

Advanced Placement in  
English Literature and Composition

Individual Learning Packet

Teaching Unit

**Beloved**

by Toni Morrison

Written by Brad Cawn

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# Beloved

## About the Novel and the Author

Now nearly a quarter-century old and firmly in place as an essential work of twentieth-century American literature—“best American novel published in the previous twenty-five years” by the New York Times Book Review in 2006—it’s worth noting that *Beloved* was met with mixed reviews upon its release in 1987; even her winning of the Pulitzer Prize for the novel the following year caused some controversy. By this time, Morrison was an established novelist, but none of her previous works—including masterpieces *Sula* and *Song of Solomon*—had dealt with slavery, a topic that—when dealt with in the grueling and surrealist fashion Morrison brings to *Beloved*—caused considerable stir among readers and literary critics. Time, however, has been on Morrison’s side: after winning the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1993 (the first black woman to be so honored), she has cemented her place as, perhaps, America’s most important living writer and literary thinker. Though no succeeding work of hers has matched the power and acclaim (and conflict) of *Beloved*, Morrison has since written a number of excellent short works (*Jazz*, *A Mercy*) and literary criticism, as well as branched out into writing opera and children’s books.

# Beloved

## Introductory Lecture

### Historical Context

The events of *Beloved* take place between 1854 and 1874, thereby encompassing the last days of the antebellum South, the Civil War (in passing), and most of the Reconstruction era; that said, the novel's dedication to the nameless "60 million and more" who perished as a result of the slave trade makes clear the work addresses the history and institution of slavery. Thus, The Middle Passage, the term used to describe the forced voyage from Africa to the Americas experienced by millions of slaves, is the underlying concern of and the symbol in the novel, for the months long journey, in which hundreds of captives were chained together and piled on top of one another in stifling and unsanitary conditions, was responsible for much of the death and dehumanization suffered by the imprisoned. It is alluded to and invoked throughout the novel: Sethe's mother, for one, was a survivor; and Beloved's monologue late in Section Two conveys some of the darkest imagery of the transatlantic voyage.

Like many other great works of literature, *Beloved's* plot is grounded in real-world events. Morrison, while working on an anthology of black history, had come across the story of Margaret Garner, a runaway Kentucky slave who, as with Sethe, killed her daughter and attempted to murder her other children in order to spare them from an enslaved life. Morrison deviates in several places from the real-life events—Gardner was tried, returned to the South, and sold back into slavery—but Garner's actions were an "obsession" to the author while writing the novel.

As illustrated by the experiences of Sethe and Paul D., runaway slaves in the United States were not safe from their former slave masters even after successfully making it to Northern states—this is because of the Fugitive Slave Act, what Baby Suggs refers to in the novel as the "Misery." Prior to the passing of this act in 1850 as part of the Missouri Compromise, most Northern states had passed local laws that either weakened the government's role in returning ex-slaves to the South or made such actions voluntary. What made the Fugitive Slave Act different from other federal laws requiring the return of slaves was the enforcement of a severe financial penalty on local law enforcement agents who did not search out and apprehend runaway slaves. Furthermore, any person who aided the escapee was jailed and fined harshly. Thus, when Schoolteacher strides up to 124 Bluestone to take Sethe, he is accompanied by an Ohio police officer, who is obliged to participate in Sethe's capture. Baby Suggs's repeated invocation that "they came in my yard" also has a literal meaning: Southern slave masters and Northern officers could investigate and arrest African Americans with little to no proof of wrongdoing.

# Beloved

## Objectives

*By the end of this Unit, the student will be able to:*

1. explain the use of figurative language to expand the major themes of the work.
2. analyze the author's style and the techniques she uses to convey mood.
3. analyze the functions of the novel's structure, including the author's use of internal monologues.
4. trace the development of motifs like the supernatural and their contribution to theme.
5. analyze the significance of the novel within the context of both United States history and contemporary literature.
6. trace the development of complex and intertwining themes in the novel.
7. analyze the use of multiple points of view, including third-person omniscient narrator, and its relation to the novel's major themes.
8. respond to writing prompts similar to those that will appear on the Advanced Placement in English Literature and Composition exam.
9. respond to multiple-choice questions similar to those that will appear on the Advanced Placement in English Literature and Composition exam.
10. offer a close reading of *Beloved* and support all assertions and interpretations with direct evidence from the text, from authoritative critical knowledge of the genre, or from authoritative criticism of the novel.

# Beloved

## Questions for Essay and Discussion

1. Given that *Beloved* is consistently ranked as one of the most significant literary works of the contemporary era, what in its style, structure, and/or perspective makes it a paragon of contemporariness? How, in other words, does it connect to the anxieties of the present era even as it is a work of historical fiction?
2. Trace a motif (e.g., milk, water) across the development of the novel; explain its meaning and significance to the work.
3. Examine allusions to Christian beliefs, including the epigraph and the interpolations of the Songs of Songs during the monologues.
4. Ambiguity is an important component in contemporary fiction; *Beloved* is no exception. Consider how plot, character development, theme, point of view, and style are developed throughout the novel in a manner that does not offer a clear-cut, definitive answer.

# Beloved

## Part 1: Chapter 1

1. How does Morrison's personification of the house help reveal both plot and characterization?

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2. Explain the literal and figurative significance of "milk" and the "chokecherry tree" in this chapter.

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3. What is the nature of the relationship between Sethe and Denver?

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## Part 1: Chapter 2

1. Explain the point of view used by Morrison in *Beloved*. What purpose does it seem to serve?

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**Part 2: Chapter 1**

- 1. How does what Stamp Paid hears outside of 124 Bluestone differ from what is taking place inside of the house?

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- 2. How does guilt shape how Sethe and Stamp Paid are characterized in this chapter?

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**Part 3: Chapters 2 – 3**

1. How has Paul D.'s narrative changed from earlier chapters?

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2. In what ways is the novel's ending ambiguous?

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