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The Monstrous South: Gothic Characters in William Faulkner's Absalom, Absalom! and Toni Morrison's Beloved

Abstract

The paper examines some of the Gothic features used in character development in William Faulkner's Absalom, Absalom! and Toni Morrison's Beloved, and explores how the two novels complement each other to form a comprehensive picture of the American South around the Civil War. In the traditions of Gothic realism and postcolonial Gothic respectively, the authors describe the 19th-century South as populated with supernatural beings: demoniac slaveholders, monsters who try to fight oppression, zombies whose souls have been devoured by the oppressive system, ghosts and revenants who return to haunt their wrongdoers, and hybrids whose transgressive nature is feared by the oppressors and the oppressed alike.

Keywords: American Gothic, American South, character development, slavery, hybrids, monsters, ghosts

Even though, as Allan Lloyd Smith points out in his survey of the 19th-century American Gothic, American writers like James Fenimore Cooper and Nathaniel Hawthorne complained that the New World lacked Gothic material, that everything was too new, bright and devoid of mystery (163), certain characteristics of the American continent such as racism, slavery, Puritanism and the vicinity of the frontier and the unexplored wilderness beyond it have contributed to the shaping of American literature as, in the words of Leslie Fielder, "bewilderingly and embarrassingly, a Gothic fiction, non-realistic and negative, sadist and melodramatic – a literature of darkness and the grotesque in a land of light and affirmation" (qtd. in Worrall 165). Although American writers do not

often appropriate the Gothic genre in its entirety, elements of the Gothic are still easily discernible in many of their works.[1] The American South has particularly proved to be suitable for Gothic treatment, and a whole subgenre of American Gothic dealing with the South has developed – the Southern Gothic.[2]

William Faulkner's Absalom, Absalom! and Toni Morrison's Beloved are generally included in the genre of the Southern Gothic and are not infrequently compared despite the fact that over half a century separates them.[3] The novels focus on the same period: the time before the Civil War, the war itself, and its aftermath (although Absalom, Absalom! covers a longer time span). However, they do this from different (and complementary) perspectives – Faulkner's point of view is white male while Morrison's is black and female.[4] The plot of Absalom, Absalom! revolves around Thomas Sutpen, an exceptionally ambitious white man of doubtful moral views, obsessed with the idea of acquiring wealth and reputation and starting a family line. It is his own past that will prevent him from accomplishing his plan – the son he has renounced because he learned that he (the son) is part black. Beloved tells the story of Sethe, a runaway slave who, faced with the return to the farm from which she escaped, decides to kill her children and herself. She is likewise haunted by her past, as her murdered daughter returns first as a ghost and then as a revenant. Faulkner's and Morrison's stories thus complement each other, providing together a balanced picture of the American South at a crucial moment of its history. As Elizabeth Kirsch notes, "[Faulkner's] novel remains unable to conceive of the true history of the Other from the perspective of that Other" (13). Indeed, in Absalom, Absalom! slaves exist only on the periphery, on the margins of the narrative, as part of the setting, while Beloved provides an account which closely focuses on the experience of slavery. Morrison's narrative thus fills in the gaps that Kirsch feels exist in Faulkner's text – she writes out the margins of his novel and gives a voice to those who remain voiceless in Faulkner, showing that within Faulkner's Gothic story there is another, even more dreadful one:

> *In Beloved, Morrison presents us with the disruptive and disrupted voice of that incomprehensible Other – Beloved is the story contained in Jim Bond's wrenching howls, the story unheard in Margaret Garner's desperate killing of her own children, the silenced story of the Other. (Kirsch 15)*

The complementarity of the two books is striking and, as Kolmerten, Ross and Wittenberg note, the knowledge of one of the books influences the reading and understanding of the other (xi). In Faulkner's work, for example, the Civil War is discussed at length. Morrison almost does not mention it but she provides a detailed description of the lives of slaves during the war and the manner in which they escaped to freedom in the North, which is given only as a casual parenthesis in Faulkner. Further, Sutpen's treatment of his slaves (slave fights, rapes) brings a deeper understanding of Sethe's reasons for killing her daughter.

A thread that connects Toni Morrison and William Faulkner is their refusal to avert their gaze, their effort to tell stories which are hard and painful but necessary to tell. Both novels, therefore, deal with the repressed and shameful part of the past of the American South: Faulkner and Morrison shed light on things both important and terrifying, which should not be forgotten – racism, hypocrisy and unscrupulousness of whites in Absalom, Absalom!, and slave life in Beloved. In the process of writing about the South they incorporate, each in their own way, certain Gothic conventions into their stories. Faulkner's novel is a representative of Gothic realism, where nothing supernatural is to be found; only the atmosphere and characters are Gothic or Gothicized. Beloved, on the other hand, is an overtly Gothic narrative, where the supernatural is constantly present, but Morrison also makes use of elements of Gothic realism. Without pretending to a comprehensive analysis or comparison of the two novels, this paper intends to explore the more important Gothic elements and procedures used in character development from the perspective of postcolonial Gothic, with a particular reference to their meaning in the context of the social circumstances of the American South in the period around the Civil War. Gothic novels demand Gothic characters. In the two novels which are the subject of this paper, we encounter people evil, broken, hurt, destroyed or oppressed, who have acquired characteristics of creatures from the other side: monsters, zombies, demons, ghosts or revenants.

