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## **Out of Body: Depersonalization in Toni Morrison's Novels**

### **Introduction**

Toni Morrison makes her readers experience each character's emotions and perspective as if it were their own. She beautifully, and honestly, illustrates the psychological processes that often stem from human trauma. Toni Morrison encapsulates the experience of depersonalization, a psychological process that is usually very difficult for people to understand who don't experience it themselves. My thesis will explore how Morrison uses formal techniques to bring the depersonalization many of her characters experience to life for her audience: specifically, nonlinear narrative structure, fragmented sentence structure, and internal dialogue highlight the characters' depersonalization. I will explore this idea through Morrison's novels *The Bluest Eye*, *Beloved*, and *A Mercy*, which feature characters who have experienced extreme traumas and seem to have developed depersonalization as a result.

Currently, there is some academic literature on Morrison's novels that analyzes them through a psychological lens, especially *Beloved*. One scholar, Lynda Koolish, notes the loss of self and the dissociative split that takes place between the traumatized mind and the capable mind of the characters in *Beloved*. Another scholar, Barbara Schapiro, views this split in a different way and describes as "psychic death" the ways in which a very dehumanizing situation can lead to a deep loss of self. Both scholars agree that this split is likely a form of self-preservation in which the characters are attempting to separate themselves from their past traumas (Koolish; Schapiro). While current literature on Morrison's writing through a psychological lens is beneficial to the experience of comprehending her novels, scholars have yet to specifically explore depersonalization in Morrison's characters. Depersonalization is present in many of Morrison's characters and is an essential part of understanding the ways in which they cope with their traumas. Since Morrison never uses depersonalization by name, it is crucial

to explore the ways she uses formal techniques to convey this psychological experience. While she may not have purposefully depicted depersonalization specifically in her novels, the traumatic events her characters face very clearly lead to a psychological experience that lines up with the definition of depersonalization.

Depersonalization can be understood as an individual experiencing persistent or recurrent episodes of feeling detached from their sense of self and the world around them (Thomson and Jaque). A 2018 study found that people with the highest levels of reported depersonalization also had more adverse childhood experiences. This group also experienced more adult traumatic events, higher levels of anxiety, and had less effective coping strategies for stress (Thomson and Jaque). Many of the characters in *Beloved*, *The Bluest Eye*, and *A Mercy* have experienced some type of extreme trauma. Since the experience of depersonalization makes an individual feel like they have completely lost touch with themselves and the world around them, the way they perceive the world is very different from people who don't experience depersonalization. Through different formal techniques, it becomes clear that Morrison's characters feel a certain level of self-detachment due to events from their horrific pasts.

Daphne Simeon and Jeffrey Abugel answer frequently asked questions and report on various descriptions of depersonalization in their book, *Feeling unreal: Depersonalization disorder and the loss of the self*. Their work is very beneficial for understanding depersonalization, as well as how it may look in Morrison's novels. Depersonalization is a psychological experience that is surprisingly quite common, and yet many individuals experiencing it have no idea there is a name for the way they are feeling (Simeon and Abugel). Moreover, many individuals experiencing depersonalization struggle to describe it to others, making it difficult to feel validated. There are many different symptoms and feelings associated

with depersonalization. While one individual might experience depersonalization one way, another may experience it very differently. One experience felt by many individuals struggling with depersonalization is feeling as if their thoughts and emotions are operating apart from their own body (Simeon and Abugel). Their mind no longer feels like it belongs to them. This, as well as other symptoms of depersonalization, show up several times throughout *The Bluest Eye*, *Beloved*, and *A Mercy*.

In order to understand the way depersonalization is depicted in literary narration, this thesis looks to a book entitled *Trauma and Literature* edited by J. Roger Kurtz. It is made up of a series of critical essays that explore trauma theory and how it relates to literature. While trauma and depersonalization are not exactly the same, the coping mechanisms they create and many of their symptoms overlap. Therefore, *Trauma and Literature* will help guide my thesis's understanding of depersonalization in literature.

Trauma is difficult to comprehend, ergo, it can also be difficult to convey. Trauma theory started to become more recognized in the 1990's, though many scholars were already exploring the idea (Kurtz). Once the movement gained more traction, many trauma theory scholars argued that literary narratives are the best way to tell the story of trauma in a way people will actually be able to understand and feel (Kurtz). Trauma and language are formally similar (Kurtz). Trauma theory theorists believe that the best way to depict trauma isn't through historical or objective language, but rather through literary narration (Kurtz). It's believed that trauma itself shares a similar form to literary narration. One way in which trauma and literary narration mimic each other is through absences or silences (Kurtz). This formal choice mimics the mind of someone dealing with trauma, or in this case depersonalization, as it skips and blocks out certain memories and moments. As this thesis will establish, Morrison utilizes this in many of her

novels, especially in her later novel, *A Mercy*. Interestingly, the rise of trauma theory happened after Morrison published *Beloved* but before she published *A Mercy*. As this thesis will explore, while *The Bluest Eye* and *Beloved* effectively depict depersonalization, *A Mercy* depicts it in a more vivid and nuanced way. Given the timing of the rise of trauma theory and the publishing of *A Mercy*, one might assume Morrison was influenced by the movement.

The literary representation of depersonalization is important for several reasons. As previously mentioned, depersonalization is surprisingly common, however, many people aren't aware that there is an explanation for the way they are feeling. Seeing depersonalization in literature can help these individuals better understand themselves and find a sense of community in the way they are feeling. Given that individuals with depersonalization struggle to describe it to others in normal or even academic language, seeing depersonalization depicted accurately in literary form can be beneficial. Hearing words that describe the way an individual feels for the first time in their life can be a liberating, educational experience.

