A Matter of Choice:

Ethical Dilemmas in
Toni Morrison’s

Beloved

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Table of Contents

Introduction .......................................................... 3

Material ............................................................... 5

Analysis

Baby Suggs as an Ethical Norm ...................................... 6
The Role of the Past .................................................. 7
A Struggle for Freedom ............................................... 9
The Sin of Excess .................................................... 11
The Consequences of Excess ...................................... 14
A Matter of Choice .................................................. 16

Conclusion ............................................................. 19

Works Cited .......................................................... 21
Introduction

In present time, and our modern society, freedom is one of the most fundamental rights human beings live by. In most societies, people are born free with outspoken rights to choose how to live their lives and thus also to take responsibility for choices and mistakes they make. The liberal democratic values are based on individual human beings’ rights over their own life, and people in a democratic society thus have formal rights to live as free members of their particular society. The country most known for its principles of freedom and democratic values is The United States of America. However, at the same time as the democratic principles of this new nation were founded, and the union of states fought for freedom of its own people, paradoxically, slavery became the ultimate test of disarray among the new founded states and also for the nation as a unity.

In the beginning of slavery, the northern and southern parts of the United States of America both used slaves as workers in industries and farms, wherever the workload was heavy. Furthermore, at these early stages of slavery, a “contract” stated that a slave would become a free man after four to seven years. During this early period of slavery some of the first enslaved Africans thus worked their way out of the system to become free tradesmen and property owners. But the quest for more land and greater profit escalated the demand for slaves. Therefore, slaves became highly prized merchandise in an inhumane system dependent on a large number of manual labourers. In the end, the system of slavery was so entrenched in the daily routines that it had to be dealt with as a national issue. America condoned the institution of slavery from 1619 until December 18, 1865, when the passage of the 13th amendment to the Constitution was granted, an amendment which abolished “slavery and involuntary servitude.” However, even though abolished, slavery had consequences that went beyond laws and amendments, and these consequences, which can be seen even today, not least in fiction, where it has been powerfully thematised in literature by African Americans. One of the most recent authors to deal with the memories of slavery is Toni Morrison. In her Nobel Prize winning novel *Beloved*, she contemplates some of the related themes as she ponders on the consequences of slavery.

Set in The United States of America, in the mid 19th century, as the era of slavery is coming to an end; *Beloved* tells the stories of a number of former slaves who struggle to build a life and a future for themselves and their families after a life of enclosure. The characters in *Beloved* are all, in different ways, carrying the weight of slavery on their shoulders. Thereby, the past and the baggage of their former lives as slaves both haunt them.
and prevent them from enjoying their life in freedom. *Beloved* thematises the problems of building a future based on freedom with past based on captivity, and this is particularly relevant when a character is faced with a choice, for example to live or die or to love or let go. I have chosen to recognize these problems of choice as ethical dilemmas.

In this essay, I intend to examine the dilemmas that some characters in Toni Morrison’s novel *Beloved* experience: Baby Suggs, Sethe and Paul D. I will examine how the characters’ background as former slaves have marked them, individually as human beings and as members of an entire community, how it affects their lives and choices and thereby their future. In my reading, Baby Suggs functions as an ethical norm for the rest of the community to follow. Her norms serve as a background of the other characters.

The field of ethics or moral philosophy involves systemizing, defending and recommending concepts of right and wrong behaviour. Ethical theories are divided into three general subject areas: *metaethics, applied ethics* and *normative ethics*. *Metaethics* investigates where our ethical principles come from and what they mean, and thereby focuses on finding universal truths or the will of God. *Applied ethics* involves examining and resolving specific, controversial issues, such as abortion, homosexuality and nuclear war. *Normative ethics* takes on a more practical task, to arrive at moral standards that regulate right and wrong conduct. This last field, involving habits, duties, and the consequences of our behaviour for others, involves a search for the ideal test of proper behaviour. The golden rule saying that “we should do to others what we want others to do to us,” is an example of a single normative principle with which we judge all actions (*The Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*).

All human societies around the world have norms set on what is accepted in that particular society, and how a member of that society is supposed to act to be accepted by its peers. As I will show, in the case of *Beloved*, it is the character Baby Suggs who functions as a norm for the whole Black community. My aim is thus to look at Baby Suggs, Sethe and Paul D, their background, sense of freedom, social ability and choices from an ethical point of view in terms of Normative ethics, examining the importance of the past as well as the importance of knowing the social code of the community.

The secondary source that has been most valuable for my analysis is Linda Krumholz “The Ghost of Slavery: Historical Recovery in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved,*” an analysis that shows a parallel between the individual processes of psychological recovery and historical and national processes in *Beloved.* I have used Krumholz mainly in the analysis of Baby Suggs as an ethical norm of the community and, in addition, in my analysis of excess. In accordance with Krumholz’s analysis, excess is seen as characteristic for something or rather someone that lacks limitations when it comes to emotions, violence and even generosity.

