

The Tragic and Comedic Co-Existence in *Beloved*

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The literary genres of tragedy and comedy have been, for the most part, unchanged over time. From ancient writer Aristotle to modern day writer and critic Louise Cowan, these genres remain fundamentally the same. The writers who epitomize these genres from Sophocles and Aeschylus to Shakespeare are spread out over a long period of time. However, modern author Toni Morrison brings the genre of tragedy and comedy into a new light as she combines the two into one heart-wrenching tale of suffering. Set during one of the most horrific and tragic periods of history, that of slavery in America, Toni Morrison's *Beloved* demonstrates both Aristotle's conviction that tragedy results in purgation of emotions and also Louise Cowan's definition of comedy to include the apocalyptic. These tragic and comic movements are evident in Sethe's decision to kill her child and then her ability ultimately to escape the curse of her murdered child's spirit.

Toni Morrison's *Beloved* is a complex story of the lives of those who suffered the tragedy of being enslaved by other humans. The horror of being treated more like animals than people is depicted in Paul D's dialogue about a rooster named Mister. Paul D recalls a time that he served on a chain gang and had a bit in his mouth. Paul D explains to Sethe the dehumanizing glare he received by Mister whom he helped to hatch and bring into the world:

“Mister was allowed to be and stay what he was. But I wasn't allowed to be and stay what I was. Even if you cooked him, you'd be cooking a rooster named Mister. But wasn't no way I'd be Paul D again, living or dead. Schoolteacher changed me. I was something else and that something was less than a chicken sitting in the sun on a tub.”¹

This dialog is but one emotionally disturbing and charged insight into a prolonged and horrific experience.

¹ Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*. Vintage International: New York. 1987. p86

There are many complex story lines in *Beloved*; however, the primary story is the decision of a mother to kill her children in order to spare them the horror of having to live a slave's life. This event is what has brought the characters into the life they are living when this book begins. It is the telling of this story and the effect on the reader that highlights Aristotle's definition of tragedy as outlined in his treatise *Poetics*.

In *Poetics*, Aristotle outlines the elements of tragedy. It covers topics from a discussion of what is imitation to a comparison between the Epic and the Tragedy and which is of higher worth. However, it is the requirement for an emotional "purgation" that gets to the core of why humans desire to experience such a painful set of emotions. In the 1977 movie *Iphigenia*², the horrific scene of Iphigenia walking to what is to be her death as Agamemnon runs up at the last moment to see her is heart wrenching, to say the least, affecting even to the most modern sensibility. Although it is difficult to watch, the viewer comes away with some sense of emotional release.³ The onset of emotion is one of the primary affects of reading tragedy. In fact, Aristotle recognized that a true tragedy facilitates the release of emotional stress. Aristotle states in *Poetics*:

Tragedy, then, is an imitation of an action that is serious, complete, and of a certain magnitude; in language embellished with each kind of artistic ornament, the several kinds being found in separate parts of the play; in the form of action, not of narrative; through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation of these emotions.⁴

It could be argued that this definition of Tragedy is difficult for the average reader to understand except perhaps for the last part, "through pity and fear effecting the proper purgation of these emotions." The key word in this statement is "purgation." Purgation means the act of purging.

²Iphigenia – Released in 1977 and was re-released on DVD in 2007.

³ Of course, the plays are meant to be viewed and not read, so the effect is not quite as powerful simply by reading the story.

⁴ Aristotle. *Poetics*. Intro. By Francis Ferguson. New York: Hill and Wang, 1967, VI.

In the case of tragedy, the target of the purging is emotional tension. Aristotle is stating that it is a point of tragedy to stir up emotions that exist deep in the bowels of the soul and which a person might normally try to avoid.

Modern writer and literary critic Louise Cowan confirms that tragedy and the emotional experience derived from reading it are in some way therapeutic and spiritual. Cowan states, “the one thing agreed upon in discussions of tragedy is that its effect is strangely therapeutic. As art, tragedy helps its viewers (not its protagonists!) look upon violence and turn away from it freed and content.”⁵ She is suggesting that some form of pleasure is gained from experiencing these feelings. The key word in this statement is therapeutic. Achieving a therapeutic goal does not always have to mean through positive application. For instance, a good crying session can be a highly therapeutic outlet allowing a release of emotional tension. It is even more beneficial when not accompanied by real life loss or hardship.

