The African
“Primal Outlook upon Life”:
Wright and Morrison

What Wright’s travelogues and Morrison’s Beloved (1987) have in common is that they reconsider Western discourse, which had been previously characterized solely by imperialism and a male-centered worldview. Schoolteacher in Beloved, for example, functions as an agent representing the most treacherous kind of institutional evil. Such a figure operates with the approval of a hegemonic culture under the guise of reason and enlightenment. This figure represents European imperialists and Christian missionaries in Wright’s Black Power, just as it represents the Falange and the Catholic church in his Pagan Spain. The expedition that Sethe, Schoolteacher’s pupil, makes outside of school teaches her to refute the lessons given by her teacher. In a similar vein, Wright, who had left America, where he was born and schooled, made an expedition into Africa and Spain. As a result, Black Power and Pagan Spain turn out to be not merely portrayals of African and Spanish cultures, but more importantly a penetrating cultural criticism of the West. Wright’s travelogues and Beloved both examine the tradition-bound Western myths as enshrined in religious, political, and legal discourses and as reflected in such institutions as Christianity, slavery, and marriage.

In their efforts to displace Western discourse, Wright and Morrison try to reinstate what Wright calls “his [the African’s] primal outlook upon life” (Black Power 266). “If my work,” Morrison remarks, “is to confront a reality unlike the received reality of the West, it must centralize and animate information discredited by the West . . . because it is information described as ‘lore’ or ‘gossip’ or ‘magic’ or ‘sentiment’” (“Memory” 388). Though fiction, Beloved, clearly informed by the tenor of the postmodern, thrives on its use of protesting voices to challenge political consensus and expand existing con-
cepts of history. Morrison, in fact, takes pride in the political nature of her work. “The work,” she has argued, “must be political. . . . The best art is political and you ought to be able to make it unquestionably political and irrevocably beautiful at the same time” (“Rootedness” 344–45). She is in agreement with Wright, who told James Baldwin: “All literature is protest. You can’t name a single novel that isn’t protest” (Baldwin, Nobody Knows 157).

In Black Power, Wright repeatedly shows that the primal outlook in African culture is buttressed by the African’s “basically poetic apprehension of existence” (266) and “poetic humanity” (dedication). The vision Wright and Morrison come to share is postmodern in its recognition not only of political and historical situatedness but also of aesthetic discourse in order to contest and disrupt from within. During his journey into Africa, Wright discovered that in the face of European imperialism, the Ashanti had survived on the strength of familial and tribal kinship and love. His travels to Spain, as discussed in the previous chapter, revealed that Spanish religiosity was more pagan than Christian and that the pillar of Spanish culture was Spanish womanhood as represented by the Black Virgin of Montserrat. The communal kinship in Africa, epitomized by matriarchal society and symbolized by the Black Virgin, is also embodied in Seth’s enduring relationship with Beloved in Morrison’s novel. The African’s primal outlook indeed underlies the theme of Beloved. “Critics of my work,” Morrison notes, “have often left something to be desired because they don’t always evolve out of the culture, the world, the given quality out of which I write” (McKay 425).

1.

When Wright traveled to West Africa to write Black Power, he was struck by a culture in transition. The profound myths, traditions, and customs underlying African culture were in conflict with its modernization. In the eyes of Western anthropologists and imperialists, African culture seemed primitive and irrational. Wright, however, realized that the African always seemed a “savage” to the Westerner, just as the modern developments in the West were “fantastic” to the African. To Wright, the Western definition of the inferiority of the African race had derived from the hegemonic assumptions of academicians, assumptions that were scarcely related to the fundamental African beliefs. In short, African culture seemed irrational to Westerners just as Western culture did to Africans.

One of the African beliefs Westerners find difficult to comprehend is the
African concept of time—that time is not chronological and linear but cyclic.

Believing in a circular movement of time, the African wishes what happened in the past to happen again. Africans, Wright thought, were capable of adapting to Western technology and industrialization, but their concept of time would be detrimental to the modernization of an old culture. Accra, the first city in Africa Wright visited en route to Kumasi, the Ashanti capital, reflected such a concept of time. The houses in Accra had no street numbers, a lack that not only indicated a chaotic urban development but also suggested a circular concept of time and space. Having no numbers assigned to individual houses meant that the houses had come into existence without regard for order and location and that the city functioned as a maze.

