

To Be Loved: Amy Denver and Human Need: Bridges to Understanding in Toni Morrison's "Beloved"

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To Be Loved: Amy Denver and
Human Need—Bridges to
Understanding in Toni Morrison's
Beloved

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I will call them my people,
which are not my people;
and her beloved,
which was not beloved.
And it shall come to pass
in the place where it was said to them,
“You are not My people,”
there they shall be called
children of the living God. (Romans
9:25-26)

So writes the Apostle Paul in his letter to the Romans as he prophesies the Gentiles' acceptance, and so begins, in part, Toni Morrison's Pulitzer Prize winning novel, *Beloved* (1988), a poignant, hopeful tale in which Morrison expands the boundaries of the traditional slave narrative to explore the far-reaching damage of the institution of

slavery and the promise of acceptance and healing. The fulfillment of this promise lies in bridging the gulf of racism that still exists between blacks and whites. Perhaps only then can all people, regardless of race, *be loved* and healed.

Throughout the text, Morrison presents healers who accept others and reach beyond self. Besides the title character, Morrison offers another beloved: Amy Denver, the often-ignored young white woman marginalized by society. In a novel about the evils of slavery where it would seem easy enough—and perhaps entirely logical—to draw a line of demarcation between black and white as between protagonist and antagonist, reader take care: in Morrison’s artistic hands, nothing is ever quite what it appears at first glance. It may seem ironic, in a novel so obviously about the African slave experience, even to bother about a white girl whom Morrison directly devotes only about fifteen pages of the novel’s 275, and to whom critics devote even fewer—indeed, to date, there are no scholarly studies *exclusively* focused on Amy Denver.¹ In fact, she often is mentioned only in passing—in one instance, as a parenthetical aside (Krumholtz 1992, 399)—as if she is too insignificant even to warrant dismissal in the first place. Indeed, how can one dismiss what has not been noticed? This essay, however, takes up what has been passed over focusing on Amy Denver as significant and integral to the very telling of the story, for without her there would likely be no story.

Studying Amy Denver not as a minor character, but one of greater importance than heretofore accorded, this essay posits her as one of Morrison’s “bridges” to deeper understanding in *Beloved*. Morrison employs her as a literary foil to various other characters in the novel—primarily Sethe—revealing Amy as an indentured servant, a prophetic healer, and a compassionate white woman who plays a crucial role in the very continuation of the story that clearly must be “passed on.” As a “foil” is literally “a ‘leaf’ of bright metal placed under a jewel to increase its brilliance” (Harmon 2000, 216), so the fair Amy contrasts sharply with the dark Sethe to highlight her distinctive characteristics. Through these contrasts, and combining Amy’s three roles, Morrison reveals her essential function as a *bridge* between black and white, racism and understanding, destruction and renewal, for she too proves “beloved” if one identifies the meaning behind her name.

~and her beloved, which was not beloved~

In what the reader is told repeatedly is “not a story to pass on” (Morrison 1988, 274–75), Morrison adeptly wields the instability of language, revealing the slipperiness of the sign, where “word-shapes” (99) vanish or splinter into symbolic fragmentation in attempts to recount the unspeakable (210–13), in no small part because language, we are told, has been appropriated by “the definers—not the defined” (190). Morrison establishes a richly

subversive pattern of multiple significance where words act as both nouns and verbs and webs of hidden meaning abound. “Rememory”² and “beloved,” both central to the text, are just such words that signify both action and object. In light of this, it seems important to scrutinize Morrison’s use of language all the more closely, including her seemingly benign use of “Amy.” The etymology of this word reveals the striking fact that the name, from the Old French “Aimee,” in use since the twelfth century, derives from the Latin *amatus* (loved), and literally means “beloved.” Recognizing this, one must logically ask why Morrison named not one, but two characters Beloved. The answer to this question lies in exploring Amy’s key role in the larger story of “beloved” characters—those broken souls who need love to heal—and subsequently, her role as bridge.

Besides the name “Amy,” one can easily argue for the multiple meaning of the title *Beloved*, also the last word of the novel. As a noun, it tragically names the murdered “crawling already?” baby at a Christening that is also a funeral. It names the baby’s ghost that returns in human form to haunt the inhabitants of “124”—the number that sequentially indicates the *absence* of the number “3” signifying that murdered and missing, third-born child. Perhaps most importantly, as critics have noted, *beloved* names the “Sixty Million and more” of Morrison’s dedication—those Africans and their descendents killed by the inhumane institution of slavery—especially if we read it figuratively as an epitaph that marks their myriad unmarkable graves.³

As a verb, “[beloved] may also be the injunction with which Morrison wishes to leave us: be loved” (Beaulieu 1993, 16), as the title of this essay suggests. Morrison’s repeated use of “beloved” as both noun and verb throughout the text, demonstrates that our need to “be loved” defines us and connects us *regardless* of race. As hatred is the opposite of love and lies at the heart of racism, clearly love is the healing balm that Morrison hopes can soothe the deep scars of slavery. Even when Ella warns: “Don’t love nothing” (1988, 92), Paul D’s “red heart” (117) is a rusted-shut “tobacco tin” (117), and Sethe’s “too-thick love” (164) can kill, every heart still yearns for “a place where you [can] love anything you [choose]—not to need permission for desire—well now *that* [is] freedom” (162). Through her own love, that which Morrison presents as Amy’s human need to love and be loved, the character *as beloved* provides the hopeful bridge to that freedom.

