The Tragedy of Medea’s and Sethe’s Outsider Status in *Beloved* and *Medea*

Sethe in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* and Medea in Euripides’ *Medea* both suffer similar tragedies due to their isolation from their communities, their conscious decision to separate themselves from their communities by not following their communities’ rules, and by following Arthur Miller’s idea of tragedy that consists of acting “against the scheme of things that degrades them” (Miller). Sethe is a slave in America prior to the Civil War who runs away from her master, the Schoolteacher, and joins her children and mother-in-law in Cincinnati. However, when the Schoolteacher traces her to Cincinnati she kills one of her daughters and prepares to kill her other children to keep them from returning to slavery. She is cast out from the society of the other former slaves and is haunted by the ghost of her dead daughter. On the other hand, Medea is a princess of Colchis who betrays her father and country in order to be with the man she loves, Jason. Jason decides, despite all that Medea has done for him, to leave her and marry the daughter of Creon, the king of Corinth. Medea, moved by rage, schemes to kill Creon and the princess and also plots to kill her own sons, since she cannot bear anyone harming them. They are both isolated from the rest of humanity and treated like they are barbarians. This isolation fills them with desperation which leads them to kill their children. Their filicidies also separate them further from their communities. Sethe and Medea both encapsulate Miller’s ideas
on tragedy that tragedy lies in the way that people try to hold onto what they believe are their own positions, no matter the cost.

One of the main tragedies in Euripides’ Medea and Morrison’s Beloved lies in the fact that their main characters, Medea and Sethe, are outsiders to the communities in which they live. Medea is considered to be a barbarian in civilized Corinth, especially since she is a non-Greek. She tells the Women of Corinth that she is a “foreigner” and that she is “deserted, a refugee, thought nothing of by my husband—something he won in a foreign land” (Euripides 8-9). Medea, too, is kept away from the society of others. She tells the women of Corinth that she lives “quietly” (Euripides 8). She claims to have been targeted by others for her cleverness when she begs Creon to let her remain for one more day; “through being clever I have suffered much” (Euripides 8). Sethe is a former slave who has never fully been part of a community. Sethe was originally from another plantation before she was sold to Mr. Garner of “Sweet Home” (Morrison 28). She did not have the opportunity as a slave to belong to a community because of the instability as a life as a slave. For Sethe, there was “no reliable other to recognize and affirm their existence” (Schapiro 155). This is clearly evident in how she talks about her mother to Beloved. She tells Beloved, “I never knew my mother, but I saw her a couple of times” (Morrison 140). She is also denied the true community of women as a slave. She tells Paul D that “there wasn’t nobody to talk to” at “Sweet Home” (Morrison 188). She had no women who could tell her how she should take care of her children. By the time she has her own children slavery has “so deprived and depleted her that she cannot satisfy the hunger for recognition, the longed for ‘look’ that both her daughters crave” (Schapiro 158). Medea and Sethe both suffer the tragedy of not belonging to a community.
Sethe and Medea also lack the ability to return to their former homes. They are forced to remain exiles in these lands. Nothing was secure in her life at Sweet Home; when Sethe thinks about her husband, Halle, she realizes that he was “a blessing she was reckless enough to take for granted, lean on, as though Sweet Home really was one” (Morrison 28). Halle has been completely lost to her even before Paul D tells her that Halle must have lost his mind watching the Schoolteacher’s nephews raping her. While the history of her childhood remains written, there is nothing that could actually bring Sethe back to it. As a princess of Colchis, Medea has no one to support her in Corinth since her husband has turned from her and taken a new wife, the daughter of Creon, the king of Corinth. She berates Jason for abandoning her and their children; she tells him that the exile of her and her children “will be a fine shame for the new-wedded groom, for his children to wander as beggars and she who saved them” (Euripides 17). The only protection she had left, Jason, has cast her aside for a new wife who can give him the power he desperately wants. There was nothing to guarantee that she would not be separated from her husband by their owner. Sethe is denied one of the fundamental aspects of humanity—she is denied true membership in a community. Not only are Sethe and Medea unable to find a place for themselves in their communities, they are incapable of returning to their former homes.

Miller writes that tragedy lies in “the underlying struggle… of the individual attempting to gain his ‘rightful’ position in his society” (Miller). Sethe’s and Medea’s search for a place in society after being separated from their communities directly relates to this. Sethe obviously is trying to gain a place in a society that gave her nothing of her own before. She tells Paul D that even the chance to decide things when she decided to run with her children was “good” (Morrison 190). Sethe wants to be in a position where she could love her children as a mother. She says that “I couldn’t love them proper in Kentucky because they wasn’t mine to love”
Sethe’s journey is to find a place where she can decide her own actions without answering to a master. Medea also is seeking to find her place in society. She is cast out of her rightful place as Jason’s wife with no one to turn to. She tells Aegeus that “he has taken a wife to his house, supplanting me” (Euripides 23). However, she quickly works to find a place for herself to go. She creates a new place for herself in Athens with Aegeus to run to after she finished killing Creon, his daughter, and Jason’s sons. She gets Aegeus to promise her that he “will never cast me from your land, nor if any of my enemies should demand me, will you, in your life, willingly hand me over” (Euripides 24). Medea quickly regains a home and even begins to plot to fully regain her place in society—she schemes to become Aegeus’ wife. Sethe and Medea both fight to keep the place they want in society.