Unlike the traditional journey motif, mainly concerned with the male narrator’s worldview, Morrison’s quest in *Beloved* is to acquire what Wright calls in *Black Power* the African’s “primal outlook upon life” (266). Just as Wright in his journey into pagan Spain witnessed the energetic, maternal instinct of the Spanish woman and the female principle in life represented by the Black Virgin of Montserrat, Sethe in her journey from slavery to freedom seizes upon the maternal love of child innate in African culture. In stark contrast to the traditional slave narrative, *Beloved* features the heroic slave mother as a replacement of the figure of the heroic male fugitive.

Morrison’s technique in *Beloved* is also innovative and strikingly postmodern. In a traditional gothic tale, the movement is either from the present to the past or from the past to the present. In Edgar Allan Poe’s “Ligeia,” for example, the first half of the story takes place as the narrator contemplates past events, and the latter half elaborates Ligeia’s gradual return to the present. In *Beloved* the movement in time is extremely fluid: the story begins one day in 1873 at 124 Bluestone Road in Cincinnati and goes back not only to Sethe’s slavery in Kentucky and the Middle Passage but also to her ancestors in Africa. Throughout the text, the story constantly goes back and forth between the present and the past. In *Black Power* Wright speaks of the African’s concept of time: “His was a circular kind of time; the past had to be made like the present” (175). To Africans, time is cyclic rather than linear as in Western discourse. In *Beloved* Morrison uses this concept of time: the past and the present are intermingled to form one continuum. The movement in time, then, enables their “dead” ancestors to return to the present with their primal outlook intact as guiding forces.

For Morrison as narrator, this concept of time allows her to convert the past to the present through memory. “Because so much in public and scholarly life,” she has complained, “forbids us to take seriously the milieu of buried stimuli, it is often extremely hard to seek out both the stimulus and
its galaxy and to recognize their value when they arrive.” The value of Sethe’s vision in the present, then, is determined by the intensity and quality of memory, the memory generated not only by one individual but also by her race and her culture. “Memory,” Morrison underscores, “is for me always fresh, in spite of the fact that the object being remembered is done and past” (“Memory” 385).

Unlike the traditional journey narrative, *Beloved* does not make the identity of the two women, “the join” on their travel, its ultimate goal. Morrison’s quest for that memory is open-ended: as Beloved reappears, Sethe disappears, and the thrust of the story in the end is toward the future, suggesting that the story must not “pass on,” must not die, must continue. Morrison’s concept of time allows the characters not only to reflect on the past but also to plan on the future. At the end of the novel Paul D reminds Sethe of their future. Their experiences suggest that African American life in the future must be strengthened by the African primal view of existence: communal and familial kinship.

Time in *Beloved* is not only cyclic as it is in African culture but also fluid and mysterious. Beloved’s appearance at the beginning of the novel is contrasted to her disappearance in the end: “By and by all trace is gone, and what is forgotten is not only the footprints but the water too and what it is down there. The rest is weather. Not the breath of the disremembered and unaccounted for, but wind in the eaves, or spring ice thawing too quickly. Just weather” (275). Not only are such images as “wind in the eaves” and “spring ice thawing too quickly” signs of the future, but Morrison also brings home her worldview: the primacy of spirit over flesh, humanism over materialism, harmony over disruption. Her attainment of such vision is a nebulous affair, however, and Beloved’s appearance and disappearance in particular can be interpreted psychoanalytically.3 “Appearance/disappearance,” Jacques Lacan theorizes, “takes place between two points, the initial and the terminal of this logical time—between the instant of seeing, when something of the intuition itself is always elided, not to say lost, and that elusive moment when the apprehension of the unconscious is not, in fact, concluded, when it is always a question of an ‘absorption’ fraught with false trails” (*Four Fundamental Concepts* 32).