Furthermore, it is also important to understand why the depiction of depersonalization in Morrison's novels is crucial. Morrison writes about deeply traumatized individuals who put everything they have into simply existing after their traumatic experiences. Unfortunately, experiencing trauma is far more common than one would hope. Since depersonalization can stem from traumatic experiences, Morrison's ability to depict depersonalization works towards breaking the stigma around coping with trauma. Many who experience trauma suffer in silence out of shame or embarrassment, convinced they are somehow at fault for what happened to them. By depicting trauma and the resulting depersonalization in a vivid and accurate way, Morrison effectively tells the reader that they do not have to suffer alone.

Toni Morrison's career spanned decades. She covered many different aspects of racism and sexism through her stories while also mapping them out against real historical events. *The Bluest Eye*—which takes place in the 1940s before the Civil Rights Movement gained momentum—was published in 1970, relatively early in her esteemed career. Morrison published *Beloved*, set in both the pre-Civil War and post-Civil War days, in 1987. *A Mercy* was published in 2008 and follows the lives of several characters set in seventeenth-century Colonial America. Seeing depersonalization represented throughout these time periods suggests how prevalent the condition is, even though statistics on people who experience depersonalization are difficult to collect as many suffering with the condition don't seek professional help or assume there is nothing they can do about it (Simeon and Abugel). Additionally, stigma around mental health has changed throughout time. Given that *A Mercy* was written much more recently than the other two novels, it is interesting to see her depictions of depersonalization become more detailed over time. This likely has to do with the fact that mental health was being more widely talked about in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, as noted in a psychological study that collected survey data from 1996 to 2006 that indicated improvements in public beliefs about various mental health conditions (Pescosolido et al.).

The way Morrison successfully brought depersonalization to life in a clearer format than many psychological papers on the same topic demonstrates Morrison's unique ability to capture human emotion. Using Morrison's novels *The Bluest Eye*, *Beloved*, and *A Mercy*, this thesis explores her use of nonlinear narrative structure, fragmented sentence structure, and internal dialogue how Morrison uses formal techniques to illustrate depersonalization in her characters. By representing characters who developed depersonalization through experiencing extreme

trauma, Morrison turns formal literary techniques into tools to humanize trauma and depersonalization.

### **Depersonalization in *The Bluest Eye***

*The Bluest Eye* takes place at the end of the Great Depression in Lorain, Ohio. Morrison tells the story of a young black girl from a troubled home, Pecola, as she tries to navigate the world around her. Pecola faces many hardships at a very young age and struggles to make sense of them. The young girl hates her appearance and wishes for blue eyes so she can be beautiful, hence the title of the novel. Growing up in a broken home led Pecola to the MacTeer family. Claudia and Frieda MacTeer help guide Pecola through her coming of age and all the hardships that follow; however, given that they too are just children, there are certain aspects of Pecola's struggles that are out of their control. Due to a combination of racism, internalized hatred, and traumatic events, Pecola (along with a few of the other characters) struggles with depersonalization. From momentary lapses of memory to a complete mental break, Morrison uses several formal techniques to demonstrate her characters' depersonalization.

### **Nonlinear Narrative Structure**

The structure of this novel follows the seasons in order with memories, flashbacks, and multiple storylines sprinkled in between. This unique structure demonstrates how the mind of someone suffering from depersonalization might work. Certain events happen in order, however, there are memories and moments that seem out of place. Sometimes, it's difficult to recall the sequence of events entirely. People who experience depersonalization have a different relationship to reality and time (David and Sierra). The way Morrison broke *The Bluest Eye* up into four simple main sections- "Autumn," "Winter," "Spring," "Summer"- mimics the way a person with depersonalization might try to reconnect to reality and temporality through grasping

onto the obvious markers (Thomson and Jaque). The flashbacks and different perspectives that randomly pop up during those sections mimics the way that sometimes, even if a person does everything they can, a person with depersonalization can't control when or how they recall their memories.

In the "Spring" section of *The Bluest Eye*, the novel jumps from the primary storyline when Frieda tells Claudia about how Mr. Henry molested her and then suddenly flashes back to Cholly's childhood. Morrison writes, "When Cholly was four days old, his mother wrapped him in two blankets and one newspaper and placed him on a junk heap by the railroad" (132). On its own, nothing seems off about this excerpt. However, when put in perspective, this time jump mimics the mind of an individual with depersonalization. The primary storyline, that of Pecola and the MacTeer girls, was following a linear narrative structure when suddenly Cholly's storyline broke through without warning. This is similar to the experience that an episode of depersonalization can bring on; recalling memories in order and then having one suddenly burst in from nowhere.

The hardest scene to read in *The Bluest Eye* is when Cholly rapes Pecola in their kitchen. Any rape, especially one perpetrated by someone the individual trusts and loves, is a traumatic, life-altering experience. As this paper has established, depersonalization is often triggered by trauma (Thomson and Jaque). Although the audience isn't able to hear Pecola's thoughts during the assault, it's the lack of perspective and transition that symbolizes Pecola's depersonalization and severe separation from reality after the rape. The audience reads about Pecola's rape from Cholly's perspective. Morrison ends the chapter by writing, "So when the child regained consciousness, she was lying on the kitchen floor under a heavy quilt, trying to connect the pain between her legs with the face of her mother looming over her" (163). Reading this alone, all the



audience really knows is that Pecola wakes up very confused and in physical pain. The next time Pecola is brought up is in a very obscure and out of order manner. The following section abruptly begins to tell the life story of Soaphead Church. Suddenly, a young girl, who is later discovered to be Pecola, comes to him to ask for blue eyes. Pecola says, “I can’t go to school no more. And I thought maybe you could help me” (174). This back and forth between story lines is confusing but indicative of Pecola’s mental state. Blocking out trauma is a very normal psychological response (Brewin). Morrison deciding to write the rape from Cholly’s perspective, completely skipping over the immediate sequential events, and then suddenly reintroducing Pecola seems disorganized but is purposeful. Pecola’s depersonalization and other coping mechanisms are working overtime to protect her from this traumatic memory.

