Baby Suggs is the mother of Halle, mother-in-law of Sethe, and grandmother of Denver. As the oldest character in the novel, Baby Suggs describes herself at a point in the story as “a sixty-odd-year-old slavewoman who walks like a three-legged dog.” However, this handicap is one of Baby Suggs’ lesser problems. Over the course of her life, Baby Suggs gives birth to eight children, loses seven, and is freed by the last child (Halle), losing him in the process. She represents a character “beyond the novel,” focusing more on the issues of slavery than the actual novel itself. Baby Suggs is a dynamic character, experiencing three major transitions in her life, her life as a slave, her life when she is free, and her life after Sethe kills her own child.

Baby Suggs as a slave represents a majority of women enslaved. Though she has eight children (from six fathers), she loses every single one of them. “Anybody Baby Suggs knew, let alone loved, who hadn’t run off or been hanged, got rented out, loaned out, brought up, brought back, stored up, mortgaged, won, stolen or seized.” It is because of this endless movement with no regard that the “pieces” of this checker game (dehumanization) are her children that Baby Suggs, like many of the slaves (i.e. Paul D.), loves small or doesn’t love at all (“That child she could not love and the rest she would not.”). “How can a child see self or mother as subjects when the society denies them that status? The mother is made incapable of recognizing the child, and the child cannot recognize the mother.” (Schapiro 5) She does not allow herself to love or remember her children, knowing that if she does open her heart, whoever/whatever she loves will soon be taken away. “The last of her children, whom she barely glanced at when he was born because it wasn’t worth the trouble to try to learn features you would never see change into adulthood anyway.”

After years of watching his mother suffer from the hip she hurt in Carolina, Halle arranges to buy Baby Suggs’ freedom from Mr. Garner. Out of love for Halle, Baby Suggs agrees despite her personal thoughts (“What does a sixty-odd-year-old slavewoman who walks like a three-legged dog need freedom for?”). But when Baby Suggs is sitting in the cart being driven to the Ohio River (and freedom), Baby Suggs experiences the truth of her new identity. “But suddenly she saw her hands and thought with a clarity as simple as it was dazzling, “These hands belong to me. These my hands.” Next she felt a knocking in her chest and discovered something else new: her own heartbeat.” This realization that she is her own person is what allows Baby Suggs to keep her name despite Mr. Garner’s opinion that she should keep the name Jenny Whitlow. (“Suggs,” she said, blotting her lips with the back of her hand. “Baby Suggs.”) Even more importantly than Baby Suggs discovery of her own being is what she decides to do once she is freed.

At 124, Baby Suggs, holy “loved, cautioned, fed, chastised, and soothed.” Baby Suggs takes in strangers, giving them shelter, warmth, and support. She can be considered a moral center for the characters and the community. Her greatest role however is as an “unchurched preacher” who “opened her great heart to those who could use it.” It is through the experiences of slavery which “busted her legs, back, head, eyes, hands, kidneys, womb and tongue” that Baby Suggs opens her heart to “every black man, woman and child who could make it through” to the Clearing. In the Clearing, Baby Suggs holds the role of a preacher, not telling her pupils to “clean up their lives or to go and sin no more.” Instead, Baby Suggs encourages the black community to love themselves, their eyes, their flesh, their hands, their mouth, their face, their neck, their inside parts, and most importantly, their hearts. It is because the white people do not love it, who will instead, break it, noose it, cut it, that the black people must love these parts.

“Self-recognition is inextricably tied up with self-love, and this is precisely the message of the sermons that Baby Suggs preaches to her people in the Clearing. In a white society that does not recognize or love you, she tells them, you must fight to recognize and love yourself.” (Schapiro 14) Baby Suggs teaches
the community to have faith and that by loving yourself, you heal, let go, and claim ownership of your free self. For these lessons, the Word, the community loves Baby Suggs.

