"Anything Dead Coming Back to Life Hurts": Ghosts and Memory in Hamlet and Beloved

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“ANYTHING DEAD COMING BACK TO LIFE HURTS”:
GHOSTS AND MEMORY IN HAMLET AND BELOVED

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Master of Arts

by
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“ANYTHING DEAD COMING BACK TO LIFE HURTS”:
GHOSTS AND MEMORY IN HAMLET AND BELOVED

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As I end two years of juggling graduate courses with my jobs as a high school English teacher, church worker, and frantic wife, I must take time to thank those who gave me the strength and courage to continue this circus act. First, I must thank God who gave me the diligence and the interest to make myself a better teacher by stepping out of my comfort zone without going insane. Second, I am deeply obligated to my wonderful husband who ate more than his fair share of fast food and coped with a dusty house strewn with books and papers without complaining. Third, I owe thanks to my church family at White House Church of Christ, which has encouraged me, prayed for me, and understood when I could not participate because of a paper, a book, or a test for which I had to prepare. Fourth, I can never repay Dr. Mosby, Dr. Flynn, and Dr. Oakes for giving up so much of their valuable summer break for my thesis (indeed, I know how precious that time is). Without their encouragement and witty e-mail messages, this project would have been abandoned. I also thank the other professors at Western who challenged me to do my best and allowed me to think like a teacher, not just a graduate student. Fifth, I have to thank my grandmother who has always given me the strength to pursue my dreams, regardless of how difficult the pathway to them might be. Finally, I have to thank the students and faculty at White House High School. For the past two years, my students have been faithful guinea pigs as I have tested new works and new ideas on them, especially the AP English classes (the seniors of 1997 and 1998), while my administration and fellow teachers have supported me when I needed to leave school early, have threatened me when I wanted to quit the circus performance, and have tolerated my complaints. Now that this degree is almost behind me, I realize what a truly blessed person I am to have such an awesome support system. Thanks to all of you who helped me survive the "Big Top."
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Ghost stories are an ingrained part of most cultures because, typically, humans must be forced to confront those elements of their individual and communal past that they would prefer to ignore. Accordingly, ghosts have embodied weaknesses and hidden evils that must be assimilated and transcended, and writers have embroidered a variety of subtexts upon the traditional fabric of ghostlore. Specifically, both William Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* and Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* employ ghosts as symbols of man’s archetypal desire to hide his past. A careful examination of the texts in these ghost stories, of the cultural folklore included, and of the ghosts’ influence on individual characters reveals both writers’ insistence that man must find the delicate balance between ignoring/evading the past and being consumed by that past. Both writers also explain that the individual’s identity must integrate the past, but not be stifled by it. These works differ in that Shakespeare illustrates how man is destroyed when he does not find that balance and does not incorporate his past into his identity, while Morrison depicts the psychic balm that results from confrontation with and acceptance of the past as her characters face a new, more authentic life. While Shakespeare draws upon his society’s widely accepted belief system, Morrison, operating in a culture alienated from its own mythic heritage, consciously constructs a mythic framework acceptable to the skeptical twentieth century reader.
GHOSTLY INTERESTS: PREFACE

“I hate the Bell Witch. I hate the Bell Witch. I hate...” As a child, I tried this experiment of sitting in front of a mirror, rubbing it in a circular motion, and chanting this phrase three times in order to summon the famed Bell Witch of Robertson County in northern Tennessee. However, no matter how many times I attempted the procedure, I was never able to finish. Something inside my superstitious mind would not allow me to say the ill-fated phrase the third time. I had grown superstitious because, during that childhood, I had been exposed to many other tales of hauntings. Since I had read stories, seen movies, and even lived for five years in a house haunted by unexplainable noises, bizarre movements, and ghostly sightings, I believed in ghosts and could not carry out my intention of inviting one to haunt me. As an adult, I still unwilling to complete the childhood game; I am still too influenced by the culture of my area. Besides, if the Bell Witch game is simply a childish hoax, I have lost nothing by not participating. But, if it is indeed a true calling of the dead, I have possibly missed much pain and suffering at the hands of the notoriously mean Bell Witch.

Growing up in the southeastern portion of Robertson County, I could not help being exposed to the folklore about the Bell Witch, who for years haunted and tortured the John Bell family of Adams, Tennessee. The tales were simply part of the culture of that area. In fact, I probably know as much about the Bell Witch as I know about Emily Dickinson’s poetry, which I teach in my high school English classes. Actually, those tales remain an integral piece of the cultural puzzle. Each Halloween, one of the ninth grade English teachers with whom I teach at White House High reads to her students certain Bell Witch tales, oral tales which have become part of literature, and the students attentively,
sometimes a bit nervously, listen. One young lady who will be in my Advanced Placement English IV class this fall actually lives in the old Bell house; she definitely receives attention when students discover where she lives. Overall, the stories about the Bell Witch are part of who I am as a Southerner in White House, Tennessee.

More important, these stories also help me to relate to other cultures throughout the world, cultures which have also incorporated ghostly folklore into their identity. These stories about ghosts and hauntings, stories which surface worldwide, form a pattern of universal human experiences. Because ghost stories of all cultures have a common foundation, they become perfect teaching tools. Exploring ghost stories from various parts of the world, time periods, and ethnic groups provides readers with an educational opportunity: to appreciate cultural diversity by observing the striking similarities between cultures.

In White House, Tennessee, with all of its cultural lore, I am a high school English teacher. In my classroom I constantly strive to introduce my students to diverse writers and various literary styles that deliver a message applicable to modern teenagers. However, trying to find universal themes to which my sometimes apathetic students can relate and about which they care is often a challenge for me. Edward H. Spicer once wrote, “The essential feature of any identity system is an individual’s belief in his personal affiliation with certain symbols, or, more accurately, with what certain symbols stand for” (796). My task as a teacher is to find those symbols with which my students identify, while exposing them to certain works they are expected to know. Being part of the Southern culture, most of these students enjoy a good ghost story; they probably grew up trying to scare each other in tents, around campfires, or under tented blankets. Therefore, I find that works of supernatural and horrific origins often pique their interest and speak to them in a way other works may not be able to
do. For example, my students can understand the message about the power of society’s restraints and about love much more clearly in Faulkner’s “A Rose for Emily” than in Hawthorne’s “The Minister’s Black Veil.” My southern students have grown up hearing horror stories and, consequently, can more easily relate to Faulkner’s story of the demented Emily Grierson than they can to Hawthorne’s story of the bizarre Reverend Hooper. They tend to dismiss the latter as a loser because they do not grasp the concept of trying to teach a lesson to others, at any cost, while they are intrigued by the former simply because of the startling actions taken by the main character, actions which relate to cultural folklore that has become part of their essence. For them, there is more universal human experience in Faulkner’s story than in Hawthorne’s story.

As a teacher and as a student of literature, I am fascinated by the influence the cultural phenomenon of ghostlore has had on the accepted literary canon. I have wondered how something so taboo as a ghost story could permeate the realm of acceptable, canonized literature; after all, how can a rational person claim he/she believes in ghosts? My decision to research this wonder has led to many insights. I have discovered that in the realm of literature, there are many works that employ supernatural folklore as a vehicle for speaking to the masses of people over numerous time periods. This particular vehicle has sped along its course from early literature of the Greeks and Romans, through the works of British and American masters, and on into the experimental writing of modern authors. More specifically, on this sometimes treacherous course, the vehicle of supernatural folklore has been driven successfully by two writers, William Shakespeare and Toni Morrison, who, although from very different worlds, use ghosts in distinctive manners to deliver the same timeless message.
In this thesis I plan to illustrate the manner in which Shakespeare and Morrison employ ghostly folklore as a text to heighten typical literary patterns in both Hamlet and Beloved by transforming that ghost narrative into a subtext of archetypal experience. Before examining these pieces of literature, I will explore the realm of folklore as it relates to culture, to ghosts, and to literature. Next, I will turn to the actual pieces of literature to illustrate how, through the joining of literary styles, both writers entitle an irrational ghost, as part of culture, to express to human characters and to readers, supposedly rational beings, the importance of remembering the past. Shakespeare and Morrison both manipulate ghosts as symbols of man's desire to escape his past so that they can stress the point that man must find the delicate balance between totally ignoring the past and being consumed by the past. Chapter two will specifically focus on Shakespeare's Hamlet. Here, I will illustrate the manner in which Shakespeare uses the Ghost of King Hamlet and some Elizabethan folklore related to ghosts to stress the significance of remembering people and events of the past, rather than banishing those memories to a forgotten realm of the mind. Shakespeare's play illustrates the destruction that results when man does not find that balance. This theme of remembrance will be discussed by probing the thoughts and actions of individual characters. Chapter three will similarly discuss Toni Morrison's Beloved, in which the author mythically develops two different ghosts, those of Baby Suggs and Beloved, to advise both the characters and the readers that genuine living requires a person to remember the past and then come to terms with it as part of one's essence. Like Shakespeare, Morrison develops this theme by incorporating her culture's folklore into her narrative and by creating individual characters who confront the ghosts in order to mold her narrative into a mythic quest toward healing. The final chapter will explain why I chose these two specific works from all of those in
the realm of ghost literature. Just as ghosts are basically symbols of the past, symbols which force the visited to remember, Shakespeare and Morrison are representative of writers who remind audiences to remember their heritage—regardless of how painful the memories may be, by examining and putting to rest the skeletons that are hidden in their closets.
"SUPERSTITION IS THE POETRY OF LIFE": FOLKLORE, GHOSTS, AND LITERATURE

In order to examine the impact and the role of ghosts in literature, one must have a fundamental understanding of folklore, especially as it relates to the supernatural and to culture. W.K. McNeil defines folklore basically as "material that is passed on orally and, usually, informally; is traditional, undergoes change over space and time, creating variants and versions; is usually anonymous in the sense that most bearers of folklore are not concerned with the original creator" (9-10). Growing up in a haunted house, I heard many instances of folklore as family members related their experiences with the ghost, even though none of us knew the true origins of that ghost. However, Alan Dundes, in his book Folklore Matters, modifies McNeil's definition as he claims folklore is not just stories transmitted orally since folklore includes "flyleaf inscriptions, epitaphs, latrinalia (bathroom wall writings), . . . zerox folklore, . . . myths, folktales, legends, proverbs, riddles, folk beliefs, costume, folk medicine, traditional foods, folk speech, charms, curses, games, folk music, folk dances, etc." (2,9).

Therefore, the area of folklore encompasses a broad range of cultural stories and traditions which have many varieties and which effect change because of evolving attitudes, beliefs, and needs of groups of people.

However, people must be careful not to assume this genre of folklore applies only to a certain group of people. Since the "term 'folk' can refer to any group of people whatsoever who share at least one common factor, . . . [like] a common occupation, language, or religion," folklore is not limited to the lower class, illiterate groups who are often stereotypically synonymous with folklore (Dundes 11). For example, a group of Wall Street stockbrokers could be
considered a folk group, and certain beliefs they share about taboos of stock market trading would be considered folk beliefs. Serving turkey and dressing at Thanksgiving is an American folk belief while the practice of allowing the oldest male to carve the turkey may be an individual family’s folk belief. Even a group of scholarly professors could be considered a folk group if it has “some traditions which it calls its own,” a tradition such as grading papers with a red pen (Dundes 11). In fact, every person in this world is a member of at least one folk group because all people perform at least one action based on traditional patterns.

The concept of folklore is important because folklore is often the vehicle used to share supernatural beliefs. It is worthwhile to note that supernatural does not mean something that is not real. Barbara Walker defines supernatural as “a linguistic and cultural acknowledgment that inexplicable things happen which we identify as being somehow beyond the natural or the ordinary, and that many of us hold beliefs which connect us to spheres that exist beyond what we might typically see, hear, taste, touch, or smell” (2). An admission that things happen for reasons beyond explanation is an acknowledgment of the existence of the supernatural. Furthermore, Walker explains that the type of folklore which focuses on the supernatural exists in various manners in our lives:

the things we say (ghost stories, creation myths . . . prayers), the things we do (what we wear, what we eat, . . . avoiding bad luck), the things we believe in (gods, devils, spirits . . . life after death), where we go (to church . . . to the cemetery), and who our friends and associations are (Catholics, shamans, witches). (7)

Whether they want to admit it or not, most Americans do participate in some type of folklore of the supernatural; this participation is especially evident when one examines the religious nature of Americans, since belief in God is a supernatural
belief. In much the same manner as other countries, America is a nation abounding in supernatural folklore--written, spoken, or thought.

One facet of that supernatural folklore is the belief in ghosts. In truth, the simple definition of a ghost takes on its own folklore characteristics as the term is often misused. For example, Tennessee's notorious Bell Witch is a ghost but is called a witch. Although many people think a ghost is a transparent, glowing figure like Casper, the true realm of ghosts is more complex than that. Simplistically, McNeil attempts to define a ghost as "a being returned from the dead in human or animal form or having some features of humans or animals" (10). Rosenblatt claims a belief in ghosts includes the belief that "the results of actions by [manifestations of the deceased] are capable of being perceived" (qtd. in Lindstrom 11). Therefore, a ghost could be a spirit as a man, a spirit as an animal, or the actions of a deceased person.

The basic idea of ghosts and other forms of the supernatural has been debated for centuries. Indeed, most cultures have some belief in ghosts; in fact, Rosenblatt notes "sixty-five out of sixty-six cultures" believe in ghosts (qtd. in Lindstrom 12). Hufford relates a cross-cultural belief as he tells about the American belief in "Old Hag," an encounter where one is paralyzed and nearly suffocated to death by a dark, shadow presence during sleep. Although this term is American in origin, other cultures such as Southeast Asia, China, and Sweden all have names for this phenomenon (12-13). During the Victorian period, sixty percent of people would have affirmed a belief in ghosts (Brennan 253). In the United States, Pimple notes that from 1850 through most of the nineteenth century, "Americans of every class were enraptured, entertained, and mesmerized by drawing-room seances" (75). At one point in history, people from all walks of life, the educated, the poor, the religious, accepted ghosts. It was a common part of British and American culture to give credence to the
existence of ghosts. Although the number of followers has dwindled since the Age of Reason, a 1990 Gallup poll found that “25% of Americans believe that ‘ghosts or ... spirits of dead people can come back’” (Hufford 17). Undeniably, ghosts have been and will continue to be a strong facet of cultural convictions and identities.

However, this belief has not eliminated the voices of the nonbelievers. Throughout history, skeptics have voiced their opinions about the existence of ghosts, evidence that the concept of ghosts has been an issue for many centuries. David Hufford notes the following historical survey: the eighteenth century philosopher David Hume “claimed to demonstrate conclusively that no supernatural belief could ever be considered rationally founded” (25); nineteenth century theologians “condemned most cognitive spiritual beliefs as superstitious”; twentieth century Freudians “identified all spiritual belief as a neurotic defense mechanism, an illusion based on infantile wish fulfillment”; twentieth century Marxism “explained spiritual belief in political terms as an instrument of the powerful used to maintain an unjust status quo”; and various 1960s thinkers simply dismissed the issue when they “declared that ‘God is dead’” (26). Moreover, in 1830 Sir Walter Scott boldly wrote in Letters on Demonology and Witchcraft that “anyone who claimed to see an apparition was either mad or on the way to becoming so” as Scott felt any ghost story could be explained by examining the mental health of the witness (qtd. in Castle 741). This skepticism continues with Jane Haddam, a writer of detective novels. Haddam strongly condemns belief in any form of the supernatural and feels society’s acceptance of literature with this element proves a lack of intellect in our culture since there is no “plausible explanation as to how a dead man could walk” (58). Then, there are those skeptics who believe biology disproves the existence of ghosts. In an article in New Scientist, Michael Whalley claims
evolution does not support the existence of a spirit in man as he writes, "at what point during the evolutionary history of humans did members of the species become endowed with a non-material spirit or soul? . . . The soul cannot be explained by natural selection" (67). Even so, Whalley admits to the power of the tradition of telling ghost stories when he admits he would not read certain ghost stories late at night and probably would not spend the night in a so-called haunted house. He feels this fear shows "how deeply ingrained are the fears and imaginings we are exposed to as children" (67). Coincidentally, the apparent need for this refutation of the existence of ghosts is evidence in itself that people are less than certain.

