Everybody knew what she was called, but nobody anywhere knew her name. Disremembered and unaccounted for, she cannot be lost because no one is looking for her....Although she has claim, she is not claimed. In the place where long grass opens, the girl who waited to be loved and cry shame erupts into her separate parts, to make it easier for the chewing laughter to swallow her all away.
Chapter 5

In Spite of Freedom:
The Self that is No Self in Beloved

It is a hard thing to live haunted by the
ghost of an untrue dream; to see the
wide vision of empire fade into real ashes
and dirt; to feel the pang of the
conquered, and yet to know that with all
the Bad that fell on one black day,
something was vanquished that deserved
to live, something killed that in justice
had not dared to die.

- W. E. B. Du Bois, The Souls of Black Folk

Morrison’s fifth novel, Beloved, set in the late nineteenth century, is
based on the true story of Margaret Garner - a slave woman who
killed her baby daughter to save her from a life of slavery. In the
novel, Sethe commits a similar act of infanticide, and this act
becomes the pivot around which the whole story of her life revolves.
Her murder of Beloved cannot, however, be viewed as merely an
irrational act committed in a moment of emotional weakness or
imbalance. It is a direct consequence of her slave past - inextricably
linked to the inhuman treatment meted out to her at Sweet Home
by schoolteacher, and her determination that the experience should
never replicate itself in the lives of her children. On a more general
and obvious level, Beloved relates the painful and traumatic
repercussions of slavery on various generations of men and women
represented by Baby Suggs, Sethe, Denver and Paul D. It
demonstrates that psychological imprisonment and self denial continue for both male and female victims of slavery even after they are physically freed - a fact embodied in the lives of Sethe and Paul D. Though there are numerous angles from which the book can be examined, this chapter seeks only to trace the course of the development of Sethe's and Denver's consciousness of themselves as independent and free women worthy of self respect. This understanding can, however, come to them only when the mother claims her past and the daughter her present - to finally strive for a secure and meaningful future. The roles played by Beloved and Paul D are crucial in putting the lives of Sethe and Denver back together again - mainly by encouraging Sethe to relinquish the strings she had held so tightly - to finally let go, accept the trauma of her past, and face the present with courage and hope. Beloved demonstrates, more strongly than any of Morrison's other novels, the way in which the race-consciousness of each individual is determined and shaped by virtue of her experiences in the white world. As opposed to Morrison's other protagonists who flounder or flourish within the black community alone (with white society at a safe distance - merely setting the dominant standard), these characters have directly confronted the wrath and brutality of white masters. They have been beaten and abused, insulted and
humiliated, owned and possessed, bought and sold, traded and lent. They have been denied ownership of their selves even as their psyches have been mercilessly fractured. Though dedicated to the “sixty million and more” who died on slave ships, Beloved, nevertheless, celebrates and pays tribute also to the lives of people like Sethe and Denver who have risen above the rubble of broken bodies and crushed spirits to reclaim their lost selfhood and become their own “best thing” (Beloved 273).¹

For each woman, the journey from utter fragmentation to gradual wholeness is both painful and enlightening. It entails remembering and confronting past horrors which at first appear best forgotten. Sethe must grapple and come to terms with two categories of memories (pre-freedom and post-freedom) which belong to two different geographical locations, but are as intricately linked as the threads of finely woven lace. The first category of memories relates to her tenure at Sweet Home in Kentucky after the death of Mr. Garner, and the arrival of his brother-in-law schoolteacher. Sethe’s first actual encounter with him occurs when she overhears him asking his pupils to list her animal characteristics and human characteristics under separate columns. (The ink that she makes with so much pride thus writes the initial

¹ Toni Morrison, Beloved (London: Picador in association with Chatto and Windus, 1988). All further references are to this edition, and appear in
story of her own destruction). Sethe's next encounter with schoolteacher occurs on the night when, though she is in the final stages of her pregnancy, she plans to escape the Plantation. He takes notes while one of his nephews brutally rapes her, and the other sucks from her breasts the milk meant for baby Beloved. When she complains to Mrs. Garner, schoolteacher finds out about it, and lashes at her with a cowhide whip - thus brandishing her back with what Amy later calls a "chokecherry tree" (16). The second category of memories relates to schoolteacher's pursuit of her all the way to Ohio to take her back to slavery - a move which compels her to brutally murder Beloved.

Sethe's life as a free woman begins when she escapes from Sweet Home and travels down the Ohio river on her way to Cincinnati where Baby Suggs has already gone with little Beloved, Howard and Buglar. It is on this nightmarish journey, as she navigates the crucial distance of murky waters between slavery and freedom, that Denver is born with remarkable and touching assistance from Amy Denver - a white girl on her way to Boston in search of velvet. Though Sethe never sees Amy again, her memories remain, and she continues to be a part of her life in the form of Denver who proudly bears her name. In creating Amy, Morrison parentheses throughout this chapter.
creates a white woman who goes out of her way to assist a slave woman. By helping another woman in distress without considering her colour or status, or even the consequences of aiding a runaway slave, Amy comes to represent those whites who are neither racist nor exploitative. Glimpses of such characters occur throughout the novel in the figures of the Garners, the Bodwins, Lady Jones and the sheriff. Their portrayal allows Morrison to balance her text and keep it from becoming merely a tirade of hatred against whites. At the same time, it also helps her to demonstrate that inter-racial harmony is not just a distant dream but a distinct possibility.

