

Morrison's *Beloved* as Physicality, History, and Tragedy

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Fadem, Maureen E. Ruprecht. *Objects and Intertexts in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*: The Case for Reparations*. New York: Routledge, 2021. xxx + 247 pages. Routledge Research in American Lit. and Culture. ISBN 978-1-003-10506-0. Ebk. \$52.95.

Toni Morrison's primary thematic concerns are constant (revolving around historical injustice, Fadem would argue) although splendidly variable in plot-level manifestations. She is an author of incessant transformations as regards fictional techniques. We have a new Morrison in each of her novels as it were. The question is, as one is watching the wheels of the Morrison industry spinning, whether the numerous Morrison scholars are themselves blessed with the gift of enough critical invention and multifariousness to enable them to explore hers?

It seems that Maureen E. Ruprecht Fadem *is*. The way *Beloved's* characters are surrounded with, and created by, objects certainly deserves the systematic analytical attention it has not yet received. Fadem's "object poetics" (xxvii) aiming at addressing the "intense physicality" of the novel, the thing-dominated "fragmentations of the narrative" (37), betokens the scholarly exploration of an aspect of *Beloved* so far unexplored methodically. Unexplored, that is, *this* systematically, in a fashion that is both penetrating and comprehensive, deploying its chosen method of investigation at the micro levels of the text while never losing sight of the macro thematic relevance and the extraordinary complexity of the novel at one and the same time.

Fadem's preoccupation with the physicality of the novel highlights new materialism ("objects have agency" [50]), one of the central theoretical sources in a monograph densely packed with theory—the latter being itself a praiseworthy feature of the book. Applied theories are either discussed directly, like tragedy as a genre, or defined indirectly through (Morrisonian) contextualization, for instance, through the employment of postcolonialism. It rarely happens that their meaning is taken for granted and therefore the theory in question is adopted a little lightly (as postmodernism is).

The monograph's premise is that, in the author's words: "In an architectural sense, *Beloved* is a complex of objects and object lessons, a history in things" (36). As for history, the overarching themes making this a "novel of history" are freedom and "the critical relation between freedom and race in U.S. cultural and political, economic, and social histories" (6),

with the collated thematics of desire and love (8). Thus, *Beloved* is “historical truth” (9), with Sethe being “a nation’s ghost” (154). The premise of her story is substantiated with all-embracing knowledge, remarkable analytical skills, and thorough, convincing argumentation.

The third main thesis is that Morrison’s novel—besides being a novel of things and history—is also “a literary tragedy,” a “novel-tragedy” (9, 154). The sweeping intertextual study of the role of the novel’s objects is Fadem’s most original contribution. Sethe’s story as history (culture, race, freedom) is somewhat more obvious for the intelligent reader, without scholarly assistance, but still a massive contribution as for critical angle, gap-filling detail, and profound insights (when related to earlier Morrison studies). Reference to earlier scholarship on Morrison’s treatment of history in this broader sense (broader than discussing the Margaret Garner story) would have been welcome, though. At least scholarship which is more than a cursory glance at the problematic, like Jill Matus’s “*Beloved*: the possessions of history” (sic) is in Matus’s own *Toni Morrison* (Manchester UP, 1998) and Ashraf H. A. Rushdy’s “Daughters Signifyin(g) History” available both in *Toni Morrison* (edited by Linden Peach, St. Martin’s Press, 1998) and *Toni Morrison’s Beloved: A Casebook* (edited by William L. Andrews and Nellie Y. McKay, Oxford UP, 1999). (Matus’s and Rushdy’s names are absent from Fadem.) But, as opposed to objects and history, the idea that the novel is also a tragedy strikes us first as self-evident. The proposition to submit to scholarly analysis what every reader has an unmistakable feeling of is provocative. Nevertheless, it does turn out to be rewarding to be immersed in Fadem’s handling of the matter rather than flatly reject it as something promising us to reveal what every attentive reader realizes about *Beloved*.

The intertextual relations the author scrutinizes involve philosophy, literary theory (especially the theory of intertextuality and drama theory), and interpretive aspects of individual tragedies, ranging from Aeschylus through Shakespeare, Nietzsche, and Jaspers to Arthur Miller and on to contemporary film tragedies. The source of tragedy in *Beloved*, all in all, is pointed out to be: “the placement of a human subject in . . . the tragic paradox” (26).

Objects and Intertexts is a book of new critical accents concerning Morrison in general and *Beloved* in particular for all the reasons given and more. But it is also a talented and enlightening contribution when it comes to some traditional accents, adding to our general understanding of the novel considerably. A particularly appealing example to illustrate the latter is what can be seen as the justification for the assertion that the character

Beloved is as important as Sethe, Paul, and Denver. That she “contains slave history” (113), central to both Morrison’s thesis and Fadem’s argument, goes without saying. What Fadem’s intertextual–intersectional critical approach yields, though, is refreshingly original: Beloved is “oracular”; she is a “figure in alignment with the Greek deities of revenge” (115), an Erinys—a postmodern one at that (118); a “Janus-faced Fury” (125).

Objects and Intertexts is rich in innovative explorations and new insights whilst making a far from innovative but most logical point (rarely foregrounded by other critics, if at all) to sum up *Beloved* for an amnesiac contemporary American culture. Morrison’s novel, Fadem’s Afterword concludes, is a cry for reparations: “to repair slavery’s obliterations, the purloining of time and space and lives that should have been lived and should have been livable” (188).

If there is such a thing as interpretive fantasy (is there, really, or would it be another critical fallacy to assume that there is such a category?), Fadem is certainly gifted that way. Occasionally one wonders if she is or is not carried away by it a little, true. As in the case of the symbolism of the Bluestone Road windows, which are “Janus-faced” themselves, both “hopeful” and “threatening.” They are

signifying both the possibility of being brought into some kind of human divinity, or some pleasure and solace, some simple reverie, and at the same time those glass panes partitioning home and world scream like prophetic hawks with the potential to break and act like some elevated and overwhelming force—the weather, God, ghosts, white people—to (symbolically) shatter and produce a violent rain of glass shards. (40)

But perhaps one needs to be endowed with such a creative interpretive faculty in order to be able to discuss the thick description of social and human tragedy that *Beloved* holds; to be worthy of interpreting the art of Toni Morrison. Fadem does display just that special ability and expertise.

She does a very thorough job of what she undertakes to do. She checks out every nook and corner of the novel and follows every line of investigation through to the minutest detail, with the enthusiasm of a competent scholar who is fully equipped with all the critical and theoretical skills to be brought to the task. And, paradoxically, this is why her learned and witty discourse tends to be overwhelming, too crammed with examples, data, justifying details, and relevant theoretical embedding. Somewhat like a perfect inventory of the examined phenomena and the possible approaches

to each and every item. It is the nearly exhaustive nature of the methodology that creates this impression; that is, the reader feels buried under the flood of details and the weight of intensive argumentation at times.

However, *Objects and Intertexts* is too good and too important to lodge complaint against. Besides, there is a helpful person and subject index attached to it, with the detailed subject words of “intertextuality,” “object theory,” “things,” and “tragedy.” “History” could have joined them as another central notion organizing the book; one whose dimension is expanded far beyond the Margaret Garner story.

But do not despair. The monograph is utterly worthy of the reader’s effort as it is.

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