Even though the debate over the existence of ghosts rages on, the relevant point is ghosts are "psychologically real"; because people "believe in them and tell stories about them," they are deserving of "consideration and study" (McNeil 24). Since ghosts and other supernatural phenomena are an inherent part of many cultures, stories about ghosts have become an important part of both oral and written literature. Writers, more than anything else, are influenced by culture; therefore, there is no way the realm of literature can escape being influenced by the oral ghost stories which have been passed around for generations. H.P. Lovecraft once wrote, "The oldest and strongest emotion of mankind is fear, and the oldest and strongest kind of fear is fear of the unknown" (67). Obviously, man likes to be frightened; what else explains roller coasters, sky diving, bungee jumping, and horror movies? Ghost stories simply feed that fear. Dorothy Scarborough claims, "The ghost is the most enduring figure in supernatural fiction. He is absolutely indestructible" (105). This indestructible nature of the ghost as a character in fiction can be witnessed by looking at the history of the ghost story in literature.
When one thinks of ghosts in literature, one usually thinks of the gothic novels which were wildly popular during the eighteenth century. Although ghost stories were prevalent during this period, they actually appeared much earlier than this. In Night Visitors, Julia Briggs writes, “Ghost stories are as old [as] and older than literature” (26) while S.L. Varnado claims “the ghostly tale has enjoyed popularity” since early history (3). One needs only to look at works such as The Odyssey, Beowulf, Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, and The Canterbury Tales to see how folklore beliefs related to ghosts and other forms of the supernatural have influenced literature. Overall, the popularity of ghost stories has been on its own roller coaster ride. During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, popular drama was full of ghosts and supernatural beings as audiences during those periods were accustomed to hearing about and believing in ghosts. Shakespeare’s plays attest to this belief. However, during the early eighteenth century, cultural beliefs began to change. While people of the period were influenced by “serious scientific investigation,” belief in the “superstitions and folklore of . . . grandparents . . . went underground” (Briggs 31, 30). During the Age of Reason, man was more interested in things that could be proven as scientific fact, not irrational, illogical beings such as ghosts. Therefore, literature about ghosts became less prominent. However, by the end of the period, the pendulum started to swing back toward ghost stories as the gothic novel became popular. Even though the gothic ghost story always tried to explain the irrational existence of ghosts, it did plant the seed of interest again, as a craving for ghost stories continued until the end of the nineteenth century when attitudes and writing styles changed. When cultural views emphasized nature and faith and religion, ghost stories seemed to abound; however, when reason or cynicism took over, the ghost story faded. Today, there seems to be a resurgence of the ghost story in literature as well as film and
television. With writers such as Stephen King and movies like *Ghost* and *Scream*, the ghost story has been taken to a new, horrific level.

Through all of these changing periods of popularity, however, one can still trace certain elements common to most ghost stories. First, the ghost always returns for a reason, whether to cause suffering for a wrongful death, to purge guilt, or to pay an old debt. Second, the ghost story is frequently "a group of narratives told by different narrators on a social occasion" (Carpenter 4). Third, the protagonist is usually "an innocent victim who blunders into the occult dimension," one who "has done nothing ‘wrong’" (Varnado 3). Fourth, the ghost usually can be classified as one of three types. Scarborough describes the typical gothic ghost as the mistaken ghost, which is discovered to be no ghost at all, but something mistaken for a ghost; the subjective ghost which appears to people who want to see it and are ready to see it because of various emotional attachments; and the objective ghost which appears to all types of people, ready or not (106). There are also disputed elements such as the setting and conflicts, but overall ghost stories have always fit some typical patterns.

Regardless of the characteristics, ghost stories as a part of folk literature have survived because people need them; people need to imagine, to fantasize, and to believe in the incredible. Robert Westall notes the "ghost story is about the undying spirit, not the dying flesh. . . . [Ghost stories] make it possible for us to escape into the land of the impossible where, delightfully, anything can happen. They are also a comfort, a reassurance of our own immortality" (qtd. in Cruz and Duff 100). Beyond giving readers a bizarre thrill, an adrenaline rush from fear, ghost stories serve many other, more valuable purposes. Because ghost stories "[invite] concern with the profoundest issues" such as the relationships between life and death, man and his universe, and good and evil, they often appeal to serious writers (Briggs 23). Some critics have even
explained ghost stories’ popularity as therapeutic since they reveal good in the face of evil (Sullivan 130). In a world full of evil, many people need to be reminded good does still exist, a reminder ironically given by many ghost stories. Similarly, Barbara Walker asserts belief in the supernatural gives people power because that belief permits them to “broaden and deepen [their] world and perhaps open [themselves] to a greater reality” (5-6). Many humans need to know there is more to life than this world has to offer, hence, the endurance of the ghost story.

Beyond fascination and reassurance, ghost stories are often told to teach “a lesson, a moral, whether explicit or implicit, [one] to be shared” (Cruz and Duff 100). McNeil delineates four more functions of sharing ghost stories: 1. compensation—tales are sometimes created to compensate for the inadequacies of an event; 2. validation—tales are told to justify cultural rituals and institutions; 3. education—tales are told for morals they project; 4. integration—tales allow cultures to maintain adherence to acceptable behavior (16,18). Bonnie Winsbro explains the power ghost stories can give to ethnic groups because ghost stories provide “an alternative reality, one that acknowledges the existence of those spirits, deities, and empowered humans who are celebrated and remembered in culturally specific folklore” which in turn strengthens individuals’ “self-definition, the process by which they define who they are” (6). Additionally, ghost stories often confront important issues such as “the crisis of religious faith and the questions of personal immortality, the eruption of socially forbidden impulses, and the nature and condition of women” as well as “the mysteries of consciousness and the unconscious” (Kerr, Crowley, and Crow 1). Through these issues, ghost stories may be a mode for “satire, analysis of social relations, probing of guilt and conscience, a search for justice” (Bleiler vii). Overall, Cruz and Duff express the purpose of ghost stories most powerfully as
they assert all ghost stories “try to explain the unexplained and keep [cultures] connected with the past” (102). This connection to the past is important because even though ghosts may be “unpleasant reminders of actions preferably forgotten by digging up long-buried corpses or re-awakening tender consciences, total repression of the past . . . [carries] even greater penalties” (Briggs 109). Because of these functions, ghosts have become an important component of many cultures.

Studying the supernatural beliefs of a cultural group is important for various reasons. First, since the manner in which a group regards the supernatural contributes to the thought and behavioral patterns of the group, through study, others “gather a fuller understanding of what is meaningful to the group, what gives it cohesion and animation, and thus [others] develop a rounder perspective of cultural nuance” (Walker 4). Studying supernatural folklore such as ghost stories simply allows one to more fully understand, and perhaps appreciate the diversity of, a cultural group. Second, people “obtain most of [their] beliefs from culture . . . [a central function of which is] to allow humans to learn from each other’s experiences” (Hufford 21-22). If humans want to become more understanding of other people, culture must be studied. Also, to deny the folklore of a culture, to deny one’s own culture, is to deny one’s self. Third, the experiences people have with ghosts “become, for them, a symbol or metaphor for an entire cultural complex which is timeless, and lies outside the perimeter of verifiability and the norms of day-to-day judgments” (Harvey 21). In other words, to some people ghostly encounters are merely a part of being in a certain cultural group. For example, Clodagh Brennan Harvey, who is Irish, explains her sister and mother both had experiences with ghosts in Ireland; and rather than analyze their sanity or the purpose of the sighting, both plainly felt
the encounter was part of their being Irish, nothing more (22-25). As a whole, there is no denying the cultural significance of ghosts.

Because ghost stories feed the imagination, reassure beliefs about life, and teach lessons about the past and life in general, they are, as Goethe says, the "poetry of life" which has become a viable part of literature (qtd. in Brennan 260). Ghost stories are no longer told only around campfires to frighten young campers; they have become a tool many writers use to teach audiences. Since ghost stories are such a powerful piece of the cultural puzzle, they cannot be overlooked in nor dismissed from the literary canon, any more than historical writings, feminist writings, and psychological writings can be ignored.
HAMLET’S GHOST: REMEMBER ME, THE SPIRIT OF HEALTH OR GOBLIN DAMNED

One cultural group distinctly affected by ghostly folklore is the British, as is clearly evident when one peruses British literature. Various writers, masters of their craft and undisputed members of the canon, have all been influenced by culture and have written about ghosts at some point in their careers. For example, an examination of Shakespeare’s Hamlet elucidates the manner in which cultural beliefs permeate literary subjects and demonstrates how ghosts can be a valid tool in literary works. Specifically, Shakespeare uses the traditional ghost story as the mythic text in order to suggest the subtext of the Ghost as a symbol of man’s archetypal need to balance his past with his present in order to avoid a poisoned life. By using a mythic structure his audience would recognize, Shakespeare is able to transform the Ghost into a complex symbol of the characters’ subconscious. The Ghost, then, is a portent that the natural order of things is awry because the past is being ignored.

As a playwright, Shakespeare knew he had to appeal to and please his audience. One way to do this was to use basic mythical elements most of his audience knew. Since his contemporaries accepted totally “the reality of angels as well as demons, . . . good as well as evil spirits,” he often had supernatural beings in his plays (Smidt 425). Hamlet engages the Elizabethan fascination with ghosts by manipulating various elements of ghostlore. On the surface, the play looks like a traditional ghost story because it adheres to certain tenets described in the previous chapter. First, the protagonist to whom the ghost appears most often is an innocent victim. As the tragic hero, Prince Hamlet is ignorant of the corruption Claudius is spreading throughout Denmark until the
Ghost explains Claudius’s sins to him. Second, the Ghost in *Hamlet* adheres to tradition by appearing to repay a debt by seeking vengeance against Claudius in order to restore Denmark. Finally, the Ghost is a subjective ghost which appears only to Hamlet, the guards, and Horatio, those who are willing to remember the past. Thus, the play is centered around traits of the traditional ghost story, in part, to seize the attention of the Elizabethan audience.

To maintain that watchfulness, Shakespeare also includes various elements of Elizabethan folklore about ghosts so that the play is more directly applicable to his audience. Since Elizabethans believed ghosts of dead people were possibly coming back for revenge, they would have responded to this Ghost “in a generally suspicious way” (Scofield 139). Being the master playwright, Shakespeare channeled this suspicion by relating the Ghost to many customary, even conflicting, beliefs.

For example, Lewes Lavater, a sixteenth century writer, explains that Protestants taught and wrote about both good-natured and evil-natured spirits which were usually allowed “by God’s license” to return to earthly life for either the “aid and deliverance of men” or the “instructing and terrifying of the living” (114). So, if a man were confronted by an apparition, he would have to determine whether the ghost was evil or good. This belief is demonstrated in the very first scene of the play. The watchmen set the tone for the entire play as Bernardo and Marcellus have seen “this dreaded sight twice” (Shakespeare 1.1.25). Once Horatio sees the Ghost for himself, he begins simply to question the Ghost about its purposes as he says:

If thou hast any sound or use of voice,

Speak to me.

---

1All further references to the play will be noted only with act, scene, and line numbers.
If there be any good thing to be done,
That may to thee do ease, and grace to me,
Speak to me.
If thou art privy to thy country’s fate,
Which happily foreknowing may avoid,
O, speak!
Or if thou hast uphoarded in thy life
Extorted treasure in the womb of earth,
For which, they say, you spirits oft walk in death,
Speak of it. (1.1.128-39)

This one speech displays the belief that a ghost appears for a definite reason and that one must decide whether the ghost is evil or good. Here, Horatio tests the Ghost by simply questioning him and giving him options that run the gamut from goodness to treasure-seeker. However, in keeping with tradition, the Ghost does not respond.

Therefore, Lavater explains there are four tests a man should perform on his ghost to decipher the nature of its appearance: first, a good spirit will revive and comfort a man after frightening him, while an evil spirit will not; second, a good spirit will appear as “a dove, a man, a lamb, or in the brightness” of the sun, while an evil spirit will appear as “a lion, bear, dog, toad, serpent, cat, or black ghost”; third, a good ghost will not say anything contrary to the “faith, good manners, and ceremonies of the church,” while an evil ghost will; and fourth, a good spirit should indicate by his words and/or actions that he is humble and repentant of his sins, while an evil spirit will groan and complain (115). Even though these tests are not specifically stated in the play, Hamlet himself does seem to consider these ideas when he is analyzing the nature of the Ghost. When they are actually applied to Shakespeare’s Ghost, the answers are
somewhat conflicting. On the first test, the fact that the Ghost does not comfort the guards who have turned “Almost to jelly” (1.2.205), which would make the Ghost appear to be evil. However, one could argue that the Ghost does comfort Hamlet by first telling him, “I am thy father’s spirit” (1.5.9). Knowing this is the spirit of his much loved father probably calms Hamlet by making him less afraid. Accordingly, the Ghost is still ambiguous. With the second test, the Ghost appears to be a good spirit since it does appear in the form of a man rather than an evil animal. However, the third test nullifies that answer because the Ghost does technically speak against the church by commanding Hamlet to seek revenge rather than forgiveness. Albeit, that revenge could be to make Claudius accept the past and admit his guilt. After all, the Ghost never says how Hamlet is to seek revenge. As it turns out, Claudius’s memory does punish him more than Hamlet’s anger does. Finally, the Ghost, again, appears to be both good and evil when one applies the fourth test. Although an evil ghost complains as Hamlet’s Ghost does about Gertrude and Claudius, this Ghost also appears to be good because he will not tell Hamlet about the tortures of Purgatory and because he is somewhat repentant when he speaks of his being cheated of that repentance during his lifetime. Once again, however, this speech could be explained as evil because he may be whining about his state. Regardless of the debate, the point is that Shakespeare uses all of these points in order to keep Hamlet guessing and to keep the audience guessing so that no hasty judgments about appearances are made.

