Trunk and Branches - Aspects of Tree Imagery in Toni Morrison's Beloved

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Introduction

Situated in the mid-19th century, the novel *Beloved* by Toni Morrison illustrates how the American black population, subjected to racism and marginalization, suffer the tremendous burden of slavery. The institution of slavery’s horrendous dehumanization, separation of families and deprivation of basic human rights and needs is clearly present in the novel.

Against this backdrop, Morrison shuffles the reader from one place to another; back and forth in time. The characters shun memories from their pasts and memories are either forced out from a character’s mind or locked up within.

The imagery of trees repeatedly occurs throughout the novel, in various scenes and with plural meanings, with the effect of providing an additional level of possible interpretation, and consequently, depth. Trees are represented to be both benevolent and harmful, and these different representations permeate *Beloved*. Therefore, highlighting scenes in which tree imagery is connected to both positive and negative outcomes for the characters is significant.

With this said, I argue that a main usage of tree imagery is in connection to the life and death struggles of the main characters in *Beloved*. Throughout the novel, struggles are a prominent feature of all the main characters’ lives, and I intend to show that these struggles often are linked to tree imagery. Since slavery is the reason for these struggles I also aim to analyse the relation between tree imagery and slavery and, most importantly, the effects of this relationship.

The essay is divided into two major parts: The Tree of Life and The Family Tree. The Tree of Life is a metaphor used not only to depict life but also birth and death. The circle of life is much present in *Beloved*, given that many of the characters are already dead or long gone when the actual plot takes place. Also, the fact that one of the main characters has gone through the life-circle twice, lived, died and resurrected, is of decisive importance.
The second part, Family Tree, is relevant because family is one of the driving forces in the novel. Slavery in connection with family takes on a special meaning, as the separation of the family is one of the most evil aspects of slavery.

The links between family members are often represented as parts of a tree, where the oldest members are depicted as the trunk and the youngest members as the branches, and there are many instances in *Beloved* where family members are illustrated as belonging to different parts of a tree.

The essay will be based on my reading of *Beloved*, previous research and interviews with Morrison.

Summary of *Beloved*

As mentioned, *Beloved* is a novel which takes us back and forth in time, to the present and to memories from the past, and it “revolves around the wish to forget and a necessity to remember” (Mandel 585). The novel opens with stating that the house, in which the former slave Sethe and her daughter Denver live, is “full of a baby’s venom” (Morrison 3). The baby is Sethe’s dead daughter whose spirit haunts their house on Bluestone Road 124.

The reason for the haunting, the reader gradually finds out, is that Sethe eighteen years earlier made a horrific choice. She was driven to a point beyond imagination for most people, where she rather sees her children die by her own hand than being killed, mentally, spiritually and, most likely, also physically by white slave-owners.

Sethe’s innermost fear, is for her children to grow up marked by slavery’s dehumanization and therefore, she escapes from the Sweet Home farm where she and her children are held as slaves. Twenty-eight days later, the sinister slave owner schoolteacher
finally finds her, and instead of letting schoolteacher get her children, she decides to kill all of them including herself, only succeeding with one, her oldest daughter.

Her deed keeps the children from slavery, but the family is torn apart and the spirit of the child who Sethe managed to kill is outraged. The child’s spirit comes back to haunt Sethe’s house and her two sons, Howard and Buglar, abandon her. The people who live in the community are scared to even pass the house and Sethe and Denver become more and more isolated. Grief, loneliness and memories which have to be kept at bay fills the house and the family inhabiting it.

The isolation is finally broken when Paul D Garner, Sethe’s fellow slave at Sweet Home, one day walks “into this landscape of regret” (Snitow 48). He makes the baby ghost disappear and moves in in her stead. Paul D and Sethe become lovers, and Denver is lonelier than ever.

When Beloved one day appears, all is altered. She appears to be the daughter who Sethe, out of love, killed eighteen years earlier. Denver becomes almost obsessed with this new “sister”. Gradually, Beloved forces Sethe to face her past, especially the tremendous guilt she has for taking the life of her “crawling already?” baby daughter. Soon, both Denver and Sethe believe the woman named Beloved in reality is the baby ghost incarnate, and a possessive, dangerous love emerges between Sethe and Beloved.

Trees as Symbols

Nature has always fascinated humans and according to professor of psychology David Fontana, trees have been worshipped in almost every culture. In some cultures certain trees were labelled as holy, and some species were given certain meanings and regarded higher than others. These holy trees could as well be idealized symbols, such as the Tree of Life. The word “symbol” means that something is representing or denoting something else (The
Concise Oxford Dictionary). A symbol has one meaning or function within itself, but also carries a different possible interpretation and meaning.

