commonplace quality of such stories. All people, regardless of their nationality, race, and educational background, have been reared on such stories within their respective communities. Therefore, it is only natural for writers to draw on the collective consciousness in order to convey the intended message. Or is it the message itself that quite comely fits into the respective mythological framework without the writer's explicit intention? Be that as it may, for modern authors such as Morrison, myth need not be avoided altogether to increase the credibility of writing. According to Robert A. Segal, 20th century theories of myth have relinquished seeing it as an "outdated counterpart of science either in subject matter or in function" and "consequently, moderns are not obliged to abandon myth for science" (2004: 3). It is therefore no wonder that Morrison employed a variety of mythological tropes and oral traditions in a body of text that may have even been written as a testament to the slave narrative, often grossly misconceived or underrepresented in both literature and history.

We shall try to present the most prevalent myth and oral tradition connotations that critics have suggested in the years of study of *Beloved* and the novel's protagonists – Sethe, Beloved, Denver, Baby Suggs, and Paul D – the main representatives of millions of voiceless African-Americans. In their search of freedom, Morrison's characters must plunge straight into the depths of themselves, where it is certainly not uncommon to meet the archetypal, the uncanny, the mysterious – and even terrifying.

late Harold Bloom, who in his critical reader on Toni Morrison, took a stance on critical perspectives of Morrison's writing with more aplomb than we ever could: "I reread Morrison because her imagination, whatever her social purposes, transcends ideology and polemics, and enters again into the literary space occupied only by fantasy and romance of authentic aesthetic dignity. Extraliterary purposes, however valid or momentous they may be for a time, ebb away, and we are left with story, characters, and style, that is to say, with literature or the lack of literature. Morrison's early novels leave us with literature, and not with a manifesto for social change, however necessary and admirable such change would be in our America." (Bloom, 2005: 2)

2. Goddesses at play: Sethe and Beloved

Let us begin with the evident: the character of Sethe, as we first encounter her, might be in the least described as a majestic woman. A fair woman in the prime of her life, regally dignified despite the excommunication she has been suffering for years, her legs covered in chamomile sap. Somewhat later we shall learn about the mark slavery has left on her back, *the chokecherry tree in full bloom*. There is so much symbolic around Sethe that it becomes difficult to isolate specific traditions she has been construed around. However, it is Paul D who will soon disperse the illusion by contrasting his memory of a goddess-like girl Sethe he yearned for back at Sweet Home with the woman in front of him – aged, marked with multiple births, hard labour and abuse she suffered at the plantation – the tree on her back is in fact no more than "a revolting clump of scars" (Morrison, 2007: 21). Therefore, at the very beginning of the novel Morrison sets the stage for the fantastical dimension of her work, should we go forward with Tzvetan Todorov's structural approach to the genre. Sethe baffles the reader with her double nature – would an ordinary woman linger at a house occupied by *an angry spectre*? Would she discuss her *scars* in terms of a highly symbolic *tree*? Is Paul D's striving to explain in rational terms what he has faced inside the 124 Bluestone justified and necessary? As Todorov posits, *hesitation* to fully embrace either the reasonable explication or put full trust in the magical holds the key to the fantastic narrative – the reader must be drawn into the world of the main protagonist(s) and share their ambiguous relationship with the events till the end (1973: 31–33). That said, it seems that Morrison wrote not only an engaged novel about the harms of slavery, but also a fantasy in which ancient African goddesses play with imaginations of the good Christian folk, black and white alike.

But why would Morrison envision Sethe in mythical dimensions in the first place? Margaret Garner's story[4] as is would undoubtedly suffice to the modern mind – the hardest possible decision anyone can be forced to make may well be a central theme of the novel in itself. However, Morrison apparently hoped to achieve something else: to depict the ties that cannot be severed despite hardship and torture. In her study of African spiritual traditions in Morrison's novels, K. Zauditu-Selassie suggests that persisting traditions and cultural concepts from Africa that the author often employed in her novels represent a literal survival mechanism of the African-Americans:

> Toni Morrison declares that the "forced transfer" of African people is the "defining event of the modern world" ("Home" 10). The arrival of captive Africans to North America, their enslavement, and their continued

4 The full account of circumstances leading to and arising from Margaret's killing her daughter to prevent the family's recapture under the provisions of the Fugitive Slave Act can be found in Andrews/McKay (1999). Titled "Margaret Garner *and seven others*", it is quite a detailed contemporary commentary written by a white abolitionist Samuel J. May and originally published in his book *The Fugitive Slave Law and Its Victims* (New York: American Anti-Slavery Society, 1856).

