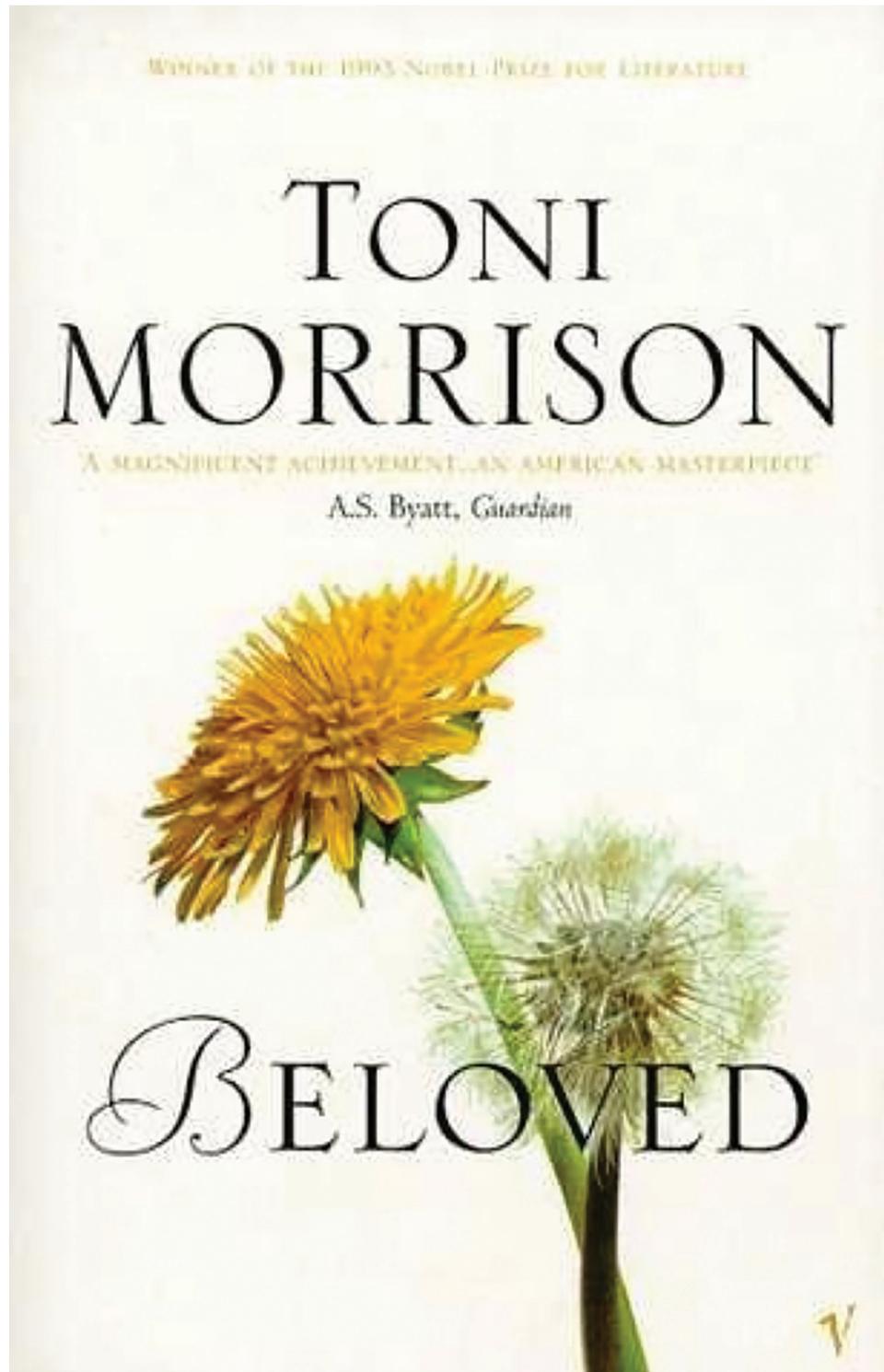


Studying Beloved

an EMC Download Publication



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Based on the EMC's resources on *Beloved*, written and edited by Barbara Bleiman,
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Page references to the novel refer to the Vintage edition (1997)

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Introduction to *Beloved* study material

What kind of text is *Beloved*?

Beloved is a hugely powerful and complex text. Its subject, slavery, is one that provokes strong feelings and disturbances in the reader. Morrison herself has said that she was 'almost frightened' of tackling the area of slavery: 'It never occurred to me to go into that area. I never thought I had the emotional resources to deal with slavery.' Her decision to focus on the experience and psychological impact of slavery on individuals makes the novel all the more intense and disturbing. The reader cannot choose to be a detached bystander, observing the events of this novel.

