

SUBJECT – AMERICAN LITERATURE

CODE – GEEN12

UNIT – 5

1.EUDORA WETTY – THE OPTIMIST’S DAUGHTER

2.JOHN BARTH – LOST IN THE FUNHOUSE

3.TONI MORISON - BELOVED

THE OPTIMIST'S DAUGHTER

Eudora Welty was an award-winning writer and photographer who wrote about the American South. Welty was born in Jackson, Mississippi and lived a significant portion of her life in the city's Belhaven neighborhood, where her home has been preserved. She was educated at the Mississippi State College for Women (now called Mississippi University for Women), the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and Columbia University's business school. While at Columbia University, she also was the captain of the women's polo team.

During the 1930s, Welty worked as a photographer for the Works Progress Administration. This job sent her all over the state of Mississippi photographing people from all economic and social classes. Collections of her photographs are *One Time, One Place* and *Photographs*. Welty's true love was literature, not photography, and she soon devoted her energy to writing fiction.

Her first short story, *Death of a Traveling Salesman*, appeared in 1936. Her work attracted the attention of Katherine Anne Porter, who became a mentor to her and wrote the foreword to Welty's first collection of short stories, *A Curtain of Green*, in 1941. The book immediately established Welty as one of American literature's leading lights and featured the legendary short stories *A Worn Path*, *Why I Live at the P.O.*, and *Petrified Man*, all of which have been included in many short story anthologies and literature text books through the years.

In 1992 Welty was awarded the Rea Award for the Short Story for her lifetime contributions to the American short story. *The Optimist's Daughter* won the Pulitzer Prize in 1973. Eudora Welty died of pneumonia in Jackson, at the age of 92.

SUMMARY

Thanks for exploring this SuperSummary Study Guide of “The Optimist's Daughter” by Eudora Welty. A modern alternative to SparkNotes and CliffsNotes, SuperSummary offers high-quality study guides that feature detailed chapter summaries and analysis of major themes, characters, quotes, and essay topics.

Eudora Welty’s novel *The Optimist’s Daughter* was published in 1972 and won the Pulitzer Prize for fiction the following year. Welty, who was born in Jackson, Mississippi, in 1906, originally wrote *The Optimist’s Daughter* as a short story for *The New Yorker*, in which it was published in 1969.

Welty is widely known as a Southern writer because her fiction is derived from the politics, people, and culture of the American South. Before becoming well-known as a writer, Welty worked as a photographer during the Depression for the Works Progress Administration. Her photos featured images of people from various economic backgrounds as they struggled through the Depression. Many of these photographs inspired her writing.

During her accomplished writing career, Welty taught at both Oxford and Cambridge in England, as well as at Harvard University in the United States. During her lifetime, she published 40 stories, five novels, three works of nonfiction, and one children’s book. She is the recipient of many awards, including a Guggenheim and several O’Henry Awards for her short fiction. Her work was widely published in top magazines like *The New Yorker* and *The*

Sewanee Review, and she was the first living writer to have her works published by the Library of America. Welty died in 2001 and is buried in Jackson, Mississippi. Her headstone is engraved with a quote from *The Optimist's Daughter*: "For her life, any life, she had to believe was nothing but the continuity of its love."

PLOT SUMMARY

As the book begins, the main character, Laurel Hand, has traveled from her home in Chicago to New Orleans because her 71-year-old father, Judge Clint McKelva, is losing his eyesight and needs an operation. Laurel, whose mother died (and coincidentally lost her own eyesight), comes to know her father's new, young wife, Fay, whom she met only once at the brief civil wedding ceremony in her hometown of Mount Salus, Mississippi. Fay is younger than Laurel, and as the two women take turns watching over Judge McKelva over a period of several months, Laurel realizes that Fay is a selfish, narcissistic woman who has cheated on her father and is only after his money. One day, Laurel walks in as Fay is physically abusing her father. After that, Laurel's father dies, and the two women travel back to Laurel's childhood home in Mount Salus.

