

# House of Fear. Domesticity and Community in Toni Morrison

David YAGÜE GONZÁLEZ

Universidad Complutense de Madrid  
[david.yague.gonzalez@gmail.com](mailto:david.yague.gonzalez@gmail.com)

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## ABSTRACT

The questioning of the domestic sphere is one of the tropes of Toni Morrison's works. From her first work *The Bluest Eye* to her latest novel *Home*, Morrison has doubted the domestic space, reflecting in it the dramas that the African American community had to suffer due to the crisis unfolding outside the domestic sphere, particularly focusing on how the women endured these traumas and how they managed to survive – or perish – through the contact with the community.

**Keywords:** African American Narrative, Toni Morrison, Domesticity, Community

## La casa del miedo. Domesticidad y comunidad en Toni Morrison

## RESUMEN

El cuestionamiento de la esfera doméstica es uno de los tropos más comunes dentro de los trabajos de Toni Morrison. Desde su primera novela *The Bluest Eye* hasta su último trabajo *Home* Morrison ha puesto en duda el espacio doméstico, situando en él los dramas que la comunidad Afroamericana ha tenido que sufrir debido a los problemas que se desarrollan fuera de este espacio, centrándose particularmente en cómo las mujeres han sido capaces de soportar dichos traumas y cómo han conseguido sobrevivir – o morir – a través del contacto con la comunidad.

**Palabras clave:** Narrativa afroamericana, Toni Morrison, domesticidad, comunidad.

When Sigmund Freud, father of the psychoanalysis, applied his theories to literature, he focused on what he thought was “the realm of the frightening, of what evokes fear and dread” (Freud, 1919: 123). To name this particular motif of literature, he decided to use the term *unheimlich* in the original German. This term has been translated usually – and correctly – as ‘uncanny’ or ‘ghastly.’ But if we analyze the etymological sense of the word, as Freud himself suggests in his essay “The Uncanny” (1919), we find that it comes from *heimlich*, which stands for “belonging to the house, not strange, familiar, [...] *homely*” (Freud, 1919: 126, italics mine). Hence *unheimlich* would stand for all that is contrary to the familiar or that does not belong to the realm of the house. But the frightening sights, the gloomy and ghastly presences are sometimes less frightening than reality within a household. As Toni

Morrison has shown us in every one of her novels, sometimes the things we should be more frightened of are the persons that are part of our household, especially for women as she explains in her interview with Salman Rushdie in 1992.

“Black women always felt themselves to be the most vulnerable in [...] society, and some of them prepared themselves and refused to be lightly attacked, refused to be [...] “easy prey.” It may happen because rape, abuse, sexual assault was understood to be the *menu* of Black women [...] There was no protection” (Rushdie, 1992: 57).

So where can one hide when the uncanny is very much earthly and common? When the *unheimlich* becomes *heimlich*? And more so, what happens when the terrors are not hidden but are visible and within the home? What if the outside elements are actually, no matter how unfamiliar, the ones that can help the individual overcome what is inside their homes? These are the main objectives of this article: to explain the different ways the victim of a trauma overcomes the aforementioned crisis within the Nobel prize winner’s novels.

Trauma, psychological and physical, has been one of the *leitmotifs* of literature, more so during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. From autobiographical works to fiction, different authors have portrayed the different experiences victims have had to endure in their lives. The authors feel the need to transmit, through their art, the pain that either their communities or themselves have suffered. As Cathy Caruth points out

“Trauma seems to be much more than a pathology, or the simple illness of a wounded psyche: it is always the story of a wound that cries out, that addresses us in the attempt to tell us of a reality or truth that is not otherwise available” (Caruth, 1996: 4).