The intention behind *Beloved* is to 'insert this memory that was unbearable and unspeakable into the literature' and the book itself is focused on memory and how memory works, both for individuals and for a whole society. The structure and style of the narrative mirrors the complex and fitful processes of memory. As characters gradually piece together their individual and collective histories, as a patchwork of interlocking memories, so the reader has to piece together the narrative from fragments, with different voices telling and retelling the story and unearthing the pain that they have tried to bury. This makes for a highly unconventional narrative, full of gaps that the reader has to work to fill in.

Woven into the narrative are patterns of imagery and symbolism that reverberate with significances that are not only literary but also historical and cultural. Such a rich use of symbolism forces the reader to draw on all his or her reserves of cultural and literary awareness. A first reading is just the beginning. Subsequent readings and discussion of the text pay rich dividends.

Beloved is challenging for other reasons too. While it operates powerfully at the level of realist narrative, this realism co-exists with elements that are more mystical and mysterious. *Beloved* the character, who appears in their lives and forces them to unbury their past, is an extraordinarily elliptical creation, a character whose very complexity allows her to represent or be suggestive of many different kinds of experience of slavery.

All of these qualities make *Beloved* an exciting but difficult book for students to study. Providing them with supportive frameworks for reading, discussion and close textual analysis is vital. It is this support that the activities in the pack aim to offer.

The organisation of the material

The division of the material into different sections is not a hard and fast one. Material that has been put in the section for teachers may be useful to students at some point during their study of the text but not necessarily at the beginning. For instance, the outline of the text is intended as a resource for the teacher – students should be encouraged to do one for themselves. However, it may be helpful to give to students who have not gained a firm enough grip on the novel as a revision aid. The story of Margaret Garner appears in the 'After reading' section. However, teachers may find it useful to read for themselves before starting classwork on the novel.

Sequencing, selecting and making use of the video

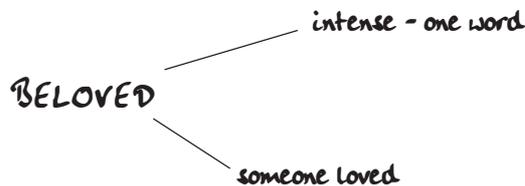
The order of the material suggests a rough sequence but there are good reasons for teachers to vary this according to the needs of their students.

The sequence of lessons in the teacher material is just one tried and tested route through the activities. It assumes that students will not read the novel in a holiday before they start studying it. With a novel like *Beloved*, there is a danger of putting students off by expecting them to do a first reading completely unsupported. The activities along the way heighten students' awareness, support their close reading and allow the teacher to offer help when it is needed.

First sightings

Early signals

- Talk about all the associations and ideas suggested to you by the word 'Beloved'. Collect your thoughts on a spidergram such as the one below.



The novel has a dedication after the title page. It reads:

'Sixty Million
and more'

- Talk about what the significance of this might be.

There is a quotation from the New Testament on the page that follows:

I will call them my people,
which were not my people;
and her beloved,
which was not beloved.

Romans 9:25

The verse comes from St Paul's Epistle. Hosea had three children, one of whom is referred to as 'not beloved'. He was one of a group of Israelites who were rejected because they betrayed God's cause. After a period of retribution for their crime, God reclaimed them.

- By looking closely at this verse, can you say anything about the kinds of issues or themes that might be addressed in this novel?
(When you have read the novel, come back to this quotation to see what more you can make of it, in the light of your reading.)

Reading the opening

The first four pages of the novel set up many of the features of the rest of the novel.

- Listen to the opening being read aloud.

Annotate the text

- Work in small groups. Put a copy of the text on to A3 or sugar paper. Annotate it as you talk, using the suggestions that follow.
 - Make a family tree to sort out the relationships between the characters who are introduced. Put question marks beside any areas of doubt.
 - Work out a chronological sequence of the events described. What questions are raised for you that Morrison leaves unanswered?
 - When is it set? How do you know? What do you know about this period in American history?
 - What is unusual about the opening? What's striking? What's puzzling? How does it compare with other novels you have read?
 - What themes or issues are being raised at this early stage in the novel?
 - What do you notice about the narrative technique, in other words, all the ways in which Morrison tells the story to the reader?
 - In what ways do you find Morrison's use of language interesting or unusual?
 - Look closely at the images that Morrison uses. Talk about your first responses to them.
 - In the Bible, Seth was the third son of Adam, born after the death of Abel. He was the father of all races and lived till he was 912 years old. Think about how Sethe is described in this opening and how this might relate to her name.

Numbering and summarising the text

Numbering

Beloved is divided into three parts. Each part has several sections. They are not presented as numbered chapters. However, it will be helpful for you to number them for yourself, so that when you talk about them in class you have a shared way of referring to them.

