



## Voicing the Unspeakable: Cathy Caruth and the Language of Trauma in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

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### Abstract:

This paper explores Cathy Caruth's trauma theory in relation to Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, examining how language becomes a medium to voice the unspeakable wounds of slavery. Through Caruth's lens, Morrison's narrative reveals trauma as a haunting presence that resists direct representation, emerging instead through fragmented memory, silence, and repetition. The novel becomes a site where the unspoken finds expression, embodying the complexities of remembering and bearing witness.

**Keywords:** trauma theory, Cathy Caruth, Toni Morrison, *Beloved*, language, memory, slavery, unspeakable, narrative silence, witnessing.

### Introduction

Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) is a haunting novel that defies traditional narrative structure to convey the profound psychological and generational trauma of American slavery. Through the character of Sethe and the spectral presence of her deceased daughter, Morrison investigates the lingering impact of traumatic memory and the limits of language in expressing suffering. Trauma, especially as theorized by Cathy Caruth, is not a fully accessible experience; it is characterized by belatedness, fragmentation, and repetition. Caruth's concept of trauma as an "unclaimed experience" aligns with Morrison's depiction of Sethe's psychological state, where language falters, memory splinters, and the past refuses to stay buried. This paper argues that *Beloved* embodies Caruth's trauma theory by portraying the legacy of slavery as a trauma that resists narration and is instead expressed through disrupted language, nonlinear narrative, and ghostly return. By doing so, Morrison constructs a literary space where the unspeakable may be partially voiced, heard, and witnessed.

### Cathy Caruth's Theory of Trauma

Cathy Caruth, in her influential work *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* (1996), posits that trauma is not experienced directly in the moment of its occurrence but is understood only through its return, often involuntarily and belatedly. Traumatic experience is characterized by a paradox: it is both overwhelming and inaccessible. Caruth writes, "To be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event" (Caruth, 1996, p. 4). Trauma thus remains unassimilated into conscious memory, manifesting through flashbacks, dreams, and narrative disruptions. Importantly, Caruth emphasizes that the traumatic event returns not as a coherent memory but as a haunting repetition—a ghostly echo that resists full representation or closure. Caruth also discusses the role of 'testimony' and the 'ethical responsibility of the listener', arguing that trauma can only be approached indirectly, through narrative gaps and through witnessing. Literature, she suggests, is one of the few spaces where the complex temporal and psychological dimensions of trauma can be explored. This theoretical lens provides a powerful framework for reading *Beloved*, a novel that enacts trauma not only thematically but structurally and linguistically.

### Cathy Caruth's Trauma Theory: Key Concepts



Cathy Caruth's *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History* offers a vital theoretical lens for interpreting the complex representation of trauma in *Beloved*. Caruth describes trauma as an experience that is not fully realized at the moment it occurs; instead, it manifests later in a way that disrupts the individual's sense of time and memory. This delayed recognition-'belatedness'-means that trauma often returns involuntarily, through nightmares, flashbacks, or fragmented recollections. Caruth writes, "To be traumatized is precisely to be possessed by an image or event" (Caruth, 1996, p. 4), emphasizing trauma's haunting, repetitive nature. Moreover, Caruth argues that trauma is inherently difficult to narrate: it often escapes the confines of language or can only be told through fragmented and elliptical speech. This leads to what she calls an "unclaimed experience," where the victim's understanding of the event remains partial and incomplete. Testimony, then, is a complex act, involving not just the survivor but also the listener, who must bear the ethical responsibility of witnessing trauma's fractured narrative. Caruth's insistence on trauma's resistance to full articulation and the necessity of bearing witness aligns closely with Morrison's narrative strategies in *Beloved*, which disrupt conventional storytelling to evoke the psychological reality of trauma.

### **Nonlinear Narrative and the Temporal Dislocation of Trauma in *Beloved***

Morrison's novel is structurally fragmented, mirroring the disrupted memory of those who endure trauma. The story unfolds through a series of flashbacks, shifts in perspective, and disjointed chronology. This fragmentation reflects the experience of trauma survivors, for whom time is not linear but often cyclical or fragmented. Sethe's memories, especially of Sweet Home and her desperate act of killing her child to prevent her from being enslaved, emerge sporadically and without clear order. Morrison refuses to present trauma as a neat, linear narrative, instead reflecting Caruth's concept that trauma is understood only after the fact, often through intrusive recollections that disturb present consciousness. For instance, Sethe's traumatic memory of her escape is intertwined with moments of intense emotional pain in the present: "It was as though Sethe didn't really want forgiveness given; she wanted it refused. And Beloved helped her out" (Morrison, 1987, p. 251). This line reveals the circular nature of trauma—the past continues to disrupt and shape Sethe's present experience. The nonlinear narrative compels the reader to inhabit this fractured temporal space, emphasizing the impossibility of fully escaping or neatly recounting trauma.

