

Study Guide for Toni Morrison's *Beloved*

*"The search for love and identity runs through most everything I write."
Toni Morrison*

"The novel is not about slavery. Slavery is very predictable. There it is and there's [information] about how it is, and then you get out of it or you don't. [The novel] can't be driven by slavery. It has to be the interior life of some people, and everything that they do is impacted on by the horror of slavery, but they are also people." - Toni Morrison

*"Because facts can exist without human intelligence, but truth cannot."
Toni Morrison*

Reading *Beloved* will often go more smoothly if you simply try to accept—and not always immediately attempt to understand—what you read. It often works better to “surrender,” and just let the writing flow over you. Struggling with it will make your reading of *Beloved* harder, so try to relax, pay attention, and just keep going. Also, keep in mind Toni Morrison’s statements that she wrote the book in the manner in which people remember, which is not linear, particularly if one is resisting remembering something terrible. This stream-of-consciousness approach includes many flashbacks and fragments, but if you read carefully, the full story will come together as you continue. *As you read, it might be helpful to write down any questions that you have, so that we can discuss them in small group or whole class discussions.*

The following major topics/ideas will be the starting point for each small group and whole class discussion. I expect you to familiarize yourself with the questions before (and while) you are reading. I expect you to take notes (either in your book or on a separate document). In fact, your final journal assignment is actually an assignment you need to be working on the entire time you are reading *Beloved*.

Assignment: While you are **responsible for notes on all** of the following ten topics, for your journal assignment, you will need to **focus** on three of the ten listed here. How you choose to organize your notes is up to you. (Think pictures, graphic organizers, timelines (although that could get tricky) etc.) **At the very least** you need to have work (notes/discussions/thoughts/reflections) for each following **four** sections of reading: 11-83, 84-146, 147-210, 211-end. “A” quality notes will have specific textual quotes and reflections/analysis of the quotes/scenes. Again, how you represent it is up to you. I’m looking for thoughtfulness and engagement with the text throughout the entire reading of the novel (read: I don’t want you doing this assignment after we finish reading the novel).

Topics for Discussion

1. **SENSE of PLACE:** Consider the importance of specific places, 124; the Clearing; Sweet Home; Alfred, Georgia, for example. Pay particular attention to the geographical markers of North and South. Where has Beloved come from? Consider the political and psychological significance of these spaces. Are there other spaces/places that are significant to the characters?
2. **MOTHERHOOD:** Note references—what is Morrison saying about it? Address motherhood and womanhood, especially within African-American culture and within the system of slavery. How are the different mothers in the story represented? What (if anything) defines motherhood in the text?
3. **MANHOOD:** How is manhood defined or discussed in this novel? Note references—what is Morrison saying about it?
4. **LOVE:** How do different characters define “love.” If all of Morrison’s works are about love (or the search for love) how is love presented and complicated in this text?
5. **THE CHARACTER OF BELOVED:** Trace the development of her character, and note how Morrison gives the readers information about Beloved a little at a time. What are we to make of her as a character?
6. **SETHE and PAUL D:** Analyze their individual characterizations – as well as their relationship. Trace how we learn of their pasts and what Morrison tells us about how they change. How do you analyze their morality?
7. **COMMUNITY:** What is the role of community? What is its responsibility to one another? Why (and perhaps how) does the community break apart in the novel?
8. **STRUCTURE OF THE NARRATIVE:** In what order/manner is the story told? What can we observe about the point of view of the narrative? How can we reconstruct it in a linear fashion? How and where does Morrison provide *foreshadowing* of later events? (You may also consider issues of *fragmentation*, as well as the fact that Morrison tells the story more in spirals than in a straight line.)
9. **LANGUAGE:** Note especially symbolic passages. How do you see Morrison using language in the work? What do you make of her words that run together, such as “whitegirl”? What other techniques do you notice as being innovative or striking in the novel?
10. **ENDING:** What do you make of the **ending** of the novel? What happens? How do you read the question of hope at the novel’s end? Does the ending seem positive or negative to you? Why?