Baby Suggs’ final transition occurs when the whitemen invade 124’s yard. Following the extravagant party at 124, the black community is disapproving of Baby Suggs’ powers of “loaves and fishes,” powers that should not belong to an ex-slave who “had probably never carried one hundred pounds to the scale, or picked okra with a baby on her back. Who had never been lashed by a ten-year-old whiteboy as God knows they had. Who had not even escaped slavery-had, in fact, been bought out of it by her doting son and driven to the Ohio River in a wagon-free papers folded between her breasts (driven by the very man who had been her master, who also paid her resettlement fee-name of Garner), and rented a house with two floors and a well from the Bodwins.” This disapproval is the reason no one warns Baby Suggs of Schoolteacher’s arrival, allowing the “new whitefolks with the Look” to come into town without a warning. This invasion of 124 might not have caused the shift in Baby Suggs, but combined with what occurs later, pushes Baby Suggs past her limit.

Sethe’s decision to take all the parts of her life that are precious and loved and kill them so that they will be “safe” is a major factor in Baby Suggs’ final state of mind. Caught between disapproval and approval of Sethe’s actions, Baby Suggs retreats. “They came in her yard anyway and she could not approve or condemn Sethe’s rough choice. One or the other might have saved her, but beaten up by the claims of both, she went to bed. The whitefolks had tired her out at last.” The major reason for Baby Suggs taking to bed and colors is the belief that she has lied. Preaching that love can prevail, Baby Suggs is contradicted by her own daughter-in-law. When Sethe kills (and attempts to kill) her children, she does so out of the belief that even death is better than slavery. Therefore, she kills her baby out of love for the girl. However, much of the community only views Sethe’s actions as animalistic, done by a psychotic murderer rather than a loving mother. Baby Suggs cannot agree with Sethe’s actions because she killed her own child, yet she cannot agree with the community’s opinion as Sethe committed murder out of love (Baby Suggs’ highest belief). Baby Suggs, receiving no support from the community that once loved her (and now disapprove of her) and trapped by her daughter-in-law’s murder, can no longer continue to love fully. “…self-love needs a relational foundation and a social context. Thus even Baby Suggs is unable to sustain her convictions and heed her own teachings.”(Schapiro 15)

“Her authority in the pulpit, her dance in the Clearing, her powerful Call (she didn’t deliver sermons or preach-insisting she was too ignorant for that-she called and the hearing heard)-all that had been mocked and rebuked by the bloodspill in her backyard.” Thus, Baby Suggs believes that everything she ever taught is a lie; driving her to go to bed and “fix on something harmless in this world.”
1. “Suspended between the nastiness of life and the meanness of the dead, she couldn’t get interested in leaving life or living it, let alone the fright of two creeping-off boys. Her past had been like her present-intolerable-and since she knew death was anything but forgetfulness, she used the little energy left her for pondering color.” (p.4)

Baby Suggs lies in bed, waiting for death. The word describing her past/present is “intolerable,” indicating Suggs’ feeling on the matter of being enslaved and her feelings after 124 is haunted by the baby ghost. Due to all her struggles and hard memories, Suggs would rather look at “harmless” things like colors than face the burden of adding more bad memories before death.

2. “What’d be the point?” asked Baby Suggs. “Not a house in the country ain’t packed to its rafters with some dead Negro’s grief. We lucky this ghost is a baby. My husband’s spirit was to come back in here? Or yours? Don’t talk to me. You lucky. You got three left. Three pulling at your skirts and just one raising hell from the other side. Be thankful, why don’t you? I had eight. Every one of them gone away from me. Four taken, four chased, and all, I expect, worrying somebody’s house into evil.” Baby Suggs rubbed her eyebrows. “My first-born. All I can remember of her is how she loved the burned bottom of bread. Can you beat that? Eight children and that’s all I remember.” (P. 6)

Baby Suggs believes that Sethe should be thankful that she has multiple children compared to herself, because she has none of her children anymore. Her comment about no houses being free of “dead Negro’s grief” shows us that throughout the country, blacks have suffered and died. Baby Suggs’ actions in rubbing her eyebrows shows the pain and worry that burdens her because she cannot remember anything about her children.

