The Dichotomy of Freedom and Gender in *Beloved*

Fredric Jameson’s exploration of the text within *The Political Unconscious* is a Marxist criticism of literary theory and dissects the specific tiers of a text in a Marxist and liturgical sense. These Marxist criticisms help to unpack the narrative of novels that discuss social issues. Looking at these issues through a hierarchical lens, Jameson is able to create a discourse of the domination and subordination within societies, political power and aristocracy. The three horizons of Jameson’s argument thus allocate the discourse upon the cultural artifacts of literature. The tier system that he enforces is broad and narrows into smaller social values and discourses. The first ideological horizon is simplified as a, “symbolic act.” (1291) The first horizon is the most expansive and incorporates the text as a whole. Therefore, as the tiers narrow, the reader is able to go back and analyze the general idea of the text and ensure that the smaller ideas apply to the big picture. As the reader narrows their investigation of the text, horizon two enters. The second horizon delves into the social questions of literary criticism in Marxist theory. Through this analysis, the reader is able to examine the nonhegemonic occurrences within the social structure of the text. Continuing into the third horizon, the reader is forced to focus upon the morals and values of literature and thus creating a new perspective within the criticism. Each tier relates back to the broader aspects of the analysis.

The Marxist criticism that Jameson has divulged is extremely applicable to the novel *Beloved* by Toni Morisson. This narrative explores the trials of slavery and freedom as a black person in the nineteenth century. Although the novel is fairly traditional, the story gains a mystical aspect in the resurrection of the supposedly dead and the spirits that haunt this slave narrative. The general plot explores the ideas of freedom and the tribulations of the hauntings of slavery. These broader ideas support the tiers of Jameson’s Marxist criticism and delve further
into the literature of *Beloved* in order to analyze the social expectations based upon gender both within freedom and slavery all while specifying the matriarchal responsibility that is outlined throughout the novel.

Jameson thoroughly deconstructs each horizon and provides even more insight into the literary and Marxist interpretations of a text. The first horizon, which discusses the text as a symbolic act, further describes the ideological subtext of literature. The subtext of literature is not always prominently stated and the reader must create a conversation of symbolism based upon the subtext. Because the subtext isn’t necessarily stated in the text, paradoxes and contradictions may arise in the analysis of certain pieces of literature. Jameson asserts, “It being always understood that that ‘subtext’ is not immediately present as such, not some common-sense external reality, nor even the conventional narratives of history manuals, but rather must itself always be reconstructed after the fact.” (1294) Jameson is claiming that because many texts occur within a historical construct, the reading can create subtextual constructs which then provide contradictions for the social and ideological ideas within the text.

*Beloved* utilizes the ideological themes of slavery and freedom in order to question the roles of gender and equality. Thus, in this binary, the contradiction of the subtext is created. Morrison does not fully explore the implications of the history of slavery, but her fictional novel employs flashbacks in order to represent the slave narrative. The flashbacks are used in order to create the symbolic act of freedom. Because the reader is presented with flashbacks to a time when Sethe (the protagonist of the novel) was on the plantation, the idea of freedom is emulated even more within the present state of the novel. Because freedom and slavery is such a prominent binary, it is important to realize that this contradiction is embedded in history. Overall the symbolic act of the novel is based upon freedom and escaping demons but there is another
binary that contradicts the construction of freedom within the novel. Gender and equality is greatly explored within *Beloved* but never explicitly spoken of. This theme is very visibly present but Morrison does not outright claim that there is a gender issue or promote her feminist ideals within the novel. Within *The Political Unconscious*, Jameson argues, “Or on the other hand to stress the imaginary status of the symbolic act so completely as to reify its social ground, now no longer understood as a subtext but merely as some inert given that the text passively or fantasmatically ‘reflects.’” (1295) It is reinforced that Morrison does not have to market the question of gender. She simply has to weave the historical context of freedom into the subtext of the novel in order to create a contradiction with gender.

This contradiction is greatly focused on Sethe. Because Sethe was previously a slave an amazingly escaped slavery, she somewhat epitomizes freedom within her success of creating a home in the North. Sethe is the epitomization of a strong female character within a novel and along with that, she is a woman of color. Thus creating a contradiction between freedom and gender is focused in on the extent of freedom that women had in the nineteenth century. Sethe is the matriarch of this family. She is the most prominent female character within the novel and she has created a home for herself in the North in order to be free. Because women in the nineteenth century were quite oppressed within their rights, Sethe creates a special kind of speculation in that she is oppressed both as a woman and a person of color but creates that contradiction described by Jameson through her achievement for freedom.