In the Gothic genre, hybridity is typically embodied in monstrous creatures and closely connected with boundaries. In both Faulkner's and Morrison's novels, hybrids (biracial characters) are represented as monsters, as liminal beings who, neither black nor white, are not accepted in any community and do not belong to any world. Hybrids are eternal outsiders who disrupt or abolish boundaries, thus creating a threat to the existing order. In the 18th- and 19th-century Gothic, this

threat was invariably successfully neutralized, and boundaries restored, stronger than ever. Conversely, in postcolonial Gothic and other more subversive forms of the genre, hybrids do not serve only to question boundaries, but, because they resist being destroyed, rendered harmless or explained away, because they manage to survive and frustrate the plans of their oppressors, they permanently undermine boundaries. Unlike imperial Gothic, where the threat is without exception successfully overcome, in postcolonial Gothic it subversively comes true.

Hybridity is a crucial issue in Absalom, Absalom!. The story of Thomas Sutpen and his family contains the fundamental premise of the imperial Gothic: the fear of the colonized and of the contamination of marriage by miscegenation. Miscegenation is perceived as such a serious threat by white Americans because it undermines the very core of their identity:

> *[T]he enforced divisions between selfhood and Otherness are fundamental to the construction of national identity; the national American being needs the Black Other to be opposite, to be lower, to be less than human, in order for the White American being to be defined against it. (Kirsch 8)*

For Henry Sutpen, hybridity is a sin greater than incest. He will not kill his half-brother Charles Bon because he wants to marry Henry's sister (and his own half-sister) but because he is biracial: "So it is the miscegenation, not the incest, which you can't bear," Bon tells Henry and then offers him a gun (Faulkner 356). "You are my brother," says Henry. "No I'm not," replies Bon, "I'm the Nigger that's going to sleep with your sister. Unless you stop me, Henry" (Faulkner 357–58). It is at this point that Henry fires a shot and the murder of Charles Bon marks the beginning of the end of Sutpen's dream of wealth and lineage. And just as Charles Bon is the cause of the failure of Thomas Sutpen's grand design, it is another hybrid, Clytie, Sutpen's mixed-race servant and unacknowledged daughter, who puts a definite end to this dream. By burning Sutpen's mansion[5] at the end of the novel, she kills Sutpen's remaining children – Henry and herself, and destroys Sutpen's Hundred – the last evidence and symbol of his grand design, leaving the mixed-blood Jim Bond as the only survivor of the Sutpen saga. Therefore, in keeping with the tenets of postcolonial Gothic, in Absalom, Absalom! it is the liminal beings who give a fatal blow to white oppression and destroy it. This, however, is by no means a triumph of the ostracized: both Charles Bon and Clytie die while the surviving Jim Bond is half-witted and unable to look after himself.

It comes as a surprise that in Beloved, which is otherwise a thoroughly postcolonial novel, hybrids are feared and destroyed, and that hybridity emerges as a source of power only in one instance. In this novel, mothers invariably kill miscegenated children. Sethe's mother refuses to take care of any of her babies except Sethe and leaves them to die because they were fathered by white crew members who raped her during the crossing of the Atlantic on the way to America. Another black character, Ella, also leaves her child, whom she describes as “a hairy white thing,” (Morrison 258) to die after five days of life, untouched and unnursed by its repulsed mother, since it was conceived in repeated rapes by a white father and son who kept Ella in captivity. Miscegenation proves to create ultimate outsiders, who, feared and repudiated by both blacks and whites, belong nowhere: blacks reject them because they are a living memory of the abuse of their bodies and whites because they are a threat to pure blood line and an undisputable proof of their shameful involvement with blacks.

Unlike these tragic hybrids, Lady Jones is the only hybrid character in Beloved who draws strength from her hybridity and turns it to the advantage of the community. Although she despises herself and depicts herself as a monster with blond hair and light eyes whom her whole family hates and mocks, she starts a school in her house and helps black children who do not have access to education: “Her light skin got her picked for a coloredgirls' normal school in Pennsylvania and she paid it back by teaching the unpicked” (Morrison 247).