After Pecola sees Soaphead Church to ask for blue eyes, but before the audience experiences Pecola’s conversation with herself, the storyline jumps back to Claudia’s perspective. Morrison begins the “Summer” section by writing, “I have only to break into the tightness of a strawberry, and I see summer-its dust and lowering skies. It remains for me a season of storms” (187). This beautifully written excerpt seems out of place between the two depictions of Pecola. This back and forth between different storylines and different tones again mimics the inability to correctly comprehend time and memories that can occur during an episode of depersonalization.

### **Fragmented Sentence Structure**

As seen in most of Toni Morrison’s novels, *The Bluest Eye* contains a lot of unique sentence structure. Morrison uses a mix of very short sentences, incomplete sentences, and a lack of sentence structure altogether to emphasize the characters’ deepest feelings. Specifically, Morrison’s sentence structure highlights the depersonalization her characters, especially Pecola,

are experiencing in this novel. The various grammatically incorrect sentence structures used throughout the book mimic how confusing and disconnected thoughts and emotions are during an episode of depersonalization (Thomson and Jaque). Perhaps one of the most striking examples of this happens before the story itself begins. Morrison starts off by describing a nuclear family, presumably white, in a perfect house—a reality many of her characters, especially Pecola, will never experience. Morrison starts, “Here is the house” (3). She later continues, “See Jane. She has a red dress” (3). These short excerpts are interesting when examined through the lens of depersonalization. This robotic-like, emotionless way of speaking is a common experience for those suffering from depersonalization. Many individuals with depersonalization experience muted emotional responses and sometimes a complete disconnect between their thoughts, actions, and emotions (David and Sierra). The way Morrison writes this introduction translates that experience into writing so people who've never experienced depersonalization can start to understand their counterparts.

At the end of Morrison’s introduction, and woven throughout the following chapters, there is a stream of consciousness version of the story described above. Morrison writes, “Hereisthehouseitisgreenandwhiteithasareddoor...” (4). This sentence continues to repeat the entire depiction of the nuclear family Morrison started the novel with. The fact that she decided to weave parts of this run-on sentence throughout the novel was a powerful choice. While at times the thoughts and feelings of a person experiencing depersonalization can feel disconnected and abrupt, there are also times where all of their thoughts bleed into each other and happen quickly (Simeon and Abugel). Weaving this run-on sentence throughout the storyline mimics the irregular thought patterns that often occur with depersonalization.

### **Internal Dialogue**

Internal dialogue is a useful tool for understanding the emotions characters feel. It also allows the reader to view the world in the way the character perceives. Although the world itself is the same for everyone, the way people perceive it will always differ. This is even more true for people struggling with depersonalization. Depersonalization creates a deep sense of unreality in those who experience it, a feeling that can make everyday life difficult (Simeon and Abugel).

Although the narration of *The Bluest Eye* switches between first person narration, through Claudia's perspective rather than Pecola's, and an omniscient third person narrator, the audience is still able to see several of Pecola's inner thoughts throughout the text. In a scene where Pecola is sitting and talking with sex workers who live in the apartment above the Breedloves, Morrison writes, "Pecola looked and looked at the women. Were they real?" (58). As mentioned, depersonalization stems from a disconnect with reality (Simeon and Abugel). Most people wouldn't question whether a person they were talking to was real or not. However, a person who struggles with depersonalization definitely could experience this. As Pecola is listening to the women talk to each other as they apply their makeup and get ready to go out, she appears to be dissociating from the situation a bit. She loses touch with the world around her and her mind isn't able to determine if she's truly in the moment or if it's all in her head. She therefore has to double check with herself by asking if the women were real. Since depersonalization makes the world feel pretend, it's not that absurd to wonder if the people in it are pretend too.

After Cholly rapes Pecola, she suffers a mental break. Understandably, the trauma of the assault was too much for her young mind to comprehend. In order to continue living, Pecola's psyche had to block out the traumatic event. In the following excerpts, the audience watches as Pecola experiences a severe episode of depersonalization. It's so severe that her psyche created a friend for her to lean on and talk to so she would never have to rely on the real world, or real

people, again—both of which had pushed her to this breaking point. When questioning why she was never friends with her imaginary friend before, Pecola asks, “No. Really. You are my very best friend. Why didn’t I know you before?” Her imaginary friend then responds with, “*You didn’t need me before.*” Pecola replies, “Didn’t need you?” (196). In this scene, Pecola is beginning to question how her imaginary friend came into her life. This struggle with memory and her inability to grasp the situation at hand demonstrate her depersonalization in full force. The entire interaction between Pecola and her imaginary friend is an extreme example of depersonalization. At its most basic level, depersonalization is the experience of feeling detached from oneself and the world (Thomson and Jaque). This scene is a conversation between Pecola and another part of Pecola that broke off. This is a clear example of a detachment from self caused by depersonalization.