Laurel is comforted by her six "bridesmaids," friends who also supported her when Laurel's husband—the love of her life—died in the war. In addition, old family friends provide much needed love and support in the face of Fay's antagonism and caustic personality. Fay, who told Laurel that she had no family left, turns out to have been lying. During the open-casket visitation in what is now Fay's home, Fay's poor relatives arrive from Texas, turning the

funeral day into a chaotic and troubling experience. After the funeral, Fay leaves with her Texas family for a respite, and agrees not to return to Mount Salus until Laurel has left three days later.

During the three days that Laurel spends in her childhood home, she attempts to make sense of all that has happened to her. She remembers her mother's long illness and death. She considers how much love she felt for her husband, a talented architect who enlisted in the Navy during World War II and was killed, his body never recovered. She finds artifacts of her parents' lives—letters and trinkets—that allow her to come to an understanding about herself and the meaning of love and loss.

In the end, she feels grateful for her friends and is able to make peace with herself and the losses she's endured. She has found a way to stop living in the past and embrace her present life. After one more run-in with Fay in the kitchen of her childhood home, Laurel returns to Chicago with a newfound sense of completion and self-worth. She may not love her dead father's choice in a wife, but she has found compassion for herself and an understanding of Fay. Most importantly, Laurel has learned to leave the past behind, accept the grief of her many losses, and discover a way to live serenely in her present life.

THE CHARACTERS

A key to understanding many of Eudora Welty's characters is the use that they make of their past. Those who distort their memories, or who fail to remember experience at all, are in no position to learn from it, but, to be remembered, experience has to mean something. Fay has no

guiding principle for her present actions because she attaches no significance to the past—either her own or Judge McKelva’s. So she “blunders.”

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“Blundering” in a major character such as Fay represents a major evil; in minor characters, Welty renders it comically. Among a handful of Mount Salus eccentrics at Judge McKelva’s wake is Verna Longmeier, the sewing lady, who recounts memories of Christmas dances that never happened: I remember, oh, I remember how many Christmases I was among those present in this dear old home in all its hospitality. . . . And they’d throw open those doors between these double parlors and the music would strike up! And then—“Miss Verna drew out her arm as though to measure a yard—” then Clinton and I, we’d lead out the dance.

Yet this novel is Laurel’s story. She is the title character—her father being the “Optimist”—and the book chronicles her struggle to comprehend the spiritual legacy of her parents. If she is unveiled slowly—the early chapters barely hint at her troubled soul—it is because at first she has no time to remember that legacy. While the focus is on her father’s illness and death, Laurel appears the most stable figure, standing watch, reading to him by the hour, asking (as Fay does not) the responsible questions of the doctor. Only when these exigencies are past, and her moment of truth can no longer be postponed, is she revealed in her loneliness and conflict.

In contrast to Laurel, Fay is fully revealed from the first time she speaks. Implicitly, therefore, she lacks all depth; it takes but a moment to sound her. Since the world of the novel is seen

primarily through Laurel's eyes, and since Laurel cannot be generous to Fay, some critics have asked if the portrayal of Fay is not excessively hostile. Indeed, she is shown from first to last as a mean-spirited, greedy, unfeeling little shrew; for Welty, this is rather a flat characterization. Yet Fay is less a foil than a catalyst: It takes someone with her extreme traits to jar Laurel out of her false recollections of the relationship between her parents. It was her father the "Optimist" who married both Becky and Fay, and not one wife, but both wives wore him down.

Moreover, Welty introduces another viewpoint than Laurel's to humanize Fay. It is the viewpoint of Miss Adele Courtland, the McKelvas' next-door neighbor—who, it is hinted, would have made a suitable and willing second wife for the judge. In her wisdom born of denial, she defends Fay against judgment by Laurel's standards. Concerning the antics of Fay and her family at the wake, Adele says, "It's true they were a trifle more inelegant [than the Mount Salus gentry]. . . . But only a trifle." Attempting to explain Fay's seemingly tasteless show of grief, Adele says, "I further believe Fay thought she was rising in the estimation of Mount Salus, there in front of all [Clinton's] lifelong friends . . . on what she thought was the prime occasion for doing it."

