

Beloved

Toni Morrison

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Overview

Toni Morrison's *Beloved* was published in 1987. The novel won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction and was a finalist for the National Book Award. Inspired by the real-life story of a runaway African-American slave named Margaret Garner, who killed her own daughter to prevent her capture and enslavement, *Beloved* tells the story of Sethe, a runaway slave who takes her daughter's life in the same manner.

The novel begins years after slavery was abolished. Sethe resides in the house numbered 124 in Ohio with her daughter, Denver, and the haint of her other daughter, who is dead. Her mother-in-law, Grandma Baby Suggs, has passed away, and her two sons, Howard and Buglar, have left home. When Paul D, who was enslaved with Sethe at Sweet Home, meets Sethe again after years apart, the two act on their attraction to each other and pursue a relationship. Paul D scares away the haint that haunts the house, much to Denver's grief, as she has relied on the spirit of her dead sister for company in her isolated home. One day, Paul D, Sethe, and Denver encounter a finely dressed young black woman named Beloved waiting for them at 124. They feed her and give her a place to rest until she becomes a permanent resident in the house. They do not realize at first that Beloved is the spirit of Sethe's dead daughter taking corporeal form.

As the mysterious Beloved extends her stay at 124, Sethe's and Paul D's traumatic memories of their enslavement grow more prominent. Paul D is forced to recall his abuse at the prison farm in Alfred, Georgia, where he was imprisoned after trying to kill his last master, Brandywine. Sethe confronts her rape and stolen breastmilk at the hands of the nephews of Sweet Home's brutal new master, the schoolteacher. They determine through their shared stories that Sethe's husband, Halle, became delirious after witnessing Sethe's rape and disappeared. Eventually, Paul D suspects that Beloved's presence may have something to do with the growing unease at 124. When Paul D interrogates Beloved, she gets her revenge by seducing him. Feeling guilty, Paul D tries to tell Sethe about his indiscretion but, out of panic, suggests that they have a baby together instead. The two have a moment of romantic glee despite both doubting that pregnancy is the right path for their relationship.

One day, Stamp Paid, the man who helped Sethe escape Sweet Home, shows Paul D a news clipping describing Sethe's arrest for killing one of her daughters. Years ago, when Sethe first arrived at 124 with her newborn baby, Denver, she was finally able to reunite with her two sons and daughter who had escaped before her and were safe in Grandma Baby Suggs' care. Jealous that Grandma Baby Suggs' family was doing well, the townspeople neglected to warn them about the arrival of the slave catchers. Without any time to make an escape, Sethe took her children with her to the shed and tried to kill them all with a handsaw. She succeeded in killing only her oldest daughter before the schoolteacher and the slave catchers found her. Reasoning that she was not sound enough to return to Sweet Home, the schoolteacher and slave catchers left. Sethe was arrested for murder. The news of Sethe's actions horrifies Paul D. When Paul D confronts Sethe about it, she defends her actions, which leads to Paul D's departure from the house.

With Paul D gone, 124 falls into decline. When Beloved reveals herself to be Sethe's murdered daughter, Sethe is overcome with guilt and neglects her job to give into Beloved's every demand. Denver realizes quickly that Sethe's health is declining due to Beloved's possession. She reaches out to the townspeople for help, leaving her house on her own for the first time. When news of Beloved's haunting makes its way across town, the townspeople gather in front of 124 to exorcize it. At the same time, Denver's new employer, Mr. Bowdin, arrives at 124 to pick her up for her night work. When Sethe and Beloved come out of the house to see about the commotion, Sethe mistakes Mr. Bowdin for the schoolteacher. She attacks him with an ice pick, only to be wrestled down by Denver and several of the other

townspeople.

Paul D learns of what happened through Stamp Paid and checks on Sethe. When Paul D enters 124, he finds Sethe in Grandma Baby Suggs' bed, grieving Beloved's departure. He promises to take care of her along with Denver. While they are both haunted by their pasts, he reminds her that they need to learn to heal to survive.

Chapter Summaries & Analyses

Chapters 1-4

Chapter 1 Summary

Sethe lives in the house numbered 124 with her lone surviving daughter, Denver. The house is haunted by a haint, the spirit of Sethe's dead daughter who did not live long enough to receive a proper name. The daughter is known only as "Beloved" as indicated on her tombstone. Sethe did not have enough money to order a proper engraving on the tombstone, something she regrets.

When the novel begins, Sethe's two teenage boys, Howard and Buglar, have already left the house, fleeing the haint that lives within it. Sethe's mother-in-law, Grandma Baby Suggs, has also already passed away, and Sethe believes her husband, Halle, abandoned her long ago. Sethe is alone with Denver and the haint of the dead baby. One day, Sethe encounters Paul D, a former slave from the Sweet Home farm where she was also once enslaved. Paul D remembers Sethe was the only woman on the farm and that the five enslaved men coveted her until she decided to marry Halle, who was also one of the Sweet Home men. Sethe invites Paul D into her house where he senses the presence of the haint. He also meets Denver, who is bewildered by Paul D's appearance, as 124 rarely gets visitors due to its haunting.

As Sethe makes bread, she and Paul D reflect upon their time at Sweet Home. Sweet Home was once run by a man named Mr. Garner, who took pride in having five black male slaves on his plantation despite other white slaveowners cautioning him about the dangers of black men. When Mr. Garner died, the widowed Mrs. Garner called upon her brother-in-law, the schoolteacher, to oversee Sweet Home.

Sethe reveals to Paul D a tragic event that happened to her while at Sweet Home. After giving birth to Denver's sister, she was raped by the schoolteacher's nephews, who then further violated her by stealing her breastmilk. When she told the schoolteacher about this, he forced the other slaves at Sweet Home to whip her, forming a "tree" (19) of scars on her back. Paul D caresses Sethe's breasts and kisses her scars. The recollection of this traumatic memory incites the haint in the house to shake the house violently. Paul D yells and tosses furniture to scare the haint away. He seems to succeed, as the noise eventually subsides and the house is noticeably emptier.

Chapter 2 Summary

After the haint leaves the house, Sethe and Paul D go upstairs to have sex. While both initially long for each other, the sex is over quickly. Paul D remembers how much he used to lust after Sethe, who was the only young woman on the plantation and, therefore, the only viable partner for the five Sweet Home men. Deprived of other contact with women on the farm, the men resorted to raping cows for their sexual release. They never harmed Sethe but waited for her to select a mate from among them. Sethe eventually chose Halle as her husband because he was a dedicated son to his mother, Grandma Baby Suggs, and labored twice as hard to earn her freedom. Though Paul D has dreamed of having sex with Sethe for a long time, he finds that she is less attractive to him now that they have consummated their relationship.

Chapter 3 Summary

The next day, Denver spies an animated white dress hugging Sethe by the waist as she prays. Sethe does not notice this dress until Denver describes it to her as a long white gown with buttons all the way down the back and a bustle. The dress reminds Denver of the story of her birth, recounted to her by her mother.

As the story goes, when Sethe was about to give birth to Denver, she was on the run from Sweet Home, trying to reunite with her three children across the Ohio River while being pursued by the schoolteacher. Weakened by the snow and her injured, pregnant body, Sethe was about to resign herself to death when a white woman named Amy found her. Amy told her she was looking for food and was on her way to Boston to acquire some velvet to make a dress. Amy's chatter soothed Sethe. Amy knew of an abandoned house nearby where they could take refuge from the snow. Sethe crawled to the house with Amy beside her and permitted the white woman to take care of her as she prepared to give birth.

When Denver asks her mother about her prayers, Sethe responds that she does not pray anymore and instead is "talking about time" (43) and cautions her daughter against returning to the past. Denver asks about the full story concerning her birth. Sethe avoids answering her directly and instead offers some insight into the schoolteacher's habit of studying the slaves at Sweet Home. Denver realizes that Sethe does not want to reveal much more of her traumatic past and concludes that the appearance of the white dress suggests that "the baby got plans" (45).

The morning after Paul D scares away the haint, he sets out to fix the things he broke in Sethe's house. He sings songs from his time at the prison farm in Alfred, Georgia, where he served time for attempting to kill Brandywine, the man who bought him from the schoolteacher. After that traumatic time, he closed himself off from the world, but the reappearance of Sethe, a figure from his past, has forced him to remember again. He asks Sethe if "it's all right to scramble here" (50) for work, implying a desire to remain. She permits him to stay. Paul D expresses concerns about Denver's feelings about his presence, a worry that Sethe brushes off, saying, "Nothing bad can happen to her" (50). She cites her last encounter with the schoolteacher as an example. Seth explains that the schoolteacher eventually caught her. She does not offer details about the murder of her other daughter, sharing instead that after her encounter with the schoolteacher, she went to jail with the newborn Denver in her arms.

Chapter 4 Summary

One morning, Denver asks Paul D bluntly about how much longer he plans to stay with them at the house. The rudeness of her question stuns Paul D. Sethe chastises Denver, who is unfazed. Paul D wonders if Sethe is anticipating his eventual departure, too. To bring the family together, Paul D insists that the three of them go the "Colored Thursday" (58) at the carnival, a day when black people are permitted to attend the event alongside white people. Sethe reluctantly agrees. While at the festival, the scent of "doomed roses" (57) fills the air. Paul D's happy spirit disarms everyone around them, which convinces Sethe and Denver to have fun, too. By the end of the festival, Denver does not seem to mind Paul D's presence in her life as much.

Chapters 1-4 Analysis

The abolishment of slavery dramatically changes Sethe's and Paul D's lives. They attempt to express attraction to each other normally, without the traumatic context of their enslavement. However, as their relationship progresses, their respective experiences at Sweet Home become more emotionally charged. Paul D's reentry into Sethe's life is

the inciting incident that provokes the violent response of the haint at 124. When Sethe reveals the story behind her rape and the whipping scars on her back to Paul D, the haint stirs and wreaks havoc on the house.

The haint's response is a symbol of the repression of traumatic memories from Sethe's and Paul D's enslavement. Though Sethe and Paul have found ways of repressing their traumatic memories internally, the haint externalizes the residual pain of their pasts. The haint is also the spirit of Sethe's murdered daughter, who possesses the house and will later take on the corporeal form of Beloved once Paul D moves in. Sethe is dismissive of the haint's intrusiveness despite the distress and growing sense of isolation it brings Denver. When asked about the spirit, Sethe dismissively says, "It's just a baby" (16), diminishing her child's violent death so as not to confront the pain of her own actions. On the other hand, Denver realizes that the presence of the haint has as much to do with her and her mother's repression as it does the supernatural forces that brought the haint into the house in the first place. Sethe's unwillingness to reach out to the black community has led to Denver's isolation. When Denver describes the haint, she insists that it is "not evil" and "not sad either" but "lonely and rebuked" (16). Her description of the haint is a projection of her feelings about herself.