Descriptions in the style of Gothic realism, of people who have acquired the features of monsters or zombies due to the dehumanizing influence of slavery, prevail in Beloved. Paul D is a zombie – in place of heart he has a rusted tin box. He lost his humanity after eighty-six days spent under horrible conditions in a prison camp in Alfred, Georgia, where black inmates were chain-ganged, slept in coffin-like wooden boxes in the ground, were beaten and subjected to daily oral rapes, without hope of release. While running from this camp, black prisoners are “[l]ike the unshriven dead, zombies on the loose, holding the chains in their hands” (Morrison 110). Slavery has turned many other blacks – Jackson Till, aunt Phyllis, Halle – into dehumanized zombies who sleep with their eyes open or are “flat-eyed as … fish,” devoid of soul and self (Morrison 224).

Just as slavery turns these people into the living dead, freedom from slavery and from the trauma of slavery restores them back to life. Paul D’s rusted tin box opens and frees his “red, red heart”

(Morrison 235) after his facing the past with the help of Beloved, and Baby Suggs feels her heart beat for the first time at the moment when she crosses the border between the South and the North and steps onto free territory:

[W]hen she stepped foot on free ground she could not believe that Halle knew what she didn't; that Halle, who had never drawn one free breath, knew that there was nothing like it in this world. It scared her. … Next she felt a knocking in her chest and discovered something else new: her own heartbeat. (Morrison 141)

Sethe turns into a monster trying to escape slavery and protect her children from male slaveholding oppression, which is characteristic of postcolonial Gothic where women/the oppressed often become monstrous while showing resistance to their oppressors. These monsters no longer carry a negative connotation because they embody active force set against the system of oppression. Taking her life and future into her own hands, Sethe becomes "the threatening aggressive female who rejects her traditional role and usurps male power" (Worrall 152).[6] Her first transformation into a monster takes place as she runs away from Sweet Home: she no longer walks upright but crawls on her hands and knees, her feet become hideously misshapen, her back is split open and running with pus and blood from flogging, she is smeared with mud and blood from giving birth, and an offensive odor spreads from her dress soaked in curdled milk. Thinking that she is going to be discovered by a boy who will try to violate her, "[s]uddenly she [is] eager for his eyes, to bite into them; to gnaw his cheek" (Morrison 31). A month later, the arrival of the schoolteacher (her former owner who wants to return her and her children to his farm in Kentucky) at her new home in free Cincinnati reawakens the monster in Sethe once again: "snatching up her children like a hawk on the wing; … her face beaked, … her hands worked like claws," (Morrison 157) she "looked like she didn't have any [eyes]. Since the whites in them had disappeared and since they were as black as her skin, she looked blind" (Morrison 150). She cuts the throats of her three older children with a saw and tries to smash her youngest baby's head against the wall:

two boys bled in the sawdust and dirt at the feet of [Sethe] holding a blood-soaked child to her chest with one hand and an infant by the heels in the other. She did not look at them; she simply swung the baby toward the wall planks, missed and tried to connect a second time. (Morrison 149)

The surviving children become deeply apprehensive of their mother. Her sons hold each other's hands day and night, fearing that she will try to kill them again, and this time may succeed, and they run away from home as soon as they are old enough to be able to manage on their own in the world. Her surviving daughter Denver is so afraid of Sethe that she does not leave their home for twelve years and constantly watches her mother's every move to make sure that she does not transform into a being capable of killing her own children again.

Postcolonial Gothic texts like Beloved raise the important questions of what monstrosity is, how monsters are created, who creates them and, finally and most importantly, what is truly monstrous – the monsters themselves or the system which begets them and the perpetuators of that system![7]

The answer that the proponents of this genre unequivocally give is that it is the slave owners who are the essential monsters (Denison 277–78) and that the institution of slavery is the source of evil which generates all these cursed creatures![8] As the bearers of the institution of slavery, whites emerge as the real source of threat and Baby Suggs says that the lesson she has learned during her sixty years of slavery and ten years of freedom is "there [is] no bad luck in the world but whitepeople." (Morrison 104) Stamp Paid, having found a ribbon with a lock of hair and a piece of scalp, thinks:

> *Eighteen seventy-four and whitefolks were still on the loose. Whole towns wiped clean of Negroes; eighty-seven lynchings in one year alone in Kentucky; four colored schools burned to the ground; grown men whipped like children; children whipped like adults; black women raped by the crew; property taken, necks broken. He smelled skin, skin and hot blood. The skin was one thing, but human blood cooked in a lynch fire was a whole other thing. … What are these people? You tell me, Jesus. What are they? (Morrison 180)*