Class consciousness, though never explicitly identified, figures prominently in the thoughts of many characters in *The Optimist's Daughter*. (Memory forms the basis of upper-class tradition, while the lower classes are thought of as having no past). Yet Mount Salus aristocrats show a curious lack of breeding. They ignore Fay, the low-class Texan, as far as possible without offending her doting husband. His doctor "looked at her briefly, as if he had seen many like Fay." Death, however, is the great leveler: The ever-tipping Major Rupert Bullock, a lifelong friend of the judge, talks like one of Fay's vulgar family members when he tries to console her.

As they stand over the coffin, he says, “Just tell him goodbye, sugar. . . . That’s best, just plant him a kiss.”

Laurel McKelva Hand

Laurel McKelva Hand, a widow in her mid-forties and a successful fabric designer living in Chicago. Slender, stable, and with “her hair still dark,” she is the optimist’s daughter of the novel’s title. She has flown to New Orleans to be with her father for his operation to repair a damaged retina. She reads to him during his initial recovery and then returns to her family home for his funeral—and to sort out some of her own past. Much of the novel and many of its memories are filtered through Laurel’s consciousness, especially back at Mount Salus after the funeral, where Laurel recalls her mother and her own early years. Laurel is surrounded by death—her husband, her mother, and now her father have all died. Once she has put memory and death in their proper places in the past, however, she finally survives and triumphs. In reaching some sort of resolution with Fay, her stepmother, Laurel makes peace with her home, and she can return to Chicago.

Judge Clinton McKelva

Judge Clinton McKelva, Laurel’s father, retired from the bench and living in Mount Salus, Mississippi, with his second wife, Fay. At the age of seventy-one, the judge develops eye trouble, but as he tells Dr. Courtland, his surgeon, he is “an optimist” and has survived much, including the death of his first wife, Becky. He also has an untapped reserve of patience, but being forced to lie still after his delicate eye operation is too much for him, as well as for his

selfish wife, Fay. The judge dies when she tries to rouse him. At his end, he apparently has lost hope. He doted on Fay, as neighbors in Mount Salus say, although no one, including his daughter, can understand why.

Wanda Fay Chisom McKelva

Wanda Fay Chisom McKelva, the judge's second wife, a silly and insensitive gold digger from Texas. Fay thinks of no one but herself and actually hastens the judge's death when she tries to get him to move too soon after his operation. Her insecurity (she has married above herself and knows it) is matched only by her meanness and hysteria. She is best at "making a scene," which she does even at the funeral. She has no passion or imagination, as Laurel finally realizes.

Becky McKelva

Becky McKelva, Laurel's mother and the judge's first wife, dead some twelve years but a powerful memory and a force in the novel. Laurel discovers her mother's letters and reconstructs Becky's childhood in West Virginia and her returns there after her marriage. The parents regularly read to each other and wrote to each other when separated, but Becky's last, sick years scarred both of her survivors. It is Becky's death that Laurel relives back in Mount Salus, and it is one of the events of her life she must consign to the past.

Major Rupert Bullock

Major Rupert Bullock, a friend of the judge since childhood and the man who organizes his funeral. The major gets drunk and, worse, invites Fay's family (even Fay does not want them to

be present), who disrupt the funeral with their crude manners. The major lives through his friends.

Miss Adele Courtland

Miss Adele Courtland, a Mount Salus schoolteacher and the McKelvas' next-door neighbor.

Miss Adele was one of Laurel's bridesmaids years before and still loves Laurel and the memory of her mother. Like the other women who flock around Laurel at Mount Salus to help her through the funeral and afterward, Miss Adele loved Laurel's mother and has trouble relating to Fay.

Missouri

The central character in *The Optimist's Daughter* is Laurel McKelva Hand, but since she is also the narrative voice, her personality must be deduced largely from her actions and her reactions to other characters. Somewhat condescending toward Fay and others whose status she considers inferior, Laurel has always taken for granted her relationships with her family and with the people of Mount Salus. She has reacted to the challenge of her mother's powerful personality by making a life for herself in the North, but she considers herself a dutiful daughter, remaining by her father's bedside and reading to him for hours, even though this seems less spectacular than her mother's heroism in a similar situation. Before her period of self-imposed isolation in the family home, Laurel repressed all negative memories of her mother, and she remains bound by the past. To free herself, she must complete an inward journey through time, examining her parents' history as well as her own and recognize her tendency to romanticize her family as myth.