Arlene R Kaizer’s article, “*Beloved: Ideologies in Conflict, Improvised Subjects,*” has helped me analyze characters and their past, and how the past influences their future, particularly regarding Sethe and the way her love is unlimited in regard to her children. However, whereas Keizer considers Sethe’s motherlessness partly responsible for her unlimited love, I believe the cause is her enslavement in general, and in particular, her being enslaved by her past.

Therese E Higgins, *Religiosity, Cosmology and Folklore: The African influence in the Novels of Toni Morrison,* has informed me mostly on the influence the community have over its inhabitants. This has helped me analyze the importance of boundaries in some cultures. In my analysis of excess, both boundaries and community are important as the community judges characters that cannot stay within the proper boundaries.

Peggy Ochoa’s “Morrison’s *Beloved:* Allegorically Othering ‘White’ Christianity,” has informed my reading with respect to the question of how both jealousy and rejection can change peoples’ lives and perspectives, which I have used in the analysis of the individual characters as well as in the analysis on the entire community. Ochoa has also helped me notice how Sethe and Baby Suggs both have had to deal with abandonment.

*Toni Morrison,* by Linden Peach is a critical introduction to Morrison’s work written with the purpose of making the novels more accessible for students and readers in general. I have used this book mainly to see the historical background and also the complex relations between the characters in the novel. Other sources used for background reading are Jeffrey, J Folks, *From Richard Wright to Toni Morrison: Ethics in Modern and Postmodern American Narrative* and Marsha J Cutter, “The Story Must Go On and On: The Fantastic, Narration and Intertextuality in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* and *Jazz.*”
Analysis

Baby Suggs as an Ethical Norm

Among the principal characters in *Beloved*, Baby Suggs, representing the ethical norm of black society, is the one who carries the moral backbone. Thus, as a provider of faith, the one to show the right way, she functions as an ethical guideline for the rest of the society to follow. Baby Suggs’s morals are based on her honest engagement with her fellow citizens and her family. According to Linda Krumholz, Baby Suggs’s morals are based on her interpretation of life, rather than on moral preaching, which is shown through her disdain for rules (398). Instead of making up rules for society to follow, or even speaking the rules that actually exist, Baby Suggs rejects all forms of formal religion and, instead, in the clearing, she preaches her interpretation of what is good in life, advocating the guidance of a free heart and empathising the importance of imagination:

> She did not tell them to clean up their lives or to go and sin no more. She did not tell them they were blessed of the earth, its inheriting meek or its glorybound pure. She told them that the only grace they could have was the grace they could imagine. That if they could not see it they would not have it. (88)

Being a leader and an ethical norm of society, Baby Suggs never openly magistrates good or bad behaviour. She enlightens the community, telling them what is superior, and asks them to live their lives in that manner, but she never judges. However, she expresses strongly what bad or evil behaviour is. According to Baby Suggs, evil is defined by excess: “Everything depends on knowing how much . . . and Good is knowing when to stop.” (87) As Baby Suggs preaches the importance of knowing the right limits, as well as the importance of having a good imagination, it becomes the ethical norm of the entire fictive society in *Beloved*. A society, with its inhabitants marked by a past of slavery, with hard outspoken rules, a lack of morality, and especially an enormous lack of limitations of the white slaveholders, paradoxically is symbolized by the gentle yet outspoken Baby Suggs, which personify the norm of a well-functioning society without outspoken rules. However, even though not outspoken, all societies have rules, and as I will show later, the rules of the fictive society in *Beloved* are sometimes even stricter than the rules of slavery as the consequence of making the wrong choice is severely punished, even to the point of exclusion. And it is
the community as a united force, who is the ultimate decision-maker. In the following, I will analyse the characters’ past and how it has affected them.

The Role of the Past

Everybody has a past: some have good and pleasant memories’, others have sad or even unimaginable pictures and recollections to deal with on an everyday basis. For the characters in Beloved, with a history as slaves, it is the latter fact that is prominent; they all suffer from things they have endured in earlier periods of their lives. Even the norm of the fictive society in Beloved is eventually weakened by the memories of the past, as we shall see in the analysis of Baby Suggs.

