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## A Study of Symbolic and Thematic Forces in Toni Morrison's Novel *Beloved* and *A Mercy*

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### Abstract

Many people consider Toni Morrison (1931–2019) to be among the most significant African American authors of the 20th century. Her books are praised for their profound exploration of African American history and cultural memory as well as their rich symbolic language. References to natural and elemental forces—earth, water, fire, and, consequently, air or breath—that serve thematic and narrative purposes reminiscent of ancient element systems are among the recurrent symbol networks in her novels. Morrison's use of elemental imagery can be interpreted in conjunction with elemental archetypes that organize the human experience and psyche, despite the fact that they are not explicitly astrological. Toni Morrison constantly explores the cosmic and ancestral in her fiction, going beyond the chronological and worldly. Her novels frequently use astronomical imagery—flight toward the sky, moonlit recollection, and starlike guidance—as a metaphorical framework for the characters' quest for identity, independence, and a link to the past. Morrison frames the Black experience within a universal, mythic order and transcends social boundaries by calling upon the sky.

**Keywords:** Classical, Planet, Symbolism, Forces, Memory, Trauma, Cosmology, Astronomy, etc.

### Introduction

Toni Morrison's literature uses symbolic systems derived from embodiment, memory, and nature to create meaning. The classical components serve as guiding principles that organize the narrative experience in *Beloved* and *A Mercy*. Fire symbolizes devastation and irrevocable change, air supports voice and consciousness, water symbolizes memory and rebirth, and earth stands for body and ownership. Morrison is able to maintain the particular of the Black historical experience while universalizing it thanks to these factors. This paper examines Toni Morrison's use of the traditional elements—fire, air, water, and earth—as thematic and metaphorical forces in *A Mercy* (2008) and *Beloved* (1987). By closely examining the text, it makes the case that Morrison uses elemental imagery to depict slavery as a cosmological and physical state rather than only as a historical institution. The components create a mythic framework that connects individual suffering to societal history by influencing memory, identity, trauma, and survival.

One of the most vivid and powerful imagery in Morrison's writing is water. The appearance of *Beloved* from the river in *Beloved* evokes the historical pain of the Middle Passage while also carrying parallel connections with birth and resurrection. This dual meaning of water serves as an example of how Morrison connects human memory and historical horror through elemental imagery. The recurrent theme of water serves as a channel and metaphor of historical consciousness in addition to being a backdrop. In *Beloved*, water serves as both a barrier and a bond, symbolizing psychological liberation through its connotations with life-giving and purification and bondage in its historical connection to the transatlantic slave trade.

Water's widespread presence throughout Morrison's novels is highlighted as a component of memory, connecting the bodies of characters to ancestors' and communities' histories in ways that mirror water's symbolic function in myth and astrology. The most noticeable elemental force in *Beloved* is water, which represents memory, trauma from the past, and transition. A physical and mental rebirth occurs as Sethe escapes over the Ohio River during her labour. As it narrates, "By the time they reached the river, Sethe was trembling and the baby's head was out" (*Beloved*, p. 98).

The river serves as a transitional area between agony and survival, servitude and liberation. This scene emphasizes water as a place of transformation by integrating birth and escape. The unsaid tragedy of the Middle Passage is also evoked by water.

The fractured monologue of *Beloved* echoes collective anguish and buried bodies: “There is no room to move... the men without skin push them through” (*Beloved*, p. 210). Thus, the aquatic imagery conveys the idea that history is buried and then resurfaces via haunting and memory. In *A Mercy*, water similarly marks displacement and loss. Florens recalls the moment her mother gives her away near the sea: “My mother pointed me away from her” (*A Mercy*, p. 26). Here, water symbolizes the Atlantic world of trade and enslavement, reinforcing separation and historical rupture.