While Paul D's reentry into Sethe's life appears at first to bring much-needed healing and calm to 124, the house's sudden silence is only temporary. While Sethe and Paul D's first sexual encounter is filled with anticipation and longing, it is brief. When Paul D contends with the woman before him, Sethe suddenly appears less attractive, the scars on her back more horrifying. However, they insist on carrying on a relationship despite the way their mutual traumas impact the intimacy they feel with each other. Just when they seem to resemble a normal family during a trip to the carnival, the smell of "doomed roses" (57) foreshadows Beloved's arrival. Despite the characters' avoidance of their pain, the stench of the roses portends their inevitable confrontation with death and grief in the figure of Beloved.

Chapters 5-8

Chapter 5 Summary

As Sethe, Paul D, and Denver return home from the carnival, a young black woman about nineteen or twenty years old emerges from a nearby stream and settles on the porch of house 124. She wears a dress of black lace and a broken straw brim hat, resembling the "women who drink champagne when there is nothing to celebrate" (60). When Sethe discovers the woman on her porch, she immediately feels an urge to relieve herself. The urge is so strong that she does not make it to the toilet and urinates outside her outhouse. The lack of control reminds her of giving birth to Denver, when "there was no stopping water breaking from a breaking womb" (61). When Sethe returns to the house, Paul and Denver are pouring many cups of water for the dehydrated woman. When they ask her for her name, she tells them that it is "Beloved" (62). She does not have a last name.

Over the next few days, Sethe, Paul D, and Denver tend to Beloved, who appears to be ill with fever or cholera. Beloved sleeps in Grandma Baby Suggs' old bed while Denver takes care of her. When Beloved finally wakes up, she hungers for sweets. The three devote themselves to her care. Eventually, Paul D grows suspicious of Beloved's condition, telling Sethe that she "acts sick, sounds sick, but she don't look sick" (67). He claims to have witnessed Beloved picking up a rocker with one hand and attests that Denver saw as well. When Sethe calls on Denver to corroborate Paul D's story, Denver looks directly at Paul D and lies, "I didn't see no such thing" (67).

Chapter 6 Summary

Beloved continues to live in 124 and follows Sethe around with quiet devotion. One day after Paul D has left for work, Beloved says to Sethe, "Tell me your diamonds" (69). Sethe is confused at first but remembers that Mrs. Garner once gifted her a pair of crystal earrings. When Sethe was about to marry Halle, she was not allowed to have an elaborate wedding as a slave. However, she crafted a wedding dress from scrap materials. When Mrs. Garner found out, she gifted Sethe a pair of crystal earrings as a wedding gift. Sethe waited until she was free before she allowed Grandma Baby Suggs to pierce her ears so she could wear the earrings. When Denver asks Sethe the whereabouts of the earrings, Sethe replies vaguely that they are "long gone" (71).

On another day, the three women rush home, wet from the rain. When Sethe insists on unbraiding and combing Denver's hair, Beloved asks Sethe, "Your woman she never fix up your hair?" (72). Sethe absentmindedly folds the laundry as she recalls her mother on the plantation where she was enslaved before her arrival at Sweet Home. Sethe's mother never fixed Sethe's hair, as she had to tend to labor in the fields. Another woman often came to nurse Sethe. One day her mother took her to a smokehouse and showed her a circle and cross burned into a scar underneath her breast. She told Sethe, "If something happens to me and you can't tell me by my face, you can know me by this mark" (72). At the time, Sethe did not understand that this mark was given by their master as a sign of ownership and requested a mark of her own so that her mother would recognize her, too. Her mother slapped her face in response. Afterward Sethe's mother was hung. Nan, another woman on the plantation, told Sethe about how her mother came to the plantation by slave ship. Her mother had thrown all her children overboard except for Sethe, who she gave "the name of the black man" (74).

When Sethe finishes her story, Denver is relieved that her mother's painful recollection is over. She notices that Beloved's questions probe at specific details of Sethe's past. She wonders how Beloved can possibly know about these details.

Chapter 7 Summary

Paul D notices that Beloved is "shining" (76) or becoming more attractive to him. Her womanly allure alarms him. He asks Beloved about her family and her origins, questions she dodges with vague answers. When Sethe tells Paul D not to antagonize Beloved, Beloved suddenly chokes on a raisin. Sethe and Denver rush to her care, leading her to Denver's bedroom to rest. When Sethe later demands to know why Paul D is so suspicious of Beloved, he responds that he harbors no ill will toward Beloved, proclaiming, "I never mistreated a woman in my life" (80).

This leads Sethe to wonder about other men she has known, including Halle, who she believes abandoned her a long time ago. Paul D reveals that Halle was hiding in the barn when the schoolteacher's nephews raped Sethe. Sethe is aghast, repeatedly uttering in disbelief, "He saw?" (81). Her disbelief is followed by anger that Halle did not attempt to stop the rape. Paul D tells her, "It broke him" (82). The sight of Sethe being raped had destroyed Halle mentally. Paul D tells her that the last time he saw Halle, he was smearing butter on his face, delirious from witnessing Sethe's violation. When Sethe demands to know why Paul D did not say anything to Halle at the time, Paul D reveals that he had a bit in his mouth that prevented him from talking.

He tells Sethe that he tries hard to maintain his sanity but there are times that broke him, too. For the first time since it happened, he is able to openly recall his traumatic past. He remembers encountering Mister, the Sweet Home rooster, who was able to roam free in the yard. He realized that that unlike this animal, "I wasn't allowed to be and stay what I was [...] wasn't no way I'd ever be Paul D again, living or dead" (86). When the memory becomes too

much for Sethe to bear, she kneads Paul D's knees to stop his story for the day.

Chapter 8 Summary

In Denver's bedroom, Denver and Beloved are dancing. Denver figures out that Beloved is her dead sister returned from the afterlife. She asks Beloved why she has come back to the world of the living. Beloved responds that she came back "to see her face" (88), which Denver realizes means their mother. Denver begs Beloved to not reveal her true identity to Sethe, which makes Beloved angry. Beloved stops dancing and demands, "Tell me how Sethe made you in the boat" (90).

Denver recites the story of her birth as it has been told to her. She explains that her brothers and sister were waiting for Sethe at Grandma Baby Sugg's place. When Sethe escaped from Sweet Home, she was pregnant with Denver, and she ran into Amy, a kind white woman who rubbed her injured feet and placed cobwebs on her newly scarred back to patch the wounds. Amy also helped Sethe fashion shoes out of pieces of shawl and leaves. They walked to the river, where they came across a boat with holes and a single oar. Sethe's labor pains began, and she crawled into the boat to give birth. Amy assisted Sethe through labor. Eventually Sethe successfully gave birth. When day approached, Amy told Sethe she had to go, as she could not be seen with a fugitive slave. Amy said that if the baby should ever ask who helped bring her into the world, Sethe should say "Miss Amy Denver. Of Boston" (100).

Chapters 5-8 Analysis

Signs of Beloved's identity as Sethe's dead baby appear from their first encounter. Upon first seeing Beloved, Sethe feels her bladder swell, and she relieves herself near the shed like "water breaking from a breaking womb" (61). Beloved's presence incites a maternal response from Sethe such that she experiences the feeling of a pregnant woman's water breaking in her own body. She also has a visceral reaction to Beloved's name, which is the sole word carved on the dead baby's tombstone. While Sethe does not realize the connection between "the remembrance of the glittering headstone" (63), her uncontrollable bladder, and Beloved's identity, Denver seems to recognize Beloved from the very beginning. When she learns Beloved's name, she is "shaking" (63) and curious to know her.

As Denver suspects Beloved's true identity before the others, she takes care to protect her sister from Paul D's scrutiny. When Paul D tries to get Denver to corroborate his story about witnessing Beloved picking up a chair with supernatural ease, Denver chooses to lie, telling Sethe, "I didn't see no such thing" (67). When Paul D's interrogation causes Beloved to fall sick, Denver cares for Beloved in her room. They grow close enough that Denver confirms Beloved's identity as her dead sister. While Denver anticipates this to be a moment of joyous reunification, Beloved proves temperamental and demanding. When Denver cautions Beloved to not reveal her identity to Sethe out of fear that their mother will hurt Beloved as she did once before, Beloved reacts angrily. She has a singular mission upon her return to the world of the living, which is "to see [Sethe's] face" (88). To Denver's disappointment, Beloved's reasons for her return have nothing to do with her.

Beloved's presence triggers the telling of stories from Sethe's and Paul D's pasts. With her frequent imperative of "tell me" (69), Beloved demands that Sethe and Denver share their stories of love, beauty, birth, and despair. For Sethe, the narrative of her past is an especially hard story to tell, yet Beloved's insistence forces her to remember everything. For instance, she recalls the story of how her enslaved mother murdered all her children but Sethe to prevent them from being taken into slavery. Her mother's story has a direct parallel to the drastic actions Sethe takes with her own children later.

By recounting these stories, Sethe is forced to relive her most traumatic memories, a difficult practice for someone who has repressed much of her traumatic past. This repression is especially evident in her unwillingness to receive Paul D's narrative of painful memories. Paul D is willing to talk about his past whereas Sethe is reticent. As Paul D discusses his imprisonment in Alfred, Georgia, Sethe rubs his knees as a gesture of affection but also an expression of her desire for him to stop talking. Paul D's vulnerability is too much for her to bear, but Beloved's insistent presence will force her to confront the most difficult parts of her past whether she is ready or not.

Chapters 9-12

Chapter 9 Summary

After Sethe learns the devastating news that Halle witnessed her rape and disappeared following the traumatic sight, she leads Denver and Beloved to a place in the woods called the Clearing where Grandma Baby Suggs used to preach. As they make their way there, Sethe recalls the events following her giving birth on the run and Amy's departure. She came across some black men by the river, one of whom was named Stamp Paid, who gave her safe passage to the other side where she met a black woman named Ella. Ella explained that Stamp Paid had left open a sty door as a sign that a fugitive slave needed passage. He had also tied a white rag on the post to indicate that Sethe was traveling with a newborn child. Ella came prepared with food and sustenance for Sethe and her newborn because of Stamp Paid's signal. When Sethe finally arrived at Grandma Baby Suggs' house, they embraced. Grandma Baby Suggs soaked Sethe's feet and tended to the wounds on her back. Grandma Baby Suggs had made a life for herself as a preacher who spoke about black people loving themselves after slavery. Before she passed away, she said, "There is no bad luck in the world but whitefolks" (105).

At the Clearing, Sethe remembers Grandma Baby Suggs' tender hands massaging her neck. She feels the sensation of hands touching her neck and mistakes it for Grandma Baby Suggs' presence. Suddenly the hands choke Sethe. Denver and Beloved intervene but not before Sethe's neck is covered in bruises. Beloved touches Sethe's neck gently and kisses her face, which soothes Sethe until the smell of breastmilk on Beloved's breath alarms her. Sethe leads the way back to 124, craving intimacy with Paul D.