When Sethe finally reaches Cincinnati, she experiences, for the first time, the joy of living as a member of a free community, of delighting in

twenty-eight days of unslaved life. Days of healing, ease and real-talk. Days of company knowing the names of other Negroes, their views, habits, of feeling their fun and sorrow along with her own, which made it better. All taught her how it felt to wake up at dawn and decide what to do with the day. Bit by bit, at 124 and in the Clearing, along with the others, she had claimed herself. Freeing yourself was one thing, claiming ownership of that freed self.
was another. (95)

Even though Sethe had known and lived with other blacks during her years of enslavement, her association with them cannot really be termed as membership of a community. It is only freedom that can create a community by giving new meaning to a group of people who had hitherto merely been a cluster of slaves belonging to, working for and owned by slave-masters. Being a community implies the claiming of a collective identity, recognition of a common history, and an acknowledgement of shared pain and struggle. Belonging to such a community gives Sethe an opportunity to indulge in all the common, everyday experiences that free and independent people so often take for granted. These joys are, however, only short-lived, and become inverted - taking on horrific manifestations when schoolteacher follows her to Ohio. *Deciding* what to do with the day mutates into *deciding* to kill Beloved. Claiming ownership of her freed self translates into claiming the life of her infant daughter by splitting her neck with a handsaw. Her first notable action as a free woman, therefore, comes, ironically, to represent the ultimate atrocity inherent in the slave-master relationship: the taking of a life by believing it to be yours to take. The second part of this ordeal takes place when Sethe gives in to the demand of the engraver, and undergoes ten minutes of sex
with him (while his young son watches on) as payment for having the name Beloved engraved on her daughter's tombstone. When Sethe returns home after three months in jail, the very community that had welcomed her to freedom, rejects and ostracises her - not just in condemnation of her act, but also out of malice toward her pride and stubborn self-sufficiency. She even begins to lose members of her family one by one. Her sons Howard and Buglar run away, and Baby Suggs dies - leaving only her and Denver to live in isolation and loneliness.

Though Baby Suggs is already dead when the novel begins, Morrison portrays the essence of her character through Sethe's flashbacks, the narrator's comments, and the memories of various minor characters. She appears throughout the narrative as a wise and comforting presence in the lives of not just Sethe and Denver, but the entire community as well. Cynical and tough, she has faced and survived the worst horrors that enslavement and exploitation have wrought in her life. Neighbours and friends remember her as Baby Suggs, holy, the informal backyard preacher - who encouraged them to sing, dance, cry and let themselves go. This experience of letting go is crucial in the lives of all former slaves because they have always been bound, tied up, repressed and possessed by slave masters. When pieced together from all these fragments, the story
of Baby Suggs’ life, as it unfolds before the reader’s eyes, becomes the traumatic tale slave grandmothers have probably told to generations of black grandchildren. She recalls that she had barely glanced at her children when they were born because “it wasn’t worth the trouble to try to learn features you would never see change into adulthood anyway” (139). Like every slave, she too learns early that slavery not only stunts the normal development of body and mind but also leads to the discontinuation of natural growth. It distances a person from those parts of her self that are embodied in her children, and thus blunts or destroys the instincts of motherhood. It permeates the soul of each black woman in a kind of melancholy too deep to overcome: “the sadness was at her center where the self that was no self made its home. Sad as it was that she did not know where her children were buried...fact was she knew more about them than she knew about herself, having never had the map to discover what she was like. Could she sing?....Was she pretty? Was she a good friend? Could she have been a loving mother? A faithful wife?....If my mother knew me would she like me?” (140). Baby Suggs’s life, like that of all slaves, is characterised by a lack of the very basic and essential of relationships against which to define herself - as friend, mother, wife. Morrison drives home the cruel truth that biologically slaves may be sons or
daughters, fathers or mothers, but psychologically, realistically, they cannot claim those roles because each individual slave is owned by the slave master alone - and does not belong to his or her family at all. Baby Suggs realises that slavery does not merely estrange a person from her essential self but also denies knowledge of that self. When she becomes an informal preacher in Cincinnati, she teaches members of the congregation to value their selves, and to seek grace under pressure. “She did not tell them to clean up their lives or to go and sin no more. She did not tell them they were the blessed of the earth, its inheriting meek or its glorybound pure. She told them that the only grace they could have was the grace they could imagine. That if they could not see it, they would not have it” (88). Grace, under these circumstances, can be equated with freedom. By implication, therefore, the only freedom ex-slaves can have is the freedom they can envision for themselves. She has to teach them freedom because even though it has technically been granted to them, they do not know how to exploit it, or what to do with their freed selves. Commenting upon another aspect of Baby Suggs' unusual advice to the congregation - that they cherish their flesh - Barbara Schapiro notes that “self-recognition is inextricably tied up with self-love, and this is precisely the message of the sermons that Baby Suggs preaches to her people in the Clearing. In
a white society that does not recognize or love you, she tells them, you must fight to recognize and love yourself." By advising members of the congregation to treasure their selves - body and soul - she teaches them another use of freedom, the ability to heal the broken self by taking possession of it. When Sethe murders Beloved, however, she also kills something within Baby Suggs who loses all missionary zeal, and rejects the company of the community. She takes to her bed, and awaits death. Her last words to Sethe and Denver are "that there was no bad luck in the world but white people. They don't know when to stop" (104). She is unmerciful in her resentment and hatred of whites because she holds them responsible for every ounce of pain she has suffered, for every child from whom she has been separated, for every bit of self respect she has had to surrender. While thinking of Baby Suggs one day, Sethe recalls her words, "Those white things have taken all I had or dreamed...and broke my heartstrings too." (89). Baby Suggs's opinion about whites has remained unchanged through freedom unto death, and such is the dark legacy she has bequeathed to Sethe.