This way, literature is a milieu through which authors can exorcise their own personal demons and make a personal or communal struggle known, something that otherwise might have remained unknown to the reader. It is a way to “preserve personal and collective memories from assimilation, repression, or misrepresentation” (Vickroy, 2002: 1) as Laurie Vickroy pointed out in *Trauma and Survival in Contemporary Fiction* (2002). We find instances of such memories in autobiographies such as *Running a Thousand Miles for Freedom* (1860) by William and Ellen Craft as slaves writing from freedom, *If This Is a Man* (1947) by Primo Levi as a Holocaust survivor or narratives such as *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007) by Junot Diaz within the Caribbean American narrative. And one of the authors that has most effectively portrayed the memory of her community within her work is Toni Morrison. As she says in her essay “Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation”

“If anything I do, in the way of writing novels (or whatever I write) isn’t about the village or the community or about you, then it is not about anything. I am not interested in indulging myself in some private, closed exercise of my imagination that fulfills only the obligation of my personal dreams” (Morrison, 1984: 64).

Hence, Morrison narrates in her works stories that were “not a story to pass on” as she affirms in her novel *Beloved* (1987). She affirms with them that without the proper testament and without the sustenance of a community, some trauma victims pass their personal demons on to future generations. The sons and daughters of survivors are usually the first ones to suffer the effects of unhealed psychological disorders. As they are brought up, children look up to their parents for models from whom to form their own identities. When they search for a model to imitate in their traumatized parents, the outcome are transgenerational trauma victims or “second generation trauma victims” – although the effects of an unhealed psychological trauma can go on for several generations. Among these persons, it is common to identify their parents’ trauma with their own, suffering all the symptoms of a post-traumatic stress disorder victim but without being able to determine the specific event that has caused their illness.

The illness of these second generation victims might develop in two different ways according to Dominick LaCapra. On the one hand, they might revive the past as if this time was present, blurring the difference between their parents past and their own present, reviving the experience over and over without being able to escape a situation they cannot control, perpetuating the behavior they have learnt from their parents and being paralyzed within this parental traumatic loop that LaCapra identifies with melancholia.

“The very conflation attests to the way one remains possessed or haunted by the past, whose ghosts and shrouds resist distinctions (such as that between absence and loss). Indeed, in post-traumatic situations in which one relives (or acts out) the past, distinctions tend to collapse, including the crucial distinction between then and now wherein one is able to remember what happened to one in the past but realizes one is living in the here and now with future possibilities” (Lacapra, 2001: 46- 47).

On the other hand, the victim might be able to work through this traumatic past through a process of mourning. Through this process, according to Lacapra, the subject will be able to differentiate the present from the past, being capable of analyzing the past critically and incorporating it to their daily lives – the paradigm of this type of work-through would be Denver, one of the main characters in *Beloved*. But in order to do this, the victims must identify their parents’ trauma and for this, sometimes, they need the aid of the community and the re-creation of a safe home outside.

As our initial thesis has stated, *home* and the *domestic sphere* can be places in which much of the suffering one person endures is perpetuated. Notwithstanding, according to the western patriarchal tradition, as Valerie Sweeney Prince explains, “‘The woman’s place is in the home’ – even if that home abuses, confines, perverts. The home as shelter is an enduring myth that both men and women found reason to support.” (Prince, 2005: 66.) Many of the inherited traumas the African American community – and specially women within this community – has had to endure have taken place within the four walls of their houses. As slaves, they had to endure the continual beatings by their masters and, in some cases, rape perpetrated by these same masters. Women had also to endure the selling of their children, being unable to protect their little ones from this system. They constituted the “easy prey,”

“[S]elected women were brought to the “big house” and set up as cook, maid, or nursemaid in a room or cabin within easy reach of the exploiter. [...] About 5 percent of the Appalachian slave narratives describe Appalachian slaveholders who structured more long-term “concubinage” arrangements with enslaved women. [...] Some white parents tolerated their sons’ exploitation of house slaves, “if they wanted them”; and, subsequently, they “would heartlessly sell [their] own offspring to some other master.” [...] One ex-slave concubinage explained that enslaved women endured such concubinage because “they had a horror of going to Mississippi and they would do anything to keep from it.” (Dunaway, 2003: 121).

This way, together with the recurring estrangement of husbands, female slaves were unable to protect their children – offspring from such abuses - from being sold. This was a common practice as Dunaway sets forth in her book, in order to protect the slaveholder from the “social risk’ to the community” (Dunaway, 2003: 42) that the offspring of such rape would mean.