Hence, many symbols do not merely imply an unequivocal meaning, but have ambiguous explanations depending on the context. J.C Cooper, who has written and lectured extensively on the subject of symbolism, states that a green tree usually stands for eternal life, immortality and undead spirits, whereas a leaf-shedding tree represents new life, rebirth and resurrection. “Trees are grounded in the earth, but at the same time raise their branches towards the heavens…. as accommodators between the high and the low” (Biederman 430, my translation). Trees have been associated with different symbolic meanings such as life, family and knowledge.

The symbolic meaning of the Tree of Life is that it represents total harmony with the beginning and end of a full life circle. The twelve fruits the tree typically carries are manifestations of the sun, and are rewards for spiritual growth. The fruits have different meanings: love, truth, wisdom and beauty, and whoever eats from these fruits gain eternal life. The Tree of Life transcends both good and evil.

A common symbol for family and family structure is the tree. This is due to the tree’s appearance, with a trunk and branches growing from the trunk, which resembles the idea of children springing up from their parents.

Trees can be used as metaphors in other fields as well. In science, trees are used as symbolic images for important subjects, such as the genetic code called DNA, the blueprint of life, which often is associated with the term “Tree of Life”. Moreover, when Charles Darwin scientifically charted the “relationships of organisms in space and time…the concept of the Tree of Life [emerged]” (Graves 1621).

Many religions also use tree imagery, but with different meanings and interpretations. The one common denominator is the importance which trees enclose. Morrison’s text has
many parallels to Christianity (Ochoa 1999) and in Christian religion trees serve many purposes.

Christians believe that Jesus was a carpenter, working with trees and the shaping of wood, and his death on the wooden cross is viewed as the final sacrifice. The Garden of Eden has the Tree of Life in the middle which, as its name implies, is a symbol for life itself. The life that God has created is symbolized by a tree, and it changes throughout the seasons to represent life, death and resurrection. A tree that is dead, and does not change, represents the sinner. Both good and evil are characterized by trees.

Trees are important in African religions as well. The continent of Africa has many diverse religions, and trees have different meanings in different religions. Trees are seen to keep both positive and negative powers, claims Olof Pettersson, and depending on the religion, they are either treated with homage or with fear. Both Tyler and Lévy-Bruhl have extensively researched African societies and their religions, and have found that trees and other objects, which in Western society are regarded impersonal, are seen as having a soul or being gods and goddesses.

The importance trees carry in almost all religions, display their importance as mystical items which we subscribe different meanings. In *Beloved*, trees also have various meanings and interpretations, which can be looked at differently for every reader. Here follows my interpretation of the meaning of them.

The Tree of Life

The Tree of Life is a general metaphor for all aspects of life: being born, living and dying. The representation of life is portrayed as a tree, since the life cycle of a tree is visual with new green leaves, shedding leaves, and, eventually, the loss of leaves.
The Tree of Life is an important symbolic interpretation when examining the trees in *Beloved*, because of the central distinction between life and death, mainly that of Beloved’s death and following resurrection.

The killing of Beloved is the central act in *Beloved*, and the remorse and guilt that Sethe feels for the killing is apparent in every scene, even in the scenes where she is desperately defending her choice, “if I hadn’t killed her she would have died” (Morrison 236). It is not until later in the novel that the truth about the death of Sethe’s daughter is known, because Sethe does not speak of it, it is too painful. The atmosphere in the house is sombre, regretful, empty of life.

Sethe experiences many traumatizing events in her life, and the memories she has from these events she represses, as she does with her memory of killing her daughter. Some of these events are threatening to rise up to the surface; if she loses focus for a flicker of a moment, memories can ascend and threaten to overpower her. Sethe tries to withhold them with all her might, but the painful, fragmented memories that she has from her life as a slave and a fugitive are constantly relived.

As a strategy for not reacting too much to some of these memories, trees function as a screen. An example is Sethe seeing two fellow slaves hanged in trees, and afterwards remembering the trees over the boys. The sentence, “boys hanging from the most beautiful sycamores in the world” (Morrison 7) seems to emphasise the beauty of the trees rather than stress the fact that the boys are dead, and this illustrates how her mind works to protect her from horrific images. As mentioned earlier, the mind has a powerful capacity of blocking, “forgetting”, situations too difficult to cope with, in order to survive mentally.