Denver accuses Beloved of choking Sethe, confused as to why she would do so after professing to love their mother. Beloved responds, "I fixed it, didn't I? Didn't I fix her neck?" (119). She runs away from Denver. Suddenly alone, Denver remembers taking writing and reading lessons with Lady Jones. She had loved those classes until one day, a boy named Nelson Lord said to her, "Didn't your mother get locked away for murder? Wasn't you in there with her when she went?" (123). Sethe was afraid to ask her mother these questions and stopped going to the classes out of shame. Back at the Clearing, Denver attempts to find Beloved to seek forgiveness. She finds Beloved lowering her dress into the water.

Chapter 10 Summary

After Sethe ran away from Sweet Home, the schoolteacher sold Paul D to a man named Brandywine. Paul D tried to kill his new master and was sent to a prison farm where he was bound with forty-five other black men as part of a chain gang in Alfred, Georgia. The men were forced to live behind bars in small quarters underground. Every day, they woke up to the sound of a rifle shot and were forced to work in the quarry. The white guards would torture the prisoners, often forcing the prisoners to perform oral sex on them or be shot to death. When Paul D thought he might

be next, he vomited.

At one point, it rained for days, and the underground quarters were flooding. Hi Man, the leader of the chain gang, yanked their chain, alerting the others to the flood. Each member of the chain gang passed the message to the next person by yanking the chain. Hi Man gave the signal to dive under the bars when the water loosened the dirt and permitted them to swim to freedom. The men worked together by signaling one another through their connected chain to survive. When the forty-six men reached the surface, they eventually came across some Cherokee Indians who helped cut them out of their chains and offered them food. One of the Cherokees gave them the advice to “follow the tree flowers” (132) that had blossomed after the rain. The flowers would lead them to freedom. The men parted ways. Eventually Paul D arrived in Delaware, where he stayed with a woman who passed him off as her nephew. When he was finally able to move again, he made his way to Ohio where he found Sethe at 124.

Chapter 11 Summary

Paul D begins to fall asleep in places that are not Sethe’s bed. At first, he falls asleep on a rocker by the stove. Then he starts to sleep in Grandma Baby Suggs’ bed. He does not know why he is compelled to sleep elsewhere but feels that “the moving was involuntary” (136). He suspects that Beloved’s growing attractiveness has to do with his agitation at night. He tries to avoid this lust by having sex with Sethe every day, but his nighttime unrest still persists. Eventually he begins sleeping in the shed. Beloved finds him there one night and tries to have sex with him. She tells him, “I want you to touch me on the inside part,” and “Call me by my name” (137). He agrees to call her by her name if she agrees to leave. However, when he does utter the name Beloved, she remains unmoved. Eventually he gives in, and they have sex. While they are having sex, Paul D repeatedly chants, “Red heart” (138). As his words get louder, Denver overhears.

Chapter 12 Summary

Denver tries her best to keep Beloved from causing further trouble at the house. She keeps her busy by accompanying her through her daily tasks. One day Denver and Beloved make their way to the shed to get some cider. Beloved playfully hides for so long that Denver believes that she is gone permanently. As Denver begins to cry, Beloved appears again. When Denver expresses her fear that Beloved had returned to where she came from, Beloved points to the cracks of sunlight spilling into the shed and says that she is like those cracks of light. Suddenly she stands up and declares that she sees “her face” (146). When Denver asks whose face she sees, Beloved responds that it is her own.

Chapters 9-12 Analysis

While Beloved’s presence has been benign so far, her first act of physical violence toward Sethe at the Clearing foreshadows the future violence that she later incites. At the Clearing, Sethe seeks the tender presence of her mother-in-law, Grandma Baby Suggs, remembering the way she would rub her neck. Beloved takes advantage of Sethe’s moment of vulnerability to strangle her, leading Sethe to believe that the spirit of Grandma Baby Suggs is responsible. However, as Sethe is unaccustomed to divorcing tenderness and violence given her past experiences, she copes by brushing aside the attack and having sexual relations with Paul D instead.

As Paul D’s presence poses a threat to Beloved’s relationship with Sethe, Beloved hurts him next by seducing him in the cruelest manner. After coaxing him into the shed at night, she “hoist[s] her skirts and turn[s] her head over her

shoulder" (137), backing into him like the cows that Paul D and the other Sweet Home men would take their sexual frustration out on. Reminding him of his past, she amplifies her harm by compelling him to call out her name, which doubles as an intimate expression. As they are in the throes of intimacy, Beloved also chants, "Red heart" (138), a sign of vitality juxtaposed against her death. By chanting the words, she mimics a vitality that she does not embody as an afterlife figure who haunts the house in corporeal form. It is also an indirect reminder to Paul D that his survival of slavery, imprisonment, and war has forced him to exist in the space between life and constant impending death.

Beloved's increasingly worrisome behavior eventually takes a toll on Denver as well. As the only one who knows Beloved's identity, Denver takes it upon herself to conceal it from Sethe and Paul D, believing that her dead sister is the one who needs protection. However, after watching Beloved choke her mother, Denver is torn between Beloved's dangerous behavior and the knowledge of her mother's violent past. While her allegiance to Beloved is certain from the beginning, Denver has started playing a mediator role to keep Beloved's dangerous behavior at bay. She becomes a "strategist" (142) who tries to predict Beloved's mood swings and provide distractions so that she does not harm Sethe. Through this process, she transforms from an "indolent, resentful" girl to a "spry, executing" (142) grown woman who becomes increasingly capable of taking care of others.

Chapters 13-16

Chapter 13 Summary

Paul D resolves to end his illicit affair with Beloved. He has no control over his body when she comes to the shed to have sex with him. He decides to tell Sethe about what he has been doing with Beloved but is fearful that she may reject him. He waits for Sethe one day outside Sawyer's Restaurant where she works. When he greets her, he tells her that he has bad news. From Sethe's expression, Paul D can tell that she believes he is about to tell her that he is leaving her. However, as what Paul D has to tell her is worse, he lies and says that he wishes to have a baby with her instead. The thought of it makes them both amorous. They walk back to the house together. However, Sethe has no desire to have another child given that Beloved's appearance has satiated her need for an additional member of her family. When they near the house, Beloved is waiting for Sethe with a shawl to cover her from the cold. To Paul D's relief, Sethe invites him back to her bed from that day forward, ending Beloved's visits to him in the shed.

Paul D's gratitude for Sethe's invitation reminds him of his time as a fugitive when he was granted shelter by a woman. The woman fed him and gave him a bed to sleep on. The sight of a comfortable bed had moved him deeply. He is grateful to be reunited with Sethe after all these years and to receive the same sense of safety.

Chapter 14 Summary

When Paul D and Sethe return home, they go up to the bedroom to have sex. Feeling abandoned, Beloved sullenly sucks her fingers and tells Denver to "make him go away" (157). Beloved resents Paul D for stealing Sethe's attention from her. She pulls out a back tooth and feels like physical pieces of herself are falling apart. Denver asks her if the plucked tooth hurts and says that people often cry from such pain. Beloved cries.

Chapter 15 Summary

This chapter narrates Grandma Baby Suggs' experiences after she was freed by the Garners and received Sethe in her home years later. When Sethe first arrived at 124 after giving birth and surviving an arduous journey, Grandma Baby

Suggs took her in and considered the possibility that her son Halle might be dead. Stamp Paid, who had helped Sethe cross the river to freedom, was so overcome with compassion for Sethe's newborn that he picked blueberries for her despite accruing several injuries during the task. After Sethe's arrival, Grandma Baby Suggs hosted several feasts at her house, which incited the ire of her neighbors, who were jealous of such celebratory excess.

Grandma Baby Suggs was bought by the Garners from her previous owners, the Whitlows, for a discounted price due to her bad hip. This allowed the Garners to afford the purchase of Halle as well. Due to Grandma Baby Suggs' condition, she helped with light chores at Sweet Home alongside her owners. The Garners called her Jenny, which she never corrected. While the Garners were never brutal like the other slave owners, Grandma Baby Suggs believed they ran a "special kind of slavery" (165) where the slaves' treatment on the farm would fail to prepare them for the brutality that existed outside it.

Eventually Halle was able to purchase Grandma Baby Suggs' freedom. Mr. Garner took Grandma Baby Suggs to see his friends, the Bowdins, who were sympathetic white people who disapproved of slavery. The Bowdins helped Grandma Baby Suggs find a home in exchange for her washing clothes and doing cobbler work. As Mr. Garner prepared to leave, Grandma Baby Suggs inquired why the Garners referred to her as Jenny. Mr. Garner said that it was her name when he purchased her from the Whitlows. Grandma Baby Suggs renamed herself that day after her late husband and the nickname he called her. When Mr. Garner asked if Grandma Baby Suggs lived a good life at Sweet Home, she replied positively but privately thought to herself, "But you got my boy and I'm all broke down" (172). Since then she had tried to locate her other children with no success, as they had been sold off. When Sethe arrived, she was elated that a member of her family could experience freedom with her. However, Grandma Baby Suggs could sense that the celebration of Sethe's arrival also brought in "a dark and coming thing" (173).

Chapter 16 Summary

When it was discovered that Sethe was residing with Grandma Baby Suggs, the schoolteacher, one of his nephews, a slave catcher, and a sheriff arrived at 124, prepared to bring Sethe and her four children back to Sweet Home. They found Sethe in the shed with her two sons injured and bleeding on the floor. Sethe had also slit the throat of her older daughter. She was about to kill Denver as well when they walked in. Given that the children appeared to be or were dead, the schoolteacher left with his nephew and the slave catcher, as dead slaves were not profitable to him. The sheriff was tasked with arresting Sethe.

Grandma Baby Suggs and Stamp Paid tended to the two injured boys' wounds. Grandma Baby Suggs also took the dead baby from Sethe's arms and had her nurse Denver before the sheriff came back with a wagon to take her to jail. As Denver was still nursing when the sheriff returned, Sethe and her newborn were taken to jail together. Devastated that she would lose another grandchild, Grandma Baby Suggs thought of screaming after the wagon, "Don't let her take that last one too" (179). A crowd of black onlookers watched as the wagon pulled away. Two white children from the crowd came to Grandma Baby Suggs and demanded that she fix a pair of shoes by Wednesday. Stunned by her recent loss, Grandma Baby Suggs could only apologize and agree to the task.

Chapters 13-16 Analysis

These chapters tell the narrative of the night of Sethe's arrest. By the time the schoolteacher and the slave catchers arrive, Sethe has injured her two boys and killed her oldest daughter whom she is still holding in her arms when they find her. To the schoolteacher, the scene is a matter of exchange value. According to him, "there [is] nothing there to

claim" (175). This callous assessment implies that a black mother injuring and murdering her own children does not incite any moral confusion, grief, or shock. The schoolteacher sees only what he loses in property value. Furthermore, he compares the situation to "beat[ing] [a horse] beyond the point of education" (176). He believes that Sethe's actions were provoked by his nephew's mishandling of her. Instead of acknowledging the pain and trauma associated with Sethe's rape, he compares her devastating actions to the impulsive moves an animal takes after receiving extreme punishment. Even in a time of despair, the schoolteacher cannot recognize Sethe's humanity or see his own complicity in her actions against her children.