3. “‘A man ain’t nothing but a man,’” said Baby Suggs. “‘But a son? Well now, that’s somebody.’” It made sense for a lot of reasons because in all of Baby’ life, as well as Sethe’s own, men and women were moved around like checkers…That child she could not love and the rest she would not…gave her Halle who gave her freedom when it didn’t mean a thing.” (p.27-28)

To Baby Suggs, men are simply people; this is because she herself has been abused, beaten, used, etc. by multiple men over the years. However, in her eyes a son will always be important despite Baby Suggs’ lack of memory about her children. Even the fact that she is freed by Halle is less important to Baby Suggs than the fact that she was with her son, because all her children were being moved around without any regard for Suggs.


Baby Suggs encourages Sethe to no longer fight back against the hate and misery she feels, either offensively or defensively, because it will defeat a person. To Baby Suggs, love is the only way to prevail and “studying war” (i.e. mulling over past battles) will only cause even more destruction.

5. “Everything depends on knowing how much,” she said, and “Good is knowing when to stop.” (p.102)
To Baby Suggs, everything should have a limit. This is due to the fact that Baby Suggs’ past as a slave gave her less than what she required, so having a limited amount (only what is necessary), is already enough.

6. Before 124 and everybody in it had closed down, veiled over and shut away; before it had become the plaything of spirits and the home of the chafed, 124 had been a cheerful, buzzing house where Baby Suggs, holy, loved, cautioned, fed, chastised and soothed. Where not one but two pots simmered on the stove; where the lamp burned all night long. Strangers rested there while children tried on their shoes. Messages were left there, for whoever needed them was sure to stop in one day soon.” (p. 102)

Like God, Baby Suggs holds many roles and fulfills various duties (i.e. “loved, cautioned, fed, soothed). The “lamp” that burns all night indicates the openness of 124, similar to how heaven is always there after death. The words “whoever needed them was sure to stop in one day soon” is another indication of 124’s similarity to heaven, because people will inevitably go there one day.

7. “Who decided that, because slave life had “busted her legs, back, head, eyes, hands, kidneys, womb and tongue,” she had nothing left to make a living with but her heart-which she put to work at once. Accepting no title of honor before her name, but allowing a small caress after it, she became an unchurched preacher, one who visited pulpits and opened her great heart to those who could use it…she let her great heart beat in their presence. When warm weather came, Baby Suggs, holy, followed by every black man, woman, and child who could make it through, took her great heart to the Clearing-a wide-open place cut deep in the woods nobody knew for what at the end of a path known only to deer and whoever cleared the land in the first place.” (p.102)

Baby Suggs is shown as a very humble person (“Accepting no title of honor before her name, but allowing a small caress after it”) despite her role as a preacher in the black community, followed by “every black man, woman, and child who could make it through.” This loyalty and devotion to Baby Suggs and her teachings in the Clearing is symbolic in its similarity to the gratitude and devotion the Israelites have for the Lord after crossing the Red Sea.

8. “She did not tell them to clean up their lives or to go and sin no more. She did not tell them they were the blessed of the earth, inheriting meek or its glorybound pure. She told them that the only grace they could have was the grace they could imagine. That if they could not see it, they would not have it. “Here,” she said, “in this place…For this is the prize.” Saying no more, she stoop up then and danced with her twisted hip the rest of what her heart had to say…deeply loved flesh.” (p.103-104)

Another of Baby Suggs roles is that of a preacher, but unlike a regular preacher, she doesn’t order her people to change their lives or not sin; instead, she accepts everyone. Baby Suggs loves and wants the black people to love everything about themselves (from their hands to their hearts), because she believes that if they don’t, their beings will be beaten by the whites.

9. “At the most to get a clue from her husband’s dead mother as to what she should do with her sword and shield now, dear Jesus, now nine years after Baby Suggs, holy, proved herself a liar, dismissed her great heart and lay in the keeping-room bed…”Those white things have taken all I had or dreamed,” she said, “and broke my heartstrings too. There is no bad luck in the world by whitefolks.”…Baby Suggs, holy, believed she had lied.” (p.104-105)
Baby Suggs believes she lied to the black community because the whites invaded her yard and took away her daughter-in-law and two grandchildren (one indirectly; whites causing Sethe to kill her child) despite her speeches in the Clearing about loving and preventing the whites from stopping the blacks.