Although Lavater’s test sounds thorough, it must not be complete because Elizabeth Prosser claims both Protestants and Catholics had other tests to determine the origin of the ghost. In the “Enter Ghost” chapter of her book *Hamlet and Revenge*, Prosser outlines three more tests. She explains if a ghost appears at night and vanishes at daybreak, it is probably evil; if a ghost
seeks deserted places such as deserts, castles, and battlements, it is probably a devil; and if a ghost appears to murderers or innocent children, it is demonic (97-117). All of these elements are important since on the surface they seem to indicate the Ghost of King Hamlet must be evil because he appears late at night on the battlements, he is in armor "from head to foot" (1.2.227), and he appears to innocent characters. However, the issue is not so simple because of other rational explanations for these characteristics. Yes, the Ghost appears at night; however, he does not have a choice to appear during the day since part of his sentence in Purgatory is "to walk the night" (1.5.10). Yes, the Ghost does appear at the castle, which is easily explained because that is his former home and the residence of his wife and child, whom he wants to protect. Also, he was a soldier who is still battling State threats in the form of Claudius; therefore, he wears armor. Yes, he appears to the innocent Hamlet, but Hamlet is the only one who remembers his love and will purge the evil. Horatio is not powerful enough or connected enough to take the task; only Hamlet can succeed. Moreover, Shakespeare continues to complicate this issue by describing the Ghost in fatherly terms as he appears with a "countenance more in sorrow than in anger" (1.2.230) and a "grizzled" beard (1.2.237). Since the Ghost reminds Horatio and Hamlet of the King Hamlet, they are not very afraid. Also, the Ghost appears to be sad rather than angry as an evil ghost probably would be. As is, the Ghost’s sad countenance can be justified as his disappointment with the state of affairs in his beloved country. Prosser’s tests only prove to strengthen the conflict which Shakespeare himself seems to have written into his text in order to keep his audience’s attention and to lay the foundation for remembering the past.

Roland Mushat Frye offers a lengthy discussion of more Elizabethan beliefs in ghosts. A key detail he explores is that most common lore did hold
that a ghost who demands revenge is evil. On the other hand, there was also a belief that "some children are born to be public executors of justice, or are at some point in their lives properly ordained as such," as Solomon was commanded by the dying King David to kill Joab in revenge (23). In Hamlet's case, this belief is truly paradoxical. As King Hamlet's son, maybe Hamlet is destined to avenge his father's murder. When Hamlet is first instructed to punish Claudius, Hamlet's love for and devotion to his father is emphasized when he pleads for the details which may "sweep to my revenge" (1.5.31). However, this love becomes questionable as the "father whom Hamlet habitually compares to a god . . . has returned in a guise that seems to speak simultaneously of heaven and hell [to] confer a duty [whose] nature is flawed by the very corruption it sends Hamlet out to destroy" (Scofield 182). Therefore, the Ghost appears to a loving, devoted son only to ask the son to perform a corrupt deed. If one stops here, the Ghost seems to be evil. However, Shakespeare, once again, will not allow the debate to end as the Ghost tells Hamlet, "Taint not thy mind, nor let thy soul contrive / Against thy mother" (1.5.85-86). Although he wants Hamlet to seek vengeance against Claudius, the Ghost seems compassionate enough to warn Hamlet not to allow his emotions to control him so much that he harms his mother. An evil ghost probably would not take this step. On the other hand, the statement itself is a bit ironic because, as Scofield wonders, "has not the Ghost's own narrative up to this point been charged with just those elements which are, if anything is likely to taint Hamlet's mind?" (142). As the Ghost speaks with irony and paradox, it is clear Shakespeare includes enough Elizabethan beliefs to maintain the mystery of the Ghost's character and to intensify the mythic nature of the text.

Basically, Frye claims the controversy about the nature of the Ghost will always exist since "Elizabethan attitudes were too sophisticated, too qualified,
too carefully balanced to allow for any unilateral judgment on this issue” (24). But, perhaps the conflict is simply part of Shakespeare’s manipulation of the symbolic Ghost as the author reminds his audience of the diverse past and echoes a common theme about the conflict between appearances and reality, a key theme in a discussion about memory. As a symbol of the past, the complex Ghost is an admonition that things are not always what they appear to be. The Ghost, then, puts the characters who see him and the audience on suspicious watch in order to determine his meaning. Moreover, as a hidden skeleton of Claudius’s past, the Ghost remains shrouded in a mystery which cannot be solved until Claudius acknowledges those skeletons by confessing his faults and putting the past to rest.

Once he has the audience interested in this mystery, Shakespeare turns to the protagonist, Hamlet, who will be used as the Ghost’s emissary to assure everyone knows the past and to restore order to the rotten State. Before he can fulfill this duty, however, Hamlet must follow cultural beliefs and test the nature of this possible damnable Ghost. When Hamlet first hears that the Ghost has appeared, he echoes a common belief as he says, “I’ll speak to it though hell itself should gape / And bid me hold my peace” (1.2.242-43). Here, Hamlet seems determined to speak to his “father’s spirit in arms” (1.2.252) even though he realizes that hell itself may be tempting him. Once Hamlet actually speaks to the Ghost, Shakespeare introduces even more of the Elizabethan beliefs as Hamlet calls “Angels and ministers” to defend him against this “spirit of health or goblin damned” (1.4.39, 40). Again, Hamlet expresses the common belief that this Ghost can have either “wicked or charitable” intentions (1.4.42). Like the Elizabethans would, Hamlet knows he must be cautious with this unpredictable Ghost. Before Hamlet can act upon the Ghost’s command to “Remember me”
(1.5.91), he must protect his soul by determining the reason for the Ghost’s return while also deciphering the true nature of the Ghost.

Thereupon, Hamlet stages the Mousetrap play to test the Ghost’s story. Even though Hamlet wants to believe the fatherly Ghost, folklore forces him to be cautious so that he does not damn his soul. Once Hamlet brings the past to life on stage and sees Claudius’s disturbed reaction, he is assured he will “take the ghost’s word for a thousand pound” (3.3.262). He now is confident the Ghost is not an evil demon sent to destroy him. Because he now trusts the Ghost’s story, Hamlet is ready to confront the true evil of the past by revealing Claudius’s skeletons and, thus, restoring Denmark. By including these folklore beliefs, Shakespeare reinforces the mythic idea of the disruption which occurs in the natural order of the universe when the past is ignored. Also, he allows Hamlet to use the past, in the form of ghostlore, as a weapon to protect his soul.

Even though the debate over the nature of the Ghost will rage on because Shakespeare included a myriad of folklore beliefs loaded with ambiguity, it is clear that “Hamlet is given a mandate he cannot ignore, but from a source which remains mysterious and dubious from first to last” (Frye 16). When the Ghost tells Hamlet that he was murdered and “the whole ear of Denmark” is “[r]ankly abused” (1.5.36, 38) because the evil past is hidden, Hamlet knows he must remedy that past in order to honor his father and to aid Denmark. Kristian Smidt interestingly notes that the original source of the story for Hamlet presented Claudius’s role in the murder as a “matter of general knowledge”; but for Shakespeare to lodge the details of the murder within a ghost “whose status and intentions are debatable and whose very existence is questionable makes for an interesting dramatic as well as psychological development” (430). Therefore, the Ghost becomes a key character of purposes in this subtext of the psychology of man. Specifically, through the Ghost’s haunting command to “Remember me,”
Shakespeare transforms the Ghost into a symbol of the necessity for man to confront his past in order to avoid corruption of life. Because of King Hamlet's own unreconciled past, his spirit is in a state of unrest. Therefore, his Ghost symbolizes the disturbed subconscious of those characters who have trouble blending the past into their being.

As already illustrated, Hamlet first honors the past by testing the cultural beliefs that are part of his heritage. Without remembering these folklore customs, Hamlet could easily fall into corruption by murdering Claudius. Therefore, this subtext of man's desire to forget the past explains many of the actions which occur. When the Ghost speaks to Hamlet, John Kerrigan thinks Hamlet's agreement to remember "determines the movement of the tragedy: slow, eddying, as though reluctant to leave the past" (117). Though Hamlet wants to return to the period when his father was alive, many of the other characters want to forget it and surge forward in life with little or no recollection. By the end of the play, Shakespeare has proven both actions are detrimental.

Shakespeare first begins to develop this subtext with the characters who are willing to remember the past. Since the guards and Horatio originally see the Ghost, their encounters set the stage for the Ghost to work as a symbol. First, Marcellus realizes the Ghost is an omen by observing, "Something is rotten in the state of Denmark" (1.4.90). Again, past folklore has trained him to realize a ghost is a portent. Indeed, the state of Denmark is rotten as King Claudius himself is infected by evil. When a leader is corrupt, history has proven the nation will suffer the consequences eventually. In this case, it is only a matter of time before all of Denmark, the entire state itself, will be poisoned by Claudius's canker. Even though Marcellus is frightened by the Ghost, he is prompted to remember at least some of the past by remembering folklore.
Similarly, Horatio remembers culture, but he goes further and remembers King Hamlet himself. After realizing the Ghost is the spirit of King Hamlet, Horatio immediately remembers “our valiant Hamlet” (1.1.84) who fought courageously and fearlessly. He remembers King Hamlet “as a representative of that lost and epic age in which political issues were decided by fierce, single combat, an age in sorry contrast to that which kings take power by poison” (J. Kerrigan 117). Obviously, Horatio respected the King and is willing to honor his memory by pursuing the Ghost. In fact, this sighting causes him to decide the Ghost’s appearance “bodes some strange eruption to our state” (1.1.69). Since he knows ghosts appear for a reason and he thinks respectfully of the former King, Horatio feels assured this Ghost has appeared in an attempt to protect Denmark from something. Thus, the Ghost brings Horatio to a higher reality as he realizes Denmark may be in some sort of danger and he must warn Hamlet. Hence, Shakespeare uses Horatio in the opening scene to set the stage for memory. As soon as Horatio sees the symbolic Ghost, he is reminded of a dignified, even glorious period, which has faded with the death of its noble leader. Because of this positive memory, Horatio is determined to serve the Ghost by speaking to young Hamlet in order to discover the true meaning of the Ghost’s appearance. Therefore, all of the men remember the past and know something is awry. Since Horatio remembers King Hamlet and feels compelled to honor the King’s memory, the Ghost is able to use Horatio “to get to Hamlet, who then becomes the Ghost’s agent in securing revenge” in an attempt to heal the rotten state of Denmark (Wright 98).

Obviously, the character most affected by this charge to remember is Hamlet. Similar to Horatio, Hamlet is ready to see the Ghost because he wants to remember his father and cannot understand why others would not. However, Hamlet, too, falls prey to this willingness to forget as he almost forgets his own
identity in order to remember only one thing: his father's murder. From the point of Hamlet's promise to remember, "he is bound to his father and his father's curse" and so "subordinates himself to the authority of his father" that he is willing to forget everything else in his life (Kastan, "His Semblance" 198-99). Although Hamlet knows revenge will make him "couple hell" (1.5.93), he is willing to wipe away everything--his virtuous mother, the loving Ophelia, his god-like father who is damned to hell, all friends, reputation, wisdom and guidance, his entire identity--to think only of what his father's ghost tells him. He will remember these words and nothing more: "He commits himself to his father, to being a son, to represent, that is, old Hamlet in both senses of the word--as the child who re-presents the father and as the agent who represents the father's interests" (Kastan, "His Semblance" 199). In this shocking passage, Hamlet transforms, at least for a moment, and is willing to give up all he has ever been taught about goodness and morality in order to obey his father; he will even bring damnation if necessary because he is thinking only of revenge, his father's command.

Tragically, Hamlet almost allows the past to consume him by focusing too much on remembrance. This vow of remembrance also contributes to Hamlet's mental anguish because as he remembers his father and the Ghost, he is not easily able to change his nature. As John Kerrigan notes:

Hamlet knows that revenge would please the stern, militaristic father whom he loves, and he wants to please him; but he cannot overcome his radical sense of the pointlessness of revenge. . . . Revenge cannot bring back what has been lost. Only memory, with all its limitations can do that. (120)

Since revenge cannot bring back his father in the manner memory is able to, Hamlet focuses more on remembering and wants others to remember his father.
as well. As is, he is merely a skeleton of a man trying to live in the past. However, memory cannot change the past in any way. Hamlet must learn to use memories constructively rather than live by them destructively.

Another interesting aspect to which this remembering brings focus is Hamlet's metamorphosis as he "becomes ghost-like himself" (Austin 97). Once Hamlet meets with the Ghost and becomes obsessed with memory, Kozokowski feels Hamlet's "self-portrait . . . substantially . . . draws upon the Ghost's presence" (126). He offers the following scenes as examples of Hamlet's evolving similarities to the Ghost. First, Hamlet's telling Ophelia he has untold "offenses at my / back" (3.1.122-23) echoes the Ghost's offenses which put him in purgatory. Second, Hamlet's question "What should such fellows as / I do, crawling between earth and heaven?" (3.1.124-25) places him "physically helpless, in an undefined realm like that of his father's spirit." Third, when Hamlet says "Denmark's a prison" (2.2.236), he repeats the idea of the Ghost's "prison house" (1.5.14). Fourth, the image of the pale Ghost is imitated as Hamlet exhibits a "pale cast of thought" (3.1.85) and is "pale as his shirt" (2.1.80) (Kozokowski 126-27). As Hamlet is controlled by his memory, it seems he becomes so dangerously wrapped in the past that he takes on characteristics of the Ghost, perhaps in an attempt to regain the past. However, this ghostly nature also works toward Shakespeare's subtext. As the messenger of the Ghost, Hamlet becomes the embodiment of the symbolic past. He figuratively takes on characteristics of the Ghost as he tries to persuade others to confront their pasts. Since the Ghost does not appear to all of the characters, Hamlet becomes more like him in order to vex the subconscious of other characters. Even in this transformation, though, Hamlet must find that balance between the past, present, and future, or he will lose his identity to the past.
Throughout the play, Hamlet is repeatedly reminded of this meeting with his father’s ghost and serves as the epitome of the past by making others see the past. Instead of being a spur, however, Hamlet’s memory becomes a burden as he is almost destroyed by trying to make up for the past. For example, in the closet scene in Act 3, scene 4, Hamlet nearly loses touch with reality and harms his mother because he wants her to go back to the past. Even though memory itself is necessary, Gertrude cannot make the past reappear as Hamlet seems to wish. In a prophetic manner, it is the Ghost which stops Hamlet’s frenzy by saying, “Do not forget” (3.4.112). At a time when Hamlet is about to become carried away with his desire for the past to return, the Ghost reminds him to stay focused on the present. Furthermore, remembering the Ghost earlier in Act 3 possibly prevents Hamlet from committing suicide. During his “To be or not to be” soliloquy (3.1.56+), Hamlet seems to be thinking of suicide. What prevents him from taking his life, however, is “the dread of something after death” (3.1.78). Subconsciously, Hamlet is thinking of his father, the father Hamlet thought was practically a saint. Yet, after death, his father is roaming through Purgatory. It appears the Ghost has made Hamlet fear death because he is not sure what is to come after death since he has witnessed his father’s fate and now has proof things are not always what they seem. This knowledge of his father’s destiny has caused a crisis in Hamlet’s religious faith as he now doubts what happens to a man after death. Consequently, Hamlet’s memory is a dual-edged sword: on one hand it drives him to irrational and dangerous depths while on the other hand it protects him.

