

Inescapable hauntings in caleb williams and beloved

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



Written almost two hundred years apart, William Godwin's *Caleb Williams* and Toni Morrison's *Beloved* convey stories in which the characters attempt to find freedom by fleeing from unfair oppression and the haunting remnants of oppression. Caleb Williams, the titular protagonist of Godwin's novel, attempts to escape from the persecution of his cruel master, Falkland, while Sethe, the protagonist of *Beloved*, successfully escapes from the imprisonment of slavery. It is important to note, however, that Caleb's persecution by Falkland, while unjust, was based on Caleb's individual actions and could have been avoided. In the end, he is capable of using legal action to free himself and escape the fate he once saw as inescapable and ends up haunted by nothing but a guilty conscience. Sethe, on the other hand, was born into her oppression, and even after escaping slavery she is still haunted, figuratively by her the negative perceptions of her race that pervade the nation, even in the free north, and quite literally by the ghostly reincarnation of the daughter she killed to save from a life of slavery. Even though Sethe is able to escape the literal haunting when the ghost is banished, she and her family will not be able to escape the lingering effects of racism within their lifetimes. Comparison of the two texts emphasizes the added difficulty in the lives of African Americans, particularly in Sethe's time period. Though Caleb and Sethe faced similar scenarios, Caleb was oppressed as an individual and by an individual, and had no system working against him, while Sethe is trapped in a system that harms her even without the abuse of slavery. She does not have the luxury of escape.

While Caleb and Sethe find themselves in similar situations, Caleb makes it clear that he found himself in the situation as a result of his own actions.

While his persecution is unjust and seemingly inescapable, he could have avoided it by acting differently. When Caleb begins to speculate over whether his master could be a murderer, he writes “ To do what is forbidden has always had its charms... That there was danger in the employment served to give [it] an alluring pungency... The further I advanced, the more the sensation was irresistible” (Godwin 112-3). While obviously not working with the goal of being slandered and pursued across the country in mind, he recognizes and explicitly states that the task he set for himself, its only goal being to assuage his curiosity, puts him at risk. He persists even after Falkland warns him, telling him “ Begone, and fear lest you be made to pay for the temerity you have already committed!” (123). Though Caleb does not necessarily deserve to face Falkland’s extreme reaction, he finds himself in this situation by inappropriately prying into the details of someone else’s private life when he understands there can be consequences. For Caleb, the onslaught of the apparently inescapable force of Falkland’s wrath was perfectly avoidable.

Sethe, on the other hand, is powerless before her inescapable fate. As a black woman born to slaves in the American south, there is nothing she could have done to avoid becoming a slave. It was a role assigned to her at her birth, due to the damaging negative perceptions white society at the time has about blacks. As Stamp Paid thinks of it, “ Whitepeople believed that whatever the manners, under every dank skin was a jungle... But it wasn’t the jungle blacks brought with them to this place from the other (livable) place. It was the jungle whitefolks planted in them. And it grew. It

spread” (234). Here he states that while there is nothing inherently savage in blacks, white people at the time seem them that way because they have forced blacks, through slavery, into a situation where they are not allowed to appear in any way conventionally considered civilized.

Even though she is able to escape the slave plantation itself, Sethe is not ever able to escape these negative perceptions. They follow her and her family into the free north and even come from characters that otherwise appear friendly. Even Amy, the white girl who graciously assists Sethe when she is running, pregnant, from the plantation, is not free of racist sentiment and some of her comments, perhaps inadvertently, deny Sethe’s individuality. While talking to her, Amy says “ We got an old nigger girl come by our place. She doesn’t know nothing... can’t barely stick two words together. She don’t know nothing, just like you. You don’t know a thing. End up dead, that’s what” (94). Amy unthinkingly lumps her together with another black woman she knows and, even though she hardly knows anything about Sethe, equates them and automatically assigns both of them a lesser degree of intelligence, seemingly due just to race, judging by how nonchalantly the girl threw out the racial slur. As Sethe’s daughter Denver later considers in the book, “ anybody white could take your whole self for anything that came to mind. Not just work, kill, or maim you, but dirty you. Dirty you so bad you couldn’t like yourself anymore... you forgot who you were and couldn’t think it up” (295). She recognizes the negative psychological effects racism can cause, while also recognizing its other more severe effects, such as mutilation and death and the hands of extreme

racists. Stamp Paid considers the “ whole towns wiped clean of Negroes; eighty-seven lynchings in one year alone in Kentucky; four colored schools burned to the ground... black women raped... property taken, necks broken,” horrible examples of what racism could lead to. Because of their skin color, Sethe and other black characters are unable to escape the racist forces of social constructions that exist across the country, in both free and slave holding regions.