Until she understands the complexity of truth, Laurel is helpless to deal with the unpleasant elements in her life, but once she sees confluence as the essence of human existence, she gains a strength of her own — parallel to, but different from, her mother's.

Fay McKelva (nee Wanda Fay Chisom), Judge McKelva's second wife, is the antithesis of Laurel and her mother. A typist employed by the Judge during a legal convention, she is as loud, crude, and overblown as Becky was quiet, reserved, and understated. To the chagrin of most of the Mount Salus women, Fay does not even attempt to conform to their code of appropriate behavior, and her display of grief for the Judge is so excessive that all of them consider it fakery designed to enlist the sympathy of the town's sentimental men. Secretive about herself and her background. Fay also rebuffs Laurel's attempt to get to know her. When Laurel asks about her family. Fay says they are all dead and — perhaps echoing Becky's stories of caring for her dying father — that she nursed Grandpa Chisom through his final illness and he died in her arms. She seems unembarrassed by the contradictions when Grandpa shows up at the funeral, having come by bus from Bigbee, Mississippi. The rest of the reportedly dead family — Mrs. Chisom, Sis, Bubba, and Wendell — then arrive from their home in Madrid, Texas. In fact, emphasizing the reversal in which she is surrounded by family and Laurel is alone, Fay vehemently declares the importance of close family ties and impulsively decides to return to Texas with her loving family.

The "optimist" is Clinton McKelva, retired judge and leading citizen of Mount Salus, Mississippi. Laurel regards him as isolated by his illness, but he has evidently long been aware of the breakdown in communication between himself and his daughter, Hospitalized following eye surgery, he must lie absolutely still, and he gradually retreats within himself, becoming

increasingly reluctant to make the effort to speak or follow Laurel's movements with his good eye. Until his marriage to Fay, Laurel has never distinguished between his personality and her mother's; and she is amazed at the changes she sees in him. She observes that he has never before described himself as an optimist, and she regards this remark — like his marriage to Fay and his subsequent indulgence of her — as further evidence of a weakness and folly probably resulting from his age. Laurel does not understand the attraction between Fay and her father because she cannot comprehend his need for a relationship with a woman who is not as strong as, or perhaps stronger, than he.

A background presence in the novel is Becky Thurston McKelva, the Judge's first wife. As Laurel and the townspeople remember her, Becky represents an unmatched ideal. Not only was she the perfect mother, homemaker, and hostess, but she was unbelievably brave, having run back into her burning home to retrieve her set of Dickens's novels and, alone, having transported her dying father by raft to Baltimore for medical treatment. Only gradually do Laurel's memories of her mother's later blindness, bitterness, and paranoia emerge, suggesting that Becky was not completely perfect after all.

LOST IN THE FUNHOUSE

Thanks for exploring this SuperSummary Study Guide of “Lost In The Funhouse” by John Barth. A modern alternative to SparkNotes and CliffsNotes, SuperSummary offers high-quality study guides that feature detailed chapter summaries and analysis of major themes, characters, quotes, and essay topics.

OVERVIEW

John Barth's *Lost In The Funhouse* is a collection of self-reflexive stories that stray from traditional realist **narrative** methods while calling attention to the artifice of narrative technique. It features stories narrated by a spermatozoon journeying to the ovum, a Siamese twin attached belly to rear to his brother, and characters from Greek mythology. In one tale, a teenager gets lost in a funhouse mirror maze. Steeped in allusions to Greek mythology, Arabic, and postmodern writers like Borges, the collection seeks to merge personal stories with the **epic** while satirizing classic hero narratives and themes like **love**, as well as stories that follow the realist rising action, climax, falling action, denouement form. Often, Barth's stories end on an ambiguous note.