During this conversation between Pecola and her imaginary friend, or more accurately, between Pecola and herself, Morrison makes it clear that Pecola blocked out the rape. The following excerpt is a conversation between Pecola and herself. Morrison writes, “*That was horrible, wasn’t it? Yes. The second time too? Yes. Really? The second time too? Leave me alone! You better leave me alone*” (201). Before this, Pecola continually told the other version of herself that nothing happened when Cholly walked into the kitchen that day. This is the first time Pecola was able to admit it to herself, but only to a certain degree. As soon as she realizes what she admitted to, she wants to be left alone and allowed to forget about it again. Purposefully blocking out harmful memories is both a way of coping with trauma and can be associated with depersonalization (David and Sierra). Pecola lacked proper support from her parents and suffered multiple traumas all at a young age, which forced her to attempt to learn how to cope with big feelings on her own. This is likely why her depersonalization manifested in the first place.

Despite being Toni Morrison's first published novel, *The Bluest Eye* encapsulates Pecola's struggle with depersonalization. The audience can begin to understand what depersonalization feels like through Morrison's use of nonlinear narrative structure, fragmented sentence structure, and internal dialogue. Through formal technique, Morrison depicted Pecola's sense of unreality, her struggle with conceptualizing time, and her disconnect from her own mind, all of which are symptoms of depersonalization.

### **Depersonalization in *Beloved***

*Beloved* begins in 1873 in Cincinnati, Ohio. The story follows Sethe, a former slave, and her daughter Denver. Though their family started off much bigger, they are all that is left. After Paul D's arrival, another former slave Sethe is friends with, the spirit of the baby that once haunted their house is gone. In its place enters a mysterious young woman going by the name Beloved. The story jumps between the present and past memories from darker days. The narration also alternates between the perspectives of different characters.

Sethe is haunted by her past and the death of her daughter. In order for Sethe, as well as Paul D and Denver, to move on, she must stop living in the past. Sethe needs to accept her past and forgive herself in order to live a fuller life. Due to Sethe and Paul D's traumatic experience with slavery, disconnecting from themselves and the world around them might be a coping strategy to protect themselves from painful memories. Growing up with Sethe as a mother likely took its toll on Denver's mental wellbeing as well. Through their individual traumas, all three characters likely experience depersonalization to some degree. Given the severity of their traumas, Sethe shows more intense signs of depersonalization.

### **Nonlinear Narrative Structure**

Given that *Beloved* was published seventeen years after *The Bluest Eye*, the audience is able to see how Morrison again uses nonlinear narrative structure to illustrate depersonalization, as well as how she expands on her past strategies. Throughout the entirety of *Beloved*, similar to the narrative structure of *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison jumps back and forth in time. In some ways, flashbacks feel more vivid and real in *Beloved* compared to *The Bluest Eye*. In this novel, Morrison often uses strong imagery and aggressive words when writing about a flashback, making it more realistic for the reader. This allows readers to immerse themselves into an experience they might not experience themselves, aiding in the development of their empathy for others suffering from depersonalization in real life.

Of all the characters in *Beloved*, Sethe and Paul D have the most vivid memories. This seems intentional given that they are the two living main characters who experienced the atrocities of slavery. Specifically, Sethe repeatedly gets entangled in her past in her day to day life, making it difficult to ever properly move on. In the following excerpt, Sethe begins to flashback to the time she first arrived at 124: “It was time to lay it all down. Before Paul D came and sat on her porch steps, words whispered in the keeping room had kept her going...Sethe decided to go to the Clearing, back where Baby Suggs had danced in sunlight...Before 124 and everybody in it had closed down...It was in front of *that* 124 that Sethe climbed off a wagon, her newborn tied to her chest...” (102). This excerpt begins in the present time and suddenly jumps to her first memory of 124. This demonstrates the way depersonalization can mess with one’s sense of time and linearity (Simeon and Abugel). The way Morrison writes highlights how Sethe is thrown into random memories instead of purposefully recalling them on her own. This lack of control and disconnect from present reality really encapsulates what an episode of depersonalization can feel like.

Moreover, from the second Paul D arrives at 124, it's very apparent that he is still fighting his own demons. In an excerpt recalling the torture Paul D endured after he attempted to kill the man he was told to, Morrison writes, "Paul D thought he was screaming; his mouth was open and there was this loud throat-splitting sound-but it may have been somebody else. Then he thought he was crying. Something was running down his cheeks" (129). Not only does this quote demonstrate Paul D's difficulty connecting with current reality, it also shows a disconnect to the reality he was experiencing at the time. Paul D was experiencing such severe depersonalization that he wasn't even able to tell what his own body was doing. This is a common experience for people who struggle with depersonalization (Simeon and Abugel). When the world doesn't feel real and one's body doesn't feel like their own, it even becomes difficult to stay in tune with one's own anatomy and physical movements.

Perhaps one of the most difficult flashbacks to read takes the audience back to the day Sethe killed her daughter and attempted to kill her other children because she believed it would protect them from the atrocities she experienced during her enslavement. Morrison writes, "When the four horsemen came-schoolteacher, one nephew, one slave catcher and a sheriff- the house on Bluestone Road was so quiet they thought they were too late" (174). This quote introduces the new flashback. The audience is able to vividly imagine the sight that pushed Sethe over the edge and forced her to do something she would never normally do. It's interesting that it took this far into the novel to hear the real story about what happened with Sethe in the barn that day. That just further highlights how difficult time can be to grasp when a person is dealing with depersonalization. Painful memories are always going to be more difficult to remember; however, that task becomes even more difficult when also dealing with the disconnect that comes with depersonalization.