Sethe’s horrible experiences from slavery, where white people could own other people, and treat them almost however they pleased, are brutal and therefore many of her memories are shielded in order for her to stay sane. Some of them, like the image of the farm where she
was held as a slave, are replaced by trees. Tree imagery functions as a screen which replaces the evil which stems from slavery, with peaceful images of beautiful trees.

While Sethe most likely survives mentally due to tree imagery blocking her memories from slavery, all Sweet Home men, except Paul F who is sold, die by trees; Sixo is tied to a tree and burned, and Paul A is hanged from a tree. Halle, Sethe’s husband, is probably also hanged, since Sethe sees two men who are hanged but does not recognize either of them, “one had Paul A’s shirt on but not his feet or his head” (Morrison 233). It is likely that Halle, the only man whose ending is not told, is the unrecognizable one hanging next to Paul A, since we know the fate of all the other men. The one thing we know about Halle is that he becomes crazy, which might serve as a motif for schoolteacher to hang him.

The murders of the Sweet Home men might function as a counterweight to Sethe’s struggle to live. Both life and death are connected to tree imagery. For the men, whose attempted escape from Sweet Home end with death, and Sethe, who manages to flee, the trees signal a departure from slavery.

During her time at Sweet Home, one of the worst events for Sethe is when she is being labelled as having animal characteristics. Schoolteacher asks the slaves questions, measure their bodies and writes the information down in his notebook with the ink made of trees; cherry gum and oak bark. Sethe feels guilt that the ink he uses to write it all down with, is made by her, as Lorie Fulton puts it: “she cannot help but feel that she facilitated her abuse by making the ink he used to record those characteristics” (191). Sethe tries to explain this to her daughter Denver: “He liked the ink I made…He preferred how I mixed it and it was important to him because at night he sat down to write in his book” (Morrison 44). She believes that if she had not made the ink from the trees, schoolteacher would not have been able to label them animals. Of course he would merely use somebody else’s ink, but Sethe does not reflect over this fact. In her eyes it is the ink’s as well as her fault.
The explanation why the ink makes Sethe suffer much more than what a spoken comment might have her suffer, lies in the authority of the written word. Schoolteacher’s distorted opinion, that coloured people have animalistic features, is given more power when written down. Not many slaves were able to read and write and therefore the written word was given more power than the spoken word, which is why Sethe could not disregard it.

When Sethe finally escapes from Sweet Home and schoolteacher, she runs, even though pregnant with her daughter Denver, so much that she finally can not stand on her two feet. She runs through a forest, and is at the brink of giving up, when the white girl Amy Denver “come[s] out [of] the trees” (Morrison 220) and helps her to a lean-to where she can rest. Amy Denver functions, in my view, as a guardian angel. It is quite extraordinary, first, that they even meet, and, secondly, that Amy finds it in her heart to help Sethe, which might be due to the fact that they both are “lawless outlaws” (Morrison 100).

Without the presence of Amy and her prophetic healing, Sethe would surely have died; Amy’s good hands and kind heart helps the desperate Sethe through the ordeal of surviving an escape, pregnant and half dead. What is interesting is that Amy’s breath is described as being “like burning wood” (Morrison 92) which proves that one function for trees in the novel is to accompany the characters’ struggles, here the struggle for life. Additionally, Amy is not part of the ruling white society, and maybe therefore her connection with nature and trees is used as an effect to further detach her from slavery and white society.

During the escape, Sethe’s feet have turned swollen from running on bare ground, but Amy massages them “back to life” (Morrison 91). Amy also provides the bed of leaves that shelters Sethe’s bruised and battered body from lying too hard on the ground, and makes shoes that Sethe wears to protect her swollen feet, which are stuffed with leaves. Tree imagery, here displayed as leaves from trees in the forest and connected to the presence of Amy Denver, makes Sethe’s escape from slavery to freedom possible.
It is not only the struggle and escape of Sethe that is made achievable because of trees; Paul D’s escape from the horrific prison in Alfred, Georgia is facilitated by following the blossoming tree flowers:

He raced from dogwood to blossoming peach. When they thinned out he headed for the cherry blossoms, then magnolia, chinaberry, pecan, walnut, and prickly pear. At last he reached a field of apple trees whose flowers were just becoming tiny knots of fruit. Spring sauntered north, but he had to run like hell to keep it as his travelling companion…. When he lost them, and found himself without so much as a petal to guide him, he paused, climbed a tree on a hillock and scanned the horizon for a flash of pink or white in the leaf world that surrounded him. (Morrison 133)

Paul D’s journey to Northern freedom is as dependent on trees as Sethe’s. The tree flowers, as Bonnet so eloquently puts it, “signal his passage from symbolic death to symbolic life; being active catalysts of his spiritual rebirth, they are shown to have a creative force of their own, the faculty of generating the life that goes with freedom” (Bonnet). Paul D runs from the winter of life in prison, which is synonymous with death, to spring; blossoming tree flowers and freedom, which here is synonymous with life. He runs away from the white Southern society, which in the 19th century was built on slavery, towards the woods and the freedom of the North.

