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THE MALE THREAT IN *BELOVED*

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One element that comprises a Gothic novel according to Sybil Korff Vincent is “persecuting/protecting males...reflecting the ambivalent position which males occupy in relation to females” (153-156). It is her opinion that the definitive factor for designation as a Gothic novel is “a literary representation of our innermost fears” (Vincent 155). Molly Hite echoes this sentiment when she observes that “the potentiality of men to be murderers as well as rescuers of dependent women is inscribed in the culture, as well as in the fictions the culture produces (151). Although less pronounced, Claire Kahane in *The (M)Other Tongue* alludes to this dichotomy when she states that “...the female Gothic depends as much on longing and desire as on fear and antagonism” (342). This paper explores how these abusive and supportive male roles are portrayed by some of the key male figures in Toni Morrison’s Gothic novel, *Beloved*.

That man performs the dual role of tormenter/rescuer is exemplified in Morrison’s *Beloved* in large part due to its setting during and immediately following the period of American slavery. The arrival of Paul D Garner at Baby Suggs’ house at 124 Bluestone evokes a chain of flashbacks and events experienced by the book’s main characters that initially polarizes and ultimately unites them through its healing. Two of the book’s most prominent male characters, Paul D and Stamp Paid, function in both roles at different times. However, the definition resides with the definer as *Beloved* shows. Schoolteacher is the sole persecuting male whose behavior is consistently abusive.

In their first moments together after an eighteen year separation, Paul D asks Sethe about the baby she was carrying when they last met before her escape from their former master. He is incredulous to learn that she delivered the baby alone, musing silently that “he was proud of her and annoyed by her. Proud she had done it; annoyed that she had not needed” neither her husband (Halle) or him in the “doing” (Morrison 8). This reveals his own ambivalence about his identity. On one hand he wants to give her support, but her self-sufficiency irritates him. Once her availability and their attraction to each other is clearly established, Sethe invites Paul to “scramble” (e.g., move in) with her and her daughter (Denver).

Denver is immediately threatened by Paul D’s presence. Prior to his appearance, she had her mother’s full attention after her two brothers’ departure and her baby sister’s death. She tries to dissuade

Paul from staying by warning him about the “spiteful” spirit (her baby sister) who resides with them. Mother and daughter have opposing perceptions in relation to Paul D’s affect on 124 Bluestone. While Denver blames Paul for “getting rid of the only other company she had” (Morrison 19), Sethe credits him (as a man) for that same act of exorcism and for taking “its place for himself” (Morrison 104). The daughter perceives him as a threat and the mother sees him as her savior.

Sethe recognizes that Paul’s presence in her life in addition to giving her “something she wanted to count on but was scared to” also added “new pictures and old rememories that broke her heart” (95). Some of these “rememories” are painful in that they deal with Sethe and Paul D’s experiences while they were slaves at Sweet Home and they belonged to the Garners. Mr. Garner’s treatment of his slaves was quite unconventional. He believed in allowing them more freedom than was customary, which may have actually put their lives in greater jeopardy. While he appeared to have been the slaves’ savior he could also be considered their executioner. He was fixated with calling his men “men” (rather than “boy” as was the practice) and would take umbrage with anyone who challenged his definition.

After Mr. Garner’s untimely death, Mrs. Garner (whose health is failing) asks schoolteacher—a fascist-styled ‘educator’ to administer the activities at Sweet Home. It is under schoolteacher’s direction that the three Pauls (Paul D, Paul F and Paul A Garner), Sixo and Halle Suggs (Baby Suggs’ son) and Sethe are subjected to suffering and, in at least one case, murder. Schoolteacher even manages to use language which “falls under the sign of the father” (Wolstenholme xi) as an instrument of torture when he directs his pupils to catalogue Sethe’s “characteristics.” He beats Sixo “to show him that definitions belonged to the definers—not the defined” (Morrison 190). And it is under schoolteacher’s tutelage that Sethe’s milk is taken (while she is nursing her baby) and her back is permanently scarred.

