

FREEDOM AND SLAVERY AT 124 BLUESTONE ROAD

PILAR CUDER DOMÍNGUEZ
Universidad de Huelva

There is no denying the protagonism of Sethe's house, 124 Bluestone Road, in Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987). Firstly, each of the three sections of the novel opens with a reference to 124, thus recording the evolution of the drama of its inhabitants: at the beginning it's spiteful and full of venom (3), then loud (169) and eventually quiet (239). Secondly, and since the building is the site of ESP phenomena, it exhibits human traits and modes of behaviour it could not possibly have otherwise: it commits insults against its owners, it shakes, it looks back at them, etc.

Beloved is, however, much more than the story of a haunted house. As a neo-slave narrative, it explores from the perspective of the late 1980s the issues of freedom and slavery as they affect the lives of a group of African-Americans in the difficult post-civil war years. Both tales need not be separate; in fact, Morrison interweaves them to such an extent that the house foregrounds precisely those issues, together with related concepts of identity and self-affirmation.

Chronologically, 124 first belonged to the Bodwins, a white family who would later move into town and rent it out to Baby Suggs, Sethe's mother-in-law. Edward Bodwin's recollections of his childhood as he approaches 124 at the end of the novel dwell on its connection to death, and particularly, women's death: all the Bodwin women had died there (259). He also remembers how he had used to bury around the house those precious things he wanted to protect, presumably from his father's authority and power. Both memories, though belated, actually prefigure Sethe's attempt to murder her children, her own precious possessions, in order to save them from slavery (that is, to protect them from the white men's attempt to seize them in the episode known as "the Misery").

As Baby Suggs moves into the house, it comes to stand for her newly-acquired freedom, and the changes she introduces, like boarding up the back door and cooking inside instead of outside project her rejection of her previous mode of life as a slave

(207). 124 also becomes the embodiment of her generosity and openness, her reputed “big heart;” as such, the house is turned into a sort of community shelter, a safe harbour, a place for comfort, both physical and psychological (87-8). During this period then, the house is the embodiment of Baby Suggs’ self, the inner self she did not even know she had while still a slave at Sweet Home:

Sweet Home was a marked improvement. No question. And no matter, for the sadness was at her center, the desolated 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 or what they looked like if alive, fact was she knew more about them than she knew about herself, having never had the map to discover what she was like. (140)

The symbolism of 124 is strengthened through contrast with Sweet Home. The name itself is intensely ironic for, as Paul D says very early in the novel, “It wasn’t sweet and it sure wasn’t a home” (14). For Baby Suggs, it was a sad place, just like her sad center. For Sethe, Sweet Home meant deprivation, since her being sold to the Garners broke the last link she had to her past. Even though during her childhood in another plantation she had not been allowed a conventional relationship with her mother, she had retained a sense of family and history through a mother-like figure, Nan. Nan had preserved for her some semblance of roots, especially through storytelling and her native African language. When Sethe was sold into Sweet Home, she did not only lose that last link to her past, but also all female companionship: Mrs. Garner, the only woman around, was the slaveholder and barren (Samuels and Hudson-Weems 113).

Sweet Home, as a matter of fact, stands for slavery, even if of a mild sort because there is no brutal treatment of the slaves and they are encouraged to think of themselves as men and women (i.e. as free). Under Mr. Garner, Sweet Home is a sort of edenic world where generally accepted rules for the behaviour of masters and slaves bear no effect. Outside, however, all hell breaks loose: “. . . they were only Sweet Home men at Sweet Home. One step off that ground and they were trespassers among the human race “ (125). Their special status in Sweet Home is, therefore, a parody of freedom, because they are free only as long as their movements are restricted, and restriction of movement is a defining trait of slavery.

A mild treatment of slaves, then, does not alter the basic assumption of slavery: that these black people do not belong to themselves, but to someone else. When Sethe claims that not all slaveholders are the same, that some, like Mr. Garner, do not insult or in any way abuse them, Halle points out that “It don’t matter, Sethe. What they say is the same. Loud or soft” (195). The essential contradiction in the concept of a mild or humane slavery is further exposed after the death of Mr. Garner, who had acted as a demi-god in this edenic world, with the arrival of schoolteacher who, acting as a sort of devil, will bring the outside rules into Sweet Home. The loss of paradise will be

tragic, both for Sethe and for the men, and even more so because, in spite of having been forewarned through the tales of Baby Suggs and Halle's former experiences, they were not prepared to accept the full implications of their slavery; in fact, they had dismissed those stories as "bad luck" (221).

