

Trauma and Literature
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Lecture – 58
Toni Morrison's Beloved - Part 4

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Repressing Red



The second step in which *Beloved's* characters process the wounds of slavery is the repression of its horrors.¹⁹ The novel endows both Paul D and Sethe with powerful red images of the traumas of slavery. In these instances, which serve as a transitional stage between the state of shock and the beginning of successfully dealing with the trauma, the novel turns the concrete and physical appearances of red into figurative elements, tropes as it were, portraying the internalization and the repression of slavery's cruelties.

The most conspicuous example of the use of the color red in *Beloved* in relation to repression is Sethe's contact with the pink tombstone against which she leans in the engraver's workshop, and which is explicitly denoted as a lighter shade of red in her description of the fading color progression starting with her baby's blood (46-47). The image certainly appears, similar to the ones described above, as an occurrence of physical contact with the color red: Sethe is having sex with the engraver while leaning against the tombstone, feeling its "welcoming cool" (5). There is even an instance of voicelessness or a lack of words in that Sethe has to prostitute herself so the engraver will put her daughter's name on the stone. In fact, it pains Sethe afterwards that she did not get the word "Dearly" as well, since she might only have had to ask for it in return for another ten minutes of sexual favors. The lack of words and voice is manifold: Sethe cannot afford to have words put on the stone, and when she prostitutes herself she does not get all the words she wants because she does not speak up and does not ask for them.

The difference from the occurrences of red described in the previous section is that this concrete physical object is rather explicitly turned into a metaphor for Sethe's repression of her memories of the infanticide. The immense importance of this repression for Sethe is expressed in her own description of her work in the restaurant: "Working, working dough. Nothing better than that to start the day's serious work of beating back the past" (86). Marilyn Sanders Mobley has thus described Sethe as being in "a kind of psychic bondage to the task of 'keeping the past at bay'" (360). The process of repression is visible in her own admission of a regression of color awareness, not coincidentally exemplified



This is an NPTEL course titled "Trauma and Literature". We are looking at Toni Morrison's novel "Beloved" and we are reading a particular essay which covers the novel, titled "Repressing Red".

Let us see how red becomes a signifier repression and of course repression is connected to agents and listeners voice listeners etc other forms of slavery. The second step in which "Beloved's" characters process the warnings of slavery is a repression of his Horus. The novel endows both Paul D and Sethe with powerful red images of the traumas of slavery in these instances which serve as a transitional stage between the state of shock and the beginning of successfully dealing with trauma.

The novel turns the concrete and physical appearance of red into figurative elements tropes as it were portraying the internalization and the repression of slavery's cruelties now these are two key words over here internalization and repression. We find how slavery becomes an internalized process just. So, do not even question the atrocity or the violence or the illegality or the inhumanity of the whole process it just becomes internalized and hence legitimized in a very perverse way.

That does consequently is it generates the culture of repression through which an agency voice will be all repressed and also storytelling another very fact that we cannot even tell us stories all we can do is suffer in silence. So, silence evasiveness we have talked about how these become almost narrative categories in this novel and this is the part of internalization the most conspicuous example of the use of the colour red.

“Beloved” in relation to repression this set is contact with the pink tombstone against which she leans in an engraver's workshop which is explicitly denoted as a lighter shade of red in a description of the fading colour progression started with a baby's blood. There are different shades of red which we find throughout the novel. This is baby's blood and from the most of the pink tombstones.

The different shades of red correspond in different psychological conditions and psychological locations. The image certainly appears similar to the ones described above as an occurrence of physical contact with the colour red Sethe is having sex with the engraver while leaning against a tombstone feeling this welcoming coup. There is even an instance of voicelessness or a lack of words in that setting has to prostitute herself to the engraver will pull out a daughter's name on the stone.

In fact it pains Sethe afterwards she did not get the word dearly as well since she might only have to ask for it to return for another 10 minutes of sexual favours. Lack of words and voices manifold said they cannot afford to have words put on this term and when she prostitutes herself she does not get all the words she wants because she does not speak up and does not ask for them.

We find this barbaric scene where the mother has to prostitute herself to get her daughter's name engraved in a stone is also an example of abuse at a bodily level sexual. But also abuse Adam at a word level she cannot speak out what she wants she cannot say the word she cannot say the objective that she wants to be engraved in the stone and for that she might have to go back again and prostitute herself to the engraver.