Soon after Paul D establishes himself in Sethe’s house, the three of them encounter a wandering, soaked and ailing young woman (Beloved) for whom Sethe and Denver show an affinity. They nurse her back to health. Beloved’s love of Sethe becomes so obsessive that she perceives Paul’s relationship with Sethe as a threat to her. She expresses this sentiment after Paul D and Sethe have an argument that sends Sethe to the woods. Beloved accuses him of keeping “her hidden at night behind doors” (101). Not being content with sharing Sethe, Beloved embarks on behavior designed to motivate his departure from 124 Bluestone. She successfully moves Paul D out of the house, one

room at a time despite his realization that he is being “prevented” from being there. Finally, she seduces him repeatedly until he becomes desperately ashamed of his weakness.

Paul D longs to share his secret with Sethe and ask for her help but “the danger was in losing Sethe because he is not man enough to break out, so he needed her...to know about it, and it shamed him to have to ask the woman he wanted to protect to help him do it...” (Morrison 127). His good intention goes awry and he settles for a way to manipulate the situation in such a way as “to hold on to her, document his manhood and break out of the girl’s spell—all in one” (Morrison 128). As a reader I can almost touch Paul D’s discomfort and disappointment in himself. He is trying to function in the role of the protector, but instead feels he must guard himself and, therefore, becomes her abuser.

The vacillation between protector and persecutor is also seen in Morrison’s self-righteous character, Stamp Paid. He is described as a “sly, steely old black man: agent, fisherman, boatman, tracker, savior, spy” (Morrison 136). He functions as the community’s conscience and, in addition to providing them with his assistance, has personally escorted many of the slaves from oppression into freedom crossing the Ohio River. He has also helped practically all of the people in the community. It is said that “once Stamp Paid brought you a coat, got the message to you, saved your life or fixed the cistern he took the liberty of walking in your door as though it were his own” (Morrison 172). He is the guardian of one of Sethe’s most horrible “rememories” as witness to the events that he has named “The Misery.” For most of the story, Stamp Paid uses his knowledge of this event to stigmatize Sethe, perhaps as a defense to avert the community’s attention away from his own crimes, first of giving his wife to his master and then, breaking her neck when she returned. He exhibits another cruel use of language (the father tongue) when he decides to reveal the newspaper clipping to Paul D about Sethe’s murdering her infant daughter when schoolteacher, his nephew, the slavecatcher and the sheriff attempted to take her and her family from 124 Bluestone back to Mrs. Garner’s.

After confronting Sethe about the murder, Paul D leaves her house and “scrambles” in the church basement. Feeling guilty for having caused Paul D to flee Sethe, Stamp Paid visits him and shares his own shameful story of murdering his wife Vashti. Reversing his former intransigence toward Sethe’s act, he supports her by telling Paul D that she was not crazy when she murdered her baby, that she was trying to “outhurt the hurter.” When Paul D confides in Stamp that he is afraid of Beloved (“that girl”), Stamp then deduces that it was really her

presence that forced him to leave. Ultimately, Stamp and Paul D are able to become supportive of Sethe. Stamp motivates the community to help her and Paul D returns to nurse her back to health.

Denver, having wrestled with her own ambivalence regarding her relationship with her mother and Beloved, shows by example that her own interpretation of man's language may be persecutory or supportive. Her attendance at Lady Jones' where she learns how to read and write is terminated by Nelson Lord's innocent question about her mother because "certain odd and terrifying feelings about her mother were collecting around the thing that leapt up inside her" (Morrison 102). It is her own perception of Nelson's motivation for asking the question that causes Denver to stop listening. Yet when she matures and realizes she needs help with her mother, it is Nelson Lord's greeting to "take care of herself" that "opened her mind" (Morrison 252).

It is not surprising that a female Gothic novel would, of necessity, contain males who function as persecutors or saviors because they mirror the female's ambivalence about herself. As Fleenor succinctly observes, "the Gothic is a form created by dichotomies and the subsequent tensions caused by the dialectic between the patriarchal society, the woman's role, and the contradictions and limitations inherent in both" (15-16).

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