Grandma Baby Suggs' perspective of Sethe's suffering demonstrates empathy where the schoolteacher is lacking. When the sheriff departs momentarily, Grandma Baby Suggs takes on the task of caring for Sethe and her injured children before he returns. Despite the horrific nature of Sethe's actions, Grandma Baby Suggs still treats her with compassion, offering a firm but gentle reminder: "It's time to nurse your youngest" (179). She struggles to make Sethe clean the blood from her body so that she can be arrested with dignity, but Sethe refuses.

While the schoolteacher and his nephews portray a more explicit form of violence through power and ownership, these chapters also demonstrate ways in which white people enact violence in more benevolent forms. For instance, when Halle successfully buys his mother's freedom from Mr. Garner, Grandma Baby Suggs is reticent to celebrate, as her freedom is contingent upon Halle's continued enslavement. When Mr. Garner brings Grandma Baby Suggs to meet the Bowdins, who will ensure that she has a job and lives well, she thinks to herself, "But you got my boy and I'm all broke down" (172). She knows that Mr. Garner's willingness to let Halle buy Grandma Baby Suggs' freedom is not a wholly altruistic act, as he still has an able-bodied slave in Halle. Grandma Baby Suggs' declining health also means that she will eventually be of no use to the Garners, so her freedom will not be an immense loss to the farm. The Garners' actions demonstrate that even benevolent expressions of power in a system of slavery can still be oppressive.

Chapters 17-19

Chapter 17 Summary

While Stamp Paid and Paul D are working at the slaughterhouse, Stamp Paid shows Paul D a newspaper clipping about Sethe's arrest after she was found with her murdered child. Stamp Paid explains that on the night of the celebratory feast, the schoolteacher came with his men to take Sethe and her children back to Sweet Home. While the neighbors generally have a system of notifying one another when slave catchers are on the road, nobody alerted Grandma Baby Suggs at the time. Stamp Paid believes that everybody was resentful of Grandma Baby Suggs' life and "just wanted to know if Baby really was special" (185). Since Grandma Baby Suggs and Sethe did not know that the schoolteacher and his men were coming until too late, Sethe made the impulsive decision to take her children with her to the shed and take matters into her own hands. While Stamp Paid relays this story, Paul D does not seem to register its details. He repeatedly gestures to the image of Sethe in the newspaper clipping and says, "That ain't her mouth" (181).

Chapter 18 Summary

When Paul D shows Sethe the news clipping that Stamp Paid gave to him, Sethe spins in a circle and rambles about the day the schoolteacher came with his men. Paul D wants to believe that the newspaper clipping is a joke. However, when Sethe confirms that the events in the article are true, Paul D is frightened and realizes that the Sethe

he sees before him is not the girl he knew back at Sweet Home. When he asks her why she killed her own child, Sethe responds assertively, "I took and put my babies where they'd be safe" (193). Her confident response scares him. He tells her that what she did was wrong, but she claims that a life of slavery for her children would be far worse. Paul D insists that there is some other way. He insults her by saying, "You've got two feet, Sethe, not four" (194). The cruelty of comparing her to an animal forms an emotional barrier between them. Paul D sees Beloved listening from the stairs. He leaves with a flimsy promise of returning, but Sethe knows that he does not intend to come back.

Chapter 19 Summary

This chapter moves between Stamp Paid's perspective narrated in third person and Sethe's address to Beloved in first person. At the beginning of the chapter, Stamp Paid goes to 124 with the intention of making amends with Sethe after revealing her traumatic story to Paul D. He feels an obligation "to make right what he may have done wrong to Baby Suggs' kin" (202). He suspects that the town of black people turning on Sethe after she killed her daughter is one of the main causes of Baby Suggs' death. When he reaches 124, he loses his will and goes away. He tries to knock on the door of 124 in the days after but leaves each time.

He finally gains the courage to knock on the door of 124 after a series of signs. One of these signs is when he runs into Ella. Hearing her disparage Sethe's actions and abandonment of Paul D, Stamp Paid is dismayed by how the black people of the town have neglected to care for one another in a time of need. Paul D has taken residence in the cellar of a nearby church, having nowhere else to go. Stamp Paid tells Ella that he is responsible for Paul D's departure from 124, which surprises Ella, who had assumed that Paul D had known Sethe's whole story and agreed with her actions. She had passed judgment on Paul D and was reluctant to reach out to help him due to these assumptions.

Stamp Paid finds another sign in the form of a ribbon with a bit of hair attached to it stuck on the bottom of his boat. The ribbon is a sign of the many people he helped escape to freedom before the Civil War. He holds on to this ribbon as a reminder of his commitment to his community.

By the end of the chapter, the growing callousness of his community and his desire to do better for its suffering members convinces Stamp Paid to finally knock on the door of 124. While he spies the backs of Denver and Beloved in the window of the house, no one answers him. The house seems to be surrounded by haunted voices obscuring the sound of his knocking.

Meanwhile, Sethe copes with Paul D's departure by unearthing a two pairs of ice skates from her home. Since there are more people in her home than there are skates, Sethe, Denver, and Beloved take turns with the skates on the ice. When they return home to warm themselves by the fire, Beloved hums a song that Sethe used to sing to her dead daughter. Sethe is startled and says, "Nobody knows that song but me and my children" (207). Beloved states plainly, "I know it" (207). Sethe realizes that Beloved is her dead daughter come back to life and is relieved to learn that Beloved is not mad at Sethe for killing her. The next day, Sethe is late to work for the first time, drowsy from the former night's realization.

Sethe tries to indirectly express to Beloved the reasons behind her impulsive act and the tensions leading up to it. She recalls the early days when the schoolteacher had just taken over Sweet Home. The schoolteacher was a practitioner of eugenics, studying the black people at Sweet Home as part of his research on race and biology. He had also installed changes that made it even more difficult for Sethe and Halle to gain their freedom. For instance,

the schoolteacher forbade Halle from working outside Sweet Home to earn money on the side. Halle's paid labor had enabled him to buy his mother's freedom. After the schoolteacher's new rule on the matter, Halle realized he could not do the same with his wife or children. Halle said to Sethe one night, "If all my labor is Sweet Home, including the extra, what I got left to sell?" (232). When Sethe recalls this realization, she is devastated. The memories, including that of her guilt over her daughter's death, propel her to return home after work and lock the door behind her.

Chapters 17-19 Analysis

Paul D's departure from 124 and Beloved's revelation of her true identity are two dual events that lead to Sethe's deep descent into her traumatic past. Paul D's presence serves as a buffer between Beloved's desire to possess her mother and Sethe's attempts to manage her own traumatic memories. With Paul D gone, Beloved is able to reveal herself in the uninterrupted company of her living family, finally gaining Sethe's full attention. Beloved's revelation moves Sethe, as it unearths the latent guilt Sethe has felt since taking her daughter's life. Rather than express fear, Sethe is relieved that Beloved seems to have forgiven her. The morning after Beloved's revelation, Sethe thinks, "She ain't even mad with me. Not a bit" (214). However, she still tries to justify her actions to Beloved through a first-person narrative that addresses her dead daughter. She emphasizes her struggle to free her children and get them to safety, stating, "But I got you out, baby" (233). Sethe reminds Beloved of the trials she had to face to return to her with breastmilk. This act of love is important to Sethe, as her own mother was not able to breastfeed her as a slave. By fixating on being able to breastfeed Beloved, Sethe convinces herself that she is free from inheriting the intergenerational trauma of her family. However, Sethe's lingering guilt reveals that she has not healed from the events of her past. Beloved's presence continues to remind her of what she cannot repair.

These chapters also provide insight into the black community's ostracization of Sethe and especially their complicity in her arrest. Stamp Paid is the member of the black community most sympathetic to what Grandma Baby Suggs' family has endured, a feeling that eventually provokes him to approach Sethe following revealing her history to Paul D. He acknowledges that the black townspeople had judged Sethe long before her arrest, "longing for Sethe to come on difficult times" (202). After Sethe's arrest, the town views her "outrageous claims, her self-sufficiency" (202) as prideful, ostracizing her further instead of showing compassion for her circumstances. Now that Sethe has fallen on hard times again, Stamp Paid revisits his past actions, remembering that he has dedicated his life to helping runaway slaves gain their freedom. He intervenes in a small way by talking to Ella about Sethe and Paul D, slowly softening the hearts of the black townspeople who have turned away from the family living in 124.

Chapters 20-24

Chapter 20 Summary

Told from Sethe's voice in first person, this chapter reveals Sethe's feelings about the discovery that Beloved is her daughter. Sethe repeats the words, "She mine" (236) about Beloved. This lament forces Sethe to recall her past, especially her shame and confusion over her rape by the schoolteacher's nephews. She recalls running away from Sweet Home and sending her children off with an unnamed figure who assists runaway slaves to freedom. She had decided, "I had to go back" (238) to look for Halle. She also expresses her justification for trying to kill all her children: "My plan was to take all of us to the other side where my own ma'am is" (240). She reveals that she had not only planned on killing all of her children but also herself.

Chapter 21 Summary

Told from Denver's perspective in first person, this chapter features Denver's feelings about Beloved's presence in her life with her mother. She expresses fear and mistrust of Sethe after learning of Sethe's attempt to kill all her children. Denver dreams that "she cut my head off every night" (243). Before her brothers left the house, they used to tell Denver how to kill Sethe should she ever try to hurt her again. Denver also recalls the stories Grandma Baby Suggs told her about her father Halle and determines that he is an "angel man" (246). She imagines his kindness in contrast to Sethe's cold detachment. As her dead sister has come back to her, Denver imagines that Halle can return as well. She envisions a family consisting of "me, him and Beloved" (246). She does not care if Sethe remains or goes. Echoing her mother's sense of possession over her dead sister, Denver also expresses, "She's mine, Beloved" (247).

Chapter 22 Summary

Told from Beloved's perspective in first person, this chapter features Beloved's fragmented thoughts and feelings about her return to the living world. She recalls a memory of being on a bridge where she is separated from Sethe. She remembers Sethe smiling upon their separation. In the afterlife, she sees her father, "my dead man" (250), whose death she watches over. However, Beloved is obsessed with Sethe, the parent whose separation has been the most difficult. She laments, "I want to be the two of us" and "I want the join" (252) as expressions of her desire to be with Sethe again.

Chapter 23 Summary

This chapter illustrates Beloved's voice in more coherent prose. She recounts her memory of being separated from Sethe on a bridge once again but does not mention being killed by her own mother as her last memory. She was afraid that she would not be able to find Sethe again but is elated to have found Sethe at 124 at last.

The chapter also features mixed dialogue between Sethe, Denver, and Beloved. It is unclear who speaks at different turns, but the dialogue features various identifying refrains such as Denver's concerned caution to Beloved, "'Don't love her too much'" (255). In this statement, Denver warns Beloved that Sethe has a dangerous past. Other times, Sethe seeks Beloved's forgiveness, asking her dead daughter, "'Do you forgive me? Will you stay?'" (254). At the end of the chapter, all three women say to one another, "'You are mine'" (254).