10. “Baby Suggs inched the spoiled fabric through her fingers and came upon what felt like pebbles. She held them out toward Sethe. “Going-away present?” “Wedding present.” “Be nice if there was a groom to go with it.” She gazed into her hand. “What do you think happened to him?” “I don’t know,” said Sethe. “He wasn’t where he said to meet him at. I had to get out. Had to.” Sethe watched the drowsy eyes of the sucking girl for a moment then looked at Baby Suggs’ face. “He’ll make it. If I made it, Halle sure can.” Well, put those on. Maybe they’ll light his way.” Convinced her son was dead, she handed the stones to Sethe.” (p.110-111)

At this point in the story, Sethe has arrived at 124 and is welcomed by Baby Suggs. The theme of mothers and daughters can be seen in this quote by Baby Suggs and Sethe’s relationship. Though she has only been with Baby Suggs for a short amount of time, Sethe is already comforting Baby Suggs over Halle; afterwards, it is Suggs comforting Sethe and reassuring her that the earrings will “light his way.”

11. “Sethe remembered the touch of those fingers that she knew better than her own. They had bathed her in sections, wrapped her womb, combed her hair, oiled her nipples, stitched her clothes, cleaned her feet, greased her back and dropped just about anything they were doing to massage Sethe’s nape…If she lay among all the hands in the world, she would know Baby Suggs’ just as she did the good hands of the whitegirl looking for velvet.” (P.116)

Once again, Sethe’s memories of Baby Suggs touch comforting her in multiple ways (i.e. “dropped just about anything they were doing to massage Sethe’s nape”) symbolizes the theme of mothers and daughters because of a mother’s role in comforting her daughter.

12. “Baby Suggs grew tired, went to bed and stayed there until her big old heart quit…the lesson she had learned from her sixty years a slave and ten years free: that there was no bad luck in the world but whitepeople. “They don’t know when to stop,” she said, and returned to her bed, pulled up the quilt and left them to hold that thought forever.” (p.122-123)

Baby Suggs feels defeated by the white people and says so (“They don’t know when to stop”), summarizing all the different ways whites have pushed her in one statement (i.e. enslavement, beatings, taking away her children); with the final straw being schoolteacher’s invasion of 124’s yard, which caused Sethe to kill her baby girl.

13. “In the back of Baby Suggs’ mind may have been the thought that if Halle made it, God do what he would, it would be cause for celebration…But since there was still no sign of Halle and Sethe herself didn’t know what had happened to him, she let that whoop lie—not wishing to hurt his chances by thanking God too soon.” (p.159)

The fact that Baby Suggs does not allow herself to celebrate the arrival of Sethe and Halle and Sethe’s children is a sign of the self-discipline Baby Suggs has. Though she wants to rejoice, from years of experience, Baby Suggs knows not to celebrate too early.

14. “Baby Suggs’ three maybe four) pies grew to ten (maybe twelve)...made them angry. Too much, they thought. Where does she get it all, Baby Suggs, holy? Why is she and hers always
the center of things? How she always knows exactly what to do and when? Giving advice; passing messages; healing the sick, hiding fugitives, loving, she cooking, cooing, loving, preaching, singing, dancing and loving everybody like it was her job and hers alone…Loaves and fishes were His powers they did not belong to an ex-slave who had probably never carried one hundred pounds to scale, or picked okra with a baby on her back…Who had not even escaped slavery—had, in fact, been bought out by a doting son…they hated slavery worse than they hated slaves.” (p.161-162)

In this quote, Baby Suggs can be seen as a human version of God/Jesus. “Giving advice, passing messages, healing the sick, hiding fugitives, loving, cooking, preaching, singing, dancing,” all of these jobs were done by the Lord and the fact that Baby Suggs can do all of it despite the fact that she did not “suffer” (in the eyes of the black community), cause the other blacks to despise Baby Suggs with her powers of “loaves and fishes.”

