

Narrative Empathy as Resistance in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

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Abstract: *This paper examines narrative empathy as a mode of cultural and political resistance in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987). Drawing on Keen's theory of narrative empathy [1–3], Caruth's trauma theory [4], and Iser's reader-response framework [5], the study analyses how Morrison's poly-vocal narration, fragmented temporal structure, and representation of traumatic memory compel readers into ethically engaged, co-witnessing roles. Three primary empathic mechanisms are identified through close textual analysis: situational empathy, generated through immersive focalisation; affective and cognitive empathy, activated through Morrison's somatic representation of bodily and psychic trauma; and moral abstraction, achieved through collective voice and communal memory. These mechanisms function not as aesthetic devices alone but as instruments of political resistance, challenging the historical erasure of enslaved experience and disrupting dominant antebellum narratives. The paper argues that Morrison transforms reader empathy into a form of ethical witnessing, positioning the act of reading as participation in the ongoing project of historical reckoning. The findings extend narrative empathy theory to formally experimental, non-realist texts and contribute to scholarship at the intersection of African American literary studies, trauma theory, and the ethics of reading.*

Keywords: Narrative Empathy; Toni Morrison; *Beloved*; Trauma and Memory; African American Literature

1. Introduction

Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) occupies a singular position in African American literature not only for its representation of slavery's psychological aftermath but for the ethical demands it places on readers. Based on the historical case of Margaret Garner, an enslaved woman who killed her infant daughter rather than allow her return to slavery, the novel raises questions that conventional historical narrative cannot adequately address: how does one bear witness to atrocity and through what mechanisms does literature produce not merely understanding but felt transformative engagement?

These questions point to the central role of narrative empathy in Morrison's literary project. Narrative empathy as Keen [1] defines it, encompasses both affective resonance (the spontaneous sharing of a character's felt experience) and cognitive engagement (the deliberate effort to understand another's perspective). In *Beloved*, these dimensions are not incidental aesthetic effects but the novel's primary political instruments: they position readers within experiential realities from which comfortable detachment is structurally impossible.

While existing scholarship has examined *Beloved* through trauma theory [4,6], post-colonial criticism [7], and African American literary tradition [8,9], relatively few studies offer a systematic account of the specific narrative mechanisms through which empathy is produced and of how those mechanisms function as instruments of political resistance. This study addresses that gap through three interconnected objectives: (1) to identify the narrative techniques through which *Beloved* elicits situational, affective, cognitive, and moral empathy; (2) to demonstrate how these mechanisms function as instruments of resistance against historical erasure; and (3) to situate Morrison's empathic project

within the broader theoretical framework of narrative ethics and trauma studies.

2. Literature Survey

The most influential body of scholarship on *Beloved* draws on trauma theory. Caruth [4] argues that trauma resists direct narrative representation and is approachable only through gaps, repetitions, and fragments. Herman [6] similarly characterises traumatic memory as fragmented and compulsive. Hartman [12] has further argued that trauma theory requires significant qualification when applied to the historically specific experience of racial slavery, a critique that productively complicates rather than invalidates the framework.

Gilroy's [7] concept of the Black Atlantic frames *Beloved* as a formal intervention in the politics of historical memory, while Rushdy [9] reads the novel as a daughter's signifying act on the master narratives of American history. Hirsch's [13] theory of post-memory extends this framework to account for the intergenerational transmission of trauma, though her Holocaust-oriented model requires adaptation to the African diaspora context.

Within narrative empathy studies, Keen [1,2,3] has developed the field's defining taxonomy, distinguishing bounded, broadcast, and ambassadorial empathy and relating these to specific narrative strategies including free indirect discourse, first-person narration, and direct address. Lifson [10] has recently examined Morrison's strategy of deliberate linguistic refusal in *Beloved*, while Hogan [11] offers a cognitive poetic approach to narrative ethics. Toksöz [14] has examined Morrison's use of repetition and testimony, and Caruth's [4] trauma theory provides the hermeneutic framework for reading Morrison's structural fragmentation. The three theoretical frameworks applied in this study are Keen's [1,2,3] narrative empathy theory, which provides the

analytical vocabulary for identifying empathic mechanisms; Caruth's [4] trauma theory, applied not to character psychology but as a hermeneutic for Morrison's formal choices; and Iser's [5] reader-response theory, which locates meaning in the dynamic interaction between textual structure and reader activity and provides the concept of the "implied reader" for analysing how Morrison positions her audience.

