

# MLA Style English Essay Example Format

Exploring the Power of Memory and  
Rememory in Toni Morrison's  
Beloved

This essay example of 1823 words in the subject of English literature, serves as a valuable guide for students on MLA style formatting.



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Exploring the Power of Memory and Rememory in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

"The picture is still there, and what's more, if you go there – you who never was there – if you go there and stand in the place where it was, it will happen again; it will be there waiting for you. So Denver, you can't never go there. Never.

Because even though it's all over – over and done with – it's always going to be there waiting for you" (Morrison 36)

Memory is a defining aspect of one's life, allowing individuals to store, retain, and recollect information from their experiences. Despite the fact that not all of our memories are accessible to us, as some may be forgotten or suppressed, our past experiences continue to shape us throughout our lives. We learn from our mistakes, develop strengths and weaknesses, and respond to our surroundings based on our past. However, memories can also be painful, and if not managed properly, they can become a destructive force. This notion of destructive memory is a central theme in Toni Morrison's novel, *Beloved*. The protagonist, Sethe, is tormented by the painful memories of her past, which control her life. *Beloved* explores the divide between actual events and false memories, which can be dangerous. Sethe, a former slave, is unable to live in the present because she is constantly reliving her past through rememory, making her past tragedies "ever present" and impossible to escape. Through *Beloved*, Morrison highlights the significance of memory in shaping one's life and the importance of managing one's memories to avoid their destructive impact.

For most people, memories are something that can be accessed at will, recalled or forgotten as desired. However, for Sethe in Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved*, memories are not under her control. She experiences fragments of her past on a daily basis, reliving traumatic moments that make it impossible for her to fully accept and move forward from her past. Despite living in the present at 124, Sethe is constantly pulled back into her past, unable to escape the events that shaped her life. This inability to control her memories is evident in her interaction with Paul D., an old acquaintance from the Sweet Home plantation. When they meet again after 18 years (16), their conversation triggers a flood of memories that divide the story into two distinct time periods. Sethe's inability to deal with her past is evident in her uncontrollable slips into memories, which have become a destructive force in her life.

The novel *Beloved* by Toni Morrison presents two distinct storylines that reveal the hold Sethe's past has over her. The first narrative takes place in 1873 at 124, while the second comprises fragmented memories from the 1850s. Sethe's past trauma is evident from the beginning of the story. She believes her home is haunted by the spirit of her two-year-old child, whom she killed. This haunting manifests physically, with objects moving on their own. Sethe's family is affected, with her daughter Denver becoming reclusive, and her sons leaving home early. Sethe actively tries to forget her past, including her own children, as the pain of her slavery experience is too much to bear. The novel illustrates the destructive nature of memory when left unprocessed, leading to a lifetime of torment.

The historical trauma of slavery has caused immense suffering and pain for countless individuals, with many forced to repress their memories in order to survive. However, this repression can lead to a sense of fragmentation and disconnection from one's true self (Demetrakopoulos 51-59). In Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, this effect is evident in the characters of

Sethe and Paul D., who have both experienced immense trauma as slaves. To cope with their past, they have buried their memories and attempted to forget as much as possible (Koolish 169-195). Paul D. has even gone so far as to lock his emotions and memories away in a "box." However, this comes at a cost, as he must sacrifice much of his emotional depth to maintain this control. It is only through confronting his past that Paul D. is able to begin to make peace with it and move forward in his life, as seen in his interactions with Beloved and his subsequent personal growth.

Sethe's efforts to bury her past have left her without a personal history, hindering her ability to create a stable life and personality. Her escape from slavery came at a great cost, as the memory of it haunts her every day and pulls her back into regretful memories. When she attempted to escape, Sethe had three children and was pregnant with a fourth. Her sons Howard and Buglar were sent ahead with her daughter to her mother-in-law's house, where they had a brief period of time together as a family before they were captured and taken back to their owners. In despair over the life of slavery her children would face, Sethe tried to kill them, successfully killing her elder daughter with a hacksaw (Morrison 36).