15. “What was left to hurt her now? News of Halle’s death? No. She had been prepared for that better than she had for his life. The last of her children, whom she barely glanced at when he was born because it wasn’t worth the trouble to try to learn features you would never see change into adulthood anyway. What would be the point of looking hard at the youngest one? But for some reason they let her keep him. He was with her-everywhere.” (p. 163)

When Halle is born, Baby Suggs does not bother to truly look at him, believing that he will soon be taken away from her just as her other children had been taken away. The way she speaks of Halle (“barely glanced,” “wasn’t worth the trouble,” “what would be the point,” “he was with her-everywhere”) is almost indifferent and the final word “everywhere” almost makes Halle seem like a burden rather than a blessing (as a child should be to its mother).

16. “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.” (p. 165)

Baby Suggs sees and believes that Sweet Home is better than the other places she has been enslaved in, yet she also knows that Sweet Home does not change the fact of her identity. She is troubled and saddened by her lack of identity, indicated in the quote “she knew more about them than she knew about herself.” Baby Suggs is never given the opportunity to discover herself, because she is enslaved and through it, dehumanized.

17. “In Lillian Garner’s house, exempted from the field work that broke her hip and the exhaustion that drugged her mind; in Lillian Garner’s house where nobody knocked her down (or up), she listened…It’s better here, but I’m not.” (p.165)

Baby Suggs knows that despite the differences/improvements in Sweet Home from her past places of enslavement, it does not change the fact that she is still enslaved and not seen as a human being with her own identity.

18. “When Mr. Garner agreed to the arrangements with Halle, and when Halle looked like it meant more to him that she go free than anything in the world…she chose the hard thing that made him happy…that Halle, who had never drawn one free breath, knew that there was nothing like it in this world. It scared her.” (p.166)
Like all mothers, Baby Suggs’ greatest wish is for her children to be happy; and because Halle wants his mother to be free, despite Baby Suggs’ wish to stay with him (i.e. staying enslaved), she chooses Halle’s wish instead. Baby Suggs is also scared to find out that Halle is more knowledgable than herself on the matter of freedom, indicating how Halle can continue to dream as opposed to Baby Suggs who does not allow herself to dream of freedom (after being enslaved for so long).

19. “But suddenly she saw her hands and thought with a clarity as simple as it was the dazzling, “These hands belong to me. These are my hands.”...She couldn’t stop laughing. “My heart’s beating,” she said.” (p.166)

It is at this point in the story that Baby Suggs is freed and riding to freedom in a wagon with Mr. Ganer. At this point, Baby Suggs comes to the realization that she does not belong to anyone and everything, from her hands to her heart belong to her and her alone.

20. ““Well,” said Mr. Garner, going pink again, “if I was you I’d stick to Jenny Whitlow. Mrs. Baby Suggs ain’t no name for a freed Negro.” Maybe not, she thought, but Baby Suggs was all she had left of the “husband” she claimed.” (p.167-168) & “Baby, marveling at the ink, drank every drop of water although it tasted like a serious medicine. “Suggs,” she said, blotting her lips with the back of her hand. “Baby Suggs.” (p.169)

These two quotes clearly show the beginnings of the formation of an identity for Baby Suggs. Instead of complying to Mr. Garner’s belief that she should keep the name Jenny Whitlow, Baby Suggs decides that she will take the name Baby Suggs, even if it causes disapproval.

21. ““Tell em Jenny. You live any better on a place before mine?” “No, sir,” she said. “No place.” “How long was you at Sweet Home?” “Ten year, I believe.” “Ever go hungry?” “No, sir.” “Cold?” “No, sir.” “Anybody lay a hand on you?” “No, sir.” “Did I let Halle buy you or not?” “Yes, sir you did,” she said, thinking, But you got my boy and I’m all broke down. You be renting him out to pay for me way after I’m gone to Glory.” (p.171-172)

In this quote, we can see that Baby Suggs has not fully freed herself from her enslavement under Mr. Gardner. Her tone towards him is deferential (“No, sir,” “Yes, sir”) and she knows that even though she is “free,” Halle is not; therefore, Baby Suggs is still under Gardner’s power (indirectly).