After slavery, they had to suffer the relentless pursuit of racism within the United States, being unable to heal the wounds that the previous situation of slavery had inflicted upon their bodies and their souls, being unable to procure a stable and safe environment to their young, perpetuating their own trauma into future generations. The brutality of some racist acts was so deep that there was no chance of recovering from the past.

“Analyses of rape play little or no role in most histories of the civil rights movement, even as stories of violence against black and white men – from Emmett Till to Andrew Goodman, Michael Schwerner, and James Chaney – provide gripping examples of racist brutality. Despite a growing body of literature that focuses on the roles of black and white women and the operation of gender in the movement, sexualized violence – both as a tool of oppression and as a political spur for the movement – has yet to find its place in the story of the African American freedom struggle. Rape, like lynching and murder, served as a tool of psychological

and physical intimidation that expressed white male domination and buttressed white supremacy” (McGuire, 2004: 907).

Therefore, as Evelyn Jaffe Schreiber affirms, “the trauma results from a lacking protective function, and treatment for trauma involves helping the ego to feel safe and secure” (Schreiber, 2010: 8). They must, consequently, create a safe environment outside of the house in which they can retell and remember the trauma with the help of a supportive community in order to move forward, as she explains later on.

It is at this point that we must take into consideration the role that the community plays within the healing process of the trauma victim. If the victim of a traumatic experience does not have the appropriate tools and he or she is not surrounded by a community to protect him or her. If this is not so, as Kalí Tal affirms

“If a trauma victim perceives herself as suffering alone, and has no sense of belonging to a community of victims, she will remain silent, imagining that her pain has no relevance to the larger society. She will likely come to believe that she has, in some way, brought her suffering upon herself. The internalization of blame for the evils that befall one is difficult to escape even when the notion of community exists” (Tal, 1996: 124).

It is fundamental that a group of peers –that is, a group of persons that either identify with his/her suffering or that have gone through a similar experience– acknowledge the pain the victim is going through. We need the gaze of the Lacanian “Other” in order to create our own self image, in order to re-member an otherwise dismembered memory, in order to accept the traumatic experience, work through it and break the cycle of traumatic experiences.

In case of Morrison’s black communities, this traumatic experience appertains to the field of their common story. Although some of the victims of such traumatic experience are individuals in particular –Pecola Breedlove in *The Bluest Eye* (1970), Sethe and Denver in *Beloved* or Joe and Violet in *Jazz* (1992), among others –the experiences they need to share are communal. As Schreiber points out “race relations produce and perpetuate inherited parental trauma stemming from a history of slavery and discrimination” (Schreiber, 2010: 16-17). The individual must then “recapture a sense of wholeness” (17) through the re-creation of a home, a community that understands the pain they are going through.

Within the works of Toni Morrison we can distinguish four different types of community responses towards trauma: the creation of a trauma as a result from the rejection of a community, the failure of the community to approach the victim, the acceptance of the victim within the community, and finally, the creation of a community of victims.

In order to distinguish among these four kinds of responses, we must consider a genealogy of trauma.<sup>1</sup> We have to look for the primordial trauma that originated the suffering within the community in order to understand the different outcomes that the author offers us in her different works. That is why we will center our attention first on the creation of a trauma as a rejection from the community within the author's work *A Mercy* (2008). The novel is situated in Maryland in the late 17<sup>th</sup> century, right at the origins of slave trade within the United States. In it, Morrison tells us the story of the Vaark household and their three slaves, Lina, Sorrow and Florence. For the purposes of our study, we will focus our attention on Florence, a slave taken from her mother at an early age, something not that uncommon as has been seen earlier.

Florence, the youngest and the most unsecure of the slaves, is the clearest example of this primordial trauma. At a very young age, she was given away by her mother to Vaark as payment for her master's debts.

Her voice was barely above a whisper but there was no mistaking its urgency.  
 "Please, Senhor. Not me. Take her. Take my daughter"

Jacob looked up at her, away from the child's feet, his mouth still open with laughter, and was struck by the terror in her eyes. His laugh creaking to a close, he shook his head, thinking, God help me if this is not the most wretched business. (Morrison, 2008: 24).