In keeping with this, in both novels individual white oppressors are depicted as strong-willed ruthless demons. Racism and male chauvinism form the foundation of Thomas Sutpen's monomania – hell-bent on starting a dynasty and having a purely white male heir, Sutpen abandons his first wife and their son because they are part-black, proposes to his dead wife's sister but tells her that he would marry her only if she gives him a son and finally has an affair with Milly, the fifteen-year-old granddaughter of his servant, whom he also cruelly repudiates after she

gives birth to a daughter; he treats his slaves with utter brutality and callousness, cheats Indians and seizes their land in order to build an estate on which to start his dynasty. This domineering racist and misogynist is given demonic features in the novel in the following way: Sutpen's origin is mysterious; allegedly, even he himself does not know where he comes from or how old he is. He arrives in Jefferson out of nowhere, with only a horse and two guns, without any past. In his dealings, Sutpen is similar to Count Dracula, furtively arranging business through intermediaries until his transactions are irrevocably secured. When it is revealed that he has bought land and thereby ensured his membership in the Jefferson community, it is too late for the town authorities to react – the demon has already made himself comfortably at home among the townsfolk. After he has acquired land he disappears without trace, reappearing two months later, in an equally mysterious and abrupt manner. Rosa Coldfield, his former fiancée and one of the incidental victims of his idée fixe, demonizes everything related to Sutpen. This is how she describes his second arrival in Jefferson:

Out of quiet thunderclap he would abrupt (man-horse-demon) upon a scene peaceful and decorous … faint sulphur-reek still in hair clothes and beard, with grouped behind him his band of wild niggers like beasts half tamed to walk upright like men. In attitudes wild and reposed, and manacled among them the French architect. (Faulkner 8)

This unscrupulous and egocentric man who subordinates everything to his goal is deemed a "fiend, blackguard and devil" (Faulkner 15) with infernal helpers, and his success in growing cotton gives rise to wild rumors about his slaves improving the yield with their magic. Sutpen's death is equally imbued with Gothic overtones: he is killed with a rusted scythe by the man who has idolized him for fifteen years.

Sutpen's fate epitomizes the fate of the American South, and Rosa Coldfield, an avid supporter of the Southern cause, is so eager to tell his story in order to explain how God could have allowed the South to lose the war. It is because the South was in the hands of man-demons like Thomas Sutpen, who had courage and strength but no mercy and compassion, that the war was lost:

[Rosa] wants [the story] told … so that people whom she will never see and whose names she will never hear and who have never heard her name nor seen her face will read it and know at last why

God let us lose the war: that only through the blood of our men and the tears of our women could He stay this demon and efface his name and lineage from the earth. (Faulkner 11)[9]

However, later in the novel, to balance the Gothic description of the quintessential white male oppressor, Faulkner provides the motives which lie behind Sutpen's cruel self-centered behavior, making him more human and sympathetic. We learn how he was infected with the will to power and how he became the demon of Rosa's narrative. Sutpen was a child of a very poor West Virginian family, and after he was thrown out of a Southern mansion at the age of fourteen by a black servant because he tried to enter at the front door, he became aware of the system of race and class in the South and unstoppable in his intention to gain wealth and reputation. He loses (or suppresses) his human feelings and becomes a monomaniac who stops at nothing to fulfill his intent.[10]

The most pronouncedly demonic character in Morrison's novel is the schoolteacher, a cruel slaveholding ascetic who eats little, sleeps less and works constantly, engaged in quasi-scientific study of blacks, coldly asking them questions, measuring their bodies and classifying their behavior into human and animal categories. His reaction to his nephew's savage beating of Sethe, which prompted her to run away from Sweet Home, is typical of his cold, detached brand of sadism:

Now she'd gone wild due to the mishandling of the nephew who'd overbeat her and made her cut and run. Schoolteacher had chastised that nephew, telling him to think – just think – what would his own horse do if you beat it beyond the point of education. Or Chipper, or Samson. Suppose you beat the hounds past that point thataway. Never again could you trust them in the woods or anywhere else. You'd be feeding them maybe, holding out a piece of rabbit in your hand, and the animal would revert – bite your hand clear off. So he punished that nephew by not letting him come on the hunt. (Morrison 149-50)

It is exactly this cold calculation, this complete lack of feeling, empathy and compassion, that makes him the real monster of the novel. In Absalom, Absalom! Sutpen is demonized, but the explanation of his motivation (he is the poor boy in front of the big house) awakens a degree of compassion and understanding for his actions, whereas Beloved refuses to provide any mitigating

circumstances for the proponents of slavery and unwaveringly asserts that there are no excuses, that whichever reasons lie behind them, crimes remain crimes, and demons remain demons.

Just as white male oppressors are invariably diabolical, their victims are frequently depicted as ghosts or ghostlike beings, whose encounter with the demonic oppression has left them devoid of life, energy and substantiality. In the Gothic, ghosts are always connected with the past, and at the beginning of her study of the inexpressible in Poe, Faulkner and Morrison, Elizabeth Kirsch points out that "Gothic tendencies frequently signal the haunting presence of the past in the form of things returning that should be dead or gone" (2)[11] and Julia Briggs observes that "ghost stories represent the return of the repressed in its most literal and paradigmatic form" (178).