22. ““...but I did get to church every Sunday some kind of way. I bet the Lord done forgot who I am by now.” “Go see Reverend Pike, ma’am. He’ll reacquaint you.” “I won’t need him for that. I can make my own acquaintance...She fixed on that and her own brand of preaching, having made up her mind about what to do with the heart that started beating the minute she crossed the Ohio River. And it worked out, worked out just fine, until she got proud and let herself be overwhelmed by the sight of her daughter-in-law and Halle’s children...Now she stood in the garden smelling disapproval, feeling a dark and coming thing, and seeing high-topped shoes that she didn’t like the look of at all. At all.” (P.173)

Once again we can see Baby Suggs’ formation of her personal opinions. Despite the common practices of going to church every Sunday (by blacks and whites alike), Baby Suggs decides not to attend church and believes that God will hear her despite it. She also decides that
once she is free, she will use her heart to preach to others about what she values most, love. Yet, this love is what eventually gets her in trouble with the black community’s disapproval.

23. “Baby Suggs meant to run, skip down the porch steps after the cart, screaming, No. No. Don’t let her take that last one too. She meant to…She took the shoes from him-high-topped and muddy-saying, “I beg your pardon. Lord, I beg your pardon. I sure do.”” (p.179-180)

Instead of chasing after the cart and refusing to allow the white men from taking Sethe and Denver, Baby Suggs stops and instead takes the shoes of the white boy and girl, apologizing to the Lord for choosing to comply despite her grief over Sethe’s jailing.

24. Deeper and more painful than his belated concern for Denver or Sethe, scorching his soul like a silver dollar in a fool’s pocket, was the memory of Baby Suggs-the mountain to his sky.” (p. 201)

Stamp Paid is seen as similar to Baby Suggs in this quote “the mountain to his sky,” in the fact that Stampil Paid and SBay Suggs work together in order to help blacks in need, yet they view things differently (i.e. Baby Suggs belief that the whites have won opposing Stamp Paid’s refusal to accept defeat).

25. “Had she waited just a little she would have seen the end of the War, its short, flashy results. They could have celebrated together; gone to hear the great sermons preached on the occasion. As it was, he went alone from house to joyous house drinking what was offered. But she hadn’t waited and he attended her funeral more put out with her than bereaved.” (p.201)

Baby Suggs’ death before the end of the War disappoints Stamp Paid because the War’s end and result were proof that the whites had not won; something Stamp Paid tried to prove to Baby Suggs before her death and during Sethe’s time in jail (when she had given up).

26. “Sethe had no instruction except “Take her to the Clearing,” which he tried to do, but was prevented by some rule the whites had invented about where the dead should rest. Baby Suggs went down next to the baby with its throat cut—a neighborliness that Stamp wasn’t sure had Baby Suggs’ approval. The setting-up was held in the yard because nobody besides himself would enter 124—an injury Sethe answered with another by refusing to attend the service Reverend Pike presided over…as she stood there not joining the hymns the others sang with all their hearts…they ate the food they brought and did not touch Sethe’s, who did not touch theirs and forbade Denver to. So Baby Suggs, holy, having devoted her freed life to harmony was buried amid a regular dance of pride, fear, condemnation, and spite.” (P. 201-202)

Baby Suggs’ wedding is a contrast to all the things she values (i.e. love, community, unity) due to Sethe’s crime, causing the residents of 124 to face a disapproving community with forced pride. The fact that Baby Suggs is buried next to the baby is done with “a neighborliness that Stamp wasn’t sure had Baby Suggs’ approval,” because of the way the baby had died (the baby was murdered by Sethe, an action that Baby Suggs cannot approve or disapprove).

27. “When she told him what her aim was, he thought she was ashamed and too shamed to say so…her powerful Call (she didn’t deliver sermons or preach-insisting she was too ignorant for that-she called and the hearing heard)-all that had been mocked and rebuked by the bloodspill in her yard…Instead she told Stamp she was going to bed to think about the color of things.” (p.208)
Baby Suggs no longer goes to the Clearing or uses the Call, believing that her teachings on love are lies. The reason Baby Suggs views it as a lie is because of Sethe’s murder. Baby Suggs preached that people should love everything (hands, hearts, the things that made babies), including children a person produced. By killing her own baby, Sethe went against everything Baby Suggs preached. Thus, Baby Suggs’ teachings had been “mocked and rebuked by the bloodspill in her yard.”

