

The various ways in which memories can be preserved leading them to be used as a tool for shaping identity

Abstract

The purpose of this journal article is to explore the different ways in which memories can be portrayed, and to discuss the impact that the preservation and repression of particular memories can have upon an individual in the novel *Beloved* by Toni Morrison. Memories are portrayed in various ways in the novel: through the body, in facial features and skin colour along with scars and injuries, or in physical items like possessions or artefacts. The repression of traumatic memories, like the memories of slavery from victims themselves, can have a negative impact on mental wellbeing in later life. Memories can both be preserved and portrayed externally, and the build-up of hundreds of memories and experiences throughout one's life creates identity.

Memories are a "powerful tool in quests for understanding, justice and knowledge",¹ healing wounds, restoring dignity, and prompting uprisings. Throughout this article I will primarily be exploring the various ways in which memories can be preserved and the impact that repressed memories, particularly those of traumatic events, can have upon a person, in the context of the slave trade in the period after the American Civil War. Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved* represents this context, with the characters using destructive coping mechanisms to repress the past, even after they have escaped the brutality of slavery. I will also discuss the different ways memory can be portrayed rather than just through the mind – I will analyse the representation of scars, injuries, and physical artefacts.

The memory of ancestors and family members is continued through physical aspects of the body such as skin colour and facial features. A person's physical identity has been partially created from their ancestors' identity and certain features are passed on through generations. This continuity preserves a family history that cannot be erased - you can't change the colour of your skin, or choose what shape you want your children's facial features to be. Events in family history are somewhat conserved and passed on, both things that may not be happy to remember, and good memories. "Memories of the holocaust and of slavery must be passed on to new generations"² as memory creates knowledge and understanding, and the knowledge of such traumatic events can shape the rules, regulations and overall formation of today's society. This idea that a singular person can evoke particular memories is shown in *Beloved* as the presence of one of the characters, Paul D, conjures memories for Sethe – memories that have lain buried in her mind for almost two decades. He begins sharing his painful memories but stops – "he would keep the rest where it belonged: in that tobacco tin buried in his chest where a red heart used to be. Its lid rusted shut".³ Both Paul D and Sethe avoid painful memories of the past as best they can, but ultimately, they both have destructive coping mechanisms to keep the past at bay, revealing how trying to bury vital memories can in fact alter an individual's identity for the

¹ Ian Hacking, *Rewriting the Soul* (Princeton University Press, 1995), p. 3.

² Hacking, *Rewriting the Soul*, p. 3.

³ Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (London: Vintage, 1987) p. 81.

rest of their lives. The repression of their time as slaves has led to fractures within their later life, changing the way they act and sacrificing much of their humanity by foregoing their emotions. They also experience extreme unease whenever there is a chance that one of these memories may make its way to the surface – avoiding it is far easier than dealing with it for the characters, although this has negative consequences on their mental wellbeing.

A large portion of the text is then made up from fragmented memories of the major characters, some memories going back as far as twenty years earlier. This shows the importance of memory as a tool for justice, as it is used in *Beloved* to explore the physical, emotional and spiritual devastation wrought by slavery – a devastation that continues to haunt the characters through unavoidable and unchangeable memories that will “always be there waiting for you”.⁴ The novel not only portrays how slavery dehumanised and destroyed individual identity but also how the constant memories of a horrific past can continue to break down and diminish a person’s identity. The text goes on to represent an “excruciating process of returning life and feeling into that which had been beaten and repressed into oblivion”.⁵

Additionally, memory can be preserved through an individual’s physical body, shown as scars and injuries - every cut and bruise can tell a story. Slaves that had been whipped or beaten will bear the scars for a lifetime, constantly provoking memories for them and their peers every time scars are visible. Sethe’s “tree-shaped scar” on her back is a prime example of this, representing how although memories can fade over time they will never be fully erased, just as her scar will never fully disappear. Her scar is one of the most distressing ways of portraying one of the most distressing memories of the novel, where she is physically violated by two white men – a memory that is not allowed to be forgotten due to her physical reminder of it. Equally, memories can be preserved by other means outside of the body. Physical items, such as belongings and antique artefacts, can trigger a memory. A possession that conjures images of a particular event, or an artefact that has been passed down through generations can provoke a memory for individuals. Even a metaphorical item, such as Paul D’s rusted “tobacco tin”, can hold memory – physical items such as this are often used in literary texts to represent a memory that is too painful to think about on its own. Even a memory that was thought to be long forgotten can reappear after the individual sees such an object, or a memory that an individual wants to forget can continue to have a strong presence due to a particular item.

A person’s history and life experiences creates a bank of memories that ultimately shapes who they are. Everything they have been through is subconsciously used as a tool to create themselves, shaping, altering and expanding their personality. Black writing centred around diaspora, like Morrison’s *Beloved*, work to “to recover the trauma of Middle Passage and slavery.”⁶ An individual’s current identity is a physical representation of the past, built of memory.

⁴ Morrison, *Beloved*, p. 35.

⁵ R. Lucas, ‘The Parturition of Memory: Toni Morrison’s “Beloved”’, *Australasian Journal of American Studies*, 10.1 (1991), p. 39- 47.

⁶ S. Brock, ‘Postmodern Mediations and “Beloved’s” Testimony: Memory Is Not Innocent’, *American Studies, Media and Cultural Memory*, 41.3 (1998), p. 33.

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