

Feelings of Human Beings Conveyed through Symbolic Representation of Places in Toni Morrison's Stories

Sandamali, K. P. S

Lecturer, Institute of Human Resource Advancement, University of Colombo

(sandamali@ihra.cmb.ac.lk)

Abstract

The current study has used Toni Morrison's Beloved as the particular novel which is subjected for the identification of symbolic places for the conveying of universal feelings of human beings with the aim of observing the way that the particular author has used symbols. The prime objective of this study is to see the employment of symbols with respect to the feelings linked with major places that are described in the text. Further, this study seeks for the different interpretation which are agreeing with the represented places. The places that are as symbolic representations are very significant, because it may have several indirect interpretations that supply many socio-cultural backgrounds for the enrichment of the literary value by adding different feelings. With the historical representations, these places stand in the text inter-related with feelings. As a whole, the symbolical places can be seen as 124 (the name of Sethe's house), Ohio River, Bluestone Road and Sweet Home. These places convey the feelings such as loss, grief, sadness, secure, happiness, relief, satisfaction, confusion, despair, helplessness and the feeling of miserable in the novel as far as possible.

Keywords: Symbolic Representation, Places, Feelings, Socio-cultural background

1. Introduction

As a Black American writer, Toni Morrison tries her best to make her people and the community to stand as an independent nation in the society through her writings. Her skillful writing was rewarded with both Nobel Prize- and Pulitzer Prize by keeping her the first woman black writer who gained the Nobel Prize. The popularity which she earned through her writings has kept the figure to define her not as Toni Morrison but as the author of *The Bluest Eye* (1970), *Sula* (1975) and *Song of Solomon* (1977). Through her writings, it is possible to identify *The Bluest Eye*, *Song of Solomon* and *Beloved* as the prominent writings in her collection.

Toni Morrison first publishes *Beloved* in 1987 as a story which tells about her own community and the way they suffer with the harassment of white people. This is not a creation that brings romance for the people but gives them a chance to see one aspect of the history. Since the novel deals with her own community and the environment, it becomes famous among many of her readers. In *Beloved*, Morrison depicts the pain, violence and the long-lasting aftermaths of slavery. And also, it can be considered as a part of historical epic in black community.

Mainly in *Beloved*, the author has given her attention to discuss about the usage of places in the novel with the depiction of feelings of her community as a major thematic aspect of the novel in many situations. In addition to the usage of characters, the employment of places in the novel talks more indirectly about the suffering of people due to the long-lasting effects of slavery. So, in this study it discusses about symbolic representation of places in *Beloved* to convey feelings.

Objectives

To identify the contexts how feelings are human beings are brought out.
To interpret possible places related to feelings.

Research Questions

How the places that the author has used to convey feelings in the text?
How these particular places are can be interpreted with feelings in *Beloved*?

Methodology

To fulfill the objectives of this study it has used qualitative method. The data were collected for the study through referring the particular text and understanding the whole content of the text. It has caught out all the possible and highlighted places in the text to convey feelings in the novel. The collected data have been analyzed and

discussed with her own perceptions and ideologies but related to the text. Here the qualitative study becomes an effective method for data collection since it makes the way to investigate the reliability of the evidences for all the readers and reviewers.

2. Result and Discussion

2.1 124 (Name of protagonist's house in Bluestone Road)

Toni Morrison shows her mastery in writing through the application of places as symbols in her creations to convey universal feelings of the human beings. In her *Beloved*, the employment of the name 124 for the identification of Sethe's house is identical, because it is very appropriate to give the information about the real situation of the house. According to the arithmetical order, the number three (3) should be there between two (2) and four (4). However through the usage of 124 as the name of the house, the author tries to depict some more details regarding that particular place. Especially this name stands as a symbol to indicate a kind of absence inside the house. At the beginning of the novel, the author presents these all the happenings of the house through the first line of chapter one.

“124 WAS SPITEFUL. Full of a baby's venom. The women in the house knew it and so did the children. For years each put up with the spite in his own way, but by 1873 Sethe and her daughter Denver were its own victims” (Beloved, Part one, Chapter one, lines 1-4)

The description of the author at the opening chapter of the novel tells about the implied meaning of 124. Simply this adds some information about the order of the children of the protagonist, Sethe, who was a slave woman. She delivers four children including two boys and two girls. Three of them were born when she works in Sweet Home in Kentucky while the last one delivers on the middle of her running away from the Sweet Home to Cincinnati, her mother-in-law's place. After her escaping from the Sweet Home, schoolteacher who leads the plantation farm in Kentucky comes Cincinnati to bring Sethe back with her children. In that situation, Sethe cuts the throat of her third baby girl to avoid her being a slave. So, this absence of the third child symbolizes by the name 124.