In accordance with the character of Gothic realism, there are no proper ghosts in Faulkner's novel; nevertheless, ghostlike creatures feature prominently. Charles Bon is a personification of Sutpen's dark past, which has come to haunt him. Bon is in many ways specter-like, immaterial and elusive, and Rosa emphasizes his ghostly existence in the following way:

I never saw him. I never even saw him dead. I heard a name, I saw a photograph, I helped to make a grave: and that was all … I do not even know of my own knowledge that Ellen ever saw it, that Judith ever loved it, that Henry slew it" (Faulkner 146-47)

Rosa has never seen him, and neither have any of the other narrators. He has never promised Judith that he would marry her. He is "fullsprung from no childhood, born of no woman and impervious to time and, vanished, leaving no bones nor dust anywhere" (Faulkner 74), as if he has materialized out of thin air to bring Sutpen down and then returned to non-existence. Charles Bon is a ghost in another sense as well: he feels invisible and excluded like a ghost, because all he wants is his father, Thomas Sutpen, to show that he notices him, at least with a wink or a word that would confirm his existence![12] Nonetheless, his burning wish remains unanswered. Impervious to his son's needs, Sutpen treats him like a specter, an invisible ghost of the past, and, desperate to escape what he perceives as a shameful mistake, he persistently refuses to acknowledge Bon's existence.

Rosa Coldfield also perceives herself as Sutpen's victim and explains: "My life was destined to end on an afternoon in April forty-three years ago" (Faulkner 17), believing that Sutpen effectively killed

her then with his unacceptable offer of marriage and that she has lived a ghost's life ever since. She is neither living nor dead, vegetating in her frustrated past, in which she was left without a husband. Like Dickens's Miss Havisham, Rosa spends her days in her closed-up house, steeped in the past. In her study of Rosa's narrative voice, Valerie Baehl points out that

> *Rosa exists as a ghost to her community and to the other narrators. This outside position, however, demands that speakers of patriarchal discourse notice Rosa due to southern gentleman culture. Mr. Compson asks, "so what else can we do, … but listen to them [ladies] being ghosts?" (6)*

In contrast with the fundamentally realistic Absalom, Absalom!, Beloved is quite literally populated with ghosts. When Sethe suggests to her mother-in-law Baby Suggs that they move out of their haunted house,[13] Baby Suggs replies: "What'd be the point? … Not a house in the country ain't packed to its rafters with some dead Negro's grief." (Morrison 5) America is full of specters of slavery, and the solution is not escaping them but getting to know them and learning to live with them. Thus, every appearance of the ghost in Beloved leads the protagonists to face the past. When Denver sees a white dress next to Sethe, Sethe tells her about the schoolteacher and Sweet Home. Paul D, while repairing the furniture he has broken in his encounter with the ghost of Sethe's dead baby, remembers the long-repressed days he spent in the prison camp in Georgia. Denver enjoys spending time with the ghost because she longs to have a past in which to root herself and on which to build her identity.

After the ghost of the murdered baby materializes as Beloved, these encounters with personal and collective history intensify. The complex character of Beloved has been variously interpreted as Sethe's dead daughter, as her mother and as an allegory of the history of slavery in the United States. There is evidence in the text for each of these interpretations but, whichever one is chosen, there is no denying that, as the Encyclopedia of Gothic Literature states, Toni Morrison "depict[s] the legacy of racism as a literal haunting" (Snodgrass 25) and that Beloved personifies the burden of the past. Beloved encourages Sethe and Paul D to tell her about their past and confront their history with her eternal "Tell me."[14] In Beloved's presence repressed memories flood Sethe's mind: long-lost memories of her mother, of her nurse Nan and of the forgotten language in which

she spoke to them surface into her consciousness. In an argument about Beloved, Sethe learns from Paul D what happened to her husband Halle after she left Sweet Home, and while they discuss Halle's tragic destiny, Beloved dances happily on the upper floor.

Sheri Ann Denison claims that "in postcolonial Gothic, a traumatic memory drains its host if it is not faced – but facing that memory opens the possibilities … to once more find one's self" (267). Beloved presents this struggle of facing the past and shows how difficult and uncertain it is. Before her encounter with Beloved, "[t]o Sethe, the future was a matter of keeping the past at bay" (Morison 50), and she invested all her life force in it. Reassured by Beloved's return, Sethe manages to bring repressed contents back into her conscious mind and in this way reduce the pent-up pressure of years of "beating back the past" (Morison 81). As Gurleen Grewal explains, it is similar with Paul D:

Metaphorically, in touching Beloved, Paul D is touching the past inside him and is in the process of being healed: the lid of his rusty tobacco tin has been dislodged, and as the tightly guarded content of the past is spilling out, he begins to find his "red heart." (14)

