

Stamp Paid—The Bridge in *Beloved*
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As a minor character in Toni Morrison's book *Beloved*, which examines African American people's mental and physical traumas caused by slavery, Stamp Paid actually plays a significant role. He serves as a bridge, which leads people from where they are to where they want to be and [he] enables people to move freely between unrelated lands. By helping southern slaves cross the Ohio River to escape to the North, he physically and metaphorically serves as the bridge between the South and the North, between the past and the future, between the old lives and the new lives, and between slavery and freedom. Just like a bridge leading people to where they want to be and thus to what they want to have, Stamp Paid is also the bridge that leads readers to Morrison's hidden messages and to [understanding] some of the major themes concerning freedom and trauma in this book. Meanwhile, representing an important part of the Underground Railroad, a mysterious anti-slavery activity in American history, and experiencing things that commonly happened [to] slaves [on] plantation[s] at that time, he [Stamp Paid] enables Toni Morrison and her readers to transfer naturally between real historical facts and the fictional world in this novel. In this paper, through the examination [of] his [Stamp Paid's] significance as a bridge in many different ways, we are going to learn about the importance of being a bridge and what messages Toni Morrison wants modern readers to reach through this bridge.

As a local leader that helps southern black slaves cross the Ohio River to Cincinnati, Stamp Paid is literally and metaphorically a bridge between the South and the North and a bridge between slavery and freedom. He is not just helping people move from one place to another. He is essentially helping these slaves to get out of the source of their pain, which is the slavery system. In fact, his special value and status as the bridge leading slaves to the land of freedom is implied through his old name given by Morrison. Joshua, the name that Stamp Paid was called in the past, was one of the twelve spies who were sent by Moses to explore the land of Canaan and [he] was one of the only two spies who gave encouraging reports in the Bible. All of the other ten spies gave discouraging reports out of the fear of entering a new land. (Number 13-14) Therefore, if we consider the land of Canaan to be the land of freedom in the era of slavery, then Stamp Paid is acting the same as Joshua in the Bible. Many other southern black slaves at that time lacked the courage and determination to escape to the North because they didn't want to risk leaving their families and entering a new, unknown land, just like the other ten spies in the Bible (Frank, 46-47). However, Stamp Paid not only came to the North, but also helped many other fugitive slaves. By helping black people to the North, he essentially gives an encouraging report on the North and on the life as a free man. Led by him, other slaves also start their new lives as free men. Thus, he [Stamp Paid] is also the bridge connecting their old lives and their new lives. This is especially important in this book since the main story line in *Beloved* deals with the tension between the major characters' old lives in the South and [their] new lives in the North, between their old lives before the American Civil War and [their] new lives after the war, and between their old lives before the return of Beloved and new lives after that. Therefore, if there weren't people like Stamp Paid who help major characters, Sethe in particular, gain their new lives in Cincinnati, the story would never happen.

However, Stamp Paid works as a bridge connecting the past and the future for those who he helps not just [by] physically helping them cross the Ohio River to gain their new life of freedom, [but by serving] as a great learning model for them [by] moving on from [his] past and adjusting to being a free man. He leads these people to their new lives mentally in two ways. First, he teaches them the true meaning of being a free man starting from the time he helps them to cross the river. Just like every black slave who wishes to get out of the life of misery, Stamp Paid also has his past and his trauma. After he [leaves] his wife, who [is] taken away by his master, he change[s] his name to Stamp Paid and [thinks] that he [will] become “rambunctious,” or “renegade,” or “a drunkard”(Morrison, 185). But surprisingly, he didn't. Instead, he [becomes] engaged in helping other black slaves pay their debts (Morrison, 184-185). As a man free from debts in his life, Stamp Paid can choose to do whatever he wants to do, and apparently helping other slaves to the North is his choice. Being “rambunctious” or “renegade” or “a drunkard” may be the traditional social image of a heart-broken man, but Stamp Paid [makes] his own decision. What's more, to many people, being free from debt means being free from responsibility, which is, however, not the case to Stamp Paid. Although he considers himself to be free from debt, he thinks he is responsible in taking care of others in his community, like Paul D., Sethe, and Denver, because he [Stamp Paid] is the leader in helping people to the free land in Cincinnati. Such sense of responsibility can also be implied through the fact that he convinced himself that he should tell Paul D. about what Sethe did to her children (Morrison, 169). Whether or not to let this man know that the woman he love[s] [has] killed her daughter [is] actually none of his business. However, because he [feels] the way that he should take care of others, he basically [tells] Paul D. what Sethe [has done]. So, being responsible is also his choice. Choosing to be someone he really wants to be is how Stamp Paid understands being a free man. Through helping southern black people run away to the North, he is actually advocating such understanding of freedom. He serves as a great model for other new free men to learn about the true meaning of being free and the basic rights free men own, and thus, [he] leads them from being slaves to being real free men.

