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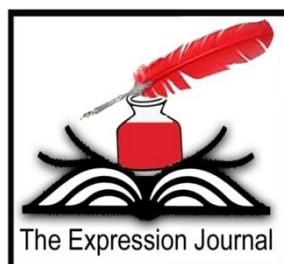


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Reimagining Death in Contemporary Fiction: Memory and the Continuing Presence of the Dead in *Beloved* and *Grief is the Thing with Feathers*

R. Sahana

**Research Scholar, Department of English,
Bharathi Women's College, Chennai-108, Tamil Nadu**

Dr. S. Rasheeda Sulthana

**Associate Professor, Department of English,
Bharathi Women's College, Chennai-108, Tamil Nadu**

Dr. T. Abdul Rahman

**Associate Professor, Department of English
The New College, Chennai-14, Tamil Nadu**

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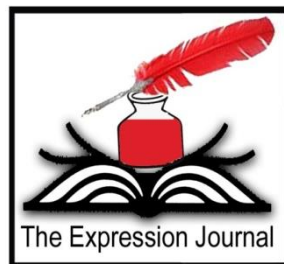
Abstract

This paper studies the enduring presence of the dead through memory, love and grief in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* and Max Porter's *Grief is the Thing with Feathers*. Death is often considered a final separation from the living; however, literature serves as a medium to connect the dead with those left behind through various forms. In *Beloved*, memory plays an important role in preserving Sethe's past, particularly the death of her child, which returns as a haunting and embodied presence. Similarly, in *Grief is the Thing with Feathers*, the memory of the deceased mother shapes the lives of the father and her sons. The appearance of the crow is the manifestation of grief that guides the family to cope with the loss and sustains her presence alive within the family. Memory in both novels is a bridge between the living and the dead, which enables the dead to shape reality. In *Beloved*, Sethe's obsessive love for her daughter literally takes physical form, as it shows an unresolved attachment can be both destructive and healing. In *Grief is the Thing with Feathers*, love allows the family members to preserve her presence while gradually accepting her absence. Through the frameworks of memory and love, these novels challenge conventional understandings of death as an ending and instead portray it as an enduring presence that continues to shape the experiences, emotions, and identities of the living.

Keywords

Death, Memory, Love, Grief, Haunting, Continuing Bond.

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Introduction

Death is an inevitable aspect of human beings, yet it is surrounded by plenty of mystery and uncertainty. Literature offers multiple perspectives on death through disciplines such as philosophy, sociology, psychology, and history. This approach helps to reveal how literature portrays the complex relationship between the living and the dead. Traditional works of literature presented death in terms of spirituality, morality, and fate. Whereas contemporary fiction focuses more on the psychological and emotional survival of death within the lives of the living than the supernatural return of the deceased. It particularly considers the way in which the dead sustain the living, not as mere recollection but as a real element in the complex interplay of memory, love, grief and psychological experience.

As Bradbury observes, “our talk about death has a very real impact on how we die, what we do with our dead and how we experience our bereavements” (qtd. in Botelho 2). This view suggests that death is not only a mere physical event but continues to impact the individual's consciousness and reality.

Cathy Caruth suggests that traumatic experiences are not fully confined to the past but repeatedly return to consciousness, influencing the lives of those who experience them (Caruth 4). Therefore, this idea claims death is an active force rather than a completed event, continuing in memory, grief, and emotional attachment.

Toni Morrison's original birth name was Chloe Anthony Wofford, and she was born in Lorain on February 18, 1931. Since her childhood, she has faced a lot of racial discrimination, which made her focus her attention on her studies, and she became an ardent reader. Later, she became one of the most celebrated African American authors in the world. Her literary works received widespread critical recognition for exploring African American

history, identity, memory, race, and trauma. In 1993, she became the first African American woman to be awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature, marking a significant achievement in American and African American literature.

Toni Morrison's *Beloved* is one of her very popular novels; it was published in 1987 and also won the Pulitzer Prize in 1988. Toni Morrison admits that *Beloved* was inspired by the true story of black woman Margaret Garner, who ran away from slavery and also killed her baby because she did not want her to be taken into slavery. However, Morrison transforms this historical incident into fiction, creating the character of Sethe and the supernatural figure of *Beloved* to explore the lasting effects of slavery, memory, trauma, motherhood, and the continuing presence of the dead. Nearly three decades later, Max Porter's debut novel, *Grief is the Thing with Feathers*, was published in 2015. The title was inspired by Emily Dickinson's poem "*Hope is the thing with feathers*" and also the embodied presence of grief, as the crow refers to Ted Hughes's poetry book *Crow*. This study explores the continuing presence of death and how it influences the lives of characters through memory and embodiment, shaping their emotions, relationships, experiences of trauma and grief, and processes of healing and acceptance.