If 124 is for Baby Suggs the symbol of her freedom and newly-discovered self, then the whitemen's trespass during the episode of the Misery makes her realise that not even here is there any safety from the intrusion of the whites and the pain and suffering they always bring along. Both in Stamp Paid's and Denver's recollections, Baby Suggs keeps saying "They came in my yard" (179 and 209). Although conveyed in terms of space related to the house, this is a trespass into Baby Suggs' very self, and as such it signals her psychological breakdown and her retirement from life, as she comes to understand that, though now free, she remains very much a slave.

Although for Sethe, as for Baby Suggs, 124 stands for freedom and again as opposite to Sweet Home, Sethe's definition of freedom is based on possession, a concept that is central to all her actions in the novel:

This house he told her to leave as though a house was a little thing—a shirtwaist or a sewing basket you could walk off or give away any old time. She who had never had one but this one; she who had to bring a fistful of salsify into Mrs. Garner's kitchen every day just to be able to work in it, feel like some part of it was hers, because she wanted to love the work she did, to take the ugly out of it, and the only way she could feel at home on Sweet Home was if she picked some pretty growing thing and took it with her. (22)

There is a further difference. Baby Suggs had thought of the house as the possibility of a new life, a future: her first decision is to try to re-unite her family by bringing her missing children to 124. When this proves to be an impossible task, she nevertheless settles for second best, the only family she now has, Halle's. Whereas Baby Suggs has plenty of time to establish that connection, Sethe does not; she barely has a month of freedom before schoolteacher and the other white men come after her. After the Misery, she stops thinking of the future; we are told more than once that "To Sethe, the future was a matter of keeping the past at bay" (42). The same words would apply to her relationship to her house, whose ghostly forces she has to keep at bay day in day out.

As the house represents the past for Sethe, it is not surprising that she should be literally surrounded by images from that past. Paul D manages to make a place for himself in the house (notice again the reference to space) because, as a former slave at Sweet Home, he also belongs there:

When she woke the house crowded in on her: there was the door where the soda crackers were lined up in a row; the white stairs her baby girl loved to

climb; the corner where Baby Suggs mended shoes, a pile of which were still in the cold room; the exact place on the stove where Denver burned her fingers. And of course the spite of the house itself. There was no room for any other thing or body until Paul D arrived and broke up the place, making room, shifting it, moving it over to someplace else, then standing in the place he had made. (39)

The house does not represent the past because of the ghost; rather the opposite. The ghostly presence is a constant reminder that Sethe has not yet come to terms with that past. She never managed to overcome the grief over the last of all the losses she had suffered, the loss of her beloved daughter. Sethe actually stopped living when her daughter did; from then on she just went through the motions of everyday life mechanically, pretending she was indeed alive.

To Paul D, who has spent 18 years wandering all over the country, 124 represents a shelter, just what it was for many wandering black people during Baby Suggs' golden age. He has found other such shelters; the weaver lady's house in Delaware, where he managed to stay for 3 full months, is mentioned occasionally. But these places were no more than stopovers in his continuous wanderings; this time he seems to have something rather more permanent in mind: ". . . when I got here and sat out there on the porch, waiting for you, well, I knew it wasn't the place I was heading toward; it was you. We can make a life, girl. A life" (46). In that life he now wants to make with Sethe, the creation of a family plays the most important role, since it is something that, as a slave, he had never had any claim to and craved for.

Paul D's compulsion to keep walking, to never stop for long at one place, is caused by a composite of feelings. First and foremost, he defines freedom as the capability of going anywhere he wants to at any given time, and that has been so ever since he found out at Sweet Home, that Mister, the rooster, had more freedom than he did: "Mister was allowed to be and stay what he was. But I wasn't allowed to be and stay what I was" (72).