Second, Stamp Paid teaches people how to heal themselves. Unlike Sethe, who [hides] her trauma deep inside her heart since the trauma [is] too much for her and [she] needs the return of Beloved to bring out her trauma to help her heal, Stamp Paid actively [faces] his past and [heals] himself on his own. This statement can be supported by the fact that he [tells] Paul D., who at that time he [isn't] very familiar with, about his past, [thus revealing] that he [doesn't] hide his past from others (Morrison, 232-233). Hence, he shows people that actively facing the past, rather than hiding the trauma, is a faster way to heal. After all, people can never be cured if they don't confront their trauma directly. Rather than waiting for someone else to bring out the hidden trauma, facing it directly and then working out methods to heal helps people get out of their past faster. However, although Sethe heals herself through the help of exterior force while Stamp Paid mostly heals himself through his interior force, the rationale for their healing methods is actually the same – to rebuild the things they [have] lost. The way Stamp Paid loses his wife hurts his manhood, his dignity and his pride. Hopelessly facing his wife being taken away by his master is a shame for every man, even if a black slave [is] not considered a man from most people's perspectives in that society. But [by] being helpful in others' lives, he [Stamp Paid] sees his self-worth and value. Regarded as a leader, Stamp Paid regains his dignity and pride and rebuilds his manhood, and thus heals himself. To rebuild what has been lost is also how Sethe heals herself after the return of Beloved brings her hidden trauma out. She overreacts

to being a mother for Beloved to rebuild the part of motherhood she [loses] after she kills her own daughter, as can be seen from the latter part of the book. As a necessary part of this healing method, her overreaction releases her long-time suppression and soothes her guilt. Therefore, to sum up, the healing methods Stamp Paid teaches others are that first, people should actively face their past and confront their trauma; and second, people should then rebuild the things they have lost. By teaching people these healing methods, Stamp Paid acts as a bridge that mentally leads people to their new lives.

In fact, messages concerning the trauma in the American history and the healing methods for it are also conveyed through how Stamp Paid and Sethe heal themselves. Here, Stamp Paid is a bridge Toni Morrison uses to lead the American people to the place she wants them to reach, [a place] where they are truly free from historical trauma and historical problems. As I mentioned in the paragraph above, while Sethe heals herself through exterior help, Stamp Paid heals himself on his own by confronting his past. Some argue that Beloved is the part of American history that Americans don't want to remember. The reason that Toni Morrison wrote this book was to remind Americans of that part of history and to heal Americans. So, *Beloved*, to [the] American people, is like Beloved to Sethe. However, facing the past actively, like Stamp Paid, is a better way to heal. Stamp Paid is the teaching model for the American people of how they should deal with the past. To actively face the past, to carefully examine the past, and then to rebuild respect towards human rights are healing methods provided to Americans by Morrison through Stamp Paid. Morrison uses Stamp Paid as one of the bridges to help Americans move on from the past and then build a real land of freedom. He is the bridge between the past and the future in American history as well.