Newly freed, alive and well, Baby Suggs takes on the world, showering everyone she meets with love and comfort, food and shelter. As I will show later, in the analysis on excess, her love has almost no limits as she gives her heart out to everyone who needs love or support. But that all changes as Baby Suggs, who after had lived enslaved almost all her life is granted freedom after being bought free by her son Halle, witness the horrible circumstances of her granddaughter’s death. After that, covered with memories of all she had endured in life, slavery, misery and death, she is so overwhelmed, and her entire being is ultimately so tired that in the end all she can do is look at colours: “Her past had been like her present – intolerable – and since she knew death was anything but forgetfulness, she used the little energy left her for pondering color” (4). After years of suffering, and years of remembering her sufferings, Baby Suggs has nothing more to give to the world. After being granted freedom, she dedicates her life on helping others in need, and that ultimately leads to her being the ethical norm of the society. However, in the end of her life, she is all worn out from serving others and finds herself not living up to the norm that is she; Baby Suggs considers her life being over and, therefore, she spends her last days looking at the colours of the world that she never had the time to notice before.

Not only Baby Suggs, but all characters, are troubled by their past, which is especially shown in Sethe and Paul D. The historical context of their relationship makes it special, since black people were not allowed to have free physical and emotional relationships during slavery, and thus, according to Linda Krumholz, their relationship as such can be seen as a sign of a healing process of the entire black community (406). Both Sethe and Paul D are haunted by their past and destroyed by what they have done, or what has been done to them,
and are thus trying to sort out their past, a past which particularly Sethe tries to avoid: “As for the rest, she worked hard to remember as close to nothing as was safe” (6). To Sethe, who is severely marked by her past, the future seems to be a matter of keeping the past at bay; however, her relationship with Paul D forces her to think about the future:

The “better life” she believed she and Denver were living was simply not that other one in captivity. The fact that Paul D had come out of “that other one” into her bed was better too; and the notion of a future with him, or for that matter without him, was beginning to stroke her mind. (42)

Sharing a past as slaves at Sweet Home, Sethe and Paul D also share some of the bad memories. However, as hard as Sethe tries to forget her past, Paul D is occupied with fighting his own deamons. More than anyone in Beloved, Paul D struggles with his personality since he, after years of slavery and captivity, has lost his sense of self. Being free, he struggles hard to find it: “But wasn’t no way I’d ever be Paul D again, living or dead. Schoolteacher changed me. I was something else and that something was less than a chicken sitting in the sun on a tub” (72). To ease his mind from his troublesome memories, he keeps them close to his heart but far from his head, so that he cannot remember them: “He would keep the rest where it belonged: in that tobacco tin buried in his chest where a red heart used to be” (73). The consequences of slavery are shown by both Sethe and Paul D having troublesome memories, which they both try hard not to face. According to Arlene Keizer, Sethe’s and Paul D’s past almost drown them. They both try to live and survive in the present, and yet they must incorporate their past experience into their present lives in order truly to claim their freedom (Keizer 107).

Critics offer different interpretations of what separates Sethe and Paul D from the rest of the community. My impression is that what isolates them is their own inner isolation in their own memories. Most of all, Sethe’s head is so filled with bad memories that her brain cannot cope with more, and for that reason she cannot bear to deal with her future: “. . . her brain was not interested in the future. Loaded with the past and hungry for more, it left her no room to imagine, let alone plan for the next day.” (70) Peggy Ochoa considers jealousy the source of Sethe’s separation from the larger community of black women, even before the death of her baby. Although, I see her point, that jealousy plays a great part in this novel, I do not share this view. I do not think it is jealousy that separates Sethe from the community, but her past. The black society that is represented in Beloved also has a past which makes it hard for them to understand people who are different. The norm, Baby Suggs, is love and
engagement for all. The love Sethe offers, on the other hand, can only include her own family, and the result is exclusion. But being a strong woman, and having a lot to fight for, she has the strength to stand strong against the community and fight back, even as Paul D alters her life and forces her to remember her past:

. . . If she could just manage the news Paul D brought and the news he kept to himself. Just manage it. Not brake, fall or cry each time a hateful picture drifted in front of her face. (...) All she wanted was to go on. As she had. Alone with her daughter in a haunted house she managed every damn thing. Why now, with Paul D instead of the ghost, was she breaking up? Getting scared? Needing baby? The worst was over wasn’t it? (97)

In concluding the area of discussion, regarding the influences of the past, some questions still remain. Could it have been different? If the memories of the past had not been as prominent and challenging, would the community be as forgiving and as loving as the norm? And again, if Sethe would have been able to look beyond herself and her children, would the community more easily have accepted her and her family? I have no answers. There were no such understanding, and Sethe is left to her own devices, leading to the consequences which almost destroy the whole community. The characters’ pasts certainly mark them and prevent them from moving forward. Other than the characters’ past there are supplementary problems which influence the way they make choices in life, mostly shown in the different ways they are freed from their former lives as slaves.