Morrison later continues, “But neither Stamp Paid nor Baby Suggs could make her put her crawling-already? girl down...Sethe reached up for the baby without letting the dead one go” (178-179). Two components of this flashback stick out. First of all, Sethe remembers the daughter she killed as “her crawling-already? girl.” The question mark here makes visible that at the time and in the present there are details that Sethe will never be sure of, again highlighting how difficult it can be to trust current moments or memories when dealing with depersonalization (Thomson and Jaque). Secondly, the language used to describe the lifeless baby is very graphic. One might think that it would be easier to remember something as terrible as this in a more muted fashion; however, the mind of someone with depersonalization doesn’t have the energy or ability to sugarcoat.

### **Fragmented Sentence Structure**

As seen in *The Bluest Eye*, Morrison continues to utilize fragmented and irregular sentence structure to create psychological depth in *Beloved*. Similar to the way nonlinear narrative structure demonstrates the inability to fully grasp and understand time during an episode of depersonalization, fragmented sentence structure does the same. In addition, fragmented sentence structure also highlights how discombobulating thoughts can be for a person with depersonalization. Sometimes it can be difficult to get entire ideas across when an individual feels like they are not even present in their own life. Getting any thoughts or feelings out, regardless of how together they actually are, can be a useful way to try to reconnect to reality (Simeon and Abugel). On a more basic level, this broken speech pattern emulates what it feels like to have a broken mind, a feeling many people with depersonalization are very accustomed to.



Throughout the novel, there are instances of each of the characters, as well as the narrator, speaking in fragmented sentences. More specifically, there are several times when Denver seems to think and exist in a very fragmented, choppy way. One example arises when spending time with Beloved, Denver goes through many emotions that fall perfectly in line with the experiences that someone with depersonalization might have. After Beloved looked intensely at Denver, Morrison writes of Denver, “She floated near but outside her own body, feeling vague and intense at the same time. Needing nothing. Being what there was” (139). Not only does this quote show the fragmented sentence structure that indicates depersonalization through mimicking the broken thought process of a depersonalized mind, but it also demonstrates some of the recurring thoughts a person with depersonalization might have. The idea that she feels like she’s floating outside her body is one of the most common feelings for a person with depersonalization (Simeon and Abugel). It can feel like someone is watching their life from a place outside their own body. The passage continues, “It is noon, quite light outside; inside it is not” (143). This fragmented and grammatically awkward narration again demonstrates a person with depersonalization trying to grasp on to the tangible parts of life in order to feel grounded. Even the smallest markers of the reality of the world around them can be helpful (Thomson and Jaque).

Aside from Denver’s fragmented existence, there are also countless instances throughout the novel where Sethe partakes in fragmented thinking. When spending time with Denver and Paul D, Sethe notices that their shadows are all holding hands. Morrison writes, “Nobody noticed but Sethe and she stopped looking after she decided that it was a good sign. A life. Could be” (57). This excerpt ends with two fragmented thoughts. In this case, the disconnectedness of them makes them even more powerful to read. Although her mind and depersonalization are working

against her ability to understand reality, Sethe is still able to appreciate the moment she is witnessing, even if it's in a fragmented, matter of fact style. To cope with her disconnect from much of the world around her, Sethe, like many other individuals experiencing depersonalization, pulls out positive events to stay sane, regardless of how small they may seem (Thomson and Jaque).

Later on in the novel, Sethe is again struggling with separating her past from her present. Morrison writes, "It was not real yet. Not yet. But when her sleepy boys and crawling-already? girl were brought in, it didn't matter whether it was real or not" (111). As previously mentioned in regard to nonlinear narrative structure, this narration is very interesting due to the way Sethe's "crawling-already? girl" is written. Although grammatically incorrect, writing about Sethe's baby girl in this way shows the audience that Sethe struggles with understanding small details from a traumatic time in her life. People who suffer from depersonalization often feel like they're missing important parts of memories that occurred during an episode, especially if that time was particularly traumatic (Thomson and Jaque). Morrison's decision to repeat "Not yet" was also a very powerful move that points to depersonalization. Triggered by a sense of unreality brought on by depersonalization, Sethe's feelings are repeated, likely to show that she is still questioning whether or not the situation actually was real.

### **Internal Dialogue**

Internal dialogue is essential in any novel when trying to understand the characters' deepest, truest feelings and thoughts. It allows for depth that third-person narration could never achieve alone. When looking at internal dialogue in *Beloved*, the audience is able to submerge themselves inside the minds of characters like Sethe, Beloved, Denver, and even at times Paul D. What makes *Beloved's* internal dialogue so captivating is the insight readers get into the

depersonalization these characters are experiencing as a result of severe trauma. The reason internal dialogue is such a key aspect of portraying depersonalization stems from the self-talk that often goes through an individual's mind who is suffering from the condition. Since the world around them feels off and out of reach, self-talk is a common coping mechanism to help individuals reattach to reality (Simeon and Abugel). Sometimes this self-talk is the only thing left grounding them to real life.

