

A Psychoanalytical Approach to Jonathan Demme's film *Beloved*

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Abstract

Beloved is an American horror-drama film, based on Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved*. The movie pictures the life of Afro-American slaves, their life struggles and their traumatic pain in their lives ever after. This paper tries to find out how Sigmund Freud's psychoanalytical theories are closely observed in the key characters in the movie. The paper traces the closeness of the concepts of Repression, Projection, Displacement, Denial, and Reaction in the movie.

Keywords: Defense Mechanism, Preconscious, Conscious and Reaction

Beloved (1988), is an American horror-drama film based on the novel written by Toni Morrison. The film was directed by Jonathan Demme and starred by Oprah Winfrey, Danny Glover, and Thandie Newton. The plot revolves around a former slave and her daughter after the American Civil War. This movie received many remarkable awards including an Academy Award.

Toni Morrison is an American novelist, editor, and Professor Emeritus at Princeton University. Her novels are known for the epic themes, vivid dialogue, and richly detailed characters. Among her best known novels are *The Bluest Eye* (1970), *Sula* (1973), *Song of Solomon* (1977), and *Beloved* (1987).

Originally the novel is written based on the true story where a slave named Margaret Garner killed her own daughter to save her from the hands of the owner. The tragedy is that before she could kill the other children and herself she was caught and sentenced to prison. Toni Morrison bases this real story for her novel which was later cinematographed.

The movie's plot concerns around the story of Sethe and her daughter Denver after their escape from slavery camp. Their home in Cincinnati is haunted by a revenant, whom they believe to be the ghost of Sethe's daughter. Baby Suggs, the mother of Sethe's husband Halle dies in her bed soon afterward. Paul D, one of the slaves from Sweet Home the plantation where Baby Suggs, Sethe, Halle, and several other slaves once worked comes to Sethe's home and tries to bring a sense of reality into the house.

When Paul D asks Sethe about it, she tells him what happened. After escaping from Sweet Home and reaching her waiting children at her mother-in-law's home, Sethe was found by her master, who attempted to reclaim her and her children. Sethe grabbed her children, ran into the tool shed, and tried to kill them all. She succeeded only in killing her eldest daughter by running a saw along her neck. Sethe claims that she was "trying to put my babies where they would be safe"(73). The revelation is too much for Paul D and he leaves. Without him, a sense of reality and time moving forward disappears.

Beloved's presence Sethe's life to the point where she becomes depleted and sacrifices her own need of eating, while *Beloved* grows bigger and bigger. In the climax youngest daughter Denver reaches out and searches for help from the black community and some of the village women arrive at the house to exorcise *Beloved*. At the same time, a white man comes into view the same man who helped Halle's mother. Baby Suggs by offering her the house as a place to stay after Halle bought her from their owner. He has come for Denver, who asked him for a job, but Denver has not shared this information with Sethe.

Unaware of the situation, Sethe attacks the white man with an ice pick and is brought down by the village women. While Sethe is confused and has a "re-memory" of her master coming again,

Beloved disappears. The novel resolves with Denver becoming a working member of the community and Paul D returning to Sethe and pledging his love.

Sigmund Freud 1856- 1939 is considered to be the founder of the psychodynamic approach to psychology which looks closely at the unconscious drives that motivate people to act in certain ways. Freud premises that the mind has both a conscious and unconscious realm. Psychology most often explores the unconscious mind, which uses Isolation, Intellectualization, Repression, Projection, Displacement, Denial, and Reaction formations to disguise the thoughts and emotions in the conscious mind refuses to accept. Isolation occurs when one acknowledges an incident but does not confront its significance.

Psychoanalysis is a way to determine what the author feels through irrational and unconscious desires expressed throughout the literary texts. The novel *Beloved* by Toni Morrison is subject to psychoanalytic criticism for many reasons. Since *Beloved* has a lot of imaginary instances, one can conclude that Morrison was projecting her thoughts through those instances (like the haunting of a baby ghost in a house); Meaning that Morrison was unconsciously portraying what she feared, desired, and wished unconsciously.

The id, ego, and super ego are three aspects of the mind Freud believed to make up a person's personality. Freud believed people are simply actors in the drama of their own minds, pushed by desire and pulled by coincidence. Sethe's struggles are partially the play of Id in her memory. Sethe believes that Beloved is the two-year-old daughter she murdered, whose tombstone reads only "Beloved". This belief is a struggle in her ego and super ego. This paper critically looks at the psychoanalytical perspectives and the psychological struggles undergone by the character Sethe and Beloved in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*.

There is no single concept of the unconscious in Freud, as any responsible reading of his work shows. This is because there are two Freudian topographies or maps of the mind earlier and later (after 1920)... In the first Freudian topography, the psyche is divided into unconscious, preconscious and conscious; while in the second divisions are the rather different traits of id, ego and super ego. The preconscious, descriptively considered, is unconscious, but can be made conscious, and so is severely divided from the unconscious proper, in the perspective given either by a topographical or a dynamic view (Ellman, 1982:95).

Bourdreau discussed the role that torture played in the movie. She believes that Morrison instilled in her characters a sense of denial of the pain they endured by the way they address those times of torture. For instance Sethe's memorize, as every other human being tries to forget the past and recreate the new memory and how she chooses to remember Sweet Home as a pastoral vision or how she replaced the pain of being attacked and whipped with the memory of how she was told the lash marks on her back represented a beautiful chokecherry tree.

Repressed memories are the ones that have been unconsciously blocked due to the memory being associated with a high stress or trauma. The theory postulates that even though the individual may not recall the memory or, it may still be affecting them unconsciously, and that these memories can emerge later into the consciousness. The ideas on repressed memory hiding trauma from awareness were an important part of Sigmund Freud's early work on psychoanalysis. Such a pain was felt by Sethe throughout the movie, she lives with guilt, though she tries to forget she could not forget her past it stays in her subconscious mind to trouble her throughout.

In *Macbeth* lady Macbeth suffers by similar repression. She lives with the feeling of guilt forgets that how ambitious she was. Her broken memories and feeling of guilt leads her to the grave. In *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859), by Charles Dickens, Dr. Manette forgets that he is a physician after his incarceration in the Bastille. In *Great Expectations* by Charles Dickens one can observe 'repression' affects Miss Havisham in a different way. Her repressed sexual desires leads her to be violent and frozen in the past. Similarly the characters in Morrison's novel greatly display the repercussions of just how much traumatizing experiences affect a person's physical and mental health and well-being. These consequences not only affect each person in their own mind, but also alter their relationships with others. Every one of these characters could be examined individually but also against their relationship with each other.

When a person attempts to rationalize a situation rather than emotionally experience it, he or she is an intellectualizing, repression is like selective hearing for the mind to repress a thought or occurrence is to deny its existence. An individual is engaging in projection when he or she sees a trait

in others not because it is necessarily present but because it is present in the individual. Displacement involves targeting someone less dangerous or powerful than the person one really wishes to oppose.

Psychological critics attempt to discover the hidden mind which has repressed desires and emotions. In spite of the fact that the article does not explore all the possible psychoanalytical views of the character Sethe, this article is an attempt to understand the character with a few theoretical support of Sigmund Freud.

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