In another famous soliloquy in Act 3, Scene 3, Hamlet comes to an important revelation. Before this scene, he has rebuked himself for not taking vengeful action on Claudius. He has tested the Ghost and now has proof and opportunity to truly remember his father and kill Claudius. However,
remembering the Ghost provides Hamlet with yet another excuse for delay: he now realizes the truth of the folklore belief that men who die with sins on their souls are eternally punished. He does not want Claudius to have a better afterlife than his father. So, the Ghost causes Hamlet to delay revenge in order for it to be more damnable, while Claudius is in some sinful act. Once again, this symbolic past has brought Hamlet to a religious crisis as he no longer is satisfied with just revenge. He now wants damnable revenge. His memories of the past are contaminating his noble mind as he now wants to condemn a man to hell. He feels if he can send Claudius to hell, his father's fate will be somehow justified or at least balanced. However, the fate of the two men does not cancel out the past in any way. Basically, Hamlet is "betrayed into this state of vindictiveness by the memory of the Ghost... which should be a spur to justice, [but] is also a snare" (Scofield 164). Hamlet first becomes ensnared because of the tests he must perform to determine the nature of the Ghost and because he has a good nature rather than a murderous one. However, at this point, he is ensnared by trying to live in the past and even to make up for that past. Scofield further believes that "the combination in the Ghost of human evil, fallibility, tenderness, compassion, self-pity, love, revenge, added to the mystery of its supernatural return" causes Hamlet to fill with a "host of conflicting impulses and... precise contradictions of [his] own nature" (166). Once again, Shakespeare's compounding of folklore with the memory of a father and a very human ghost brings about more conflict within Hamlet as Shakespeare demands the audience weigh all of the odds related to memory and warns Hamlet that he cannot live in the past any more than others can live without the past.

However, Hamlet's trip to England seems to change his obsessive focus on the past. When he returns, he seems different in spirit. He has not forgotten his father necessarily, but he seems to believe something else is in control of
him as he tells Horatio, “There’s a divinity that shapes our ends, / Rough-hew them how we will-” (5.2.10-11). Here, his memory is no longer controlling him and torturing him because he feels God is in charge of his life. By remembering his father, Hamlet has learned that things are not always what they appear to be since man does not have total control over his life. He once thought his father was a saintly man, but now he is aware that a divine being determines man’s ultimate destiny. In essence, he seems resolved that things will happen according to fate’s plan, regardless of what Hamlet wants or does. Also, he seems more resolved to punish Claudius, not just for the Ghost, but more because Claudius is the “canker of our nature” who has brought great harm to Denmark through his lack of honoring customs and beliefs (5.2.69). Hamlet seems more determined to take on the role of the Ghost, in a constructive manner, by making Claudius confront his actions so that Denmark may be healed. The memory, although it provokes Hamlet, serves to torture him only as long as it is his prime motivation because the command to remember “condemns [Hamlet] to an endless, fruitless ‘yearning for the lost figure’” (J. Kerrigan 119).

Through Hamlet, Shakespeare allegorizes the power of the past to destroy when it is allowed to consume one’s life. When Hamlet is able to incorporate his memory into his present state, he is then, and only then, able to move toward the future.

Conversely, Shakespeare also uses the Ghost to symbolize the destruction which erupts from trying to ignore the past. One character who never actually sees the Ghost but is strongly connected to him is Claudius. Actually, Claudius is the entire reason for the Ghost’s appearance since Claudius killed the King and is corrupting Denmark by hiding that past encounter at any cost. At the beginning of the play, Claudius is worried about Hamlet, who seems melancholic over the death of his father, a death which occurred not even
two months earlier. Although Claudius claims to understand Hamlet's sorrow, he tells Gertrude and Hamlet that "we with wisest sorrow think on him / Together with remembrance of ourselves" (1.2.6-7). He professes to feel it wise to remember the dead but contradicts that by insisting the living remember themselves more. He is willing to remember his dead brother but only to the point of slight discomfort; he thinks focusing on his own happiness and desires is much more important than remembering and respecting the dead. Moreover, he probably does not want to remember his brother because he then would have to face the fact that he is a murderer, a man who has corrupted his moral beliefs to gain power.

Because he is not concerned with this respectful remembrance, he moves ahead in his life and marries Gertrude, his dead brother's wife, and celebrates their incestuous marriage. This lack of remembrance causes conflict with Hamlet and overall corruption in Denmark as "the ceremonial objects properly devoted to the expression of grief have been perverted to the expression of joy" (Bevington 130). By quickly moving from the funeral to the wedding, Claudius has spread more poison over Denmark because he is not remembering tradition; he is thinking only of his own needs rather than the needs of the State. Also, Claudius has ignored the sacred bond of brothers by murdering his own brother in order to gain power, therefore causing a "perverted monarchy" in Denmark (Bevington 130). When a man has such an ominous skeleton in his closet as Claudius does, that skeleton will eventually be found. Denmark will suffer, at some point in time, for this perversion brought about by the King and his disdainful treatment of heritage.

In staging the Mousetrap, Hamlet has served as the Ghost's emissary by forcing Claudius, at least for a few moments, to face the past. This encounter with the past does make Claudius realize his "offense is rank" (3.3.36).
However, his guilt renders him unable to truly reconcile the past since such remembering would require him to stop the perverted life he is living. Therefore, throughout the play he spends his time trying to avoid that past Hamlet has put before him, trying to make others forget the past, and trying to hide the corruption he has caused. As the Ghost’s agent, Hamlet is a constant threat to the past’s erupting before Claudius’s eyes; therefore, in the attempt to keep his skeletons hidden, Claudius goes so far as to order Hamlet killed. This action proves the extent of his corruption: he is ready to murder the prince to keep the past at bay.

Surprisingly, Claudius analyzes his own problem when he speaks of Hamlet’s insane murder of Polonius. He claims he and Gertrude are “like the owner of a foul disease, / [who] to keep it from divulging, let it feed / Even on the pith of life” (4.1.21-23). By keeping King Hamlet’s murder secret, Claudius does indeed own a foul disease by hiding his skeletons. He realizes that the only way he can conceal the past is to allow the past to “feed” on/ destroy the essence of his life. Tragically, he knows his secrets are depleting the quality of his life, but he is still unwilling to reveal them. Because of this disease, Claudius has become an internal threat to the state of Denmark. While everyone’s attention is focused on an external threat by Fortinbras, Denmark is decaying under the leadership of a murderous leader. Ironically, Claudius is the one who holds the cure to this threat by admitting his secrets. This hazard to the throne is a corruption which seeps into every realm of the country and destroys the court; it is the corruption which results from his attempts to forget and to bury the past; it is the corruption which provokes the Ghost to appear to Hamlet and warn him that only memory can stop this deadly canker.

Caught in this foulness is Gertrude. Like Claudius, she has forgotten her husband, Hamlet, and has married “that incestuous, that adulterate beast”
Claudius (1.5.42). Even though she would “hang on” (1.2.143) King Hamlet because of her love for him, she has quickly forgotten her dear husband and has flown with “most wicked speed” (1.2.156) to Claudius’s bed. Her hasty marriage proves she has forgotten her past life. This problem is important because it causes her to become a victim of the corruption and because it induces Hamlet’s disillusionment with a humanity that can so easily forget the dead. Furthermore, after the discussion with the Ghost, Hamlet takes on his role as the Ghost’s representative who must make Gertrude face her past. In the closet scene when Hamlet admonishes Gertrude to look at the picture of King Hamlet and remember their life together, Gertrude cries, “Speak no more! / Thou turn’st my eyes into my very soul” (3.4.89-90). Obviously, Gertrude has locked up her feelings and her grief rather than try to cope with anguish. When Hamlet forces her to face past emotions, she wants no more of them because of the pain they bring.

By marrying Claudius, Gertrude has been able to bury those painful emotions; however, that forgetting leads only to further conflict and pain. Once close to her son, she now has isolated herself from Hamlet because he cannot understand her forgetful, seemingly disrespectful actions. She cannot live, truly live, without confronting those emotions by grieving and eventually putting the past to rest as a memory. As it is now, her life is a facade because she spends it with a man who thinks more of himself than others while she cannot even reminisce about the past. When the Ghost tells Hamlet to “Leave her to heaven” (1.5.86), he provides insight into her character as he implies she will, in time, remember and confront her emotions and past actions. He knows Gertrude is not an evil woman; she is simply a woman who has found a way to avoid dealing with the pain of remembering her former life. Yes, she does need to move toward the future, but not until she has reconciled her past and put her skeletons
to rest. However, her lack of remembrance has caused her to make a grave mistake, which prevents her from that reconciliation and puts her in the middle of the fatal corruption as one of its victims.

Another minor character Shakespeare uses to stress the importance of remembrance is Ophelia. Although she is naive and innocent, she too becomes a victim of the corruption that results from forgetting. In Act 1, both Laertes and Polonius exhort Ophelia to forget Hamlet. Although she and Hamlet have had an innocent romance, Laertes warns her to disregard that relationship because Hamlet “is subject to his birth” (1.3.18). This warning sounds like good advice since Ophelia is beneath Hamlet on the social ladder. However, the advice is actually problematic because Laertes is basically telling Ophelia to neglect her feelings for Hamlet, something Gertrude already proves to be harmful. This admonition becomes a direct command when Polonius tells her she can no longer spend time with or even converse with Hamlet (1.3.131-35). Again, Ophelia is being taught that ignoring the past is acceptable. Instead of talking to Hamlet and explaining why they must end their relationship, Ophelia is instructed to scorn Hamlet. Actually, this behavior creates a skeleton for her closet because she is being forced to forget the past without truly putting it to rest. To compound the problem, Ophelia is used as a pawn in Claudius’s and Polonius’s game to trap Hamlet. Like a puppet, Ophelia is told to “accidentally” meet with Hamlet and to return old love letters he wrote to her. The two men are using her emotions for their benefit—Polonius to advance himself in the King’s esteem, and Claudius to test the cause of Hamlet’s strange behavior. Her memory is being used like a strategic faucet that is turned on only when someone else wants it. Hence, she is probably confused about whether to remember or forget.
This scene further spreads the corruption resulting from forgetting. Once Ophelia does return the “remembrances” (3.1.92), Hamlet thinks Ophelia is echoing the frail nature of women presented to him by the Ghost. Hamlet wrongly feels Ophelia is able to easily forget their love for one another and becomes very angry. He allows her pain to add to his disillusionment with a mankind that can forget memories so easily (as he sees it). Hamlet views Ophelia’s actions the same way he views those of Claudius and Gertrude. By being a pawn, Ophelia is compelled to see Hamlet’s frustration and leaves the encounter feeling more pain and confusion--because her memories have been played with like toys.

However, Ophelia still has not escaped the corruption of forgetfulness. To avoid the conflict that could result from Hamlet’s murder of Polonius, Claudius makes another tragic mistake by violating ceremony and memory. Since he wants an excuse for sending away Hamlet, who has made him remember the ugly past, he secretly buries Polonius and sends Hamlet to England. This time Shakespeare himself uses Ophelia as the pawn when Ophelia is driven insane by these actions. Claudius admits to Gertrude, “the people [are] muddied, / Thick and unwholesome” (4.5.79-80), and Ophelia has gone mad because they have given Polonius a “hugger-mugger” burial (4.5.82). Claudius knows that violating ceremony and trying to hide the past causes corruption as the people are “muddied” and dirty because of his hidden deeds. He also knows he is partly to blame for Ophelia’s madness because of the burial of Polonius. By burying him in secrecy and disorder, Claudius has robbed Ophelia, and the country, of the chance to grieve and find the closure a proper burial brings. Through his attempts to keep his own skeletons locked away, he has brought decay into the lives of others. Everyone has wanted Ophelia to
forget and ignore her feelings; Shakespeare uses her to demonstrate how a person’s sanity can snap under that sort of unnatural pressure.

Ironically, during Ophelia’s madness she indicates she may have learned a lesson about the importance of memory. In Act 4, scene 5, lines 172-179, Ophelia, in a seeming fit of insanity, gives flowers to various characters, flowers with very sane messages. As Harold Jenkins explains, she gives rosemary and pansies for remembrance and thought to Laertes; to Gertrude, fennel and columbines for infidelity; to the King, rue for repentance and the daisy as an emblem of love’s victims since he has caused Hamlet’s absence; had Polonius not died, she would also have given violets to Claudius for the faithfulness associated with Polonius’s service to Denmark (qtd. in Shakespeare 76-77). Before her death, Ophelia echoes the Ghost’s edict to remember by prompting other characters to treasure people and allegiances and to recollect past actions. Essentially, she tells Laertes to remember what takes place in his life and to think about those things. She tells Gertrude to remember her first husband and the love they had. She tells Claudius to remember the relationships he has destroyed through his evil deeds. If these things are ignored, destruction may result, as it does by the end of the play. Like the Ghost, Shakespeare uses Ophelia as the prophetic voice of reason that symbolically warns the court of the fate that results from forgetting. Unlike the Ghost, Ophelia’s warning is covered in conflict because of insanity rather than folklore. With the direct and indirect influence of the Ghost on the characters, Shakespeare successfully admonishes his audience to find the balance between forgetting the past and being devoured by the past.

However, Shakespeare’s subtext about memory is brought full circle in the play’s final scene. As the stage is strewn with the bodies of the forgetful and corrupt Claudius, Gertrude, and Laertes, the dying Hamlet tells Horatio to “report
me and my cause aright / To the unsatisfied" by telling his story (5.2.318-19). Claudius’s evil desire to escape the past has destroyed the lives of many, including Hamlet. Before dying, though, Hamlet serves one last time as the Ghost’s emissary by being the prophetic voice which gives Horatio the power to heal the corruption Claudius has caused to fester. Here, Hamlet wants to be remembered for attempting to redress the wrongs stemming from Claudius’s murder of King Hamlet. As the Ghost’s emissary, Hamlet has an obligation not only to kill Claudius, but also to make certain others know this tragic story. In order to prevent more corruption, the people must know the events that have occurred and the reason for those events. They cannot hide the past behind a veil of ignorance because the past is part of what the country is. They also cannot live in that glorified past. To be cured, they must know everything that has happened. Horatio must clean out all of the skeletons, and the citizens must see them and move forward with the knowledge gained. If there is no memory, as there is not with Claudius and Gertrude, there is no healing. The Ghost indirectly teaches this lesson to Hamlet and the other characters. Through Hamlet’s command to tell his story so that Denmark’s people can confront the past, the play closes with the hope the country will be healed from its canker by finding the balance the other characters missed.

Robert Penn Warren once said that the past serves as a rebuke to the present because it shows the extent of human capabilities (qtd. in Purdy 210). Not only is the past part of a person’s identity, but also it is an instructional tool which reveals man’s nature. By examining the past, people are able to witness both good and evil. As Shakespeare takes an old tale of the Scottish Hamlet, he is able to use history to instruct his audience about the futility of trying to escape the past. Rather than unsuccessfully run from a past which always wins the race, Shakespeare uses Hamlet as a mythic tale to illustrate how people should
allow the past to pass them in the race in order to examine that past, discover its lesson, and move away from it toward a fulfilling future.

To stress the importance of the past, Shakespeare also includes Elizabethan ghostlore as part of a strong heritage. More specifically, he clearly uses the entertaining ghost story as the main text. However, when that captivating element is peeled away, an important subtext is revealed. The major purpose of this lore is to teach the lesson to remember loved ones, vows, and beliefs, and to maintain adherence to goodness rather than corruption by living life with the past and the future in harmony with the present. Just as man cannot live without air, he also cannot live without knowing the past roots that sustain him. Without the Ghost, this lesson would not have been as powerfully stressed. By using a ghost as the revelation of the past, Shakespeare creates a mysterious symbol because the Ghost represents the undying nature of the past. Like a ghost, the past can never be killed nor ignored, no matter how hard people try to suppress it. Both appear when they are least expected. Moreover, by having Horatio and Hamlet refer to the folklore related to ghosts, Shakespeare gives an example of how the past can be used as a shield. If the two men had immediately obeyed the Ghost, they could have destroyed their souls, and the past would not have been resolved. However, through Hamlet's debate over the nature of the Ghost, Shakespeare gives Hamlet the past to wield as a weapon to defend his soul and as an elixir for the decay in Denmark. Without the folklore, Shakespeare would not have this point of reference for the instructing nature of the past.