However, in the beginning section of the escape, the Southern trees are more hindrance than help. Paul D and his fellow inmates fought the trees during a heavy rain: “Moss wiped their faces as they fought the live-oak branches that blocked their way” (Morrison 131). They run for their lives but the trees make it almost impossible since there is only one chain that holds all prisoners locked together; “For one lost, all lost. The chain that held them would save all or none” (Morrison 130). The oak branches have them struggling, and the effect created is that the trees delay the possibility to reach freedom. Here the effect of tree imagery connected to slavery is a negative one, displaying the diverse nature of tree imagery in the novel.
Trees are not only important for physical escapes, for they can also facilitate a spiritual one, which Denver, Sethe’s youngest child, discovers. She is a lonely child and deeply afraid of going too far from the house, because she is aware of her low status in comparison to white people, and dares not risk to cross their path. This makes Denver a prisoner of slavery as well, even though not owned or chained. Denver seeks refuge in the boxwood bushes in her garden, which are planted in a circle to create a space in the middle, when she needs to get away from the house. Her constant isolation from the outer world creates a solitary existence. In the boxwood bushes she feels safe and secure, and in this shielded area she relieves her stress and masturbates: “Veiled and protected by the live green walls, she felt ripe and clear, and salvation was as easy as a wish” (Morrison 5). In this room in the forest, Denver’s fantasy roams free, and she needs it, since static life and “loneliness wore her out. Wore her out” (Morrison 35). The effect of the boxwood bushes keeps, in some manner, Denver struggling for a better life as well. She escapes her everyday life for a while, and, as for Sethe and Paul D, trees lead the way to, some extent of, release and freedom.

As seen, trees can aid or obstruct struggles for freedom from enslavement. Sethe’s greatest struggle for freedom takes place in her own mind: how to let go of her past. When Beloved returns from the dead, she seems to, like the trees, both help and hinder Sethe. Whatever her function or functions, Beloved appears to be a catalyst for Sethe’s suppressed past, since she seems to reawaken memories and open up many closed doors, previously locked because of their horrific content. Sethe’s and Denver’s struggles for liveable lives are made possible because of Beloved, and since she often is linked to tree imagery, another connection between life and death struggles and tree imagery can be drawn. Beloved is the catalyst that pushes the “play”-button on the previously paused lives, and ironically, it is the dead that sparks life in the living.
Previous to Beloved’s resurrection, Sethe does not truly live: she is shut down, and Denver is a prisoner to her own fears. Their lives revolve around avoiding the past and fearing white people. This repression and fear causes a loss of identity, since their pasts are not included in their self-image, and a disconnected, fragmented self emerges. Certainly, Beloved is the one who makes Sethe face her past and eventually forces Denver to go outside the house. As a result, both Sethe and Denver ultimately retrieve some of their former identities.

A warning by Ann Snitow informs us about the consequences for those who survived slavery if this is not accomplished, “those who remain must exorcise the deadly past from their hearts or die themselves” (47). The past must be accepted if a reintegration of the disconnected self is to occur.

Since trees symbolically are in connection with both life and death, and Beloved is representative of both, having both lived and died and resurrected, the different views that Beloved is either compared to a dead or a living tree can be debated. Beloved is, according to Bonnet, “constantly associated with a felled tree” (Bonnet). To support this argument Bonnet points to a quote in Beloved: “Up and down the lumberyard fence old roses were dying. The sawyer who had planted them twelve years ago to give his workplace a friendly feel – something to take the sin out of slicing trees for a living – was amazed by their abundance” (Morrison 57). Bonnet argues that the word “slicing” from this quote is a parallel of the slicing of trees to the slicing of Beloved’s throat, and therefore Beloved should be viewed as a felled tree. Also, Bonnet claims that a parallel can be drawn between the sawyer and Sethe: the sawyer slices trees and so did Sethe, and in spite of her reason for doing so, she is still judged:

even if no explicit judgment is passed on Sethe's deed, even if we are given a number of unquestionably good reasons that partly legitimate her decision, she is nevertheless shown to commit a major transgression in deciding to cut her daughter's throat since she infringes upon a principle whose sacredness is postulated by the narrator's remark on the sawyer's sin and demonstrated by the nourishing quality of the tree. (Bonnet)
Bonnet believes Beloved to be a felled tree, for she was sliced when she was alive and has therefore come back as a felled tree to Sethe. Late in the novel, Denver reflects over Sethe’s ability to trigger Beloved’s rage and set of her accusations of Sethe abandoning her, almost as if “Sethe didn’t really want forgiveness given; she wanted it refused” (Morrison 297). Sethe does not believe she deserves forgiveness, she agrees with the rest of the community, and the sawyer, that there lies a sin in slicing trees, taking a growing life, and that she had committed this sin and therefore should not be forgiven.

The community’s judgement of Sethe’s action, as well as the word “sin” describe how Sethe’s deed might be viewed considering certain moral aspects, such as the sacredness of life. Sethe however, attempts to legitimize her action: “I couldn’t let her nor any of em live under schoolteacher. That was out” (Morrison 192). Sethe persistently justifies her action, she can not bear to think that she might have made a mistake, and that killing her daughter was not really saving her. “To admit any doubt to herself about the murder of her daughter would be to admit more pain than she can tolerate” (Daniels 352) and possibly, this justification is part of her strategy for survival; she can not mentally afford to question herself and her deed.

Another reason why Bonnet believes Morrison associates Beloved with a felled tree is that the very first meeting between Sethe and Beloved occurs when Beloved is “lying on [a] tree stump” (Morrison 292). Bonnet associates this with Beloved being a felled tree, a stump. I would argue, like Lorie Fulton, that Morrison uses living tree imagery instead, and that Beloved is like a new sprout which is reawakened to life after the original tree has been chopped down. She is not a representation of the felled tree, but of a new life aspiring from it. Therefore, when she is found on the stump she is not a felled tree, as Bonnet argues, but a fresh sprout. Paul D’s description that Beloved “Just shot up one day” (Morrison 276) supports the idea of a new life shooting up from the stump. Moreover, the fact that Sethe’s water broke when seeing Beloved, is an association to new life, rather than felled life.
Furthermore, after being found on the stump, Beloved acts like a sprout that has not been watered for long; she has difficulties keeping her head up, she is weak and has not the power yet to sit straight, “Her neck…kept bending and her chin brushed the bit of lacing edging her dress “(Morrison 60). When she is taken into the house she drinks cup after cup of water. After the drinking, she falls asleep but now sits “bolt upright in the chair” (Morrison 64). Beloved acts like a dry plant which needs water, and after the drinking she becomes refreshed and has her trunk and leaves revitalized and lifted high. This scene also supports the idea of Beloved being portrayed as a living tree rather than a felled tree.

An explanation why Beloved is linked with living tree imagery can be explained by the symbolical interpretation that a living tree stands for undead spirits, which is what Beloved truly is. Why tree imagery is at all related to Beloved can be explained with tree imagery’s relation to struggles, and Beloved’s struggle for returning from the dead. Her exhausting voyage to return to 124, constantly having to rest, falling asleep of fatigue from the long journey, is indirectly also connected with trees, since her behaviour is described by the other characters, and the narrator, as tree- like.

Fighting and struggling is highly present for all the main characters throughout Beloved, whether it is struggling for life and escaping death or escaping an enslaved by death. These struggles are a result of slavery, how to survive it mentally and physically, and often described in connection to tree imagery and the ever present circle of life.

The Family Tree

Within the institution of slavery, coloured people were considered merchandise and there was accordingly no consideration left for families, who were separated for economical profit. Slaves were conceived as deficient in some emotional sense, and “not considered fully
human” (Currie 9), and therefore it was not regarded morally condemnable to sell off certain members of a family, the same way as it is not regarded condemnable to sell off cattle or other animals.

Slavery is, by Roger Lockhurst, described as an “active disorganization of [the] community” (qtd in Kaplan 515). Slaves were purchased depending on what the buyer needed; a strong man, a fertile woman, or a child who had many years of labor still ahead, and not depending on what the slaves’ needed. Parents did not own their children, and the children had no rights to their parents. All belonged to the master/mistress and were dependent on his/her benevolence.