Chapter 24 Summary

At the church where Paul D has been staying since he left 124, he thinks of his past. The schoolteacher's presence at Sweet Home was a turning point for everyone: "Schoolteacher broke into children what Garner had raised into men" (260). When things worsened with the schoolteacher, one of the Sweet Home men, Sixo, told Halle about his woman friend, nicknamed the Thirty-Mile Woman, who had mentioned that several slaves were planning to run away to the North and that two knew the way. One of them was a woman who would wait for them when the corn was high. The slaves of Sweet Home were divided about what to do.

Sethe became pregnant, and the schoolteacher made routines stricter around the farm. They all had to plan their runaway around these new obstacles. When the corn was high, Paul D could not find Halle, Sethe, or Paul A so he made his way to their meeting spot at the creek in the hopes that they would meet him there. Only Sixo arrived with the Thirty-Mile Woman. Suddenly the schoolteacher and several other white men were pursuing them. The Thirty-Mile

Woman managed to run away, but Sixo and Paul D were caught. Sixo defiantly shouted and sang, so the schoolteacher declared, "This one will never be suitable" (266). The white men burned Sixo alive and shot him. Meanwhile, a shackled Paul D was returned to Sweet Home.

Back on the farm, Paul D relayed what happened to Sethe. He said that Halle was nowhere to be found and that Sixo was killed. Sethe told him that she intended to run anyway despite being pregnant.

Chapters 20-24 Analysis

These chapters feature the individual and blended voices of Sethe, Denver, and Beloved as their lives become further intertwined. Sethe's voice expresses a persistent guilt about killing Beloved. She repeats the following sentiment in different iterations: "When I explain it she'll understand, because she understands everything already" (236). While Sethe states that "she'll understand," her repeated insistence suggests that she is still trying to convince herself that Beloved will understand. Sethe feels that she needs to prove her love to Beloved now that Beloved has returned in corporeal form. This guilt-driven obsession proves never-ending, as she cannot reverse killing her.

Meanwhile, Denver expresses her fear of her mother, stating, "She cut my head off every night" (243). While her mother did not harm her in the shed, growing up with the knowledge of what her mother could be capable of has only enriched her fear. She idealizes her absent father, an "angel man" (246) who is a contrast to her mother's violence. As she has never met him, she can only romanticize him against her mother's cruel ways.

Beloved's perspective appears across two chapters, each one featuring a distinct voice. In one chapter, Beloved speaks in nonsensical fragments and without punctuation. Through her descriptions, she expresses that she has been watching Sethe from the afterlife for some time. She shares that she was searching for Sethe's face when she emerged from the water, that "Sethe's is the face that left me Sethe sees me see her" (250). By pursuing the impression of Sethe's face, Beloved is able to locate Sethe at 124. Meanwhile, in the second chapter, Beloved speaks more directly. She repeats the sentiment, "I will not lose again. She is mine" (254). The expression "She is mine" is a possessive desire that Sethe and Denver separately articulate in their chapters. While Sethe and Denver are referring separately to Beloved, Beloved is only concerned with possessing Sethe.

Chapters 25-28

Chapter 25 Summary

Stamp Paid visits Paul D at the church to apologize for neglecting to offer him a place to stay after he left 124. He also extends an apology on behalf of the rest of the town for ostracizing Paul D as they had Sethe. Paul D asks about a woman named Judy who he intends to stay with after the church. He seems to be drunk when he asks about her. Stamp Paid, still intent on righting his wrongs, proceeds to tell Paul D two stories.

His first story is about how he got his name. Originally called Joshua during his time as a slave, he watched as his master took sexual advantage of his wife Vashti. His master made his wife wear a black ribbon as a marker of his sexual ownership of her. One night, Stamp Paid hinted about his master's indiscretion to his wife, which led to the end of his master and Vashti's relationship. Stamp Paid considered his master's actions against his wife a form of payment for his labor on the property. This transactional view of his time as an enslaved person led him to the name Stamp Paid. As Stamp Paid talks about how he wanted to snap his wife's neck from the betrayal and how this was

the lowest he felt during his time enslaved.

When Paul D is confused as to why Stamp Paid is telling him this, Stamp Paid tells a second story about how he was present when Sethe tried to kill all her children and herself in the shed. Stamp Paid tells Paul D that Sethe isn't crazy but that "she was trying to out-hurt the hurter" and "spread it" (276). Paul D says that what terrifies him more is not Sethe but the presence of Beloved in the house. Stamp Paid and Paul D establish that the two of them, Denver, and Sethe are the only ones to have encountered Beloved and that she seems to have come out of nowhere. Stamp Paid asks Paul D if Beloved is what scared him away from 124 and not Sethe. Paul D responds, "How much is a nigger supposed to take?" (277).

Chapter 26 Summary

Over time, Sethe becomes further enthralled by the realization that Beloved is her dead daughter. She arrives at work little bit later every day until she is eventually fired. Without a job, Sethe ends up giving much of her food and time to Beloved, who devours both with glee. Denver joins in at first, afraid that Sethe will harm Beloved. She realizes eventually, though, that Beloved has her mother possessed. Sethe caters to Beloved's every need and tantrum. Denver notes that it is "as though Sethe [doesn't] really want forgiveness given; she want[s] it refused" (297). Recognizing that they will all eventually starve with Sethe in her current state, Denver vows to leave 124 on her own for the first time to seek out help.

Denver's first stop is the home of her former teacher, Lady Jones. She asks Lady Jones for a job, but since she has no skills, Lady Jones cannot help her. Instead Lady Jones lets others know about Denver's circumstances. The town responds by leaving food for Denver. After Denver finishes the food, she returns the plates and baskets on which the food is served to their rightful owners, exposing her to other people in the town. Occasionally they teach her new skills that she can use to eventually get a job. Finally, Denver interviews with Janey Wagon, a longtime servant for the elderly Bowdins. In exchange for a job as a nighttime caretaker of the Bowdins' home, Denver tells Janey about the recent disturbances at her home, including Beloved's upsetting arrival. After consulting with the Bowdins, Janey offers Denver the job.

Meanwhile, Janey tells the rest of the townspeople about Beloved. Everyone suspects that Beloved is Sethe's dead daughter come back to inflict justice on Sethe. Ella, Sethe's former friend, comes to Sethe's defense when others relish this sense of justice too insensitively. Ella leads a group of townswomen to confront the haunting at 124.

At the same time, Mr. Bowdin is on his way to pick up Denver to start her new job at his house. He arrives at the same time as the women, led by Ella. Sethe and Beloved hear the commotion and go out onto the porch. Sethe, still holding an ice pick from breaking ice just then, notices Mr. Bowdin in the crowd. Seeing a white man for the first time in a while, she experiences a flashback of the schoolteacher returning to capture her. The chapter ends with Sethe lunging at Mr. Bowdin with her ice pick.

Chapter 27 Summary

The chapter reveals the aftermath of Sethe's attack from Paul D's perspective. He hears from Stamp Paid that Sethe lunged toward Mr. Bowdin, confusing him for her former white master. Denver, Ella, and other women restrained her and knocked the weapon from her hand. When the townspeople tackled Sethe to the ground, it was said that Beloved "exploded right before their eyes" (310). She disappeared. Meanwhile, Mr. Bowdin was so confused about the

circumstances that he did not intend to press charges against Sethe.

Paul D runs into Denver one day after the incident at 124. Denver tells him that she has been doing night work at the Bowdins and plans to take on another job at a shirt factory. She has been taking care of her mother during the day but does not live at 124 anymore. Paul D asks Denver if she is sure that Beloved was her dead sister. Denver replies that she believes she might be “more” (314).

As Paul D makes his way to 124 to visit Sethe, he thinks of all the trials he has survived from being imprisoned in Alfred, Georgia, to serving on both sides of the Civil War just to make a living. When he arrives at 124, he sees a defeated Sethe lying on Grandma Baby Suggs’ bed. Sethe is beside herself with grief over Beloved’s departure. Paul D tells Sethe that he will take care of her alongside Denver. He tells her to not give up on survival.

Chapter 28 Summary

In the final chapter of the novel, the memory of Beloved still haunts 124 but not in the same way as it once did. The refrain “It was not a story to pass on” (323) signals that Sethe and Paul D will put the past to rest until “by and by all trace is gone” (324).

Chapters 25-28 Analysis

In the final chapters of the novel, Denver experiences tremendous growth that allows her to advocate on behalf of her mother when Sethe is fully possessed by Beloved. While Denver has grown up with the belief that Sethe is dangerous, she realizes that Beloved’s presence is more of a concern, as her mother is investing all her energy in keeping her dead daughter satiated. However, Denver notes that it is “as though Sethe [doesn’t] really want forgiveness given; she want[s] it refused” (297). Sethe cannot forgive herself for killing Beloved, and her dead daughter’s increasing demands make it impossible for her to heal her guilt. As Beloved is a manifestation of Sethe’s past, she exerts power over her mother’s life. Beloved’s needs are insatiable because Sethe believes she does not deserve forgiveness, preferring to relive her painful past to punish herself.

Urged by Sethe’s emaciated state to act, Denver leaves 124 on her own for the first time and slowly incites the black community around her to rally in support of her family. While the community had previously ostracized Sethe, Denver’s willingness to open herself to the community endears everyone to her. In the end, a group of women lead the charge to exorcise 124 and save Sethe from harming Mr. Bowdin. The collective action of the group of black women offers a reparative ending to the strife the women of 124 experience. Whereas kinship among the women of 124 has been colored by trauma, the collective action of the town’s black women demonstrates the power of community.

By the end of the novel, Denver has taken over care of Sethe while her mother grieves the loss of Beloved. Despite Beloved’s cruelty, Sethe still insists, “She was my best thing” (321). While once repressed, Sethe is forced to confront her most painful experiences after her dead daughter’s temporary return to life provides relief for all the grief she has harbored over the years. With Beloved gone, Sethe still longs for this small relief. However, Paul D experiences a change in his healing journey as well. With time away from 124, he reconciles with his past and is determined to not be a victim to his circumstances any longer. He tells Sethe, “We need some kind of tomorrow” (322). In these words, Paul D offers hope through survival. By choosing “tomorrow,” Paul D suggests that dwelling in the past is not a sustainable to survive. To heal, they must look toward the future.

Character Analysis

Sethe

Sethe is the protagonist of the novel. Her traumatic past comes back to haunt her at house 124. She grows up as a slave, separated from a mother who killed all her children but Sethe. Her mother gives Sethe her birth father's male name, but this story is relayed to her by another enslaved woman, as her mother is killed before she has the chance to explain. Years later, Sethe repeats her mother's tragic actions against her own children. After running away from Sweet Home where she was enslaved, Sethe lives in hiding at her mother-in-law Grandma Baby Suggs' house with her four children. When her former master finds her, she tries to kill her children and herself, succeeding in killing only her oldest daughter. While the horror of her actions prevents her from being brought back into slavery, it also results in her ostracization from the rest of the black community, the eventual death of Grandma Baby Suggs, the departure of her two sons, and the haunting of 124 by her dead daughter's spirit.