Morrison begins by locating present action (1873 to 1874) in Cincinnati, Ohio, at 124 Bluestone Road - Sethe's haunted house -

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whose story is as horrifying and tragic as it is unbelievable. In its entirety, the house may well be viewed as a microcosm of the United States because just as American soil is haunted by the spirits of slaves who lived and suffered there, 124 is haunted by the sad ghost of Baby Suggs and the "spiteful" (3) one of Beloved. Just as the larger African community in America needs to confront and exorcise the painful ghosts of the past, Sethe too must enact the bloody drama of remembering, reclaiming and burying forever the hurtful memories that make the present a living hell. It is to this house that Paul D finds his way in the summer of 1873. His coming makes Sethe contemplate the possibility of indulging in memory, and recalling the incidents she has always kept at bay. "Maybe this one time she could stop dead still in the middle of a cooking meal...and feel the hurt her back ought to. Trust things and remember things because the last of the Sweet Home men was there to catch her if she sank?" (18). Sethe's words indicate that her agonising experiences have made her numb, and forced her to postpone pain so that she has never really gone to the roots of the chokecherry tree to dig up the hurt that lies there. As the temptation to think back to the past grows stronger, she asks herself, "Would it be all right? Would it be all right to go ahead and feel? Go ahead and count on something?" (38). Paul D's gesture of
suddenly hugging her from behind in the kitchen, makes her wonder if she can come out of the anaesthetic effect of forgetting, and feel the pain that remembering will bring. That these thoughts are triggered off by Paul D’s arrival indicates that it is not just the unbearable nature of memories that has made her evade realities of the past but also the fact that she has been alone, without support and unsure of her ability to come out of the trauma on her own. As a black woman living in white America, there has been no one (neither black nor white) for her to lean on and trust. It is significant that Paul D develops a physical relationship with her first, and initiates verbal discussion later. This enables him to not only cherish the body that slavery has violated and devalued, but also to make an attempt to redeem it. Just as he subtly guides Sethe toward physical wholeness, he also gives her an opportunity to mingle with the community by taking her and Denver to the carnival. Morrison writes that on this trip she “returned the smiles she got” (49) indicating that the doors to communal reconciliation are still open and Sethe will, ultimately, step through them. For mother and daughter, the act of dressing up, going out, and buying candy also symbolises taking advantage of a freedom they had forgotten how to exploit. While going to and coming back from the carnival, Sethe imagines that their shadows are holding hands.
What she is seeing, in fact, is a vision of the future as it can be. The shadows of the three people walking along link together to give the appearance of a complete family consisting of father, mother and daughter. The black shadows against the background of golden sunlight represent literally the possibility of a unified African American family against the greater background of white society. Even before she has time to relish the image, however, the pattern of the past intruding upon the present repeats itself - as it does whenever she tries to exploit the freedom she has acquired - and when they return home, Sethe, Denver and Paul D see Beloved sitting on the steps.

In creating Beloved, Morrison blurs the margins between the real and the ethereal. She endows the character with deliberate enigma and ambiguity, thus leaving the text open to various interpretations. The fact that Sethe breaks “water” (132) with unsurpassed intensity upon seeing Beloved indicates that the grown up ghost of the murdered baby has, indeed, returned. Beloved’s memories of being raped, beaten and abused in crowded premises, on the other hand, indicate that she may well be a runaway slave woman who has suffered through the Middle Passage. Morrison has, however, called Beloved a “ghost story”\(^3\) and all of Beloved’s

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actions and questions reinforce the fact that she has known Sethe at another time, in another place. Deborah Horvitz writes that “the ghost-child who comes back to life is not only Sethe's two-year old daughter...she is also Sethe’s African mother....[who was] among the African slaves who experienced the Middle Passage....”

