Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
1999 Volume I: Women's Voices in Fiction

"This is Not a Story to Pass On": Teaching Toni Morrison's Beloved

Guide for Curriculum Unit 99.01.03
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This curriculum unit aims to solve two problems I have encountered in my linked tenth grade Early American Literature and Early United States History classes this year ? finding texts about American history that interest teenagers, and expanding the course's curriculum to include more women.

The unit will introduce students to Toni Morrison, a Nobel prize-winning author, through *Beloved* , her historical novel of the psychic trauma of slavery on its survivors. The unit approaches *Beloved* both as historical fiction and as literature. The unit also devotes a substantial amount of energy to comprehension, as the text is a challenging one for high school students.

Toni Morrison's *Beloved* is so gripping and phenomenally told that students will be motivated to work through the difficulties of the text. Briefly summarized, it is the story of an escaped slave living on the border between Ohio and Kentucky just at the end of the Civil War. She is haunted by the grown-up ghost of her baby girl, whom she killed in order to save the child from returning to slavery.

The unit includes suggestions for connection of Beloved to two documents from the time of the historical novel ? Sojourner Truth's *Ain't I a Woman?* speech and *The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* . The unit also provides historical background useful to readers of the novel and ideas for how to share this information with students. Three strategies for working through the text are provided ? a journal, a word log, and a plot chart. The culminating activity is a mock trial of the main character, with other characters serving as witnesses.

(Recommended for English and History, grades 10-12.)