Cowan also states that Aristotle’s doctrine of catharsis suggests that tragedy effects a “cleansing of the soul and a regeneration of the polis”:

Tragedy, then, as we have been saying, would have to be judged by neither its plot nor its characters but, like a cathartic, by its results, which, we are hazarding, effect a cleansing of the soul and a regeneration of the polis.⁶

The reference to the soul suggests something much deeper than the idea of simple human emotions, a metaphysical reality. Accordingly, in his introduction to *Poetics*, Ferguson compares the experience of reading tragedy to that of a religious experience:

But tragedy speaks essentially to the mind and the spirit, and its effect is like that which believers get from religious ceremonies intended to cleanse the spirit. Aristotle noticed that ... passions were stirred, released, and at last appeased.⁷

⁵ Cowan, Louise. *The Tragic Abyss*, Introduction. Dallas: The Dallas Institute Publications, 2003. p14.

⁶ *Tragic Abyss*, p15.

⁷ Aristotle, p35.

Pointing out that Aristotle made notice of a religious ceremony's ability to draw out emotional responses; Ferguson explores the communal participation of the audience and its experience.

After the experience has concluded, the participant returns to a normal, relieved state.

The main tragedy in *Beloved* is realized slowly as the horrific scene surrounding the death of Sethe's oldest daughter is gradually revealed. Morrison graphically depicts the life of a slave and the atrocities they suffered in order to assist the reader in understanding the decision that Sethe came to. The death of Beloved is first presented in the first chapter:

Counting on the stillness of her own soul, she had forgotten the other one: the soul of her baby girl. Who would have thought that a little old baby could harbor so much rage? Rutting among the stone under the eyes of the engraver's son was not enough. Not only did she have to live out her years in a house palsied by the baby's fury at having its throat cut, but those ten minutes she spent up against dawn-colored stone studded with star chips, her knees wide open as the grave, were longer than life...⁸

The language that Morrison uses has very definite emotional impacts, "soul of her baby girl", "baby's fury", and "having its throat cut". This paragraph introduces the fact that Sethe had a child that suffered a horrible death. It immediately elicits feelings that most people could not imagine. The image of a young child just barely able to walk having its throat cut is instilled in the reader and so begins the inner struggle to empathize and try to understand these feelings.

The use of imagery involving children is one of the most potent and powerful tools available to writers and is easily exemplified from one of the oldest and most famous tragic plays, *Oedipus the King*. In *Oedipus the King*, Sophocles presents a heart-wrenching, tear-filled scene as Oedipus begs to talk to his children one last time. Oedipus can hear his two children sobbing:

⁸ Morrison, Toni. *Beloved*. Vintage Books: New York. 1987. – p5.

“What’s that? O god! Do I really hear you sobbing? - my two children.”⁹ Oedipus has blinded himself and cannot see his children, but the comfort he receives from their crying induces a feeling of pity for Oedipus. This fulfills Aristotle’s requirement of “pity and fear” for the character. At the end of the play, Oedipus instructs Creon to “take me away. It’s time.” Creon instructs him to let go of the children, but Oedipus makes one last heart wrenching appeal, “No- don’t take them away from me, not now! No no no!”¹⁰ It is difficult to imagine a father who has torn out his eyes and suffered such personal loss not wanting to let go of what he has left of his family. The plea not to be parted from one’s children touches on universal terror and threat of grief, as Aristotle implies.

Another example of a powerful conjuring of emotions is in the Greek tragedy *Agamemnon*, written by Aeschylus. After Clytaemnestra has killed Agamemnon in retaliation for having sacrificed their first-born child, she describes Agamemnon as a horrid man who treated his child as nothing more than a beast:

“He thought no more of it than killing a beast, and his flocks were rich, teeming in their fleece, but he sacrificed his own child, our daughter, the agony I laboured into love to charm away the savage winds of Thrace.”¹¹

Only through empathy can most humans feel the emotional pain of a father sacrificing his child and the anguish of a mother losing her child.

In *Beloved*, there are continuous examples of what it was like to be a slave. In one dialog, Sethe is telling a tale to Denver about her mother. She tells how her mother showed her mark in the event that she is killed or died and Sethe needs to identify her:

⁹ Sophocles. *The Three Theban Plays: Oedipus the King*. Trans. Robert Feagles. New York: Penguin Books. 1984, (ll.1613-1614).

¹⁰ Sophocles, p250.

¹¹ Aeschylus. *The Oresteia: Agamemnon*. Tans. Robert Feagles. New York: Penguin Books. (1977) 1440-1444.

She picked me up and carried me behind the smokehouse. Back there she opened up her dress front and lifted her breast and pointed under it. Right on her rib was a circle and a cross burnt right in the skin. She said, “This is you ma’am. This,” and she pointed. ‘I am the only one got this mark now. The rest dead. If something happens to me and you can’t tell me by my face, you can know me by this mark.’¹²

She then states that after her mother was hung that “by the time they cut her down nobody could tell whether she had a circle and a cross or not, least of all me and I did look.”¹³ These conversations that take place between characters appear to take place as though it was normal talk. The use of the words “cut her down” creates a powerful image. To imagine a body hanging and having to be cut down let alone your own mother is another example of an unimaginable event.

