

MJC ENGLISH, SEM-IV

Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, Chapter 4 - 6 summary

Summary: Chapter 4

Denver hurts Paul D by asking him how long he plans to “hang around.” Sethe is mortified by Denver’s behavior but refuses to allow Paul D to criticize her daughter. Paul D interprets this as a sign of intense motherly love and thinks it is dangerous for a formerly enslaved person to love anything too much. Paul D has learned to love the individuals in his life only partially, so that he has enough love left over for the next person when the first is taken away. Paul D promises Sethe that she can safely reenter her past because he will be there to catch her if she falls. He invites Denver and Sethe to a carnival in town that is having a special day for Black people. At the carnival, Denver surprises herself by having a good time. The people they see there greet her casually, rather than showing her the contempt she expects. Because he is such an extrovert and so shamelessly thrilled by the carnival, Paul D is a hit with the other carnival-goers. He thus helps reintegrate Sethe and Denver into the community, and he makes a few acquaintances. He also inquires about getting a job. Paul D is amused by the spectacle of the supposed “Wild African Savage,” because he says he knew the man back in Roanoke. On the way to and from the carnival, the smell of rotting roses is overpowering. Also, both on the way there and on the way back, Sethe notices that the three shadows of Paul D, Denver, and herself overlap so as to appear to be holding hands. She interprets this as a promising sign that signals future happiness.

Summary: Chapter 5

A fully dressed woman walks out of a stream and falls asleep beneath a mulberry tree. The woman moves to a tree stump near the steps of 124, where Paul D, Sethe, and Denver find her as they return from the carnival. Sethe suddenly feels a strange, irrepressible need to urinate and is reminded of her water breaking before Denver’s birth. Denver and Paul D take the woman inside, where she drinks cup after cup of water. Her name, it turns out, is *Beloved*. Her skin is as smooth as a baby’s, and she has no recollection of the past. Denver notes that Here Boy, the dog that was disfigured during one of the baby ghost’s rages, has disappeared. *Beloved* sleeps for four days, waking only to ask for water. While *Beloved* sleeps, Denver cares for her with a possessive devotion. *Beloved*’s presence makes Paul D uneasy. He

remarks that although she acts and sounds sick, she does not show visible signs of ill health—the other day, he tells Sethe, he saw her pick up a rocking chair with one hand. He claims that Denver was also watching, but when he asks Denver for confirmation, she denies having seen any such thing.

Summary: Chapter 6

Beloved develops a strange attachment to Sethe. Although she usually hates discussing the past, Sethe enjoys pouring stories into Beloved's eager ears. Beloved asks what has happened to what she calls Sethe's "diamonds." Sethe replies that she once owned some crystal earrings given to her by Mrs. Garner for her wedding. She then recounts the story of her haphazard, patchwork wedding dress.

As she watches Sethe arrange Denver's hair, Beloved asks about Sethe's mother. Sethe explains that she rarely saw her. Sethe remembers that her mother once took her aside and showed her a circle and a cross that had been burned into her skin. She said that Sethe could use these marks to identify her body if she died. When Sethe asked to be marked, too, her mother slapped her. Sethe tells the girls that she did not understand why her mother had done this until she had a mark of her own.

Sethe mentions that her mother was hanged, and she is suddenly stunned by the recollection of a disturbing memory that she had forgotten. Sethe ran to her dead mother, but Nan, another enslaved woman, pulled Sethe away from her mother's body when Sethe tried to search for the mark. Speaking in her mother's long-forgotten language, Nan told Sethe that the two women had come across the sea in the same ship. The white crewmembers had raped them repeatedly, but Sethe's mother "threw away" the children she had by the white men. Sethe was kept because she had a Black father, for whom she was named.

Analysis: Chapters 4–6

Although the cheer of the carnival in Chapter 4 is tempered somewhat by the stench of the rotting roses, the chapter ends on a note of optimism that is perhaps unparalleled in the rest of the book. Sethe begins to think that with Paul D there to support her, she may be able to confront her past. There are other beginnings: Denver and Paul D begin to reconcile with

each other, Sethe and Denver begin reconciliation with the community, and Paul D begins to feel at home in Cincinnati.

Read more about the symbolism of the red roses.

Beloved's mystical arrival in Chapter 5 interrupts the progress that is made in Chapter 4. In the subsequent chapters, the existing relationships in the novel become unhinged, and the characters recombine with unusual force. Beloved seems to be a manifestation of Sethe's infant daughter who was killed. Details linking her to the daughter include her age, her name, her lack of memory, her smooth, "new" skin, Here Boy's disappearance, Sethe's strange sensation of her "water breaking," and Beloved's impossible knowledge of Sethe's earrings. It is never made clear, however, whether Beloved is a reincarnation of the child—an actual living human who is inhabited by the spirit of the dead baby—or simply a ghost. Paul D's observation of Beloved's secret strength suggests that she is capable of the supernatural violence wreaked by the poltergeist before Paul D's arrival.

Read an important quote about Beloved's arrival.

In their actions, the residents of 124 treat Beloved as they would a human visitor in need. In their thoughts, however, they associate her with the murdered infant. As the story develops, all three forge relationships with her that are governed by these thoughts. Although Beloved appears on the surface to be a woman, she resembles a baby in many ways. She does not walk steadily, her speech is impaired, she does not have full control over her bodily functions, and she sleeps constantly. Beloved also represents the untrained and undisciplined desire of an infant. Her single-minded fixation on Sethe resembles that of an infant, who is unable to conceive of an identity separate from its mother and who thinks of its mother as its exclusive possession.

Read an in-depth analysis of Beloved.

Sethe tries desperately to keep the past at bay, but Beloved's arrival demonstrates the difficulty—indeed, the impossibility—of repressing the past. Over the course of the novel, Sethe's confrontation with that past will prove both destructive and productive. This section emphasizes the beneficial aspects of the process: in Beloved's presence, memories surface that help Sethe understand her past and, consequently, herself. For example, in Chapter 6

Beloved inspires Sethe's memory of her mother's hanging to come to the surface. Sethe's story of the hanging marks the first time Denver has ever heard about her mother's mother. Especially poignant is the blank space in Sethe's memory for the forgotten language of her early years. Perhaps Sethe's failure to remember the African language spoken by her mother is a deliberate part of her attempt to repress her memory of her mother. Importantly, the lost language represents the kind of cultural devastation suffered by enslaved people. Just as Beloved partially restores that lost cultural history to Sethe along with her personal history, Morrison's novel restores a repressed part of American history to contemporary readers by including the stories and memories of enslaved people. Later, in Beloved's monologue in Chapter 22, the slaves' ancestors' memories of the Middle Passage, the ocean crossing between Africa and America, are evoked.