This symbol achieves the space to make readers aware about the feelings that lay behind the name 124. The absence of the child gives the feeling of grief and sadness that occurs in the mind of the mother and the members of the family. And also, it gives the feeling of loss of its' dwellers and for the readers. So, it is obvious that the author uses the place 124 as a symbol to convey this absence of the child and the feelings that are dealt with that incident.

2.2. Ohio River

The Ohio River which belongs to United States has formed by the confluence of the Allegheny and Monongahela rivers at Point State Park in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. The name of the river suggests the meaning of “Good River”. According to the socio-cultural background of the country, the author of the novel has used the Ohio River to symbolize the freedom of slaves. Since the Ohio River is the southern border of Ohio, Indiana and Illinois, it was part of the border between Free states and slave states in the years before the American Civil War.

The expression “sold down the river” originated as a lament of Upper South slaves, especially from Kentucky, who were shipped via the Ohio and Mississippi for cotton and sugar plantations in the Deep South. Before and during the Civil War, the Ohio River was called the “River Jordan” by slaves, because they achieved freedom by crossing it to the North via the Underground Railroad. More escaping slaves, estimated in the thousands, made their perilous journey to freedom across the Ohio River than anywhere. In *Beloved*, the protagonist, Sethe gets her freedom from her slave owner Margaret Garner by crossing the river. In many places, the author employs the name of the river to symbolize the freedom of slaves in *Beloved*.

“When the flatbed was beyond her sight she stumbled on and found herself near three colored people fishing- two boys and an older man. She stopped and waited to be spoken to. One of the boys pointed and the man looked over his shoulder at her- quick look since all he needed to know about her he could see in no time.”

“No one said nothing for a while. Then the man said, “Headin’ ‘cross?”

“Yes, sir,” said Sethe.

“Anybody know you coming?”

“Sethe walked to it and sat down. The stone had eaten the sun’s rays but was nowhere near as hot as she was.” (Beloved, Chapter 9, Lines 5-20)

While the river Ohio symbolizes the freedom, it conveys the feelings such as safe, secure and happiness in the novel, because after crossing the river Sethe can live with her people and there isn’t anyone to do harmful things to her. So, this satisfaction in Sethe’s mind makes her happy while she feels secure. In addition to this, Morrison, compares the water of this river with pure drinking water which gifts the relief for the people when they are thirsty. When Sethe asks for some water, the old man gives her

water from a jar. However, in the text the author uses the term “Ohio” instead of water, because she wants to convey the relief of Sethe’s mind when she crosses the river. “She begged him for water and he gave her some of the Ohio in a jar” (Beloved, Chapter 9, Lines 27-28)

In this way the author uses this river Ohio to symbolize the freedom of slaves while she conveys many feelings that are related with satisfaction and happiness. The usage of this symbol throughout the text can be seen as a percentage from the following chart. In chapter 1, the percentage shows as 15% while it is possible to see 23% in chapter 3. The maximum usage comes in chapter 3 and 9 as 23% in the text. And also, in chapter 11, the author has employed this Ohio River as a symbol in chapter 11 while it shows the percentage as 7%. Apart from that the author has used this symbolization in equal way in chapter 15, 16, 19 and 27 as 8%. As a whole, the author has used the Ohio River to symbolize freedom in novel for fourteen turns through nine chapters.

These all descriptions are available in the following chart with a clear image.