Margaret W. Ferguson believes "the 'spirit' of Death . . . in the figure of the Ghost . . . , sits upon the lives of all the characters in the play" (149). Since the past is hidden and ignored, the characters are dead to real life. Because of his father's spirit, Hamlet realizes he lives in a corrupt and forgetful world. He is
given the task of dispelling some of that corruption. Through Hamlet's attempts to fulfill the Ghost's wishes, the reader witnesses the truth in Ferguson's statement because no one is able to escape the corruption resulting from King Hamlet's murder. Like ripples in a pond, the abscess spreads from the innermost point of Denmark to its outer edges. However, as the play closes with the death of many and the command to honor Hamlet with a soldier's burial, Fortinbras commences the healing that will result from Hamlet's heroic attempts to resolve the past, which has been forgotten. Life goes on only when there is a balance between hiding the past and living in the past. In the end, no one is allowed to forget nor hide those skeletons as the audience--like all Denmark--learns things are not always what they seem to be.
American writers seem to have adopted the ghost story tradition from their British counterparts. American pieces abound with this type of folklore, no doubt because "America's melting-pot diversity creates perhaps the widest variety of ghostlore in the world. Our ghostlore is inextricably intertwined with our history and is a rich part of our American heritage" (Downer 10). Because of this diversity, ghostly characters in American literature serve a variety of purposes ranging from those classified as good to those as evil; however, Nobel Prize winner Toni Morrison employs ghosts in her novels "to develop mythic explorations of ways for culturally disenfranchised Black characters both to acknowledge their heritage and to forge a more satisfying connection with their communities" (Smith-Wright 146). Her ghosts are archetypes of remembrance and of ancestry, because as Deborah Guth writes:

\[ \ldots \text{the impetus of her work is to explore and dramatize the complex interaction between a present in search of itself and a past that appears sometimes as nurturing cultural foundation, sometimes as a restrictive tradition to be fought off, and sometimes } \ldots \text{as a frightening nightmare that imposes itself between the present and a future of freedom and renewal}. \] (576)

Many of her novels explore the manner in which man deals with the past: does he see it as part of his heritage? does he feel restricted by its traditions? or does he simply run from it?

Morrison explores the interaction between the present and the frightening past most obviously in her Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, Beloved (1987). In this
novel Morrison uses the ghost story to highlight the mythic subtext of remembering one's heritage. Specifically, the ghosts of Baby Suggs and Beloved force the other characters to understand that being truly alive requires accepting one's past and somehow incorporating that past into one's identity, rather than running from that past or suppressing it in the dark catacombs of the memory, where, by its very nature, it will eventually erupt. The attempt to ignore the past often paralyzes all the characters who deny the past; their inability to deal with the past alienates them from real life. Morrison clarifies this point by stating, "without a clear understanding of the past, there's no way to confront the future. . . . It's vital for us to preserve the culture we have inherited" (qtd. in Guth 578). Without acknowledging the past, her characters are unable to embark on the future. Instead, they live a corrupt life consisting of pain and basic existence by trying to keep all of their skeletons hidden in the closet forever. Fulweiler explains that Morrison addresses this history not "by recommending a clean break with the past to a free but sterile world without 'ancient properties’" (353). Instead, he argues, Morrison's characters survive because they accept their spiritual roots as Morrison forces both the characters and the readers to see "the transformation of slavery into service, and the growth of freedom into a recognition of the spiritual roots of humankind" (353-54). Through the ghosts, Morrison's characters learn how to use the past constructively rather than destructively.

Morrison requires the characters and the reader to confront their heritage by transforming the traditional ghost story, fraught with fear, into a consciously constructed myth that uses African-American folklore to illustrate the cost of man's attempts to escape the past. To construct this myth, Morrison uses "a baby in human body without past or future (having been killed so young) . . . to be the embodiment of the past" (Morrison qtd. in Carabi 38) along with the ghost
of Baby Suggs. Since Baby Suggs is the ancestor spirit and Beloved is the past incarnate, Morrison's ghosts lead the characters and the reader on a spiritual journey which cleanses them of man's primal fear of the past. Her myth "keeps alive the struggle to remember, the need to forget, and the inability to forget" (Sale 169) by confronting the characters' skeletons and putting them to rest.

In order to seize upon Morrison's lesson about remembering the past, the American reader must accept his heritage, which includes the period when men, women, and children were enslaved. Furthermore, Morrison develops a subtext by addressing the nuances of African-American folklore passed from African ancestors. With this narrative, she is able to capture her American audience in the myth and speak even more directly to the African-American audience through the specific cultural lore she includes. Without these beliefs and customs, the ghost story loses its mythic power to actively involve readers and becomes a simple ghost story. Additionally, these folklore beliefs are part of the African-American heritage which fortifies a person's lifeline and identity. Her inclusion of American history and African-American folklore mimics Bonnie Winsbro's point that ethnic ghost stories strengthen an individual's "self-definition" (6). Since Morrison refers to both American and African-American ideas, all of her readers have a clear connection to the text. That link from their heritage provides a direct association to her theme of being one's own beloved by accepting the past, both good and bad aspects, as part of self definition. For centuries man has tried to escape or ignore a disturbing past, and, thus, has cut off part of his lifeline; however, Morrison advocates weaving that past into the present. Therefore, in a mythic narrative about this desire to escape, Morrison must not ignore heritage, which is a part of the past. By exploring folklore beliefs related to ghosts, she successfully captures the
attention of her audience while she also portrays the necessity of meshing the past with the present.

To first gain the reader’s fascination in order to entrap him/her in the mythic story of healing, Morrison models Beloved after a typical ghost story which stems from a cultural amnesia about slavery. First, Beloved exhibits the four tradition elements of American ghost stories as the ghost appears to purge guilt, as the story is revealed by different narrative voices, as the ghost first appears to the innocent protagonist, Denver, and as Beloved is an objective ghost who appears to all of the characters whether or not they are ready to see her. Additionally, the narrative conforms to two more characteristics of American ghost stories as described by Carol E. Schmudde: first, it has haunted house occurrences including “noises, displaced objects, smells, lights, a brooding atmosphere, and the sensitivity of an animal to the presence of the ghost”; and second, the ghost of Beloved has new, lineless skin, knows things humans do not, possesses great strength and the magical ability to change shape and to disappear, casts spells on characters such as Paul D, and is exorcised by ritual singing and praying (409). On the surface, readers think this is just another story about ghosts, an interesting cultural phenomenon.

Morrison further develops her ghost story by employing traditional beliefs related to the setting of a ghost story: the haunted house. According to Carol E. Schmudde, there are two main factors to consider when examining hauntings: first is an old house which symbolizes an existing bond with the past; the second is a spirit made restless, often by regret for life or shock from a violent death (409). Specifically applied to Beloved, the house at 124 Bluestone Road is an old, somewhat dilapidated house that has been a haven to many visitors via the Underground Railroad. Because of this role in assisting escaped slaves, the house holds a respected place in Cincinnati’s African-American history.
Furthermore, Beloved, the ghost that actually appears at 124, was violently murdered by her mother, who slit her throat with a handsaw. Additionally, the Ohio River from which Beloved emerges clearly symbolizes a specific setting in African-American ghostlore. The Ohio River represents the Kalunga line, a barrier of water that "divides this world from the next [and] symbolizes the surface of a body of water beneath which the world of ancestors is found" (Stuckey 13). Not far from 124, the Ohio River is the boundary between the world of the living, who exist above the water, and the world of the dead, who exist below the water. When the spirit of Beloved is summoned, she emerges from the Ohio River, the symbolic world of the dead. Throughout her stay at 124, she makes repeated references to the time she spent in the water of dead spirits. Her statements clearly correlate to living under this Kalunga line. When Beloved departs, she is seen returning to the Ohio River, her true home. Thus, Morrison describes the setting as a typical haunted house situated near the Kalunga line, which has the same connotation as living beside a cemetery. With this haunting setting, Morrison continues to appeal to her readers' interests in order to carry them to her mythic destination.

Morrison continues to attract attention from her dual audience by introducing two ghosts who embody various African-American folklore beliefs. Although some readers are disturbed by and unaccepting of Morrison's ghosts, especially Beloved, who appears in fleshly form, Morrison is not deviating from standard beliefs of African-American culture regarding the existence of ghosts. Lynette Carpenter and Wendy K. Kolmar explain that, in this particular culture, "family ghosts, like living family members are simply part of experience. They can be healing and supportive, and can bring information crucial to survival, [or] they can also be angry and resentful" (12-13). Moreover, a very important slave tradition which stemmed directly from an African belief was to be respectful of
the dead because these dead spirits were the spirits of important ancestors. Therefore, “deceased family members are considered part of the present family unit” (Smith-Wright 144). This ancestor spirit is of such great importance that in many African-American novels, “the presence or absence of that figure determine[s] the success or happiness of [a] character” (Morrison, “Rootedness” 343). In Beloved, Sethe knows that her mother wore a felt hat, had a scar, and was hanged while trying to escape without her. Since these are the only facts she knows about her family (she does not even know her mother’s name), she has no ancestor figure. At 124, Baby Suggs, as Sethe’s mother-in-law, becomes that ancestor. So, when Baby Suggs dies, Sethe feels totally abandoned and represses her memories of the past.

However, those memories resurface with the appearance of Beloved, who proves to be a new ancestor type for Sethe. Since she is an ancestor figure, she is not something to be feared. Sethe and Denver openly accept her as part of their family even after they know she is a ghost. They are not shocked by her return since they know family members may return from the dead. According to Robert L. Broad, Morrison contends “African Americans can, through storytelling, retrieve their ancestors from the ash heap of American ‘history’” (192); this process is specifically what happens to Sethe, Denver, and Paul D as they basically call Beloved from the dead. By being forced to tell their stories about the past, all three of these characters walk away from their ghostly encounter with a better understanding of who they are as human beings and as African Americans. They are no longer going through the motions of life as walking dead people. Morrison believes, “when you kill the ancestor you kill yourself. I want . . . to show that nice things don’t always happen to the totally self-reliant if there is no conscious historical connection” (“Rootedness” 344). Thus, she allows the ghosts to function as mythic ancestors in order to stress the
importance of remaining consciously connected to the past. Without these ancestral ghosts, the characters would remain in their unhappy, counterfeit worlds; fortunately, the ancestors lead the others to successful, genuine lives.

Once the ghost story is firmly established, Morrison begins to transform her narrative into a myth by making one of her ghosts a fleshly being who will lead the characters on their mythic journey of healing. According to African belief, “it’s very easy for a son or parent or a neighbor to appear in a child or in another person”; this type of incarnation works powerfully for Beloved because by making the ghost of Beloved a real person, Morrison declares she “is making history possible, making memory real” by using Beloved as the archetypal symbol of the past (qtd. in Darling 6). These convictions are consistent with Ella’s telling Stamp Paid, “You know as well as I do that people who die bad don’t stay in the ground” (Morrison, Beloved 188). Since the characters themselves know the folklore about the dead, they seem to be waiting for Beloved to return; therefore, no one is shocked to find the ghost to be a nearly twenty-year-old fleshly woman. More particularly, Morrison explains in an interview how Africans believed “children or young people who die uneasily return out of the water in forms of members of your family” (qtd. in Carabi 39), a concept which would explain why Sethe urinates when she first sees the figure of Beloved; Sethe is symbolically giving birth to this reincarnated spirit of her daughter. This belief also relates to the Kalunga line setting as Beloved literally returns out of the River. Wisely, Morrison manipulates these long-standing, traditional beliefs in ghosts and the importance of ancestors to teach her mythic lesson about memory.

^1 All further references to the novel will be noted with only a page number.
More important, Morrison employs the ghosts as the agents who emphasize “how remembering either destroys or saves a future” (Horvitz 157). Even though the memories that resurface through contact with the ghosts are uncomfortable, even painful, they eventually effect healing, a healing which applies directly to characters and indirectly to the reader. Basically, the two ghosts incite this healing by carrying the characters and the reader through a traditional African healing ritual, symbolic of the mythic journey, which Linda Krumholz feels consists of three stages. The first stage of the ritual is the repression of memory resulting from traumatic episodes of being enslaved. After enduring years of slavery, none of the characters want to remember the traumatic episodes which have caused them to have little self-respect and little self-love. However, “Baby Suggs, holy, acts as a ritual guide” through this stage as she encourages former slaves to love every part of themselves (397). Once characters learn to love themselves, they are ready to surge forward in the ritual.

The second stage Krumholz describes is the process of remembering those painful memories, the stage for which “Beloved, the ghost-woman, acts as a psychological catalyst.” Once Beloved appears at 124, memories seem to flood into the area; no one can stop them. As the catalyst for healing, Beloved drains these painful stories. Third, the final stage is the “clearing’ process, a symbolic rebirth of the sufferer” which involves both Baby Suggs, who spiritually advises characters to cleanse themselves by loving themselves, and Beloved, who is reborn in the flesh to cause cleansing by confronting the past (Krumholz 397). Overall, Baby Suggs is the ghost who consoles, while Beloved is the ghost with “both the pain and the cure” as she compels other characters to “accept their past, their squelched memories, and their own hearts, as beloved” (Krumholz 400). Again, Morrison appeals to her dual audience by making connotations to the standard mythic journey while also referring to the more
culturally specific African-American healing ritual. This dualism continues her purpose of attracting readers who are now ready to be guided by the ghosts on the ritual quest.

Baby Suggs is one ghost who never actually appears in physical or spiritual form, but is one of the guides who is consulted by both Sethe and Denver for advice about the painful past. Although the primary ghost in this novel is Beloved, Morrison uses the spirit of Baby Suggs as the conductor on the journey toward loving one's self with all of its past horrors. During her life, Baby Suggs is a powerful force who serves as "the moral and spiritual backbone of Beloved" (Krumholz 398) because she, as "Baby Suggs, holy," teaches Sethe, Denver, and the surrounding African-American community how to appreciate and to love themselves. She tells them to love their hearts, "For this is the prize!" (89). After enduring the world of slavery where no one was taught about love, these former slaves must learn to love themselves in order to survive as humans because no one else will love them and care about them. Baby Suggs gives them that knowledge, as well as the strength to pursue that kind of love.

However, like many other characters in the book, Baby Suggs has her heart broken when the ugliness of slavery violates her freedom: Sethe murders her child to save it from the white men who have come into Baby Suggs' own yard. This action produces many other painful memories for Baby Suggs as she succumbs to the idea that African Americans are simply pawns in the game white men play. Morrison describes how anybody "Baby Suggs knew, let alone loved, who hadn't run off or been hanged, got rented out, loaned out, bought up, brought back, stored up, mortgaged, won, stolen or seized" (23). Baby Suggs thought her freedom would end this tragic cycle, but, again, slave owners prove her wrong. Once schoolteacher enters her yard and Sethe ironically kills a child
in a desperate attempt to save it, Baby Suggs’ heart is overtaken by hopelessness as she lies down to await death.