Medea and Sethe are also not “passive” when it comes to their lots in life; as Miller writes, it is only because of their attempt to change their place in society that their tragedies exist (Miller). Sethe and Medea “act against the scheme of things that degrades them” through their murders (Miller). In the case of Medea, her “actions are irrational, meaning that they do not follow the logic of reason, but they are driven by a powerful logic of passion” (Federici-Nebbioso 465). Medea might not be driven by sound reasoning, but nothing is stopping her from accomplishing what she wants. Medea carefully plots out her plan to kill her children. When the time comes for her to commit the murder and flee Corinth, she tells the women that she must do this. She says that her “task is fixed” and that she cannot let her children be harmed “by any other hand less kindly to them” (Euripides 40). Sethe too is driven by the fear that her children will be harmed that leads her to decision to kill them. Both Sethe and Medea fight against “the underlying fear of being displaced, the disaster inherent in being torn away from our chosen image of what and who we are in this world” (Miller). It is this active desire to better their
situations that lead Sethe and Medea to commit horrible crimes that greatly affect themselves and their communities.

Sethe’s outsider status is also due to her disobedient actions. In *Beloved*, “Sethe had had twenty-eight days—the travel of one whole moon—of unslaved life” (Morrison 111). She only experiences twenty-eight days of freedom before she kills her daughter to save her from the Schoolteacher. She separates herself from the rest of the black community by committing a heinous act against one of their own; they avoid associating with a mother guilty of infanticide. That murder is the reason she cannot be a member of the former slaves’ community in Cincinnati. This act is completely her own decision—she tells Paul D that she did all that it took to protect her children from the Schoolteacher, “I took and put my babies where they’d be safe” (Morrison 193). Paul D realizes that Sethe’s love is different from the other members of the community; “Sethe talked about safety with a handsaw” (Morrison 193). Sethe’s actions further divide her from her community.

Medea resembles Sethe, by casting herself out of her community by committing murder. Before the play has even started, she has made it impossible for her to return to her home because she had killed her brother and betrayed her father for Jason. She also makes it impossible for her to stay in Corinth; she plans on killing Creon’s daughter with a dress and a diadem that any who touches them “will die in agony” (Euripides 26). Medea convinces Creon to let her stay an extra day in Corinth in order to get her revenge. She tells the chorus that Creon “has given me this one day to stay here, and in this I will make dead bodies of three of my enemies” (Euripides 13). Medea chooses to commit actions that are anathema to her community, with full recognition of their consequences.
These two women both feel a need to keep their children from suffering a “psychic
death” by which their children would emotionally die (Schapiro 156). They want to keep other
people from hurting their children, which is worth for them abandonment by their societies.
Sethe’s reasoning for killing her daughter is that “if I hadn’t killed her she would have died and
that is something that I could not bear happen to her” (Morrison 236). Medea has a similar
reason for killing her own sons. She says that “it is not bearable to be mocked by enemies” and
cannot stand for her children to suffer that fate (Euripides 26). Medea and Sethe both separate
themselves from their communities in order to do what they feel is necessary for them and their
children to survive.

Sethe and Medea are shunned by their communities because of their actions, although
Sethe is ultimately welcomed back into the freed slave community of Cincinnati. Sethe has
caused great turmoil in the African-American community in Cincinnati because the former
slaves cannot fathom how one of them could do something as horrible as an action of their
former masters. When Stamp Paid feels ashamed about the way Sethe and especially Denver
have been treated by the rest of the community, he goes to 124 to offer his help. However,
Stamp Paid, who has every door in the community open to him, cannot bring himself to knock
and ask for entrance into his good friend, Baby Sugg’s, old home. He abandons “his efforts to
see about Sethe, after the pain of knocking and not gaining entrance” (Morrison 235). Sethe
refuses to seek the help of others in her community, and they dislike her for it. Medea also is
shunned by her community for her filicide. The women of Corinth are horrified at Medea. They
beg the gods to stop her and mention that the only precedent for Medea’s actions is Ino, who
killed her children accidentally. They cannot fathom that a mother would intentionally kill her
children. They say that Medea must have a heart “made of rock or steel” when she is killing her
children (Euripides 41). The communities in *Medea* and *Beloved* are similar in the way they shun Medea and Sethe.

Sethe and Medea are forced to bear the consequences of their actions despite the fact they are driven to them because of their treatment by their communities. They both work to find a place in their communities, but their desperate actions have disastrous results. These actions lead their communities to cast them out once more. However, the community in *Beloved* ultimately welcomes Sethe and Denver, her daughter, back into their community, as opposed to Medea, who flees to Athens, knowing she will never be welcomed in Corinth ever again. Membership in a community is necessary for people to live peacefully; when people do not have a place to belong to, they are at war with all other people. These tragedies both illustrate Miller’s idea that tragedy lies in the way people seek to find a secure place to call their own in their societies.
Works Cited


