

Because It Is Bitter, and Because It Is My Heart Study Guide

Because It Is Bitter, and Because It Is My Heart by Joyce Carol Oates

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Plot Summary

Joyce Carol Oates' novel of personal pain plays out against a backdrop of social issues in a small New York town in the 1950s and '60s. The two main characters, Iris Courtney, a white girl, and Jinx Fairchild, a Negro boy, come from different worlds that collide when Jinx accidentally murders an obnoxious boy, Little Red Garlock, who has threatened Iris. This heinous act joins Iris and Jinx forever in their secret about Little Red but societal issues prevent any true exploration of their friendship and bond.

Iris is the only child of Duke and Persia Courtney, a dashing couple whose marriage eventually ends when middle age and bad fortunes force them to part. So unlike her vivacious parents, Iris spends her childhood wishing she had a normal life like her classmates but realizes that nothing, not even Iris' sense of security and well-being, can alter her parent's need for excitement. Duke and Persia thrive on dancing, nightlife, and befriending wealthy individuals who let them into their world for temporary entertainment.

Eventually, Persia tires of the insecurity of Duke's gambling lifestyle and leaves Duke to pursue relationships with other men amid an unending string of cocktail waitress jobs and a burgeoning alcohol problem. Iris essentially raises herself due to her parents' self-centered neglect, and this forced self-reliance instills in Iris a strong sense of independence and emotional distance.

The one stable factor in Iris' life is her relationship with her Uncle Leslie, Duke Courtney's brother, who is the exact opposite of the flamboyant Duke. Leslie Courtney begrudges his brother's callous treatment of Persia and makes himself available to Persia and Iris whenever they need security in their lives. Leslie harbors a secret love for Persia, which lasts even after her death of alcoholism in her mid-forties.

Iris and Jinx are bound by their secret over Little Red's murder, and although society will not permit them to explore their relationship, Iris is drawn to Jinx throughout her life in both friendly and romantic ways. As a young black man in the 1960s, Jinx finds high school basketball stardom, which gives way to reality when he is forced to work at low-paying jobs, marry and have children, and eventually die in the Vietnam War. Iris leaves her small town to attend college in Syracuse, New York, where an art professor and his wife, Dr. and Mrs. Savage, befriend her and introduce her to a genteel way of life.

Iris misrepresents her past life to the Savages in order to be accepted into their way of life, fully aware that someone of her troubled past would not normally be allowed entrance into their lives and position in society. Internally, Iris continues to struggle with reconciliation of her past and her future, and there are moments of uncertainty and angst, but Iris eventually marries the Savages' son, Alan, in an attempt to rise above her personal history and entrench herself into a life of security and wealth. Ironically, Iris has achieved the lifestyle that had eluded Duke and Persia in their quest to live graciously among the wealthy even though her piece of mind and sense of belonging will always be in question.



Part 1: The Body, Chapters 1, 2, and 3

Part 1: The Body, Chapters 1, 2, and 3 Summary

Joyce Carol Oates' novel of personal pain plays out against a backdrop of social issues in a small New York town in the 1950s and '60s. The two main characters, Iris Courtney, a white girl, and Jinx Fairchild, a Negro boy, come from different worlds that collide when Jinx accidentally murders an obnoxious boy, Little Red Garlock, who has threatened Iris. This heinous act joins Iris and Jinx forever in their secret about Little Red but societal issues prevent any true exploration of their friendship and bond.

As the novel begins, a fisherman discovers the dead body of a sixteen-year-old boy named "Little Red" Garlock in a lake near Hammond, New York. After the authorities are notified, Little Red's body is identified by his brother, Morton, and cousin, Edith Garlock, who reveal that Little Red's real name is Patrick Wesley Garlock. The Garlock's have a large family of nine children and other family members who live in a contained space, so Little Red's failure to return home the previous night was not noticed.

As the authorities continue their investigation at the crime scene, a girl named Iris Courtney informs a police officer that she had heard that Little Red Garlock had been in trouble with a motorcycle gang that had vowed revenge on Little Red.

In another part of town, a woman named Vesta Garlock approaches Persia Courtney, Iris Courtney's mother, on the street. Vesta, tired and bedraggled, and looking much older than her mid-thirties age, has convinced herself that she is being followed by some Negroes and begs Persia to accompany her on the walk home. Persia is appalled at the sight of the Garlock home; especially the filthy conditions in which Persia finds a sleeping infant.

Persia contemplates the idea of having another baby herself now that Iris is growing up, but Persia does not want another child to complicate the free and entertaining lifestyle that she and her husband Duke now enjoy.

In a flashback, Persia recalls a day spent at the racetrack with Duke and some of their friends when the conversation turned to the topic of Negroes. Persia admonishes Iris for staring at some Negroes but Iris does not understand Persia's secretive whispers and thinly veiled contempt for the black people. Iris' confusion over the race relations issue is further entrenched by her Uncle Leslie's overt acceptance of Negroes and whose photography business has become known as a Negro establishment because of Leslie's willingness to photograph Negro families, many of whom cannot afford to pay.