Because she is endowed with multiple identities, Beloved’s presence is both spooky and exciting for the other characters as well as for readers. Ashraf H. Rushdy notes that “Beloved is more than just a character in the novel...She is the embodiment of the past that must be remembered in order to be forgotten; she symbolises what must be reincarnated in order to be buried, properly.” Beloved’s presence thus forces Sethe to dwell thoughtfully on the past even as the girl’s persistence compels her to talk about it. One evening as she dozes, relaxed, she feels Beloved’s gentle touch upon her shoulder, and the girl asks her about her (fake) diamond earrings - “Tell me,’ said Beloved, smiling a wide, happy smile. “Tell me your diamonds” (58). This is when Sethe first dips into memory and pulls out a story to tell Beloved. She is surprised at her own willingness to talk about something she had always avoided previously because “everything in it was painful or lost. She and

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5 Ashraf H. Rushdy, “Daughters Signifying History The Example of Toni
Baby Suggs had agreed without saying so that it was unspeakable... Even with Paul D, who had shared some of it... the hurt was always there - like a tender place in the corner of her mouth that the bit left” (58). With Beloved, however, Sethe discovers an “unexpected pleasure” (58) in sharing her memories and, almost without realising that she is talking about the unspeakable past, begins to tell her daughters about her mother. The story is occasioned by another of Beloved’s questions, asked while Sethe is busy doing Denver’s hair, “Your woman she never fix up your hair?” (60). Sethe recalls, and talks about her mother who seldom had a chance to nurse her because slaving away in the rice fields all day gave her no respite or time for motherly indulgences. She recollects the only memorable, bonding moment between herself and her mother when the latter had lifted up her breast and shown Sethe her rib - branded by a cross inside a circle, and had said, “this is your ma’am....If something happens to me and you can’t tell me by my face, you can know me by this mark” (61). She tells the girls about her mother as she has heard it from the woman who used to look after her. “What Nan told her she had forgotten, along with the language she told it in. The same language her ma’am spoke, and which would never come back. But the message -

Morrison’s Beloved.” American Literature 64 (1992): 571.
that was and had been there all along...she was picking meaning out of a code she no longer understood" (62). Horvitz reads this episode as the beginning of a subtle change in Sethe's life, stating that "murky pictures and vague words begin to creep into her [Sethe's] mind...[and] Ma'am's language erupts into her conscious mind signalling the beginning of Sethe's slow metamorphosis."6 Since slavery is responsible for alienating Sethe from her mother, and thereby depriving her of the inheritance of lingual codes, Sethe feels that her understanding of her mother's life is incomplete. By sharing this episode with Beloved and Denver, however, she realises that even though she only knew her mother as a third person pointed out to her by another woman, the essence of her message has not only remained with her, but also repeated itself in her life. Just as the institution of slavery was responsible for alienating Ma'am from her children, it is responsible for making Sethe absent from hers. Schapiro reflects that the system of slavery renders the mother "incapable of recognizing the child, and the child cannot recognize the mother....When [Sethe] becomes a mother herself, she is so deprived and depleted that she cannot satisfy the hunger for recognition...that both her daughters crave."7

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6 Horvitz 159.
7 Schapiro 197.
As a free woman, however, the challenge before her is to overcome this deficiency and make her presence felt in the life of her remaining daughter.

Beloved is not the only one who forces open the floodgates of past memories. Paul D too brings to the house tales of his own trauma combined with the stories of Halle's pain and destruction. A dazed Sethe listens as he tells her that Halle was hiding in the loft the night she was raped, and witnessed every action of schoolteacher and his nephews. The sight affected his mind so profoundly that all he was able to do after that was sit and plaster his face with butter the whole day long. While Sethe slowly takes all this in, she wonders at the ability of her mind to accept the worst possible images and store them:

like a greedy child it snatched up everything.
Just once, could it say, No thank you? I just ate and can't hold another bite? I am full God damn it of two boys with mossy teeth, one sucking on my breast the other holding me down, their book-reading teacher watching and writing it up. I am still full of that, God damn it, I can't go back and add more. Add my husband to it, watching,...hiding close by...looking down on what I couldn't look at at all. And not stopping
them - looking and letting it happen....There is also my husband squatting by the churn smearing the butter as well as its clabber all over his face because the milk they took is on his mind....there is still more that Paul D could tell me and my brain would go right ahead and take it and never say, No thank you. I don't want to know or have to remember that. I have other things to do: worry, for example, about tomorrow, about Denver, about Beloved, about age and sickness not to speak of love. (70)

Paul D's words compel Sethe to go back down memory lane and recall the rape as it happened. There is still a part of her, however, that wants to concentrate only on practical day to day things, and thus procrastinate the conversion of past memories into present remembering. After listening to Paul D's story, she realises that she should learn to manage, and "not break, fall or cry each time a hateful picture drifted in front of her face" (97). Remembering, however, is not so easy because she has seen what happens to those who do remember. "If she could just manage the news Paul D brought....Not develop some permanent craziness like Baby Suggs' friend...who's food was full of tears. Like Aunt Phyllis, who slept with her eyes wide open. Like Jackson Till, who slept under the
bed”(97). By mentioning a cross-section of former slaves whose past has ruined their future, Morrison shows that the repercussions of slavery never end - that freedom comes but the imprisonment continues in various ways. The task before Sethe is that just as she learns to claim herself, she must learn also to claim the memories that make up her painful past.