> survival, represents a journey of remarkable resiliency. Besides enslaving African people, the deliberate mission of Europeans included efforts to destroy them by attempting to wipe out their traditions, substituting their languages, and desecrating their cultures. To reiterate, this experience of Africans in America has been a quintessential example of adaptation in the face of adversity. That they managed to continue on with any measure of psychic integrity is a tribute to the dynamic role that culture plays in the lives of people. A necessary element of life, culture is the medium through which humans exercise their humanity and express and affirm their view of reality.
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> For members of the African diaspora, culture surpassed its role to provide self-definition and sustain the group ethos; it became a way to physically survive. As a site of cosmic connection, identity, meaning, and values were made and remade in order to resist. Through the tenacious practice of culture, Africans endured in America. (Zauditu-Selassie, 2009: 1)

For Zauditu-Selassie, Sethe is a character torn by her need to forget the past, the exact opposite to the ritual practices of her people. African peoples observe the ancestors (who otherwise may come back to haunt them as evil spirits); a majority of spiritual traditions recognise ancestors as deities whose primary task is to establish connections between higher divinities and humans. By fighting back the memories of her dead, Sethe shuns the ancestors, and in turn suffers ostracism by the practising community of her town. The ghost of Beloved is first sent, and then revived, to make Sethe, herself both an ancestor and a descendant of an initiated mother[5] aware of her place within the spiritual tradition. In order to fulfil her purpose and become the goddess-like great ancestral mother, Sethe needs to retrace her actions and understand the horrendous choices she and her mother, her childhood guardian, Baby Suggs, and the women of the community had to make while enslaved. To all of them Beloved appears as both a demon ghost child and an embodiment of a powerful river and wind goddess Oya, who enables the passage of souls into Heaven. For the BaKongo and Yoruba, this deity is inextricable from the concepts of memory, healing, and remembrance – as the spirit that stands at the water-barrier between the worlds of the living and the dead, Oya demands sacrifice and praise to vouch for an untroubled existence on both plains[6]. When

5 Zauditu-Selassie has speculated on Sethe's most vivid memory – that of her mother and the mark on her skin that was not necessarily a brand put there by the slavers. The circle with a cross may as well be a tribal cicatrisation known as *dikenga dia Kongo*, a cosmogram that represents soul's movement through the different stages of life, and physical and spiritual worlds of the Africans as well. Traditional dances of Kongo also recreate and reflect the underlying principles of the cosmogram. Even more significantly for *Beloved*, the dancers move counterclockwise, as if their return to the past serves to symbolically ensure the future (Zauditu-Selassie, 2009: *x-xi*, 156).

6 Events unfolding later on in the novel represent another proof for Zauditu-Selassie that Morrison intended to stress the importance of community in the African experience: "Moreover, characters in *Beloved* embody the African idea of community since they provide the primary support for the individual. Offering different accounts of events, each provides what is significant and poignant for them and omits details that do

we first meet Beloved, she is the noise and air movement around the house; then she comes out of water fully dressed, having taken on the human form, which also precisely fits in with attributes of this African goddess (Zauditu-Selassie, 2009). But is she malevolent? Certainly her activities around Paul D and Sethe herself may place her further down the alignment of evil creatures that exist solely to torture unsuspecting souls. However, if we choose to perceive Beloved as a more complex African deity, her malevolence can be quickly diminished, even entirely dismissed. Her primary purposes in that case are to heal the rift within the community and teach Sethe how to become a proper ancestor[7] to her living daughter Denver.