Iris also learns of her father's penchant for gambling and reckless spending. Although Duke is a good salesman, he cannot stay ahead of his debts and the family is constantly vulnerable to Duke's waxing and waning income. Consequently, the Courtney family moves frequently to a series of rundown apartments in neighborhoods of



increasing decline. The sporadic habits and unsettled lifestyle do not provide Iris with the foundation for developing long-term friendships at school. In Mrs. Rudiger's sixth grade class at Peter B. Porter elementary school, Iris engages in physical fights with some of the Negro girls and is surprised to see that their blood is as red as her own.

Part 1: The Body, Chapters 1, 2, and 3 Analysis

At the beginning of the novel, the author establishes the foundation for an important theme in the book, racial prejudice. During the 1950s and '60s in America, the division of the Caucasian and Negro people created much hatred and distrust. These negative elements are passed on from parents to their children so there is little room for breaking the cycle of hate.

Iris Courtney symbolizes most white children in her fair, delicate appearance and her youthful naivety about race relations until she is immersed in the situation in school. Like most children, Iris has heard so many negative comments about Negro people that she is surprised to find that their blood is red, just like her own. This is a moment of revelation and Iris learns early that prejudice and discrimination against people of different color and differing economic backgrounds will present itself throughout her entire life.



Part 1: The Body, Chapters 4 and 5

Part 1: The Body, Chapters 4 and 5 Summary

Iris learns that she was named for the iris of an eye instead of the flower that she had always imagined. Persia also tells Iris that she herself was named for the country Persia because of its exotic qualities so appealing to Persia's mother.

Duke Courtney continues his life of failed jobs, poker games, and gambling while Persia works as a waitress. The Courtney family is deeply in debt and Persia begins to realize that Duke has a serious gambling problem. Alcohol begins to be a problem for both Duke and Persia as they drink to escape their increasingly dreary life.

Soon Persia realizes the extent of the family's indebtedness due mostly to Duke's gambling habits and bad investments. Persia is astonished at the outrageous amount but Duke, as usual, is able to sweet talk Persia into loving him again and staying in their shaky marriage.

Part 1: The Body, Chapters 4 and 5 Analysis

The author has been symbolically named Iris for the iris of an eye because the girl can intuitively see social injustices as well as the flaws of the adults in her life. Persia is also appropriately named because of her love of the exotic and mysterious, qualities inherent in the country Persia. Duke's name, however, is ironic, because although he aspires to be wealthy and prestigious, his actual life circumstances are the opposite in spite of his dreams and ambitions.



Part 1: The Body, Chapters 6, 7 and 8

Part 1: The Body, Chapters 6, 7 and 8 Summary

Fifteen-year-old Jinx Fairchild and his seventeen-year-old brother, Sugar Baby, enjoy jumping and swimming in Peach Tree Creek near the Lowertown section of Hammond. On this particular day, the Fairchild brothers perform their swimming and diving gymnastics for the benefit of Iris Courtney and her friend, Nancy Dorsey, who are also swimming nearby. Iris knows that Jinx and Sugar Baby live in the "good" section of black Lowertown, not far from where the Courtney family now lives.

Iris also knows that both Fairchild brothers are good basketball players and that Jinx has real athletic potential to go far in the sport. Typically, this situation of white girls and Negro boys enjoying themselves in the same area would not be allowed to continue, but Iris loves the thrill of being inappropriate and cannot help but be drawn to Jinx's good looks and confidence.

On the same day, it is Leslie Courtney's fortieth birthday, and Persia and Iris visit Leslie at his photography studio to mark the occasion. Iris wanders through the studio looking at Uncle Leslie's portraits and scenic photos while Uncle Leslie and Persia chat and drink wine in the back room. Iris views again the aging photographs of her parents in their elegant dance costumes when they performed as "The Incomparable Courtneys" and cannot help but look at the many images of herself as a child at various ages always seated with her beautiful mother, Persia. Inexplicably, Iris cannot help but look at the collection of photographs each time she visits the studio but without fail regrets her choice because the obvious passage of time depresses her.

Later that afternoon, Uncle Leslie takes yet another portrait of Iris and Persia to add to his collection of many that he has photographed of the mother and daughter over the years. Leslie cannot help but be struck by Persia's radiant beauty and he is mesmerized temporarily under the black cloth of his upright camera. Leslie cannot help but notice the stark difference between the glowing Persia and the sallow Iris who always seems so melancholy.

When a heavy rainstorm knocks out the power and delays Persia and Iris's departure, Persia and Leslie return to their bottle of wine and talk about the possibilities of love, Leslie all the while wishing it were he that Persia spoke of so tenderly and not his brother, Duke. Both Persia and Duke feel as if this downpour washes away all pretense and inhibitions and they speak freely in the cozy atmosphere of Leslie's now candlelit studio. Persia reveals Duke's infidelities and her inability to remain living with Duke in spite of her love for him. Leslie silently wishes that Persia would seek solace in Leslie himself but warns himself not to take the conversation or the wish too seriously because both he and Persia have drunk the bottle of wine and Persia will probably not recall the confidences shared this evening.



A few weeks later, Duke, Persia, and Iris attend the harness races at Schoharie Downs as the guest of Cal Yard, a millionaire horse breeder and owner from Pennsylvania. Duke has just recently moved back to the Courtney apartment from which Persia had banned him for a while for his reckless behavior. Iris cannot help but notice that her parents are the most attractive and engaging people sharing cocktails in the clubhouse and is momentarily proud of them despite their personal shortcomings as parents.