3. Problem Definition

Despite the richness of existing scholarship on *Beloved*, a persistent analytical gap remains. Studies that address empathy tend to treat affective reader response as a secondary effect of Morrison's craft rather than as its central political strategy. The formal mechanisms through which empathy is produced and through which those mechanisms function as instruments of resistance against historical erasure have not been systematically mapped. Furthermore, Keen's [1,2,3] framework of narrative empathy was developed primarily in relation to realist fiction; its application to a formally experimental, non-realist text such as *Beloved* remains underdeveloped.

This study directly addresses these gaps by asking: through what specific structural mechanisms does Morrison's narrative elicit situational, affective, cognitive, and moral empathy? How do these mechanisms function as political instruments? And what does the application of narrative empathy theory to formally resistant texts reveal about the theory's scope and limits?

4. Methodology / Approach

This study employs qualitative close reading as its primary analytical method, consistent with established practice in literary hermeneutics and narrative empathy research. The analytical corpus is the full text of *Beloved* [15], from which six key passages are selected as primary analytical sites on two criteria: (1) formal distinctiveness - each passage exemplifies a different narrative technique (poly-vocal narration, free indirect discourse, interior monologue, fragmented syntax, direct address, or communal voice); and (2) critical salience - each has been identified in scholarship as significant for the novel's political and empathic effects. The analytical procedure for each passage follows three steps: (a) identification of the specific narrative technique employed, using the Genettean narrato-logical vocabulary; (b) application of the theoretical frameworks to explain the empathic mechanism activated; and (c) assessment of how that mechanism functions within the novel's broader politics of resistance. The study makes no claims about actual reader response which would require empirical research but analyses the response structures constructed by Morrison's text for what Iser [5] terms the implied reader.

5. Results & Discussion

5.1 Situational Empathy and Immersive Focalisation

Beloved opens with a statement that immediately establishes an unusual narrator-reader relationship: "124 was spiteful. Full of a baby's venom" [15, p.1]. The confident declarative

presents as self-evident, something literally impossible; a house cannot be spiteful thus drawing the reader into a perspective in which supernatural states require no apology. The effect, as Keen [2] terms it, is the immediate generation of situational empathy: readers are asked to share not only the characters' emotional states but the interpretive framework within which those states make sense.

This focalisation strategy deepens through Morrison's use of free indirect discourse. When Sethe reflects on "rememory," the discourse hovers between narrated explanation and direct interiority:

Places, places are still there, and what's more, if you go there and stand in the place where it was, it will happen again; it will be there for you, waiting for you. So, Denver, you can't never go there. Never. [15, p.43]

Morrison's use of second person, "you" collapses the distinction between fictional listener and actual reader. Iser [5, p.154] argues that the implied reader is always constructed by the text's internal structures; here, that construction is made explicit and inescapable. Lifson [10, p.40] notes that *Beloved* consistently refuses "to provide closure or redemption," a formal choice that extends the reader's discomfort beyond the reading encounter.

5.2 Affective Empathy through Bodily Trauma

Morrison's most decisive empathic strategy is her representation of slavery's violence through the body's physical reality. The scene in which Schoolteacher instructs his nephews to steal Sethe's milk is presented obliquely, through Sethe's retrospective account:

All I knew was I had to get my milk to my baby girl. Nobody was going to nurse her like me... I was thinking of that when I told Mrs. Garner on em. I have to tell you, it made them furious. [15, p.19]

Sethe does not describe the assault directly; she describes her determination and the consequence of reporting it. The reader must reconstruct the violence from its aftermath. This gap is precisely what Caruth [4, p.7] identifies as the structure of traumatic testimony: "the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available." By withholding direct representation, Morrison forces readers into active, reconstructive engagement, producing what Keen [3, p.49] calls "empathic distress."

Paul D's psychic numbing is rendered through a concentrated object-image: "he would keep the rest where Paul D kept his: in that tobacco tin buried in his chest where a red heart used to be" [15, p.86]. This is an instance of what Hogan [11, p.112] terms "affective simulation", rendering interiority through imagery in ways that activate in readers the felt quality of the described experience. Morrison does not explain the psychology; she enacts it.