The rejection she feels from her mother will haunt Florence during the entire novel – and her entire life – as she will appear to Florence in her dreams. Therefore, Florence will try to find a community in which she feels accepted and she can finally express herself, exorcising the apparition of her mother. At first, she finds this validation in Lina, who treats her as her own daughter, teaching her how to do chores around the house. But then Vaark hires a free black blacksmith to forge the gates of his new state and Florence finds in him what she was looking for, his gaze to feel complete: "I run away not knowing then you are seeing me seeing you. And when at last our eyes hit I am not dead. For the first time I am live." (Morrison, 2008: 36)

This state of completion –that fits perfectly the paradigm of Lacanian "Other" that was explained before– does not last long, as once the blacksmith is done with his work, he moves on to the next, leaving Florence, once again, alone. She must look for him afterwards, looking for a cure to her mistress' condition, but when she finds him, he rejects her. This final rejection will doom her to the darkness and the solitude of the empty household where she will write her story on the walls: "My telling can't hurt you in spite of what I have done and I promise to lie quietly in the dark –

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<sup>1</sup> Term taken from Ruth Leys' *Trauma: A Genealogy* (2000) where she explores the different implications and history of the term "trauma"

weeping perhaps or occasionally seeing the blood once more – but I will never again unfold my limbs to rise up and bare teeth” (Morrison, 2008: 1). This way, the house acts as a jail and a protection from the outside world, Florence locking herself within the four walls.

What the reader finds out at the end is that Florence’s mother gives her up to protect her from the terrible situation she was living in, from the constant rape and violence she had to endure. Henceforth, the act of kindness that her mother performed is misinterpreted by Florence, though the roots of the trauma lay within the tragic acts that occurred at the plantation. Hence, Morrison changes the Christian notion of kindness that many slaveholders held as one of their reasons to have these slaves and corrupts it to show the agony they were putting the African American through.

The same kind of desperate kindness can be found in *Beloved* (1987), based on the real life story of Margaret Garner. Margaret Garner was a former slave that escaped from her plantation with her four children. When she is found by her former master, she decides it is better to murder her own children than of having them live as slaves, although she is only able to kill one of them before she is found. After this, her captor decides it is better to leave her, as she is not stable.

In Morrison’s story, Garner is transformed into Sethe who, after having successfully killed her daughter years ago and her two sons leave the house, is currently living with her daughter, Denver, in the house that the dead baby haunts. All this situation changes when Paul D, a former slave from the same plantation as Sethe, arrives to the house and the baby makes herself visible in the form of a teenage girl.

Because of the terrible act that Sethe had committed, she – and by extension, Denver – is a pariah. The rest of the community does not interact either with her or with her daughter. This way, the home becomes once again a barrier to protect the women from the judgment of the community, making them live in a permanent state of stasis from which they cannot escape by themselves. Furthermore, when her daughter tries to reach out and become a part of the community by going to school when she is a little girl, she learns what her mother did. Obtaining such information causes her to become deaf-mute for years –what, according to Freud, would be one of the symptoms of hysteria, as Jean Wyatt points out

As in Freud’s classic cases of hysteria, Denver’s deaf-mutism is a symptom of past trauma: the body expresses what the voice cannot say. It is, however, not Denver’s own traumatic experience that her deaf-muteness expresses, but the experience of her mother. (Wyatt, 2004: 66)

When her sister Beloved comes back from the dead and starts feeding on their mother’s stories and becoming more and more dependant on her, Denver must

overcome her fears and go outside the household. She accepts her mother's past, works through it in order to leave it behind –figuratively and literally, as she leaves the house behind– and claims her space within the community. Once she masters this, she must then come back with the community in order to make her mother work through her trauma and finally defeat her own fears. Consequently, in this case the acceptance within the community can help the individual defeat her demons. This same kind of acceptance from the community can be seen in *Home* (2012),<sup>2</sup> Morrison's latest work.