Family plays a major role in Beloved, and both one’s blood-related family as well as the community can be seen as belonging to the same family. The Sweet Home men were like brothers and they acted as a small extended family and Baby Suggs, with her gatherings at the Clearing, took the role of community mother, guiding and giving support to the rest of the community. In Beloved, both the inner family circle as well as the community as a family are significant, and the importance of having a family is a major theme.

Since family never was a certainty for slaves, who lived with the constant fear of being sold and their family being shattered, the implication of having a family was that it was a blessing, one was fortunate if the whole family was intact. The action Sethe performs when killing her baby daughter is therefore looked upon as an act of treachery by the community; white people murdered black children, not black people. A woman who takes the life of her own and then walks with her head “a bit too high” (Morrison 179) is not given much sympathy. Compared to other slaves’ situations hers was fortunate – she had all her children with the same man, and lived with them as a family. Not many slaves had the same opportunity, and luck, as Sethe. When Sethe does what slave owners usually do, separate the
child from the parent, she performs a sinful act, which she will pay for during the rest of her life.

In Sethe’s view the act is one of mercy. She wants to protect her children, who she believes are “the part of her that was clean” (Morrison 296). Sethe constructs her whole identity through her role as a mother, and the text implies that this can be dangerous, because “unless carefree, mother love was a killer” (Morrison 155) and a life as a fugitive slave is seldom carefree. At various points in the novel, Sethe’s idea of mother love is commented upon as being too extreme.

Consequently, when schoolteacher finally locates where his escaped slaves live and comes to collect his “property”, Sethe’s mother love drives her to do, what she believes, the only thing she can to keep them safe. She protects the branches of her family tree, not by hiding them, but by ripping them off. She does not use a knife, but a saw, to be able to saw off the branches. The shed in which this is executed is also a woodshed, a symbolical place for separating the family tree. When schoolteacher opens the door to the shed he sees “two boys [that] bled in the sawdust” (Morrison 175), someone has been sawing real wood in the shed, and now blood from the boys and dust from trees is mixed, all are sawed branches. The struggle for having a life outside of slavery results in death for one of the children, and a significantly altered life for the rest.

In the scene where Sethe performs the most obvious evidence of slavery’s viciousness, killing one’s child rather than seeing them live under slavery, there are multiple links to trees; the woodshed, the handsaw and the sawdust. The connection between slavery and tree imagery becomes obvious since the killing is a direct result of slavery, and the threat of returning to it.

Another link between the killing of the child and tree imagery occurs when Sethe runs to the woodshed with her children. Stamp Paid, a former slave who now helps fugitive slaves,
describes it as Sethe “split to the woodshed to kill her children” (Morrison 186). The word “split” is in Fulton’s view a mark of the split within Sethe, “her psychic, emotional break” (191). This reading seems inadequate as there is no split in Sethe’s mind, she is fully aware of what she is doing and rationalizes it, even though she feels guilty and certainly would have preferred not having to go to such extremes, but to kill the children was at this particular time the best way to save them according to Sethe. Arguably, the word “split” can instead be related to the fact that the family tree is split; branches are divided and shattered. Sethe is most definitely the trunk of the family tree, and therefore she is the one who “splits”.

As mentioned, at one point in the novel Morrison cautions Beloved’s destructive behaviour towards Sethe with the phrase, “Ax the trunk, the limb will die” (Morrison 285) and with that sentence Morrison gives Sethe the role of the trunk and Beloved that of the limb or branch. This further reinforces the argument that Sethe can be looked upon as the trunk of a family tree.

The use of the word “split” reoccurs in the novel, which supports the view that it is used in connection to tree imagery. When Sethe and her family plan to run away from Sweet Home Halle, Sethe’s husband does not show up. Therefore, Sethe sends the children forward alone. Her mind struggles with the choice of continuing the escape towards her children or making sure that her husband is ready to leave as well. To choose which part of the family tree needed her aid most tears Sethe apart, and she describes it as being “split in two” (Morrison 238). Sethe expresses a sensation of being divided, but uses the word split, which can be used for trees as well, and again connects Sethe’s struggle to live, and maintain her family, with tree imagery.

Another instance when the word “split” is used is when Sethe, Denver and Beloved one day go ice-skating. On the ice, Sethe “discover[s] that she could not only do a split, but that it hurt” (Morrison 205). Sethe is determined to keep her family together, in life or in death. Her
radical standpoint proves to have opposite effect when the outcome of her deed makes both her boys run off, and her oldest daughter the only one dead, alone on the other side. When the killed daughter comes back to Sethe in the form of Beloved, Sethe realizes that she can see her family tree “split”, she can handle it, but it did hurt, and guilt is ever present.

