

# Limbo

[Literature](#), [Novel](#)



Much like a ghost, Beloved's Sethe is caught in limbo between her past and future. She constantly struggles between the remembrances triggered by Beloved and the opportunities afforded by Paul D. Having never matured into the present, Sethe finds consolation in Beloved, who personifies both the good and the bad of her past. With the re-entrance of Paul D into her life, Sethe becomes aware of the future, but resists moving forward.

Accentuating Sethe's strain between the past and future is the constant battle between Beloved and Paul D for control over Sethe. It is not until Sethe conquers her past that she can move into the future. To Sethe, the encumbrance of her past is comforting. Beloved, as both a spirit and a human, is always with Sethe. As Sethe prays, Denver sees " a white dress knelt down next to her mother and...and its sleeve around her mother's waist" (29). Prayer is an activity in which one finds peace within one's self, but it is not from within that comes her comfort, but instead from Beloved's presence. Even in Sethe's most private, solitary moments, Beloved placates her, all the while refusing to let go, as the waisted arm reveals. Sethe, although hesitant, is perceptive of her omnipresent past. As she discusses the white dress apparition with Denver, she admits that " Some things go. Pass on. Some things just stay. I used to think it was my rememory. You know. Some things you forget. Other things you never do. But it's not...it will happen again; it will be there for you, waiting for you...it's going to always be there waiting for you" (36). When Beloved arrives at 124, reincarnated in human form, Sethe " can't place it" (67), but the " feeling" (67) in her recognizes Beloved as the same haunting past and knowing this, she still " had let her in" (66), to her house, her life. As the physical embodiment of

Sethe's past, *Beloved* inhibits her from conquering the ghosts of the past in which she remains. After mercy killing *Beloved*, Sethe's dress dries "stiff, like rigor mortis" (153); it is not the dress that undergoes partial mortality, but instead Sethe. At the death of her daughter, a part of Sethe dies, suspending her in the past. Having accustomed herself with Sethe's habits, *Beloved* begins "inching down Bluestone Road further and further each day to meet Sethe and walk her back to 124...as though every afternoon she doubted anew the older woman's return" (57). *Beloved* is afraid that Sethe will leave her past, and she collects her in this fashion, striving to hold her in it. She continually pushes Sethe back into the past as she fishes for stories, using remnants of memories as bait. *Beloved* receives a "profound satisfaction...from storytelling" (58) because every time Sethe senses a hint of her past life, she returns to that piece of her life, which is so readily available having never fully escaped it. *Beloved* claims possession of Sethe, telling Denver, "She is the one. She is the one I need...she is the one I have to have" (76). Each journey back holds Sethe there as she embraces both the good and the bad, fulfilling *Beloved*'s desire to hold her in the past. With Paul D's arrival, comes a wary reassurance, leading Sethe to become inquisitive of the future. The morning after they have sex for the first time, Sethe begins to think, "Would it be all right? Would it be all right to go ahead and feel? Go ahead and count on something?" (38). He suggests the prospect of a family, something Sethe never truly experienced, telling her that they should make "space for somebody along with [Denver]" (45). Before space can be made for Paul D in their family, Sethe must overcome her past. As Sethe begins to step forward, *Beloved*'s efforts grow, holding her

back. At the carnival with Paul D and Denver, Sethe first sees the possibility of a future as she notices that “[t]hey were not holding hands, but their shadows were...all three of them were gliding over the dust holding hands” (47). But, much like the landscaping of the carnival, where “the closer the roses got to death, the louder their scent” (47), the closer Sethe gets to putting her past behind her, the louder and stronger Beloved’s actions become. As she recognizes that “Paul D was adding something to her life—something she wanted to count on but was scared to” (95), Sethe begins to lay the memory of Halle to rest in Baby Suggs’ preaching clearing, but as she gains greater peace with remembrance of Halle, the “fingers touching the back of her neck [become] stronger... Harder, harder, the fingers [move] slowly around toward her windpipe making little circles on the way” (96). She associates the pain as that of forgetting the past, resurrecting her fear of letting go. Beloved not only attacks the future through Sethe, but also through Paul D, Sethe’s link to the future. Paul D recognizes that it is the haint that prevents Sethe from moving on, just as Beloved recognizes that it is Paul D that will cause Sethe to leave the past. Between Paul D and Beloved, there is a constant power struggle; they struggle for power over Sethe and power between themselves. Upon their first acquaintance, Paul exhibits his supremacy over Beloved, instructing her to “Leave the place alone! Get the hell out” (18), in hopes of giving Sethe the opportunity to escape from the past that possesses her. With Beloved in the house, “[t]here was no room for anything or body until Paul D arrived and broke up the place, making room, shifting it, moving it over to someplace else” (39), but she later uses her own tactics to rid 124 of Paul D. As Beloved slowly moves

Paul D around the house, she eventually corners him in the shed behind it, disregarding Paul D's pleas of Sethe's love for her, taking her own turn to instruct Paul D to "touch [her]. On the inside part" (117). Beloved uses sex, man's weakness, to conquer the future. Although Beloved succeeds in the instant, she does not rid 124 of Paul D, but instead leads him to the realization that Sethe cannot move on as long as her past haunts her. It is not until Sethe is at ease with the prospect of a future that she can confront her past. After his sexual encounter with Beloved, Paul D says to Sethe, "I want you pregnant...Would you do that for me" (128). The baby of Paul D's desire is his wish to start anew with Sethe, for both of them to lay their past to rest and create their own future, but Sethe responds with, "Don't you think I'm too old to start that all over again" (128), demonstrating her interest in the future, because she does not reject the idea of a family, but at the same time her hesitance to move forward, because she is insecure leaving her past to regenerate her life. As they sleep together later, Sethe "placed her hand on his chest [as she wondered] if her boys come back one day, and Denver and Beloved stayed on well, would it be the way it was suppose to be, no" (132). With the placement of her hand, she begins to bridge into the future as she contemplates and acknowledges its consequences. Her recognition of "the smile and the upfront love that made her try" (161) to explain the murder of Beloved to Paul D demonstrates her growing comfort with the future. She hesitates as she draws closer to the account, knowing that "the circle she was making around the room, him, the subject, would remain one" (163), not because she was avoiding the past, but instead because of her personal consciousness that she could not move

into the future without confronting her past. As Sethe approaches the future, her movement is reflected in Beloved's physique. " She had two dreams: exploding and being swallowed. When her tooth came out—an odd fragment, last in the row—she thought it was starting" (133). Her dreams expose her growing awareness of Sethe's reconciliation with the past, while the loss of her tooth reflects the physical effects of it, as Sethe is literally dismantling her past, Beloved. But, Sethe digresses, fully submitting herself to Beloved. " Beloved sat around, ate, went from bed to bed...The bigger Beloved got, the smaller Sethe became...Beloved ate up her life, took it, swelled up with it, grew taller on it" (250). When Sethe makes the decision not to kill Mr. Bodwin, whom she believed to be school teacher, " her hand is empty" (262), now absent of that of Beloved, who had held onto her for so long. During the exorcism, Sethe is forced to relive the events surrounding Beloved's death so that she can correct her actions, and finally move on. Beloved exists to force Sethe to confront her past. Sethe tries to repress her memories, which results in its return with greater force. She must choose between the past and the future, Beloved and Paul D, but in order to move into the future, she must bury her memories, and rid herself of the parasitic Beloved. Although Sethe finally surmounts her past, she will never be fully absent of it because, as Morrison said, " She did the right thing, but she didn't have the right to do it."