**A Struggle for Freedom**

Being a slave means not only that one is forced to work for someone; it also means that one’s body, thoughts, mind and future are bound to a master; slaves are not even free to notice things around them. Baby Suggs may serve as an example of the difficulty of not recognizing your own body and its functions. The very day she becomes free, after more than sixty years of slavery, she notices her own heartbeat and is thrilled about her own body for the first time. She then “open[s] her great heart to those who could use it” by becoming an “unchurched preacher” (87). With her newly found freedom, Baby Suggs creates her own ritual out of her own heart and imagination to help heal former slaves; she thus enables them to seek reconciliation with their memories, the scars of which survive long after the experience of slavery has ended. The complications of freedom can therefore be seen through Baby Suggs,
who does not even grasp the true meaning of freedom until the very day she is released and thereby starts to feel:

Of the two hard things – standing on her feet til she dropped or leaving her last and probably only living child – she chose the hard thing that made him [Halle] happy, and never put to him the question she put to herself; What for? What does a sixty-odd-year old slavewoman who walks like a three-legged dog need freedom for? And when she stepped foot on free ground she could not believe that Halle knew what she didn’t; that Halle who had never drawn one free breath, knew that there was nothing like it in this world. (141)

Despite this early exultation, the novel demonstrates how freedom is not something that comes to every freed slave the minute she is set free. Freedom is something that rather catches up with her after time. In the case of Sethe, her memories of being free are not even mentioned with reference to herself but through the joy of her having saved her children from slavery: “We was here. Each and every one of my babies and me too. I birthed them and I got em out and it wasn’t no accident. I did that” (162). Not being bought free like Baby Suggs, or captured over and over again like Paul D, she herself has made it with her children, and no one can take that away from her, no matter what she has to give up in doing so. Paul D’s story, on the other hand, is quite the opposite of Sethe’s:

In five tries he had not had one permanent success. Every one of his escapes (from Sweet Home, from Brandywine, from Alfred, Georgia, from Wilmington, from Northpoint) had been frustrated. Alone, undisguised, with visible skin, memorable hair and no Whiteman to protect him, he never stayed uncaught. (269)

Paul D is caught in a pattern of trying to escape and being caught, and this becomes a reason for him to question his own manhood. As I mentioned earlier, Paul D struggles with his own personality because of the way he has been measured by white people in the past. This fact, and the fact that he cannot escape and become free, has affected how he discusses ethical issues related to his manhood:

Was that it? Is that where the manhood lay? His strength had lain in knowing that schoolteacher was wrong. Now he wondered. If schoolteacher was right it explained how he had come to be a rag doll – picked up and put back down anywhere any time by a girl young enough to be his daughter. (127)

Furthermore, as referred to above, Paul D is moved around by Beloved as if she has cast a spell on him, which ultimately makes him move out of Sethe’s house and life, not by free
will, but by the girl’s. This shows that Paul D is not free at all. He is still caught, in mind and body, which makes it impossible for him to move on with his life.

In conclusion of this section, I would like to mention that Sethe’s and Paul D’s escapes both have an element of joy, but mostly of sorrow. Sethe’s escape was successful at first, but ultimately ended in her killing her own child. Paul D’s escape lead from one prison to another, and more than seventeen years in captivity before he is finally freed, only to be moved around by Beloved. The joyful part for both, however, is the fact that they manage to find freedom for their bodies, although they have to continue struggling to secure the same type of freedom when it comes to their minds. One problem with the newly won freedom is to know limits. As slaves, the characters have strict rules to follow; in their new, free society, the ability to know when to stop and not to exaggerate becomes important. In this balancing act, the main negative norm at work in this novel comes to light.

The Sin of Excess

Being a part of a society always means that there are rules to follow for someone to be a complete citizen of that society. In the fictive society of Beloved, with Baby Suggs as moral fibre, excess comes to be one of the most important means of measurement of how people are supposed to behave. Knowing the limits of society thereby becomes a great theme in the novel, and the characters all have different ways of dealing with it, which is most often shown in the way they deal with love and its limits.

When Baby Suggs is first freed from slavery, her heart almost bursts with all she has to give: “She had nothing to make a living at but with her heart – which she put to work at once” (87). Not wealthy, she shelters and helps escaped slaves and others in need without asking for anything in return: “Uncalled, unrobed, unanointed, she let her great heart beat inn their presence” (87), and this unlimited love for all becomes the norm of the community. However, by not being able to help Sethe in need, not be able to secure her family in her own house, Baby Suggs loses her ability to love everybody and everything, and before she dies her care is as limited as to herself and her own concern of colours. “Love is or it ain’t. Thin love ain’t love at all,” she preaches in the clearing, but after giving all and losing all, Baby Suggs has nothing left and loses her spirit and will to live. Baby Suggs’ love has shrunk from thick to thin, a love that is not complete enough. She has lost the ability to meet her own standards and thus the standard of the community, the norm, her norm, to help others in need. If she cannot take part in helping others, her love is worth nothing, and thus her life is worth
nothing, and that is why she gives up and dies. Judging herself by her own standards, she cannot live up to the norm that is she.