Although an extraordinary woman from the very beginning of the story, Sethe turns out not to be the true goddess material until her passing through the ordeal of relationship with the daughter/a host of African ancestors returned from the netherworld, and Paul D's revealing her true purpose in his newly gained voice. The culture they have been stripped of by slavery cannot be concealed inside hearts buried in boxes, or under deliberate amnesia, or silence and community's minding their own business. Through Sethe's horrific and desperate act, an ancient deity finds the way back into lives of everyone, forcing them to embrace the power within their black selfhood, healing the wounds, and prompting a debate on survivor's experiences. Marylin Sanders Mobley confirms this in her essay "Memory, History and Meaning in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*" referring to it as a reinvention of a classic slave narrative the purpose of which is not to convince the white reader of the slave's humanity, but to call black readership to awaken the repressed and ignored past (Sanders Mobley, 2005: 75).

The organic bond between the goddess Oya and the African-Americans allows for the novel to be read as an allegory of the past and its vital presence in the *now*, which in turn makes Beloved, her spectral embodiment, a central figure in the narrative (Erickson, 2009: 16). This is an unusual choice when it comes to ghosts – for Daniel Erickson, such beings in literary tradition typically only set up the plot, having returned for "unfinished business", but other than that fail to occupy a dominant spot till the very end. Morrison, in contrast, needed an entity from beyond the plain of physical existence to expose skeletons of slavery and reclaim her community's rightful place in the United States, and not only to offer the readership a highly aestheticized gothic story[8] (Erickson, 2009). Thus it may be claimed that

not inform their personal mythic realities. What some characters leave out, others furnish; the result of which is the creation of a complete story. Morrison inscribes the noun memory as a verb to emphasize its dynamism." (Zauditu-Selassie, 2009: 149). A community is therefore necessary to expel Beloved, but in turn Beloved is necessary to heal the community.

7 Zauditu-Selassie also argues that the *Egun* – the ancestors – take a central spot in majority of African cultures; they protect families from evil influences and untimely death, and also represent the link between the realms of the living and the dead as "the foundation of all people" (2009: 202). To become an ancestor Sethe must undo the trauma caused by her murderous act and acknowledge her innate goddess-like qualities – this lesson comes from the unlikely teacher, Paul D, at the very end of the story. When he says that Sethe is her "best thing" (Morrison, 2007: 273) he perhaps involuntarily, but still significantly, finalises her initiation and metamorphosis into an ancestor-mother.

8 In *Religiosity, Cosmology and Folklore: The African Influence in the Novels of Toni Morrison*, Higgins further

vividly portrayed both black goddesses who preside over 124 Bluestone Road and personal histories of many an African-American demand a sacrifice of heart and soul, a cry that must eventually be let out, even if it comes long after the awareness of the wrong done to an entire culture. The worst crime against the gods is not to be humiliated by a human of another creed, but to forget them, to repress them and hide them inside boxes, thus preventing (or at least postponing) the actual closing of the circle of life.

3. The darkness within: angels or demons?

Having explored the more subtle and optimistic view of the African connection, we could say that *Beloved* should first and foremost be read as an African-American (hi)story. However, such an interpretation implies the innate goodness, if not a didactic function, of Beloved as a deity, and Sethe as a mother. What if they were not benevolent entities, or spiritual teachers of the community that must provide a moral to the story written in blood?

Trudier Harris has pondered on this in her essay "*Beloved*: Woman, Thy Name Is Demon". Starting from the premise that in literature the female body often represents the Other, "a source of fear, both an attraction and repulsion, something that can please, but something that can destroy" (Harris, 1999: 129), Harris proposes that Morrison presents us with Beloved as a *succubus*. Beloved is then after revenge against her mother and her killer, she knows and shows no mercy or any humanity for that matter, she feeds on and off Sethe and manipulates all other characters into participating in her little game[9] (Harris, 1999). Further proof of this can be found in Beloved's clash with the unlikely hero, Paul D:

supports this view: "Indeed, *Beloved* exists as an embodiment of such a connection between Africa and America on several levels. Throughout the novel, Morrison has buttressed African lore with American experience. In other words, that Beloved is the dead daughter of Sethe returned to life is the African cosmological belief in the spirits of dead ancestor resurrecting. That Beloved also represents, as Morrison says, an Everywoman character, the forgotten African woman whose story will never be told (although through this novel and this interpretation is finally told), is the American experience which forever links the two together in Morrison's works. To illustrate this connection between Africa and America (namely Sethe's mother and Sethe), Morrison describes Sethe's experience just prior to Denver's birth when Sethe, exhausted from her long journey of escape, thinks she is going to die. Every time she stops walking, the child within her kicks and drives her forward. The kicking child reminds Sethe of an antelope ramming her insides. Clearly, Sethe had never before seen an antelope, yet the image exists somewhere in her mind's eye and signals a connection to Africa. Furthermore, as she is about to give birth to Denver, Sethe remembers the dancing feet of her dead mother. The two images—her dancing mother and the ramming antelope—embody Africa and forever link her mother of Africa to her daughter of America. The connection, though seemingly forgotten, was never completely severed. The triumph of Sethe and others like her is the triumph of "rememory" over repression." (Higgins, 2010: 41)

9 "Vengeance is not the Lord's; it is Beloved's. Her very body becomes a manifestation of her desire for vengeance and of Sethe's guilt. She repays Sethe for her death, but the punishment is not quick or neat. They attempt to choke Sethe to death in Baby Suggs's clearing and the lingering pain of that encounter is but the beginning of Beloved's taking over the women's lives. Before she can accomplish that, however, she must extricate the most formidable opposition, Paul D. In another demonic parallel in the male/female clash, she becomes the traditional succubus, the female spirit who drains the male's life force even as she drains him of his sperm." (Harris in Andrews/McKay, 1999: 132).

> Woman's body is a threat to men in *Beloved* as well; that is the vantage point from which we see what happens in the novel. Paul D's arrival at Sethe's house brings with it the ancient fear of women. When he enters the house haunted by Beloved's ghost, it becomes the enveloping enclosure of the vagina; the vagina dentata myth operates as Paul D feels the physical threat of the house. The red light of the baby's spirit drains him, makes him feel overwhelming grief, feminizes him. [...] Holding himself together against such a feminine breakdown, Paul D already views the house as a threat to his masculinity. He therefore enters it like the teeth-destroying tricksters of tradition entered the vagina, in the heroic vein of conquering masculine will over female desire. The competition, as it develops, then, seems initially unfair—a grown man against a baby. The supernatural element of the baby's spirit neutralizes the inequality somewhat, but the spirit of maleness in this initial battle seems stronger even than Beloved's supernaturalism. (Harris, 1999: 130–131)

Interestingly enough, Harris draws from a variety of African and Judeo-Christian myths about the demonic female power, although her interpretation seems to have more to do with feminist criticism and reading of *Beloved* as a novel on gender clash. For her, the character of Sethe is all but the bearer of feminine principle. She is proud, self-sufficient, rational – "her rugged individualism is more characteristic of males than females of the time" and she would therefore be "a masculine presence that the female demon seeks to exorcise" (1999: 134). Yet, she still can co-exist with the ghost until Paul D's arrival. He, according to Harris, cannot cope with the spectral energy as it "drains him, makes him feel overwhelming grief, feminizes him" (1999: 130). Having expelled the ghost, Paul D relishes in his temporary victory, unaware that Beloved is a much stronger and much more malevolent being just about to strike with all her might. Indeed, eventually Beloved will have expelled Paul D by a peculiar sexual torture typical of demonic female vampires. It will take a community of women to send the demon back to where she has come from. To Harris, this is a strong proof of *othering* of women in literature, a siren's song that has successfully lured even Toni Morrison.