Throughout the hardships of Sethe's life, she exhibits resilience and immense strength. After surviving her rape at the hands of the nephew of her former slave master, the schoolteacher, she runs away while pregnant with her youngest daughter, Denver, and without her husband, Halle. Despite being close to death, she survives with the help of a kind white woman, Amy, who helps her give birth. After Amy's assistance, Sethe completes her journey on her own, arriving safely at Grandma Baby Suggs' door with her newborn infant. The townspeople interpret Sethe's resilience and strength as pride, leading them to betray and shun her. When Sethe is arrested after attempting to kill all her children and herself, the townspeople judge her not for the horrific circumstances of her actions, but rather for her "outrageous claims, her self-sufficiency" (202). Hurt from the townspeople's betrayal, Sethe never seeks anybody's help after the incident in the shed. As a result, she becomes more independent and isolated.

Since Sethe has overcome so many difficult life circumstances, she does not flinch when it comes to potentially fearful or violent events. When the haint of 124 throttles the family dog, Here Boy, so severely that several of his joints and limbs are out of place, Sethe swiftly sets his bones. To Denver, Sethe is the "one who never look[s] away" (14) from any horrific circumstance but rather look[s] directly at it without fear. Since Sethe is hardened from her experiences, this attitude carries through until the novel's end when she impulsively attacks Mr. Bowdin, believing him to be the schoolteacher. Refusing to be taken back to captivity, she responds instantly despite her error in recognition.

Beloved

After Paul D chases away the spirit of Sethe's dead daughter from 124, the spirit takes the corporeal form of Beloved, a beautiful and mysterious "sleepy beauty" (63) dressed in fine clothes who appears at the house one day. Beloved's appearance incites varied reactions from those around her—Paul D's curiosity, Sethe's instinctual warmth, and Denver's nervousness. She gradually becomes a part of the household, accepted openly by Sethe and Denver but arousing suspicion in Paul D. Over time, she demonstrates increasingly alarming behavior that betrays her identity as Sethe's dead daughter and her capacity to do harm to those around her. She seduces Paul D in an attempt to drive him away from Sethe, cruelly reminding him of his sexually repressed past and unstable present. Additionally, she taunts and dismisses Denver, repeatedly reminding her doting sister that she did not enter into the world of the living for her. She makes it clear that she is only interested in possessing Sethe, proclaiming, "She is the one. She is the one I need. You can go but she is the one I have to have" (89).

Beloved unsettles those around her with visions of a past she could not possibly know about. The level of intimacy in her revelations grows increasingly sentimental until she finally hums a song that Sethe would sing to her dead daughter. By informing Sethe of her identity in such a way, Beloved emotionally manipulates her mother's sense of latent guilt. Beloved's possession of Sethe is so strong that she can coax her mother into abandoning all her responsibilities to tend to her every need. She delights in Sethe's dependency on her approval, escalating her demands at every turn. When the townspeople gather to exorcize her from 124, Beloved appears to them as a "pregnant woman, naked and smiling" (308). She has taken on the form of someone disarming, despite possessing supernatural abilities to manipulate the actions of people around her.

Beloved acquires her name from the lone word printed on her pink tombstone. Since Sethe could not afford a more elaborate engraving, she offered the engraver "the one word that mattered" (5) from the phrase "dearly beloved," part of the preacher's sermon during her daughter's funeral. When Beloved introduces herself, Sethe is "deeply touched by her sweet name" (63) and feels immediate affection toward her. Unlike Denver, whose name has a more original and specific origin, Beloved's name is as ephemeral as her haunted presence. Her name gestures to her temporal existence between life and death.

Denver

As Sethe's youngest and only surviving daughter, Denver has spent much of her life burdened by the knowledge of her mother's violence. As the only one of Sethe's living children to reside at 124, Denver grows up sullen, petulant, and isolated. Given Sethe's ostracization from the rest of the black community, Denver does not have the opportunity to socialize beyond her immediate household. After her brothers' departure from the house and the passing of Grandma Baby Suggs, Denver knows only the company of her mother and her dead sister's spirit. As a result, she is resistant to strangers such as Paul D, who she initially views as a threat to her place in the house. When Paul D visits, she is overwhelmed by his presence and protests, "I can't live here. I don't know where to go or what to do, but I can't live here" (17). As her mother is so preoccupied with her repressed grief, Denver realizes that the addition of Paul D in their lives will mean that she will become less of a priority in the house. She will cease to matter.

While her isolated upbringing has hampered her emotional maturity, she experiences an immense growth over the course of the novel. By devoting so much of her time to protecting Beloved's identity, Denver learns to care for someone other than herself. She also demonstrates tactfulness and intelligence in the way she guards Beloved from Paul D's suspicion. When Paul D attempts to enlist Denver's help in corroborating a detail about Beloved's curious behavior, Denver's eyes become "deceptive, even when she [holds] a steady gaze" (67). She lies to prevent Paul D from exposing Beloved's true form and to keep her mother from enacting the same violence she did years ago when she murdered her sister. In each of her actions, Denver is motivated by love, loyalty, and a deep desire to be needed.

By the end of the novel, Denver achieves a more empathetic perspective of her mother's traumatic past. She realizes that Beloved is not a benign spirit but a dangerous supernatural creature who is killing Sethe slowly. When Sethe is fired from her job after being fully possessed by Beloved, Denver leaves the house by herself for the first time to seek employment to care for her mother. Without any skills or prior training, she manages to gradually endear herself to the townspeople, eventually acquiring a job as the Bowdins' nighttime caretaker. She even alerts the townspeople to her mother's struggle, which leads them to intervene and help get rid of Sethe's possession. Her growth is so notable by the novel's end that Stamp Paid remarks with admiration, "I'm proud of her. She turning out fine" (313).

Paul D

Paul D began his enslavement alongside four other men and Sethe at Sweet Home under the ownership of the Garners. When Mr. Garner passes away, leaving the schoolteacher in charge, Paul D is sold to another slaveowner named Brandywine. When Paul D attacks Brandywine, he is sent to a prison farm in Alfred, Georgia, where the white guards sexually and physically abuse him. He is fortunately able to escape with the other inmates during a flood. In the years following, he serves as a soldier on both the Union and Confederate sides of the Civil War, as he does not have many other employment options available to him as a former slave. After the war ends, he wanders on his own and takes employment wherever it is available.

After slavery is abolished, he encounters Sethe again in Ohio. He is reminded that during his time at Sweet Home, he and the other men coveted Sethe as a potential mate when she first arrived. Like the other Sweet Home men, his masculine desires were repressed under his enslavement, so he mitigated his feelings by “fucking cows, dreaming of rape, thrashing on pallets” (13). Despite this frustration, the Sweet Home men let Sethe choose her mate from among them. Although Sethe chose to be with Halle at the time, Paul D and Sethe begin a relationship when they reunite years later. However, the trauma of Paul D’s enslavement still haunts him. As his trauma is largely associated with his emasculation as a black man, he struggles to express his desires in truly vulnerable ways, leading to his inability to form long-lasting, committed relationships with others. After consummating his relationship with Sethe, Paul D remains “guarded and stirred up” (30) by Sethe’s eyes, suddenly disturbed by the scars on her back. Although he seeks her permission to stay at the house and tries to create a family with her, his fear of his past, which manifests in his relationship with Sethe, intervenes. He leaves her after learning that she had killed her own daughter. By the end of the novel, he faces his past and returns to Sethe with a newfound sense of tenderness and vulnerability, reminding her, “You your best thing, Sethe” (322).

Themes

The Trauma and Memory of Slavery

Following the abolishment of slavery, the trauma of enslavement still follows Sethe and Paul D as their relationship forces them both to remember the horrors of their pasts. This trauma persists in various hauntings—from the haint possessing house 124 to the sudden appearance of Beloved. Each haunting reminds the formerly enslaved characters of the residual trauma they grapple with even long after slavery's abolishment. Both Sethe and Paul D struggle with their coping mechanisms at the start of the novel, moving between repression and silence.

For Sethe, her isolation from the townspeople has enabled her to avoid confronting the horrors of her past, particularly her violent actions toward her own children. However, the temperamental haint of 124 physically articulates the anger and pain that Sethe has repressed by shaking the house and tossing its furniture. The haint, the spirit of Sethe's dead daughter, imbues the house with "baby's venom" (3), and it is also a constant reminder of Sethe's fear of being enslaved once again.

Paul D has coped with his enslavement and subsequent imprisonment by moving from place to place. House 124 is one of the first places he has settled in a while. His growing intimacy with Sethe, a woman he has desired since they were enslaved together at Sweet Home, compels him to speak about his traumas for the first time. However, the process of narrating his traumatic experiences is not easy, as he is practiced in keeping his past to himself. He has placed his feelings in a "tobacco tin buried in his chest where a red heart used to be" (86). Like Sethe, he has been desensitized by the rapidity of his traumatic experiences during his enslavement and imprisonment. The only viable way of coping he has had all these years is not to feel. Throughout the novel, Sethe and Paul D heal from their traumatic pasts and reconcile with their painful memories of enslavement.

The Destruction of Black Identity

Long after the abolishment of slavery, white people enact control over black people through the destruction of black identity. The most violent example of this harm is the schoolteacher's methods of controlling and punishing the enslaved black people at Sweet Home. His cruel punishments include burning Sixo alive and whipping Sethe when she informs him that his nephews raped her. He is able to justify his dehumanization of them by assigning white superiority over their black identity. As an educator, he practices eugenics, a science rooted in biological racism, and studies the bodies and practices of his black slaves, establishing ideas about black inferiority. To the schoolteacher, the ownership and control of black slaves is the same as taming animals. When he finds Sethe in the shed with her injured and murdered children, he does not express any emotion over the scene but rather calculates his own losses in labor and property value. He determines that Sethe has "gone wild" (176) as horses do when they reach their threshold for physical punishment.

Slavery's psychic and physical harms also have a detrimental impact upon kinship among the black townspeople in the novel. While Grandma Baby Suggs labors to produce a sense of community and healing for the townspeople, they betray her family by neglecting to inform her of the slave catchers' arrival. While they have all benefitted from Grandma Baby Suggs' words of wisdom over the years, they also grow increasingly jealous of her life when her family slowly rejoins her. Grandma Baby Suggs is so heartbroken by this betrayal from her black community that she becomes sick shortly after and passes away. To her, the betrayal is the fault of whiteness, leading her to proclaim,

“There is no bad luck in the world but whitefolks” (105). The persistent influence of whiteness continues to disrupt black kinship, even in a town of black people who have the opportunity to protect one another.

The Intimacy of Mother-Daughter Relationships

While there are different forms of intimate relationships throughout the novel, the most prominent ones are between mothers and daughters. For Sethe, the trauma of motherhood begins with her own mother, who killed every one of her children but Sethe. While Sethe cannot comprehend the meaning behind her mother's actions when she is younger, she will go on to repeat her mother's violent actions against her own children to prevent them from being captured into slavery. In both incidents, the mother permits the survival of one daughter who will live to either break the cycle of intergenerational trauma or sustain the pain for another generation.