### **Nonlinear Narrative and Temporal Dislocation in *Beloved***

Morrison's novel defies chronological storytelling, instead weaving together multiple timelines, perspectives, and fragmented memories. This nonlinear structure mirrors the disjointed nature of traumatic recall, aligning with Caruth's assertion that trauma is experienced too late, erupting unexpectedly into the present. Sethe's memories of Sweet Home, the plantation where she was enslaved, and the killing of her daughter are not recounted in a clear sequence. Rather, they emerge in bursts, often uninvited and jumbled, underscoring the psychological truth that trauma defies temporal order. For example, Sethe frequently experiences involuntary flashbacks that disrupt the narrative flow: "It was as though Sethe didn't really want forgiveness given; she wanted it refused. And Beloved helped her out" (Morrison, 1987, p. 251). These moments reflect what Caruth calls the "belatedness" of trauma—when the past irrupts into the present without warning, as if it were happening again. Morrison thus uses structure to simulate the mental disarray that trauma imposes, and in doing so, invites the reader to experience this disorientation firsthand.

### **The Inexpressibility of Trauma: Sethe's Language of Silence**



A central tension in *Beloved* lies in the difficulty of articulating trauma. Sethe's most traumatic act—killing her daughter to spare her from slavery—is barely spoken aloud for much of the novel. When she does begin to discuss it with Paul D, her words falter, filled with hesitation, euphemism, and fragmentation. "I stopped him," she says simply (p. 192), unable or unwilling to fully verbalize the event. Sethe's struggle to narrate her trauma reflects Caruth's theory that trauma "is not locatable in the simple violent or original event in an individual's past, but rather in the way that it's very unassimilated nature—the way it was precisely not known in the first instance—returns to haunt the survivor later on" (Caruth, 1996, p. 4). Sethe's silence is not just a refusal but a symptom. Her inability to articulate the murder signals that it remains unprocessed. Morrison's language reflects this: at crucial moments, syntax becomes fractured, ellipses appear, and pronouns become ambiguous. This linguistic instability points to the limits of language under the weight of traumatic memory.

### **The Language of Silence and the Limits of Articulation**

One of the novel's most poignant themes is the inability to fully articulate trauma. Sethe's silence regarding her act of infanticide—killing her daughter to save her from slavery—is emblematic of trauma's inexpressibility. For much of the novel, Sethe avoids speaking explicitly about this act, reflecting Caruth's assertion that trauma "is not locatable in the simple violent or original event," but in the way it returns unassimilated and unclaimed (Caruth, 1996, p. 4). When Sethe finally attempts to verbalize her trauma to Paul D, the language is hesitant, fragmented, and laden with euphemism: "I stopped him" (Morrison, 1987, p. 192). This simple phrase belies the enormity of the act and the psychological burden it carries. The insufficiency of words here reflects Morrison's larger thematic concern with the limitations of language under trauma's weight. The novel's prose often breaks into fragmented syntax and ellipses at moments of trauma, symbolizing speech's failure to capture pain fully.

### **Beloved as Embodiment of the Repressed**

The character Beloved, who returns as a grown woman after having died as an infant, serves as both a literal ghost and a metaphor for the return of the repressed. Her presence externalizes Sethe's unresolved trauma, functioning as the haunting echo Caruth describes. Beloved's speech is often cryptic, fragmented, and dreamlike—evoking a non-linear, preverbal state associated with traumatic repetition. In one of the most striking sections of the novel, Morrison presents a stream-of-consciousness monologue by Beloved (pp. 210–213), written without punctuation, grammatical clarity, or concrete time references: "I am not separate from her there is no place where I stop her face is my own and I want to be there in the place where her face is" (p. 210). This exemplifies what Caruth means by trauma's resistance to narrative: the voice collapses time, space, and identity. Beloved is both self and other, past and present, daughter and ghost. Her language represents a psychic space where traumatic memory circulates without order or explanation. This "unspeakable" speech forces Sethe (and the reader) to confront a truth that has been buried too long.

### **Witnessing and Ethical Listening: Paul D and Denver**

Cathy Caruth emphasizes that trauma demands ethical listening—not the extraction of facts, but the willingness to hear the broken, uncertain, and painful stories of survivors. In *Beloved*, this ethical witnessing is dramatized through the characters of Paul D and Denver, who represent two different paths toward acknowledging and responding to trauma. Paul D initially cannot accept Sethe's act of infanticide. When she tells him what she did, his response—"You got two feet, Sethe, not four"—echoes the community's judgment and shows his struggle to ethically bear witness (p.