Iris is old enough now to be aware of Duke's philandering ways and the stress in the Courtney marriage and cannot help but hold herself at a distance from her father creating an invisible tension between father and daughter. Today, though, the mood is light and Duke feels like a winner which he hopes will come to fruition to earn him a place in Iris' heart once again.

The Courtneys are treated royally by Cal in a special box seat at the track and for a little while Persia revels in Cal's attentions, feels young and pretty again, and imagines that she and Duke can be happy like they once were. Behind her laughter though, Persia is not altogether pleased to be at the track today because she recalls all the unpaid household bills and she also knows the odds are not good that Duke will win back any money he has gambled. Finally, the anticipated race of Cal's horse ends resulting in a second place finish for the horse and a five thousand dollar win for Duke, who has invested in Cal's horse. Even though Persia had not been aware of the investment, she is very pleased with the turn of luck.

Part 1: The Body, Chapters 6, 7 and 8 Analysis

The author uses many literary techniques such as similes and metaphors throughout the book to help add interest and character dimension. In this section she writes, "Upright as a sinewy black-glittery snake, Sugar Baby Fairchild jumps cannonball fashion from the topmost girder of the Peach Tree Bridge, screaming, 'Bombs away!'" (Chap. 6, p. 47). In that same chapter, Iris is described as "wearing a single-piece jersey swimsuit the color of dried blood" and "Glancing uneasily down at herself she sees flesh white and vulnerable as something pried out of a shell" (Chap. 6, p. 50). The author uses metaphors as well as foreshadowing to describe Iris who will soon emerge from her relatively safe white world and encounter death and violence.

The author also uses the literary technique of irony in this section when she writes about the Courtneys attending the horse race. Duke and Persia have aspirations of being winners but they both lack the breeding and refinement necessary to succeed and socialize with those who own the thoroughbred horses.



Part 1: The Body, Chapters 9, 10 and 11

Part 1: The Body, Chapters 9, 10 and 11 Summary

One night Iris and her friend Nancy Dorsey are watching an Ava Gardner movie at the Rialto Theater when Jinx Fairchild and his friend, Bobo Ritchie, enter late and take seats in front of the girls. Jinx and Bobo try to engage Nancy and Iris in conversation during the film but the girls ignore the boys although Iris is excruciatingly aware of the male power of the two young men. Jinx and Bobo are escorted from the theater due to their disruptive behavior but not before they have a chance to show off a little more to catch the girls' attentions. Iris is so taken with their boldness that she follows the two boys out of the theater, but Jinx and Bobo have disappeared by the time Iris reaches the front of the theater and Iris feels an overwhelming sense of letdown.

Iris lies in her bed in her tiny, dismal room in the cramped apartment on Holland Street in Lowertown, a rundown part of Hammond where the Courtneys now live. Even though the neighbors are not any better situated socially or financially, Iris gazes out her window and watches the lives of families that seem much happier than hers by comparison. Iris also gazes at the moon and hopes to be a good person and live a better life than the one inflicted on her by her parents.

Most of the time Iris simply listens to her parents argue each night in their inebriated conditions. Because of the constant tension in the household, Iris stays in her room to avoid any interactions with her parents who do not understand Iris's quiet demeanor and studious behavior. Iris deflects most dialogue from her parents, but is morbidly intrigued by their admonitions to stay away from men and boys, especially the black boys in town.

Iris is also beginning to awaken sexually and between her rampant thoughts of male and female bodies, Iris is accosted verbally and visually by boys and men of different races and ages. These occurrences both repel and delight Iris and she particularly enjoys thinking about Jinx Fairchild in an amorous context.

On a spring day in 1956, Little Red Garlock harasses all the girls and women with whom he comes in contact as he rides his bike on the streets of Lowertown. Little Red is especially foul-mouthed for someone his age and the women recoil in disgust as he passes. The sight of the women's embarrassment only fuels Little Red's behavior and he is particularly delighted when he spots Iris approaching on the nearby sidewalk and he proceeds to hurl lewd remarks as Iris walks down the street.

People in town debate whether or not Little Red Garlock is retarded or just a nuisance because of his obnoxious behavior and filthy appearance. Most townspeople agree that Little Red must behave the way he does because he has been abused and neglected all his life. The Garlocks have a reputation for being dirty, lazy, and drunk most of the time and Little Red finds his own way of navigating a world which already dislikes him immensely. Little Red's mother has tried to the best of her ability to raise Little Red to be



a decent person but the family's lifestyle and sporadic attention to the boy ultimately undermines her pathetic efforts.

Part 1: The Body, Chapters 9, 10 and 11 Analysis

In this section, the author further establishes Iris's character traits. Primarily, Iris is forced into a life of isolation due to avoidance of her parents and the abysmal circumstances in which they force Iris to live. Iris wants to be good and prays to a God whom she desperately hopes exists and asks for His interceding on her behalf. Iris' only other escape is in her imagination which becomes well developed at this point in her life. Iris also learns that love is not unconditional setting her up for a lifetime of wariness and heartbreak. This perception may be the underlying reason for Iris' attraction to black boys, especially Jinx Fairchild, which will be her character's ultimate fatal flaw.

As another technique, the author uses long passages of dialogue in the novel to quickly portray the current state of relationships between people. In this section, the sparring between Persia and Duke painfully captures both the realistic animosity and love felt between the couple. This enables the reader to "hear" the conflict between the two characters much quicker than if the author described the relationship in paragraph form.