Furthermore, Morrison is noted as having said she wishes “to subvert [the reader’s] traditional comfort so that he may experience an unorthodox one” (Corey 2000, 31). This notion of “subversion”—literally to “corrupt or overthrow”—appears evident in Morrison’s attempt to force the reader to re-think the traditional slave narrative, partly by including the “enslaved” white woman, Amy, in her tale. As Morrison “confronts [the] reader with an

unfamiliar reality” (2000, 31), she pushes the reader to face slavery’s horrific consequences in some of the most graphic accounts of the evils of slavery readers may encounter anywhere. While this retelling in many ways echoes one of the benchmark texts on slavery in America, Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (released serially from 1851–1852), we have none of the relatively benign descriptions a nineteenth-century account, while groundbreaking in its day, presents. “Whereas old slave narratives exercised a willed omission of trauma as a defensive armor against humiliating or embarrassing memories, Morrison . . . seeks to disrupt” (Khayati 1999, 315) this pattern. While Morrison’s characters and readers enjoy little comfort in her narrative, she does offer hope. As her characters’ lives are shattered as a result of their slave experience, so too are their stories. By piecing them together, a clearer, more complete version of their painful history emerges, even as it will remain forever fragmented. Morrison offers Amy Denver as an important part of this puzzle; indeed, Sethe would not have a story to tell, if not for Amy. As Amy reaches out to Sethe with love and compassion, Sethe survives.

In an interview with Jane S. Bakerman (1981, 543), Morrison says, “Actually, I think, all the time that I write, I’m writing about love or its absence. Although I don’t start out that way. . . . But I think that I still write about the same thing, which is how people relate to one another and miss it or hang on to it . . . or are tenacious about love.” Love, then, and the tenacity of these damaged souls, provides the central theme in *Beloved* with which Morrison highlights all her abused characters’ struggles to survive the painful injustices they are forced to endure as a result of their enslavement.

In a discussion of slavery and the way in which Morrison shows people as property, critic Rafael Perez-Torres comments, “Commodity and exchange serve as the *only* form of interaction between blacks and whites in *Beloved*. This exchange on its most basic level involves the marketing of human beings . . .” (1998, 132; my emphasis). While this proves true for most of the white characters, clearly, since no money changes hands during Sethe’s encounter with Amy Denver, this statement is not entirely accurate. Indeed, Amy experiences not *material* gain, but *spiritual* gain as a result of saving Sethe and Denver.

~ *in the place where it was said to them, “You are not My people,”* ~

Amy Denver, as a runaway indentured servant with “fugitive eyes” (Morrison 1988, 78), was also property. “The European *slave* (indentured servant) is represented by Miss Amy Denver of Boston” (Mbalia 1991, 95; my emphasis). Perhaps here, the difference between “slavery” and “indentured servitude” is primarily a semantic one since “in theory, [an indentured servant] is only selling his or her labor. In practice, however, servants were basically slaves and the courts enforced the laws that made it so [with the] treat-

ment of the servants [being] . . . often harsh and brutal” (Barker 2004, 2).⁴ It is worth noting that the Thirteenth Amendment to *The Constitution* abolished both slavery *and* indentured servitude, which indicates that historically the federal legislature saw them as similar ills at the time, even though the issue of slavery was clearly the paramount concern. The amendment reads in part: “Neither slavery nor involuntary servitude . . . shall exist within the United States, or any place subject to their jurisdiction” (2003, 33–34). If not “legally” speaking, then both figuratively and physically, Amy experienced her own enslavement at the hands of Mr. Buddy.

Additionally, through images of confinement, Morrison suggests that part of that enslavement Amy suffered also might have been sexual in nature. She alludes to Amy’s sexual abuse as the hands of her “master” when he locked her in the root cellar (1988, 34), thus linking her to the novel’s host of sexually exploited characters. Recall that Amy’s mother, who was “give to Mr. Buddy” may have been raped by him: “Joe Nathan said Mr. Buddy is my daddy, but I don’t believe that” (80) Amy tells Sethe. Certainly we know Sethe’s mother (62), Baby Suggs (139), and Sethe herself (5, 16–17) were all sexually abused. Sethe “told Denver that she believed Beloved had been locked up by some whiteman for his own purposes, and never let out the door” (119). Ella suffered the same fate at the hands of a white father and son who “for more than a year, . . . kept her locked in a room for themselves” (119). ““You couldn’t think up,” Ella [recalls], ‘what them two done to me”” (119). Even Stamp Paid, “born Joshua, . . . renamed himself when he handed over his wife to his master’s son. Handed her over in the sense that he did not kill anybody, thereby himself, because his wife demanded he stay alive. Otherwise, she reasoned, where and to whom could she return when the boy was through” (185)? With these passages, Morrison establishes one of the most degrading aspects of human abuse: sexual enslavement of women at the hands of sadistic masters, the most extreme subjugation of women in a white patriarchal culture that historically touched women irrespective of their ethnicity.