However, even more than proving that he is free, his endless wandering is an escape: "If a Negro got legs he ought to use them. Sit down too long, somebody will figure out a way to tie them up" (10). This is a physical escape, as he tries to avoid the sphere of influence and power of the white men over his life, but it is also a psychological flight from his memories of slavery, especially of those final days at Sweet Home, when he lost all his "brothers," the only family he ever knew, and of his ordeal in Alfred, Georgia.

Paul D's attempt to make a new life, a free one, at 124 Bluestone Road, is however cut short very soon with the arrival of Beloved. In his first encounter with the ghostly presence in the house he had won, but the defeated enemy has only returned with renewed strength. The house becomes the battlefield where the dispute over Sethe will have to be settled. Because Paul D's concepts of freedom and slavery are based on the notion of control over one's own movements, the struggle between his

will to stay and Beloved's will to throw him out will be enacted in terms of territory. Thus, he first moves downstairs and then outside the house.

Just as the whitemen's intrusion in her home made Baby Suggs understand that she was not altogether free, Paul D's realization that he is being thrown out of the place where he does want to stay signals that he is still a slave to someone else's wishes, though in this case a black woman's, Beloved. As in the case of Baby Suggs, this is the starting point of his breakdown, represented by the opening of the rusty tobacco tin he has lately had for a heart (117).

Beloved's victory over Paul D (i.e. that of a woman over a man) is shown as being achieved, and especially maintained, through sex. This is so to such an extent that it has been pointed out that Beloved behaves as "the traditional succubus, the female spirit who drains the male's life force even as she drains him of his sperm" (Harris 157). The struggle with Beloved is so markedly sexual because Paul D conceives freedom and manhood as inseparable notions, the reason lying again in his Sweet Home past. In Mr. Garner's definition of his slaves as "men" there was already a strong sexual component:

"Y'all got boys," he told them. "Young boys, old boys, picky boys, stroppin boys. Now at Sweet Home, my niggers is men every one of em. Bought em thataway, raised em thataway. Men every one."

"Beg to differ, Garner. Ain't no nigger men."

"Not if you scared, they ain't." Garner's smile was wide. "But if you a man yourself, you'll want your niggers to be men too."

"I wouldn't have no nigger men round my wife."

It was the reaction Garner loved and waited for. "Neither would I," he said. "Neither would I, " and there was always a pause before the neighbor, or stranger, or peddler, or brother-in-law or whoever it was got the meaning. (10-11)

Garner implied that these were men because they were sexually active and potentially aggressive. Further evidence is provided by the fact that he allowed them the use of rifles (a phallic symbol; cf. Samuels and Hudson-Weems 124). Sixo proved his manhood by walking 30 miles to meet his lover: here again sex and freedom of movement, if somewhat restricted, come together. It may even be interpreted that Paul D's arrival at Sethe's house after so many years is triggered by an attempt to prove (to her as to himself) his newly discovered manhood/freedom:

At the point of finding Sethe, Paul D's intentions appear, to a large degree, to be purely sexual. She feels that the meeting provides an opportunity for him to display his manhood in a manner heretofore unwitnessed by Sethe. For not only had she been made an object of sexual desire for him and the other Sweet

Home men . . . but she had also chosen someone else and witnessed his deterioration as well under schoolteacher's brutal management. (Samuels and Hudson-Weems 123)

In this context, Paul D's affair with Beloved is the confirmation of his being both a slave and not a man. After all, he is being forced to have sex with someone he is not in the least attracted to, even positively hates, which was so often a slave's lot (though usually a slavewoman's). Paul D's final attempt to rid himself of Beloved's power is thwarted when he cannot tell Sethe what is happening (again, characteristic of a slave, for whom those experiences are unspeakable). However, he does something even he considers unexpected: he asks Sethe to have his child. Although at first sight these are two unrelated issues, they are not. Having a child is for Paul D a way to re-establish his manhood and thus to recover his freedom, just as Sixo had transcended slavery and even death in his cry "Seven-O" (i.e. in the fact that he was going to have a child).

Beloved's victory is complete when Paul D leaves the house and its grounds altogether. Although the reason for his leaving seems to be his finding out about the Misery through Stamp Paid, it should be taken into account that throughout his conversation with Sethe he feels he is being observed by Beloved through the ceiling. Moreover, this appears to be a pretext to hide his feelings that, in having become Beloved's puppet, he is not enough of a man for her: "How fast he had moved from his shame to hers. From his cold-house secret to her too-thick love" (165). In fact, the house has come to represent slavery for Paul D, and as such, he cannot endure to stay.