The second horizon delves into the social acts within the construct of gender and freedom. According to Jameson, the second horizon of his argument is, “The semantic horizon within which we grasp a cultural object has widened to include the social order.” (1291) Because the cultural objects of slavery and freedom have been surpassed, the idea of gender opens up the
argument. The second horizon brings a large idea into a smaller collective. Within *Beloved*, the group of strong female characters that drive the plot represent this collective. The family tree that Baby Suggs has created is supported by her pseudo-daughter Sethe. Sethe’s family tree continues with the lineage of her two sons Howard and Buglar, Denver and the deceased Beloved. Sethe is the matriarch of the family. She is the strength of the family and she breaks the female stereotype of being weak and submissive. Sethe asserts herself throughout the novel in order to create and protect her family. Unfortunately, the protection that she provides her family becomes her downfall and thus reinforces the second horizon that Jameson speaks of. He states, “For Marxism, however, the very content of a class ideology is relational, in the sense that its ‘values’ are always actively in situation with respect to the opposing class.” (1296) The opposing class in this case would be the institution of slavery. Slavery has forced Sethe to become a woman of her own mind. She sought out freedom and she found it. Unfortunately that freedom coincides with the demise of her female power.

As the matriarch of the family, Sethe had a responsibility to keep her children safe. Sethe had carried one baby to freedom while pregnant and managed to save them all from slavery. The strength that Sethe conveys is amazing and it is understandable that she would do absolutely anything in order to keep her babies safe. Slavery has emblazoned this idea within her mind and she will not give up her freedom for the institution that the white men of America have sustained. Her class conditions have forced her to resort to infanticide in order to keep her family safe. The contradiction of class, race and gender all come into play when Sethe commits this heinous crime. But truly, the strength lies in the instinct of being a mother. Sethe did not have the desire for her children to suffer through slavery as she did. Therefore, murder was the only option when freedom was about to be taken away. Through a first person perspective, Sethe claims, “She had
to be safe and I put her where she would be.” (Morrison 236) Gender varies in the fact that Sethe protected her children by carrying them to freedom, finding a fresh start for them and protecting them for the terrors of return.

Morrison creates an interesting argument within *Beloved* because she creates equality within the genders. Although gender roles are constructed differently in slavery, Morrison still seems to find a balance of showing the hardships that both the men had in the plantation fields and that the women had in the household realm. Because Morrison works so hard to create gender equality within the novel, it is interesting to view the dichotomy of gender and freedom within the realm of slavery. Both Sethe and Paul D have faced struggles, from Sweet Home, to jail, to finding freedom, but it seems that Sethe has faced more obstacles as a woman and as a mother. Jameson continues to explore the contradiction between freedom and gender, “In their social development, as in that of their neighbors, this nascent hierarchy is already the place of the emergence, if not of political power in the strict sense, then at least of relations of domination, the inferior status of women.” (Jameson 1293) Women are typically represented as a submissive within culture.

Sethe breaks down the walls of that stereotype. When her daughter Beloved seemingly returns from the dead, Sethe continues that role. She wants the best for her children but it seems that the events that include Beloved change that. When Beloved suddenly disappears, it seems that Sethe has gone crazy and is unfulfilled. Her transformation is noticed by Paul D“Her eyes, fixed on the window, are so expressionless he is not sure she will know who he is. There is too much light here in this room. Things look sold.” (Morrison 319) As the central, strong character within the novel, it is somewhat shocking to see Sethe in this form. Her matriarchal senses are removed from her life, just as Beloved disappeared.
Sethe’s transformation is represented within Jameson’s third horizon. Jameson claims, “Even the passions and values of a particular social formation find themselves placed in a new and seemingly relativized perspective by the ultimate horizon of human history as a whole, and by their respective positions in the whole complex sequence of the modes of production.” (1292)

Sethe mirrors this transformation. When Paul D sees that she is not the same person, he feels that it is his job to take her under his wing. The strength and feistiness that Sethe has shown throughout the novel contradicts her submissive demeanor. Her gender role reverts back to the typical female characterization of the nineteenth century. Through her haunting, Beloved has simultaneously taken Sethe’s freedom and her strength as a woman. Although Sethe seems to completely forget the events of Beloved’s visit, she has still reverted back to a wife. She is no longer in charge of her household and Paul D has become her shoulder to lean on.

The cycle of events within Beloved are clearly reflected through the ideas of Frederic Jameson’s The Political Unconscious. Each specific horizon that Jameson describes is represented within the novel quite clearly. Class and social status reinforce Jameson’s ideals and thus helps to highlight the dichotomy of gender and freedom within slavery. From the overarching critical theme of slavery, the narrowing of escape and freedom become highlighted as a constructed ideology through subtext. Even further within that subtext is the social construct of gender. Morrison has truly depicted the complicated lines between freedom within slavery and freedom as a woman. Through the use of personal demons, the ideology of history and the stereotypical nuances of women in the nineteenth century, Morrison has reinforced the critical constructs of Jameson’s Marxist ideology.
Works Cited