It is not only Sethe’s family structure that is linked to tree imagery. Tree imagery is used to also depict Sixo’s, one of the slaves at Sweet Home, family as well. When Sixo makes an unsuccessful attempt to escape he is punished with death by schoolteacher, who believes Sixo no longer is suitable for the work schoolteacher wants him to perform. Sixo is strapped to a tree and a fire is lit underneath him. When he starts singing and calling out “Seven-O! Seven-O!” (Morrison 267) the men shoot him to silence. The reason for Sixo’s giddiness is that his “blossoming seed” (Morrison 270), which he has named Seven-O, lies in the womb of a woman who Sixo believes has managed to escape. Morrison uses a tree metaphor when describing how Sixo views his unborn child, to once again connect tree imagery to family.

Paul D, on the other hand, does not have a family, but surrogates his desire for one with a tree, which he names “Brother”. That name symbolizes something more than merely a tree and, as Bonnet points out, “The tree’s very name, Brother, emphasises not only its animate but human-like nature” (Bonnet). Paul D also refers to trees as “things you could trust and be near; talk to if you wanted to” (Morrison 25) and with this statement gives them human-like qualities and characteristics. The absence of family and intimate relationships, apart from those with the other Sweet Home men, makes Paul D turn to trees and see them as company and companions.

The trees at Sweet Home are described as being very beautiful and giving shelter and the men at Sweet Home talk, laugh and eat their meals underneath “Brother”. However, trees on plantations do not always provide refuge and happiness, for as Glenda Weather points out; “many of these trees… provided limbs and switches for whipping and gallows for lynching”
For many slaves trees were not seen as beautiful and giving shelter, but looked at with terror, for they carried the weapons and were the elements which they could be punished with or hanged from.

Schoolteacher beat his slaves, both as punishment and to make statements such as “definitions belonged to the definers - not the defined” (Morrison 225). When Sethe is caught sending her children away from Sweet Home she experiences a brutal whipping on her back, which results in massive scarring. These scars are described by Amy Denver as a tree:

It’s a tree, Lu. A chokecherry tree. See, here’s the trunk – it’s red and split wide open, full of sap, and this here’s the parting for the branches. You got a mighty lot of branches. Leaves, too, look like, and dern if these ain’t blossoms. Tiny little cherry blossoms, just as white. Your back got a whole tree on it. In bloom. (Morrison 93)

After this comment by Amy, Sethe always refers to her scars as “a tree”. Replacing the mark left by the white boys with a symbol from nature, a tree, makes it is easier to accept than that the brutality she has faced bares witness on her back as a “revolting clump of scars” (Morrison 25) as Paul D later puts it.

One interpretation of the scars is that slavery always will be branded on Sethe’s back, a mark too far from her eye to see, but nevertheless present. Like the memories Sethe can not rid herself from, the scars never go away, but she does not fully face them either. As said, many of the traumas Sethe has experienced are replaced with images of trees. Her scar is yet another brutality which Sethe distance herself from, and in its place a tree emerges. If nature is viewed as the opposite to society and slavery, which caused the scar, Sethe does not have to be reminded that Sweet Home is placed on her back.

Another possible interpretation of the scars are that they show a family tree, since shortly after the brutal beating Sethe escapes and becomes solely responsible for her children, given that her husband Halle does not have the psychological strength to continue with the escape, and is missing when the time to run comes. Sethe carries the children, the branches, on her own.
After the escape, and the arrival at 124, Sethe and her family have, at first, good help from Baby Suggs, Sethe’s mother-in-law, and the community. The community acts as an extended family, where support and aid is given. Baby Suggs is in many peoples’ eyes the community mother, for she holds sermons at the Clearing, a glade in the forest that the people go to instead of to the church, preaching about the importance of self-worth. Because the Clearing lies in the woods, it might act as a connector to their African heritage. Rachel Elizabeth Harding claims:

[African] religions all reflect a powerful, shielding spirit whose roots and branches represent the links between the spiritual and material worlds, as well as the connections between living human beings and their ancestors. The Africans who came across the Atlantic as slaves carried with them this tradition of recognizing a sacred tree as the dwelling of a protective divinity and as a symbol of their own relationship to spirit and to lineage. (268)

According to Harding, trees are important elements in African religions, and perhaps this instinctively led the people to the Clearing, and not to a common church. The forest connects them with their heritage and to their African roots.