- Agree a numbering system that everyone will follow, then number the sections as you read. In *this* text, the system used is as follows:

The three parts are called Part One, Part Two and Part Three. Each part is sub-divided into Section 1, 2, 3 etc (Part One, Section 1, Part One, Section 2, etc).

If you write about the text in an exam, you should refer to page numbers rather than your numbering system – the examiner may not understand your system!

Summarising

- When you have read each section, write a very brief summary of it into your book, at the beginning of the section. For the first few sections, do this as a small group activity, or as a whole class. Where sections are particularly complex and contain confusing timeshifts, or several different stories, work out a summary as a whole class, talking about what is important.

An example

Part One, Section 1 (p3)

A first telling of some of the story in the past: strange happenings in the house, the flight of Hazard and Buglar, the death of Baby Suggs, the buying of the engraving on the grave, Sweet Home and the escape, the taking of the milk and beating of Sethe. Paul D arrives at 124 Bluestone Road.

- Transfer your summaries on to paper and keep them as a linear outline of what happens where in the text. This will be useful to you as a way of finding your way around the text later on.

Headings for each section

- When you have finished reading the text, look back at your linear outline and try to decide which of the headings listed below would be most appropriate for each of the three parts of the novel. Make up ones of your own if you prefer, or put two together if they seem to go together.

Chaos

Rememorying

Exorcising the past

Loss of Self

Unburying the past

Looking to the future

Reclamation of self

Loss of self

Atonement

Understanding

Order

Restoration

Charts, notes and other ways of keeping track

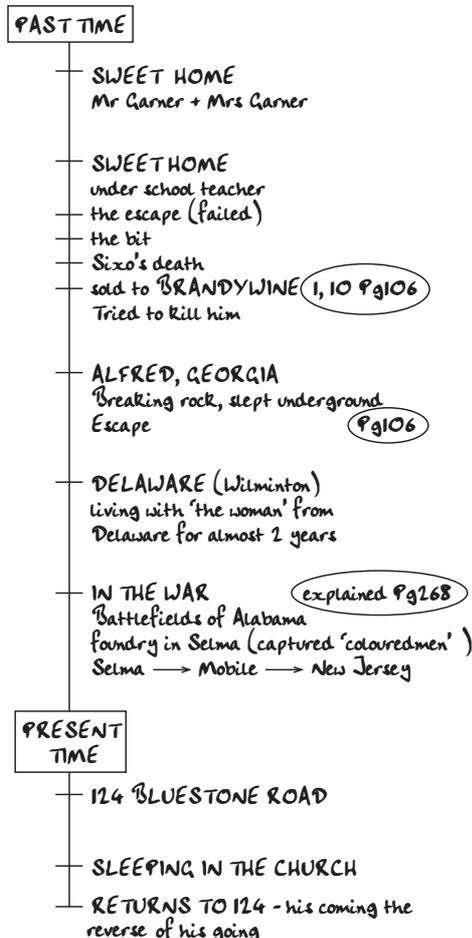
Because *Beloved* is such a complex narrative, using different voices, introducing new information through different characters' stories and forcing the reader to piece together the narrative, it is especially important to have a systematic approach to recording observations and ideas.

The suggestions that follow offer some approaches.

Timelines for each character

- Track the stories of each of the main characters, by putting events on to a timeline. Leave plenty of space between each event that you note, just in case the novel offers you additional information that you want to slot in later on.

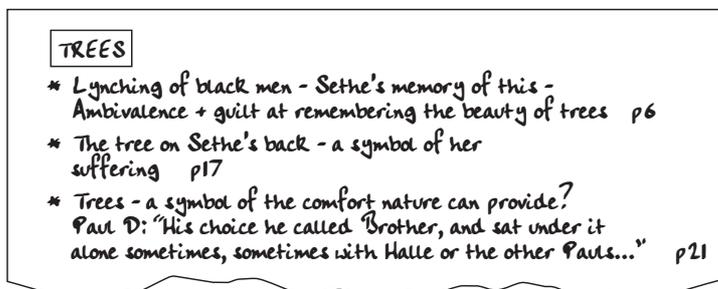
The example opposite is the beginning of a timeline for Paul D.



Image/symbol sheets

- Each time you come across an image that seems significant, or one that recurs in the novel, start a new sheet for that image. Note down page references and short quotes or reminders of how the image was used at that moment in the novel. Note down on the sheet any ideas you have about what the image represents and the effect Morrison achieves by using it.

The example below is the beginning of one student's image sheet on the images of trees in the novel:



The list below gives you some of the key images that appear in the novel. Add to it any others that you notice.

trees
water/ice
cold/warm images
milk/breasts
the patchwork quilt
colours

animals
birds
physical wounds
shadows and light
containers that open or close
houses/homes

biblical images
skin
the heart
sweet things