Yet, in keeping with African American tradition, Morrison does not allow the positive influence of Baby Suggs to die. During the trials depicted in the novel, both Sethe and Denver consistently look to Baby Suggs as their nurturing ancestor. Morrison once wrote that “these ancestors are not just parents, they are sort of timeless people whose relationships to the characters are benevolent, instructive, and protective, and they provide a certain kind of wisdom” (“Rootedness” 343). Filling this ancestor role is the overall purpose of the character of Baby Suggs both before and after her death. More than once after Baby Suggs’ death, Sethe wishes Baby Suggs were present to give her advice. When Sethe feels most overwhelmed by memories and the new knowledge about Halle’s going mad after powerlessly watching her have her milk stolen, she goes to the Clearing, the place Baby Suggs preached about love, to feel Baby Suggs’ nurturing presence. Even though Baby Suggs has been dead for nine years, Sethe knows as an ancestor, Baby Suggs will never abandon her family.

At the Clearing, Sethe thinks to Baby Suggs’ spirit, “just the fingers . . . Just let me feel your fingers again on the back of my neck and I will lay it all down, make a way out of this no way” (95). During one of the most difficult times of her life, Sethe feels Baby Suggs is the only medicine she needs; she knows that “Baby Suggs’ long-distance love [is] equal to any skin-close love she [has] known” (95). She still requires the ancestor figure to help her deal with this new information about Halle and the “rememories” she is experiencing. She looks to the spirit of Baby Suggs for the help and guidance she needs to deal with the horrors she experiences on her pilgrimage of remembering.
Likewise, Baby Suggs is a powerful ancestor for the lonely Denver. While alive, Baby Suggs is a companion for Denver, who listens to stories about her father, Halle, and her birth. Denver reveres her grandmother who gave her wisdom about loving herself. Moreover, it is Baby Suggs who tells Denver not to fear the ghost because of the blood bond they had; she warns Denver “to watch out for it because it was a greedy ghost and needed a lot of love” (209). Long before the ghost ever appears in physical form, Baby Suggs seems to realize that the loud noises and strange occurrences at 124 stem from the ghost of the murdered daughter and that the ghost could definitely cause trouble for the family. She is the prophetic voice which foreshadows Beloved’s consuming power. Through her wisdom she plants the seed Denver will use later to defeat the hungry ghost of Beloved.

Once Sethe discovers that the young woman named Beloved is the reincarnation of her dead daughter, she gives herself over to Beloved’s every whim. While Denver watches her mother give up on life, she realizes she must take action and save her mother and herself. Although Denver has not been out of the house more than two times in over ten years, she gathers strength to leave the house and heal her family. This strength comes from Baby Suggs’ spirit. Before Denver courageously steps off the porch because she is frozen in fear of life beyond 124, Baby Suggs’ ghostly voice interrupts her thoughts to tell her to “know it [the past], and go on out the yard” (244). Basically, Baby Suggs is telling her that knowledge is the key. During Baby Suggs’ years of freedom, she thought no white person, no person at all for that matter, could harm her, simply because she had a piece of paper claiming she was free. Nonetheless, the lesson she seems to have learned is that knowledge of man’s deficiencies and weaknesses along with his strengths is the only shield a person can really have. She gives Denver the courage to learn from the past, to go to the past for
strength, in order to know how to deal with the present world. These comforting, motivating words from her ancestor's spirit wrap Denver in a shield of power which enables her to eventually complete the quest by saving her mother's life and healing her own lonely spirit.

As part of the African-American tradition, Morrison uses the ghost of Baby Suggs as the ancestor figure who empowers other characters to cope with the past and the haunting present. This coping is a step toward the healing necessary for survival. However, the characters are not strong enough to complete the journey themselves; they need a stronger guide to force them to totally confront the past and finish the quest. That guide is Beloved, the loud, multilayered ghost, who touches the lives of all the characters.

In most aspects, Beloved appears to be different from Baby Suggs because Beloved has a vendetta, does not seem to console others, and causes strife. However, she is interestingly similar to Baby Suggs. Although on the surface Beloved seems to be merely the ghost of Sethe's murdered daughter, below that surface Morrison reveals that Beloved, too, is a type of ancestor figure as she is also the ghost of a Middle Passage victim. As such, the ghost of Beloved symbolizes the agonizing past which the characters of Denver, Paul D, and Sethe are desperately trying to forget. From the very beginning of the novel, the ghost is described in this symbolic nature. When Paul D first arrives at 124 and walks through the haunting red light of the ghost and feels "a wave of grief [soak] him so thoroughly he wanted to cry," Sethe informs him the ghost is "not evil, just sad" (9). This grief and sadness are produced by the forgotten past; no one wants to remember the atrocities under which the baby became a ghostly spirit; no one wants to remember the past that has made them who they are. In addition, the grief is also a foreshadowing of the emotion those repressed memories will bring as part of the healing process once the ghost
appears in fleshly form to lead the characters to that elixir. Before she ever actually appears, the ghost epitomizes the pain of forgetting the past. As this archetypal ghost, she must emerge “in the flesh to challenge a continuous process of forgetting, refusal, and evasion” (Guth 585). There is only one way to alleviate the sadness and grief associated with the invisible spirit; the ghost must appear in the flesh. In order to heal the pain of the past, the characters must come face to face with the ghost as the embodied past. As a fleshly being, the past cannot be ignored or hidden.

Once the ghost does surface as a corporeal character, the controversy between the dual audiences begins. How can a ghost be a fleshly human being? How can a ghost have more than one consciousness? Essentially, readers must suspend their ordinary perception of reality and remember the African-American beliefs already discussed and focus on the facts Morrison presents in the novel, as Robert Broad warns readers, “Where Beloved comes from we will find no individual spirits; there, identity and time are conflated . . . in the spirit world, our boundaries do not apply” (191). When referring to ghosts, human logic does not apply. Humans cannot expect the supernatural to conform to man’s expectations. Therefore, Morrison is free to further complicate the issue by giving Beloved multiple identities. Although Malmgren thinks Beloved could be an actual survivor of a slave ship, “smuggled in sometime before the Civil War and the establishment of the Northern blockade” rather than a ghost (98), Morrison told Marsh Darling in an interview that Beloved is both the spirit of the dead baby of Sethe and Halle and the fleshly spirit of a “survivor from a true, factual slave ship” (5).

Numerous descriptions of Beloved support the first claim. When she first appears on the stump at 124, she is “trying to negotiate the weight of her eyelids” (50) and has “flawless [skin] except for three vertical scratches on her
forehead" (51), as a toddler would. Moreover, she says her name is Beloved, the same as on Sethe’s daughter’s headstone (52); she first has trouble walking and standing without holding on to something for support, much as Sethe’s daughter would since she was only crawling at the time of her death (53); she is incontinent, like an untrained baby (54); and, her love of sugary things could be explained by Sethe’s insistence eighteen years ago that her daughter be given sugar-water to drink (55). Later in the novel, Beloved reveals she knows things only Sethe’s daughter would know: Sethe had crystal earrings and sang an original song to her children. As the ghost of Sethe’s daughter, Beloved has a definite purpose which Deborah Horvitz feels is “to pass judgment on Sethe” because Sethe’s “protection became the act of possession that led to [Beloved’s] own death, which was murder. Beloved becomes mean-spirited and exploits her mother’s pain” (161). In the role of Sethe’s murdered daughter, Beloved is the spiritual conductor that carries Sethe further toward the reward of healing by forcing her to remember the murder, something Sethe has not wanted to think about for eighteen years. Conversely, in that role of Sethe’s daughter, Beloved can also be an evil, destructive force trying to enact revenge.

Additionally, Morrison offers details which support the claim that Beloved is also the ghost of a captured slave as she expresses “the memories and experiences of several generations of her ancestors, going back through the Middle Passage to Africa” (Schmudde 410). Many of the things Beloved does and says are indicative of a person on a slave ship. She claims her lungs hurt, possibly from lack of oxygen or even from drowning (50). She drinks “cup after cup of water . . . as though she had crossed a desert” (51). Records of life on slave ships reveal slaves received little, if anything to drink; therefore, Beloved’s thirst correlates with Morrison’s explanation. Also, she tells Denver it is “hot [down there]. Nothing to breathe down there and no room to move in. . . . A lot
of people is down there. Some is dead’” (75). At first glance, the “down there” could simply be the world of the dead below the Kalunga line; however, Beloved’s claim that “some” are dead, rather than that all are dead, would seem to eliminate the possibility that the world of the dead is her point of reference. Down there more accurately relates to the area below deck on a slave ship, the area where the dead did mingle with the living until the former were thrown overboard. Furthermore, in Beloved’s monologue section in Part Two of the novel, she makes numerous statements which can be explained only if one looks at her as the ghost of a slave ship victim as well as the ghost of Sethe’s daughter.

Why does Morrison make the ghost so complicated? The answer is simply that the past, especially the history of slavery, is that complicated. Deborah Horvitz explains:

Beloved stands for every African woman whose story will never be told. She is the haunting symbol of the many Beloveds—generations of mothers and daughters—hunted down and stolen from Africa; as such, she is, unlike mortals, invulnerable to barriers of time, space, and place. She moves with the freedom of an omnipresent and omnipotent spirit who weaves in and out of different generations within the matrilineal chain.

(157)

Therefore, this dual nature of Beloved reinforces Morrison’s mythic subtext as the ghost brings different parts of the past to life in order to force the characters to absorb the past and transcend its chains.

In a story that deals with a forgotten segment of history, Morrison must not ignore the millions who have been forgotten. Giving Beloved multiple identities allows Morrison to address the neglect of the past exhibited by both the characters and her readers. Cleverly, Morrison manipulates Beloved so that
the novel itself "re-collects the history of all the 'disremembered and unaccounted for' who fell victim to the African American genocide" (Broad 191). By describing Beloved's experiences on the Middle Passage, Morrison recounts the horrors of that passage and carefully stacks them at the reader's feet where they cannot be ignored. In the novel, Morrison writes, "You could be lost forever, if there wasn't nobody to show you the way" (135). In essence, this statement explains Beloved's purpose; Morrison uses a ghost, with all of its meanness, to lead the characters and the reader to a better way of living, through remembrance, so that none of us is lost. Beloved is "like a catalyst [that] opens up everybody's vulnerability" (Morrison qtd. in Carabi 38). As the archetype of the ignored past, Beloved is also the medicine to remedy a broken, unfulfilled life brought about by hidden skeletons.

Although the ghost's identity is difficult to understand, its purpose is not. Because of the ghost, Beloved, characters are able to move to a better quality of life since they acknowledge their past as part of their lifeline. Morrison asserts that Beloved "makes them face up to things they have been avoiding. They have to, in a sense, grow up in her presence. Her physical presence is so persistent that she cannot be ignored anymore" (qtd. in Carabi 39). Through her multiple identities, Beloved forces Denver, Paul D, Sethe, and the reader on a crusade to confront the ugliness of the American past and to learn how to deal with it in the present because she "embodies the power and beauty of the past and the need to realize the past fully in order to bring forth the future, pregnant with responsibilities" (Krumholz 401). By the end of this rendezvous with the ghost, both the characters and the reader arrive at their mythic destination with a powerful elixir: the confronted past.

Denver is one of the first characters whom Beloved guides on this mythic quest to confront a suppressed past. Put simply, Denver does not want to deal
with the past because she is the daughter of a murderer, who she feels is responsible for her lonely life of no siblings, no father, no grandmother, and no friends. Since the community shuns her, the only friends she has are the few stories about her. These Denver-stories are the sole part of her past she wants to hear. When Paul D arrives and he and Sethe talk about Sweet Home and Halle, Denver feels that “both belonged to them and not to her” (13). If the stories do not include her, she does not want to participate in the telling of them because she feels even more isolated. She goes so far as to let others know her feelings on this subject when she says to Paul D and Sethe, who are swapping happy tales, “How come everybody run off from Sweet Home can’t stop talking about it? Look like if it was so sweet you would have stayed” (13). To her these stories are like ancient myths that she thinks are irrelevant to her life. She does not realize these stories are just as much a part of her essence as the Denver-stories. Sethe and Paul D and even Denver must hear all of these stories in order to heal from their psychological ordeals.

Rather than listen to the stories and deal with them, Denver ignores them, as exemplified by her childhood deafness. When Nelson Lord asks her questions about being in the prison with her convicted mother, Denver goes “deaf rather than hear the answer” (105). Instead of asking her mother about the past she has forgotten, she buries the past even further and decides not to listen to nor hear anything anyone has to tell her so that she does not have to face the pain of those memories and answers. Coincidentally, it is the ghost which brings Denver out of this period of deafness. After two years of silence, Denver hears something: the sounds of the baby ghost crawling up the stairs. Later, she actually wishes for the ghost to appear because she realizes the ghost is something that is directly connected to her since it is her sister whose blood she drank when nursing. Also, because the ghost alleviates Denver’s loneliness,
she wants it to come to her and be her playmate. When the ghost does appear
on the stump after the carnival, Denver is excited because her confidante has
responded to her desire by appearing in the flesh.

However, having a playmate again does not eliminate the problem of the
past. Since she hates the world of stories that are not about her, she wants
Beloved “to hate it too” (62). This remark clearly demonstrates her desire for
only part of the past to be remembered and her desire to have Beloved as her
ally. However, as a fleshly link to the past, Beloved slowly gives Denver the
confidence and the desire to confront the past. While telling the details of her
birth story to Beloved, Denver is “seeing it now and feeling it--through Beloved”
(78). For the first time, Denver is able to put herself in her mother’s place and
feel the story with all of its details. This action is a direct result of Beloved’s
hunger for stories. Through Beloved’s eyes, Denver is beginning to understand
the past, a little at a time. Linda Krumholz observes:

Sethe intentionally keeps Denver in the dark [about the past]. . . . But the
unacknowledged past keeps Denver from moving into the future. She is
jealous of her mother’s past, and her exclusion from that past increases
her loneliness and bitterness. Beloved, on the other hand, thrives on
stories of the past, . . . and Denver’s love for Beloved forces her to
confront the past she hates. (404)

As long as Denver denies the past, she will be imprisoned in 124 forever. With
Beloved’s presence, her unknown connection to the past, Denver gradually
faces all of the past she has avoided.

Fortunately, Denver does change. Through her interaction with Beloved
and through Sethe’s interaction with Beloved, Denver learns to accept the past
and move ahead in life. When Beloved begins to literally consume Sethe’s life
and Denver fears Sethe is dying, she realizes “she would have to leave the yard;
step off the edge of the world" in order to make a future for herself and her mother (243). She goes out into the community that has neglected and ridiculed her; she accepts the past as the past and realizes "that, while the outside world is fraught with danger, interaction with it is necessary in order to live and grow' (Schmudde 413). Hearing Baby Suggs, she is assured the only weapon she has to fight the dangerous world is to know the world and herself, including the past, and to move beyond the past by going out of the yard. As Howard Fulweiler explains, Denver learns that "human beings cannot grow by cutting off the roots which sustain them" (353). The past Denver wants to forget is part of her heritage. Like a tree, if she cuts off the roots of her past, she is hollow inside. Without Beloved's all-consuming presence, Denver would have probably remained locked inside the fortress of 124 and her Denver-stories. With Beloved's guidance, Denver learns to accept all of the past and to move ahead toward the future. She finds the medicine she needs to actively live life, the same medicine she is eventually able to share with her mother and the community: memory and acceptance of the past.