In contrast to Baby Suggs, Sethe’s love is concentrated to the ones close to her heart, her family, which consists only of her children. Despite Sethe’s limited circle of concern, her love is far from thin, as she would walk through fire to save her children from bad things:

. . . far worse was what Baby Suggs died of, what Ella knew, what Stamp saw and what made Paul D tremble. That anybody white could take your whole self for anything that came to mind. Not just work, kill, or maim you, but dirty you. Dirty you so bad you couldn’t like yourself anymore. Dirty you so bad you forgot who you were and couldn’t think it up. And though she and others lived through and got over it, she could never let it happen to her own. The best thing she was, was her children. Whites might dirty her all right, but not her best thing, her beautiful, magical best thing – the part of her that was clean. (251)

The reasons for this love, as thick as obsession almost, and limited only to the ones closest to her, has often been discussed and analysed. Arelene Keizer says that the cause of Sethe’s limited love is her own mother’s abandonment of her, and the fact that Sethe never got enough milk when she was being nursed. These are tragedies at the very base of Sethe’s life, events which she tries to compensate for by being a super mother to her own children (Keizer 112). In contrast to Keizer, I believe that the reason for Sethe’s “thick” love is rather connected to her new state of freedom, as she herself states: “Look like I loved em more after I got here. Or maybe I couldn’t love em proper in Kentucky because they wasn’t mine to love. But when I got here, when I jumped down off that wagon – there wasn’t nobody in the world I couldn’t love if I wanted to” (162). As Baby Suggs, after being freed from slavery, Sethe’s heart is filled with love; the difference is that her love only concerns her own flesh and blood, and for that reason her love is almost too big for her to handle. She is free to love anyone she wants, but she chooses to love only her children, and because of that, until Paul D comes into her life, all she will and can do is look out for her children the best way she can.

In contrast to Sethe, Paul D, afraid of being hurt and of having a family others could hurt, is careful about owning things and loves as little as he can:

So you protected yourself and loved small. Picked the tiniest stars out of the sky to own, lay down with head twisted in order to see the loved one over the rim of the trench before you slept. A woman, a child, a brother – a big love like that would split you wide open in Alfred, Georgia. He knew exactly what she meant: to get to a place where you could love anything you chose – not to need permission for desire – well now, that was freedom. (162)
Being a slave, managing to escape only to be moved around for seventeen years, Paul D does not have a clue about how to love anything at all. He has never owned anything, cared for anyone or protected anyone other than himself. Because of his life, the way he has been bounced around until Sethe comes along, he has never met love and is therefore somewhat scared of Sethe and her boundless love. Not truly comprehending Sethe’s choice in murdering her own child, Paul D confronts her on the issue of her love being too thick. Sethe defends her deed, saying that she would rather kill her children then let them live their lives as slaves: “They ain’t at Sweet Home. Schoolteacher ain’t got em” (164). Paul D then points to the fact that her boys have left and that she has no knowledge of where they are. But all she does is to justify what she has done: “It ain’t my job to know what’s worse. It’s my job to know what is and keep them away from what I know is terrible. I did that” (164). Obviously, Sethe and Paul D have entirely different views on love and the limits of love. Whereas Sethe believes that love is everything, Paul D believes that love is something dangerous that you should keep at a distance.

In my reading of this novel, excess and a lack of limitations colour and control the entire fictive society. Several events demonstrate the connection between the white society’s immorality and its obvious lack of limitations when it comes to slavery. According to Linda Krumholz, this treatment stays in the mind of the victims as too much suffering to be endured (398). My claim is that excess has significant effects as the former slaves try to build a new society. Having endured and survived the horrors of white people, the former slaves cannot accept excess or lack of limitations in their own society; therefore, the women of the fictive society in Beloved are quick and hard in their judgement of both Baby Suggs and Sethe. Because Baby Suggs and Sethe could not live by the norms of society they are excluded from the community. People no longer help each other. Baby Suggs cannot bare to keep her norm up, so it changes. She loses her will to live and the community loses their will to love:

After sixty years of loosing children to the people who chewed up her [Baby Suggs] life and spit it out like a fish bone; after five years of freedom given to her by her last child, who bought her future with his, exchanged it, so to speak, so she could have one whether he did or not – to lose him too, to acquire a daughter and grandchildren and see that daughter slay the children (or try to); to belong to a community of other free Negroes – to love and be loved by them, to counsel and be counselled, protect and be protected, feed and be fed – and then to have that community step back and hold itself at a distance – well, it could wear out even a Baby Suggs, holy. (177)
Concluding this section, excess thus can be seen as the most important part which controls the entire black society, which is harshly shown in the way society treats Sethe and her family after the murder of her child. In this particular case, limits are broken, both by Baby Suggs regarding the unlimited party that she throws, and by Sethe in the actual murder of her child, and in the next section we will see how rigid the penalty of defiance can be.