We find there is a very direct and very complex and very perverse and unsettling link between violence and death and the tombstone obviously becomes the material of death

in a certain sense the matter of death the symbol of death and the engraving of the name of the subject who has died and so, that that quality of the tombstone becomes interesting over here.

And symbolic at the same time that also becomes his sight of sexual violence that also becomes the Sethe for producing deadness because the sexual act done or perpetuated to Sethe is also in a way killing her humanity killing her as a human killing as a human subject in a process just generating her as some kind of an object a modified object a sexual object.

The site of the tombstone becomes quite symbolic in terms of the landscape of violence and abuse and trauma that is subject subjects are subjected to throughout the novel. The difference from the occurrences of red described in the previous section is that this concrete physical object is rather explicitly done into metaphor for such as repression of the memories of the infanticide.

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words in that Sethe has to prostitute herself so the engraver will put her daughter's name on the stone. In fact, it pains Sethe afterwards that she did not get the word "Dearly" as well, since she might only have had to ask for it in return for another ten minutes of sexual favors. The lack of words and voice is manifold: Sethe cannot afford to have words put on the stone, and when she prostitutes herself she does not get all the words she wants because she does not speak up and does not ask for them.

The difference from the occurrences of red described in the previous section is that this concrete physical object is rather explicitly turned into a metaphor for Sethe's repression of her memories of the infanticide. The immense importance of this repression for Sethe is expressed in her own description of her work in the restaurant: "Working, working dough. Nothing better than that to start the day's serious work of beating back the past" (86). Marilyn Sanders Mobley has thus described Sethe as being in "a kind of psychic bondage to the task of 'keeping the past at bay'" (360). The process of repression is visible in her own admission of a regression of color awareness, not coincidentally exemplified with the color red, starting with the blood of the daughter she killed:

because the last color she remembered was the pink chips in the headstone of her baby girl. After that she became as color conscious as a hen. Every dawn she worked at fruit pies, potato dishes and vegetables while the cook did the soup, meat and all the rest. And she could not remember remembering a molly apple or a yellow squash. Every dawn she saw the dawn, but never acknowledged or remarked its color. There was something wrong with that. It was as though one day she saw the red baby blood, another day the pink gravestone chips, and that was the last of it. (46-47)

Accordingly, the pink tombstone can be seen as a transitional piece, starting out as the literally cold and hard reality of slavery along with its consequences and ending up as a metaphorical device which the novel employs to illustrate the process of repression.

A similar observation can be made in relation to Paul D. His most intense instance of shame, as discussed above, is that of seeing the free and proud rooster Mister with his



The fact that the child was killed, so, this becomes a metaphor for repressing that memory the tombstone the immense importance for this repression for Sethe is expressed in our own description of a walk in the restroom working down making nothing better than to start the day serious world or beating back the past. The physical act of beating the dawn in a way gives us the tactile experience of the past. She is beating back the past.

There is only form of motor control only form of touch only from a retaliation true touch or tactile retaliation that's possible for her to beat back the door. She is enjoying that bit. We can see how the degree to which these people are dehumanized the degree to which these people are subjected to drama. Marilyn Sanders Mobley has just described Sethe as being in a kind of psychic bondage to the task of keeping the past at bay.

So, psychologically she is tired she's in prison she is a slave which will keep the task of keeping the past at pace the past will not come back. She is keeping the past at bay the process of repression is visible in our own admission of a regression of colour awareness not coincidentally exemplifying with the colour red starting with the red blood the blood of the daughter she killed.

This is a quotation from the novel because the last colour she remembered was a pink chips in the headstone of the baby girl after that she became as colour-conscious as a hen. Every dawn she walked at fruit pies potato dishes and vegetables while the cook did the soup meat and all the rest and she could not remember remembering a molly apple or a yellow squash every dawn she saw the dawn.

But never acknowledged or remarked its colour there was something wrong with that it was as though one day she saw the red baby blood another day the pink gravestone chips and that was the last of it. It almost becomes some kind of a colour closure. She cannot see she cannot experience any other colour apart from red and pink. The colours of the dead baby the colour of the tombstone.

She is stuck between two orders of deadness one the physical the biological body of deadness and the other the symbol of deadness the tombstone. Both are marked by different shades of red and she seems to be stuck between different shades of red and she cannot move on to another colour. This is a very symbolic level a very chromatic level is it just imprisons her in a particular colour it makes her a bond, some kind of a slave to a certain colour.