For Sethe, this tension is exemplified through her two daughters, Denver and Beloved. Whereas Denver stands for the future of growth and healing from trauma, Beloved represents the inability to let go of the past. Denver grows from protecting Beloved to shielding her mother from her dead sister's possession. Despite being afraid of her mother's capacity for violence, Denver also realizes from witnessing Beloved's possession that “if Sethe [doesn't] wake up one morning and pick up a knife, Beloved might” (285). Denver witnesses her mother's pain over time and understands Beloved's possession for what it is. Meanwhile, Beloved's possession represents an unwillingness to heal. Sethe nurses this possession by providing motherly love in excess, spoiling Beloved and feeding her own guilt over killing her child. Realizing this is not sustainable, Denver seeks outside help, disrupting the abusive pattern of mother and daughter relationships by being open to new forms of kinship that might heal them.

Symbols & Motifs

The Haint

The haint is the spirit of Sethe's baby daughter who haunts house 124. A temperamental spirit whose behavior vacillates between calm and turbulent, the haint reflects the violent conditions under which Sethe's baby daughter died. In its invisible form, the haint is also a representation of Sethe's residual anger and pain over the hardships she experienced during her enslavement. Despite the unstable nature of her pain, Sethe's repression causes her to ignore the magnitude of her suffering as well as the extent of the haint's destruction in the house. Paul D suggests to Sethe that the haint's temper may have something to do with an unfulfilled desire: "Must be something you got it wants" (16). As Paul D notices, the haint is attached to Sethe's traumas and reacts to the intensity of her internal struggle.

The haint eventually takes on corporeal form as Beloved when Paul D chases the spirit out of the house. In her the form of a beautiful young woman, the haint becomes even more frightening and dangerous, as she cannot be physically ignored in the way the spirit, who came and went, could. Beloved quickly becomes a permanent resident of 124 and grows in strength when the three women live alone together in the house. When Sethe's focus is no longer divided between her daughters and Paul D, Beloved's demands for motherly affection grow in intensity. Sethe indulges Beloved's demands as though "[she] [doesn't] really want forgiveness given; she want[s] it refused" (297). At this point, Beloved has become the manifestation of Sethe's guilt and inability to overcome her traumatic past. Sethe permits Beloved's needs to overtake her, driving herself toward death until Denver's intervention.

The Home

The house numbered 124 is a crucial setting for the haunted circumstances of the novel and represents the various means by which its residents try to overcome their traumatic pasts. Owned by the Bowdins and given to Grandma Baby Suggs' care when they are no longer able to tend to it on their own, the house is an initial step toward freedom from slavery. However, since the traumatic events in the shed, the house has been conflated with the haint that haunts it. According to Denver, the house is "a person rather than a structure" (35). She further personifies this house as a "child approaching a nervous, idle relative (someone dependent but proud)" (35). Through this portrayal, Denver foreshadows the eventual appearance of Beloved, Sethe's baby daughter returned to the world of the living to haunt the house in corporeal form. Beloved draws her strength from the house and by keeping Sethe bound to it.

House 124 also consists of the shed in the backyard where Sethe goes to kill her children and herself to avoid being caught by slave catchers. The shed continues to be a place of darkness and indiscretion for the house's residents. Beloved utilizes it to cruelly seduce Paul D and draw him away from Sethe. The shed is also where Beloved disappears during a mean-spirited game of hide-and-seek with Denver. During the game, Beloved gestures to the space between light and darkness in the shed and declares, "This is the place I am" (146). In this way, Beloved refers not only to her existence between worlds, between the living and the afterlife, but also to her intimate ties to house 124.

Ribbons

Ribbons appear repeatedly throughout the novel as an expression of femininity and innocence threatened by the horrors of slavery. Stamp Paid tells Paul D about the black ribbon that his slave owner made his wife wear when he

coerced her into a sexual relationship with him. As the accessory was more fanciful than the usual slave dress, the ribbon was a taunting gesture of white ownership. Its black color also lends a funereal quality to the sexual relationship, something not unfamiliar to other enslaved women like Sethe, who was raped by the schoolteacher's kin.

In another instance, a red ribbon appears underneath Stamp Paid's boat. The ribbon has a piece of a young girl's scalp and hair attached to it. It is what remains of one of his last trips ferrying runaway slaves to safety before the abolishment of slavery. The ribbon reminds him of his obligation to the black community and his service to black people. His discovery of the ribbon gives him courage to approach Sethe and help her after years of being complicit in her ostracization. For Stamp Paid, "the skin smell [on the ribbon] nag[s] him, and his weakened marrow [makes] him dwell on Baby Suggs' wish to consider what in the world was harmless" (213). The ribbon reminds him of Grandma Baby Suggs' hope for humanity and makes him consider he might recommit his life to helping those most vulnerable.

Important Quotes

1. "124 was spiteful. Full of a baby's venom."

([Chapter 1](#), Page 1)

In the opening sentence of the novel, the house numbered 124 is personified as the haint that haunts it. The haint is Sethe's dead daughter who she kills in a shed when her former master and slavecatchers come after her. Rather than surrender herself and her children to a life of slavery again, she tries to end her children's lives and then her own. As a consequence of her violent act, 124 is haunted by the spirit of Sethe's dead daughter, scaring away Sethe's two sons who were also victims of Sethe's actions and isolating Denver from the rest of the black community.

2. "She had not thought to ask him and it bothered her still that it might have been possible—that for twenty minutes, half an hour, say, she could have had the whole thing, every word she heard the preacher say at the funeral (and all there was to say, surely) engraved on her baby's headstone: Dearly Beloved. But what she got, settled for, was the one word that mattered."

([Chapter 1](#), Page 5)

Sethe reflects on the memory of her dead daughter's tombstone, regretting the brevity of its message. The engraver offered to make the engraving for free so long as the message was brief. Sethe gave the engraver a single word, "Beloved," the most important and memorable part of the preacher's speech at the funeral. Unnamed except for that single word, the spirit of Sethe's dead daughter calls herself "Beloved" when she takes corporeal form.

3. "It's not! It's not the house. It's us! And it's you!"

([Chapter 1](#), Page 17)

When Paul D arrives at 124, he asks Sethe about her way of life, especially given the haint haunting the house. She pretends that everything is fine, which upsets Denver. Despite being immature and isolated, Denver demonstrates insight into the traumas that everyone in the house carries. According to Denver, the issue is not just the haunted house, but also their unreconciled pasts.

4. "I got a tree on my back and a haint in my house, and nothing in between but the daughter I am holding in my arms. No more running—from nothing, I will never run from another thing on this earth. I took one journey and I paid for the ticket, but let me tell you something, Paul D Garner: it cost too much! Do you hear me? It cost too much."

([Chapter 1](#), Page 18)

After Sethe tells the schoolteacher, the new master at Sweet Home, about being violated by his nephews, he punishes her by whipping her back so badly that it scars over. When Sethe runs away and encounters Amy, a white woman who helps deliver her baby, Amy tells her that the scars on her back look like a tree. Years later, as a free woman, Sethe tells these memories to Paul D and is visibly agitated when recounting them. She does not specify that one of the costs she refers to is the murder of her daughter. Paul D learns the truth from Stamp Paid later in the novel.

5. "Shivering, Denver approached the house, regarding it, as she always did, as a person rather than a structure. A person that wept, sighed, trembled and fell into fits."

([Chapter 3](#), Page 35)

Denver has only known a haunted house where her dead sister lives as her home. As such, she conflates the house with her dead sibling, comparing the tumultuous occurrences in the house to a child throwing a tantrum. Given her intimate relationships with 124 and her dead sister's spirit, she easily becomes the first one to recognize Beloved as her sister come back in corporeal form.

6. "Where I was before I came here, that place is real. It's never going away. Even if the whole farm—every tree and grass blade of it dies. The picture is still there and what's more, if you go there—you who never was there—if you go there and stand in the place where it was, it will happen again; it will be there for you, waiting for you. So, Denver, you can't go there. Never."

([Chapter 3](#), Pages 43 - 44)

When Sethe recounts her past, the story is never linear, clear, or specific. She tries to tell Denver about Sweet Home where she was enslaved, but cannot muster up details or a clear narrative because of the pain associated with her enslavement. When she tells Denver "you can't go there," she is not referring to finding the physical place where she once was enslaved but is rather projecting her own reluctance to recall her past aloud. She represses her traumatic memories so as not to relive them in the present.

7. "The box had done what Sweet Home had not, what working like an ass and living like a dog had not: drove him crazy so he would not lose his mind."

([Chapter 3](#), Page 49)

When Paul D is put into a prison farm in Alfred, Georgia, after trying to murder his new master, Brandywine, he is chained with other black men underground, allowed to see sunlight only when laboring at the quarry. The experience introduces him to a new form of torture, different from the enslavement at Sweet Home where he at least had some room to roam. The prison farm is intended to dehumanize and degrade imprisoned black men until they die or become mentally unstable because of such torture. Since his experience in Georgia, Paul D has not been the same.

8. "For a used-to-be-slave woman to love anything that much was dangerous, especially if it was her children she had settled on to love. The best thing, he knew, was to love just a little bit; everything, just a little bit, so when they broke its back, or shoved it in a croaker sack, well, maybe you'd have a little love left over for the next one."

([Chapter 4](#), Page 54)

Paul D's distinction between how a black woman and former slave loves and how a formerly enslaved black man loves suggests a gendered way of dealing with trauma and healing. Whereas formerly enslaved black women turn their trauma into vigilant love for their children, the men respond differently. The men love in anticipation of loss. Paul D identifies with this mode of love, noting that Sethe emblemizes the former.

9. "Underneath the major question, each harbored another. Paul D wondered at the newness of her shoes. Sethe was deeply touched by her sweet name; the remembrance of glittering headstone made her feel especially kindly toward her. Denver, however, was shaking. She looked at this sleepy beauty and wanted more."

([Chapter 5](#), Page 63)

Sethe, Paul D, and Denver each have their own separate reactions to Beloved's appearance at 124. Paul D reacts with suspicion about Beloved's origins, given the newness of her clothing. Sethe does not realize that it is not a coincidence that Beloved shares the name written on her dead daughter's tombstone. Her fondness for Beloved comes from this unconscious affinity for her. Meanwhile, Denver intuitively senses that Beloved is her dead sister, as she has a particular closeness to the spirit in the house.

10. "Tell me your diamonds."

([Chapter 6](#), Page 69)

Beloved suddenly turns to Sethe and demands that Sethe tell her about her diamonds, a request that is puzzling until Sethe realizes that Beloved is referring to a pair of earrings Sethe used to have. When Sethe married Halle, Mrs. Garner, her former master's wife, gifted her a pair of crystal earrings, which she took with her when she ran away from Sweet Home. Beloved's mention of the earrings is one of the early signs that she is Sethe's daughter. However, Beloved is not simply a benign force but one who possesses supernatural knowledge of her mother's memories.