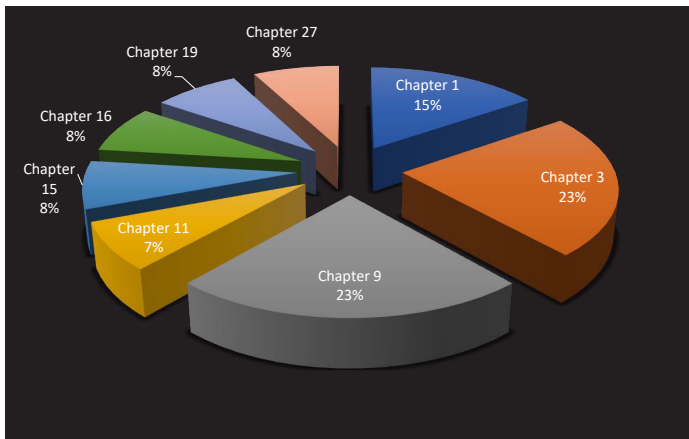


Figure 1. Using Ohio River as a symbol in Beloved

2.2.1. Bluestone Road (Name of the road that the house of the protagonist has placed)

Bluestone Road in Cincinnati stands as the setting for the present story in Beloved while the Sweet Home plays the role of the setting for the story that comes with the technique flashback. In present story, Bluestone Road symbolizes the freedom of slaves, because many of the former slaves occupy in that area in Bluestone. Those who get the freedom by crossing the river Ohio were there in that road. So this 124 is the last house which can be seen at the edge in that road. At the beginning of the novel, the author introduces the Bluestone road as following.

“Within two months, in the dead of winter, leaving their grandmother , Baby Suggs, Sethe, their mother and their little sister, Denver, all by themselves in the gray and white house on Bluestone road. It didn’t have a number then, because Cincinnati didn’t stretch that far” (Beloved, Chapter one, Lines 16-20)

The color “blue” is considered as the symbol of calmness, because it seems very comfortable for the eyes of the viewers. So, this easiness and the consolation depict by blue, build another stable notion about the lives of people combining with “stone” in the novel. Simply, Bluestone Road symbolizes the comfortable way of living of former slaves without any trouble and the degree of community solidarity with them. In one aspect, this Bluestone Road conveys the feeling of satisfaction and happiness while it gives contradictory concept, when it relates with the lives of 124 in that particular road. The dark reflection of the color has given some uneasiness and confusion with the feeling of miserable for the inhabitants in 124 in Bluestone. However, all the people can have their freedom in that place. So, this tells the mastery of the writer to convey many feelings by the usage of single place as a symbol.

To give the feeling of happiness and satisfaction, the author has used the Bluestone Road in the text for four turns through three chapters. And also, the author expresses the miserable nature and the confusion through three chapters by using four turns.

2.3. Sweet Home in Kentucky (A Plantation Home)

Sweet Home is a kind of plantation farm that employs slaves in cultivation and James Garner is the owner of the farm. Extremely, the name of the Sweet Home is ironic, because the routine is completely different with what the meaning of the suggested name. According to its’ name, the happenings should be pleasant. The Sweet Home should be a sweet place for all the people, especially those who live there. However, it is somewhat different from the other plantation houses in Kentucky, because Mr. Garner encourages his workers (slaves) to think as men.

However, the situation of the Sweet Home was completely different after the arrival of Schoolteacher (the name comes in this way in the text) to keep the things in order. His way of leading and running the farm added the suffering for the lives of slaves. Those who concerned as men within Sweet Home become animals under the ruling of Schoolteacher. In one situation Schoolteacher takes Sethe as an animal to give a lesson for his pupils.

“No that’s not the way. I told you to put her human characteristics on the left, her animal ones on the right” (Beloved, Chapter 19, Page 228, Lines 12-13)

From that point, the severe suffering of the Sweet Home men is started. Here the author uses this name of the plantation house to symbolize the unbearable suffering of the Slaves.

“There had been six of them who belonged to the farm, Sethe, the only female. Mrs. Garner was crying like a baby, had sold his brother to pay off the debts that surfaced the minute she was widowed. Then schoolteacher arrived to put the things in order. But what he did broke three more Sweet Home men and punched the glittering iron out of Sethe’s eyes, leaving two open wells that did not reflect firelight” (Beloved, Chapter 1, Page 11, Lines 3-9)

The way that Sethe was abused by the ruler and his followers can be seen as following. The author arranges her words carefully while she adds the feelings to her expressions to give the exact happening of the Sweet home.

“After I left you, those boys came in there and took my milk. That’s what they came in there for.Then boys found out I told on em. Schoolteacher made one open up my back, and when it closed it made a tree.” (Beloved, Chapter 1, Page 19-20, Lines 31-36)

In this light, the author uses the Sweet Home as a symbol of the novel to tell about the degree of suffering, violence and the hell that the slaves have lived. Through that it conveys the feeling of unhappiness, helplessness and the despair of the slaves of the Sweet Home. People are unhappy, because they suffer severely while there is no one to give a care for them. As a result of this, they feel despair about themselves. Throughout the novel, the author has used the term “Sweet Home” twenty-nine times within nine chapters to give these feelings.

