The Pursuit of Worthiness

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We live in a world dominated by illusions of value. The value of a dollar is not a concrete idea; we have the ability to give or take value from a dollar because the idea of value is an illusion. We construct this illusion in an attempt to simplify the complex nature of human life. By ambitiously bestowing upon ourselves the power to determine worth, we create a false construct of it, unknowingly stripping the word of meaning while trying desperately to infuse it with value. In her novel *Beloved*, Toni Morrison uses vastly opposing depictions of the idea of worth to deconstruct the seemingly binary opposition between worth and worthlessness.

Morrison probes the animal-human dichotomy to reveal how worth does not have a single unified meaning; it is instead very complex, with multiple ambiguous layers. Sethe's first encounter with this idea, for example, was at Sweet Home, when the men were ordered to “put her human characteristics on the left; her animal ones on the right” (193). In a twisted way, schoolteacher believed that Sethe was worth more because she was “property that reproduced itself without cost,” but in assigning her greater value than her male counterparts based on an animal sense of worth, he simultaneously stripped her of human worth (228). The constructed hierarchy places humans above animals, so by implying value in Sethe's role as “the breeding one,” Morrison deconstructs the hierarchy in which worth itself is fundamentally superior (227). Like Sethe, Paul D's experience at Sweet Home reveals how blacks have been placed below animals; so much so that he feels “less than a chicken sitting in the tub” (72). The illusion constructed by other gazes is that humans are human by nature. However, by giving a rooster the name Mister, she deconstructs the animal-human dichotomy by implying that human status can only be determined by other gazes assigning worth to an individual. Does the fact that society has deemed Paul D sub-human make him sub-human? Or is there

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some greater truth that makes humans human? Morrison implies that humanity is a label of value, not a biological classification.

From a broader perspective, Morrison tells a story that conveys how slavery itself is a deconstruction of the idea of worth. Whites dispossessed black people of worth to justify slavery, yet the peripheral implication of slavery is that blacks were valuable enough as workers to be bought and sold. This is why schoolteacher thought Garner a traitor for deeming the Sweet Home slaves “men”; he understood that the only way for slaves to “claim ownership of [their] freed self” was to know their own worth. By removing the blinders that whites placed on blacks to shield them from their own value, Garner was defying the very foundation upon which slavery is built (95). Morrison takes this idea to another level by conveying how Garner damages the Sweet Home men by making them aware of their own humanity without fully granting it to them. Although Garner gives the Sweet Home men worth, the fact that he even has agency to do that further deconstructs our understanding of worth and its implications.

Furthermore, Morrison utilizes the complex nature of the Bodwins’ relationship with Sethe and her family to illustrate how by deeming blacks worthy, whites simultaneously obtain ownership over them. In a society where blacks are automatically considered unworthy of basic human rights, the implication of abolitionists like the Bodwins deeming them worthy of such rights is twofold. There is no doubt that the Bodwins mean well; they seek to empower blacks by giving them strength “in knowing that schoolteacher was wrong” about their “animal characteristics” (126, 193). However, the tragic reality of the situation is that blacks end up just as much enslaved spiritually by freedom as they were physically by bondage. Even after physically escaping slavery, they still find themselves imprisoned by the desperate search for worth, though their efforts are in vain.

As characters in the novel attempt to construct their own worth by basing their identities on the perception of external gazes, Morrison explores the question: to what extent do humans use the constructed theory of worth to construct each other? For years, Sethe has measured her own value using a measuring system made by whites that had been
constructed to confirm pre-existing misconceptions about blacks. In an attempt to “claim ownership of [her] freed self,” she values herself very little and considers her children, especially Beloved, her “best thing” (95, 262). By having Sethe essentially lose herself in the pursuit of worth, Morrison discredits the idea that finding meaning in life is an indubitably noble pursuit. She conveys instead how Sethe’s false sense of identity, supported by an illusion of worth constructed by external gazes, directly resulted in Denver “los[ing] her mother” (266).

At the same time, without the support of constructs, not only Sethe, but the entire freed slave population would still be “lost forever, if there wasn’t nobody to show [them] the way” (135). For example, if the Bodwins didn’t believe that “human life is holy, all of it,” Sethe might have died on the bank of that river, waiting to cross, with no one to help (260). Towards the end of the novel, Paul D makes a desperate attempt to bring Sethe back from her lost path by telling her that she is “her best thing,” not her children (273). Ironically, while trying to encourage Sethe not to become imprisoned by other gazes, Paul D was inflicting his own gaze upon her. In this way, Morrison uses a conceptual lens of worth to deconstruct the delusion that human identities can be untainted by other observers.

Paul D endures a personal journey with this idea that occurs in the search for his manhood. The key misconception that complicates his journey is that being “believed and trusted, [and]...listened to” by Garner made him a man (125). Regardless of how “well” Garner treated them, he was still a slave owner and Paul D was still his slave. Still, Paul D falls for this illusion of manhood until “for the first time, he learns his worth,” which is actually a quantification of dollars and cents, not an evaluation of his human qualities (226). The fact that Paul D’s “manhood lay...in the naming done by a whiteman” reveals how his manhood is constructed by external forces, which places him under a glass ceiling; he can never reach the state of manhood that he sees above him (powerful white men) because it is an illusion (125). This is confirmed by Paul D’s realization that “they were only Sweet Home men at Sweet Home” because Garner was not “naming what he saw” when he called them men, but “creating what he did not” (125, 220).
Morrison shows how the foundation of Paul D’s manhood is built atop a construct, which is a recipe for dissatisfaction.

Morrison depicts Beloved as a metaphor for worth to demonstrate its effect on individuals who lack worth. When pursuing Beloved, a ghost, Sethe demonstrates the innate human tendency to search for meaning, worth and value while never being able to attain them. Instead, the concept of worth “[eats] up her life” (250). In this, Morrison implies that it is virtually impossible for slaves to free themselves from emotional slavery because they are their own owner, and they can’t escape from something that’s not tangible or real in the first place: worth. This is proven by the “rememories” of Sweet Home that haunt Paul D and Sethe despite having escaped that situation many years ago. They simply cannot escape the figurative shackles of slavery because they will always be real in their minds. Just as Beloved is a ghost that nearly drives Paul D insane with confusion, and renders Sethe “worn down, speckled, dying, spinning, changing shapes, and generally bedeviled,” the concept of worth haunts “freed” slaves (255).

It seems that the only way to truly escape emotional slavery, which individuals face in our own ways, is to take agency over our own worth. However, we in turn enslave ourselves by trying to obtain agency over worth, because we are trying to control something that is little more than an intricate illusion created by other gazes and sustained by our own. In Beloved, Morrison thoroughly deconstructs worth, stripping away the false oppositions enveloping it, until we’re left with a single nugget of a question that digs right into the heart of humanity: can worth even be measured? Morrison suggests that it cannot.

Works Cited