Through internal dialogue, the audience is allowed a peek into Sethe's mind as she works through reliving a past trauma from her years in slavery. Sethe is very clearly at war with her own mind as she tries everything in her power to escape the cycle she's stuck in. This is a prime example of Sethe's character using self-talk to attempt to reconnect with the reality around her so she can focus on events that she believes are more important than her past. Sethe took a seat by herself outside and "shook her head from side to side, resigned to her rebellious brain...I don't want to know or have to remember that. I have other things to do: worry, for example, about tomorrow, about Denver, about Beloved, about age and sickness not to speak of love" (83). This section of Sethe's perspective bounces between her own internal dialogue as well as the third person narration the audience has become accustomed to throughout the majority of the novel. In this excerpt the audience is able to see Sethe struggle to come to terms with her past trauma. She doesn't want to "know or have to remember" the atrocities she suffered while she was enslaved, especially the details of her escape. This avoidance to properly cope with her past is likely why she is still stuck in a cycle of depersonalization. When she feels herself getting caught up in these past details, she tries to ground herself to situations that are more tangible. The narration later continues "Other people went crazy, why couldn't she" (83)? This particular statement showcases Sethe's awareness of her struggle with mental health. She can feel herself slipping

away from reality and part of her thinks it would be easier if she completely allowed herself to give up and break down—a thought process individuals with depersonalization often know all too well (Simeon and Abugel).

Towards the end of the novel, the characters take turns narrating their own thought processes. Sethe's portion of this section is heartbreaking. As she does throughout the entirety of the novel, Sethe finds herself both completely entrapped in her past while also trying desperately to move on from it. This excerpt also provides an example of the fragmented structure of this novel further indicating signs of depersonalization. Sethe abruptly exclaims, "Didn't stop it till I saw Halle. Oh, but that's all over now. I'm here. I lasted. And my girl come home. Now I can look at things again because she's here to see them too. After the shed, I stopped" (237). Sethe can't help but relive her past, and this isn't the first time she's tried to talk herself out of doing so. She also acknowledges that her mental health took a serious turn for the worse after she killed her daughter in the shed. She believes Beloved is her daughter coming back from the otherside to rejoin their family. Clearly, Sethe is in many ways still trapped in a world that isn't real. She doesn't truly start her healing journey until Beloved again departs from her life. This departure indicates that Sethe has finally moved on from living in a reality that isn't real, a place where she is finally able to start moving forward.

Published nearly two decades after *The Bluest Eye* was published, *Beloved* demonstrates that, as her career progressed, Morrison was able to convey trauma and depersonalization in even clearer ways through similar, yet elevated, techniques. Morrison added more intense, vivid flashbacks to *Beloved* than she did with *The Bluest Eye*. This change made the nonlinear narrative structure of her novels even more effective in illustrating her characters' depersonalization. It allowed readers to fully understand the traumas that caused the

depersonalization, as well as understand the way each character perceived those traumas. With *Beloved*, Morrison started to include more quotes that mimic the real language people with depersonalization use. This development only gets stronger as her career progresses.

### **Depersonalization in *A Mercy***

Although *A Mercy* explores multiple characters' struggles, Florens seems to be the main protagonist, and much of the story is told from her perspective. Due to the structure of this novel, the audience is able to see Florens' depersonalization from within her own experiences, as well as how other characters view it. When Florens' mother was about to be sold out of her abusive situation, she offered up Florens to Jacob Vaark so her daughter would have a better life than herself. Florens was too young to understand that her mother's act was out of love, and many of her psychological issues stem from the belief that her mother abandoned her. Watching Florens' struggle with her mental health due to her traumatic life experiences aids in creating a rich and heartbreaking tale of human bondage, the oppression of women, and the psyche of people living in a broken world.

As this novel was written later than the other two, readers are able to see Morrison's writing change in a way that highlights depersonalization in more depth. When put into historical context with the period of publication, her ability to accurately depict depersonalization in her novels happens at a time when mental health was becoming more recognized and understood. Compared to the earlier two novels, *A Mercy* has more lines that accurately depict depersonalization through content, not just form, including thoughts and phrases that a person experiencing depersonalization might actually say to themselves. Morrison's ability to step into that mindset allows the reader to more fully understand Florens's depersonalization.

### **Nonlinear Narrative Structure**

In *Beloved* and *The Bluest Eye* the stories seem to jump back and forth between memories and the present. On the contrary, while much of *A Mercy* seems to be occurring in chronological order, the perspective switches are what makes the narrative structure nonlinear. Rather than flashing back to a painful memory, readers are instead able to see events and emotions through the lens of different characters, and especially through the eyes of Florens. The chapters often switch perspectives abruptly. One minute, the third person limited perspective is describing events presently occurring to the main characters. Then suddenly the narration jumps back to Florens telling her own experience. This seesaw between a person narrating their own thoughts and an outsider narrating them mimics an experience felt by many individuals experiencing depersonalization: these individuals report feeling like their thoughts and emotions are operating apart from their own body (Simeon and Abugel). This also happens with limbs and movements: sometimes it just feels like something else is in control. Having the narration bounce between first person and third person emulates the feeling of a loss of autonomy over one's own thoughts and actions.

In the following excerpt, Florens is explaining how scared she is out on her own while journeying to find the blacksmith. She is frightened as she hasn't been alone in the wilderness before. Florens explains at the end of the chapter, "I know sleep will not claim me because I have too much fear. The branches creak and bend. My plan for this night is not good. I need Lina to say how to shelter in wilderness" (49). The next chapter abruptly jumps back to the third person perspective. Morrison writes, "Poor Florens, thought Lina. If she is not stolen or murdered, if she finds him safe she would not return" (51). These two perspectives illustrate what the lack of ownership over one's own thoughts feels like during an episode of depersonalization. The world and one's perception of it can start off as their own when suddenly, due to a trigger or not, their

mind no longer feels like it belongs to them (Simeon and Abugel). Morrison writing from Florens' point of view about Lina and then having the next chapter from a third person perspective examining Lina worrying about Florens is very intentional. The audience first sees Florens' fear from her own eyes. She's so worried she isn't even able to sleep. Jumping to Lina speaking about Florens' possible fate mimics Florens' own feelings but from a perspective outside of herself.

