

# African Ideas of the Afterlife and *Beloved*

By Paul Horton

## Overview

The most striking aspect of reading *Beloved*, apart from its rendering of the complexity of memory and history, is the interaction between *Beloved* and Sethe. Readers are asked to enter a world where the dead are very much a part of life. Although *Beloved* appears to be something of a mystery, her presence is accepted. When she reappears in flesh and blood, she is welcomed back into the family almost naturally. While the belief in "haints" was a component of folklore among African-American slaves, we must examine cultural expectations and practices that existed in Africa and continued in the African-American slave culture to understand the matter-of-fact place that *Beloved* finds within Sethe's household.

## Student Objectives

Students will demonstrate the understanding of:

- Religious diversity in the colonies and how idioms about religion evolved (National Standard 2B)
- African life under slavery by analyzing how African Americans drew upon their past to develop a new culture (National Standard 3C).-NEH

## Skills Attained

Students will be able to:

- Analyze passages focusing on *Beloved's* return to Sethe
- Read and analyze historical and anthropological commentary about death and reincarnation among African peoples
- Evaluate the extent to which Morrison incorporates African beliefs about death and reincarnation into her novel

## Materials Needed

- African Ideas About the Afterlife Handout
- Reader response questions
- *Beloved* by Toni Morrison

## The Lesson

### Anticipatory Set

Give students 10-15 minutes to reread passages focusing on *Beloved* and her entry into their lives in Chapter 1, the beginning of Chapter 5, and the beginning of Chapter 7.

### Procedures

1. Lead students in a discussion about how Toni Morrison describes *Beloved*.
2. Then, direct students to examine African cultural beliefs about death.
3. Give students the handout below and have them read and answer the questions, below.
4. Finally, have the class discuss students' answers.

### **Assessment**

You should informally evaluate students based on their participation in discussions, while also formally assessing their written responses to the questions.

### **Connections**

For further readings on African ideas about death, the "living-dead," and reincarnation, you could have students examine John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, and Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion* in their entirety.

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## Handout: Reader Response Questions

1. How do African religions view death?
2. Why are funeral rites and care with burial important?
3. Describe the relationship between the "living-dead" and its former family.
4. Why do the living need a relationship with the "living-dead?"
5. How is belief in reincarnation "partial?"
6. To what extent, in your opinion, does Morrison borrow her conception of *Beloved* from traditional African beliefs about reincarnation and the "living dead?"

Also use these short accounts of [African Ideas About the Afterlife](#) from John S. Mbiti's *African Religions and Philosophy* and Albert J. Raboteau's *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South*.

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