Sethe also encourages Paul D to talk to her - and especially to tell her what it was like having the bit in his mouth. Paul D, however, cannot discuss it because though the bit has physically been removed, psychologically he still continues to hold it there - making speech impossible. It takes great effort on his part to tell her that as he was walking past the roosters at Sweet Home, he felt that he was worth even less than they were because even a rooster named “Mister was allowed to be and stay what he was. But I wasn’t allowed to be and stay what I was. Even if you cooked him you’d be cooking a rooster named Mister. But wasn’t no way I’d ever be Paul D again, living or dead. Schoolteacher changed me. I was something else and that something was less than a chicken sitting in the sun on a tub” (72). These words indicate that the institution of slavery has robbed Paul D and others like him of their identity and self-respect. The irony, however, is that it has been done through the medium of schoolteacher. Linda Krumholz
comments that “Morrison depicts schoolteacher’s pedagogical and interpretative methods as morally bereft, and through him she condemns not only slavery but also the United States’ educational system. Schoolteacher’s practices are basic to the institutional educational system...which...still presents politically motivated versions of knowledge and history while masking these representations in a rhetoric of ‘facts’ and scientific method.”^8

Normally when one thinks of a school teacher in the proper sense of the word, it implies somebody who teaches a student to grow and develop to his or her full potential. In this case, however, it is schoolteacher who is responsible for doing just the opposite - of stripping another human being of his sense of self. The fact that Morrison nicknames Garner’s brother-in-law schoolteacher indicates that like The Bluest Eye, Song of Solomon, and Tar Baby, Beloved too critiques and satirises the traditional American education system for promoting empty values, and inverting the very concepts that are supposed to glorify it. Victimisation by schoolteacher is not the worst that Paul D has undergone, however. He has been a member of a chain gang - sexually abused and humiliated by the white guards - and has seen “Negroes so stunned, or hungry, or tired or bereft it was a wonder they recalled or said

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anything. Who, like him, had hidden in caves and fought owls for food...stole from pigs...slept in trees in the day and walked by night....Move. Walk. Run. Hide. Steal and move on.” (66). From these observations it appears that in nineteenth-century America, animals and birds were better off than slaves who were considered and treated not just as less than human but also less than animals. Because he has witnessed the worst that life has to offer, and undergone such experiences, Paul D too has his own share of locked up memories. Through years of effort, he has succeeded in putting “Alfred, Georgia, Sixo, schoolteacher, Halle, his brothers, Sethe, Mister, the taste of iron, the sight of butter, the smell of hickory, notebook paper, one by one, into the tobacco tin lodged in his chest” and “by the time he got to 124 nothing in this world could pry it open” (113). Like Sethe, Paul D too is hiding from the past - crouching in terror - afraid that remembering will re- evoke the trauma. He is convinced that his heart has been replaced by a tobacco tin full of painful memories. That tin is now safely “buried in his chest where a red heart used to be. Its lid rusted shut” (72-73). Paul D thinks that he has buried forever the feeling heart so that it can hurt him no more, but Beloved succeeds in prying it open when she seeks him out in the cold house with her strange request, “I want you to touch me on the inside part and call me my name”
(116). He can only stand bewildered as “she moved closer with a footfall he didn’t hear and he didn’t hear the whisper that the flakes of rust made either as they fell away from the seams of his tobacco tin. So when the lid gave he didn’t know it...when he reached the inside part he was saying, “Red heart. Red heart, over and over again” (117). It takes Beloved less than a few minutes to unleash from his heart the memories that had taken Paul D years to seal and secure. Besides enabling Sethe to speak the unspeakable, therefore, Beloved also compels Paul D to remember what he had always considered unrememberable. More significant, however, is the fact that her physical closeness to him signals the beginning of his guilty, very subtle distancing from Sethe - not because he feels attracted to Beloved but because he is disgusted with himself. Morally speaking, what happens between Beloved and Paul D is as problematic as the act of infanticide committed by Sethe, but there is a justification for it. Pamela E. Barnett writes that “without this nightmare experience, Paul D would not be able to overcome his numbing defence mechanisms or perform the necessary exorcism.”9 Morrison presents the assault as a necessary evil that had to happen in order for Paul D to get back in touch with the past, and to step on the road to wholeness. Beloved’s forced entry into Paul D’s

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private life also signifies the beginning of his exit from 124, which
finally becomes a reality when Stamp Paid tells him that Sethe
killed her daughter.

When Paul D confronts Sethe with the newspaper clipping
given to him by Stamp Paid, he hopes that it would ask the question
he was afraid to, and that she would provide a perfectly logical
explanation to clear all misunderstanding. Sethe, however, feels
that she cannot really explain to someone who does not already
know:

she could never close in, pin it down for anybody
who had to ask. If they couldn't get it right off -
she could never explain. Because the truth was
simple. She just flew. Collected every bit of life
she had made, all the parts of her that were
precious and fine and beautiful, and carried,
pushed, dragged them...where no one could hurt
them....where they would be safe" (163).