Having fled this abuse, Amy and Sethe meet near the riverbank and Sethe describes Amy as “The raggediest-looking trash you ever saw” with “arms like cane stalks and enough hair for four or five heads” (Morrison 1988, 32). Amy thinks nearly the same thing upon beholding Sethe saying, “You ‘bout the scariest-looking something I ever seen” (32). In the woods, as a runaway indentured servant, her situation in many ways mirrors Sethe’s as a runaway slave. Wendy Harding and Jacky Martin explore how Morrison places these two “throw-away people, two lawless outlaws” (84):

in parallel destinies in a relationship combining specularly and interaction.
This intense and emotionally charged structure constitutes the next stage

in the character definition before [Morrison's]...heroines immerse themselves in the rituals of community [here childbirth]...exploring an intermediary pattern of relationships, the intimate or proximate sphere that no longer wholly contributes to the definition of their personalities but is still distinct from more impersonal collective pressure. (Harding and Martin 1994, 40)

Certainly Sethe and Amy, because of their parallel situations, experience just such a connection. One manifestation of this interaction—again their encounter that makes the rest of the story possible—is the communion of lost souls and the vital and *hopeful* mothering ritual of birth in which they immerse themselves.

As they wander the wilds, both characters also suffer from starvation. Recalling her desperation Sethe says, “I was hungry . . . just as hungry as I could be. . . I was gonna eat [the stranger’s] feet off. . . I was hungry to do it. Like a snake. All jaws and hungry” (Morrison 1988, 31). Similarly, Amy, whom Sethe describes as “need[ing] beef and pot liquor like nobody in this world” (32), combs the hillside for huckleberries. Disappointed in her search, she asks Sethe, “You got anything on you, gal, pass for food? I like to die I’m so hungry” (32). This *physical* hunger they share, parallels not only abuse and the hardships endured fleeing it, but their other needs as well—specifically, the hunger of their love-starved hearts and a need not only to *be loved*, but to love others, for paradoxically it is through *giving* that we *receive* the greatest gifts.

Amy then reveals how her mother consigned herself to work in order to pay for her passage, which provides further evidence of parallel experience with the allusion to “Middle Passage.” Amy adds, “But then she had me and since she died right after, well, they said I had to work for em to pay it off” (Morrison 1988, 33), much the way a slave’s children were born into bondage and became the master’s property. It appears obvious that like Sethe, who does not know her father and lost her mother at a young age, Amy’s familial situation proves strikingly analogous, as noted by Mbalia: “The parallels between [Amy Denver’s] experiences and those of the African are similar. Her mother is dead and her father, unknown—perhaps the slavemaster. She shared the same work experience and punishment as those Africans” (95). Indeed, they were both orphaned. Ironically, however, it is Sethe who has a mother-in-law waiting for her, Baby Suggs, who cares for her first three children: two boys, Howard and Buglar, and a girl, the “crawling already? baby” Sethe eventually murders. In contrast, Amy, utterly alone in the world, has no one. As slavery denied families their traditional bonds,⁵ this illustrates yet another layer of abuse leveled on its victims—the dissolution of the

nuclear family—certainly one of the central problems in Morrison’s text that again underscores both loss and the need for love to heal.

These two young, orphaned women are also close in age, but unlike Amy, Sethe—“married” at the tender age of fourteen when she was but a child herself—has three children and is about to give birth to the fourth. Emphatically, Amy tells Sethe, “I been bleeding for four years but I ain’t having nobody’s baby. Won’t catch me sweating milk . . .” (Morrison 1988, 83). “Sweating” implies labor, and because of their youthfulness, this emphasizes yet another loss—that of childhood and all its attendant innocence—since both Amy and Sethe knew bondage from birth.

Amy then refers to her mistreatment at the hands of her master: “I used to be a good size. Nice arms and everything. Wouldn’t think it, would you? That was before they put me in the root cellar” (Morrison 1988, 34). And later, “I had me some whippings. . . . Mr. Buddy had a right evil hand too. Whip you for looking at him straight. Sure would. I looked right at him one time and he hauled off and threw the poker at me” (79). Margaret Atwood notes that here Morrison “incidentally reminds the reader” through the character of Amy Denver, “that the nineteenth century, with its child labor, wage slavery and widespread accepted domestic violence, wasn’t tough only for blacks, but for all but the most privileged whites as well” (1999, 7). Morrison offers starving, abused, uneducated Amy as proof of this.

As a result of her indentured servitude, Amy’s status as an uneducated white girl reveals how she also mirrors Sethe in speech. Using dialect, Morrison establishes this similarity. Mbalia notes that “[Amy] too was denied education, making her English vernacular almost indistinguishable from that of the African slave: ‘be so pretty on me’ and ‘Mr. Buddy whipped my tail.’ [‘More it hurt, more better it is.’] Of course the significant difference between the two is their skin color” (Mbalia 1991, 95). Despite her lack of formal schooling, Amy overlooks racial differences, just as Morrison pushes the reader to do. Although an orphaned bastard, “enslaved,” and denied so much, Amy, through her life’s “education” of abuse, still understands how to treat another human being with compassion. Her all too human desire to *love* and *be loved* supersedes both her concern for safety and her desire for freedom.