Similarly, Shirley A. Stave, albeit wishing to avoid reading the writer's intentions into the text, proposes that Morrison must have been at least informed by the myth of Lilith, Adam's first wife when she wrote *Beloved*. For Stave, it is not the spectral baby that can be equalised with the disobedient first wife of Adam, but Sethe herself. Sweet Home is taken to symbolise the Garden of Eden, its benevolent master Mr. Garner God himself, while slave men there happen to be a composite character of Adam. A change of master that makes Sethe flee turns her into a demonic force whose daughters shall tempt and sexually drain men of the Earth as nightly succubae[10] (Stave, 1993). Beloved is then a daughter of Lilith who not only

10 Stave clarifies as follows: "All the major tropes of the Lilith myth exist in *Beloved*. According to the legend,

tempts, but also punishes men who diminished her mother over her independence and self-sufficiency. Sethe is a force to be reckoned with, someone who community fears and steers clear of if they can help it – such parallels with Lilith abound throughout the novel. Stave has also wondered why Morrison decided to give an ancient female demon a voice:

> In giving voice to Sethe/Lilith, Morrison valorizes defiance; in rejecting Eden with its seeming perfection – and rejecting its God as well-Sethe/Lilith arrives at an identity created through self and community rather than one imposed by some other being. Her narrative becomes a critique of the hierarchical system that developed out of that Edenic consciousness. She herself becomes archetypally constitutive of the fusion of the disabling Good Mother/Terrible Mother duality. Patriarchal culture has privileged motherhood to the point of apotheosis, but that privilege is predicated upon its fear of and subsequent desire to control the mother. Motherhood – and patriarchal fictions about it – has traditionally been imposed upon women, who were allowed no other discourse; however, the patriarchal definition of motherhood is articulated in such a way that no woman could ever live up to the expectations it imposes. (Stave, 1993: 58)

We could conclude that both Harris and Stave offer feminist readings of *Beloved*, making it a story not only of slavery, American history, and experience of uprooted Africans, but also a story of gender perceptions, feminine power, and the role of motherhood. And certainly so, one cannot reject such analyses, as Morrison's work indeed allows for a myriad of interpretative possibilities. However, criticism of *the demonic woman* readings also persists, and are mostly based on African cosmology and worldview. Therese E. Higgins refers to Harris' reading as, to say the least, incomplete:

> In more recent scholarship, Trudier Harris acknowledges that Morrison follows "the African belief that the demise of the body is not the end of being" (154), but Harris does not follow through in her own criticism of the novel in reviewing Morrison's work in the light of African cosmology. Indeed she seems to miss the point entirely when she notes that "Morrison

God brings Lilith to Eden to curtail Adam's coupling with the animals; however, Lilith is dismayed by Adam's insistence on continually assuming the dominant position during lovemaking and flees from Eden. God sends three angels to fetch Lilith back, but they are unsuccessful in their attempts. Lilith chooses demons as her sexual partners, bearing as a result of these couplings a hundred children a day, some of whom she eats. In response, God creates Eve as a more submissive mate to Adam, while Lilith's half-demon daughters continue to haunt earthly men, coming to them at night, squatting over them as they sleep to have sex with them. Lilith mythically has come to signify an aspect of the Great Mother Goddess, both creator and destroyer of all life; despite the former attribute, however, culture has traditionally regarded Lilith simply as a demon, as one who must be feared. It is she, legend tells us, who drank the blood of Abel after his murder by his brother" (Stave, 1993: 51).

> has well prepared her readers . . . for complete suspension of disbelief in the human and natural worlds" (Harris 155) by the fact that Morrison's previous novels also included ghostly appearances. Morrison's point is not to prepare her readers for complete suspension of disbelief—for to say this is similar to critics' response to *Beloved* or *Song* as "magical realism." The point Morrison wishes to make is that ghosts do exist; they are real, and this is a fact, a cosmological belief of Africans. To "suspend our disbelief" is to pretend to believe that something occurs or merely to believe something temporarily. Harris' criticism, based on linking Morrison's work with African American folklore, is rich in information about just that; however, her criticism stops short of going the full distance. (Higgins, 2010: 36)

According to Higgins, Beloved may at most be creature resembling a *genie*, a spirit hailing from the Mende people's tradition[11] (2010: 38). In parallel with Zauditu-Selassie's interpretation, the novel seems to take an altogether different shape when reading is informed by the African culture. Angels, ancestral mothers, or demons, the women of 124 Bluestone Road are obliged to take the place within community that no rite bars them from eternally; on the contrary, each of them, including the very human Denver, must transform and overcome the dark and isolated inside to become the women they were always meant to be.