Beloved features Sethe, an ex-slave African woman who fights to get over the painful memories of slavery and her daughter's death. Memories of her past resurface as *Beloved*. A strange young lady thought to be the literal figure of her departed offspring. With the spectre of *Beloved*, Morrison investigates the lasting scars of memory, trauma, and maternal affection. Similarly, Max Porter's *Grief Is the Thing with Feathers* follows a father and his two sons through the immediate aftermath of the death of his wife and mother. The grief manifests in the form of Crow, a bizarre and allegorical character who stays with the family in their suffering. Where Morrison investigates the ongoing existence of the dead through haunting and "rememory", Porter does so via grief and the archetype of Crow.

Both novels show that the dead remain present in memory and the psyche. In Morrison's example, *Beloved* manifests as both a spirit and a corporeal entity, and she is a product of Sethe's inability to let go of her daughter. In Porter's novel, Crow serves as a preservation of the mother of the family. Morrison and Porter both show the negative and positive consequences of death by exploring how it produces suffering but also helps the living to process the healing.

Drawing upon Sigmund Freud's concept of mourning and melancholia, which emphasizes the persistence of emotional attachment after loss, and Dennis Klass, Phyllis Silverman, and Steven Nickman's Continuing Bonds Theory, which argues that relationships with the deceased endure beyond death, this paper examines how memory, love, and the human mind function as mediums through which the dead continue to exist. Through a comparative reading of *Beloved* and *Grief Is the Thing with Feathers*, this study argues that a relationship beyond physical absence is possible and even shapes the individual's identity.

Memory and Grief as the Continuing Presence of the Dead

The dead are never truly departed unless they are forgotten completely from the world. This study demonstrates how contemporary literature represents death as an active part of the present world, where the memories of the characters and the narration continue to impact the lives of the living. In both *Beloved* and *Grief is the Thing with Feathers*, memory functions as an important device through which the dead sustain their existence and continue to influence the reality of the living. In *Beloved*, the past memory persists materially through haunting, physical space and maternal attachment. Sethe's conception of "rememory" suggests that

memory is not merely a recollection of past events but an external force that continues to live beyond the individual. Ángel Otero Blanco observes that in *Beloved*, rememory challenges the distinction between presence and absence, describing “the apparent opposition in the binomial presence/absence, eventually amounting to the same” (Otero Blanco 146).

Sethe explains, “It is a picture floating around out there,” making encounters with them possible even after their physical disappearance. Morrison reinforces this idea through Baby Suggs’s assertion that “death was anything but forgetfulness” (Morrison 4). It indicates that the dead continue to exist as long as they remain in memory. Similarly, Sethe understands that “some things go pass on; some things just stay” (Morrison 43), which emphasises that some memories persist despite the passage of time. The memory of her past slavery and her murdered child haunts her both mentally and physically, eventually appearing in the embodied form of Beloved, whom Sethe believes to be the reincarnation of her dead child. The spectral and embodied presence of Beloved became a tangible memory that continues to define Sethe’s existence, blurring the boundary between memory and reality. According to Dr Lalithambika, memory in the novel serves a dual purpose, as it is “both destructive and redemptive—it wounds, yet it also heals” (Lalithambika 235). Therefore, the memory of her dead child afflicts her physically by recollecting the trauma she endured; also, it serves as a healing mechanism to cope with her trauma wounds and the loss of her child. The return of Beloved represents the manifestation of Sethe’s dead baby, showing how the guilt and trauma of her past resurface in the present again. Here, the presence of death pushes Sethe to confront her suppressed past, which becomes distressing, but it also helps her move towards healing.

In *Grief is the thing with Feathers*, the memory of the dead mother is not represented by passively remembering her but emerges as a crow that constantly manifests their sorrow and their inability to separate them from their memory. Here, the dead mother is never physically present, but she continues to exist in the thoughts, emotions and the things left behind by them. A crow comes as a coping mechanism that helps the family to deal with the loss. It says, “I won’t leave until you won’t need me anymore” (Porter 7). Porter highlights the concept that grief is not an obstacle to be discarded, but it helps to remember the presence of the dead and live with them. The dad of the novel understands that grief is a long-term process and rejects the idea of quick recovery. He reflects, “Moving on, as a concept, is for stupid people, because any sensible person knows grief is a long-term project. I refuse to rush. The pain that is thrust upon us let no man slow or speed or fix”(Porter 99). Unlike *Beloved*, where the return of Beloved intensifies sethe’s guilt and trauma, here the crow helps the family to process the grief and “find a path outside simple fury” (Rivera-Izquierdo). Sethe’s “rememory” of Beloved, and Crow’s presence, show that death does not erase an individual from existence but transforms them into an enduring force that persists through memory and grief.