Amy’s quest for velvet further magnifies her situation. “I’m a get to Boston and get some velvet” (Morrison 1988, 80). Philip Page argues that Amy’s velvet is one of the “overlapping and accumulating images” Morrison uses to develop *Beloved* (1995, 141). The reader must consider the kind of life Amy lived if the most precious thing imaginable is a piece of “*carmine* velvet” (similar to Baby Suggs’s retiring to contemplate color before her death [Morrison 1988, 104] and Paul D’s affinity for a bed with sheets [131]). Amy

tells Sethe, “Velvet is like the world was just born. Clean and new and so smooth. Carmine . . . means red but when you talk about velvet you got to say ‘carmine’” (33). The velvet, then, with its rich color and texture, symbolizes another facet of human experience that Amy and Sethe’s lives lack. In Morrison’s capable hands, “The concept undergoes a literary transformation whereby colour serves as a metonym for luxuriousness, comfort, pleasure” (Perez-Torres 1998, 133). With this evocative detail, Morrison illuminates how Amy, like the African slaves, knew repression and hard labor in a bleak existence devoid of even the simplest pleasures.

Further evidence of this lies in Amy’s cherished memory of sleeping with the sun on her face. Recalling one of the few moments she enjoyed a respite from labor, she says to Sethe:

Bet you never even sleep with the sun in your face. I did it a couple of times. Most times I’m feeding stock before the light and don’t get to sleep till way after dark comes. But I was in the back of the wagon once and fell asleep. Sleeping with the sun in your face is the best old feeling. Two times I did it. . . . [The second time] Mr. Buddy whipped my tail. Kentucky ain’t no good place to be in. Boston’s the place to be in. (Morrison 1988, 80)

Morrison establishes Amy’s parallel experience in these passages, specifically her decision to flee slavery and its abuse. One must also note that her destination, the city of Boston, was one of the original and most radical abolitionist cities in America. By going there, Amy not only secures her own freedom, but can also “pass on” Sethe’s story, again making her a bridge to both understanding and healing.

Linden Peach comments that Amy’s character “. . . introduces another subtext about slavery which had often been ignored and which develops Morrison’s concern with . . . the slave trade. The slavery endured by the poor, working-class whites involved treatment . . . which, as Sethe discovers, was not so dissimilar from her own” (1995, 107). This parallel treatment forces the reader to accept, as Beauvoir notes: “the deep similarities between the situation of women and that of the Negro” (qtd. Peach 1995, 9). Perhaps these similarities account for “how recklessly [Sethe] behaved with this whitegirl—a recklessness born of desperation and encouraged by Amy’s [tenderness]” (Morrison 1988, 78). Indeed, Sethe had no alternative but to lay her trust at Amy’s feet. Clearly, without Amy’s assistance, Sethe and Denver would have died. Noting this, Peach says, “The song which Amy sings to ease Sethe’s pain conflates mother-love with mother-pain; combining tenderness with vicarious suffering. [It] enables Amy to bind with and heal Sethe, saving her and her child from certain death” (1995, 105). Sethe recalls that “if it hadn’t been

for that girl looking for velvet, she never would have [made it]" (Morrison 1988, 8). In this respect, Morrison places Amy in the role of *savior*.

~And it shall come to pass . . . There they shall be called children of the living God. ~

Despite Amy's own brokenness, Morrison presents her as a prophetic healer. Corey focuses on Amy's power to heal Sethe: "One of Sethe's memories is the healing power of physical touch that [she] first experienced at the hand of Amy, the mysterious white girl . . . who rubbed her feet . . . dressed the wounds on her back and assisted in the delivery of Denver" (Corey 2000, 40). Her attention to Sethe's suffering and the ability to relieve it is a poignant, pivotal moment in Morrison's tale. Peach argues that it is no coincidence that Amy is "one of the two main healers" in the text (1995, 103). Of course the other main healer is Baby Suggs Holy, who had been abused so badly that she "had nothing left to make a living with but her heart" (Morrison 1988, 87). Baby preached her healing Love Sermon in the Clearing (88-89) deep in the woods beyond the cultural confines of civilization. Note that Amy's healing acts take place in the woods as well. As Amy attends to Sethe's suffering, one can argue that the meaning of Amy's name—*beloved*—may in part account for her compassionate nature, when, like Baby Suggs's offering up "her great big heart" (87), Amy offers her heart as well.

Amy repeatedly appeals to God and Christ saying, "Come here, Jesus" and "What God have in mind" (Morrison 1988, 78-80). Page notes that "Besides comforting Sethe with ordinary words, [Amy] sings songs of healing that mimic her own role" (149). Sharing the lullaby her own mother lovingly sang to her before she died, Amy sings, "Layeth she her hands upon/ My dear weary little one,/ And those white hands overspread/ Like a veil the curly head . . ." (81). In her own laying on of hands, adopting her mother's maternal care, Amy soothes as she rubs Sethe's torn and swollen feet, working her "magic" (35) and stating prophetically that "Can't nothing heal without pain, you know" (78) and "Anything dead coming back to life hurts" (35). Morrison suggests with these lines that tortured and broken souls must also experience pain to heal.