4. Classical tradition: the community and tragedy in *Beloved*

It would be extremely difficult to offer a reading of *Beloved* without multiple references to the role of community in the novel. It can set free, it can condemn, it can speak truths that hurt the soul – and this seems uncannily familiar. This may be so owing to our culture's reliance upon the classical, namely the Ancient Greek tragedy.

The function of *the chorus* in Greek drama is to represent *vox populi*, to comment on the events and destinies of the protagonists (Škreb et al., 1985: 248), but in this novel it can be said to transcend the role. Although Greek tragedy may, unlike myths and oral traditions, boast of traceable authorship, we aim to move beyond it reaching for the very foundation of the ancient dramatic texts, i.e. the Ancient Greek mythology. Read that way, the community of women exorcising the demon quickly becomes a reinvented *chorus*, while Sethe herself could be the tragic heroine, the *black Medea* who, unlike the original, kills one of her children in a desperate last-resort act.

For Tessa Roynon, Sethe is conceived as a "hubristic, outrageous protagonist" (Roynon, 2013: 84) which resonates with the aforementioned readings of Sethe as

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11 "The ancestral spirits . . . are the spirits of former living members of the community—both former members of various cults as well as individual families. The non-ancestral spirits comprise certain widely known spirits or *genii* associated quite often with natural phenomena such as rivers, forests, and rocks, but not confined to any one locality. Both categories of spiritual beings are closer at hand than God. (115)" (Kenneth Little's essay "The Mende in Sierra Leone" as cited in Higgins, 2010: 30)

independent, even masculine in her ways, a woman for whom "love is, or it ain't" (Morrison, 2007: 164). She writes:

> During the 'twenty-eight days' between Sethe's safe arrival in Cincinnati and her arrest for murder, the community teach her how to 'claim herself' (Morrison 2005a: 111–12). One of the defining experiences of freedom, she realizes, is 'to wake up at dawn and decide what to do with the day' (Morrison 2005a: 111; original italics). This capacity for choice is also a prerequisite of tragic heroism; in Arthur Miller's words, 'so long as the hero may be said to have had alternatives of a magnitude to have materially changed the course of his life...he cannot be debarred from the heroic role' (Miller 1989: 165). Morrison's characters repeatedly make life-changing decisions or insist on self-determination in ways which unequivocally prove their heroism. (Roynon, 2013: 85)

Adding her twist to the ancient genre of tragedy by sparing her protagonist from certain death, Morrison offers a revision intended to educate the American society on the menace of slavery, long held anything but wrong due to its origins in the Greek and Roman cultures. As Roynon further demonstrates, for the majority of American slave owners these civilisations were the ones to look up to[12]. In such a world, *men and women* of Garner's Sweet Home are already tragically misplaced. They should be incapable of making decisions, and yet, it is almost ironic that Morrison's white master was the one who nurtured a degree of independence in his slaves, thus triggering the tragedy. Their respective decisions bring them to commit acts both horrendous and merciful – there would be no Sethe to murder her child out of love, just as there would be no Paul D to eventually save Sethe without the godlike play of their former master, which resembles influences of the ancient deities and social norms in the Greek drama.

Just as the tragic heroism may be inherent in the individual protagonists, the community of *Beloved* can be said to mime the Greek *chorus*. First judgemental of Sethe, they come to her aid in her very darkest hour, resolving the conundrum, exorcising the malevolent entity, and enabling the eventual recovery of Sethe. Quite unlike the Greek chorus, they meddle and prevent the character from meeting their demise, but otherwise they do share its characteristics, especially when it