Love as the Continuing Bond Between the Living and the Dead

While memory helps to preserve the presence of the dead within the minds of the living, love sustains the emotional bond between them. In both novels death cannot cease the relationship, as love and attachment continue to connect the dead with their loved ones. Sethe displays her maternal connection with her daughter through her “thick love”; she believes that her love for the child ensures the child is not gone truly, as the “pictures” of their life are bound with her into the world forever. “I mean, even if I don’t think it, even if I die, the picture What I did, or knew or saw is still out there. Right in the place where it happened”

(Morrison 36, 44). Sethe even looks at the haunted house as a cost that she is willing to bear just to feel the presence of her child. She mentions, "I got a tree on my back and a haint in my house, and nothing in between but the daughter I am holding in my arms. No more running—from nothing." (Morrison 243). This maniac love for her daughter transcends the boundaries of life and death, turning the presence of the child into physical reality. She expresses killing her daughter only to protect her from the future violence of the enslavement; insisting that her love was "tough" suggests a maternal bond that transcends conventional morality to protect the child's humanity.

In Max Porter's *Grief is the Thing with Feathers*, love is the structural force that constructs a "continuing bond" between the living and the dead. Rather than seeking "closure", the characters choose to live within the presence of the deceased, transforming their grief into a "long-term project" that ensures the dead mother remains an active participant in their lives. Here the husband manifests his love by not erasing the traces of his wife's existence and calls their home a "physical encyclopedia of no longer hers", cluttered with objects like a hairbrush, turmeric, and notes stuck to bottles of red wine that capture her as someone who was "simply busy living" rather than "busy dying" (Porter 3).

Love operates as a significant medium through which the dead continue to survive in the lives of the living. This idea is demonstrated through Dennis Klass, Phyllis Silverman, and Steven Nickman's Continuing Bond Theory, which challenges the notion that the traditional belief of healthy mourning requires detachment from the deceased but rather maintains an ongoing relationship with the dead through emotional attachment, memory and enduring bonds (Klass et al. 3). This framework is deeply evident in both *Beloved* and *Grief is the Thing with Feathers*, where the dead remain present in the world through the minds of the living driven by their persistent love. In *Beloved*, we see how Sethe's powerful maternal love brings her dead daughter back from the brink of total disappearance. Beloved returns both ghostly and bodily. The return of the daughter means that the physical body may die, but in the world of living, love animates "Beloved," and the bond and love endure. Continuing Bonds theory, put forth by Dennis Klass, Phyllis Silverman and Steven Nickman states that, rather than the healthy severance of emotional ties to the deceased, good grieving involves the continued emotional connection and the living memory of the deceased (Klass et al. 3). This theory is strongly illustrated in both *Beloved* and *Grief is the Thing with Feathers*. In *Beloved*, Sethe's powerful maternal love brings her dead daughter back from the brink of total disappearance. "Beloved" returns both ghostly and bodily. The daughter's return shows that even death cannot bring a cessation to the love of a mother, for love continues to bring Beloved back to the realm of the living. A similar message can be found in *Grief is the Thing with Feathers*. In the book, even after the death of the mother, she continues to be a powerful presence in the lives of the father and the two sons through memory and grief, as well as Crow, the symbol of her continuing presence and relationship with the family. The disappearance of Crow represents the family's gradual movement through grief towards accepting their mother's death. However, her death does not end their emotional connection with her. Their continuing bond is evident when the family dedicates a song to their mother, allowing her presence to remain through their shared memory and music: "Their voice was the life and song of their mother" (Porter 114). Thus, Porter suggests that acceptance of death does not mean forgetting the dead; instead, the bond between the dead and the living continues through memory and remembrance.

"This is not a story to pass on" (Morrison 276). The deceased from both novels continue to shape the emotions, actions, and identities of the living, suggesting that death

does not mark the end of human relationships. Rather, love functions as a continuing bond that preserves the presence of the dead within the emotional and psychological lives of those left behind. Through these representations, Morrison and Porter demonstrate that the dead survive not through physical existence but through the enduring power of affection, memory, and attachment.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Dr Lalithambika argues that in Morrison's work, the past "is not simply remembered; it intrudes violently upon the present" and that the ghost is a "manifestation of repressed memory and trauma" (Lalithambika 235). The "rememory" concept shows that the past is always present and acts as both destructive and healing. Sethe claims "nothing ever dies"; this shows healing is possible only when the memory is acknowledged rather than suppressed. Similarly, Crow's presence in Porter's novel embodies the persistence of grief, transforming loss into an ongoing relationship rather than a completed separation. This representation aligns with Continuing Bonds Theory, which argues that bereaved individuals maintain meaningful connections with the deceased rather than severing those ties completely (Klass, Silverman, and Nickman 16). Ultimately, the dead in these novels are not consigned to the past; they continue to populate the minds, emotions and relationships of the living. The real opposite of death is therefore not life but forgetting. With memory and love, the dead remain an active part of the world they seemingly left behind.

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