Meanwhile, as I said from the beginning, another function for bridges is to let passengers move between unrelated lands easily. Since this is a historical novel, Morrison needs a bridge in this book to let readers naturally move between the historical reality and the fictional world in this novel. Therefore, Stamp Paid is the bridge. He is a great example showing how history works in historical novel. Unlike the slaves who live in Sweet Home, Stamp Paid [goes] through things [that are] more common and more closely related to reality at that time in the history. As a matter of fact, he and his wife never marry like Halle and Sethe do. Before he leaves the plantation, he is never treated like a real man, such as the black men in Sweet Home. After all, Morrison created Sweet Home in order to profoundly uncover the trauma that [the] slavery system can leave on its victims. Stamp Paid has constructed the miserable historical reality for modern readers. Later in his life, Stamp Paid [runs] away to the North and begins his life as a leader [by] helping southern slaves escape to the North. Leading southern slaves to the free North shows that he is an important part of the Underground Railroad, a mysterious anti-slavery activity in American history. Stamp Paid represents a special group of people in American history. He considers helping others escape to the North [as a way] to help them pay the debt in their lives, which shows that he truly values all types of freedom (Morrison, 185). By helping these black people, he is actually advocating the importance of freedom through his actions. Therefore, he is a symbol of progressive African Americans who actively participated in advocating their opinions concerning freedom and searching for their rights as human beings through their actions in American history. To summarize, Stamp Paid leads readers to learn about historical realities of two groups: slaves in the plantations and the African American heroes, not just necessarily those [involved] in the Underground Railroad, but those involved

throughout all of the anti-slavery history. As a bridge reflecting the historical reality, Stamp Paid strengthens the themes in this book.

Throughout the discussions above, we have already learned some of the reasons that Toni Morrison needs to have Stamp Paid as a bridge in this book. Morrison needs to have a bridge to physically lead the characters to enter the land of freedom and to gain their new lives, and then also to mentally lead them to move forward. In addition, she needs a bridge to let modern readers move between historical realities and the fictional world in this novel naturally and freely in order to further strengthen the themes in the book. However, Stamp Paid means more to modern readers. His ability to adjust himself to the new environment as a free man and his courage to be the person he wants to be are still important in modern society. Although slavery was abandoned more than a century ago, racial discrimination still exists nowadays, which suggests the effects of slavery still continue. Therefore, what Stamp Paid also does in this book is show people how to move forward. He is a bridge for modern readers to go from being stuck in the discriminatory mindset to owning the ability and courage to think of everyone as equal. Finally, since Toni Morrison conveys all these ideas through Stamp Paid, we can say that Stamp Paid is one of the important bridges by which Toni Morrison approaches her readers, shares her opinions, and affects the mindsets of those who encounter her book.

Works Cited

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Morrison, Toni. Beloved. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1987.

Holy Bible. English Standard Version. Illinois: Good News/Crossway, 2001

Commentary by Claire Navarro '11, Spanish and Religion

This character analysis begins with an introduction that successfully and clearly articulates Joy Wang's voice as she develops her thesis regarding the character, Stamp Paid, and his importance as a "bridge" in Toni Morrison's Beloved. In the body of the essay, Wang dedicates each paragraph to one idea that carefully supports and relates back to her thesis. Throughout her paragraph's argument, she provides explanations supporting her point and then elaborately explains her rationale, thus reducing any ambiguities that could potentially confuse the reader. For example, when Wang compares Stamp Paid to Joshua of the Bible, she makes sure to carefully develop the comparison to clarify her point. Besides remaining focused on a single idea within the body paragraph, Wang also refers back to her thesis in the concluding sentence of each body paragraph as she relates her discussed point to the central idea of Stamp Paid as a bridge. This established correlation between support and thesis strengthens Wang's paper by increasing the visibility of her overall argument. In her conclusion, she continues her loyalty to her thesis as she touches on all the main points, ideas and arguments that have been discussed throughout the paper. Wang's conclusion provides an enlightening overview that avoids the common

writing trap of simple argument regurgitation. Rather, Wang's well developed analysis is brought together in the conclusion as she elaborates her paper's points and provides an interesting insight that leaves the reader contemplating how Wang's argument can be applied to the world.