As we see Amy in this role of prophetic healer who appeals to her Lord and rubs Sethe's feet, we are reminded of Christ in the thirteenth chapter of John in one of His most humble and healing roles when He Himself washes the feet of His disciples before the Last Supper demonstrating that a compassionate heart and His own impending sacrifice have the redemptive power to heal. Christ asked,

Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord; and you are right, for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you

an example, that you also should do as I have done to you. Truly, truly I say to you, a servant (or slave) is not greater than his master; nor is he who is sent greater than he who sent him. If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them. (John 13: 12–17)

Here and elsewhere Morrison casts Amy in this blessed role. Despite her own suffering, Amy offers herself as a humble healer who follows Christ's charitable example.

If one reads this notion of healing in light of the promise in Romans 9:26, that "they shall be called children of the living God," clearly *Beloved* must be interpreted as a hopeful text. Atwood writes:

The epigraph . . . from Romans . . . is from the chapter in which the Apostle Paul ponders, Job-like, the ways of God toward humanity, in particular the evils and inequities visible everywhere on earth. Paul reminds the reader that the once wretched Gentiles are now acceptable. The passage proclaims not rejection, but reconciliation and hope. It continues "And it shall come to pass, that in the place where it was said unto them 'Ye are not my people,' there shall they be called the children of the living God." Morrison is too smart, and too much of a writer, not to have intended this context. (Atwood 1999, 9)

Atwood credits Morrison for her close reading and use of the Bible in *Beloved* (both in this passage and elsewhere) to infuse the text with the promise of something better. Certainly Amy's grace offers Sethe hope in her own wretched suffering: "Below [Sethe's] bloody knees, there was no feeling at all; her chest was two cushions of pins. It was the voice full of velvet and Boston and good things to eat that urged her along and made her think that maybe she wasn't, after all, just a crawling graveyard for a six-month baby's last hours" (Morrison 1988, 34). Amy offers hope not only to Sethe, but, more importantly, to the reader.

Page sees this hope directly in Amy, whom he describes as "another healer who despite her own mistreatment and vulnerability, provides physical and spiritual salvation for Sethe" (1995, 146). Amy not only treats Sethe lovingly, but, through her words, Sethe finds, at least temporarily, comfort and hope in God's redemptive love. Colleen Carpenter Cullinan suggests that the text "[e]xplores the discourse of redemption voiced by the [mothering characters] in *Beloved* . . . focusing on the way maternal voices describe and respond to suffering and sin" (2002, 78). As Amy remembers the song her own long-dead mother sang to her, she adopts that mother's love and offers it up to Sethe and her newborn baby in one of their darkest hours. Herein lies further affirmation of *Beloved* as a hopeful, healing text with Amy as one of its central, nurturing, redemptive figures.

Bryce Patrick Bjork describes the scene on the riverbank as that “of [a] white child who helps deliver Denver on the banks of the Ohio; and in its entirety, it is a magical, miraculous testament to . . . love and determination” (1992, 148). This is the very tenacity of which Morrison spoke (see Bakerman 1981, 543). Ever hopeful, Amy also predicts that, “You make it through the night, you make it all the way” (Morrison 1988, 82). Amy senses that “Jesus looking at you, [Lu]” (83) and also that God must have something in mind. She sees the spiritual significance in Sethe’s situation: shunned by the white world, Sethe nevertheless remains a child of God and one of His *beloved*.

Interrupting her own flight to help another human being in need, Amy identifies the horrible wounds on Sethe’s back as “a chokecherry tree” saying, “It’s a tree, Lu. A chokecherry tree. See, here’s the trunk—it’s red and split wide open, full of sap, and this here’s the parting for the branches. You got a mighty lot of branches. Leaves, too, look like, and dern if these ain’t blossoms. Tiny little cherry blossoms, just as white. Your back got a whole tree on it. In bloom” (Morrison 1988, 79). It seems hard to ignore the allusion to the Biblical Tree of Life that in Revelations 22:2 overshadows death, especially as Sethe herself blooms with life in the midst of the ravages of slavery as she faces her own death. Peach suggests that, “Amy’s reading of [the tree on Sethe’s back] imaginatively transforms the pain and humiliation of slavery” (1995, 107–08), because she describes it with awe as something blooming in nature, untouched by man and another part of God’s creation. It also shows the possibility that language, appropriated by “the definers” can be commandeered by the “defined” to alter injustice, which after all is what Morrison’s work as a novelist attempts to do for her readers.

Page confirms Amy’s “associat[ion] with nature, whose webs and leaves she uses to relieve Sethe’s pain” (1995, 79). As she drapes the spider webs on Sethe’s back, Amy says “it was like stringing a tree for Christmas” (80), a reference to celebrating Christ’s birth, the fulfillment of Biblical prophecy, and also the luxury, like velvet, of adornment. Amy’s transformative powers that can heal “the pain and humiliation of slavery” parallel the transformation that Morrison intends the text to incite for her readers because it provides proof that one can achieve grace through suffering. This in no way suggests forgetting, glossing-over, or condoning slavery and suffering. Morrison wants the reader to share the story because, through the anguish of telling it—passing it on—pain can be a “cathartic,” a natural part of the healing process that allows those who suffer to move toward love: “can’t nothing heal without pain, you know” (78), which Denver later noted is certainly “[a] truth for all times” (35).