In 1967, one year before publishing *Lost In The Funhouse*, Barth published "The Literature of Exhaustion," an essay that critics pared down to being about the death of the novel. Barth believed realist narrative techniques were exhausted, and readers bored. Key to understanding Barth is understanding the narrative ambitions expressed in this essay. Barth is writing into a culture where postmodern literature has assumed the role of deconstructing the world around us, from story to history to identity. Barth's oeuvre represents a literary investigation of these concepts using new techniques as much as realist authors like Tolstoy and Conrad invented techniques for building characters that represented symbols, a technique adopted from theatre. For Barth, if those symbols were great, but old-fashioned, the theatre of story was alive. Barth asks how can we move forward into new narrative territory. Part of Barth's response relies on technique: he points out the artifice of story and language itself, probes the philosophical

realm, finds the nature of the self to be elusive. How can this be represented through story in an awakening way? Barth addresses these concerns in *Lost In The Funhouse*, and the Author's Note, before the story, suggests various modes of storytelling beyond print. We're told "Night-Sea Journey" was meant for print or recorded authorial voice; "Echo" is meant for monophonic tape and a visible but silent author. It lets readers know to expect a new experience.

The appearance of **Ambrose** in three stories signals Barth's nod towards a realist narrative arc. We see a boy's birthmark give rise to an epic family legend in "Ambrose His Mark." "Water-Message" presents Ambrose's boyhood gang the Sphinxes, further developing Barth's theme of merging the epic and mythic. Finally, in "Lost In The Funhouse," Ambrose is thirteen, on a maybe-date competing against his older brother for a girl named Magda. On Independence Day, they visit the Ocean City boardwalk. The narrator comments on narrative technique, bucking **characterization**, and Ambrose imagines he's stuck forever in the funhouse.

Analysis of John Barth's *Lost in the Funhouse*

"Lost in the Funhouse" begins with young Ambrose, who was possibly conceived in "Night-Sea Journey," now an adolescent, traveling to Ocean City, Maryland, to celebrate Independence Day. Accompanying him through his eventual initiation are his parents; his uncle Karl; his older brother, Peter; and Magda, a 13-year-old neighbor who is well developed for her age. Ambrose is "at the awkward age" (89) when his voice and everything else are unpredictable. Magda becomes the object of his sexual awakening, and he feels the need to do something about it, if only barely to touch her. The story moves from Ambrose's innocence to his stunned realization of the pain of self-knowledge. John Barth uses printed devices— italics, dashes, and so on—to draw attention to the storytelling technique throughout the presentation of conventional material:

a sensitive boy's first encounters with the world, the mysterious "funhouse" of sexuality, illusion, and consciously realized pain.

As the story develops, Barth incorporates comments about the art of fiction into the narrative: "Should she have sat back at that instant, his hand would have been caught under her. . . . The function of the beginning of a story is to introduce the principal characters, establish their initial relationship, set the scene for the main action . . . and initiate the first complication or whatever of the rising action" (92). These moments, when the voice seems to shift outside Ambrose's consciousness, actually unite the teller with the tale, Barth with his protagonist, and life with art. As the developing artist, Ambrose cannot forget the least detail of his life, and he tries to piece everything together. Most of all, he needs to know himself, to experience his inner being, before he will have material to translate into art.

When Ambrose is lost in the carnival funhouse, he develops this knowledge. Straying into an old, forgotten part of the funhouse, he becomes separated from the mainstream—the funhouse represents the world for lovers—and has fantasies of death and suicide, recalling the "negative resolve" of the sperm cell from "Night-Sea Journey." Ambrose also finds himself reliving past incidents with Magda and imagining alternative futures.

These experiences lead to Ambrose's fantasy that he is reciting stories in the dark until he dies, while a young girl behind the plywood panel he leans against takes down his every word but does not speak, for she knows his genius can bloom only in isolation. This fantasy is the artistic parallel to the sperm's union with "Her" in "Night-Sea Journey." Barth thus suggests that the artist's creative force is a product of a rechanneled sexual drive. Although Ambrose prefers to be

BELOVED

On the edge of Cincinnati, in 1873 just after the end of the Civil War, there is a house numbered 124 that is haunted by the presence of a dead child. A former slave named Sethe has lived in the house, with its ghost, for 18 years. Sethe lives at 124 with her daughter **Denver**. Her mother-in-law, **Baby Suggs**, died eight years previously after languishing for years with exhaustion and seeming overwhelming sadness. And her two sons, **Howard and Buglar**, ran away from the haunted home just before Baby Suggs' death.