12 "My contention is that Morrison's classicism is fundamental to the critique of American culture that her work effects. Her allusiveness is characterized by a strategic ambivalence—that is to say it is fraught with her perception both of the classical tradition's hallowed position within hegemonic culture, its role as a 'pillar of the establishment', and of that tradition's simultaneous subversive potential, its usefulness in the ongoing struggle for fully-realized racial, gender, and economic equality in which she continues to participate. My readings of the novels illuminate her profound concern with the often-conflicting uses to which dominant narratives of American history and identity have put the classical tradition: in justifying colonization in the sixteenth century, for example; or in bolstering notions of exceptionalism at the time of the nation's foundation; in both sides of the debate over slavery in the nineteenth; or in the arguments against immigration in the early 1900s." (Roynon, 2013: 3)

comes to language. Yvonne Atkinson has discussed the relevance of Black English[13] to Morrison's work and how its specific rhythm contributes to expression of the African-American community's worldviews. The singular model of speech known as *call and response* that features the community actively replying to preacher's statements is indeed dominant in *Beloved*. For Tessa Roynon, there is an evident connection between Black English and the language of the chorus in Greek tragedy which is "compelling because both cultural forms have been seen as expressive of social change, and specifically of developments in the interactions between the individual and the group" (Roynon, 2013: 135). The transformative nature of language that Morrison herself has pointed out many times may be claimed to be the true hero of this modern myth. It is with their chants that women expel the unholy entity, and it is with words that Paul D sets Sethe free. As far as language is concerned, we are all "our best thing" (Morrison, 2007: 237).

For the African slaves, captured, uprooted, deprived of their identities and traditions, language and community were all they could abide by and rely on. It is no wonder that both perform an essential role in the novel on experience so terrible that it can hardly be committed to writing. Yet Toni Morrison managed to achieve precisely that, merging together the long-silenced voices of "60 million and more" (Morrison, 2007: *xi*) in the *chorus* that consists not only of the members of black community in Cincinnati, but also includes the very character of Beloved[14].

5. Conclusion: Know thy past and love thyself

Many books have been written on slavery and can be used to reconstruct the exact events or make splendid documentary films about one of history's most shameful chapters. But not *Beloved* – this novel surely transcends history books and eyewitness accounts.

As demonstrated by Zauditu-Selassie, Higgins and Sanders Mobley, the novel seems to call to the African-American community to embrace their cultural heritage and understand their roles as *ancestors* who are to pass on not only their story, but an entire worldview. Conversely, spectres in the novel are not, as Erickson put it, mere *spectres*, but more likely messengers whose task is to incite *response* and herald change in community's attitude to its gruesome past. As Roynon has rightfully claimed, Morrison's creative divergence from the traditional role of the classical drama's *choir* seems to be gifting the reader with an explanation of the

13 "The language the African slave spoke is the foundation of the language spoken by most African Americans today: Black English. According to Geneva Smitherman, Black English is "an Africanized form of English reflecting Black America's linguistic-cultural African heritage and the conditions of servitude, oppression, and life in America. Black language is Euro-American speech with an Afro-American meaning, nuance, tone, and gesture" (*Talkin 2*). In African American culture, language is an aesthetic: "Many Black English vocabulary items manifest a poetically appropriate representation of rather mundane reality. Not only is the black lexicon a tool, its figurative power and rhetorical beauty complement its survival function" (70; see also Dillard)." (Atkinson, 2000: 13)

14 We are referring to Beloved's chapters in the novel, which provide a poignant insight into the experience of Africans being captured and transported on ships to America, bought and sold, and killed (Morrison, 2007: 210–217).

fulcrum of the African-American community experience, which must act when called upon and remain with the protagonist *for better or worse*. Unlike the passive observers of the Ancient Greek world, Africans descended from the Middle Passage should embrace their cultural roles, whether that be caring about children or driving out destructive forces.

Although the aforesaid community's healing through mutual support may be understood as Morrison's declaring her political stance, *Beloved* undoubtedly taps into the primordial, the subconscious; the novel also explores traditions, myths, ancient rites, and the fantastic of more than one culture, as scholars mentioned in this paper have posited. Moreover, further evidence of that may be found in its ending with an ironic warning: "This is not a story to pass on" (Morrison, 2007: 275) – but should we heed the advice? It seems to us that the warning functions not as an actual ban against discussing the destructive urge of one group to rule over another, but as a kind of rite of passage. The priestess has just warned her initiates that secrets of the rite may not be passed on to the uninitiated. However, that comes at the exact moment when we the readers have become fully-fledged members of the community by having read the book. Such a farewell leaves us with a little more knowledge on the matters of indomitable spirit, and the potency of memory and language. While our pasts may *define* us, they are not *definitive* as long as we draw breath. It is perhaps why another ancestral mother, Baby Suggs Holy, urges the community to cherish their heart in one of the most beautiful passages from *Beloved*:

> The dark, dark liver—love it, love it, and the beat and beating heart, love that too. More than eyes or feet. More than beloved lungs that have yet to draw free air. More than your life-holding womb and your life-giving private parts, hear me now, love your heart. For this is the prize. (Morrison, 2007: 88–89)

In addition and not inconsequentially, Zauditu-Selassie's, Higgins', Harris', and Stave's readings in particular could be said to subtly nod to – at least in terms of the *mythologised* dynamics between Sethe, her community, and the uncanny forces – Joseph Campbell's concept of *the monomyth*[15] (2004). Should it be applied to *Beloved*, it would go something like this: a young slave girl with no father and only a vague memory of her mother discovers that the only way to survive is to break the chains; with a little help of the ancestors, she is initiated into the secrets of motherhood and love; although haunted by the horrific ghouls of her past and the unimaginably difficult decisions she was compelled to make, upon the intervention of her guardian angels she is finally delivered of trauma and invited to embrace her true nature. If we take Sethe's path as an example of *the hero's journey*, as Campbell

15 In myths and oral traditions of all peoples Campbell noticed the universal thread, the code that sees a hero of an extraordinary birth prompted to claim, with some guidance of a mentor or divinities, the specific knowledge or boon for their community, having first overcome a number of ordeals, trials and tribulations and having risked their life for the greater good (Campbell, 2004).

labelled it, then it is no wonder that the narrator ends her story with a mock call for silence and secrecy. Now initiated, we know that the individual's *quest for the heart* is an intimate affair, ironically observed and facilitated by the entire community. Nevertheless, it is possibly the only way to restore or preserve humanity, something that both a slaver and a slave must strive to avoid becoming the cruel gods everyone fears – even (and fortunately so) at the cost of their divinity.

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Sažetak

KRITIČKI OSVRT NA MITOLOŠKE MOTIVE U ROMANU *VOLJENA* TONI MORISON

Iako se roman Toni Morison *Voljena* često tumači kao istorijski roman, on neosporno predstavlja delo van užeg žanrovskog određenja. Pošavši od zastrašujućeg čedomorstva, koje je počinila očajna majka i crna robinja, Morison uspeva da prodre u samu srž *afroameričkog iskustva*. Preplićući heroje i zlikovce iz afričke mitologije sa likovima iz dela i koristeći se narativima i tehnikama antičkog teatra, ona gradi priču koja se graniči sa fantastikom, a opet ostaje u domenu istorijski mogućeg, te nam tako ostavlja prostor za najrazličitija tumačenja. Tumači dubljih kulturoloških nijansi romana uglavnom pažnju usmeravaju na glavne junakinje, Setu i Voljenu, otelotvorenog duha njene kćeri, za koje se tako može reći da predstavljaju moćne duhove predaka iz afričke tradicije, ali i apokrifnu Lilit. Pored ovih simbolički značajnih i tragičnih junakinja, kritičari se slažu da je Morison, kao i uopšte u svojim romanima, izrazito zainteresovana za pitanje uloga *zajednice* u životu jednog društva. Ne samo da je tesno povezana afroamerička zajednica komšija i prijatelja važan simbol, već za tumače poput Rojnon, ona funkcioniše i kao modifikovani *antički hor*, čija uloga nadilazi komentatora drame. *Voljena* se može opisati kao višeznačni i višeslojni roman koji istovremeno uspeva da uzbudi i gane i koji se može doživeti i iz perspektive funkcije mitologije, narodnog predanja i antičke drame u savremenom svetu, kao što predlažu kritičari navedeni u ovom radu.

Ključne reči:

kritički osvrt, mit, narodno predanje, fantastika, istorija, zajednica/pojedinac, afroameričko iskustvo