Morrison extends the natural imagery to the bluefern spores. Like the slaves, who are often mistaken for or equated with animals—as by school-teacher and his pupils, for example (1988, 193)—the spores, “often mistook for insects . . . are seeds in which the whole generation sleeps confident of a future. And for a moment it is easy to believe each one had one—will become all of what is contained in the spore: will live out its days as planned. This moment of certainty lasts no longer than that; longer, perhaps, than the spore itself” (84). Denver, the newborn babe, like the bluefern spore, holds within her the promise of her people’s future. Critic Ashraf H. A. Rushdy notes that “In *Beloved*, Denver becomes the daughter of hope” (1999, 126). The significance of Denver’s birth and survival magnifies the importance of Amy’s hand in the events, their interconnectedness, since Amy directly ensures that survival and thus the safeguard that Denver’s fate will come to fruition. Hope is passed from Amy to Denver in both spirit and name through Denver’s very existence.

~I will call them my people, which are not my people; ~

Marc C. Conner notes that, “Like her ‘namesake’ Amy, Denver provides a link to the white community and a sign of potential interracial healing” (2000, 45). Finally, because Amy is a compassionate white woman, Morrison presents her—who is called beloved, but is not beloved—as a bridge to white society. Because Morrison presents her characters as human beings who resist stereotypes, she shows that due to their fallible humanity, none live without sin. Just as she hopes to intervene in racist attitudes, neither will she be a party to the same. For that reason, she resists taking sides *only* with the black community.

While Morrison portrays the Garners and the Bodwins as “good” white people, certainly an oxymoron for blacks at the time, they remain far from blameless. The Garners, though they treated their slaves well, nevertheless still *owned* them. Similarly, the Bodwins, though part of the Underground Railroad, remain blind to their own shortcomings. Consider that the change figurine at the Bodwins’s back door is “a blackboy’s mouth full of money” (Morrison 1988, 255) with nails in its head, a gaping mouth, and bulging eyes. The head, “thrown back farther than a head could go” (255) resembles that of a lynched man.⁶ The irony of the kneeling figure and the inscription, “At Yo Service,” is certainly not lost on Morrison’s readers. The abuse of blacks and the link to the capitalist underpinnings of slavery as whites profited from the sale of black human flesh remain present. Among these white characters, only Amy Denver falls outside the realm of racism. Amy is very much a biblical Good Samaritan: not robbing, but aiding.

Christ’s Parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25–37) provides another parallel to Sethe and Amy’s encounter. Christ clearly teaches: “Love thy

neighbor.” The parable demonstrates that the Jews and Samaritans—who did not consider each other neighbors, like the blacks and whites of Morrison’s story—are reconciled through Christ when they learn that *all* people are neighbors deserving of compassion and love *regardless* of race. Sethe, like the Jew in the parable who is “stripped, beat and left half-dead” (Luke 10:30), is saved by Amy, as the tale’s Good Samaritan, who “had compassion, and went to [her] and bound up [her] wounds, pouring on oil and wine . . . and took care of [her]” (Luke 10:33–34). Christ’s injunction at the end of the story is “Go and do likewise” (Luke 10:37) and “you shall live” (Luke 10:28). Clearly this is Morrison’s message as well. As racism pits whites and blacks against one another, Amy and Sethe illustrate the possibility of reconciliation through love. Amy helping Sethe provides that bridge.

By abetting an escaped slave, Amy places herself in danger of serious punishment, including imprisonment, under the “Fugitive Slave Law of 1850.” Except for her own “fugitive” status as a runaway indentured servant who is in violation of a legally binding contract, she has the opportunity to turn Sethe in to receive a reward. Though she could, in theory, join the ranks of whites who profit from the slave trade, the fact remains that she does not; rather, she saves Sethe. Harding and Martin observe that, “‘twinned’ characters in [Morrison’s] novels freely elect to share each other’s existence and explore their mutual affinities” (1994, 41). Amy reaches out to Sethe because of her compassion and this need to share. For both characters, their “mutual affinities” and interaction affirm their value as human beings, *not* as property.

Morrison also explores the gap between blacks and whites and the deeper divisiveness of this separation:

With [Morrison’s] exploration of splitness, [she] renders the dividedness of the American and African-American cultures: objects are split, bodies are split, psyches are split, families are split, neighborhoods are split, a nation is split. Given that American Culture is externally divided from the “old” worlds of Europe and Africa, and given that it is internally divided into multiple fragments, Morrison’s novels analyze the consequences of African Americans’ external separation from dominant white culture. (Page 1995, 30)

To begin to remedy this “splitness,” as Page calls it, this deep divide that American culture has excavated, Morrison realizes she can do so only by enlisting the help of the “in power” white community that originally created and condoned, or ignored, the problem. Moreover, she cannot hope to accomplish this if her work should harbor racial undertones that encourage the black community to blame all whites, which would further magnify the divide rather than bridge it. If Amy functions as a bridge through her role as a foil to Sethe and the many “beloveds” in the text, we see that, as Harding

and Martin note, “The double or kindred spirit relationship . . . is an occasion for [Morrison’s] characters to practice the absolute imperative never to choose and thus never to exclude, which means once again ‘seeing’ unity in multiplicity and the possibility of ‘identity’ in otherness” (1994, 41–42). If the white community cannot accept “otherness,” as Amy does when she overlooks racial differences to save Sethe, little hope exists either to subvert racist notions in America or approach any sort of healing, painful as that healing may be.