Paul D, a former slave who used to work on the same plantation, called Sweet Home, as Sethe, arrives at 124 and moves in, making a kind of family with Denver and Sethe. Paul D awakens painful memories for Sethe and Denver is jealous of the attention and affection that Sethe gives to him. But just as Denver is getting used to the new familial arrangement, a strange woman appears at the house. She calls herself **Beloved** and says that she doesn't know who she is or where she is from.

Beloved asks Sethe many questions about her past and somehow seems to know about things only Sethe knew, such as about a pair of earrings Sethe received as a gift from the wife of her former master. Denver loves having Beloved around the house and eagerly tells her about the miracle of her own birth: Sethe escaped from Sweet Home while pregnant with Denver and almost died of hunger and exhaustion while trying to make it to Ohio. But a white woman named Amy Denver found Sethe, cared for her, and helped her get to the Ohio River, where she gave birth to Denver. Sethe named Denver after the kind white woman.

Paul D recalls his experience working on a chain gang. He and the other slaves eventually escaped together and had their chains cut by a group of Cherokee. Paul D wandered north and stayed with a kind woman in Delaware for some time, but he was unable to settle. He felt an urge to wander and did so for years before coming to 124.

Missing Baby Suggs, Sethe takes Beloved and Denver to the clearing in the woods where Baby Suggs used to have spiritual gatherings before she fell into her exhausted state. Sethe wishes that Baby Suggs were there to rub her neck and suddenly she feels other-worldly fingers massaging her neck. But then the fingers begin to choke her until they finally let go. Denver thinks that Beloved is somehow behind the choking, but Beloved denies it.

Beloved gradually and mysteriously forces Paul D out of the house by making him restless, so that he ends up sleeping outside in the cold house. When he is sleeping outside in the cold house one night, she persuades him to sleep with her and stirs up his painful memories. Beloved tells Denver that she wants Paul D out of 124.

The novel moves back in time to follow Baby Suggs as she waits for Sethe and her son **Halle** (Sethe's husband). Sethe has snuck her children out of Sweet Home and sent them ahead to 124, and she and Halle are supposed to escape together and come to the house. Halle never arrives, but Sethe does, and Baby Suggs is happy to have at least Sethe and her children reunited. She hosts a grand celebration for the neighboring community and her meager stores of food miraculously furnish a huge feast for ninety people. After the celebration, she feels uneasy, and realizes that she has offended the community with an excessive display of joy and pride. She senses that something bad is coming as a consequence.

Soon after the celebration, four horsemen come to 124: **Schoolteacher** (who became the owner of Sweet Home after the kinder original master died), his nephew, a slave catcher, and a sheriff. They have come to take Sethe and her children back to Sweet Home to work as slaves. The offended community does not warn Sethe or Baby Suggs, and when Sethe sees Schoolteacher coming, she gathers her children and runs to a shed. When the four horsemen find her, she has killed one child with a saw and is ready to kill her other children. Schoolteacher decides that she is crazy and not worth bringing back to work. The sheriff takes Sethe off to jail.

Back in the present, a former slave named **Stamp Paid** (who helped Sethe escape to 124 eighteen years ago) tells Paul D about Sethe's killing her own child. Paul D confronts Sethe about it, and then leaves 124. Feeling guilty for causing Paul D to leave Sethe, Stamp Paid goes to 124 to talk to Sethe. But she does not come to the door. Stamp Paid hears strange voices from the house and sees Beloved through a window.

Within the house, Beloved causes Sethe to remember more and more of her painful past. The novel follows Sethe's stream of consciousness as Sethe maintains that her killing her child was an act of love. Sethe believes that Beloved is the returned spirit of her dead child. The novel then follows the thoughts of Denver and Beloved. In a series of vivid but fragmented recollections, Beloved remembers being taken on a ship from Africa to the United States, the "middle passage" of the Atlantic slave trade.