**The Consequences of Excess**

As the norm of the black community, Baby Suggs is often seen as the one who does and says the right thing. She is also seen as a marker for what is accepted and what is not. In the main event of the novel – the murder of Beloved -- Baby Suggs, the norm herself, is the one who crosses the line of what is accepted. Therefore, she and her family are punished by the community. In this case, Baby Suggs represents the opposite, the one who is erroneous, and because of that the community turns its back on her family:

> To much they thought. Where does she get it all, Baby Suggs, holy? Why is she and hers always the centre of things? How come she always knows exactly what to do and when? Giving advice; passing messages; healing the sick, hiding fugitives, loving, cooking, cooking, loving, preaching, singing, dancing and loving everybody like it was her job and hers alone. (137)

After throwing an immense party in Sethe’s honour, Baby Suggs does not at first comprehend her mistake and the fact that she herself has broken the boundaries with her excess. The effect of that mistake is more horrible than imaginable: “The heart that pumped out love, the mouth that spoke the Word, didn’t count. They came in her yard one or the other might have saved her, but beaten up by the claims of both, she went to bed. The whitefolks had tired her out at last” (177). Baby Suggs who had embodied the norm, being a guideline and offered support, was neglected and rejected by the same community, and because of this Schoolteacher and his men were able to come into her home to try to collect what they saw as their property, namely Sethe and her children. Even though Baby Suggs had worked hard to receive only love and respect of her people, because of her excess, they leave her at a time of need. As Stamp Paid puts it,

> Nobody warned them and, and he’d always believed it wasn’t the exhaustion from a long day’s gorging that dulled them, but some other thing – like, well, like meanness – that let them stand aside, or not pay attention, or tell themselves somebody else was probably bearing the news already . . . (157)
Sethe, who is mentally divided from the outside world, never notices Baby Suggs’ concern with or the revulsion from the community. When the men comes for her and her children, all she can do is to save her children, and in doing so she also breaks the community’s rules of excess:

She just flew. Collected every bit of life she had made, all the parts of her that were precious and fine and beautiful, and carried, pushed, dragged them through the veil, out, away, over there where no one could hurt them. Over there. Outside this place, where they would be safe. (163)

Not seeing any problem or fault with her deed of murdering her own child, the only evil to Sethe is that she misses her child; apart from this, it even seems as though she did a good thing: “I stopped him,” she said, . . . “I took and put my babies where they’d be safe” (164). With her background as a former slave, her fear of that this will happen to her children is larger than her losing them to death. Then again, during the course of the novel, there is a change in Sethe’s personality, which is particularly shown in the end when she is put in a somewhat similar dilemma. A white man comes into her yard. She thinks it is Schoolteacher who has come to take her children away, but this time she directs her anger towards the man as she tries to stop him by killing him with an ice pick instead of trying to hurt her children: “He is coming into her yard and he is coming for her best thing . . . And if she thinks anything, it is no. No, no. Nonono. She flies. The ice pick is not in her hand; it is her hand” (162). The question is if she would have been judged as harshly by the community if she had murdered an unknown man as when she murdered her own child.

Paul D, in some sense the opposite of Sethe, has another problem with limits: they are too narrow. He thinks that his place in Sethe’s life is to make everything good by taking away all the bad. By limiting Sethe and set boundaries for her love, Paul D thinks that he can control her and make sure that she never makes a mistake like that again. But Sethe sees no problem in the love she has for her children, and, if he cannot fit into her system, she would rather see him gone than change anything. Both Paul D and Sethe stand apart from the community because they do not see themselves as part of it, Sethe because she is excluded from the beginning and because she has no room for anyone but her children, and Paul D because he thinks that he does not deserve to be a part of the community and because he comes in contact with the community at a time when the norm has slowly changed because of Baby Suggs’ abandonment of the social code. To make matters worse, Paul D punishes
himself for not being able to love and for not being able to brake through to Sethe by placing himself outside the community.