According to the following chart, the percentage of using Sweet Home to symbolize her idea can be seen as 23% chapter 1 while it shows as 11% in chapter 2. The maximum usage of this same symbol shows in chapter 3 as 27% in the text. In chapter 6 the percentage can be identified as 4% while the author employs the same symbol in chapter 7 with the percentage of 8%. Finally, the usage of this same symbol in chapter 13, 19 and 24 show the percentage as 11%, 4% and 12%.

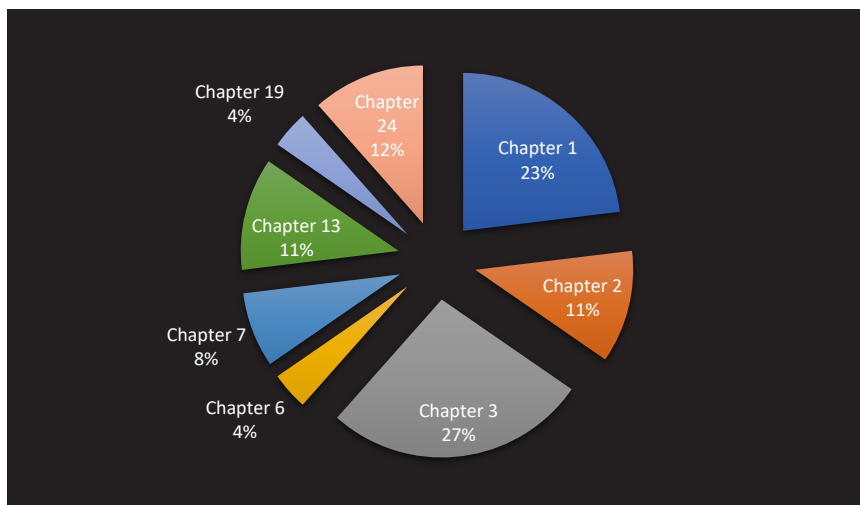


Figure 4. Using Sweet Home as a symbol to convey the feeling of unhappiness, helplessness and the disparity.

3. Conclusion

Characters take the responsibility of actions in a literary creation. And also, this has the ability to grab the mind of the readers. Therefore, the author has taken much attention to build the characters in the novel since she wants to convey different messages through the same text. So purposefully the author uses a few characters in the text to convey different thematic aspects. She has built some characters effectively to give her themes violence and the slavery's destruction of identity with different interpretations. To symbolize violence as a theme in *Beloved*, the author has used Schoolteacher as a character. Slavery's destruction of identity can be seen through the characters Sethe, Beloved, Baby Suggs and Paul D. To conclude, it is important to say that Morrison's *Beloved* is magnificent with its characterization to convey the themes violence and slavery's destruction of identity. Though it is impossible to deal with all the characters, the present study has focused more on the major ones and tried to explain their meanings in order to add an extra meaning to the novel.

References

- Abraham, Kinfe, *Politics of Black Nationalism: From Harlem to Soweto*, Trenton: Africa World Press, 1991.
- Barksdale, Richard and Keneth Kinnamon, *Black Writers of America: A Comprehensive Anthology*, Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1972.
- Buss, D.M, “Cognitive Biases and Emotional Wisdom in the Evolution of Conflict Between the Sexes,” *Current Directions in Psychological Science* 10, no. 6 (December 2001), pp. 219–23. 28. K. Hundley, “An Unspoken Problem—Two-Thirds of Female
- Cosmides. L and Tooby.J, “Evolutionary Psychology and the Emotions,” In M. Lewis and J. M. Haviland-Jones (eds.), *Handbook of Emotions*, 2nd ed. (New York: Guilford Press, 2000), pp. 91–115.
- Cuddon, J.A. (1998). *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*. England: Penguin Books.
- Fadaee, E. (2011). Symbols, Metaphors and Simile in Literature. In *English and Literature*, 19-27.
- Ford, B. (1967). *American Literature*. England: Penguin Books.
- Toni Morrison.(2010). *Beloved*. Reading guide edition. Vintage classics.