

Reflections:

*A Student Response Journal for...*

*Beloved*

*by Toni Morrison*

written by Lisa Burris

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## *Beloved*

*Note to the Teacher:* This book contains references to prostitution, scenes of graphic sex and violence (including a scene in which the main character murders a child), prodigious use of offensive language, including repeated use of the word *nigger*, as well as depictions of the racism of society in the 1800s.

### **Pre-Reading**

1. The title of this book is *Beloved*, meaning something or someone that is dearly loved. What is something that is beloved to you? What personal possession do you have that you love above all others? Write a journal entry in which you describe something that is beloved by you, and explain why it is special.
2. Some of the language in this book is quite complex. As you study *Beloved*, keep a list of words you don't understand. When you write the word, look it up in a dictionary, and write a short definition of it to help you better understand the novel.
3. Toni Morrison dedicates *Beloved* to "Sixty Million and more." Imagine that you have written a novel. Write a dedication for it. List to whom or what the novel is dedicated, and explain why.

## Foreword

4. At the beginning of the Foreword, Morrison describes what she did to make a living before she was a full-time writer. Although she was writing her own novels part-time, she also worked as a book editor. Many of her colleagues found this to be conflicting. They questioned how Morrison could create her own books and edit others' books at the same time. They thought that a person could have the skills to either write or edit, but not both. She could either create art, or edit others' creations.

This brings to mind the old adage, "Those who can, do; those who can't, teach." Do you think these two things are mutually exclusive? Can a person either create, as a writer does, or teach, but not do both? Write a flyer to be given to college students who are studying to be English teachers, advising them whether teaching will mean that they cannot be writers themselves.

5. Morrison's decision to quit her part-time job and focus on her own writing led her to question what it means to be free. She found a new type of freedom in her life by leaving her steady job, in which she was obligated to do what others told her to do. Once she left that job, she was free to write whenever she felt like doing so, and she no longer had to answer to a manager or a supervisor. Morrison's contemplation of her newly found freedom led her to write *Beloved*, which addresses what freedom was like for the people who had formerly been slaves.

There are many ways to think about the concept of freedom. Freedom for Morrison, personally, meant that she alone controlled the use of her time. Freedom in terms of release from slavery, however, is quite different.

Write an essay for a scholarship contest, explaining what the word *freedom* means to you. In your essay, you must not only define the word, but also give specific examples to illustrate your concept of freedom.

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*Beloved*

6. When this book was first published, it did not include a foreword. The foreword here, however, gives readers an insight into some of the things that Morrison was thinking about when she wrote *Beloved*.

Some people prefer reading a book's introduction, while others do not. Do you think reading the foreword to *Beloved* will help you to better understand the novel, or would you prefer to just read the book on your own and draw your own conclusions about it? Do you want to know why Morrison wrote this book and what inspired her to do it, or does that not matter to you? Write a paragraph for a study guide for *Beloved*, telling readers whether it is important to read the book's foreword. Give specific reasons to support your argument.

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*B e l o v e d*

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7. Strange things are happening at 124, the house where this story takes place. Mirrors shatter by themselves, handprints mysteriously appear on a cake, and a sideboard moves on its own. Sethe's sons are scared of the otherworldly occurrences and run away rather than stay to endure more. Sethe, however, thinks the house is haunted by the harmless spirit of a child. She thinks if she can talk to the ghost, the odd phenomena will stop.

Do you think ghosts, like the one that Sethe thinks haunts her house, really exist? Are there spirits that haunt the living? Research and write a report either supporting or refuting the possibility that ghosts exist and can haunt the living. Provide information from your research to support your position.

8. When Paul D, a former slave whom Sethe knew on the plantation Sweet Home, comes to visit her, the two of them sit on the front porch and catch up with what's been going on in their lives. They both remember when Sethe, who was pregnant at the time, ran away. As if those circumstances weren't enough, Paul D remarks that it is admirable that Sethe also did it alone. Sethe, however, tells him that she wasn't entirely alone because a white woman helped her. Paul D responds, telling Sethe that, in helping her, the white woman "helped herself, too."

The woman of whom Sethe speaks must have shown her great kindness. When people do such things, are they also helping themselves? Write a posting for the Red Cross's website, telling people how they can help themselves by helping others.

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*B e l o v e d*

9. Sweet Home is the name of the plantation where Sethe and Paul D were held as slaves. The horrifying experiences that they had there, the violence and oppression that they endured, make the plantation neither “sweet” nor a “home.” Giving an ironic name to the plantation is a strategy that Morrison uses to stress the difference between the slaves’ experiences on the plantation and the slave owners’ experiences. It is ironic that a place called Sweet Home is such a place of horror.

Create a list of ten fictional ironic place names. List the place names and then provide a brief explanation of why each name is ironic. For example:

**Place Name:** Oceanview, Kansas

**Ironic because:** There are no oceans in Kansas

10. In some ways, Denver’s experience is typical of any teenager. It is not unusual for a teen to feel like an outsider. Denver has no friends or boyfriends, and she feels outcast from others in her peer group. There is more to Denver’s situation, though. Sethe says that no one wants to visit Denver at her home because it is haunted. Denver, however, blames her mother for making their home unwelcome and for discouraging people from being friends with her.

Write an instant message to Denver, reassuring her about her feelings of loneliness and advising her of at least three ways that she can get out and meet people her own age.

11. It goes without saying that Sethe’s life at Sweet Home was difficult. She was beaten there. She was treated as a work animal. Anything she owned, even her breast milk, was taken from her. Still, Sethe tried to find the good in her work at Sweet Home. She tried to find some way to take pride in the jobs she was doing and in her own work performance.

Many people like Sethe are conscientious about how well they do their jobs. Sethe is right—if one makes an effort to find good in her work, no matter how demeaning the job, it can help to make the job easier.