Another strong and powerful image of slavery is evident during a conversation between Sethe and Paul D. Paul D is forced to tell Sethe why Halle never returned to her. He tells her that he saw Halle after he had observed Sethe get raped and her milk taken. Sethe asks why Paul D didn’t talk to Halle. Paul D states:

“I had a bit in my mouth.”

“I didn’t plan on telling you that.”

“I didn’t plan on hearing it.”

“I can’t take it back, but I can leave it alone,” Paul D said.

He wants to tell me, she thought. He wants me to ask him about what it was like for him—about how offended the tongue is, held down by iron, how the need to spit is so deep that you cry for it.¹⁴

This image combined with the image discussed earlier of the rooster is powerful. It builds on the ultimate justification of Sethe’s actions.

¹² *Beloved*, p72.

¹³ *Beloved*, p73.

¹⁴ *Beloved*, p82,84.

Half way through the story, the reader is given an image to keep in the back of his mind. It describes the detail of what the men found when they came looking for Sethe and the other slaves that left. The men enter a shed and observe a woman holding a child who was bleeding:

Inside, two boys bled in the sawdust and dirt at the feet of a nigger woman holding a blood-soaked child to her chest with one hand and an infant by the heels in the other. She did not look at them; she simply swung the baby toward the wall planks, missed and tried to connect a second time...¹⁵

The imagery created by such a violent depiction brings the reader closer to an emotional purgation.

At the end of the book, Morrison delivers perhaps the most graphic and horrid depiction of the murder of her child. Denver is afraid that Beloved might leave without understanding how hard it was for Sethe to take her life:

That before Sethe could make her understand what it meant-what it took to drag the teeth of that saw under the little chin; to feel the baby blood pump like oil in her hand; to hold her face so her head would stay on; to squeeze so she could absorb, still, the death spasms that shot through that adored body, plump and sweet with life - Beloved might leave.¹⁶

The use of imagery in this passage brings the reader to a climax and full understanding of the choice that Sethe made. By dragging the blade of the saw under her “little chin” and holding the face so the head would stay on brings the reader to a level of emotions that most do not know how to handle. How can a mother do this to their child? Are the atrocities of a slave’s life worth murder? The reader is left with a moral dilemma in the end and has to decide within himself how to release and live with these feelings. Eventually the reader must purge them from the emotional abyss.

¹⁵ *Beloved*, p175.

¹⁶ *Beloved*, p295.

Although the main theme in *Beloved* was tragic in nature, it can be argued that there are comic themes as well. To suggest that this horrific story can be comic in nature is almost insulting. However, before these can be explored, the spirit of comedy must first be reviewed and understood.

The premise that comedy is only tasked with making the reader laugh is immediately quashed after reading just a short excerpt from Cowan's Introduction to *The Terrain of Comedy*. She states that "the notion of comedy seems by its very nature to include all aspects of human life, the darkest as well as the brightest elements in the entire literary spectrum."¹⁷ That comedy can be found in all aspects of human life may seem dreadful to some, but although many aspects of our existence seem too horrid to laugh at, laughter is not the only criteria for it to be labeled comedy. Cowan breaks the kinds of comedy into three distinct sub-genres. These are Infernal, Purgatorial, and Paradisal and each has its own distinct character.¹⁸

In chapter three of her book, titled "Aristophanes' Comic Apocalypse," she discusses the point that the Aristophanes plays are apocalyptic in nature. The term "apocalyptic" means devastation or doom. In relation to literary work, it is the destruction of the present circumstance which is then replaced by a different circumstance. She also states that "Imperfection and weakness rather than malice and evil are the obstacles to happiness in this realm of middle comedy [purgatorial]..."¹⁹ Purgatorial and apocalyptic are almost synonymous in that the term purgation means to release or purge something and apocalyptic can mean to destroy or purge a current state.

In *Beloved*, there are three distinct changes in circumstance. The spirit of *Beloved* had

¹⁷ Cowan, Louise. *The Terrain of Comedy*. Dallas: The Pegasus Foundation, 1984. - Page 1 of the Introduction.

¹⁸ Cowan, p9.