As previously mentioned, trauma theory suggests trauma itself shares a similar form to literary narration. One way in which trauma and literary narration mimic each other is through absences or silences in writing (Kurtz). Since depersonalization is a consequence of trauma, they share many similarities. Morrison occasionally uses pauses in Florens' narration to imitate a depersonalized mind that skips over both present and past moments. Choosing to stop telling Florens' point of view in a suspenseful moment highlights the issues with memory and time that individuals with depersonalization experience.

Once the blacksmith returns to see Florens has injured Malaik, he becomes upset and lashes out at her. While on the floor and trying to process everything that happened, Florens thinks, "Now I am living the dying inside. No. Not again. Not ever. Feathers lifting, I unfold. The claws scratch and scratch until the hammer is in my hand" (167). Florens appears to be in the middle of an intense episode of depersonalization. She feels like she has lost her autonomy and can't control what her hands are doing. Florens explains that she feels like she is lifting away from what is happening on the ground, an image that demonstrates what feels like her mind leaving her body. After this, a new chapter starts from the third person perspective looking at Jacob Vaark's ghost. After an entire chapter, Florens' story finally picks up again, "I am swinging and swinging hard. Seeing you stagger and bleed I run. Then walk. Then float" (185).

The way she narrates this is very telling of an episode of depersonalization: Florens explains the actions as if they are not her own. Then, she again references a feeling of floating. The imagery around floating is important as many people with depersonalization say they feel like they are out of their own body or even that they see life as if they were floating above themselves (Simeon and Abugel). The pause in her narration, with an intervening chapter, is also important. It demonstrates a possible lack of memory caused by feeling disconnected from herself.

### **Fragmented Sentence Structure**

As seen in many of Morrison's novels, particularly in *The Bluest Eyes* and *Beloved*, the sentence structure in *A Mercy* is often fragmented, especially when writing from Florens' point of view. This fragmentation creates a sense of disconnect between her thoughts. It also illustrates a disconnect between herself and what is actually happening. Due to the unreality depersonalization creates, an individual struggling with the condition often feels as though they can't fully grasp what is happening around them (Sierra and David). The robotic style that is created from fragmented sentences imitates the self-narration that goes on during an episode of depersonalization. In order to proceed with the day as if everything was normal, a person struggling with depersonalization might talk themselves through the steps of what they think they are expected to do (Simeon and Abugel). What seems like an excessive amount of thought going into a daily routine can be the only thing that keeps an individual sane.

When traveling alone to find the blacksmith, Florens explains, "At last the wagon is here. I climb up. The driver helps me, stays his hand hard and long on my back parts. I feel shame" (45). At this moment in the novel, Florens is dealing with the stress of traveling alone as a young, Black woman. She feels unsafe and alone, causing her to worry about every little thing. Stressful situations can trigger an episode of depersonalization (Thomson and Jaque). In this



scene, she is getting on a wagon and is inappropriately touched by a man. She first has to tell herself to climb up onto the wagon rather than just doing so. This self-talk was likely necessary in order to gain control of her body at a time where she felt like she had little due to her depersonalization. After the man touches her, another traumatic and stressful event, she declares to herself that she feels shame. The way Florens tells herself what to feel is also indicative of someone who feels disconnected from her body and feelings. She knows how an action like that would normally make her feel and, in an episode of depersonalization, she instructs herself to feel that way in order to feel normal.

Another similar scene happens later in the novel when she is again traveling alone. She is stressed and worried about potentially being hurt or taken advantage of as she is surrounded by a group of young men. Morrison narrates Florens' thought process, "All male, all native, all young...they circle. They smile. I am shaking" (120). Florens talks herself through the situation she is dealing with. She tells herself what they look like and what they are doing in order to decide whether or not it is really happening. Florens also takes note of how her body is reacting. She realizes she is shaking but doesn't seem to recognize it until she says it to herself, indicating yet another disconnect between her body and mind.

Although the following excerpt has already been analyzed for the part it plays in nonlinear narrative structure, it's also important to understand in regard to fragmented sentence structure and content. Morrison writes, "Now I am living the dying inside. No. Not again. Not ever. Feathers lifting, I unfold" (167). Florens is trying to control herself before she spirals. She talks to herself in a very basic and directional way, almost mimicking a series of directions. Florens says, "No. Not again. Not ever," in an attempt to regain autonomy of her thoughts and actions. Notably, Florens references how she feels like she is dying inside. Many people who

struggle with depersonalization refer to the experience as a feeling of disembodiment, even going as far as to say they feel dead or automaton-like (Sierra and David). This concept is especially interesting when put into conversation with this excerpt. One way to describe the way Florens is talking to herself is automaton-like. It's emotionless and quick. The "dying" feeling Florens refers to is, as previously noted, a common description of how some individuals with depersonalization explain the experience. Morrison was able to not only convey depersonalization through fragmented sentence structure, but also through the descriptions of how Florens feels in moments of depersonalization.

