

FYS 16: Fourth Essay

Length: 1,250-1,500 words

Dates:

Dec. 2-4: Editorial conferences

Dec. 5 (Sun.): Final draft due by e-mail by 5:00 PM

Rick Griffiths, ex. 5355

Earth Sciences 306

Office hours: Tues. 2-4; Fri. 10-12

## *Beloved*: Freedom is a Killer

The nastiest trickster in *Beloved* may be freedom, who endlessly plays “gotcha” on people who think they’ve got her. Freedom lets Baby Suggs’s heart start beating when she crosses the Ohio River, then breaks it twenty-eight days after Sethe and Baby’s grandchildren make it to freedom. Freedom’s most irresistible and toxic incarnation, of course, is love in its many forms – fascinating topic, but writers go chasing after it in a few days and 1,500 words might well be freedom’s next victims. I propose some more limited and controllable questions.

Please answer one of the following questions about how well various common approaches give characters some control over freedom: self-denial, financial security, education, and manliness.

### One: Renunciation

#### Debtless, Loveless

In this story of parents and children, two of the crucial rescuers are more like an aunt and uncle, Ella and Stamp Paid. They are both pillars of the Cincinnati community (or almost-community) whose commitments can be related to the way that their respective womanhood and manhood have been violated:

“Nobody loved her [Ella] and she wouldn’t have liked it if they had, for she considered love a serious disability” (p. 301d).

“With that gift [of his wife to his master], he [Stamp Paid] decided that he didn’t owe anybody anything” (218b).

From one perspective, Ella and Stamp present cases of violation less severe than Sethe and Paul D, but without someone to “gather” the sections.

*>How do Ella’s and Stamp’s ways of compensating for personal loss reflect their respective positions as woman and man or, alternatively, complicate assumptions about gender?*

## Two: Property

### 124

For people in slavery, the step from being property to owning property meant everything in the world. Paul D experiences owning a coin as a “miracle” (317d). Unfortunately, other things that are owned may themselves have souls, wills, and histories:

“124 WAS SPITEFUL.” (3b)

“124 WAS LOUD.” (199b)

“124 WAS QUIET.” (281b)

In protecting, imprisoning, maddening, and comforting, 124 proves to be as metamorphic, or as subjective to shifting perceptions, as Beloved.

*>How does 124 function as a character to limit and, perhaps ultimately, enable freedom?*

## Three: Literacy

### **Ink**

“THAT AIN’T her mouth.” (181b)

Frederick Douglass in his first autobiography describes the classic path to freedom through literacy. In stealing letters, he begins to steal himself from bondage. However, the equally canny thief Sixo makes the renunciation of print culture a form of resistance, and the self-cancelled Stamp realizes that it was a mistake to use a clipping to warn Paul D. But Morrison herself made no secret of the fact that she found one of her inspirations, Margaret Garner, in a clipping. That other tough mom, Medea, has been lapping up ink for 2,500 years, and the Apostle Paul’s prophecy about the Beloved Nation in the epigraph is from his Letter to the Romans. For “long-school people” (234b) like Morrison’s readers, the toxicity of ink may cause some perplexity.

**>How writing function to propel, poison, and, perhaps ultimately, enable freedom?**

On this topic, it helps to keep track of how women and men traditionally use literacy differently.

## Four: Manhood

### **Mister**

Douglass also sets the pattern for making the attainment of freedom and manhood a common goal. We’ve all spotted Morrison’s one-upsmanship in creating an heroic protagonist who wins her way to freedom on her own, giving birth along the way. Paul D (what about that “D”?) beats Douglass’s record on escapes: five, but none of them a permanent success (316b).

*>How does Paul D’s quest for freedom and manhood restage and critique the scenario described by Douglass?*

## Some comments on the assignment:

How to start:

**Survey:** You need to make a full survey of the passages that bear on your topic, either marking the text or making a catalogue. Writing up a rough summary can be helpful, as long as you keep reminding yourself that a blow-by-blow of the narrative would eat up precious space in the final essay and be a red flag to the reader: WRITER IS SUMMARIZING, NOT ANALYZING. Since the scattered and involuted narrative of *Beloved* makes the reader “gather” the story retrospectively, plot summary is a necessary first step to analysis and a nice security blanket, maybe with some patches of orange. But by itself summary does not get us beyond where the class discussion and reading notes leave off.

**Select:** Once you have a sense of what concerning your topic needs to be accounted for in the text, you probably need to prune Morrison’s thicket of images. Even though the topics above address limited themes, you cannot account for everything. Pick what answers the question best, making sure that it does not misrepresent what the text presents elsewhere. For example, your reconstructed biography of Paul D (#4) might run 2-3 pages, but only some elements of it bear directly on the question of Douglass and masculinity (perhaps: name, travels, escapes, animals, family, and so on). Similarly, you should have a sense of the various rooms in 124 (#3), what happens in each, and how they change over the years, but you have space to explore only a few of these in depth as you connect these spaces to the question of freedom (e.g., one or two particular spaces at different times or as experienced by different characters). I evaluate in terms not of what’s missing (unless you’re really missing the boat on the whole topic) but of how far you’ve taken the analysis into new territory.

**Avoid Misery:** You’re only a heartbeat and Google from the Babel / Bedlam / Wild West / Pentecost of Morrison.com on the WWW. In an assignment centered so much on controlling information overload, ingesting chunks of other people’s learned / misguided / biased / crazy interpretations will probably not help you to get a coherent sense of things on your own terms.

**Give me a “so what?”:** This assignment does not involve resolving a pro / con issue, but it does aim for a larger view that informs how we read *Beloved*. We already know (#3) that writing is sometimes crucial and sometimes surprisingly harmful; is there some larger pattern here that supports and clarifies the story of *Beloved*?

### **Intellectual honesty:**

Please consult *Intellectual Honesty* on the course CMS page. Use of secondary sources, including the Internet, is not required or encouraged. All sources used should be cited. The reading questions, material from discussion, and e-mailed questions/comments can be taken as common knowledge and need not be cited. I refer any suspected plagiarism to the Office of the Dean of Students. When in doubt, please contact me.