Until he actually spoke to her about the infanticide, Paul D was
confident that he knew Sethe very well by virtue of their Sweet
Home association - but he now finds that he was wrong. This is
because the Sethe he knew at Sweet Home was a slave - an
imprisoned woman who did not know the power of the human will.
The unslaved Sethe, however, is a different woman. He finds that
freedom (no matter how restricted its use) has changed everything about her. "This here Sethe was new....This here Sethe talked about love like any other woman...but what she meant could cleave the bone. This here Sethe talked about safety with a handsaw....more important than what Sethe had done was what she claimed. It scared him" (164). He fails to understand that Sethe has been reborn as a free woman. For the first time she has experienced what it feels like to possess those to whom she has given birth - those who had always belonged to her - but whom she could not claim before because she herself was owned by someone else. This act of possession has, however, also led to murder - led her to decide the course of another's life - and to give death almost as naturally as she had given birth. Though disappointed and hurt, Sethe is not really surprised at Paul D's inability to comprehend why she acted in such a manner. Only she understands her own act because she knows how hard she has tried to be optimistic and understanding, but has always had to bow before circumstances. She recalls the time when she had thought, hoped, that "for every schoolteacher there would be an Amy; that for every pupil there was a Garner, or Bodwin, or even a sheriff...But she had come to believe every one of Baby Suggs' last words and buried all recollection of them and luck. Paul D dug it up, gave her back her body, kissed
her divided back, stirred her rememory and brought her more news...but when he heard her news, he counted her feet and didn't even say goodbye" (188-189). Though all of Paul D's actions indicate that he will stand by her, she accepts the fact of his going much as she has accepted all the horror that life has thrown her way so far.

Paul D's leaving marks the beginning of yet another phase in the lives of the women living at 124. It takes Sethe, Denver and Beloved back to pre-male days, and allows them to further bond as women without the interference of any outside force. It is at this time that Beloved sings the song her mother had made up especially for her children, and Sethe realises that her daughter has indeed come back to her. Overwhelmed by this realisation, she gives her mind free rein, and allows herself to step fully back into the past. For the first time she makes a conscious effort to think about the past - recalling each incident chronologically from the beginning to the end. It is most significant that her thoughts finally begin to follow a linear pattern instead of a haphazard, directionless wandering. This change suggests that her mind has now put the past into proper perspective, and accepts the events as they happened. She is late to work, and returns home with renewed enthusiasm - to shower all her love and attention on Beloved, and
cater to every whim. Such a situation is idyllic only for a little while, however. Denver finds that she is being subtly excluded from the mother-daughter circle. Beloved's grasp on her mother's love becomes so strong, her thirst for attention so insatiable, that the more Sethe tries to make up for the years of separation, the more belligerent and demanding Beloved becomes. She heaps resentful accusations upon Sethe who tries in vain to explain and justify - but fails to convince Beloved. Finally Beloved overshadows Sethe completely, and it is difficult for Denver to tell whether Sethe has a personality (body and mind) of her own or not.

Dressed in Sethe's dresses, she stroked her skin with the palm of her hand. She imitated Sethe, talked the way she did, laughed her laugh and used her body the same way down to the walk, the way Sethe moved her hands, sighed through her nose, held her head. Sometimes coming upon them making men and women cookies or tracking scraps of cloth on Baby Suggs' old quilt, it was difficult for Denver to tell who was who.

Morrison demonstrates here that the past has finally caught up with Sethe in the form of Beloved, and now threatens to swallow up her entire present (represented by her self) and her future.
Horvitz rightly contends that when Beloved "transforms from a lonely, affectionate girl, into a possessive, demanding tyrant,...her ruthlessness almost kills Sethe. There is...a connection between this ruling Beloved and the slave-driver...because any attempt to possess another human being is reminiscent of the slave-master relationship." Just as Sethe had once demonstrated this kind of ownership, Beloved now does the same, but where the mother had succeeded, the daughter fails - mainly because of Denver's new-found, rather unexpected determination and presence of mind.

Morrison portrays Denver as someone conceived in slavery, born in escape, and brought up in freedom (to use the word with reservation). In her merge all the milestone moments of her mother's life from enslavement to escape, from physical freedom to psychological imprisonment, from communal acceptance to social ostracism. Her first crucial childhood experience occurs when she sucks her mother's milk from a breast soaked with Beloved's blood, and thus suffers vicariously all the punishments heaped upon her mother. She first becomes an alien amidst society at the age of seven when her enjoyable afternoon classes come to a forced stop because one of her classmates unwittingly asks a loaded question,