The author also uses the literary technique of foreshadowing when writing about Little Red Garlock's harassment of Iris on the street. It is a similar event soon to occur which will change the course of their lives as well as that of Jinx Fairchild's.



Part 1: The Body, Chapter 12

Part 1: The Body, Chapter 12 Summary

A few weeks later, Iris is at home alone once again and decides to leave the apartment around midnight to buy cigarettes at Cheney's, a variety store located in an undesirable section of Gowanda Street. When Iris arrives at Cheney's, she notes that she is one of only two white girls in the store and feels a thrill at the implicit danger of the situation. Jinx Fairchild takes brief note of Iris as he mops the floor and rings up Iris's sale of cigarettes. Jinx's friend, Bobo Ritchie, makes flirts outrageously with Iris who feigns cool indifference as if she spends all her nights smoking and drinking with strangers.

After conversing for a while with some of the others gathered at Cheney's, Iris leaves Cheney's store and heads toward home. The streets are quiet and deserted at this time of night and Iris accelerates her pace partly from the cold but mostly out of fear for her safety. Iris makes the mistake of taking a shortcut down a well-known alley because she sees the shape of a boy running across the end of the alley ahead of her. Iris assumes the figure is that of Bobo Ritchie and intuits that she is in danger. Coming to an abrupt stop to collect her senses, Iris calls out for the person to identify himself and her call is met with the derisive laughter of a white boy.

Suddenly, Little Red Garlock, who has been hiding in a nearby alley, steps out of the shadows and begins to verbally and physically harass Iris. Little Red pursues Iris who, realizing that she will not be able to reach her home without being attacked, returns to Cheney's, where Jinx Fairchild is closing the store.

Iris tells Jinx about her frightening encounter with Little Red and attempts to call home so that Persia or Duke can come to her rescue but no one is at home. Ultimately, Jinx begrudgingly offers to accompany Iris on her walk home so that Iris may arrive safely without any further taunting from Little Red. Jinx seems primed for a fight and it takes some effort for Iris to convince Jinx to take a route in a direction away from Little Red. Unfortunately, Little Red still wants his devious fun and circles back on his path so that he can encounter Iris and Jinx once more. Little Red takes some well-known shortcuts and is able to thwart Jinx and Iris's passing, resulting in a verbal altercation.

Ultimately, Little Red and Jinx engage in a physical fight, with Jinx being caught off guard by Little Red's cunning and obnoxious pugilism. Soon Jinx and Little Red drop to the ground where the fight continues and Jinx is still surprised by Little Red's physical resilience in spite of the difference in their sizes. Iris knows instinctively that she should get help but the street is deserted and she stands fascinated, watching the altercation and secretly willing Jinx to kill Little Red. Little Red rallies and hits Jinx with a chunk of concrete resulting in Jinx beating Little Red on the head with a heavy object until Little Red collapses dead.



Part 1: The Body, Chapter 12 Analysis

The author ends the first section of the book with the murder of Little Red Garlock, the defining act that will bind Iris and Jinx together for the rest of their lives. This act becomes the book's pivotal point, an inevitable source of conflict that will alter Iris and Jinx, and their behavior forever. In addition to using the thoughts of the characters, Iris and Jinx, the author uses language to help describe the scene. "Hiya, llllllll-ris! Where ya going!" "Gonna hurt ya titties!" (p. 108). The taunts of Little Red Garfield especially help to set the tone for the violence that erupts between Jinx and Little Red. It is hard to imagine anyone not being seriously provoked by the taunts of the obnoxious Little Red.

The author intentionally creates the scene of inflammatory behavior so that Jinx's actions can be justified to some degree. The reader understands from Jinx's behavior that he is ready to fight anyone and Little Red is the one who crosses Jinx on this fateful night. It is interesting to note that although Iris does not actually engage in the physical fighting, she is clearly vested in the violence and revels in the display, indicating Iris' own need for an outlet for all her own personal anger.



Part 2: Torsion, Chapters 1 and 2

Part 2: Torsion, Chapters 1 and 2 Summary

Little Red Garlock's death temporarily transforms his mother, Vesta, from a dirty, wandering drifter to someone more appropriate to attend the funeral of a son who died much too young. Vesta maintains her ambulatory route through town rummaging through trash and resting in her usual locations. People in town are more inclined to be nice to Mrs. Garlock today out of sympathy for her grief and out of appreciation for her newly acquired hygiene.

Official attempts to solve Little Red's murder begin but no credible suspects are named. Finally the police come to the conclusion that the killers are probably white men and members of the Hell's Angels motorcycle gang, recent targets of Little Red's antagonism. However, no one in the Garlock family can identify the gang members in the lineup as having any association with Little Red and the men are released. People in Lowertown have little sympathy for the police efforts to find Little Red's murderer due to Little Red's history of harassment and his family's low standing in the community.

Jinx Fairchild is in a contemplative mood as he remembers childhood scenes such as playing in the creek with his brother, Sugar Baby, and being thoroughly scrubbed before dinner by his mother, Minnie Fairchild. As Jinx moves through his day, he is constantly reminded of the murder he has committed each time he looks at his hands, the same hands that catapulted him to basketball star status in high school the past year.