Sethe begins to get weaker and weaker, falling under the sway of Beloved, whose every whim Sethe obeys. Denver ventures out of the house in search of work, to try to get food and provide for the household. She goes to the house of the **Bodwins**, who once helped Baby Suggs settle at 124, and tells their maid **Janey** about Beloved and the situation at 124. The community rallies together to supply food to 124.

As news spreads of Beloved's strange presence at 124, a group of women join together to rescue Sethe and Denver from her. They gather around 124 and break into song, in a kind of exorcism. Mr. Bodwin approaches the house and Sethe mistakes him for Schoolteacher. Crazed, she tries to attack him but is restrained by Denver and other women. Beloved disappears.

After Beloved's departure, 124 seems to become a normal household. Sethe has mostly lost her mind, but Denver is working and learning, hoping one day to attend college. Paul D returns to 124 and promises to always care for Sethe. The inhabitants of 124 and the surrounding community gradually forget about Beloved entirely, even those who

Sethe

The main character of the novel, Sethe is an enslaved woman who first smuggles her two older boys to freedom and then escapes with her own baby girl children to Cincinnati, Ohio in 1855.

A...

Denver

Denver is Sethe's youngest child. She is quiet and independent, but also craves attention and love from Sethe and Beloved. She loves to hear Sethe tell her about her miraculous birth. Toward the end...

Baby Suggs is Halle's mother, Sethe's mother-in-law, and Denver's grandmother. Halle buys her freedom before the events of the novel and, after establishing a life at 124 in Cincinnati, she becomes something...

Paul D

Paul D was a slave at Sweet Home along with Halle, Sixo, and two other Pauls (Paul A and Paul F). He suffered greatly under Schoolteacher and also as a prisoner on a...

Beloved

It is never clear exactly who or what Beloved is. One day, she climbs out of the Ohio River with no memory of where she is from or who she is. She says she comes... **Get the**

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Stamp Paid

Stamp Paid is a former slave who works on the Underground Railroad and helps bring Sethe to 124 by ferrying her across the Ohio River. Late in the novel, he tells Paul D about...

Amy Denver

Amy Denver is a white woman, who flees from her indentured servitude in an attempt to get to Boston and purchase some velvet. She encounters Sethe when Sethe is almost dying of exhaustion, pregnant, and

Schoolteacher

Schoolteacher comes with his nephews to manage Sweet Home after the death of Mr. Garner. He is extremely cruel. Not only does he beat and abuse his slaves, but he also takes notes on

Mr. and Mrs. Garner

The original owners of Sweet Home, the Garners are relatively kind slave owners compared to Schoolteacher (and indeed most slave owners). They allow Halle to buy Baby Suggs' freedom, for example, and boast of their...

Ella

Ella is a black woman who was locked up by a white father and son, who abused her. She is a friend of Sethe, but abandons Sethe after she kills her child. At the...

Halle

A male slave at Sweet Home, Halle is Sethe's husband and the father of her children. After seeing Schoolteacher's nephews hold down Sethe and take her breast milk, he goes mad. The last anyone sees...

Howard and Buglar

Howard and Buglar are Sethe's sons. When Schoolteacher comes to recapture Sethe and her children, she tries to kill them along with her baby daughter, but is able only to kill the daughter. By the...

Sixo

Sixo is one of the slaves at Sweet Home. He is remembered for walking more than thirty miles to see a woman. He steals a pig and eats it, and then tells Schoolteacher that since...

Minor Characters

Mr. and Miss Bodwin

Mr. Bodwin and his sister are two white abolitionists, who help Baby Suggs, Sethe, and Denver, as well as other freed and escaped slaves.

Lady Jones

Lady Jones is a mixed-race woman who is a schoolteacher in the local community. She teaches a young Denver and then, late in the novel, helps Denver by getting the community to donate food to 124.

Janey

Janey is the Bodwins' maid. She helps Denver find work at the end of the novel, and spreads the word around town about Beloved, eventually leading to the women coming to exorcise Beloved from 124.

The Thirty-Mile Woman

The Thirty-Mile Woman is the woman who Sixo walks thirty miles just to see. She is with Sixo when he tries to escape from Sweet Home and, while he is captured, she gets away. She is pregnant with Sixo's child.