The physicality of bodies, the land, and the material conditions of African American life are frequently correlated with earth imagery in Morrison's work. Anderson in his thesis (2012), makes the case that soil and water play a key role in the image of black bodies in *Sula*, *Song of Solomon*, and *Beloved*. In this interpretation, Earth turns into a place where historical brutality, disenfranchisement, and environmental degradation meet. Morrison's focus on embodiment, social ecology, and the historical connection between body and place is highlighted by this grounding in earthly images. In addition, Morrison uses earth imagery to highlight the ways that rootedness and displacement are interconnected in African American cultural memory in his depictions of the neighbourhood of Bottom (*Sula*), local landscapes in *Song of Solomon*, and the eerie setting of 124 (*Beloved*).

Earth imagery in both novels connects the body to land and ownership. In *Beloved*, Sethe's back bears the scars of enslavement, described as a natural formation: “A chokecherry tree. Trunk, branches, and even leaves” (*Beloved*, p. 18). This image merges body and earth, showing how violence is inscribed onto the flesh as if it were soil. The body becomes a site of cultivation and exploitation. In *A Mercy*, land ownership reflects the moral foundations of colonial America. Jacob Vaark's farm depends on enslaved labour, exposing how earth is tied to economic power. Florens's barefoot journeys emphasize her vulnerability and connection to the ground: “I am leaving you in the dust” (*A Mercy*, p. 37). Thus, Earth represents both grounding and dispossession—home and exile at once.

In *Beloved*, planetary imagery—especially the moon—is linked to cyclical time, memory, and haunting. Morrison's preference for repetition and return over linear history is further supported by the moon's recurrent appearance. Often associated with moonlit imagery, *Beloved* herself is further associated with the paranormal: “She moved closer with a footfall like a cat and he could smell her breath. Moonlight spread” (*Beloved*, p. 65). The unconscious and the reemergence of repressed memories are represented by the moon. Similar to lunar cycles, the trauma of slavery fluctuates but never goes away. In addition, the night sky offers Sethe and Denver brief intervals of tenuous tranquility in contrast to the anguish of the earth: “The moon looked so small” (*Beloved*, p. 175). The diminished moon mirrors the characters' fragile sense of safety and distance from wholeness.

Astronomical imagery in *A Mercy* highlights desolation and distance instead of transcendence. Characters who are oppressed and displaced experience emotional solitude, which is reflected in the huge sky. Florens believes that the heavens are indifferent: “The sky makes no answer” (*A Mercy*, p. 161).

Thus, Morrison's fiction may be read in a way that honors both literary artistry and the cultural logics influencing narrative form thanks to this fundamental framework. The idea that literature is a place where elemental forces express human experience is similar to that of critical ecology and myth studies. The classical components function as symbolic engines rather than ornamental imagery in both books. Air sustains voice and identity, fire enacts permanent transformation, water carries communal memory, and soil ties body to history. Using these components, Morrison portrays slavery as a pervasive force that affects the body, the spirit, and nature.

To conclude, Toni Morrison uses the classical themes of *Beloved* and *A Mercy* to create strong thematic and symbolic energies. She describes trauma, survival, and memory in mythic terms using water, earth, fire, and air. By confirming that the legacy of slavery is not limited to the past but rather is ingrained in both the natural and human worlds, these fundamental structures enhance the emotional and historical significance of her work.

Morrison uses astronomical imagery to turn history into a cosmic epic in his writings. The stars encode genealogy, the moon organizes the return of trauma, the sky becomes a place of freedom, remembrance, and reckoning, and cosmic silence reveals moral failure. In mythic traditions, where heavenly bodies control fate and human meaning, Morrison's use of the skies is consistent. African American history is elevated above social realism into mythic and cosmic dimensions in Toni Morrison's novels through the use of astronomical components. Morrison uses the sky, moon, stars, and flight to place his own pain into the universal cycles of space and time. The cosmos itself is inscribed with Black experience, which is frequently denied historical persistence, as these celestial symbols affirm.

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### Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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