To summarise the points of this section, the community judges not only Baby Suggs for giving too much; it also judges Sethe for loving too much, and they abandon her the same way they abandoned Baby Suggs. Could she have been included? If she had begged for help, would the community have shown her kindness and sympathy? Possibly, but she did not. She holds her head up and asks no one for love or support she could not offer in return. Paul D, on the other hand, is also excluded from the community, but not in the same way. He judges himself for loving too small and is expelled from the community as he set himself outside of it and as a result of a shift in norms of the entire community. Excess is in a way the reason for all three of them ending up as outsiders. They have all been enslaved and become free, and even though they fight their individual daemons in different ways, they all end up being left on their own. In the next section, I will show how their individual situation and backgrounds are the very foundation of the choices they make, choices which put them in their respective place.

A Matter of Choice

Freedom and the right to make choices are fundamental rights that people around the world take for granted, especially in the Western parts of the world, but this has not always been the case. The former slaves we meet in Beloved fight for their freedom and the right to make decisions about their own lives, and even when they have been granted freedom, the ability to make the right choices is still not achieved. The difficulty of making the right choice is shown as even Baby Suggs, the norm herself, breaks the social code as she chooses to give too much. She also chooses the easy way out of life; she quits fighting and gives up, afraid that God will punish her: “God puzzled her and she was too ashamed of Him to say so. Instead she told Stamp she was going to bed to think about the colours of things. He tried to dissuade her . . . suddenly Baby declared peace. She just up and quit” (177). The fact that even the character who is the norm impersonated makes choices that go against the norms of the community shows the importance of the past and excess. As Baby Suggs says, “everything depends on knowing how much . . . Good is knowing when to stop” (87). These boundaries are shown both in the lack of limitations of the white people in their treatment of the African Americans, and in the way Baby Suggs breaks the rules of the community.
Sethe’s decision to kill her child also has to be seen in context of her past and the lack of limitations when it comes to the love she has for her children. Sethe blames only herself for the killing until Baby Suggs points out that the real responsibility lies with the white people and the inhumane system they have imposed upon blacks: “Those white things have taken all I had or dreamed,” she [Baby Suggs] said, “and broke my heart stings too. There is no bad luck but whitefolks” (89). As Peggy Ochoa shows, Sethe and Beloved are both women who are left defenceless by one whom they have loved and whom they thought would protect them. Just as Beloved is rejected by Sethe, Sethe herself is abandoned by her husband Halle (Ochoa 116). Halle has been murdered by the slaveholders, a fact that Sethe does not know. She manages to escape on her own only to face an impossible choice: to allow her child to be ripped from her arms and returned to slavery, or to end the child’s life mercifully and quickly. The mother kills her daughter so that “there was nothing there to claim.” (149) Paradoxically, there is nothing left for the mother to claim either, as her child is dead.

Even if Sethe is still captured and afraid in mind, at least, right or wrong as it may be, she is free enough to make a choice. The story of Paul D, on the other hand, is quite different as he himself does not understand what it is to be free until the very end of the novel, when he saves Sethe, who has almost decided to follow the example of Baby Suggs, to give up and die. After attempting to escape the slaveholders but being captured and enslaved over and over again, he never really grasps what freedom is. After meeting Sethe, he tries to rescue her and her children by making the ghost go away and thereby pushing the evil out the door. What he does not realize is that Sethe is not a victim of this ghost; it is her choice to keep it. Also, while Paul D tries to make choices for Sethe, he is still being pushed around and out by Beloved. In the end, living in a cellar underneath the church, alone, outside Sethe’s family and the entire community, he finally finds freedom and is free to make the choice to help free Sethe from her daemons, instead of forcing them out himself, and that eventually sets them both free, in body and mind. As a consequence, Sethe is loved both by Paul D and by the community of black women who initially rejected her.

The African community and its meaning in Beloved have been heavily discussed by many literary critics. According to Therese E Higgins, the ghost Beloved represents both the past and slavery; she cannot be fought by one individual but only through the power of the community (Higgins 103). When it comes to decision-making and exclusion, the women of the community seem to have particular importance as they are the ones who determine the acceptance level within the community. At first they celebrate Sethe’s successful escape from slavery. 28 days afterward they criticise the feast Baby Suggs has thrown and begin to reflect
on the large quantity of the celebration and feel offended by it: “Her friends and neighbours were angry at her because she had overstepped, given too much, offended them by excess” (138). This resentment then puts into play the episodes which follow, namely the failure of the community to warn Baby Suggs and Sethe of Schoolteacher’s approach and the following murder of Beloved. Once Sethe kills her baby, is jailed and then freed, the community rejects her and her children. Her failure to seek support in the community is perceived as arrogance, which cannot be and is not tolerated by the community as a whole, and not by women in particular. Sethe, on her part, believes that the community will not help her even if she asks, which is wrong (Higgins 104). According to the community, Sethe acts in a negative way when she murders her child, but Sethe herself justifies her deed because there was no alternative available. Paul D is also excluded, mostly by his own choice, but partly for being connected to Sethe, and his salvation comes through the community and its understanding of Sethe.