For the next few weeks, Minnie senses that something is wrong with Jinx, although he repeatedly denies being ill. Mrs. Fairchild observes Jinx carefully, as she does not want anything to interfere with Jinx's basketball career and the hope for a better life than the one she shares with her invalid husband, Woodrow. Mrs. Fairchild is proud of her long-term employment as housekeeper and part-time nurse for Dr. M.R. O'Shaughnessy, a white doctor whose position in the community helps to elevate Mrs. Fairchild's by association.

Jinx is increasingly haunted by the murder he has committed and alternates between wanting to tell his mother and retreating into heavy silence. At times, Jinx tests his fate by visiting the scene of the crime, almost as if someone will recognize the guilt in him and force him to confess. Rumor on the streets of Hammond indicates that people believe that Little Red was killed by members of the motorcycle gang which alleviates Jinx's anxiety slightly knowing that the police have probably dropped the case.

Jinx also believes that his father, who is a religious man, has the ability to see into Jinx's soul and will soon reveal Jinx's dark secret. Jinx knows that his father would make him confess the murder to the police and Jinx cannot bear the fate that would await him. Consequently, Jinx avoids his father's presence leading to even more personal isolation

on Jinx's part. Jinx even harbors secret thoughts that if Iris were to die, no one would ever know that Jinx had killed Little Red Garlock.

Part 2: Torsion, Chapters 1 and 2 Analysis

The author uses the technique of flashbacks to illustrate the transition Jinx is making in his life. After the murder of Little Red Garlock, Jinx realizes that his life will never be the same, and he lingers over some childhood memories to accentuate that point. The author also shares with the reader the anguish that Jinx experiences through his thoughts. No conversation occurs which addresses Jinx's committing murder, but Jinx's mental processing of the event runs the gamut from shock, denial, and remorse, ending with the tantalizing thought that all Jinx's problems would disappear if Iris would no longer be alive either.

The author also makes a social comment on the lack of importance placed by the authorities on solving Little Red's murder. Because Little Red comes from a poor family in the Lowertown section of Hammond, his murder is given only slightly more consideration than it would be had Little Red been a Negro child. In the eyes of the community, the poor, white Garlocks are just slightly above the blacks in town in the social hierarchy, much as it is in most towns in America in the 1950's and 1960's.



Part 2: Torsion, Chapters 3 and 4

Part 2: Torsion, Chapters 3 and 4 Summary

Persia Courtney has a new lover, Virgil Starling, who stays overnight at the apartment on Holland Street with Persia and Iris now that Duke Courtney has moved out. Virgil is a wonderful dancer and rekindles a joie de vivre in Persia that has been buried during her trying marriage to Duke. Vince treats Persia with care, even cooking dinner for her, something that Duke would never have done. Vince is a mulatto and Persia enjoys the sense of danger and breaking societal rules by dating a man who is not all white. Virgil is also the most sensual lover Persia has ever known, but Persia cannot help but be drawn back to her bond with Duke, who haunts her thoughts in reveries about the past.

Before long, Persia and Iris, with Virgil's assistance, move into an old house on Jewett Street in a rundown neighborhood of mixed residential and commercial properties. Duke's belongings are left in the old apartment building as Persia no longer wants the relationship with Duke. Iris is strangely attracted to Virgil, too, and muses about his smooth, brown skin and his eyes which inspect Iris longingly whenever the opportunity arises. Persia is oblivious to Virgil's interest in Iris and continues to date Virgil in spite of Duke's protests and accusations of betrayal and humiliation.

Iris wonders periodically what has happened to Jinx, who has remained out of sight since the murder of Little Red. Iris recalls wanting to tell Persia about the murder, but instead she refrains from sharing information that could ultimately harm many people. One night, Iris revisits Cheney's Variety Store for the first time since the night of Little Red's murder and thinks for a moment that she sees Jinx but she is mistaken. Iris is periodically haunted by both guilt and amazement about Little Red's murder and surmises that the police will never be able to connect Iris and Jinx to the crime.

Part 2: Torsion, Chapters 3 and 4 Analysis

The author uses popular culture items of the period to provide a more complete picture of the characters' experiences. For example, Iris sings current songs such as "The Great Pretender" and Virgil and Persia dance in the kitchen to Chuck Berry's "Maybelline." Persia and Virgil drink Beck's beer and Iris purchases Chesterfield's cigarettes, both popular brands of the period. Mentions of popular singers at the time such as Johnny Mathis and Frank Sinatra are scattered throughout the book to add color and dimension to the reader's experience.

The author also uses the literary technique of metaphor when she writes, "Her guilt? She turns it slowly in her fingers, in awe, in fascination, in pride; it's like one of those stones of uncommon beauty found now and then along the shore of Lake Ontario" (p.157). Obviously, guilt cannot be held in a hand, but the author wants the reader to

understand how Iris cannot help returning to her guilt almost as if she turns it over and over, examining it, hoping to find some clues or answers to her current dilemma.



Part 2: Torsion, Chapters 5, 6 and 7

Part 2: Torsion, Chapters 5, 6 and 7 Summary

Months have passed and the interest, both official and casual, in Little Red Garlock's murder wanes except with Jinx who still considers confessing to the crime. Jinx even visualizes his confession to the police, but cannot form the words even in his mind, especially knowing that the officials are probably white men who will probably not view Jinx objectively.