10 Horvitz 160-161.
“Didn’t your mother get locked away for murder? Wasn’t you in there with her when she went?” (104). Denver is suddenly forced out of the community because the question makes her look at herself and her mother as objects of derision from whom all decent folks must keep away. Ashamed and humiliated, she never leaves home after that - until Paul D and Beloved arrive to change everything when she is eighteen years old. Since Denver has never known kinship of any kind, she is rude to Paul D in the first instance because she views him as an outsider who poses a threat to her relationship with her mother. Ironically, her reaction to Beloved (who would later pose the real threat to the mother-daughter relationship) is entirely different. Because she has so far been denied the vital link with the female community, Beloved's coming provides for her “a racing heart, dreaminess, society, danger, beauty” (76), and thus gives her back a duly acknowledged self. Denver initially grows close to her ghost sister because she fears that the circumstances which prompted her mother to kill Beloved might occur again, and this time it may be her life that is taken. “I love my mother but I know she killed one of her own daughters, and tender as she is with me, I'm scared of her because of it....maybe there is something else terrible enough to make her do it again” (205). Her perspective, however, changes gradually when she sees
the effect that Beloved is having on Sethe. She feels that Beloved is slowly draining all the life and energy from her mother. "The bigger Beloved got, the smaller Sethe became....She sat in the chair licking her lips like a chastised child while Beloved ate up her life, took it, swelled up with it, grew taller on it. And the older woman yielded it up without a murmur" (250). Denver not only realises the threat to her mother, but also acts immediately on it. "Somebody had to be saved, but unless Denver got work, there would be no one to save, no one to come home to, and no Denver either. It was a new thought, having a self to look out for and preserve" (252). This is a turning point in the development of her consciousness of her self. In order to preserve this recently acquired sense of self, and retain her mother's life and love, she overcomes her greatest fear and actually leaves the house to go in search of help. Carol E. Schmudde reiterates that "in leaving Beloved and her mother behind, Denver is able finally to give up her identification with her dead sister, her own enslavement to the past, and to begin her life as an independent adult." Just as Sethe travels down memory lane, Denver ventures physically out of 124 and steps into the outside world to embrace the future even as her mother becomes ready to confront her past.

As Denver prepares to knock on doors and ask for help, she realises that the world, as she knew it, is both unchanged and different at the same time. The things that seemed immense or appeared larger than life when she was a child are now dwarfed. "She was shocked to see how small the big things were: the boulder by the edge of the road she once couldn't see over was a sitting-on rock. Paths leading to houses weren't miles long. Dogs didn't even reach her knees. Letters cut into beeches and oaks by giants were eye level now" (245). She sees the old world with new eyes not just because she has grown physically but because her perspective has altered. She is moving toward claiming her hitherto unclaimed selfhood, and trying to find her feet as an independent woman. When compared to this new-found sense of self, everything appears small or minuscule. Her attempt to re-establish human contact is successful. Not only does the community welcome her into its midst, but also helps her with generous gifts of food. The baskets of food that Denver takes home everyday are Morrison's oblique metaphors for the sustenance and nourishment gradually seeping to Sethe from the community. Denver, however, does not become complacent or comfortable just because there is food on the table now. She decides to go out and find work - a decision which takes her to the Bodwin house, where she is forced to explain to Janey why she
needs work so desperately. This is the first time that she verbalises Beloved's story, and thus involves the community in something that had been painfully private for almost a year. It is when Janey passes on the story to others in the community that thirty women take it upon themselves to go over to 124 and rescue Sethe from the clutches of the ghost and, by implication, the past.

When the women, led by Ella, reach there, they are confronted with a startling vision of their own past. It seems as if their childhood and youth lie preserved in the backyard of the house. “When...all...thirty arrived at 124, the first thing they saw was not Denver sitting on the steps, but themselves, younger, stronger, even as little girls lying in the grass asleep....Baby Suggs laughed and skipped among them, urging more. Mothers, dead now, moved their shoulders to mouth harps....there they were, young and happy, playing in Baby Suggs' yard.” (258). Such a collective remembering not only binds the women more firmly together, but also enables them to see Sethe as a part of themselves. It renews their urge to succeed in their mission. Ella recalls the child she herself had killed because he had been forcefully fathered by a white man, and the memory makes possible a sympathetic identification with Sethe. Bodwin, on his way to pick Denver up, is also thinking of the past: “he was headed for the house he was born
in. Perhaps it was his destination that turned his thoughts to time - the way it dripped or ran....There was a time when he buried things there. Precious things he wanted to protect....Where, exactly, was the box of tin soldiers? The watch chain with no watch?....now he just wanted to...recall exactly where his treasure lay" (259-261). Bodwin too confronts a past he had always evaded, and faces squarely the house whose memories had haunted him for a long time. James Berger contends that "going to his violent meeting with Sethe, where Beloved was murdered, Bodwin goes to the place of his origin. Neither he nor Sethe knows it, but their histories are entwined." Just as 124 is the house of Bodwin's birth, it is also the house where Sethe is reborn as a free woman, and where Beloved too is born again. For Sethe, the advancing women bring back memories of the Clearing: "it was as though the Clearing had come to her with all its heat and simmering leaves, where the voices of women searched for the right combination, the key, the code, the sound that broke the back of words. Building voice upon voice until they found it, and when they did it was a wave of sound wide enough to sound deep water and knock the pods off chestnut trees. It broke over Sethe, and she trembled like the baptized in its wash" (261). By thus recalling bygone days, Sethe is able to view

