

Beloved begins in 1873 in Cincinnati, Ohio, where Sethe, a former slave, has been living with her eighteen-year-old daughter Denver. Sethe's mother-in-law, Baby Suggs, lived with them until her death eight years earlier. Just before Baby Suggs's death, Sethe's two sons, Howard and Buglar, ran away. Sethe believes they fled because of the malevolent presence of an abusive ghost that has haunted their house at 124 Bluestone Road for years. Denver, however, likes the ghost, which everyone believes to be the spirit of her dead sister.

On the day the novel begins, Paul D, whom Sethe has not seen since they worked together on Mr. Garner's Sweet Home plantation in Kentucky approximately twenty years earlier, stops by Sethe's house. His presence resurrects memories that have lain buried in Sethe's mind for almost two decades. From this point on, the story will unfold on two temporal planes. The present in Cincinnati constitutes one plane, while a series of events that took place around twenty years earlier, mostly in Kentucky, constitutes the other. This latter plane is accessed and described through the fragmented flashbacks of the major characters. Accordingly, we frequently read these flashbacks several times, sometimes from varying perspectives, with each successive narration of an event adding a little more information to the previous ones.

From these fragmented memories, the following story begins to emerge: Sethe, the protagonist, was born in the South to an African mother she never knew. When she is thirteen, she is sold to the Garners, who own Sweet Home and practice a comparatively benevolent kind of slavery. There, the other slaves, who are all men, lust after her but never touch her. Their names are Sixo, Paul D, Paul A, Paul F, and Halle. Sethe chooses to marry Halle, apparently in part because he has proven generous enough to buy his mother's freedom by hiring himself out on the weekends. Together, Sethe and Halle have two sons, Howard and Buglar, as well as a baby daughter whose name we never learn. When she leaves Sweet Home, Sethe is also pregnant with a fourth child. After the eventual death of the proprietor, Mr. Garner, the widowed Mrs. Garner asks her sadistic, vehemently racist brother-in-law to help her run the farm. He is known to the slaves as Schoolteacher, and his oppressive presence makes life on the plantation even more unbearable than it had been before. The slaves decide to run.

Schoolteacher and his nephews anticipate the slaves' escape, however, and capture Paul D and Sixo. Schoolteacher kills Sixo and brings Paul D back to Sweet Home, where Paul D sees Sethe for what he believes will be the last time. She is still intent on running,

having already sent her children ahead to her mother-in-law Baby Suggs's house in Cincinnati. Invigorated by the recent capture, schoolteacher's nephews seize Sethe in the barn and violate her, stealing the milk her body is storing for her infant daughter. Unbeknownst to Sethe, Halle is watching the event from a loft above her, where he lies frozen with horror. Afterward, Halle goes mad: Paul D sees him sitting by a churn with butter slathered all over his face. Paul D, meanwhile, is forced to suffer the indignity of wearing an iron bit in his mouth.

When schoolteacher finds out that Sethe has reported his and his nephews' misdeeds to Mrs. Garner, he has her whipped severely, despite the fact that she is pregnant. Swollen and scarred, Sethe nevertheless runs away, but along the way she collapses from exhaustion in a forest. A white girl, Amy Denver, finds her and nurses her back to health. When Amy later helps Sethe deliver her baby in a boat, Sethe names this second daughter Denver after the girl who helped her. Sethe receives further help from Stamp Paid, who rows her across the Ohio River to Baby Suggs's house. Baby Suggs cleans Sethe up before allowing her to see her three older children.

Sethe spends twenty-eight wonderful days in Cincinnati, where Baby Suggs serves as an unofficial preacher to the black community. On the last day, however, schoolteacher comes for Sethe to take her and her children back to Sweet Home. Rather than surrender her children to a life of dehumanizing slavery, she flees with them to the woodshed and tries to kill them. Only the third child, her older daughter, dies, her throat having been cut with a handsaw by Sethe. Sethe later arranges for the baby's headstone to be carved with the word "Beloved." The sheriff takes Sethe and Denver to jail, but a group of white abolitionists, led by the Bodwins, fights for her release. Sethe returns to the house at 124, where Baby Suggs has sunk into a deep depression. The community shuns the house, and the family continues to live in isolation.

Meanwhile, Paul D has endured torturous experiences in a chain gang in Georgia, where he was sent after trying to kill Brandywine, a slave owner to whom he was sold by schoolteacher. His traumatic experiences have caused him to lock away his memories, emotions, and ability to love in the "tin tobacco box" of his heart. One day, a fortuitous rainstorm allows Paul D and the other chain gang members to escape. He travels northward by following the blossoming spring flowers. Years later, he ends up on Sethe's porch in Cincinnati.

Paul D's arrival at 124 commences the series of events taking place in the present time frame. Prior to moving in, Paul D chases the house's resident ghost away, which makes the already lonely Denver resent him from the start. Sethe and Paul D look forward to a promising future together, until one day, on their way home from a carnival, they encounter a strange young woman sleeping near the steps of 124. Most of the characters believe that

the woman—who calls herself Beloved—is the embodied spirit of Sethe's dead daughter, and the novel provides a wealth of evidence supporting this interpretation. Denver develops an obsessive attachment to Beloved, and Beloved's attachment to Sethe is equally if not more intense. Paul D and Beloved hate each other, and Beloved controls Paul D by moving him around the house like a rag doll and by seducing him against his will.

When Paul D learns the story of Sethe's "rough choice"—her infanticide—he leaves 124 and begins sleeping in the basement of the local church. In his absence, Sethe and Beloved's relationship becomes more intense and exclusive. Beloved grows increasingly abusive, manipulative, and parasitic, and Sethe is obsessed with satisfying Beloved's demands and making her understand why she murdered her. Worried by the way her mother is wasting away, Denver leaves the premises of 124 for the first time in twelve years in order to seek help from Lady Jones, her former teacher. The community provides the family with food and eventually organizes under the leadership of Ella, a woman who had worked on the Underground Railroad and helped with Sethe's escape, in order to exorcise Beloved from 124. When they arrive at Sethe's house, they see Sethe on the porch with Beloved, who stands smiling at them, naked and pregnant. Mr. Bodwin, who has come to 124 to take Denver to her new job, arrives at the house. Mistaking him for schoolteacher, Sethe runs at Mr. Bodwin with an ice pick. She is restrained, but in the confusion Beloved disappears, never to return.

Afterward, Paul D comes back to Sethe, who has retreated to Baby Suggs's bed to die. Mourning Beloved, Sethe laments, "She was my best thing." But Paul D replies, "You your best thing, Sethe." The novel then ends with a warning that "[t]his is not a story to pass on." The town, and even the residents of 124, have forgotten Beloved "like an unpleasant dream during a troubling sleep."