Jinx continues to be compelled to visit the scene of the crime and contemplate whether the murder was an act God had wished on Jinx or rather the crime was just a senseless act with no real impact. One day Jinx encounters Iris near the scene of Little Red's murder and Iris tells Jinx that the guilt of the murder should rest with Iris, not Jinx.

Persia continues to date Virgil and the two are stopped for speeding one night by two policemen who do not conceal their contempt for the interracial couple. The policemen roughly frisk Virgil, verbally harass him, and make lewd taunts at a hysterical Persia. Once released from the policemen with only a speeding ticket, Virgil and Persia tentatively continue the trip home but something has changed in the relationship. Persia is repulsed by Virgil's being reduced to tears by the police officers and confesses to Iris later that night that there is no going back after a woman has seen a man behave in such a weak manner.

Jinx throws his pent up energy into basketball and soon college recruiters show interest in Jinx, whom classmates now call "Iceman" for Jinx's cool demeanor under pressure. Jinx enters another world when he is on the basketball court and Jinx knows the court is the only place he is completely safe from Iris and his own thoughts about the murder. Jinx's basketball coach is thrilled with Jinx's athletic performance and recalls that Jinx was not always as focused and wonders casually about the impetus that has suddenly spurred Jinx's obsession with the sport.

Iris now attends the same school as Jinx does so it is hard to block out thoughts of the murder because he sees Iris often. Iris tells Jinx that no one is as close to her as Jinx and the thought both scares and sexually excites Jinx although he is unsure of how to process what Iris has told him. Iris and Jinx share their mutual bad dreams about Little Red's murder and wonder if there will ever be a time when the two of them will be free from the haunted memories of the crime.

Jinx begins to resent Iris's intrusion into his thoughts and his life and is particularly annoyed when Iris seems to appear unexpectedly as on a bus where she insists on sitting with Jinx or when Iris phones Jinx at his home. Jinx is perplexed by Iris's habit of bringing him little gifts all the time too almost as if Iris is trying to buy Jinx's friendship and further secure their invisible bond.



Jinx's life begins to unravel in spite of his almost continual pleas to God for some relief from his mental anguish. At home, Minnie refuses to let Sugar Baby come home because of his street life ways of drinking and doing drugs. Sugar Baby tries to tell Jinx that the basketball glory will be short-lived and that Jinx is really just another nigger to the white men who hold the sports scholarships. Sugar Baby's prophecy comes true, but not for the reasons Sugar Baby had believed, when Jinx breaks his ankle during the last few seconds of a basketball game, the last one Jinx will ever play.

Part 2: Torsion, Chapters 5, 6 and 7 Analysis

This section reveals a major turning point in the novel when Jinx breaks his ankle during the basketball game. Up to this point, Jinx begins to believe that he can rise above his family and his murderous secret to secure a better life via a college basketball scholarship. The Fairchild family as a whole begins to decline when Minnie loses her job and Sugar Baby plunges into a world of drugs and violence. Jinx, who had become cool and reserved to protect his feelings and his secret, will have even more reason to withdraw now that his hope for a better life is gone.

The author also increases the importance of religion and spirituality in this section. Both Iris and Jinx continually pray for divine guidance or some intercession on their behalf in mitigating their guilt. When the obvious answers do not arrive, both characters take different approaches to managing their feelings. Jinx withdraws emotionally and immerses himself in basketball while Iris takes a more sinister approach almost taunting Jinx by her constant presence in his life. It is not clear yet whether Iris feels that keeping the memory of the murder alive is her spiritual duty but she seems obsessed with her task in spite of Jinx's annoyance.



Part 2: Torsion, Chapters 8, 9, 10, 11 and 12

Part 2: Torsion, Chapters 8, 9, 10, 11 and 12 Summary

Iris and Persia live in conflict during the summer of 1958. Persia works as a cocktail hostess at The Golden Slipper Lounge where her alcoholism flourishes. One day, Persia receives a bouquet of roses with a card from Duke commemorating the first official day of their divorce and Persia collapses in tears, an emotional display which infuriates Iris. The recent divorce between Duke and Persia has not diminished Persia's love for her ex-husband, and Iris is irate at Persia's continual emotional weakness on the subject.

Although Duke cannot leave Persia alone, Duke never seeks out Iris and it seems as if Duke has forgotten that he even has a daughter. In addition, Iris cannot abide Persia's return to alcohol and vows to get away from the household with its hidden liquor bottles just as soon as she is able to do so.

Persia and Duke's divorce has had an effect on Leslie Courtney, too, whose love for Persia has escalated in his dreams of one day loving her openly. Leslie finds multiple opportunities to phone Persia to inquire about her health and ask if Leslie can be of any assistance to either Persia or Iris. Despite repeated rejections, Leslie persists in this behavior until one night Leslie arrives at Persia's apartment and stays hoping for some response to his romantic gestures but Persia firmly squelches his hopes.

Leslie's unrequited love for Persia creates a restlessness that forces Leslie to virtually abandon his photography shop in order to take endless drives along the lake and dream of Persia. Most of the time Leslie drives along the shore of Lake Ontario where he gets out of his car to walk and explore and take photographs of the rocky scenery. At all times Leslie carries his camera whether he is in the mood to shoot pictures that day or not.