The fact that she cannot move on to different colour is also connected to a lack of agency or lack of being able to say what she is what she wants. She is just stuck in redness and different shades of redness. Redness obviously becomes a metaphor for imprisonment at

a very visceral experiential level. Accordingly the pink tombstone can be seen as a transitional piece starting out as a literally cold and hard reality of slavery along with this consequences and ending up as a metaphorical device which a novel employs to illustrate the process of repression.

The tombstone becomes a device away the tombstone becomes a transitional piece from the heart, it is cold and hot the coldness of dead is there and the tombstone and then it is a device which novel employs to illustrate the process of repression. The site of the tombstone destroys the site in which Sethe was sexually attacked and gave herself up for the sexual invasion for the sexual slaughter.

It was just an act of repression an act of being silent and silently suffering the sexual attack the body of violence. We can see how the tombstone becomes the reality of slavery as well as a symbol of repression. A similar observation can be made in relation to a Paul D his most intense instance of shame as discussed above is that of seeing the free and proud rooster missed up with his red calm and sweet home.

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red comb on Sweet Home.²⁰ Paul D himself is forced to endure an iron bit in his mouth, which as Jenna Fuston-White points out, in general “reduce[s] the slave to animality so effectively [and] ... strip[s] him/her of language and humanity” (467). Kristin Boudreau, in her study of the unmaking of self, argues convincingly that this causes Paul D to discover “his own contrasting enslavement” and arrive “at a definition of himself imposed by his internalization of the rooster’s gaze” (461). Note that this scene includes both the appearance of red in its physical, visual nature and a clear instance of voicelessness. Even without any physical contact with the color red, this scene is clearly linked to the usage of red as described above. The main difference among the events analyzed above is the novel’s explicit return to the color red in discussing the repressive psychological process which follows. Again and again the novel mentions Paul D’s red heart kept in a box as the trope for the memory of an event that is not accessible, because it was never experienced, only registered. In fact, the novel, once more, is rather explicit in transferring the outer physical appearance of red into an inner presence. The two red symbols, the rooster and the heart, are distinctly linked when Paul D tells Sethe about his experience with Mister. This represents yet another example of a lack of the power to completely verbalize his own emotions: “Saying more might push them both to a place they couldn’t get back from. He would keep the rest where it belonged: in that tobacco tin buried in his chest where a red heart used to be. . . . And it would hurt her to know that there was no red heart bright as Mister’s comb beating in him” (Morrison, *Beloved* 86). Not coincidentally, in pondering the shameful events which resurfaced after his red heart escaped its tobacco tin later in the novel, Paul D is twice described as having red eyes because he is drunk (222, 257).

It is this attempt at communication met with only partial success which amply characterizes the relationship of Paul D and Sethe in the context of their dealings with the past. In their repeated discussions of the horrors of Sweet Home and the woodshed, they both learn to, at least partly, express their own feelings and psychological wounds. Their relationship and their conversations make them capable of “facing the immediate past



Paul D himself is forced to endure an iron bit in its mouth which as Jenna first and white points out in general reduces a slave to animality. So, effectively and strips him or her of language of humanity. The iron in her mouth is just completely animalizes baldy and this literal translation of transition into an animal state is exactly part of the systemic process of torture and abuse and violence that slavery perpetrates in a very intergenerational way.

Christian border in the study of the unmaking of self argues convincingly that this causes Paul D to discover his own contrasting enslavement and arrive at a definition of himself imposed by his internalization of the roosters gaze. We are seeing here is she is internalizing the roosters gaze. The gaze are being enslaved someone something is looking at him as a slave.

He internalizes that gaze and that further animalizes him that further dehumanizes him and again we are looking at a relationship between repression and internalization. The fact that he is aware of being gazed at as a slave. He is aware of being refiled he is aware of being commodified as a slave and that awareness. That knowledge of commodification the fact that the gaze is there at him as an object transforming him into an object he internalizes that in the process we further objectifies himself he further dehumanizes himself.

We can see how in a very complex and perhaps paradoxical way Paul D shapes its own internalization shapes its own commodification shapes its own slavery and he accentuates and intensifies his own slavery his own imprisonment and he adds on to it by internalizing that case on himself or at himself.