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## **Teaching Philosophy of Life through the select Ghost Novels of Toni Morrison and Margaret Atwood**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Teaching a novel is a skill, where the teacher must fathom the situations, characters and events of the story and should narrate at par with the original view of the author. Ghost novels send a chill down the spines of their readers. Other than a thrilling experience, what else can ghost novels provide? The significance of teaching philosophical aspects in the ghost novels *Beloved* and *The Robber Bride* is discussed in this paper. Both the novels portray how unpleasant encounters in life impact people. The characters Mr. Garner and Schoolteacher in the novel *Beloved* depict extreme variations in their conduct with others. The philosophy of inner cleanliness is revealed through the character of Charis' grandmother in *The Robber Bride*. The idea of ownership is dealt with in both the novels, through the protagonists, Sethe and Tony. The courage of living and fighting against evil is portrayed through the protagonists of novels. Against popular conviction, philosophy can also be drawn from ghost novels on par with their philosophical counterparts. Besides teaching the narrative technique, metaphors, imagery, and plot construction in a ghost novel, it's the responsibility of a teacher to counsel the values of life to students in them.

**Keywords:** philosophy, ghost novels, teaching, values, life

### **INTRODUCTION**

Life is a mixed bag of surprises and predictable events, sometimes good, sometimes bad and many a times ungaugable. It is quite difficult for Man to find a more consistent and reliable alternate to literature. It acts as a true companion to share the overpowering moments of joy as well as solace on dire straits. Literature soothes one with umpteen genres of good reading that brings un-lived life experiences with fantabulous imaginations. On the topic of philosophy of life various authors have shared their impressions and views in the form of poems, prose, novels, and plays. The books of Rabindranath Tagore, Henry David Thoreau, Friedrich Nietzsche, Plato, and Russell are good takes that give a life inspiring realization to its readers. While teaching any genre of literature, the real role of a teacher lies in making the students realize the purpose and moral that the author has concealed between the lines. The teacher is more obliged to bring out the values and philosophy of life through the books than merely making the students comprehend the chapters.

### **Objective of the Paper**

The objective of the paper is to emphasize the role of a teacher in instilling the much-needed moral, spiritual, and philosophical values of life while taking them through Literature.

A teacher's onus is not limited to just taking the students through the chapters in the curriculum, assigning homework, grading tests and documenting student's progress. Rather, a teacher's factual role commences only beyond these routines and assumes significance when he / she shows the students the path to a virtuous and contended life.

### **Uniqueness of the Paper**

The uniqueness of this paper is that ghost stories in general are looked upon as an avenue to quench one's thirst for thrill, a ticket to ride through the darker and unexplored realms of life. Readers seldom pursue ghost novel reading for purposes other than one that leads to amusement. An earnest attempt has been made in this paper to extract finer values of life hidden within the sinister plot of ghost novels. It will pave way for a whole new and unique

methodology to deliver philosophy along-side drama, thrill, fear and other emotions. This will be a literary treat to the zealous literature student who is on a constant pursuit to derive knowledge from unchartered corners.

A good number of people lose their happiness and peace in life by dwelling in their bitter past. They fail to realize that their past is behind, future is ahead, while the present is the sole reality that ever matters. Simply put, the predominant part of one's life is the present time and incidentally the only time they can design their future and overhaul their past. In the words of the most distinguished philosopher and writer, Leo Tolstoy in his short story *The Three Questions*: "Remember then that there is only important time, and that time is now" (31).

If a person is intelligent enough to utilize, happy and live the moment, one has overcome destiny and fatal life. In this paper, the chief characters of the novels spoiled their lives by the influence of their past. In *Beloved*, Sethe suffered and plodded a lot as a black slave in the Sweet Home. She and her children fled slavery to Cincinnati. Though she escaped from being a slave, miserably, she was caught in the trauma of her past days in the Sweet Home. Her decision and courage were good that she decided to get relieved of slavery and the determination to protect her children. But she was unable to give up her memories of her past because they haunted her then and then. Paul D met Sethe and Denver and stayed in 124, their home as they call it, for some days. He gave Sethe the words of hope for their future life. Though she had a desire of having a peaceful and happy life, she wasn't bold enough to accept it. She was unable to decide her future as well as unable to make up her mind to change the present. "... We can make a life, girl. A life." "I don't know. I don't know" (55 Morrison).