It is now January 1959 and Iris is forced to admit that she is helpless in helping Persia conquer alcoholism. Iris's journal is filled with notations of Persia's late night stumbling arrivals home and the liquor bottles stashed in hiding places Persia thinks Iris will never find. Persia's alcohol abuse escalates to the point that she has a difficult time eating and keeping any food down and she tries desperately to maintain her job during her illness. One night in the Ladies room at the Golden Slipper Lounge, Persia vomits in front of a co-worker and Persia can only hope that the co-worker will not reveal Persia's alcoholic sickness.

Part 2: Torsion, Chapters 8, 9, 10, 11 and 12 Analysis

In this section, the author provides the significance of the book's second section, Torsion, as she addresses the internal conflicts of three main characters, Persia, Iris,



and Leslie. Persia, who is freshly divorced, is still in love with Duke whose romantic overtures continue in spite of their physical separation. Persia also realizes that she is no longer young and as desirable as she had once been, so she drowns her sorrows in alcohol to the point of becoming violently ill as the liquor poisons her body. Matter-of-fact Iris is the opposite of her emotional mother and cannot understand Persia's weakness over Duke and the resulting plunge into alcoholism.

Iris is also physically different from Persia in that Iris's body is hard and angular as opposed to Persia's slowly drooping curves. Iris reaches her tolerance level and vows to be as different from Persia as possible and to leave Hammond as soon as she can. Leslie Courtney suffers in silence as he realizes that, although Persia is a free woman now, Persia will never love Leslie, which plunges Leslie into a dark period of brooding and isolation.



Part 2: Torsion, Chapters 13, 14 and 15

Part 2: Torsion, Chapters 13, 14 and 15 Summary

It is now November 1959 and Persia and Iris have moved once again, this time to an even shabbier neighborhood and more rundown apartment than the last one. Iris is a senior in high school from which she will graduate fourth in her class winning her a full scholarship to Syracuse University. Iris rarely sees Jinx anymore and when she does, Jinx will not acknowledge Iris's presence.

In January 1960 Persia is fired from her cocktail waitress job at another bar, Covino's Bar & Grill, because she has passed out in the Ladies room due to her alcoholic illness. The humiliation Persia feels is overwhelming and she silently tries to justify her alcoholism and her work in the degrading job as a better alternative than accepting money from men which Persia will not do. Persia's health rapidly deteriorates and Iris's attempts to get Persia to eat healthily are futile as Persia craves only alcohol and cigarettes.

Eventually, Iris has Persia admitted to the hospital and because Persia has no health insurance, Iris must pay cash out of the money she earns working part time at the library. Iris has a temporary lift in spirits that finally someone will be able to diagnose Persia and rescue her from her downward spiral but Persia leaves the hospital soon after admittance. In order to smooth over Iris's huge disappointment and disgust with her mother's behavior and denial of the medical treatment, Persia suggests that Iris call in sick at her library job so that Persia and Iris can attend a matinee.

Iris attempts to maintain some semblance of a normal life, completing her senior year in high school and working at the library part time to earn some spending money.

Part 2: Torsion, Chapters 13, 14 and 15 Analysis

The author uses figurative language throughout the novel to add dimension to the narrative. For example, she writes, "Iris Courtney's prayers are lightweight aluminum; she imagines them skittering, skimming, flying across the surface of a body of water, knows they won't be heeded so she fashions them cheap and disposable" (p. 223). When describing the weather of a February day, the author writes, "The wind off the river lifts skeins of dry powdery snow like snakes many yards long" (p. 232). Obviously, prayers are not aluminum and snow cannot be a snake, but by using these similes and metaphors, the author helps the reader to understand exactly what she's trying to convey by providing this imagery.

This section also provides a major turning point in Persia and Iris's relationship. Iris has been forced to adopt the role of mother to Persia who insolently rejects any care or advice for her own well being. This role reversal has been long in coming but when it

occurs, both characters realize the shift and resign themselves dejectedly into their new roles.



Part 2: Torsion, Chapters 16, 17 and 18

Part 2: Torsion, Chapters 16, 17 and 18 Summary

It is now late winter 1960 and Persia's condition deteriorates to the point that Iris avoids going home at night, preferring instead to take long walks after she leaves her library job. One night, Iris arranges to meet Jinx at a diner called Kitty's Korner, and the two agree to talk in Jinx's car after the diner's patrons silently show their disapproval of a white girl meeting with a black boy. Jinx tells Iris that he has married a girl named Sissy Weaver and has abandoned all ideas of going to college or ever playing basketball again. Iris and Jinx end up sitting in Jinx's car for a while near the river, where Jinx, who understands the complications far better than Iris could ever imagine, halts their attempts at physical intimacy.

Persia's health continues to deteriorate and by April Persia refuses to eat any food which Iris prepares. Soon Persia begins to exhibit paranoid behavior convinced that people are spying on her and trying to communicate through her via sound and radio waves.

One afternoon in mid May, Iris encounters Persia entering a bar with a strange man and Iris runs away in disgust when Persia opts to stay with the man instead of going home with Iris. After her shift at the library, Iris finds solace in sitting in the bus terminal to avoid going home and watching Persia's decline.