Caleb Williams, even while pursued, is capable of momentarily confounding the apparently inescapable wrath that pursues him by disguising himself. Before attempting to leave the country for the first time, he realizes that his description is being circulated in order for Falkland to locate him, so he “ adopted along with [his] beggar’s attire a peculiar slouching and clownish gait to be used whenever there should appear the least chance of [his] being observed, together with an Irish brogue which [he] had an opportunity of studying in prison” (247). In London, he writes “ the exterior which I was now induced to assume was that of a Jew” (263). In both cases, his disguise only fails due to an awkward coincidence or the extreme diligence of the agents of Falkland. It succeeds, though, for a while, in keeping him from the notice of most who see him and would otherwise recognize him based on the descriptions, because while successfully disguised he does not match the description of the individual who is being searched for.

Sethe, on the other hand, does not have this option. Even if she is capable of disguising herself enough to appear as someone different, she will still appear as a black woman, and while this may help her escape schoolteacher,

an authority figure from her old plantation Sweet Home, and the slavecatchers, she will not otherwise be any freer. Because of the system of racism that she is forced to face and that Caleb is not subjected to, she is seen as an inferior and as less of an individual, so will still be mistreated despite her individual identity. Furthermore, she, unlike Caleb, is not alone. She has four children to take care of, greatly diminishing her chances of effectively disguising herself. This combination of things may be why she, rather than devising some complex plan to evade her inescapable fate like Caleb does, decides to take much more drastic measures, or as Stamp Paid refers to her actions, “ the Misery (which is what he called Sethe’s rough response to the Fugitive Bill)” (201). In an act controversial among the black community of her area, she decides to attempt to kill her four children when the slavecatchers come, to prevent them from having to experience what she experienced.

Caleb Williams, in the end, is able to take legal matters to free himself, and end up haunted by a guilty conscience. However, aside from that, he ends the story completely free. Sethe, as an African American and former slave, is denied political agency so is unable to use the same measures as Caleb to free herself, particularly because what she is haunted initially by a ghost of her dead baby, then, after it is banished, by is what seems to be a literal reincarnation of the daughter she killed, going by the name Beloved. “ I am Beloved and she is mine” (248), she says. “ In the night I hear chewing and swallowing and laughter... It belongs to me... I see her face which is mine” (251). Here, Beloved refers to Sethe. Her claims that Sethe is hers manifest

more clearly in later chapters when she seems to possess and weaken her, eventually driving her to nearly attack a passing white man.

In an otherwise realistic novel, *Beloved* as a supernatural entity seems to be a manifestation of the difficulties in African American's lives, particularly those of former slaves, the added complications of their race aside from their own individual problems, and how they can weigh on them. Caleb was only haunted by memories of his own individual past, as he was not subject to any oppressive system other than what one individual, Falkland, applied against him as an individual. *Beloved*, on the other hand, was killed as a child without a name because of the threat posed by the system of slavery and oppression her mother feared, which threatened them not less as individuals and more as members of a mistreated race. Her return to life is a physical and ever present reminder of the horrible things that Sethe felt the need to do because of the system oppressing her, and the reminder consumed her individual identity and sanity, as implied by *Beloved*'s lines "she is mine" and "her face which is mine."

Even though *Beloved* is banished from their home for a second time, allowing Sethe's family to escape her more literal haunting, their skin color will prevent them from escaping the haunting of racism. *Beloved* seems to represent the extreme psychological effects of a system like slavery, but even when the entire community successfully comes together to help Sethe rid herself of this haunting, they are still all haunted by the same system. While Caleb's and Sethe's experiences parallel each other in ways, certain things are absent from Caleb's narrative that make their presence in Sethe's

more pronounced. Caleb's situation was clearly avoidable to begin with, while Sethe could not have possibly done anything to prevent being born into slavery. The fact that Sethe's individual persecution is inextricable from the oppression of her entire races emphasizes the fact that while Caleb is persecuted, he is persecuted as an individual and by an individual and, unlike Sethe, is able to completely escape persecution once the individual persecuting him dies, whereas Sethe will be oppressed due to her race even if she is able to escape her individual situation. Caleb's brief mention of feelings of guilt, contrasted with Beloved's presence and malevolence for a large portion of Morrison's novel, makes it clear how much more extremely and intensely blacks could be haunted because of the systems of racism that oppressed and continue to oppress them. Far from saying that white people are unable to have complex problems, contrast of the novels clarifies the ideas that problems faced by whites lack the further complication of race and racism, because of the two protagonists, only Sethe, due to her race, was truly unable to escape all of her problems.