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herself as a part of the community of women - instead of separate from it. The memory takes her back to happier days - before the murder of Beloved. The singing women drink in the sight of the gorgeous, naked, "devil-child" (261), who is now standing on the porch, holding Sethe's hand. As Sethe turns to look at the faces of the women, her eyes settle on the figure of Bodwin astride his horse behind them. She mistakes him for schoolteacher and runs toward him with an ice pick in her hand. She sees him "guiding the mare, slowing down, his black hat wide-brimmed enough to hide his face but not his purpose. He is coming for her best thing. She hears wings. Little hummingbirds stick needle beaks right through her headcloth into her hair and beat their wings. And if she thinks anything, it is no. No no. Nonono. She flies. The ice pick is not in her hand; it is her hand" (262). As Sethe flings herself on Bodwin, attacking him with a vengeance, Denver and the other women run to separate the two. When they finally look up after a prolonged struggle, Beloved is gone, and no one can satisfactorily explain what really happened to her. Her disappearance is as shrouded in mystery as her sudden appearance. Only the narrator indicates toward the end that she returned to the stream through which she had come.

This exorcism episode is significant because it represents the
ultimate battle between the past and the present - culminating in
the victory of the latter over the former. Everyone comes to unsure but goes back with renewed knowledge and self confidence. Each key character grapples with memories on its premises and gains a different perspective about the past and the present. What is clear in the end is that one can exorcise the memories but not the events. This explains why Beloved's "was not a story to pass on" (274), i.e., it was neither a story to be ignored nor one to be told. The events of slavery, likewise, can neither be overlooked, nor glorified. They must, rather, be seen as a bitter truth that a nation must live with through all the years of its existence, without allowing it to shadow the future. The literal exorcism of Beloved marks for Denver, Sethe, and Paul D freedom from the clutches of the past. Each had initially sought in Beloved what he or she had lost in life. Denver had thus turned to her for acknowledgement and confirmation of herself as a self. Sethe had looked in her for proof that she saved her daughter instead of killing her, and Paul D had turned to her for restoration of his lost sense of manhood. Their ultimate victory, however, lies in the fact that their sense of wholeness and acknowledgement of selfhood continues even after Beloved's departure. Sethe, initially, takes to her bed in misery - believing that she has lost her "best thing" again, but Paul D
returns to convince her of the value of the individual self by telling her that she is her own “best thing.”

Though a kind of melancholy sadness prevails in the poignantly written last pages of the novel, there is also a sense that something lost has been restored. Beloved, whose past was in this world, and who had come to have her own questions answered, returns to the other world - to her present and her future. She leaves behind a family that had initially been fragmented because of her death but which has now become whole because of her departure. It is ultimately Sethe who emerges as a contemporary tragic heroine because her quest for physical and emotional freedom, combined with her fierce determination to protect her family from slavery, lends a certain nobility to her character. Her story becomes both private and universal because it is identifiable not only to former slave women but to all men and women who have lived through traumatic times and are victims of repressed memories. Sethe’s *hamartia* is her inability to come to terms with her past - to relate to her daughters the terrible events of her enslaved life and the death of young Beloved. Schmudde too has pointed to some elements of tragedy present in the novel in both form and content. She believes that “the black community in *Beloved* functions similarly in many ways to the chorus in a Greek
tragedy. Influencing their initial judgment of Sethe's act was their predisposition to see the inhabitants of 124 Bluestone Road as flaunting their good fortune, claiming too much, not knowing when to stop....The narrative makes clear that...[the] withdrawal [of the townspeople] contributed to the tragedy because when schoolteacher rode into town...nobody came to warn Sethe."^{13} Schmudde also sees Beloved's arrival as a repercussion of Sethe's extreme act of infanticide. She explains that "as in Greek tragedy,...the consequences of an act of hubris, of going beyond ordinary limits, and of not knowing when to stop are about to bear fruit."^{14} Beloved's coming is, however, essential because she forces Sethe to come to terms with the act of infanticide just as Paul D gives her an opportunity to come to terms with her past as a slave woman - thus making it possible for her to speak the unspeakable, and reach a kind of catharsis. Schmudde too claims toward the end that "storytelling promotes healing when it helps change to occur, when it is possible for things to be over, when emotions can be exhausted, when, in other words, it creates catharsis."^{15} This catharsis initiates the process of the healing of Sethe's fractured

^{13} Schmudde 124-125.

^{14} Schmudde 126.

^{15} Schmudde 134.
psyche. Denver, who represents the black woman of the new century, also enables her mother to acknowledge the present, and gives her hope for the future. Symbolically, she also stands as a ray of hope for other black women or marginal groups all over the world who must act as vehicles of change. Krumholz conjectures that Denver will probably go on to become a teacher, which is why Morrison shows that she “points the way to a recovery of literacy, one that is suspicious of white definitions and discourse, and one that uses the African oral and cultural heritage and African-American values to take over the task of African-American history-making.” The change that Morrison envisions in Beloved therefore is not only at the personal or individual level but at the communal and societal level as well. Denver, and those like her, must transform the system of present beliefs and attempt to create a new ideology which cherishes the black self and places it at the centre of a black world view.

16 Krumholz 405.