The same cannot be said for Pecola, the main character in Morrison's first novel *The Bluest Eye*, which takes place in Lorrain, Ohio, in the years after the Great Depression. In it, Pecola is the youngest daughter of Pauline and Cholly Breedlove, a couple who has been marginalized by their own community because of their destructive conduct –Cholly being an alcoholic and Pauline rejecting her heritage as African American. After her brother escapes, Pecola cannot find solace within the walls of her house, so she tries to find it outside. Her only friend is Claudia McTeer, the narrator, and even she is unable to protect Pecola and finally rejects her. As a result, Pecola hates herself and only desires to possess what might bring her mother's love, a pair of blue eyes like Shirley Temple's, the paradigm of children's beauty within Pecola's mother's mind.

The community sees in Pecola all the characteristics that white society affirms are wrong with them. Therefore, instead of fighting all the negative stigmas and stereotypes the community has, they placed them all onto Pecola, a helpless child that can be the vessel for all their problems. After that, they reject her and make her invisible to everyone, much like the example that Ralph Ellison offered in his book *The Invisible Man* (1947) in which he commented with the duality of invisibility and hypervisibility of the African American individual. Ellison said in the introduction to his book that “despite the bland assertions of sociologists, ‘high visibility’ actually rendered one [the African American citizen] *un-visible*” (Ellison, 1952: 482).

The victimization of Pecola by the community and her father – Cholly rapes her in one of the most disturbing passages of the novel – produces her final state of madness. She believes at the end that she finally has blue eyes – a wish that a child molester grants – and the only company she has is the one of an imaginary friend

“If there is somebody with bluer eyes than mine, then maybe there is somebody with the bluest eyes. The bluest eyes in the whole world.  
That's just too bad, isn't it?”

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<sup>2</sup> *Home* was published at the time of composition of this essay, thus the exclusion of this book for this particular analysis.



Please help me look.

No.

But suppose my eyes aren't blue enough?

Blue enough for what?

Blue enough for... I don't know. Blue enough for something. Blue enough... for you!" (Morrison, 1970: 161).

But even though the community can victimize an individual or a group of individuals, they can also find comfort with each other, creating a community of outcasts, which is the case of the main characters in *Love* (2003). In this narration, we find the story of Heed and Christine, two childhood best friends separated by the decision of Bill Cosey, Christine's grandfather, to marry Heed when she is only eleven. Heed's change of status, added to the hatred Christine's mother, May feels separate from the young child and this creates a lifetime hatred between them. This added to the fact of both are unable to leave the house in which they lived. They stay in the house, in a sort of stasis, haunted only by the memory of Bill Cosey and their hatred.

"Heed and Christine were the kind of children who can't take back love, or park it. When that's the case, separation cuts to the bone. And if the breakup is plundered, too, squeezed for a glimpse of blood, shed for the child's own good, then it can ruin a mind. And if, on top of that, they are made to hate each other, it can kill a life way before it tries to live. I blame May for the hate she put in them, but I have to fault Mr. Cosey for the theft" (Morrison, 2003: 199-200, italics in the original).

In this case, the need for a community is overpowered by the need to create their own community, their own family. They can only do so when they escape from the claustrophobic environment of the house and the permanent haunting of Bill Cosey and May in order to get to the Cosey's hotel to find out the truth about Bill Cosey's will. They cannot find the testament but they find each other finally. They are able to be honest with each other and revive their old friendship, even if for a brief time as Heed is dying. It is through the creation of this community-of-two that they can finally heal the wounds of their traumatic past and move on.

In conclusion, we can affirm that the different attitudes towards trauma victims in Toni Morrison's novels show us the various outcomes that the healing process in these victims may take. The acceptance within a community can save these persons from feeling invisible and alone – although the rest of the community may feel the same way – or they can condemn them to the *unheimlich* within their own homes, proscribing them to the madness that haunts them within their domestic spheres. This way they would be unable to interact with the rest of society, or the communities can help heal the victims' wounds, and become able to claim their own space within the community and move on. In Morrison's own words

“The point of the book is that it is *our* job. [...] I want to point out the dangers, to show that nice things don’t always happen to the totally self-reliant if there is no conscious historical connection. To say, see – this is what will happen” (Morrison, 1984: 64).

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