### **Internal Dialogue**

The narration in this novel shifts back and forth between Florens' internal dialogue and the third person limited perspective of the other characters. Florens' internal narration is in the form of a message to the blacksmith, a past lover she is infatuated with. Towards the beginning of the novel, when Florens is starting to tell her life story Morrison writes, "My head is light with the confusion of two things, hunger for you and scare if I am lost" (5). Depersonalization can leave individuals feeling as though they've lost their grounding for no apparent reason. Florens speaks of confused feelings and a fear that she is lost. This illustrates the deep sense of unreality that comes with depersonalization (Sierra and David). This quote allows the reader to be fully immersed in Florens' psyche. Though she was just talking about wearing boots instead of heels to find the blacksmith, a tale depicted later in the story, she suddenly loses her train of thought and can only pick out the simplest emotions she is feeling. Many individuals experiencing depersonalization cannot name their true feelings due to brain fog and emotional numbness. Although a mind that doesn't suffer from depersonalization might find it difficult to grasp, feeling lost in reality or in one's thoughts is a common experience during an episode of

depersonalization (Thomson and Jaque). Although Morrison could have written this excerpt, or the entire book for that matter, from the third person limited perspective used elsewhere in the novel, she chose not to because the best way to represent trauma in literature is through first-person literary narration (Kurtz).

Depersonalization is an extremely complex psychological experience. It is multifaceted and difficult to understand for those who haven't felt it themselves. People with depersonalization can feel as though they are part of a dream. The world they are experiencing, as well as their own perception of it, does not feel real (Simeon and Abugel). Individuals struggling with this symptom sometimes describe the experience as a dream-like state. They could be awake, they could be asleep, it all kind of feels the same when everything doesn't feel real. There is an overall veil of disconnectedness from the self, applied to all levels of consciousness (Simeon and Abugel). For example, while taking a much needed rest on her journey to find the blacksmith to bring him back to help Rebekka, Florens thinks, "I sleep then wake to any sound. Then I am dreaming cherry trees walking around me. I know it is dreaming because they are full in leaves and fruit. I don't know what they want. To look? To touch?" (119). She goes on claiming that she wakes up from this dream and her surroundings have not actually changed like her dream wanted her to believe. The reality of this scene is up for interpretation. Warped perceptions of objects is also a symptom of depersonalization. Things might seem bigger or closer than they are in real life (Thomson and Jaque). It gets to a point where the individual cannot even trust their own sight. The scene makes it impossible to distinguish whether or not this is truly a dream, which is suggestive of the symptoms of depersonalization. In the excerpt, Florens openly decides it's a dream and goes on to personify the trees around her, describing them as walking towards her. Due to the feeling of unreality that comes with depersonalization,

Florens' ability to decide what is actually a dream or what her awake mind might be making up is faulty. Morrison encapsulates this eerie sense of uncertainty through Florens' "dream," allowing the reader to question for themselves whether or not this moment was instead her depersonalization getting the best of her.

As mentioned, when depicting depersonalization in *A Mercy*, Morrison seems to focus more on the content of what her characters are saying rather than just the formal techniques. Again, this might be because the stigma surrounding mental health started to break down around the time she wrote the novel. It might also be in part due to a deeper understanding of trauma and trauma theory in literature that comes from decades of being in the business—especially given that all of her novels touch on trauma and psychological distress in some way. Florens specifically says many phrases that real individuals who have experienced depersonalization are familiar with. Research on depersonalization highlights how difficult it can be to define, even for an individual experiencing it (Sierra and David). This comes across in the way Florens speaks herself through situations. She is simultaneously deciding things are real that are not, while also questioning everything around her. It's a mix of certainty and uncertainty that is difficult to explain through typical psychological writing but can be clearly illustrated through narrative writing (Kurtz).

Once Florens finds the blacksmith and sends him to help Rebekka, she is stuck taking care of the little boy under his care, Malaik. Eventually, Florens gets upset with the boy and takes away his doll. She leaves while he cries but eventually returns once he is silent. Florens says, "The doll is not on the shelf. It is abandon in a corner like a precious child no person wants. Or no. Maybe the doll is sitting there hiding. Hiding from me. Afraid. Which? Which is the true reading?" (164). Florens understands the doll is no longer on the shelf and that the boy must have

moved it. She first decides the doll must have been abandoned, an assumption most people would make. Florens suddenly starts questioning what seems to be a straightforward perception. She isn't sure if maybe the doll is actually just hiding from her. While it may not logically make sense to question something like that, people suffering from depersonalization do it all the time. She never explains why she questions it or the feelings that bring it on, similar to the difficulty individuals with depersonalization face when trying to explain the rationale behind their unreality.

Morrison used her years of practice and expertise to write *A Mercy* in a way that highlights characters' mental states, especially their depersonalization, in a very effective way. The nonlinear narrative structure, in the form of multiple perspectives rather than flashbacks, allows the reader to understand what feels like a loss of autonomy over one's own thoughts. Although seen a bit throughout *Beloved*, Morrison included even more passages that depicted depersonalization through content rather than just form in *A Mercy*. Taking time to understand trauma and the reaction it can have on a person's mind allowed Morrison to write a raw story about human bondage, racism, sexism, and the depersonalization it can cause in an individual.

## **Conclusion**

As Morrison's career progressed, so too did her already impressive grasp of formal literary technique and the ways it could be used to bring light to an experience - depersonalization - that often remains in the dark. Through nonlinear narrative structure, Morrison helps the reader understand the confusion caused by living with depersonalization. Through fragmented sentence structure, Morrison allows the reader into the sometimes jumbled thought processes that depersonalization brings. Through internal dialogue, Morrison guides the reader into the ways that people experiencing depersonalization use self-talk to keep a grasp on

reality. And by combining all three of these literary techniques, Morrison weaves an increasingly complex and ever more realistic picture of the experience of depersonalization. As her grasp and control of formal literary techniques progressed from expert, to master, and to true artist, her ability to give depth and life to people experiencing depersonalization became so powerful as to strike at the stigma surrounding trauma and depersonalization, specifically, and mental health in general.

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