Wright, on the other hand, appreciated the ancestral worship not only characteristic of African religion but also typical of other religions such as Hinduism, Buddhism, and Shintoism; even so, he was unable to penetrate the detail and symbolism of its mystery. He had no difficulty understanding, for example, the dedication of an African woman’s life to preparing and serving food to the bones of a dead king, a ritual analogous to a Buddhist
woman’s service in offering food to statues of the Buddha. Similarly, just as a
menstruating woman is feared in Ashanti life, a Shintoist woman in the same
case condition abstains from consecrating the food to be presented at the house-
hold shrine. But Wright found it difficult to appreciate the symbolism of the
Golden Stool, shrouded in mystery. To him the stool represented the collect-
ed soul of a million people. Ashanti appeared Oriental, for a soul hidden
behind the dark face “shrinks from revealing itself” (Black Power 273).
Indeed, Western discourse is incapable of explaining the depth of the tribal
culture. Africans, conscious of unwritten history, have created methods of
representation to cast doubt upon the Westerners attempting to understand
them.

The African primal outlook on life, in which a person’s consciousness, as
Wright and Morrison both believe, corresponds to the spirit of nature, bears
a strong resemblance to the concept of enlightenment in Buddhism. To the
African mind and to Buddhism, divinity exists in nature only if the person is
intuitively conscious of divinity in the self. To American transcendentalists
such as Emerson and Whitman, God exists in nature regardless of whether
the person is capable of such intuition. Wright’s discussion of the African
concept of life is also suggestive of Zen’s emphasis on transcending the dual-
ism of life and death. As mentioned in the introduction, Zen master Dogen
taught that life and death both constitute human experience and that there
is no need to avoid death. The funeral service Wright saw in an Ashanti tribe
showed him that “the ‘dead’ live side by side with the living; they eat, breathe,
laugh, hate, love, and continue doing in the world of ghostly shadows exact-
ly what they had been doing in the world of flesh and blood” (Black Power
213).

Like a Buddhist text, Dr. J. B. Danquah’s The Akan Doctrine of God per-
suaded Wright of the African belief that spirits reside in inanimate objects
like trees, stones, and rivers, an innate African philosophy on which
Morrison’s narrative in Beloved is based. Wright also witnessed Africans’ belief
in ghosts and in the spirits of the dead, as Morrison used the concept in her
fiction. Just as, in Zen, a tree contains satori only when the viewer can see it
through his or her enlightened eyes, Wright saw in African life a closer rela-
tionship between human beings and nature than between human beings and
their social and political environment:

Africa, with its high rain forest, with its stifling heat and lush vegetation,
might well be mankind’s queerest laboratory. Here instinct ruled and
flowered without being concerned with the nature of the physical struc-
ture of the world; man lived without too much effort; there was nothing
to distract him from concentrating upon the currents and countercurrents of his heart. He was thus free to project out of himself what he thought he was. Man has lived here in a waking dream, and, to some extent, he still lives here in that dream. (*Black Power* 159)

Wright created here an image of the noble black man: Africa evokes in one “a total attitude toward life, calling into question the basic assumptions of existence,” just as Zen teaches one a way of life completely independent of what one has been socially and politically conditioned to lead. As if echoing the enlightenment of Zen, Wright says: “Africa is the world of man; if you are wild, Africa’s wild; if you are empty, so’s Africa” (159).

Wright was moreover fascinated by the African reverence for nonhuman beings, a primal African attitude that corresponds to Buddhist belief:

> The pre-Christian African was impressed with the littleness of himself and he walked the earth warily, lest he disturb the presence of invisible gods. When he wanted to disrupt the terrible majesty of the ocean in order to fish, he first made sacrifices to its crashing and rolling waves; he dared not cut down a tree without first propitiating its spirit so that it would not haunt him; he loved his fragile life and he was convinced that the tree loved its life also. (*Black Power* 261–62)

The concept of unity, continuity, and infinity underlying that of life and death is what the Akan religion and Buddhism share. When Wright was among the Ashanti, he was not conscious of an affinity between the two religions, but as he later read R. H. Blyth’s explanation of Zen and its influence on haiku, he found both religious philosophies fundamentally alike.