This reliving of the long-repressed past, however, is not free of danger. On the contrary, "when oblivion is removed, obsession with the past becomes such that the feeling for contemporariness and future is lost and that, also, the ability of orientation is lost, … which leads to defeat" (Savićević 8). Paul D starts drinking after he regains his heart and feelings through his contact with Beloved, and Sethe becomes completely immersed in a deadly dance with history embodied in her revenant daughter: she quits her job, spends all her savings on satisfying the ever growing and increasingly more reckless demands of the revenant, grows thinner and thinner, becoming almost a shadow: "Sethe no longer combed her hair or splashed her face with water. She sat in the chair licking her lips like a chastised child while Beloved ate up her life, took it, swelled up with it, grew taller on it." (Morrison 250)

At the end of the novel, after the exorcism of Beloved, Paul D returns to 124 Bluestone Road and to Sethe, who spends her days lying in bed, spent from the struggle with the revenant past; she is no longer monstrous, but not yet fully human either, with her gaze fixed on the window and her eyes utterly expressionless. "Sethe," Paul D says, "me and you, we got more yesterday than

anybody. We need some kind of tomorrow." (Morrison 273) The process of dealing with the long-repressed past embodied in the revenant/ghost has eventually brought Sethe and Paul D back to life and given them a chance to try to build a future for themselves, but this is by no means a classic restoration of order found in the traditional Gothic. This open ending of the story of former slaves and their coping with the trauma of slavery provides a realistic conclusion to a fantastic ghost story. Their experience exposes the full extent of the difficulty of overcoming the paradox inherent in the psychological position of ex-slaves: on the one hand, there is the undeniable necessity of facing the ghosts of the past in order to counter the dehumanizing effects of slavery and create an opportunity to have a future; but on the other, the devastation this encounter inevitably brings to the already damaged psyche of the survivors of oppression can prove to be overwhelming.

The role of Beloved is different for Denver, who has been unable to place herself in a familial and racial context on which to build her identity before the appearance of the revenant. Denver has spent her whole life in her house and has never, apart from a brief period when she went to Lady Jones's school, set foot beyond 124 Bluestone Road. Her mother, locked in a life-and-death struggle of repressing the onerous burden of personal and racial history, wanted to protect Denver from the damaging influence of the legacy of slavery[15] but in this way deprived her of the material she needed to construct her identity. This is why Denver recognizes Beloved's great significance from the beginning. When she first sees Beloved, "Denver … [is] shaking. She look[s] at this sleepy beauty and want[s] more" (Morrison 53), and she desperately clings to her for the most part of the book. Beloved provides Denver with the much needed familial and historical grounding, and behaves differently with her than with Sethe and Paul D. With the two former slaves, Beloved is very reticent. When she addresses them on her own initiative, it is invariably with the variations of "Tell me" or "Touch me," and when addressed by them, she gives very short and reluctant answers. The situation is different with Denver: Beloved asks Denver to tell her about the only piece of personal past she possesses, the story of her birth, and in the presence of Beloved the past comes to life in front of Denver's eyes for the first time: "Denver was seeing it now and feeling it – through Beloved. Feeling how it must have felt to her mother." (Morison 86) Apart from this, it is Denver who demands "Tell me," and Beloved tells her, in her characteristic way, about the

experience of her ancestors, the collective trauma of crossing the ocean. Denver also receives her family history with Beloved's help, as she listens to the stories Sethe tells Beloved. However, in order to acquire a self-sufficient identity, Denver will have to outgrow her dependence on Beloved and, having incorporated into her life the past she lacked, go out into the world and start an independent life. Beloved helps her in this as well. By completely dedicating her attention to Sethe and incapacitating her, she makes Denver leave her home and reintegrate into the community.

The classic Gothic novel provides two possible endings: there is either a restoration of order after the triumph over the dark forces which have unsuccessfully tried to usurp power and destroy the established order, or a new system of division of power is established where the powerless have become the powerful, and the powerful have lost everything. Faulkner's and Morrison's novels are different. At the end of Absalom, Absalom! all the participants of Faulkner's Southern Gothic story are dead except for the idiotic Jim Bond, who remains equally powerless as at the beginning. At the end of Beloved, there is at least a faint hope of the restoration of order on the micro-level of the family and a decidedly bright outlook for the young Denver. A comparison of the encounter of Quentin and Denver – the descendants of the opposing sides of the drama of the American South – with the legacy of the collective past, underscores the complementarity of Absalom, Absalom! and Beloved, as the novels yet again provide profound insights about one another. Denver, the descendant of the oppressed, finds a source of independence in her newly acquired knowledge of her past and reinvents herself. Quentin, however, is devastated by the insufferable story of the South, in which he did not participate but for which he nonetheless feels responsible:

I am going to have to hear it all again he thought I am going to have to hear it all over again I am already hearing it all over again I am listening to it all over again I shall have to never listen to anything else but this again forever. (Faulkner 277)

The burden of the past, as we learn in The Sound and the Fury, will eventually kill Quentin:

As Quentin hears Sutpen's story from his father and from Sutpen's living sister-in-law, he recognizes his complicity in this history, and confronts its implications – that the past lives on in the present and that the Southern and American being are inextricably linked to slavery. (Kirsch 9)[16]

Even though at the end of her novel Toni Morrison warns that her story of the horrors of slavery "was not a story to pass on" (274), both she and Faulkner are aware of the necessity of its telling despite the fact that it will not necessarily have a cathartic effect (it empowers Denver but kills Quentin). The two novels taken together tell the story of the American South from complementary sides, from the points of view of the powerful and the powerless, the oppressors and the victims, thus providing a comprehensive social panorama of the 19th-century American South. The authors' skillful use of Gothic narrative strategies and techniques like hyperbole, grotesque and metaphor in character development, regardless of whether they are employed in a realistic (Faulkner) or fantastic (Morrison) framework, effectively captures the spirit of the period around the Civil War. In the traditions of Gothic realism and postcolonial Gothic respectively, the South emerges as populated with supernatural beings: slaveholders are portrayed as demons and their victims as a whole range of creatures from the other side – monsters who try to fight oppression, zombies whose souls have been devoured by the oppressive system, ghosts and revenants who return to haunt their wrongdoers and hybrids whose transgressive nature is feared by the oppressors and the oppressed alike. The unexpected effect of these unequivocally Gothic descriptions is, paradoxically, a feeling that by appropriating Gothic conventions Morrison and Faulkner painted a very realistic picture of the 19th-century American South.

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[1] Throughout its history, the Gothic genre has proved to be very adaptable: apart from being suitable for expressing a wide variety of ideas, its conventions are also very easily transposed to other genres, so Nora Crook speaks of “the power of Gothic to infiltrate other genres: the historical novel, the domestic tale, the travel book” (73). Whether writers appropriate the Gothic completely or take only some of its elements, it is because of this pronounced adaptability that they see this genre as a convenient vehicle for conveying their messages.

[2] Susan Castillo Street and Charles L. Crow point out that “[i]n the South, ghosts and men in white sheets are real, as are shackles and clanking chains, and the Southern Gothic is a genre that arises from the area’s often violent and traumatic history” (2).

[3] Absalom, Absalom! was published in 1936, and Beloved in 1987.

[4] Taking a postcolonial theoretical stance, this analysis will mainly focus on slavery and racial issues. The gender side of the Southern story, as seen and told by Morrison and Faulkner, though neither separable from race nor less important, is beyond the scope of this paper and will not be examined in greater detail.

[5] Architecture is a particularly important topos in postcolonial Gothic because it is, on the one hand, traditionally imbued with symbolic and metaphorical meaning in Gothic narratives, and because, on the other, from the perspective of postcolonialism it represents “a symbol of the power and wealth of the landowner and more broadly the social, cultural and political hegemony” (qtd. in Denison 70). Sutpen wants a home worthy of a Gothic villain and has a “dream of grim and castlelike magnificence” (Faulkner 38), so he builds a house bigger than any other building in Jefferson, including the courthouse. However, it is built by slaves, and the means with which it is furnished are of dubious origin. For this reason, according to Snodgrass, it has to disappear: “the Sutpen mansion built on cruelty and bondage collapses under the weight of despair, racism, and the repudiation of Sutpen's mixed-blood son” (3). In a similar way, Sundguist believes, the culture of the American South collapsed under the burden of guilt: “though it resembled other American dreams of opulence, the dream of the South has seldom been so convincing. Because the South for half of its history ‘lived intimately with a great social evil and [for] the other half with its

aftermath,' its preoccupation is 'with guilt, not with innocence, with the reality of evil, not with the dream of perfection.'" (107)

[6] Here lies a significant difference between Absalom, Absalom! and Beloved. In Faulkner's novel, women do not manage to escape male oppression and remain imprisoned, practically buried alive in their homes, whereas in Beloved women manage to escape and free themselves.

[7] As David Worrall explains in his exploration of the political aspects of the Gothic genre, a significant shift occurred in more recent Gothic works: "the source of the threat is no longer always located squarely within the marginal groups, the poor and criminal classes, as it is in the [older] works of the social reformers" (150).