The character *Beloved* is also symbolized as the one who was haunted by her past. She is the baby-girl of Sethe and the ghost of the house. When Sethe was trying to begin a new life with Paul D and Denver, the entry of *Beloved* in the form of a ghost was a twist in the tale. Though *Beloved* sounded to be soft in the beginning, she eventually proved to be a huge hindrance for the peace and well-being of the family. In the very words of Harold Bloom: "Thus *Beloved* comes to represent the repressed memories of slavery," (87).

Also, Tony, the protagonist of the novel *The Robber Bride*, was occasionally haunted by Zenia, the novel's unlawful and gothic character. Even after Zenia's death, Tony was lost in her memory. She had a strong intuition that something evil would happen whenever she thinks of Zenia.

Zenia's name itself is enough to give an echo of the wrathfulness, humiliation and pain. Tony feels difficult to believe that Zenia is already dead (Atwood 11).

Because of their bitter experiences in the past, both protagonists were unable to live happily in their present lives, and they were unable to get rid of those bitter thoughts. The gospel of living the present life and the significance of living now can be tutored to the students.

If living the present is a good advice from the authors of these novels, treating fellow humans with respect is a virtue they propose. A vast majority of people lack the art of handling kids, students, spouse and others around them. They form prejudices about individuals and groups around them to only blindly believe in these nonfactual theories and follow them in their interaction with others. The popular belief that all whites treat blacks only as slaves and torment them inhumanely, can be taken as an illustration. This prevalent preconception has been making rounds for quite a few centuries now. This biased rational overpowers the masses to refuse in believing otherwise, no matter how many whites they come across who treat blacks respectably. The authors portray how distinct characters in their respective novels treat people around them differently. Mr Garner was the one who ran the Sweet Home and maintained the place nicely. Though he ran the slavery plantation, Sweet Home a place supposed to house blacks in slavery, he treated the inmates there as humans and gave them the space that belonged to them.

Now at Sweet Home, my niggers are men, every one of 'em. I bought them away and raised them away. Hello, everyone (12 Morrison).

Another character in the same novel, Amy, a white woman, helped Sethe when she escaped from Sweet Home. When Sethe came running, she got hurt in her legs, and she was unable to get up. Amy who was on her way to Boston in search of velvet, found a pregnant Sethe hurt and struggling to move around. She massaged her feet and legs of Sethe and comforted her. As a white woman, Amy did not ill-treat Sethe; instead, she helped her with humanity.

Then she did the magic: she lifted Sethe's feet and legs and massaged them until she cried salty tears (42 Morrison). In the same way, in *The Robber Bride*, when Tony was threatened by a second-year graduate with a knife, she cleverly handled the ghastly student.

"I need an A!" he shouted. Tony was both frightened and angry. Kill me and you won't even pass! She wanted to shout back (26 Atwood).

Tony handled the situation bravely and with a cold head. It is very easy for students during adolescent age to come under the influence of bad company, owing to the new gush of blood running through their heads. Teachers should sometimes need to be street smart to handle such untoward incidents cleverly as Tony did.

"I appreciate your directness," she said to him. "Now, why don't you sit down in that chair right over there, and we can discuss it?" (26 Atwood).

In order to be prudent enough to always handle people and situations, it is quite necessary to give heed to words of the wise and the elderly. Owing to their maturity and vast experience, their words might sound bitter in the onset, but the outcome would be more constructive than imagined. In *Beloved* and *The Robber Bride*, the grandmothers of Denver and Charis teach them noble values through simple illustrations. Though these elders are characters of ghost novels, the teachers still have a take from them which can be in turn imparted to the students for observance in day-to-day life.

Baby Suggs, the grandmother of Denver, summoned people to a small gathering at the Clearing. Through simple gameplay she demonstrated the significance of materialness in life. She advocated that virtues and vices flip positions time to time, but what that remains all along is the present life. She advised the gathering to love their lives without any inhibitions and reminded them that their body is the central aspect of the life that they are living.

"Here," she said, "we are flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs, and dances on bare feet in grass. Love it (103 Morrison).

In contrary, the prime focus of philosophies would be soul, vice and moral values, rather than the body. But the philosophy put forth by Baby Suggs stands aloof among all others. Loving all through loving oneself is the topmost ideal given by Baby Suggs.

Love your hands! Love them. Raise them up and kiss them. Touch others with them, pat them together, stroke them on your face 'cause they don't love that either. You'll love it, you!

...

More than your life-holding womb and your life-giving private parts, hear me now: love your heart. For this is the prize" (103-104 Morrison).