Consequently, his return to 124 at the end of the novel is a return to his full status both as a free human being and as a man. As a matter of fact, it is an act of self-affirmation, as he retraces the very same steps he had taken in leaving: "His coming is the reverse route of his going" (263). The process is complete when he walks back into the house and puts his image firmly in place in Sethe's bed, again linking the notions of freedom of movement/territory and sex/manhood.

Denver coincides with Paul D in that the house is for her a symbol of slavery. Considering she is a first-generation free black child, this may appear contradictory; but Denver's slavery is psychological, not literal. Living in complete isolation from the world, she has not yet developed her own self; in that sense, she is as much a slave as was Baby Suggs at Sweet Home. Because she is a child, she still depends very much on her mother, a mother she, however, has grown to fear. That is why she takes refuge in her boxwood room, which is in fact a symbolic womb into which she crawls back, and where she is naked, nurtured and protected from the outside world:

In these woods, between the field and the stream, hidden by post oaks, five boxwood bushes, planted in a ring, had started stretching toward each other four feet off the ground to form a round, empty room seven feet high, its walls fifty

inches of murmuring leaves.

Bent low, Denver could crawl into this room, and once there she could stand all the way up in emerald light . . . In that bower, closed off from the hurt of the hurt world, Denver's imagination produced its own hunger and its own food, which she badly needed because loneliness wore her out. *Wore her out.* Veiled and protected by the live green walls, she felt ripe and clear, and salvation was as easy as a wish. (28-9)

This is also the reason why she prefers the stories about her mother's escape, not those about Sweet Home, when she didn't exist at all, and before the Misery, when her mother was still a nurturing and protecting presence, and had not yet turned into a witch who could come and kill her while asleep. These stories also make up for most of Denver's knowledge about the outside world, but they must be terrifying for the child, since in them 124 features as the only safe haven from the unspeakable dangers out there. Denver's fears then, even though attached to her mother's potential and unforeseeable violence, are as much a fear of intrusion as it was for the other women (has actually been transmitted by them), the result being that 124 is Denver's prison:

Whatever it is, it comes from outside this house, outside the yard, and it can come right on in the yard if it wants too. So I never leave this house and I watch over the yard, so it can't happen again and my mother won't have to kill me. (205)

Because she has not yet developed her own independent self, and since her mother is in some way the enemy, rescue is only possible in Denver's fantasies about her missing father, where he features as the knight saving the beautiful maiden held captive in the tower; a fantasy which reveals both her loneliness and her imprisonment. As it is, there will be no rescue, and she will be forced to become her own saviour; forced by hunger, she will have to confront her fears and step outside the familiar grounds:

In the brightest of the carnival dresses and wearing a stranger's shoes, she stood on the porch of 124 ready to be swallowed up in the world beyond the edge of the porch. Out there where small things scratched and sometimes touched. Where words could be spoken that would close your ears shut. Where, if you were alone, feeling could overtake you and stick to you as a shadow. Out there where there were places in which things so bad had happened that when you went near them it would happen again. Like Sweet Home where time didn't pass and where, like her mother said, the bad was waiting for her as well. (243-44)

As she finds her way through the town, and later establishes a relationship with her neighbours, Denver is actually drawing the map both of the world and of her own

self. Her progression is the opposite to that of the women in the preceding generations: whereas Baby Suggs and Sethe found their free selves as they arrived at 124, Denver discovers and develops her self only when she leaves. At the same time, she completes the progression of her family from slavery to freedom, by becoming a free being freely interacting with others and inserting herself as member of a community (which the Misery had prevented Baby Suggs and Sethe from doing).

It is Denver who, therefore, manages to solve and put an end to Sethe's struggle against the past under the shape of *Beloved*, a struggle that, as mentioned above, is centred on the house and whose progress is marked by the references to 124 which open each section. The progression is also illustrated by the passing of the seasons and its effect on the house. Thus, the narrative starts in the summer, but by the end of the first section snow has started piling around the house, higher and deeper (135). The growing isolation of the house illustrates that the struggle is actually taking place inside Sethe, in her inner self. In the second section, the house has been completely cut off by the snow, and the conflict will be solved in the final section with the return of spring and the heat dissolving the snow.