193). However, over time, Paul D begins to understand that Sethe's actions were shaped by the unimaginable brutality of slavery, and he returns to offer her not judgment, but companionship. In contrast, Denver, who begins the novel isolated and fearful, gradually steps into a role of witness and healing. By listening to Sethe and interacting with Beloved, she takes in their trauma and ultimately seeks help from the community. Her transformation signals a potential future rooted in care and collective memory. Trauma, according to Caruth, is not only about the survivor's experience but also about the listener's ethical responsibility to bear witness. Morrison stages this dynamic through the characters of Paul D and Denver. Paul D initially responds with disbelief and rejection when Sethe reveals her traumatic past. His reaction—"You got two feet, Sethe, not four"—echoes social judgment and denial (Morrison, 1987, p. 193). However, his journey toward understanding and acceptance highlights the difficult process of ethical listening. Paul D gradually learns to hold Sethe's trauma without judgment, embodying Caruth's idea of the listener's role in trauma testimony. Denver, Sethe's younger daughter, transforms from a frightened, isolated child into a figure of hope and healing. She becomes a witness to her mother's trauma and takes the crucial step of seeking help from the wider community, representing the importance of collective acknowledgment of trauma.

### **Trauma, the Community Memory, and Healing**

The novel's conclusion suggests that individual trauma can begin to heal through collective acknowledgment. After years of isolation, Sethe is drawn back into the community when Denver seeks help, and the women of the town come to exorcise Beloved. This act of communal ritual is less about supernatural cleansing than about shared witnessing of pain. Caruth writes that trauma is "a crisis of truth... that is experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known" (1996, p. 7). But while it cannot be fully known, it can be shared- not to resolve it, but to carry it. Morrison stages this through the presence of the community, suggesting that historical trauma like slavery must be remembered collectively, even if imperfectly. This does not erase the past, but it offers the possibility of living with it, rather than being consumed by it. The communal aspect of trauma and healing is a critical element in *\*Beloved\**. After years of isolation, Sethe's reintegration into the community is symbolized by the women's ritual exorcism of Beloved. This collective act of remembering and bearing witness suggests that trauma cannot be fully borne alone. Caruth's trauma theory supports this idea of trauma as a shared, ethical responsibility. Trauma, while deeply personal, is also historical and social. Morrison's portrayal of community emphasizes the necessity of collective memory and solidarity to confront the legacy of slavery.

### **The Limits and Power of Language**

Despite its focus on the inexpressibility of trauma, *Beloved* is also a celebration of language's potential. Morrison pushes the boundaries of literary form to represent the unspeakable. Her prose—rich in symbolism, layered with poetic rhythm, and often structurally disorienting—does not "solve" trauma, but evokes it, allowing the reader to feel its complexity. Caruth's theory supports this idea: trauma cannot be captured by linear narrative, but literature can approximate it through disruption, metaphor, and ambiguity. Morrison's novel thus becomes a space where trauma is not silenced, but voiced in a new, affective register. In the end, *Beloved* is less about explaining trauma than about sounding it- making it heard, even if not fully understood.

### ***Beloved* as a Symbolic Return of the Repressed Trauma**



The character Beloved functions both as a literal ghost and a metaphorical embodiment of the unspeakable trauma haunting Sethe. Beloved's return forces Sethe to confront a past she has tried to repress. Her speech patterns—fragmented, poetic, sometimes incoherent—mirror the disrupted language typical of traumatic memory and recall. In the striking passage where Beloved speaks in a stream-of-consciousness style, her words collapse time, identity, and place: "I am not separate from her there is no place where I stop her face is my own and I want to be there in the place where her face is" (Morrison, 1987, p. 210). This poetic, disjointed language embodies what Caruth describes as trauma's linguistic elusiveness. Beloved's presence externalizes Sethe's repressed trauma, making it visible and audible while resisting clear explanation or containment. The novel thus dramatizes trauma's paradoxical nature: it must be expressed but defies conventional language and comprehension.

### **Language, Literature, and the Ethics of Representation**

Despite emphasizing trauma's inexpressibility, *Beloved* celebrates the power of language and storytelling to approach the unspeakable. Morrison's lyrical prose, use of symbolism, and non-traditional narrative techniques evoke trauma's complexity without attempting to resolve or fully explain it. Caruth's theory acknowledges the limitations of representation but highlights literature as a crucial site where trauma can be approached ethically and affectively. Morrison's novel enacts this by refusing closure, demanding the reader's ethical engagement with trauma's on-going presence.

### **Conclusion**

In *Beloved*, Toni Morrison offers a profound literary articulation of trauma that resonates deeply with Cathy Caruth's theory of trauma as an unclaimed, belated experience resistant to full narration. Through fragmented storytelling, poetic language, and the figure of Beloved as a haunting embodiment of repressed memory, Morrison captures the enduring impact of slavery's trauma on the individual and community. The novel insists on the necessity of voicing the unspeakable and bearing witness to trauma's presence, even as language struggles to contain it. In this way, *Beloved* becomes an ethical and literary space for remembrance, testimony, and the tentative possibility of healing.

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