Another character who needs to be healed of painful memories is Paul D. Different from Denver, he has lived this past that she hates to hear about. Through horrors of having a bit in his mouth, being whipped, being starved, being overworked, and being raped, to seeing friends and brothers hanged, burned, and driven to madness, Paul D has survived, but only because he has stopped thinking and feeling. The narrator says, "After Alfred [Georgia] he had shut down a generous portion of his head, operating on the part that helped him walk, eat, sleep, sing" (41). Because he cannot endure the pain of his past, he has turned himself into a robot that focuses only on the essentials for survival. However, these repressed and ignored stories are "rooted in a place where one has been in the past and that one has to reach urgently in the present" (Mason
Paul D is not a real man without his past roots. In order to love Sethe as he wants to do, he must become a whole man by confronting his past emotions. When he needs to tell Sethe about her husband who has gone mad, he hesitates for a long time because talking about the horrors of the past "might push them both to a place they couldn't get back from. He would keep the rest where it belonged: in that tobacco tin buried in his chest where a red heart used to be. Its lid rusted shut" (72-73).

The only way Paul D has survived the tribulations of slavery is to take all of the feelings associated with those memories and press them into his heart, which has become a rusted tobacco tin that cannot be used any longer. Rather than have a warm and thriving heart, Paul D has a dirty tin can that is never opened and never replenished. His heart has become a sealed box of shredded emotions. This kind of life is definitely not real if he is not feeling; his problem is not that he is ignoring the past, but that he is not allowing himself to feel for others because of the past. While on the chain gang, he sings to himself, "eighty-six days and done. Life was dead" (109). Ironically, the only way for him to survive the atrocities he saw and experienced was to become a living dead man who does not feel. He has convinced himself that life is dead in order to be numb to pain. For a number of years, he has taken his emotions and memories and put them all "one by one, into the tobacco tin lodged in his chest [and by] the time he got to 124, nothing in this world could pry it open" (113). Sadly, his past has caused him to store away his entire essence. His heart is locked up so tightly that only Beloved, the past personified, can reach him. After casting a silent spell on Paul D, Beloved follows him to the cold house and seduces him in an attempt to make him leave Sethe. During sex with this ghostly healer, Paul D is unable to "hear the whisper that the flakes of rust made . . . as they fell away from the seams of the tobacco tin. So when the lid gave he didn't know it" (117).
There is a strange mythic power in Beloved that causes others to remember the past they should not hide. It takes a ghost, something from another world, to put Paul D back on the pathway of true living through acceptance of the pain of the past. "Plagued by the contents of his tobacco tin" (220), which is now open, Paul D must first face questions he has had about his manhood during slavery, because "when everything was packed tight in his chest, he had no sense of failure" (221). This question about his manhood resurfaces because of his sexual experiences with Beloved. After having sex with her, Paul D "feels deeply ashamed, because Beloved has made him relive what for him was the most bitter part of slavery, the loss of his manhood in powerless obedience to the commands of others" (Schmudde 414). Although he loves Sethe and is not attracted to Beloved, he feels compelled to have sex with her. This compelling force reminds him of being a slave with no power over his own self because he constantly had to obey every whim of the white man. Through his relationship with the ghost, Paul D is forced to face his past and issues about his manhood and to learn from those emotions he has kept locked up for so long.

At first Paul D cannot cope with these released emotions and moves away from 124. Like before, he is trying to run away from his emotions. However, once those emotions are released, he cannot escape them. By the end of the book, he seems ready to let the past go as he finally realizes he is the one who determines his manhood, not another human being. As a free man, he alone has that power now. He knows there was a time when his owner did have control of his manhood, but that was a long time ago. Paul D is ultimately ready to live life for himself rather than run from images of a failed man. He tells Sethe "he wants to put his story next to hers" because they "'got more yesterday than anybody. [They] need some kind of tomorrow'" (273). He realizes they must
share their past and move beyond that past to the future, rather than keep memories locked up and cause shame and guilt. He is now ready to start a new chapter of his life since he knows the past is part of the future, but not all there is to the future. As he tells Sethe, "You your own best thing" (273), Paul D proves he has taken Beloved's elixir as he understands everyone must be his/her own beloved; no one else can determine a person's value.

Similar to Paul D is Sethe, the former slave with horrifying memories of being sexually assaulted, of seeing her mother hanged, and of killing her own daughter. Sethe tries to avoid remembering anything about the past since the memories are too painful. Due to this avoidance, Beloved appears to empower Sethe to "undergo . . . an agonizing private exorcism" because "the skeletons we think safely locked in our closets" do not die "until we put them to rest" (Malmgren 97). In her life of freedom, Sethe has worked "hard to remember as close to nothing as was safe" (6) because "every mention of her past life hurt" (58); paradoxically, she knows those memories come "back whether we want them to or not" (14). As already detailed, ignoring the past like this is not true living because the past never goes away. Those skeletons continue to hang in the closets until put to rest.

When Paul D arrives, it seems that Sethe is strong enough and ready to at least look at her past as she wonders if, after eighteen years, she can "trust things and remember things because the last of the Sweet Home men was there to catch her if she sank" (18). Even though Sethe has been battling her "rememories" for eighteen years, she desires to remember more, enough to relieve the hurt, but she is afraid of that pain. She only wonders if Paul D can help her, as though she is not quite ready to trust him for that help. During the times she has battled her past, the memories always seemed to win because "places are still there. If a house burns down, it's gone, but the place—the
Sethe needs to understand that, “operating independently of the conscious will, memory is shown to be an active, constitutive force that has the power to construct and circumscribe identity” (Lawrence 189). No matter how hard she tries to squash them, those memories keep surfacing because they are a part of her. Thus, with Paul D’s assistance, Sethe must realize that her memory wins the battles because they are part of her identity; she cannot ignore her past any more than she can ignore her foot or her eye.

Before this issue is resolved, however, Sethe creates more of a problem for another character, Denver. The narrator says, for Sethe, “the future was a matter of keeping the past at bay. . . . As for Denver, the job Sethe had of keeping her from the past that was still waiting for her was all that mattered” (42). Despite Sethe’s knowledge that the past is always trying to break through the mind, she is determined to keep it away from Denver because she thinks this action will protect Denver. She does not realize this type of protection is harming Denver, who has no friends and no real identity. Morrison explains how Sethe

doesn’t talk about the past ever; she just warns Denver, but her daughter does not want to hear either. When Paul D comes, she begins to think a little bit about the past. When Beloved appears, she has to tell them more, a little bit more each time, and suddenly certain things from her childhood just come back. (qtd. in Carabi 40)

Sethe does not understand she is cutting Denver’s roots and locking Denver in a harmful cycle of denial. However, Paul D’s arrival starts to turn that wheel in the opposite direction as Sethe and Paul D reminisce. Although Sethe is partially ready to remember, Paul D is not strong enough to lead her to the medicine because he is in denial of the past himself. They both need something more to
help them balance the past, present, and future. Therefore, her emergence from this cocoon of denial begins with the spirit of Baby Suggs and the presence of Paul D, but comes to full healing with the presence of Beloved. Only Beloved, the past incarnate, is powerful enough to make Sethe stop running from the past which must be confronted.

Once Beloved begins her life as a member of the household of 124 and as the mythic guide, the stories seem never to cease as "Sethe learned the profound satisfaction Beloved got from storytelling. It amazed Sethe (as much as it pleased Beloved) because every mention of her past life hurt" (58). Beloved continuously asks questions about the past; because Sethe tries to please Beloved, she tells those stories she has tried to forget. Deborah Horvitz explains that during Beloved's presence, "Sethe's repression of countless painful memories [begins] to lift. Beloved generates a metamorphosis in Sethe that allows her to speak what she had thought to be unspeakable" (157-58). For eighteen years, Sethe has been dead because she has tried to live without her past by running from and ignoring her memories. As the embodied past, Beloved compels Sethe to stare at and to relive parts of the past she has tried to forget. On the quest for the healing balm, Beloved helps Sethe metamorphosize from dead to living by telling stories of her heritage.

Sethe's dead life is clearly evident when Sethe informs Paul D, "'It ain't my job to know worse [the future]. It's my job to know what is and to keep them from what I know is terrible'" (165). This statement indicates two important factors. First, Sethe is focused only on the past, particularly the prevention of it. She does not look to the future to see how to make things better; her only concern is to watch behind her to be sure the past does not catch up to her and does not harm her children. Second, Sethe's sole purpose in life is her children. Although parents should definitely provide for their children and protect and
nurture them, parents should not give up their identities for their children because when the children are gone, life will be gone, too. Paul D even tells her that her "love is too thick" (164). Because Sethe does not have an ancestral past, she does not know what love is--that to love oneself is as important as loving others. Since she was abandoned by her mother, she is determined to smother her children in love, by totally shielding them from her past, which is, of course, part of their identities, too. Therefore, when she realizes that Beloved is the ghost of her daughter, she rejoices because she feels her daughter has returned to her to forgive her and because she does not "have to explain" (183) anything to Beloved, who knows "it all" (191). She allows this obsessive love to rule her life totally as she tragically tells Paul D, "'whatever is going on outside my door ain't for me. The world is in this room. This here's all there is and all there needs to be'" (183). Beloved's identity compels Sethe to totally abandon herself to her family. However, as the personification of the past, Beloved also forces Sethe to relinquish everything in order to make up for the past. Sethe must now stop reliving the past that Beloved has forced her to remember.

Before healing occurs, the ghost's identity presents another challenge to Sethe, as she becomes totally focused on pacifying Beloved in an attempt to receive Beloved's forgiveness. However, Morrison quickly explains that Beloved could never pardon Sethe because Beloved "is insatiable" and that Sethe must learn to "forgive herself" (qtd. in Carabi 40). Through her attempts to obtain Beloved's exoneration, Sethe demonstrates her willingness to give up everything, her past, present, and future, to help Beloved understand the murder. This acquiescence explains why she shares stories with Beloved even though telling them pricks her heart and causes much pain. Beloved forces Sethe to remember rather than bury those memories in the crypt of her brain. Beloved allows, or forces, Sethe to open the floodgate of memories.
Nonetheless, as a symbol of the past, Beloved also represents the power the past has to destroy if the person tries to live totally in the past as Sethe does at this point in the journey.

Because Beloved is a conglomerate of spirits and has no definite past, she seems to feed off Sethe and her past. Like everyone else, Beloved, as a human, needs a heritage in order to survive. Since Sethe thinks the past is unnecessary, she willingly allows Beloved to take her own lifeline of stories. Denver watches as Beloved “imitated Sethe, talked the way she did, laughed her laugh and used her body the same way down to the walk,” and Denver becomes confused about who is who (241). The more stories Sethe shares, “the bigger Beloved” gets from figuratively digesting Sethe’s life (250). The only way Beloved can live is to have a past; she must have a past in order to have an essence: “Like a vampire, she sucks out Sethe’s vitality, fattening on her mother’s futile attempts to ‘make her understand’” (Lawrence 195). She is draining Sethe’s sustenance by swallowing the past Sethe wants to forget. Rather than looking toward the future and allowing those past scars to heal, Sethe is giving away her past and giving up the pain. Sethe demonstrates the dual power the past has to destroy when a person allows the pendulum to swing the other way by trying to live in the past. Just as a person cannot live an authentic life by hiding from the past, a person also cannot survive by living in the past as Sethe is doing. The past is a necessity for life because it is a key component of identity. In trying to make up for the murder, Sethe is giving up her individuality by allowing Beloved to take her past. Beloved, then, is growing with a heritage, while Sethe is wasting away without one.

The narrator explains that “Sethe was trying to make up for the handsaw; Beloved was making her pay for it. But there would never be an end to that” (251). What Sethe must realize is that the past cannot be changed. The key is
that the persons involved must learn how to deal with those past events rather than try to remedy them or hide from them. Instead of telling the stories then moving ahead in life, Sethe avoids the healing by remaining locked in that past. Although Beloved is an escort on the journey, she is also one of the evil forces encountered on that trip; as the embodiment of the past, she can consume the present and future if she is allowed to. Therefore, Morrison uses the relationship between Beloved and Sethe to illustrate the dual role of the past: it can make a person whole since it contains a person’s roots, or it can swallow a person who wants to stay locked in it and ignore the future.

Fortunately, Denver saves Sethe from being totally swallowed by Beloved, the symbolic past. Because Denver attempts to get a job and tells an outsider about their guest, Sethe’s community is able to release their resentment toward the prideful murderer as they decide to forget the grudges of the past and live in the present day by rescuing Sethe from the grips of the past. When the women decide to exorcise the ghost by going to 124 and singing in a ritual style, Sethe hears their singing and feels like she is with Baby Suggs in the Clearing where she can lay down her troubles. Remembering this ancestor figure, Sethe feels the singing break over her as “she trembled like the baptized in its wash” (261). Like a baptism, the singing allows her to finally cleanse her past and feel restored to life because these women comprise a large piece of the puzzle that is her past—the murder. Their facing Beloved and the past is symbolic of Sethe’s facing that same past. In an act of forgiveness, they bury their anger toward Sethe, and they fight off the consuming power of the past. Their actions give her the strength to fight as well.

The fortitude Sethe finds enables her to turn on the enslaver in a bizarre reenactment of the murder eighteen years ago. As she sees Mr. Bodwin, Sethe is reminded of Schoolteacher. This time rather than turn on her children, she
attacks the actual problem as she runs after Mr. Bodwin with an ice pick as protection for her children. Malmgren believes “this action . . . in order to save ‘her best thing’ . . . serves to exorcise her personal ghost and enables her to get on with her life” (105). This time the community helps Sethe by forcing her to the ground before she is able to hurt anyone. The result is that Beloved runs away because she feels abandoned and because she, as the reincarnation of the past, has nothing else to do since the characters have faced their past. Finally, Sethe has the healing elixir as she confronts the ugliest skeleton she has had in her closet.

However, Sethe does not swallow the medicine, yet. This confrontation with Beloved leaves Sethe depressed as she feels she has lost her child, her best thing, again. Paul D finally realizes Sethe is resigned to die to make up for the burdened past, and he grabs her shoulders and says, “You your best thing, Sethe, You are” (273). He is making her face the final lesson that she is her best part of life and she must live for herself, not for Sweet Home, not to avoid the past, and not for her children. Once Beloved is gone, Morrison explains that “Sethe is now going to concentrate on taking care of herself, the beloved that is inside her, which is her. She is the beloved, not the child. The past is returned” (qtd. in Carabi 40). Sethe, in ignoring her past, almost loses the battle of the struggle between being one’s own Beloved and being a mother. Her children are her entire focus, her own best thing. Paul D, the lover, rescues her and tells her the correct direction in which to go—the direction of one’s self. This ghostly encounter has brought Sethe to a life-changing epiphany: “To know oneself . . . one must know the past, both individual and collective” (Winsbro 153).

Symbolically, Sethe ends her mythic journey as she learns that healing comes from loving herself as a person with a heritage. The past is no longer a threat to her because she understands the past is part, but not all, of her essence. Now,
Sethe is ready to move ahead in her life and start truly living. Through Beloved, Morrison has proven the power the past has to destroy—if it is allowed that power.

The final person affected by the mythic ghosts of Beloved and Baby Suggs is the reader. Even though there are parts of American history that are brushed aside or glossed over because the events are not glorified or scandalous, Beloved forces the reader to closely examine a very painful period of that ignored history, the period of slavery. When I teach this novel to Advanced Placement seniors in high school, I hear comments such as, “Why can’t we forget slavery? We had nothing to do with it?” and “Do we have to talk about something so horrible?” My students are typical of most Americans who think the unsightly past does not concern them. Morrison herself understands this concept as she says, “I don’t want to remember, white people don’t want to remember. I mean it’s national amnesia” (qtd. in Angelo 121). However, just as amnesia patients need to be cured in order to experience life, Americans must come to terms with all of their past since history is part of their heritage. Even though slavery is a very jarring topic, “a very real ghost from our collective past, . . . we must confront [it] personally if we are to exorcise it” (Malmgren 100).