This unity and continuity between life and death, a quintessential African outlook, is fictionalized in *Beloved* with much intricacy and in depth. At times Morrison freely lets time elapse for generations and centuries. Sethe remembers the dancing feet of her dead mother as she feels the kicking legs of Denver in her womb. The pain caused by Denver’s movement makes her feel as if she were rammed by an antelope, a wild animal roaming in Africa centuries earlier. Even though she has never seen an antelope, the creation of this image bridges the gap between the occurrences of the present and those of the past. “Oh but when they sang,” Morrison writes. “And oh but when they danced and sometimes they danced the antelope. . . . They shifted shapes and became something other. Some unchained, demanding other whose feet knew her pulse better than she did. Just like this one in her stomach” (31). Morrison bridges the gap between Denver’s generation and her
grandmother’s, as well as that between American history and African history, by merging the images of the antelope, the grandmother’s dancing, and Denver’s kicking into a unified image. Later in the story Beloved recalls her traumatic experiences on a slave ship in which the captured Africans were herded into a crammed space: “All of it is now it is always now there will never be a time when I am not crouching and watching others who are crouching too I am always crouching the man on my face is dead” (210). A slave woman’s crouching in the confined space immediately evokes the image of a free woman’s crouching in an open field on the African continent, “where a woman takes flowers away from their leaves and puts them in a round basket before the clouds she is crouching near us but I do not see her until he locks his eyes and dies on my face” (211–12). This image unifies Beloved’s stream-of-consciousness rememberings of the two women from the different centuries.

On the surface of the story the distinction of present and past reflects that of outside and inside, the outer world and the character’s mind. But the story cannot distinguish the present from the past. Denver, for example, views the present in terms of the past because she is obsessed with the premonition that Beloved is her ghost sister. The character’s inability to distinguish between his or her inner mind and the outer world, the past and the present, manifests itself in Sethe’s relationship with Beloved, Morrison’s central theme. At a climactic moment Morrison depicts the mother and daughter’s reunion:

I have to have my face I go in the grass opens she opens it I am in the water and she is coming there is no round basket no iron circle around her neck she goes up where the diamonds are I follow her we are in the diamonds which are her earrings now my face is coming I have to have it I am looking for the join I am loving my face so much my dark face is close to me I want to join (213)

As Beloved sees her own face reflected in the water, she at once identifies with her mother.

2.

The primacy of kinship over individualism, a social practice based on the African primal view of human existence, is also conveyed in Morrison’s fiction. Morrison takes pains to express this African idealism in terms of place as well as of time. As time plays a crucial role in unifying various planes of
existence in *Beloved*, so does the word *place*. Morrison’s use of such a word is so powerful that it imbues the text with a postmodern sense of situatedness. Just as Wright explains the Akan doctrine of God, in which the deceased live exactly as do the living, Morrison portrays spirits and ghosts as if they were alive. When Sethe smiles at Beloved, for instance, her smile is reflected on Beloved’s face: “I see her face which is mine it is the face that was going to smile at me in the *place* where we crouched” (212–13; emphasis added). Beloved’s use of the words *face* and *place* suggests her inability to separate her own body from that of her mother. Earlier in the story, Sethe reminisces about a woman named Nan who “used different words,” the same language her own mother spoke. Although she does not remember the language, “the messages—that was and had been there all along” (62) links her back to her mother and to her mother’s land, the place where women picked flowers in freedom before the slave traders invaded their place.

As the function of time in *Beloved* is fluid, so is Morrison’s use of the word *place*. The characters journey from place to place freely and abruptly as they please. They constantly traverse the boundary between the visible and the invisible, the physical and the spiritual, the conscious and the unconscious. Baby Suggs, for example, expresses primal human sensations:

> “Here,” she said, “in this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet in grass. Love it. Love it hard... Love your hands!... Touch others with them, pat them together, stroke them on your face... The dark, dark liver—love it, love it, and the beat and beating heart, love that too. More than eyes or feet. More than lungs that have yet to draw free air. More than your life-holding womb and your life-giving private parts, hear me now, love your heart. For this is the prize.” (88–89)

In her exhortations that emphasize *this* place and *this* time, Baby Suggs is calling not only for self-love but also for communal kinship. Her use of words is reminiscent of those of a transcendental poet, such as Whitman in “Song of Myself.”

Morrison’s use of *place* varies from character to character, from the dead to the living in particular. The referents of a place for Baby Suggs are characterized by their concrete and contemporaneous existence: *flesh, feet, grass, hands, face, backs, shoulders, arms, womb, lungs, heart*. By contrast, Beloved’s referent for a place is not only abstract but elusive, as a dialogue between Beloved and Denver illustrates:
“What is it?” asks Denver.

