

**'BELOVED': WHEN ALL HELL BREAKS LOOSE**  
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Both the novel and film version of Toni Morrison's Pulitzer and Nobel Prize-winning *Beloved* center around an African American mother named Sethe, played by talk show personality Oprah Winfrey in the film. As the tale unfolds with legal slavery officially over in the United States, flashbacks reveal that, in an act of ultimate resistance, when slave-catchers appeared to return Sethe to the Kentucky plantation from which she and her children escaped, she murdered her baby daughter with intentions of killing all four of her very young children and herself, so desperate was her resolve to keep her family out of slavery's relentless grip.

*Beloved* was inspired by the documented case of a woman named Margaret Garner, a Kentuckian who escaped slavery with her children, fleeing to Cincinnati. Historical records indicate that Garner's was not an isolated case among mothers in bondage.

Today we may judge these women's actions as insanely horrifying, but perhaps they nonetheless reflected the savage and mad cruelty of their circumstances as slaves.

In *Beloved*, a time comes when it appears that Sethe may be able to piece together a happier future, in spite of all that she's endured. It is then that Beloved, the ghost of the murdered child who has haunted Sethe for years, materializes in full flesh, and eventually wreaks agonizing havoc upon Sethe's household.

That *Beloved* grows more defiant at the very moment that a possibility for a better life appears on the horizon for Sethe relates to Buddhist practice. At times, when we resolve to overcome the barriers to our happiness and bring forth the power of the Buddha from within our lives, it seems that all hell breaks loose. Nichiren Daishonin thus related the following warning: "As practice progresses and understanding grows, the three obstacles and four devils emerge, vying with one another to interfere.... If you are frightened by them you will be prevented from practicing true Buddhism" (*The Major Writings of Nichiren Dai-shonin*, vol. 1, p. 145).

In other words, if we are frightened by our obstacles and therefore don't challenge them, we will not attain enlightenment. Those very same obstacles are transformed into benefits to the degree that we face them without wavering. When we refuse to dodge life at our crucial moments, our inner lives are enhanced immeasurably. This strengthening of our spiritual selves is what is known as inconspicuous benefit — the intangible yet most valuable reward of steadfast Buddhist faith and practice.

In *Beloved*, we witness Sethe achieve inner growth analogous to the kind to which I am referring when, finally, she ferociously faces her own demon. She wins but is left battle-weary. Scarred but whole and free, Sethe pulls herself up from the depths of hell and enters the realm of humanity.

The Daishonin taught that the greatest thing we can do as human beings is to chant Nam-myoho-renge-kyo and share this awesome practice with others. Reflecting on the Buddhist parallels within the story of *Beloved* (which I've only slightly touched on here), I'm inspired to renew my determination to do my best to live up to the Daishonin's teachings.

I also hope others will journey through the pages of the novel *Beloved* and watch the film to experience first-hand this life-moving tale.

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