

Existential study of *Beloved*

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Abstract: An existentialist approach is employed to interpret *Beloved*—one of the best novels of Toni Morrison. An existential research is made through an analysis of these characters' action under slavery and making choices out of freedom that challenged the absurdity of the world.

Key words: existentialism; absurdity; choice; slavery

In the 1930s, with the development of capitalism, increased production clashes with human's spiritual emptiness. The feeling of desperation, isolation and homelessness haunted people. People were alienated from triple forces: the nature, the society and themselves. Under this situation, existentialism came into being. Existentialism shows great concern over human being's state. Existentialists think that the world is absurd and life is meaningless. Only through action and free choice can people struggle against the absurd world and free from alienation.

Though existentialism was originated from capitalism, the author employed some existentialist ideas to analyze *Beloved* because *Beloved* has inner relationship with existentialism. The social background of *Beloved* is also set in an alienated world—slavery. The characters in *Beloved* share alienation and exile either psychologically or physically under the oppressive world dominated by the white's standards. Sethe and Paul D represent the twisted absurd people who live in absurdity and rebel against the absurdity through their action—escaping from slavery both physically and psychologically and therefore achieve the freedom eventually. The absurd world, absurd people and different choices they make consist of three elements in existentialism.

1. Absurd World in *Beloved*

Most existentialists believe that there is no rationality in the world. In *Beloved*, Morrison produces a world filled with dread, disorder and irrationality. For example, in Chapter One, the writer determined the pessimistic tone by a series of symbolic images: “the red light” when Paul D entered the 124 for the first time, “a house haunted by ghost”, “scars looking like a chokecherry tree”, “the slaves hanged” on Sethe's way to Cicinanti. All these images convey clearly an impression of death, despair, failure and nothingness.

Beloved presents a cruel picture of American Southern slavery in 19th century. Millions of the blacks from Africa died in middle passage. The slaves are deprived of the right of language usage by wearing iron bit because the definitions belong to the definers. Women slaves are raped by their white owners; and the slaves are treated as subhuman; the children of the slaves do not belong to themselves; the slaves have no identities. “Anybody Baby Suggs know, let alone loved, who had not ran off or been hanged, got rented out, loaned out, brought up, brought back, stored up, mortgaged, won, stolen or seized.”

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2. Absurd Human

The lives of characters in *Beloved* can be categorized as absurdity and irrationality.

Slavery is the source of all evils. Slavery corrupts and dehumanizes everyone who comes in contact with it, including the black slaves and the white slave owners.

Sethe, the protagonist of the novel, is treated as subhuman. She seems to be alienated from herself and gets sick of herself. Paul D thinks she is inferior to a cock.

Meanwhile, the whites slave owners suffers a loss of humanity and compassion. Slavery makes the Whites changeable and they are made bloody, silly, worse than they ever wanted to be. The schoolteacher and his nephews represent cold racists and performed the oppressive policy on the plantation.

Only when absurd people have been aware of the absurdity of the world, can they rebel against the absurd world. When Sethe once overheard the schoolteacher giving a lesson on her “animal characteristics”; When Sethe was told that the young black boys are not allowed to work outside, all the absurdity has been presented ahead of Sethe—they are just the slave owner’s property, including their children. Therefore, Sethe saw her existence—isolation and desperation.

Kierkegaard, one of the existentialists, perceives isolation, terror, detestation, depression and desperation as the features of people in the absurd world.

Absurd people are lonely. Sethe is isolated. As Halle and Paul D failed to appear at the appointed meeting time. She could not find any accompany. Then Sethe was whipped severely by the schoolteacher but nevertheless she ran away in pregnancy alone. After the third child was killed, Sethe was even more lonely. All the blacks could not understand her infanticide and isolated her from the community. With the hostility of the black community comes the isolation that Sethe had to endure.

And Paul D is lonely. He has endured a series of torment that caused him to lock away his memories, emotions, and ability to love in the “tin tobacco box” of his heart. He could not share his experience with others. He concludes that one should love nothing too intensely.

3. Free Choices

Sartre’s main idea is that humans have absolute freedom and must be responsible for their own actions. Freedom in existentialism implies that people can design their own lives freely. People’s existence depends on their behaviors—their free choices. Camus, one of the existentialists, probes different attitudes towards the absurd world. In his opinion, people in absurdity first realize the nothingness of the world. Consequently, people make different choices—either escape from it or face it and rebel against it to make life meaningful and happy. Of the two options, Camus affirms the latter. Facing contradiction and nothingness, according to Camus, human is supposed to be tough, live bravely and make different choices.

In *Beloved*, after they are conscious of the absurdity of the world, the characters make different choices or actions to rebel against the absurd slavery.

3.1 Sethe’s and Paul D’s choices

One of the themes of existentialism is that each person is free to make his or her own decisions and must live with the consequences of their choices.

Sethe chose to run to free herself from bloody slavery; Sethe decided to kill her children to protect them. After her infanticide, Proud Sethe determined to endure spiritual humiliation and the suffering from the hostile

black community and live bravely in isolation with her daughter Denvor. Like Sethe, Paul D endures torturous experiences, too. The oppression and torment from the whites led Paul D to think over his destiny.

Both of them have their own mechanism to deal with the anguish that slavery brings about. Sethe deliberately forgot most of the past and Paul D locked his memories and emotions away in his imagined “tobacco tin”. He tries to repress his painful memories. Paul D’s union with Sethe also provides him with stability and allows him to come to terms with his past.

Through a series of choices that Sethe and Paul D made, only confronting their absurd past can they connect the past with the present, gain their selves and build up their identities, therefore make their life meaningful.

3.2 Baby Suggs’ and Stamp Paid’s choices

They represent the old generation of black slaves who suffer from slavery severely and harbor deep-rooted hatred towards the whites. Baby Suggs says: not a house in the country ain’t packed to its rafters with some dead Negro’s grief. She does not realize her identity until her son Halle buys her freedom. She holds religious gathering calling upon her fellows to love their voices, their bodies, their minds and themselves. Love is the first step to establish the blacks’ identity. But when she knows the community does not inform Sethe of the schoolteacher’s approach, she feels disappointed at the blacks. She chooses to stop preaching and waits to die in a sickbed.

Stamp Paid thinks that a black should endure the absurdity as much as possible. This life attitude indicates the old generation accepts their fates and endures it until they die.

In general, the old generation of blacks could not do with the irrational world. They choose to escape from the disordered world although Baby Suggs had taken preaching as a way to fight against the world, but later she was reduced to a serious depression and waited to die.

The negative choice—escaping and enduring the absurd reality without any rebellion—is denied by Camus.

3.3 Denvor’s choice

Denvor is an intelligent and sensitive girl who could not grow up by years of isolation. *Beloved*’s increasing malevolence forces Denvor to overcome her fear of the world beyond 124 and seek help from the community. Her choice of going out into the town and her attempts to find permanent work and possibly attend college mark the beginning of her fight for independence, self-possession, and maturity.

4. Conclusion

Toni Morrison can not avoid the absurdity in the American life—the blacks still suffered from the legacy of their ancestors. She unconsciously employs the techniques of the existentialism so that her works *Beloved* conveys the meaninglessness of life and characters’ different choices when facing the nothingness.

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