5.3 Cognitive Empathy and Moral Abstraction through Collective Voice

Baby Suggs's ministry in the Clearing articulates the novel's communal empathic ethic: "She told them that the only grace they could have was the grace they could imagine" [15, p.88]. This theology of the body inverts slavery's logic, insisting on Black physicality as the site of grace rather than debasement. Presented through free indirect discourse, it positions readers not as external observers but as participants in the act of imaginative self-reclamation; what Gilroy [7, p.37] describes as the counter-cultural tradition of the Black Atlantic.

The novel's most formally radical representation of collective memory appears in the stream-of-consciousness passage where the voices of Beloved, Sethe, and Denver fuse: "I am not separate from her there is no place where I stop her face is my own" [15, p.248]. Hirsch [13, p.5] defines post-memory as the relationship that the 'generation after' bears to inherited trauma. Morrison's dissolution of syntactical boundaries enacts post-memory at the level of form, forcing readers into the effortful reading that Iser [5, p.168] identifies as the condition of genuine literary engagement.

The novel's closing refrain, "This is not a story to pass on" [15, pp.324–325], repeated three times is deliberately paradoxical: a story that announces its un-transferability has nonetheless been told and read. Morrison's strategy is what Keen [16, p.821] terms "empathic inaccuracy" deployed deliberately, refusing readers the comfort of a settled interpretive position.

5.4 Discussion

These three empathic mechanisms: situational, affective-cognitive, and moral operate as an integrated political instrument rather than independent aesthetic effects. Resistance in *Beloved* is enacted through formal structures that make empathic withdrawal impossible. The reader who has moved through the tobacco tin, the Clearing, and the fragmented stream-of-consciousness cannot emerge unchanged. This distinguishes Morrison's project from sentimental fiction, which Keen [2, p.8] notes produces empathy without critical self-reflection: Morrison's formal refusals ensure that engagement is accompanied by cognitive and moral discomfort.

Hartman [12, p.17] cautions against reproducing enslaved suffering in ways that generate self-exonerating horror in observers. Morrison's strategies are precisely designed to resist this dynamic: by withholding direct violence, filtering experience through fragmented traumatised consciousness, and refusing narrative closure, she prevents the emotional resolution that would permit self-exoneration. The empathic engagement the text demands is not cathartic but on-going.

The study's findings also extend narrative empathy theory. Keen's [1,2] framework was developed in relation to realist fiction; this analysis reveals that formally experimental, non-realist strategies, stream-of-consciousness, temporal fragmentation, poly-vocal narration can deploy empathic

mechanisms that are, if anything, more powerful than conventional realist approaches. This gap in the existing framework requires the accommodations that Keen herself [3] begins to address in her later work.

6. Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated that narrative empathy in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* functions not as a secondary aesthetic effect but as the novel's primary instrument of political resistance. Through close analysis of six key passages, three principal empathic mechanisms have been identified: situational empathy through immersive focalisation; affective and cognitive empathy through the somatic representation of trauma; and moral abstraction through collective voice and post-memory. Together, these mechanisms create a structure of ethical compulsion, a reading experience from which empathic withdrawal becomes formally impossible.

The principal contribution of this study is its demonstration that Morrison's formal choices are inseparable from her political purposes. The novel's fragmentation, paradoxes, and refusal of closure are not obstacles to empathy but its conditions. This finding extends the theoretical claims of narrative empathy studies by establishing that formally experimental texts can mobilise empathic mechanisms as effectively as and sometimes more effectively than conventional realist fiction. At a moment of renewed public debate about the history of racial slavery, *Beloved*'s empathic strategies offer a model for how literature can make that history genuinely and productively felt.

7. Future Scope

Several avenues for future research emerge from this study. First, the present analysis addresses the response structures constructed by Morrison's text for an implied reader, but does not examine actual reader responses. Empirical reader-response studies combining close textual analysis with qualitative or quantitative measurement of reader empathy using validated instruments such as the Empathic Concern and Perspective-Taking scales of Davis's Interpersonal Reactivity Index would productively supplement the textual findings.

Second, the study's framework could be extended to Morrison's other novels, including *Song of Solomon*, *Sula*, and *Jazz*, to test whether the empathic mechanisms identified here are specific to *Beloved* or characteristic of Morrison's narrative practice more broadly. Third, comparative analysis with other formally experimental trauma narratives from different cultural contexts would test the generalizability of the finding that narrative disorder generates stronger rather than weaker empathic engagement. Finally, research into how reader-response variability shaped by cultural background, personal history, and degree of prior knowledge of slavery mediates the empathic effects identified here would further qualify and enrich the theoretical account.

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