Morrison constructs this ghost story in such a way that she requires readers to become directly involved so that they can be healed of the pain resulting from a difficult period of history. She compels those readers to examine their own skeletons before putting them to rest.

Therefore, readers must remember some disturbing, but nonetheless important, events in American history. Essentially, Morrison forces a discussion of the Middle Passage and the inhumane conditions which inspired the opening page of the novel, “60 million and more.” In order for this quotation to make sense, readers must remember the Middle Passage from Africa to the Americas,
a passage which claimed the lives of at least sixty million human beings. Robert Hayden’s poem “Middle Passage” presents the hideous slave trade from the traders’ perspective. In that poem, he similarly describes America’s “tree of liberty” as being “rooted in the labor of your slaves” (448). In essence, he agrees with Morrison that Americans cannot ignore slavery if they are to understand the true meaning of liberty. In an interview, Morrison claims she was bothered by the lack of mention of the Middle Passage in literature and says:

I understand the omission, because to dwell on it would perhaps paralyze you to the point of not being able to survive everyday life. It was too painful to remember, yet I had the impression that is was something that needed to be thought about. . . . I am trying to insert this memory that was unbearable and unspeakable into the literature. Not only to write about a woman who did what Sethe did, but to have the ghost of the daughter return as a remnant of a period that was unspoken. . . . So it’s a kind of healing experience. (qtd. in Carabi 38)

Morrison uses the rest of the novel as the readers’ mythic journey toward healing from this painful history by placing readers directly into the difficult world of slaves.

Through storytelling, Morrison forces readers to remember people and their emotions rather than just the institution of slavery. By making readers live the life of a slave, she effects a healing process in the reader just like Sethe’s healing, which “is a model for the readers who must confront Sethe’s past as part of our own . . . collective past” that is still alive (Krumholz 395). Even though my students are uncomfortable with this part of history, they must confront it as part of their identity because it will never be erased. Furthermore, Morrison honestly writes in the last chapter of the book, “It is not a story to pass on” (275). Indeed, she has written an unpleasant story that would not be told
around the dinner table; but she has spent 275 pages talking about this appalling institution--for a reason. Just as readers want Sethe to come to terms with her past in order to be whole, readers must want the same for themselves because this “repression of the historical past is as psychologically damaging as the repression of personal trauma” (Krumholz 395-96). Just as Americans remember veterans of wars and bombings, tragic occurrences, they should remember these people who died so that the victims will not have died in vain and so that history will not repeat itself.

Overall, Morrison creates a powerful ghost to trigger the memory of characters who are walking zombies in a life filled with ignored memories and in the readers who are basically unaware they are very similar to these characters because of a forgotten part of history. According to Beloved, “it is hard to make yourself die forever” (210). Applying this truth, readers realize Sethe cannot die to the past which is her lifeline, her ancestry; Paul D cannot die to the past and shut off his emotions; Denver cannot die to the past and the outside world because both construct her identity; Baby Suggs cannot die because she is an ancestor figure who is needed by her family; Beloved cannot die because she IS the past that will never die, even to readers who would rather forget something they think does not involve themselves.

After Beloved serves her mythic purpose of causing confrontation with the past, she “runs away, naked and pregnant with stories from the past, back to the water from which she emerged, where the narrator says she will be forgotten” (Horvitz 166). Although this sounds like everyone has forgotten the lesson about the importance of the past, the narrator also says, Beloved, “disremembered and unaccounted for . . . cannot be lost because no one is looking for her” (274). Therefore, the past is always around us, whether we want to acknowledge it or not. The characters have simply found that delicate
balance between ignoring the past and living in the past as their past finally becomes infused into their being. Moreover, this statement relates Morrison’s problem with building a history for Middle Passage victims. Beloved does not have her own, distinct past because no one has searched for her nor thought about her. She is, as Morrison describes, like others who died on the Middle Passage: “no one praised them, nobody knows their names, nobody can remember them. . . . Millions of people disappeared without a trace, and there is not one monument anywhere to pay homage to them” (qtd. in Carabi 38).

Beloved is the beginning of that monument. Using the personal ghost story as the basic text, Morrison then creates a powerful subtext by applying the healing directly to the whole society. Without the ghosts, the characters and the readers would not learn to incorporate the past into their lives. They would not understand that, as William Handley asserts, “‘Beloved’ is a call that resists slavery’s name and that asks for a response. ‘Everybody’ must answer this call and assume what Morrison calls ‘response-ability’ for the unnamable and unspeakable loss to slavery” (681). Whether directly involved in slavery or not, Morrison demands society, as a whole, take responsibility by remembering the past. This story that must be passed on teaches readers to treat everyone as a beloved, even those who died long ago and may be unnamed. Readers must integrate history into their own existence. Beloved teaches readers—as it teaches Sethe, Denver, Paul D, and even Beloved—that individual history can be “twisted, suppressed, destroyed, [and] denied”; but readers must “recreate it, narrate it, do-it-yourself—through an independent act of historytelling by which [readers] may heal [their] individuality” (Broad 193). If readers recreate their own history and face their skeletons, society, as a whole, will be strengthened because its individual members are more aware of their heritage, and thus, their identity. Hence, Morrison has transformed folklore elements from her own
African-American heritage into powerful ghosts which, in turn, provide the tools necessary for fuller awareness of individual identity and heritage. By employing her own variation on the familiar ghostlore structure, she constructs a mythic journey that brings the universal tendency to ignore the past out of the subconscious and forces it upon the human consciousness. This conscious awareness of the past leads the characters and all readers through a ritual web of healing—a healing which allows the entire society to be renewed and strengthened as its individual members have put to rest history's ignored skeletons and recognize themselves as their own beloved.
“ANYTHING DEAD COMING BACK TO LIFE AGAIN HURTS”:
THE HEALING POWER OF THE PAST

During the 1800s, an interesting folktale was in circulation. According to the tale, a group of men were designated to find someone who had no worries. After much searching, they found a woman who seemed carefree. However, she quickly changed that status by showing them one of her closets. Inside was a human skeleton. As the shocked men demanded an explanation, she revealed the skeleton was that of a rival her husband had killed in a duel. Since her husband insisted they keep the skeleton and since she kept troubles to herself, she hid this skeleton from everyone. Thus, the phrase “skeleton in the closet” was coined (Rogers 237). Since then, men and women have been hiding various types of skeletons in their closets by trying to keep humiliating and troubling experiences secret. Because of man’s nature to hide his past, this phrase has become a well-known cultural cliche. However, as ghost stories often indicate, these skeletons cannot remain hidden forever. No, they do not have to be shown to everyone, but the owner must accept them in order to put them to rest.

Again, most people have skeletons in their closets because man is not perfect. However, what is done with those skeletons is the important factor. Some skeletons are only slightly dusty, but at rest, because they have been examined but left in the past. Other skeletons are large and powerful because they control the owner. Still other skeletons are gruesome and dirty because they are tightly hidden from everyone. As good writers should, both William Shakespeare and Toni Morrison have written powerful works which teach readers an invaluable lesson about man’s skeletons: remembering the past can
have a definite healing power. Through *Hamlet* and *Beloved*, these two authors admonish readers to put all skeletons to rest.

At first glance many people are probably surprised to see a study focusing on Shakespeare and Morrison. After all, what can writers from such different time periods and cultures have in common? I teach with a man who probably thinks Morrison's name should not be in the same sentence with Shakespeare's name. Regardless of the dispute, both writers are masters of their craft who have written works that should be compared because of the obvious similarities. As the previous chapters have explained, both authors use ghosts to teach a lesson about the past. By using these symbolic ghosts as characters in *Hamlet* and *Beloved*, both authors reach the conclusion that embracing a painful past is necessary for healing from that past; if that past is ignored, conflict, corruption, and death will occur.

Although Shakespeare was writing for the Elizabethan audience of the late 1500s and Morrison was writing for a dual audience of the late 1980s and addressing specific needs of average Americans by incorporating folklore specific to African Americans, these two writers used a common element of folklore to attract and intrigue their different audiences. Shakespeare appeals to his superstitious audience, many of whom believed in ghosts, by using the ghost as a symbol of the past. Similarly, Morrison appeals to her audience by using two ghosts which symbolize the past. Since the past literally cannot walk up to a person, both writers use ghosts to represent the past in a manner strikingly similar to the mode in which the past haunts a person's mind. These ghosts demand recognition and remain restless until the past is no longer ignored.

However, Morrison carries the symbol further as she seems to approach a consciously constructed myth. Although Shakespeare uses the myth as his basic construction, he is able to take it for granted because his audience was
familiar with such classic myths. Because of their basic knowledge, the Elizabethans were able to learn from Shakespeare’s understated mythic element. However, modern audiences are much different since they are not as familiar with the classic myths and think those myths do not correspond to their lives. Since Morrison wants to reach all of her readers by giving them something personal, she consciously constructs a myth. Accordingly, Morrison takes the myths from one segment of society, the African Americans, and extends those myths to the entire society of the late twentieth century. Much like Yeats and T.S. Eliot were doing in the early part of the century, Morrison is constructing her own myth, one to which her skeptical society can relate, in such a way that the audience does not get the sense of being led as it would with a traditional myth. As a result, her mythic construction speaks to the African-American consciousness in a unique and powerful manner by starting with an ethnic folklore, then empowering it by applying it to all society. Therefore, Morrison gives Americans their own myth by taking the ghost story and African-American folklore to a new, but subtle, level.

Albeit Shakespeare does not focus on the ghost material in the same manner as Morrison does, his story is still notably comparable to hers. First of all, many of the characters and their actions are parallel. For example, Claudius is like Sethe in trying to keep the past at bay. Since neither of them wants to remember the murders he/she committed, both attempt to deny the period in which those actions occurred. However, neither one is successful: Claudius is finally destroyed by his efforts, and Sethe barely escapes death, as she ultimately discovers that she must incorporate the past into her present, or be destroyed. Also, Gertrude is like Paul D. Both of these strong characters lock up their hearts so that the emotions cannot surface and cause pain. Once again, their differences are evident by the end of the story as Gertrude is
tragically destroyed at the moment she opens her heart and her eyes to the evil of Claudius while Paul D becomes the healer because his heart is opened by the past. He learns to deal with his pain and learns to love again. Furthermore, Ophelia is like Baby Suggs because both become pawns in man's manipulative games. Ophelia is Polonius's puppet, who is used in a game to test Hamlet's sanity while Baby Suggs is the puppet used to trap humans in the slavery of man and the slavery of the mind. In the end, both are mentally destroyed by these games and by the inhumanity brought about by ignoring the past.

Finally, Hamlet resembles Denver. Although at first the two are different because Hamlet wants to remember his father and the past while Denver wants to hear nothing of the past, they are similar because they are both lonely and confused protagonists. After witnessing the ghosts, they become even more alike as they grow to be the agents of change. Both are faced with a challenge to do something to remedy the past. Hamlet transforms his calm nature to seek revenge for his father's murder while Denver must seek help from the community that has shunned her, stepping away from her isolated life and taking charge for the first time in eighteen years. Therefore, these stories that are separated by nearly four hundred years involve characters who share various universal human experiences.

However, the mythic nature of the ghosts separates the two works. In Hamlet, Shakespeare's Ghost appears only to Hamlet, Horatio, and the guards rather than to all of the characters. Instead, the Ghost works through Hamlet in an attempt to force others to remember the past. For Hamlet, the Ghost is a symbol of the forgotten past. As the Ghost's agent, he must make others remember in order to remedy the decay. Nevertheless, none of the characters reconciles his/her past before fate intervenes. Claudius never does accept the past; he keeps trying to hide it by committing more evil deeds. As Claudius slips
further into a corrupt world, Gertrude becomes his victim before she is able to learn from her past. Similarly, Ophelia is driven insane by the memories of the past and by the corruption which surrounds her. Only Hamlet and Horatio remember Denmark's past life, but Hamlet is destroyed by the past's haunting of Claudius and Laertes. He leaves Horatio with the duty of telling the story, thus ending this fatal cycle of corruption.

On the other hand, the ghosts in Beloved are more powerful and more symbolic than Shakespeare's ghost of King Hamlet. First, Baby Suggs is different because she is the mythic ancestor figure who encourages and advises family members. As such, Denver and Sethe receive strength from her ghost while African-American readers are reminded of their own ancestral ties. Moreover, Beloved touches all of the characters and all readers in a traditionally mythic manner which forces reconciliation of the past. Beloved is clearly symbolic of the forgotten past since she is the resurrected spirit of both Sethe's daughter and a Middle Passage victim. By the end of the narrative journey, Denver, Paul D, and Sethe have each faced Beloved as the haunting past. Both have learned to live with the past in a constructive manner rather than hide it. As a result, they are healed of the pain and isolation which resulted from denying their past, an important component of their identity. Different from Shakespeare, Morrison goes beyond the characters in order to give the same healing power directly to the reader. As the ghost of a Middle Passage victim, Beloved also forces the readers to come to terms with a very ugly, inhumane skeleton in the national closet that no one wants to remember, thereby giving Americans their own myth about the futility of ignoring the past.

In her essay, "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation," Toni Morrison explains that a novel "should have something in it that enlightens; something in it that opens the doors and points the way. Something in it that suggests what the
conflicts are, what the problems are. But it need not solve those problems because it is not a case study, it is not a recipe” (341). Hamlet and Beloved both fit this description of what a piece of literature should do. Both use the ghost story and other folklore to illuminate a valuable lesson: even though “anything dead coming back to life hurts,” pain is necessary for healing (Morrison, Beloved 35). Pain is the body’s voice that warns when something is amiss. In a similar manner, pain is a voice for the conscience. If a memory causes pain, the memory cannot be ignored; it must be treated with medicine. However, neither Shakespeare nor Morrison explains exactly how to treat those painful memories. Since their works are not case studies, the authors allow the characters to remedy the pain of the past in their own manner. In Shakespeare’s work, a majority of the characters choose not to redress the past at all and suffer the fatal consequences. In Morrison’s work, the characters do rectify the past, but in different styles; the same medication does not work for each character. Both authors leave room for the readers to find their own method of healing.

Although Shakespeare and Morrison are separated by nearly four hundred years, their works address a problem that has existed for centuries: man’s desire to escape the past. Moreover, both manipulate a cultural phenomenon--ghosts--in order to teach their lesson. Much like the past, ghosts have been haunting mankind for centuries. Folklore beliefs indicate those ghosts are usually the result of a nagging past, and the ghosts continue to haunt until the painful past is remedied. Stories about Tennessee’s Bell Witch denote this belief as they verify the ghost stopped torturing the Bell family once John Bell died. Since John Bell was the source of the ghost’s conflict, his death symbolically healed the past. In Hamlet the past is not truly reconciled, but the participants in the conflict die; therefore, the Ghost, as a symbol of the past, does not appear again. In Beloved the past is accepted as the characters are
healed; therefore, Beloved, as a symbol of the past, does not resurface. Like these characters, readers must learn to take their medicine by facing the past, acknowledging its pain, and incorporating that past into the present. When Baby Suggs counsels, “nothing ever dies” (36), readers must understand that the past does not die and does not vanish, no matter how much they may want it to. Part of the healing medicine is simply to realize that even though the past can be a “goblin damn’d,” learning to be one’s own beloved by accepting the past as part of one’s essence causes that past to be a “spirit of health.”
Works Cited