At the same time that Morrison does not condemn all whites, neither does she exonerate all blacks. In a Biblical reading of *Beloved*, Corey explores how Morrison “calls attention to the collaboration of the black community in Sethe’s fate, refusing to represent blacks only as victims” (2000, 42). Their betrayal at first may seem merely inadvertent, and thereby blameless, but as Corey argues: “While the [black] community does not directly betray Sethe, as Judas betrayed Jesus, they betray her indirectly, like Peter, in their failure to warn her of the coming danger (157). Their inaction might easily be interpreted as the opposite of what we might term “Good Samaritanism” since they should have warned Sethe but elect not to, something which definitely goes against the norm for their otherwise tightly-knit community where mutual aid is essential to survival. This clearly illustrates how Morrison implicates the black community in the evil that arrives at the house on Bluestone road the day after the feast. Terri Otten notes the way in which “Evil persists in the ‘meanness’ of the blacks who refuse to warn Sethe about the white men come to reclaim her . . .” (1989, 82). Morrison highlights the extent of divisiveness and “othering” when she shows how Sethe’s own community turns its back on her.

The careful reader must also connect the “bluefern” imagery at Denver’s birth to “Bluestone” road, as each holds the promise of a future. This realization helps to underscore the danger in the arrival of the four horsemen (1988, 148). Morrison uses this important allusion to the Biblical Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse (Rev. 1–8) to underscore what they represent: Conquest, Slaughter, Famine, and Death, the very ills leveled on Africans by white slave traders and owners. These atrocities threatened the future of whole generations. It also portends Sethe’s infanticide when she slaughters “the crawling already? baby” in the shed, an act for which she is further alienated from her own community, including Paul D who criticizes her harshly saying, “What you did was wrong, Sethe. . . . You got two feet, Sethe, not four” (165).

By showing even the members of her own black community, who more than anyone else, should protect Sethe out of solidarity fail to do so, Morrison emphasizes the need to reach beyond the community and, at

times, beyond self to either seek or render aid. As a bridge, Amy Denver does just this. Through Amy, Morrison shows how

Racism and oppression are not exclusive properties of white Americans, however, nor are blacks their only victims.... Her moral vision allows for few single-minded villains or heroes. She asks us to distinguish between an Amy and a schoolteacher and to feel some compassion for white victims. . . . The whiteness she castigates represents the dehumanizing cultural values of a society given over to profit, possession, and dominance. (Otten 1989, 96)

Amy Denver exists not as a party to the system, but one of its victims. Mbalia explores how for Morrison “to accomplish her goal of clarifying the dialectical relationship between race oppression and class exploitation, [she] . . . documents history by showing that the European . . . [was] enslaved before the African” (1991, 95). Morrison presents Amy Denver as evidence of white exploitation of white, class repression, and the marginalization of women within the white patriarchal culture. As others have noted about the use of white slaves in literature: while it does help to educate the public about their existence, it also serves to “raise white consciousness about the repulsive nature of black slavery” (Jackson 1990, 135). Morrison effects this bridging of issues for black and white through Amy Denver.

Both the white and black communities cannot help but see Amy as an heroic character, another parallel to Morrison’s protagonist, Sethe, since each possesses enough pride to take her destiny into her own hands in an attempt to overcome oppressive tragedy and rename, redefine, and reclaim the self. As Sethe knew: “Freeing yourself was one thing; claiming ownership of that freed self was another” (Morrison 1988, 95). Through Amy and Sethe’s encounter, Morrison hopes to show the possibility of mutual understanding and love. Repeatedly, Morrison reveals every character’s fervent desire to love and *be loved* in the face of tragedy.

Because of the obviousness of Amy’s dire situation and, in spite of it, her willingness to save Sethe, we cannot help but sympathize with and admire her. Through Amy’s example, Morrison pushes readers to examine their own lives, in hopes that if placed in similar circumstances, they would possess the same kind heart and open spirit as Amy to jeopardize the success of their own quests for freedom and safety to aid another human being in need—Christ’s “Go and do likewise” (Luke 10:37). Peter A. Muckley discusses,

a link of love and solidarity between the white and black worlds, the common sisterhood of the marginalized . . . offering us tentative hopes for a future based on the qualities residing in the ethos of the poor and the out-cast, qualities of resilience and mutual aid . . . founded on the transracial love and endurance of women. (Muckley 2002, 5)

Certainly then, as just such a link, *beloved* Amy proves to be a highly significant figure in the novel—far more important than heretofore acknowledged by many of Morrison’s critics. In her connection to Denver, as both savior and namesake, Amy’s healing, loving nature permeates Denver, who in turn becomes the link to society in the absence of the sign “Amy” as “beloved.”