Paul D. serves as a bridge between Sethe's troubled past and her present, attempting to pull her towards a brighter future. However, he faces competition from Sethe's memories and a young woman named Beloved, who appears to be the physical form of Sethe's deceased child. While Beloved triggers Sethe's access to and reliving of her traumatic history, Paul D. encourages both himself and Sethe to remember and accept their past. As a result, Sethe is pulled in opposite directions by Beloved and Paul D., with Beloved drawing her into the past and Paul D. guiding her towards the present.

The character of Beloved, despite being supernatural, plays a significant and positive role

in the novel. She forces the characters to confront their past and relive their painful memories, ultimately leading to their personal growth and transformation. Beloved is believed by most characters in the book to be the physical manifestation of Sethe's murdered daughter, and Sethe forms a close bond with her to atone for her actions and to show that the child was not abandoned. Beloved's presence triggers a flood of repressed memories for Sethe and Paul D., allowing them to face their painful history. Moreover, Beloved represents not only Sethe's most traumatic memory but also serves as a medium for the repressed memories of all who have experienced slavery. Beloved helps Denver understand her mother's history and Paul D. to confront his own feelings of powerlessness in the face of slavery and abuse. Overall, Beloved's character catalyzes the personal growth and healing of the characters and serves as a symbol of the repressed memories and suffering of those who have experienced slavery (Andrews and McKay 113-115).

The novel is structured into three distinct sections, each of which mirrors a ritual of healing. In the first section, the arrival of Paul D. and Beloved forces Sethe to confront her past, including her roles as a slave and a mother. This examination of her past helps readers to understand the source of Sethe's pain. During the second section, Sethe undergoes a period of isolation and atonement as she tries to come to terms with her past. Beloved's increasing demands and irrational behavior forces Sethe to relive and suffer through her traumatic memories. As a result, Sethe quits her job and refuses to leave the house, but Denver steps in and brings the community to their doorstep. In the final section, Sethe is able to achieve a form of spiritual cleansing as Beloved is exorcised from the house with the help of the community. The novel's climax illustrates the power of rememory. Sethe's intense fixation on her past is so strong that when several members of the community, including Mr. Bodwin, who has come to

help Denver, arrive at her doorstep, she mistakes him for schoolteacher and believes that he has come to take her and her children. This time, she decides that she will kill him instead of her children and rushes at him with an ice pick. Beloved is also overwhelmed by memories and believes that he is the man coming for her, prompting her to run away.

Beloved's existence is rooted in memory. She develops a strong and obsessive relationship with Sethe, believing that she was abandoned. Sethe's memories and profound regret drive her attachment to Beloved, despite Beloved's manipulative and abusive behavior. However, it is also memory that causes Beloved to cease existing. After she runs away, Sethe, Denver, and Paul D. all come to terms with their past and grow stronger as individuals. Memory is a marker of existence, and without the memories of Beloved, it is as if she never existed.

It is important to note that personal memory is not the only type of memory addressed in the novel. Historical memory and self-awareness are equally important. The book's setting in two different time periods, during Reconstruction and prior to the Civil War, provides a framework for exploring the painful past shared by many African American slaves. Morrison reminds us that although the physical scars of slavery have disappeared, the emotional and mental scars persist and can be debilitating. Near the end of the book, there is no one coming to take Sethe and her children away, yet both Beloved and Sethe experience extreme anxiety and fear as if there were. Their concern is so great that both believe that the past is repeating itself, leading to Beloved running away and Sethe attacking Mr. Bodwin with an ice pick. We must not forget the events that occurred before our time or the lessons that others have learned.

In *Beloved*, Toni Morrison provides a powerful example of memory's influence and control over people's lives. The three main characters in the book, Sethe, Paul D., and Denver, are bound by memory, causing Sethe and Paul D. to suppress their emotions and past

experiences. This has significant negative consequences for all involved, hindering their ability to become whole and live fulfilling lives. Beloved's presence in their lives, first as a ghost and then as a young woman, serves as a means of rememory, atonement, and ultimately absolution. Morrison also highlights the importance of historical memory and the need to be aware of our collective past and grow from it.

### Works Cited

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