Contact with the outside world is not only prevented by the weather, but also voluntarily broken by the characters themselves: the first section closes with Paul D leaving 124; later Stamp Paid gives up trying to go into the house, which is by then surrounded by a ring of strange voices; Sethe locks the door and decides to forget the world outside (199). Again, the solution to the conflict coincides with the return of the outside world, when Denver re-establishes contact.

Nevertheless, because this is Sethe's inner struggle with the past, another condition has to be met: the traumatizing events will be re-enacted in the final pages of the novel and somehow corrected. There is a close parallelism between the characters and features of the Misery and this scene (257-ff). Sethe is this time armed with an ice-pick instead of a saw; her children are present, although reduced to her two daughters; the black community is represented by the group of women, and a white man (even if harmless and benevolent) is approaching the house after many years.

The atmosphere immediately preceding the Misery had been filled with foreboding. The inhabitants of the house had been weary after a merry banquet celebrating Sethe's safety; Baby Suggs had been awoken by the scent of disapproval, and then worried by the notion that something dark was coming —ironically, since this "dark" thing was no other than the "white" men. This time, their weariness is caused by quarrels and hunger, and Denver wakes up crying from a dream, which leaves her feeling sad and oppressed. In both cases, they look one way while the intrusion comes another. Baby Suggs and Stamp Paid kept looking towards the river, but the white men came along the road; Denver now looks to the right, and the women approach from the left.

Sethe reacts very much as she had done 18 years earlier: she feels that the white man "is coming into her yard and he is coming for my best thing" (262). Ironically, Sethe is at the same time right and totally misguided: the white man is indeed coming

for her daughter but it is Denver, not Beloved. Moreover, Denver proves to be “her best thing” because she is the one to save her mother from complete disaster. There is, nevertheless, an all-important difference: Sethe now re-directs her fear and rage against the white man, whereas in the episode of the Misery she had turned them against her children.

The other characters also somehow improve on their earlier behaviour. The community had been strikingly silent during the Misery: no one had warned those at 124 of the arrival of the white men, and not one of them had made a sound to accompany Sethe’s pain and distress when she was being taken to prison (152). The women now pray, holler, and make sounds, in what has been identified as a mixture of pagan and religious rituals (Harris 163) and a ceremony reminiscent of Baby Suggs’s at the clearing (Samuels and Hudson-Weems 120). What is more remarkable, however, is that their repeated “yes, yes, yes” directly and explicitly counteracts Sethe’s “no, no, no.” Denver, in turn, corrects Baby Suggs’ passivity (for she could not or would not do anything to stop Sethe) as she now disarms her mother before she kills Mr. Bodwin.

This re-enactment of the Misery works as an exorcism, and the result is that Beloved vanishes into thin air (or rather, into water, as her last image is seen in the stream, as “a naked woman with fish for hair,” 267). What exactly causes her to leave is nevertheless unclear. Several theories have been devised to explain this episode, variously accounting for Beloved as a ghost or a runaway slave. In the latter case, it would be the sudden appearance of a white man and the fear it produces in her that triggers her departure and perhaps even her actual drowning in the stream. In the former, it can be argued that it is the pressure of the community, who now take sides in the struggle while previously they had been mere on-lookers (Samuels and Hudson-Weems 120). It might also be that Beloved has now understood what Sethe had been trying, unsuccessfully, to explain with words: that her actions had been caused by love and the impulse to protect her children from the pains of slavery (Harris 163). Finally, it is likely that Sethe’s turning her violence against a white man, who stands as the ultimate cause of slavery, has somehow put events right. This would at the same time entail a solution to the conflict that besets not only Sethe but also Eva in Morrison’s *Sula*, as it would signal a recognition that a mother’s desire to protect her children must stop short of taking their lives.

As a matter of fact, there is textual evidence to support any, and all, of these theories. In any case, the result is that the past, in the form of Beloved’s presence in the house, has now been exorcised, and the house stands as just “another weathered house needing repair” (264). Paul’s return to 124 and his decision to put his story next to Sethe’s embody the resolution of the drama of these African-American people living at the turning point between slavery and freedom: their two pasts put together equal not another past, but a future.

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