¹⁹ Cowan, p13.

been present at 124 for many years. It is a spiteful spirit that had driven away most people that lived there, “the moment the house committed what was for him the one insult not to be borne or witnessed a second time.”²⁰ Sethe and Denver both understand why the spirit is spiteful; it was too young to understand what happened:

“You forgetting how little it is,” said her mother. “She wasn’t even two years old when she died. Too little to understand. Too little to talk much even.”²¹

At the end of the first chapter, the spirit is sent out. Paul D attempts to show affection to Sethe and the spirit gets jealous. Paul D responds by ordering it out of the house and has a short struggle with the spirit:

‘God damn it! Hush up!’ Paul D was shouting, falling, reaching for an anchor. ‘Leave the place alone! Get the hell out!’...
It was gone. Denver wandered through the silence to the stove.²²

For Sethe, the spirit being gone is no longer a constant reminder of what she did. However, Denver is not happy with the disappearance of the spirit:

Now her mother was upstairs with the man who had gotten rid of the only other company she had. Denver dipped a bit of bread into the jelly. Slowly, methodically, miserable she ate it.²³

This represents the first change in circumstance. It is assumed that they have gotten complacent and used to living with this spirit. In this instance, the antagonist is Paul D who forces the spirit to leave. Sethe and Denver’s existing world is destroyed in essence and a new life can begin. However, is it necessary that it be positive? For Denver, she has lost the only other friend or presence to keep her company.

²⁰ *Beloved*, p3.

²¹ *Beloved*, p5.

²² *Beloved*, p23.

²³ *Beloved*, p23

However, the spirit does not fully disappear and returns in the form of a “fully dressed woman” who walked out of the water. She eventually finds her way to 124 and sits down on a stump close to the house.²⁴ Sethe, Denver, and Paul D come home and observe her lying down. They invite her inside and she drinks four cups of water. When asked what her name was, the reaction is mixed:

“What might your name be?” asked Paul D.

“Beloved,” she said, and her voice was so low and rough each one looked at the other two. They heard the voice first-later the name.

“Beloved. You use the last name, Beloved?” Paul D asked her.

“Last?” She seemed puzzled. Then “No,” and she spelled it for them, slowly as though the letters were being formed as she spoke them.

Sethe dropped the shoes; Denver sat down and Paul D smiled.²⁵

This re-introduction of the spirit into the household signifies what would turn out to be the second apocalyptic change. The previous circumstance was once again destroyed and a new circumstance is introduced.

The presence of Beloved becomes destructive for all in the house. Paul D is forced out of the house and moves into a shed in the back due to his uneasiness around Beloved. She seduces Paul D using her supernatural power:

“I want you to touch me on the inside part and call me my name.”...

What he knew was that when he reached the inside part he was saying, “Red heart. Red heart,” over and over again.²⁶

This causes obvious conflict between Paul D and Beloved. This change in circumstance for Paul D is catastrophic in nature, to have sexual relations with a woman that Sethe treats as her own child is tragic in nature.

²⁴ *Beloved*, 60.

²⁵ *Beloved*, 62.

²⁶ *Beloved*, 137-138.

The largest effect that Beloved has is on Sethe. By the end of the story, Beloved has a hold on Sethe that has led into arguments and submission of Sethe to Beloved, “Then the mood changed and the arguments began. Slowly at first. A complaint by Beloved, an apology by Sethe... Beloved didn’t move; said, ‘Do it,’ and Sethe complied.”²⁷ Denver started to notice that things were getting too far out of hand. She began to feel that if Sethe did not pick up a knife, then Beloved might.²⁸ By the end of the book, Sethe has been consumed completely by Beloved and has even lost her job.

A group of women come from the town to sing at the house in essence to exorcise Beloved from the house. The exorcism of Beloved is distinct and emotional. In the end, Beloved stands alone:

Standing alone on the porch, Beloved is smiling. But now her hand is empty. Sethe is running away from her, running, and she feels the emptiness in the hand Sethe has been holding...Alone. Again. Then Denver, running too. Away from her to the pile of people out there.²⁹

Beloved disappears after this and a new circumstance begins. This signifies a third apocalyptic change in events. On two separate occasions the spirit has been kicked out of the house going from one situation to another.

The first disappearance was expected to be a better circumstance as defined by Cowan. The arrival of Beloved later in the play signified a second change in circumstance, one that initially appeared to be positive, but turned out to be the opposite. The final disappearance of Beloved signified a third change in circumstance, one that although Sethe misses Beloved, is positive and in the end, Paul D returns to help Sethe recover.

²⁷ *Beloved*, p284.

²⁸ *Beloved*, p285. “and little by little it dawned on Denver that if Sethe didn’t wake up one morning and pick up a knife, Beloved might.”

²⁹ *Beloved*, p309.

Toni Morrison's Beloved demonstrates Aristotle's conviction that tragedy result in purgation of emotions and Louise Cowan's definition of comedy to include the apocalyptic. This is evident in Sethe's decision to kill her child and then her ability to ultimately escape the grasp of her child's spirit. The genres of Tragedy and Comedy are distinctly different in their character. To suggest that something as horrific a tale as *Beloved* could contain comic and tragic elements is unfathomable to most until the true understanding of what is comic is understood.

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