“After sixty years of losing children to the people who chewed up her life and spit it out like a fish bone; after five years of freedom…well, it could wear out even a Baby Suggs, holy.” (p.209)

Baby Suggs is forced to face sixty years of slavery, five years of freedom, losing all her children and a grandchild, “lose” her daughter-in-law, gain and lose a community, Baby Suggs is finally broken by the many problems in her life.

“If there had been sadness in her eyes he would have understood it; but indifference lodged where sadness should have been.” (p.209)

After having Sethe taken away to jail for having killed her daughter, Stamp Paid expects Baby Suggs to be saddened by the loss. However, in his point of view, Baby Suggs seems indifferent over the events. This is because Baby Suggs has finally given up and decided to no longer to preach love in the face of so much disapproval from the black community, Sethe’s actions, and the invasion of her yard by the white people.

“‘If I call them and they come, what on earth I’m going to say?’ ‘Say the Word!’…” “That’s the one other thing took away from me,” she said…The Word had been given to her and she had to speak it. Had to. They had reached the twin chestnuts and the white house that stood behind them. “See what I mean” he said. “Big trees like that, both of em together ain’t got the leaves of a young birch.” “I see what you mean,” she said, but she peered instead at the white house. “You got to do it,” he said. “You got to. Can’t nobody Call like you. You have to be there.”” (P.210)

In this quote, Stamp Paid is still attempting Baby Suggs to go back to the Clearing and continue preaching love through the Word, which was specifically given to Baby Suggs to speak. The “big trees” are the white people while the “young birch” is representative of the black people. Stamp Paid is trying to tell Baby Suggs that despite the mightiness of the chestnut trees, even together they can’t produce as much as the birch tree, therefore, Baby Suggs can’t give up and must continue on despite the “victory” of the white people (i.e. 124’s invasion). This also could be a comparison to the lives of the blacks who are enslaved; despite the multiple beatings, lynchings, killings, etc. of the blacks by the whites, they continue to grow, have children, and survive.

“What I have to do is get in my bed and lay down. I want to fix on something harmless in this world.”… “You blaming God,” he said. “That’s what you doing.” “No, Stamp. I ain’t.” “You saying the whitefolks won? That what you saying?” “I’m saying they came in my yard.” “Sethe’s the one did it.” “And if she hadn’t?”…”“You can’t do that, Baby. It ain’t right.” “Was a time I knew what that was.” (p.211)

In Stamp Paid’s opinion, Baby Suggs is blaming God for allowing the white people to come into her yard despite all her teachings on love. He also believes that it is Sethe’s fault that
the whitefolks “won” (i.e. the baby’s death). But the quote “And if she hadn’t?” shows how Baby Suggs does not share Stamp Paid’s point of view. Instead, she somewhat approves Sethe’s actions in murdering her baby because Baby Suggs knows that Sethe killed her baby out of love and in order to keep the baby from being enslaved (a fate worse than death).

32. “The heart that pumped out love, the mouth that spoke the Word, didn’t count. They came in her yard anyway and she could not approve or condemn Sethe’s rough choice. One or the other might have saved her, but beaten up by the claims of both, she went to bed. The whitefolks had tired her out at last.” (p.212)

The main reason for Baby Suggs’ deterioration and state of mind after Sethe’s murder is because she cannot decide how she feels about the murder. On one hand, Sethe murdered her baby, going against Baby Suggs’ preaching on loving everything about yourself from your face to your children. On the other hand, Sethe murders her baby out of love for her children, in order to prevent them from facing slavery. Thus, Baby Suggs is trapped between approving and disapproving Sethe’s actions and forces her into bed.

33. “Now I know why Baby Suggs pondered color her last years. She never had time to see, let alone enjoy it before. Took her a long time to finish with blue, then yellow, then green. She was well into pink when she died. I don’t believe she wanted to get to red and I understand why because me and Beloved outdid ourselves with it.”(P.237)

Baby Suggs decision to ponder color indicates her wish to look over and think about things she never had the chance to experience; for example, blue (symbolizing tranquility), green (symbolizing harmony). But she does not want to ponder red because of its association with passion, war, etc.