[8] Toni Morrison addresses this through the thoughts of the old ex-slave Stamp Paid:
"Whitepeople believed that whatever the manners, under every dark skin was a jungle. Swift unnavigable waters, swinging screaming baboons, sleeping snakes, red gums ready for their sweet white blood. In a way, he thought, they were right. The more coloredpeople spent their strength trying to convince them how gentle they were, how clever and loving, how human, the more they used themselves up to persuade whites of something Negroes believed could not be questioned, the deeper and more tangled the jungle grew inside. But it wasn't the jungle blacks brought with them to this place from the other (livable) place. It was the jungle whitefolks planted in them. And it grew. It spread. In, through and after life, it spread, until it invaded the whites who had made it. Touched them every one. Changed and altered them. Made them bloody, silly, worse than even they wanted to be, so scared were they of the jungle they had made. The screaming baboon lived under their own white skin; the red gums were their own." (198–99)

[9] Rosa's narrative style is Gothic, and many critics have noticed that Sutpen's demoniac nature is a consequence of Rosa's manner of representation. The question remains whether Rosa consciously manipulates listeners in order to transfer her bitterness and hatred to them or just expresses her perspective and truly lives in a horror story, in a world populated with demons and ghosts. Quentin accepts Rosa's Gothic style (or Gothic outlook) and under her influence shapes his first narrative, the story of how Rosa and he went to Sutpen's Hundred in September 1909, as a horror story.

[10] It is interesting to note that it is Mr. Compson, the son of a Confederate general and Sutpen's close friend who did not participate in the events, who provides the human side of Sutpen's story, while Rosa, the female narrator and participant in the Sutpen saga, is the source of the demonized description of Sutpen. Like Rosa, Mr. Compson locates the reasons behind the tragic events in the supernatural sphere, but for him it was impersonal destiny that caused the tragedy, in which human participants were only puppets with little power to act of their own volition, while Rosa Coldfield blames the events unequivocally on the demoniac Sutpen. Their different stances may be seen as reflecting the difference in the views of the war, its causes and outcome, of the privileged and subaltern groups.

[11] In both novels, besides the embodiment of past sins in ghosts and ghostlike characters, narration itself points to the central importance of the past, which is a distinctly Gothic feature. The constant intertwining of the past and the present and disjointed chronology, which characterize both novels, create an impression of a haunted narrative caught in a vicious circle. Such discontinuous, disrupted chronology, according to Michelle Giles, points to violence: "The structure of the narrative – the disjointed chronology, shifts in narration, unusual characterization and wording – also creates a sense of disorder and uncertainty throughout the novel. … past and present [are] intertwined, each distorting each other … the breaks in the novel's narrative chronology illustrate an undercurrent of violence." (13)

[12] In this he is similar to the baby ghost in Beloved who craves the attention of her living relatives and wants to participate in family events.

[13] As in Absalom, Absalom!, architecture is very significant and imbued with metaphoric meanings in Beloved. Each of the three parts of the novel begins with a description of the house: "124 was spiteful / loud / quiet" (Morison 3, 169, 239). This, in contrast to Sutpen's mansion, is a place which provided refuge to runaway slaves and was a station of the Underground Railroad: "Before 124 and everybody in it had closed down, veiled over and shut away; before it had become the plaything for spirits and the home of the chafed, 124 had been a cheerful, buzzing house where Baby Suggs, holy, loved, cautioned, fed, chastised and soothed. Where not one but two pots simmered on the stove; where the lamp burned all night long. Strangers rested while children tried on their shoes. Messages were left there, for whoever needed them was sure to stop in one day

soon." (Morrison 86–87) The fate of this house and its inhabitants reflects the experience of African Americans after the Civil War. At the beginning, enthusiasm and joy because of the newly attained freedom repressed the memory of the horrors that preceded freedom. As time went by, and free life settled, former slaves realized that the past was still very much alive. Fighting the specter of the past was an experience that proved to be almost equally destructive as slavery itself.

[14] Even though she does not want to, Sethe feels strangely compelled to tell Beloved about her past: "Sethe learned the profound satisfaction Beloved got from storytelling. It amazed Sethe (as much as it pleased Beloved) because every mention of her past life hurt. Everything in it was painful or lost. She and Baby Suggs had agreed without saying so that it was unspeakable; to Denver's inquiries Sethe gave short replies or rambling incomplete reveries. Even with Paul D, who had shared some of it and to whom she could talk with at least a measure of calm, the hurt was always there – like a tender place in the corner of her mouth that the bit left.

But, as she began telling [Beloved about her past], she found herself wanting to, liking it. Perhaps it was Beloved's distance from the events itself, or her thirst for hearing it – in any case it was an unexpected pleasure." (Morrison 58)

[15] Sethe made this safeguarding against history her main task in bringing Denver up: "As for Denver, the job Sethe had of keeping her from the past … was all that mattered" (Morrison 42)

[16] In accordance with Gothic conventions, the destiny of the protagonists is reflected in the destiny of their houses. Having survived the nearly deadly encounter with the past, 124 Bluestone Road, with the help of the community, rids itself of the ghost and remains battered but standing at the end of the story, unlike Sutpen's Hundred, the white oppressors' mansion which disappears in flames.

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