In The Clearing the people are instructed to love themselves, no matter what they have heard as slaves. They should not repress their past, but challenge it and reclaim their lost or shattered identities. Morrison wants, according to Rosellen Brown, to show the importance “to keep on keeping on in spite of every effort to lay them low” (63) and though heinous events from the past promote racism and atrocious behaviour as a norm, the people’s willingness to struggle and survive grow stronger. The Clearing reconnects the black community with their African ancestry, and most likely functions as a source of empowerment. The people face their pasts instead of, as Sethe, pushing the past away and concealing every bit and fragment left of it with tree imagery.

Only when Sethe starts to reclaim her past does the Clearing come to her. At this point in time, Beloved’s anger for being killed and Sethe’s guilt for the killing, create an unstable situation; as Beloved and Sethe grow more and more entwined, the complexity of their
relationship threatens to consume Sethe. Beloved is in full possession of 124, and of Sethe, and she uses her power to dictate over Sethe: “Was it past bedtime? The light no good for sewing? Beloved didn’t move, said, ‘Do it’, and Sethe complied” (Morrison 283-284). Beloved has total freedom and Sethe does whatever Beloved wants her to do in order to prove her regret and love to Beloved, whose previously positive presence has become dangerously demanding.

The women in the community, who have been informed about the situation by Denver, find that having a dead child come back to life is a punishment too harsh for anyone to suffer, even for a child-murderer, and in the end they decide to redeem their previous act of looking away when schoolteacher came, by aiding Sethe, as members of the same community, as family, ought to. When the women gather outside 124 Sethe associates their voices with the Clearing:

For Sethe it was as though the Clearing had come to her with all its heat and simmering leaves, where the voices of women searched for the right combination, the key, the code, the sound that broke the back of words. Building voice upon voice until they found it, and when they did it was a wave of sound wide enough to sound deep water and knock the pods off chestnut trees. (Morrison 308)

The strong reminiscent of the Clearing brings Sethe and Beloved out on the porch, hand in hand, and eventually this is the turning point for Sethe’s and Beloved’s dangerous relationship. The extended family of the community as well as the spiritual presence of the Clearing functions almost as an exorcism of Beloved.

After this event, Beloved does not return. By and by she is slowly forgotten and eventually “they realized they couldn’t remember or repeat a single word she said” (Morrison 324). The mysterious Beloved disappears and the only trace left of her existence is that the door to Sethe’s past is a little bit opened, and that now there exists a newfound courage within Denver. No tree imagery is now needed to screen slavery in order to live a functional life, and no boxwood bushes to ease loneliness and fear.
Conclusion

The intent with this essay was to examine in what ways tree imagery is connected to the life and death struggles of the main characters in *Beloved* and to examine the effects of tree imagery in connection to slavery.

As we have seen, there are many possible interpretations of what roles trees have in Morrison’s novel, and most likely there is not one exclusive interpretation. Trees have various meanings, both positive and negative ones, throughout the novel. As Morrison herself has said: “One can never really define good and evil. Sometimes good looks like evil; sometimes evil looks like good – you never really know what it is” (Stepto 14). Trees, as well as the characters in *Beloved*, are too complex for simply labelling them “good” or “evil”, and therefore the usage of tree imagery does not solely have one purpose; trees can be used as weapons and ink to perpetuate oppression and discrimination, or as friends to talk to and compasses to freedom.

Still, one key effect that tree imagery creates is that of distancing the main characters from slavery. Sethe detaches herself from slavery by repressing it and in its stead focuses on beautiful trees, as her scar is transformed to an image of a chokecherry tree rather than a branding by slave-owners.

There are many occasions where trees aid the main characters’ physical and mental struggles, as guides to freedom and to one’s authentic self. Often trees seem to function as symbols for the slaves themselves; referring to the slaves’ family structure or to the Clearing, which connects slaves with the long lost heritage of their ancestors. Beloved, who in many ways functions as a representative for slavery’s cruelty, is also connected to tree imagery, hence, the symbolic correlation is all the more profound. Tree imagery seems to aid, support and reconnect slaves to freedom, to their roots and to their inner selves, as is the case for
Sethe, Paul D and Denver whose physical and mental escapes from slavery and fear would not be as successful without trees.

Even so, there are passages where this is not true, where trees do not function as facilitators, but an explanation for this uneven pattern can be related to the fact that Morrison does not use fixed moulds, and as she herself has said, the line between good and evil is sometimes hard to define.

However, tree imagery plays an important role in the novel, giving depth and meaning to the characters’ life- and death struggles as they face the devastating and long-term effects of the American institution of slavery.
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