“Look,” she points to the sunlit cracks.

“What? I don’t see nothing.” Denver follows the pointing finger. . . .

Beloved focuses her eyes. “Over there. Her face.”

Denver looks where Beloved’s eyes go; there is nothing but darkness there.

“Whose face? Who is it?”

“Me. It’s me.”

She is smiling again. (124)

Moreover, Morrison’s language in Beloved is strikingly postmodern in its use of contestatory voices and ironic, parodic modes of expression. It challenges Western discourse and expands concepts of history. Stamp Paid, for example, parodies the anthropological observation, as Wright in Black Power assails Western anthropologists, that the “jungle” life of black people originated from African culture: “Whitepeople believed that whatever the manners, under every dark skin was a jungle.” He challenges such a notion by articulating fact and history: “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” (Beloved 198; emphasis added).

The most poignant use of place is reserved for Morrison’s expression of the central theme. Her aim in this narrative is to deconstruct and reconstruct history about an incident in 1855 in which, out of her innate love of child—what Stamp Paid calls “how gentle . . . and loving, how human . . . something Negroes believed could not be questioned”—a slave mother ran away to Cincinnati with her four children and attempted to kill the children when they were chased and then caught by her owner.7 Sethe, faced with this genuinely human dilemma, opts for murdering Beloved. The text Morrison creates to dramatize Sethe’s dilemma and action reverberates the morally unquestionable ideology that, for human beings, the place of death is better than that of slavery. From the beginning of the story Morrison is intent upon creating a parody to drive home the meaning of slavery. Early in the story, Sethe reminisces about her experiences at Sweet Home. “After choosing Halle for her husband,” she wonders about their wedding: “Mrs. Garner,” Morrison describes the scene, “put down her cooking spoon. Laughing a little, she touched Sethe on the head, saying, ‘You are one sweet child.’ And
then no more” (26). It is utterly ironic that the kinship of Sethe and Beloved, the mother-daughter relationship that has overcome slavery, is inherently stable and permanent whereas the mother-daughter relationship Mrs. Garner and Sethe forged at Sweet Home is not.

What motivates the African American characters in *Beloved* is their primal outlook on life: spiritualism and kinship. Searching for their “beloved,” Sethe and Denver try to reconnect their kinship with all sixty million women, and they deny any boundary between the individual and the group. Such action disrupts the Western and American character of individualism and self-reliance. Sethe’s and Denver’s quest is further intensified by Paul D’s appearance on the scene. Trying to revive Sethe with the words and images both remembered, Paul D reconnects her with the community. In Morrison’s fiction, alienation from community and kinship leads to tragic consequences; the reassertion of this bond makes possible the recovery of order and wholeness.

As pointed out earlier, Wright discovered in Ashanti’s tribal culture the primacy of kinship and community over individualism. For the Ashanti, this solidarity, a defense mechanism to fend off industrialism and imperialism, was a form of African nationalism that challenged the cross-cultural politics in modern Africa. Wright’s Marxist stories in *Uncle Tom’s Children* are endowed with this communal spirit. In “Long Black Song” Silas’s individualistic spirit in competing with white farmers is negated by the lack of solidarity with his black community: one individual’s liberation is not accomplished until all oppressed people are liberated. In a similar vein Morrison has stated that African American communal kinship is rooted in African culture. “The contemporary autobiography,” she says, “tends to be ‘how I got over—look at me—alone—let me show you how I did it.’ . . . 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” (“Rootedness” 339–40, 344).

Contrary to Morrison’s view of self-reliance, however, Wright’s is ambivalent. In *Black Power*, while Wright admired close relationships that bonded the Ashanti family and tribe, he was troubled by the denial of individualism. All his life he believed in the twin values of American life: individualism and freedom. Not only did he remain ambivalent on the subject, but to him the tribal solidarity and the lack of individualism in African life signified the African paradox in modern times. The open letter he wrote Nkrumah on his way home reflects his ambivalent feelings about African culture in general and this African pioneer’s political strategy in particular.

In fact, Paul D’s advice to Sethe bears a striking resemblance to Wright’s to
Nkrumah. Reviewing Sethe's ordeal in slavery, Sethe and Paul D are engaged in this dialogue:

“It ain't my job to know what's worse. It's my job to know what is and to keep them away from what I know is terrible. I did that.”