11. "She threw them all away but you. The one from the crew she threw away on the island. The others from more whites she also threw away. Without names, she threw them. You she gave the name of the black man."

([Chapter 6](#), Page 74)

When Sethe is young, she barely knows her mother, since the farm where they are enslaved does not permit mothers to spend nursing time with their children. Sethe learns from one of the other women that her mother had killed her siblings. She spared Sethe, although her reasons for doing so are unclear. She gave Sethe a male name, knowing she would need masculine strength to survive as an enslaved person. Sethe will eventually repeat this history with her own children, leaving Denver as the only child without injury. However, Denver does not draw the strength to heal from masculine energy but rather the collective power of black women.

12. "She shook her head from side to side, resigned to her rebellious brain. Why was there nothing it refused? No misery, no regret, no hateful picture too rotten to accept? Like a greedy child it snatched up everything. Just once, could it say, No thank you?"

([Chapter 7](#), Pages 82 - 83)

Sethe has difficulty dealing with past traumas related to her enslavement and fugitive life. When Paul D reenters her life, Sethe is forced to confront her tragic upbringing, the violent events at Sweet Home, and the arrival of slavecatchers that leads her to murder her child. She compares this mental unrest to a "greedy child," much like the haint that haunts 124 and her subsequent form as Beloved. Sethe's traumas haunt her in the same way that the haint in the form of Beloved does. The memories fill her with grief and render her unable to think of anything else.

13. "In the dark my name is Beloved."

([Chapter 8](#), Page 88)

Beloved emerges from the world of the dead to haunt the living at 124. The "dark" in this case refers to the shadows of life in which Beloved exists. In her corporeal form, she is neither living nor dead, caught in the space between

Sethe's traumatic memories and her ability to move forward. Beloved's rambling and nonsensical speech typically betray such double meaning in her responses.

14. "She is the one. She is the one I need. You can go but she is the one I have to have."

([Chapter 8](#), Page 89)

When Denver confirms Beloved's true identity as her dead sister, she worries for her, as she believes that Sethe is dangerous. Her mother has killed Beloved once before, and she fears that when Sethe learns of Beloved's identity, she may do it again. However, Beloved makes clear that she does not appreciate Denver's concern. She has her own agenda, which is her unhealthy obsession with Sethe.

15. "Those white things have taken all I had or dreamed[...] and broke my heartstrings too. There is no bad luck in the world but whitefolks."

([Chapter 9](#), Pages 104 - 105)

Toward the end of Grandma Baby Suggs' life, her words of hope and collective healing take a turn toward cynicism. The cruelty of white people incites a personal betrayal from her own black community when they neglect to inform her about the presence of slavecatchers looking for Sethe. It also causes her daughter-in-law to murder her own child to avoid capture. Just when Grandma Baby Suggs thinks she can have the surviving members of her family united at last, the violence of white people takes her family and faith in her black community from her.

16. "Years ago—when 124 was alive—she had women friends, men friends from all around to share grief with. Then there was no one, for they would not visit her while the baby ghost filled the house, and she returned their disapproval with the potent pride of the mistreated. But now there was someone to share it, and he had beat the spirit away the very day he entered her house and no sign of it since. A blessing, but in its place he brought another kind of haunting: Halle's face smeared with butter and the clabber too; his own mouth jammed full of iron, and Lord knows what else he could tell her if he wanted to."

([Chapter 9](#), Pages 112 - 113)

After Sethe's murder of her daughter, the black community ostracizes her. Sethe in turn does not reach out to the community any longer, earning her a reputation of being prideful. When Sethe begins a relationship with Paul D, it appears momentarily that she may be able to forge kinship with someone who shares her experiences. However, Paul D's traumatic memories trigger her own, making it impossible for her to repress her past.

17. "Didn't your mother get locked away for murder? Wasn't you in there with her when she went?"

([Chapter 9](#), Page 123)

Nelson Lord, a young male student who attends the same weekly reading and writing lessons as Denver, asks these questions of Sethe's youngest daughter. It is how Denver learns Sethe murdered her sister. While Denver has always suspected that things were not right, Nelson's questions force her to confront the awful truth about her mother. After Nelson's questions, Denver never returns to the reading and writing lessons, too ashamed of what her mother has done and the town's public knowledge of it.

18. “The chain that held them would save all or none, and Hi Man was the Delivery. They talked through the chain like Sam Morse and, Great God, they all came up. Like the unshriven dead, zombies on the loose, holding the chains in their hands, they trusted the rain and the dark, yes, but mostly Hi Man and each other.”

(Chapter 10, Page 130)

When Paul D is imprisoned on the prison farm in Alfred, Georgia, he is placed in a chain gang with several other black men. They are never allowed to speak to one another nor are they able to see one another in the dark underground boxes where they are kept. When the prison farm floods, the leader of the chain gang, Hi Man, sends a signal through their connected chain to let the others know that they are to swim under the bars and move upward to free themselves. The chain gang's collaboration is a demonstration of collective survival. It foreshadows the later collective movement of black women who gather to save Sethe from Beloved.

19. “This is worse than when Paul D came to 124 and she cried helplessly into the stove. This is worse. Then it was for herself. Now she is crying because she has no self.”

(Chapter 12, Page 145)

During a game, Beloved disappears in the shed, letting Denver believe that her dead sister has departed permanently. Beloved's sudden absence reminds Denver that her identity has solely been tied to Sethe and her traumas that haunt the house. Denver never leaves 124 and does not know anything else beyond it. She craves Beloved's presence, since her sisterly love gives her an identity where she has none.

20. “The Garners, it seemed to her, ran a special kind of slavery, treating them like paid labor, listening to what they said, teaching what they wanted known.”

(Chapter 15, Page 165)

White attitudes toward slavery range from abolitionism to sheer dehumanization of black people. The Garners rely on slave labor to work their farm, but they do not exercise the type of cruelty the schoolteacher enforces when he takes over. While they treat their slaves well, the death of Mr. Garner and dwindling health of Mrs. Garner make the slaves susceptible to the schoolteacher's violent aims. Regardless of how well the Garners treat their slaves, the slaves are still property and thus, victim to new ownership, particularly the schoolteacher's cruel exercise as their new master.

21. “She was looking at him now, and if his other nephew could see that look he would learn the lesson for sure: you just can't mishandle creatures and expect success.”

(Chapter 16, Page 176)

When the schoolteacher finds Sethe in the shed with her murdered and injured children, he determines her to be mentally unfit to bring back to Sweet Home as a slave. Rather than acknowledge the rape and abuse that brought Sethe to her breaking point, he still thinks of her as an animal that was mishandled. To him, Sethe is not human but merely a breeder of more slaves.

22. “He knew exactly what she meant: to get to a place where you could love anything you chose—not to need permission for desire—well now, *that* was freedom.”

(Chapter 18, Page 191)

Paul D acknowledges a crucial step in healing from the traumas of enslavement. According to Sethe, the ability to

love freely and without fear that one's family or significant others will be sold or killed constitutes true freedom. While both Paul D and Sethe are free after the abolishment of slavery, permitting themselves to love without fear proves to be a challenge. They are still informed by the traumatic events of their pasts.

23. "I stopped him [...] I took and put my babies where they'd be safe."

([Chapter 18](#), Page 193)

When Paul D confronts Sethe about the murder of her daughter, Sethe does not express regret over her actions. Instead she insists that her actions are justified, as they successfully prevent the schoolteacher and the slavecatchers from returning her and her children to slavery. Sethe believes that dying is preferable to being enslaved again.

24. "Just about everybody in town was longing for Sethe to come on difficult times. Her outrageous claims, her self-sufficiency seemed to demand it, and Stamp Paid, who had not felt a trickle of meanness his whole adult life, wondered if some of the 'pride goeth before a fall' expectations of the townsfolk had rubbed off on him anyhow—which would explain why he had not considered Sethe's feelings or Denver's needs when he showed Paul D the clipping."

([Chapter 19](#), Page 202)

Stamp Paid reflects on why he showed Paul D the news clipping about Sethe's murder of her daughter years ago. While he has dedicated his life to helping fugitive slaves to freedom, he has also joined the rest of the black community in ostracizing Sethe. Rather than come to her aid, he and the others have turned against her. Their justification is that she responds to their ostracization proudly, refusing to ask for help even despite her circumstances. He regrets his actions in hindsight.

25. "After sixty years of losing children to the people who chewed up her life and spit it out like a fish bone; after five years of freedom given to her by her last child, who bought her future with his, exchanged it, so to speak, so she could have one whether he did or not—to lose him too; to acquire a daughter and grandchildren and see that daughter slay the children (or try to); to belong to a community of other free Negroes—to love and be loved by them, to counsel and be counseled, protect and be protected, feed and to be fed—and then to have that community step back and hold itself at a distance—well, it could wear out even a Baby Suggs, holy."

([Chapter 19](#), Page 209)

Grandma Baby Suggs lives a long life of losses. She has seen so many of her children sold. Her sole remaining son helps her earn her freedom but does not survive in the end. When it appears as if she will be reunited what remains of her family at last, the black community that she has devoted everything to betrays her. Out of envy for her happiness, they neglect to inform her of the arrival of slavecatchers, leading to Sethe's devastating actions in the shed. The unceasing pattern of losses finally takes a toll on Grandma Baby Suggs' life toward its end.

Essay Topics

1. Discuss the significance of 124 as a site of haunting for the residents of the house. What does 124 symbolize? How is its meaning transformed throughout the course of the novel?
2. Describe the relationship among Sethe, Denver, and Beloved. How does this relationship develop starting with Beloved's arrival and ending with her disappearance at the end of the novel?
3. Discuss Beloved. What has incited her arrival? What does she represent in the larger scope of Sethe's, Denver's, and Paul D's lives?
4. What is significant about Denver's capacity to survive her own birth and the later turmoil at 124? How have the terms of her survival changed over time?
5. Paul D's masculine identity has been cultivated by his time as a slave at Sweet Home beside four other black men and challenged by his subsequent imprisonment in Alfred, Georgia. How would you characterize his masculinity when he arrives at 124? How does Beloved's presence complicate it?
6. Paul D's and Sethe's respective traumas arise from different violent circumstances. They recover from this violence in their own ways. How do they each cope with their traumas? To what extent are their coping mechanisms working against them?
7. What role does memory or remembering play for characters like Sethe and Paul D? How does it affect the way they contend with their pasts and imagine their futures?
8. It is said that the Garners practice a "special kind of slavery" (165) that differs from the explicit violence the schoolteacher and his nephews exercise. How else would you characterize the various master-slave relationship models in the novel? Is there a fine line between benevolent forms of enslavement and its more coercive violence?
9. Discuss the relationship between the women of 124 and the surrounding black community. What has contributed to the tension between these two parties? Has this tension been resolved in the end?
10. What might the "it" refer to in the refrain, "It was not a story to pass on" (323), particularly in regard to the novel's outcome? What does the refrain suggest about inheritance and memory, given the context of the novel's plot and the larger social history of slavery that it explores?