Morrison further illustrates the possibility for healing through Denver with her vision of the white dress holding Sethe. “‘I saw a white dress holding on to you,’ Denver [told Sethe] . . . ‘Kneeling next to you while you were praying. Had its arm around your waist’” (1988, 35). She thinks “The dress and her mother together looked like two friendly grown-up women—one (the dress) helping out the other” (29). With this vision, she makes the connection to the one good white woman she knows about: Amy Denver. Raised on Sethe’s narrative of her birth, Denver subsequently bases her view of whites on Amy and “presumes that the majority of white people are like her, rather than the slave owners” (Peach 1995, 98). The figure of the white dress still in her mind, Denver remembers her mother’s story of her birth and Amy Denver, her namesake “and the magic of her birth, its miracle in fact, testified to that friendliness [of the white dress] as did her own name” (29). Morrison uses the image of the white dress’s arm around Sethe—white and black together—to show Amy as a hopeful symbol, a conduit. For Denver to experience such a vision in the first place, she must be *alive*. She and Sethe did not die on the riverbank, because of the grace of a tattered young white woman. Sethe and Amy touch each other’s lives in a fleeting, desperate moment, and together they accomplish something both ordinary and miraculous. Morrison twice tells the reader that “surrounded by bluefern, they did something together appropriately and well” (1988, 84–85).

Amy Denver, the runaway indentured servant, shows how a “throw-away” (84) white girl could stoop so low as to offer both physical and spiritual relief to a near-death, runaway, pregnant black slave girl. Through a name used twice—Amy, as “beloved,” *and* Denver—Morrison shows how love reaches beyond all boundaries in a story that refuses relegation to the confines of the traditional slave narrative. When we see the atrocities Sethe and the other characters endured, we understand (though we may not condone) the “too-thick” love that caused a mother to murder her own child, because, as Morrison shows, “Love is or it ain’t. Thin love ain’t no love at all” (1988, 164). By contrasting Amy’s tenderness with the evil of the “Schoolteachers” of the world, we realize exactly what Morrison wants us to understand: Christian charity is colorblind, and in the love that is charity, hope resides.

In the final lyrical passages of *Beloved*, Morrison writes, “There is a loneliness that can be rocked. Arms crossed, knees drawn up; holding, holding on, this motion, unlike a ship’s, smoothes and contains the rocker” (1988, 274).

One cannot deny the allusion to Morrison's earlier description of Amy at the riverbank preceding the crucial and miraculous moment of Denver's birth ". . . weaving and rocking [she] sat down, her skinny arms wrapped around her knees, her good good hands cupping her elbows" (81). The repetition of position (cradling knees), action (rocking), and diction (the "holding, holding" of "good, good hands") quietly reminds us of Amy and her important presence in the novel. In the end, *Beloved* offers a hopeful message that one can hold, through a text that is itself a passage for the reader. In this fluid, undulating tale, we experience the destructive force of a storm that nevertheless ebbs with fleeting, extraordinary moments of tranquility as Morrison reveals the power of love to conquer loneliness and heal slavery's shattered souls. Her final word bridges all: "Beloved."

Be loved.

Notes

¹ A general search in the MLA database for "Toni Morrison's *Beloved*" locates 461 entries. Contrast this with a similarly focused search for "Amy Denver" which locates *zero* entries. Scholarly research on the topic proves frustrating. Instead of chapters, one must be satisfied with a paragraph here, a line or a note there. Yet as this essay endeavors to show, Amy is more present in the text than we first realize. Noted critics who have explored Morrison's work and discuss Amy Denver only peripherally (or not at all) include Bhabha (1994), Bloom (1999), Rushdy (1999), and Perez-Torres (1998). Usually Amy is mentioned only because Sethe used her last name for the baby she helped deliver: "Denver."

² For some of the extensive critical body of commentary on Morrison's neologistic "rememory," see Blanco (2000), Daily (1992), Hirsch (1994), Jablon (1993), Rody (2000), and Rushdy (1990).

³ Critics have referred to Morrison's "Sixty Million and more" variously as dedication, epitaph, and epigraph. For some of this critical discussion, see Davis (1998), Handley (1995), and Wyatt (1993).

⁴ Records indicate that "Masters often regarded slaves as being more of an investment than indentured servants because a servant only belonged to [the master] for a few years [usually four to seven], but a slave and that slave's children were [property] for a lifetime" (Kessenich 2004), which could account for a need to protect slaves over servants in some instances. As schoolteacher notes ironically, "you can't just mishandle creatures and expect success" (Morrison 1988, 150). "Due to the mishandling of the nephew who'd overbeat [Sethe] and made her cut and run" (149), schoolteacher "had punished that nephew by not letting him come on the hunt" (150). Clearly "property" needed "protection."

⁵ Baby Suggs knew the pain of the broken family: "The last of her children . . . she barely glanced at when he was born because it wasn't worth the trouble to try to learn features you would never see change into adulthood anyway. Seven times she had done that" (Morrison 1988, 139). She knew all too well that "nobody

stopped playing checkers just because the pieces included her children” (23). It is this dissolution—intensified by schoolteacher and the nephews’ abuse—that forces Sethe to flee and then commit infanticide, in what Homi Bhabha has called “this most tragic and intimate act of violence [and reclamation] . . . performed in a struggle to push back the boundaries of the slave world” (17). Readers should also note that Stowe presents a less graphic version of slavery’s suicide/infanticide involving a mother drowning herself and her blind son whom the master was about to trade for a “keg o’ whiskey” (73). Sadly, such tragic accounts were all too common, the most famous being that of Margaret Garner (the model for these tales). See one discussion of this in Muckley (2002).

⁶What is even more damning about this detail is the fact that the scene in which Morrison describes this takes place in the year 1873 when Denver is eighteen—*nearly a decade* after the Thirteenth Amendment was adopted—revealing much about these “abolitionists.”

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