Correspondingly, the grandmother of Charis in *The Robber Bride* insisted upon cleanliness, both inside and outside. Usually, kids can understand about the cleanliness of the body but remain clueless on inner cleanliness. Whenever Charis cleans her body, she recollects her grandmother's words: "There's clean outside and there's clean inside, ... and clean inside is better" (52 Atwood). The notion of cleanliness of Charis' grandmother can be compared to the words of Rabindranath Tagore in *Sadhana* as: "The water does not merely cleanse his limbs, but it purifies his heart; for it touches his soul" (17 Tagore). In the above sentence, Tagore clearly portrays the cleanliness of soul and body by water, against the usual thoughts of Man that water cleans only the body, but not the soul.

Although the wise and the elderly adhere to strict principles to lead a happy and meaningful life, they often forget the principle of detachment. This is considered the highest form of ascetism in ancient India and Tibet. It advocates that material attachments and belongings are temporary in nature. That is, people and things one assumes to be theirs do not belong to them forever. Numerous buy plenitude of material assets, own estates, houses and apartments, invest in Gold and numerous other material possessions. They believe that they would continue to exert their power over these materials for long. But unfortunately, they do not, at least not forever.

This philosophy of belongingness and attachment is dealt in both novels through the protagonists. In *Beloved*, Sethe feels she owns house 124 after escaping slavery. Though the house at 124 has been abandoned by the people considering it a ghost house she didn't have the heart to change the house or shifting from the place. When Paul D suggested Sethe to leave the house as it does not provide them an amicable environment to live, Sethe didn't heed to his words. Leave off, Sethe. It's hard for a young girl to live in a haunted house. That can't be easy.

...

No moving. No leaving. It's all the right way around (17 Morrison).

In another situation, Paul D complains about Denver for not maintaining proper form while talking with him. Sethe apologized for her. But Paul D wasn't ready to accept her justifications and he told Sethe that she couldn't follow or be with Denver ever. Sethe was unable to see her daughter separated from her. She believed that Denver belonged to her, and she was the only person around who could protect Denver. This conception of belongingness sounded foolishness to Paul D, and he quit the topic, to avoid the prolonged arguments.

...Apologize for her? She's grown."

"I don't care what she is. Grown don't mean nothing to a mother. A child is a child.

....

What's going to happen when you die?"

"Nothing! I'll protect her while I'm live and I'll protect her when I ain't" (54 Morrison).

In addition to Denver, Sethe also felt belonged towards Beloved. When Beloved came to 124 in the form of a ghost, Sethe in no way expostulated her. Rather she felt proud of being with her daughter, who had been killed by her. She considered it as an opportunity to get along a life with Beloved, rather than with Paul D. Harold Bloom says, "For Sethe, Beloved is the daughter who has come back to her" (111). The following words of Sethe show how much she feels belongingness towards her daughter, Beloved, despite her appearance as a spirit.

Beloved, she my daughter. She mine. See (236 Morrison).

Likewise, in *The Robber Bride*, the ownership of a house and the belonging of the brick house is portrayed through the character, Tony. When Tony left her home to go to her workplace, she looked back at her house at the street corner. She thought that even after twenty years it was an illusion that she owned such a house. She felt proud of it. “The house is brick, late Victorian, ... It’s a large house, larger than it looks from the street” (21 Atwood). From the reality point of view, the belongingness doesn't belong to them. When they give up all their effects and eventually, they give up their pride. This is rendered in *Srimad Bhagavad Gita* as: “Free from desire, with the body and mind controlled, and surrendering all possessions he incurs no sin through mere bodily activity” (4.21 Sethumadhavan).

## CONCLUSION

Novels in general, while ghost novels are largely read for their plot. Given that the characters Beloved and Zenia from the novels *Beloved* and *The Robber Bride* are ghosts, the readers tend to expect a negative portrayal of their characterization by Toni Morrison and Margaret Atwood, respectively. But the authors, haven't missed to detail out innumerable shades and emotions to their protagonists. The characters in these novels, express mixed feelings like happiness, insecurity, sadness, anger, love, lust, righteousness to name a few. Given the supernatural hue these novels carry, an average uniformed reader will tend to look only for select feelings like eeriness, fear and gruesomeness from these works. It is the teacher's responsibility to bring out the hidden philosophies the authors intend to express through the unique portrayal of their characters. The paper advocates that philosophy and moral values can be taught through any genre of literature. This also paves way for a future scope of teaching philosophy from the roads less travelled.

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