

Student Essay on An Essay on Beloved: Is Sethe Free?

An Essay on Beloved: Is Sethe Free? by Toni Morrison

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Essay

As I first began to read *Beloved*, it was apparent at the time that Sethe was an ex-slave presently living her life in freedom. But now that I've read further into the novel, I'm beginning to question whether Sethe truly is free. Of course Sethe is free in the sense that she is no longer a slave, no longer property of another person, but she isn't free from herself.

In chapter nine Sethe's mind wanders back to the past as she returns to the Clearing where Baby Suggs used to preach. She remembers what it was like to wake up and decide what to do each day, and she remembers claiming herself, thinking, "Freeing yourself was one thing; claiming ownership of that freed self was another" (95). Sethe may have "claimed herself" that day in the past but I don't believe she meant it. Or maybe she meant it then but doesn't believe in it now. Sethe, free from slavery for nearly eighteen years, has become a slave again.

This time instead of being a slave to a white master Sethe is a slave to her own pain. The sources of her pain are numerous, including the stealing of her milk, the tree on her back, the murdering of her child, and *Beloved* coming back to her. When Baby Suggs was alive, she warned Sethe about holding everything in, "Lay em down, Sethe. Sword and shield. Down. Down. Both of em down. Down by the riverside. Sword and shield. Don't study war no more. Lay all that mess down. Sword and shield" (86). Unfortunately, Sethe never really did lay it all down, she never gave up fighting; she never gave up defending herself. Instead she kept up at it and as a result of trying to forget her past rather than deal with it Sethe has put herself through most of her own misery just by refusing to give it up.

Sethe must open up and accept everything about herself; past, present, and future. She can't claim some parts of herself and not others. It's all or nothing, and until she's ready to make that choice, Sethe cannot be truly free.