

Individual Learning Packet

**Teaching Unit**

**Beloved**

by Toni Morrison

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# Beloved

## Notes

Toni Morrison was born in 1931 in Lorain, Ohio. She attended Howard University with the intention of pursuing a career in education, and following college, she enrolled in graduate school at Cornell. She eventually returned to Howard as a professor and began work on her own writing. After numerous rejections, her novel *The Bluest Eye* was published in 1970, and Morrison began to be recognized as a promising writer. She followed with the novel *Song of Solomon*, which won the 1978 National Book Critics Circle Award for fiction. Her other novels are *Tar Baby*, *Sula*, *Jazz*, *Paradise*, and *Beloved*. Morrison is now recognized as one of the best authors of her generation, garnering both a Pulitzer Prize for fiction and the Nobel Prize in Literature.

*Beloved* focuses on the physical and emotional scars of slavery, exemplified by the struggle of a single mother, Sethe. Because of the ugly history of American slavery, there are many sensitive topics touched on in *Beloved*, including violence, murder, sex, rape and the word “nigger.” Students may find parts of the text unsettling, as Morrison is honest with the disturbing details of her characters’ adjustments to life beyond slavery. Specifically, the novel deals with the supernatural phenomenon of a ghost, Beloved, who is the physical incarnation of the mental scars of slavery on Sethe, a guilt-ridden survivor of the system.

In addition, because there are no chapter titles in *Beloved*, this teaching unit divides the novel by page numbers within the three major sections.

All references come from the Plume edition of *Beloved*, published 1998.

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## Objectives

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

1. infer information about characters and events when the information is not explicitly stated.
2. discuss Morrison's writing style, which is characterized by numerous descriptive phrases and images.
3. define the listed vocabulary terms from the story.
4. define and cite examples from *Beloved* of the following literary terms:
  - irony
  - folklore
  - symbolism
  - simile
  - personification
  - theme
  - metaphor
5. discuss the significance of names and nicknames in *Beloved*, both of people and places.
6. recognize and discuss the lasting mental effects of slavery on former slaves and their ancestors, as revealed in *Beloved*.
7. identify and compare the two different time-frames in which *Beloved* occurs.
8. explain the term "objective correlative," and how it applies to *Beloved*.
9. discuss the differences in the communication that takes place between black people and between blacks and whites in *Beloved*.
10. discuss the notion of the individual's obligation to the community, as displayed by Stamp Paid, Baby Suggs, and Ella.
11. discuss the progression of matriarchs through three generations of the Suggs family, from Baby Suggs to Denver.
12. identify examples and justifications for retribution in *Beloved*, and how each applies to the characters in the novel.
13. discuss the difference between religion and spirituality, as exemplified by Baby Suggs.

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## Questions for Essay and Discussion

1. Comment on the significance of the pictures denoting the three sections of the novel.
2. Discuss the bonds between a mother and child. Comment on the difference between mother/son and mother/daughter relationships in *Beloved*.
3. Discuss the idea of “manhood,” and how it applies to *all* of the men of Sweet Home.
4. Why is Sethe apparently indifferent when Howard and Buglar run away?
5. Discuss the role of a mother; give your interpretation of Sethe’s performance as a mother.
6. Comment on the significance of Morrison’s dedication, to “sixty million and more,” in relation to the overall theme of *Beloved* and specifically to the chapter.
7. Discuss Morrison’s portrayal of schoolteacher in contrast with the traditional representation of a teacher (embodied by Lady Jones).
8. Compare indentured servitude and slavery, as represented in *Beloved* by Amy Denver and Sethe.
9. Explain why it is ironic that Mr. Garner took such pleasure in “calling his own niggers men.”
10. Explain Morrison’s idea of “rememory,” as she presents it.
11. List the evidence that Beloved is Sethe’s reincarnated daughter. What other possible explanations are there for Beloved’s identity?
12. Explain the progression of personification of the house at 124 Bluestone Road in the beginning of each of the three major sections of the book.
13. Why do the residents of Lorain, Ohio, accept the supernatural explanation of Beloved so readily? Explain your feelings about the supernatural.

# Beloved

## Book One (Pages 4 – 49)

### Vocabulary

**deprivation** – prevention from using or enjoying something  
**devious** – underhanded, deceitful; indirect  
**exorcise** – to expel an evil spirit  
**glittering** – sparkling  
**intolerable** – unbearable  
**luminous** – glowing, emitting light  
**palsied** – paralyzed, made helpless  
**perfunctory** – indifferent  
**pike** – a long-snouted fish  
**pondering** – thinking deeply  
**rebuked** – reprimanded, scolded  
**revulsion** – disgust, aversion  
**spiteful** – full of ill will or malice  
**studded** – embedded with  
**untethered** – untied, unrestrained  
**venom** – spite, malice, anger

1. The first line of the book is “124 was spiteful.” Why do you suppose Morrison describes the house and not the ghost residing in it as “spiteful”?

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2. What is the significance of the house number “124”?

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**Book One (Pages 127 – 165)**

## Vocabulary

**anointed** – blessed, extremely lucky  
**desolated** – barren, lifeless  
**inaccessible** – impossible to approach  
**insistent** – firm  
**melancholy** – sadness  
**parcel** – group  
**repulsion** – disgust  
**scrutiny** – careful looking

1. What does Paul D propose to Sethe? Why?

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2. When does Sethe finally admit to herself who Beloved is?

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3. What does Beloved's reaction to her lost tooth reveal?

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4. Why were the townspeople mad at Baby Suggs after her party?

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**Book Three (Pages 239 – 273)**

## Vocabulary

**braced** – strengthened  
**cajoling** – persuading by flattery  
**calamity** – disaster  
**chastised** – punished  
**cowered** – frightened hiding  
**dispensed** – gave out  
**doomsday** – a dreaded day of judgement  
**inaugurated** – started  
**indiscriminately** – without reason or intent  
**listless** – without motivation or energy  
**protruding** – poking out  
**rancor** – bitter resentment  
**snarl** – growl, sneer  
**tentative** – hesitant, nervous  
**vulnerability** – weakness

1. How did the family dynamic change after the night of ice-skating?  
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2. Beloved grew fatter because of eating sweets, but is there another possible explanation for her growth?  
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3. Denver was terrified to take the first steps out of her yard. What finally made her go?  
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4. On page 255, Morrison describes a small change dish at the Bodwins. Why?  
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