Summarising the final chapter concerning the matter of choice, I can further state that excess and lack of limitations are both qualities that are not accepted within the community of this novel. As Baby Suggs chooses to cross the line and gives too much, her family is severely punished by the community’s exclusion. Freedom, in contrast to slavery, is also an important point. Thus, as even though a character is free from slavery, there are boundaries within society which have to be followed which is shown in the choices Sethe and Paul D make. Not only the individuals, but also the entire community, are marked by slavery. Therefore, it is important for the individuals to stay within these boundaries in order to be accepted. The norm of the society is initially set by Baby Suggs, but determined, ultimately, as events show, by the community.
Conclusion

My aim in this essay was to analyse the main characters in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* and to examine how the characters deal with daily situations and problems as former slaves from an ethical point of view in terms of Normative Ethics. By analysing Sethe and Paul D in light of Baby Suggs as the ethical norm, I have been able to show how they react to ethical dilemmas in life, and to what extent these relations follow the ethical norm of their community.

The first section of the essay, **The Role of the Past**, shows how Baby Suggs, Sethe and Paul D all are severely marked by their past as slaves and that they all react to it in different ways. Baby Suggs uses her pain to spread her wings around the black community as a shield, offering love, comfort and salvation. She thus becomes the ethical norm and the moral backbone of the community, someone for the rest of the community to lean on and to follow. Both Sethe and Paul D try hard not to face their past, which leads to them both living it over and over again. Sethe tries to forget her pain and memories to the point that she cannot even move forward as to have a future. And Paul D has lost his sense of self and refuses to look into the past to find it, which prevents him from moving forward.

The second section of the analysis, **A Struggle for Freedom**, shows other problems than just the past when it comes to the characters making the right choices in life. To be able to make a choice, the characters need to be free. In the case of Baby Suggs, she becomes free the second she steps foot on liberated ground, and she starts to impersonate and preach the ability of a free mind and soul. But the other characters in my analysis do not grasp freedom as quickly as Baby Suggs. Sethe only expresses her freedom through her children and the way she saves them, and although she herself is free, her attachment to her children and their welfare is so enormous that she never even notices herself. Above this, Paul D is the character most excluded from the feeling of freedom. Being tossed around all his life by slaveholders and others, he is not even free to stay where he wishes.

The third and fourth sections, **The Sin of Excess** and **the Consequences of Excess**, cast a light on the importance of knowing the limits of society. In *Beloved*, the social code is set by Baby Suggs and her unlimited love. Her love and devotion, care and offering are spread around the community as the moral backbone for all: the community in *Beloved* is a helping community, but there is a change as Baby Suggs breaks her own rules and disobeys them. Sethe’s love, on the other hand, is directed only towards her own children to a point where the community cannot accept her: thus she and her children are excluded from the community. Scared of being hurt, Paul D tries to forget his past; his love is thus limited to
dead things like the stars, which nobody can hurt or take away from him. Because he never experiences love, Paul D is scared of the love Sethe showers her family with. He thinks she loves too much and tries to limit and set boundaries for her love by excluding the ghost Beloved from her life. In conclusion, I would like to point out that knowing the limits of society proves to be one of the most important parts of Beloved as the characters who break the social code are severely punished.

In the fifth section, A Matter of Choice, I have shown the difficulty of making choices without freedom. Even Baby Suggs breaks the social codes of society. Sethe, who has not grasped her free state, prefers her children being dead and free instead of being alive and enslaved. The murder she commits is a consequence of her past and the fact that the love she has for her children is limitless. The choice Sethe makes when she murders her child is not an active choice but a reflex of her doing everything she can for the children to avoid slavery, for the children to be a part of her past. As shown in this essay, Paul D is not free enough to make decisions until the very end of the novel. However, Paul D’s choice to come back and rescue Sethe from dying is connected to him being free from his own boundaries and thus he feels love for Sethe and can help her in a way he could not before. Paul D’s love is connected with the community’s as they work together to exclude Beloved from Sethe’s life.

In all societies around the world, there are rules and regulations for how people who live in that particular society are supposed to act. These rules are set by a norm which shows what the boundaries of that society are and what the punishment for crossing those borders is. In Beloved, where society is filled with people in the company of horrible memories of slavery and enclosure, I believe these boundaries have to be particularly strict as the community tries to heal its wounds and build a future. Even if freedom can be seen as the most important theme of this novel, this does not mean that the community does not desire rules and regulations. To be free is to be able to live in a society and know the limits without having to ponder on them on a regular basis. Only when the individual is free in body, mind and soul he or she can be able to experience freedom of life, love and choice.
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