34. “They had a kitchen outside, too. But Grandma Baby turned it into a woodshed and toolroom when she moved in. And she boarded up the back door that led to it because she said she didn’t want to make that journey no more. She built around it to make a storeroom, so if you want to get in 124 you have to come by her. Said she didn’t care what folks said about her fixing a two-story house up like a cabin where you cook inside…She wouldn’t pay them no mind, she said.” (P.244)

Similarly to Baby Suggs’ decision to keep the name Baby Suggs and not Jenny Whitlow is because she now has the freedom to choose how to arrange her home, despite other’s negative opinions. Another important phrase is “she boarded up the back door that led to it [the woodshed and toolroom] because she said she didn’t want to make that journey no more.” Baby Suggs does not want to revisit the woodshed due to the association it holds of Sethe’s murder of her child.

35. “Grandma said she was always afraid a whiteman would knock her down in front of her children. She behaved and did everything right in front of her children because she didn’t want them to see her knocked down. She said it made children crazy to see that.” (p.246)

Baby Suggs does everything and behaves in front of white people, fully aware that to a child, a parent is the most important figure and a symbol of strength. To have your parent beaten down and defeated would cause a child to become insecure and make them want to fight whatever knocked down the parent, placing said child in danger.
36. “Grandma Baby said people look down on her because she had eight children with different men. Colored people and white people both looked down on her for that. Slaves not supposed to have pleasurable feelings on their own; their bodies not supposed to be like that, but they have to have as many children as they can to please whoever owned them. Still, they were not supposed to have pleasure deep down. She said for me not to listen to all that. That I should always listen to my body and love it.” (P.247)

Baby Suggs’ main teaching is about love in its many forms. She knows that others (both blacks and whites) look down on her for having children with multiple men, yet Baby Suggs feels that having intercourse with other people and enjoying it is part of being human. This pleasure separates humans from becoming animals, merely engaging in intercourse to have children (as the white people want their slaves to do).

37. “I know Grandma Baby would have liked the party and the people who came to it, because she got low not seeing anybody or going anywhere—just grieving and thinking about colors and how she made a mistake. That what she thought about what the heart and the body could do was wrong. The white people came anyway. In her yard. She had done everything right and they came in her yard anyways. And she didn’t know what to think. All she had left was her heart and they busted it so even the War couldn’t rouse her.” (p. 247)

Baby Suggs believed that by loving yourself and your body, a person could prevent being defeated by the white people (who discouraged loving, who hated a slave and all of their body parts, and who wanted to hurt these body parts). But even with her solid belief in her preaching, Baby Suggs’ yard was still invaded by the white people, which caused Sethe to go crazy and kill her baby, unraveling everything Baby Suggs taught about love. Even the War, which brings an end to slavery, cannot rouse Baby Suggs, who believes that in the end, the white people will always win.

38. “Grandma Baby said there was no defense—they could prowl at will, change from one mind to another, and even when they thought they were behaving, it was a far cry from what real humans did. “They got me out of jail,” Sethe once told Baby Suggs. “They also put you in it,” she answered… “Don’t box with me. There’s more of us they drowned than there is all of them ever lived from the start of time. Lay down your sword. This ain’t a battle; it’s a rout.” (p.287)

After Sethe is released from jail, we see a clear shift in her opinions of whites. When she was first freed, Baby Suggs still accepted whites (i.e. the Bodwins), but after Sethe is jailed and released, Baby Suggs only sees white people as the source of all the problems in the world; a source that can never be defeated, no matter how hard or how long the blacks fight back.

39. “But you said there was no defense. “There ain’t.” Then what do I do? “Know it, and go on out the yard. Go on.”” (p.288)

In Denver’s mind, Baby Suggs encourages her to go out into the world despite its many dangers. Though this doesn’t reflect Baby Suggs’ final state of mind, it reflects the love and encouragement she once had for all the black people in the Clearing.