“What you did was wrong, Sethe.”

“I should have gone on back there? Taken my babies back there?”

“There could have been a way. Some other way.”

“What way?”

“You got two feet, Sethe, not four,” he said, and right then a forest sprang up between them; trackless and quiet. (165)

Reminding Sethe of having two feet rather than four, Paul D admonishes her against reliance on others. At the end of the novel, however, he abandons his earlier doctrine of individualism and self-reliance and comes to believe in communality as the most powerful weapon in the battle of life. “Look,” he calls her attention, “Denver be here in the day. I be here in the night. I'm a take care of you, you hear? Starting now. First off, you don't smell right. Stay there. Don't move. Let me heat up some water . . . Is it all right, Sethe, if I heat up some water?” Quipping at the conversion, she asks him, “And count my feet?” (272).

3.

As the title of Morrison's novel suggests, this insistence on communal kinship, the African primal view of existence, permeates the entire text. It is a mother's love for her child that constitutes the deepest layer of human relationship. As Sethe's story unfolds, Denver gradually comes to understand the paradox that compelled her mother to kill Beloved. Sethe convinces Denver that her act of murder was justified because it came from spiritual love. Pitted against the male-female relationship such as that of Paul D and Sethe, how strong and deep this mother-child bond remains becomes evident as the narrative develops. From time to time Morrison emphasizes the depth and permanence of mother-child kinship with such images as baby blood, mother's milk, and growing trees. At the end of the novel Paul D tries to negotiate his future with Sethe, but his attempt fails because spiritual love does not exist between them. By the time Beloved has chased Paul D out of Sethe's house and lured him into spiritless sex in the cold-house, she deals the relationship of Paul D and Sethe permanent separation. When he goes to live in
the cellar of the church, Stamp Paid tries vainly to rectify the situation by pleading with him: “She ain’t crazy. She love those children. She was trying to outhurt the hurter” (234).

The mother-daughter kinship that dominates Sethe’s story is remindful of the female principle in life represented by the Black Virgin in Wright’s *Pagan Spain*. Instead of applying Freudian psychoanalysis, which overemphasizes male sexual desire, Wright views the Black Virgin in terms of what he calls “superhuman order of reality” (*Pagan Spain* 61). Contrary to the male principle of life, which smacks of Christianity, he defines the genesis of the Virgin in Spain as pagan, for in Eastern and African religions the Holy Mother, the perennial life-giver, is a representation of nature. In *Beloved*, mother’s irresistible urge to feed milk, child’s insatiable sucking of mother’s nipple, “no stopping water breaking from a breaking womb” (51)—all such natural actions establish the strongest, undeniable nexus between mother and child. At the triumphant moment of her maternal quest, Sethe declares: “I was big, Paul D, and deep and wide and when I stretched out my arms all my children could get in between. I was that wide” (162).

As shown in *Black Power*, the African concept of society is derived from kinship and love in the family. Just as the Akan God is a woman, the state is owned by a female king and a child is under the custody of its mother, while the state is ruled by a male king and a family is managed by a father. Because the state is supported by women, the family is matrilineal in its inheritance. The supremacy of woman in the African state and family reflects the universal idea of Mother Nature. Womanhood in *Black Power* constitutes an innate representation of African character. Just as Wright in his journey into pagan Spain witnessed the energetic maternal instinct of the Spanish woman and the female principle in life represented by the Black Virgin of Montserrat, Sethe in her journey from slavery to freedom seizes upon the maternal love of child innate in African culture. In contrast to the traditional slave narrative, *Beloved* features the heroic slave mother to replace the figure of the heroic male fugitive.

The mother-daughter bond in *Beloved*, representative of superhumanism, originated in African religiosity. According to the Akan doctrine of God, as reported in *Black Power*, Africans believed in reincarnation just as do Buddhists: ancestors freely return to the present, and their spirits reside in nonhuman objects. Africans indeed denied the Western dichotomy of life and death. For them life in the spiritual world exactly reflected that in this world: the dead carry on their lives exactly as do the living in the present world. Given this vision of existence, not only can we understand a slave mother’s infanticide in *Beloved*; we are also painfully reminded of humankind’s worst crime—slavery.