A week later, Persia is dying from alcoholism and Iris eventually is able to get Persia back to the hospital. Iris tries to maintain a semblance of optimism despite Persia's horribly emaciated body with its swollen belly. The diagnosis of cirrhosis of the liver confirms Persia's imminent death, but Iris still hopes that Persia will awaken, apologize for not being a good mother, and promise to change her life.

Iris's mental anguish increases when she spots Duke Courtney and his new wife in the hospital one day, but Iris walks past the couple, ignoring Duke's pleas to talk to Iris. During the brief periods of Persia's lucidity, Iris tries to confirm for Persia that Persia had been a good mother and that Iris and Leslie will take Persia home when she is well, but Persia dies after being in the hospital three weeks.

Part 2: Torsion, Chapters 16, 17 and 18 Analysis

In this section, the author reveals the true intimacy between Iris and Jinx; not the aborted tryst in Jinx's car, but Iris' innate knowledge that Jinx had purposefully not taken precautions to avoid breaking his ankle in the last basketball game. Iris knows that Jinx had intentionally thwarted his chances of going to college on a basketball scholarship as a form of self-punishment for the murder of Little Red Garlock. Conflict is an important literary technique available to authors who often set up the difference between good and evil in separate characters, but in this case, the author has chosen to set the

conflict internally as Jinx struggles with his dark secret and his decision for self-punishment.



Part 3: Ceremony, Chapters 1, 2, 3 and 4

Part 3: Ceremony, Chapters 1, 2, 3 and 4 Summary

Iris has left Hammond and in the autumn of 1962 is in her junior year at a college in Syracuse, NY, where she is befriended by an art professor named Dr. Byron Savage. Iris rarely thinks of her life in Hammond and her only tie now is her uncle Leslie, who graciously borrowed money to pay for Persia's hospital bills, which Iris vows to repay one day. Iris sometimes recalls the sadness that Persia had been only thirty-eight when she died and that Duke had left Hammond soon after Persia's death leaving no forwarding address and no offer to help with the hospital expenses.

Iris revels in her new life, especially the privacy afforded her in her comfortable little room in the boardinghouse where she lives. For the first time in her life, Iris is in control of her own destiny, even the solitude which she has craved and been denied for so many years. Most importantly, Iris now feels as if she is grounded and secure and is open to love in her life however that may come.

Iris is thrilled by the people and opportunities in her new life at the university where she is surrounded by intellectuals, and especially enjoys working for Dr. Savage, who immerses Iris in culture and the arts. When Dr. Savage invites Iris to his home for Thanksgiving, Iris is soon drawn into the elite, artistic world of Dr. Savage and his sophisticated wife.

Most of the fourteen tenants in the boardinghouse where Iris lives are men, and Iris is attracted to one in particular, a student named Claude St. Germain, a mechanical engineering student from Jamaica. Claude's continental demeanor and easy, confident style are both attractive and frightening to inexperienced Iris. Iris also knows that Claude's dark complexion is a major part in her attraction to him. Eventually, Claude becomes aware of Iris's infatuation with himself and begins to return the attraction but in a more overtly sensual context. Claude is clearly worldlier than Iris and forces himself on her one night, but Iris is able to rebuff the advances, much to the chagrin of the enraged Claude who unexpectedly leaves the boardinghouse and the university a few weeks later.

At 2:30 the following morning, Iris feels the adrenaline rush that always precedes a migraine headache and, not being able to sleep, dresses hurriedly, rushes to a gas station, and calls Information to find Jinx's number. Catching herself in time, Iris hangs up the phone before the call has a chance to disturb Jinx, and she tries to rationalize her behavior but cannot forgive herself for allowing her old life to protrude into her new one.



Part 3: Ceremony, Chapters 1, 2, 3 and 4 Analysis

The author uses Iris's diary notes to help the reader further understand Iris's feelings and actions. For example, when Iris remembers her life in Hammond, she writes, "She was thirty-eight when she died. He disappeared immediately after the funeral, leaving no forwarding address. There was no insurance. The bills came to just under \$8,000: L. took out bank loans but I intend to pay him back. I am readying myself to fall in love. It's time" (p. 269). This is not only a personal glimpse into Iris's mindset but also a succinct way of relating much information without complicating the narrative with minor details of the events.

The author shows Iris's deep attachment to Jinx through her attraction to the black Jamaican student, Claude St. Germain. Although Iris has flirted with Claude in the boardinghouse, Iris is enraged when Claude acts on the overtures. Iris's aborted phone call to Jinx after the rough encounter with Claude shows Iris's unspoken bond with Jinx, who will always represent love and protection for Iris.

The author also uses the literary technique of irony when she names the very cultured and very artistic professor Dr. "Savage." Dr. Savage and his wife are the opposite of everything that could be considered savage and far from the mental savagery Iris has experienced in her life to this point. This is the author's way of interjecting some humorous perspective into a storyline that is ready for some levity.



Part 3: Ceremony, Chapter 5

Part 3: Ceremony, Chapter 5 Summary

Iris's attendance at Thanksgiving dinner at the home of Dr. and Mrs. Gwendolyn Savage plunges Iris into a world of wealth and privilege. In awe of the protocol and other guests, Iris finds it hard to believe that not only is she sitting at such a bountiful feast, but also that she has been invited because someone actually likes her. Iris is particularly struck by Mrs. Savage's hostess style and command of every social situation presented.

Iris temporarily forgets that she had had plans to go with a boyfriend, Tom, to his home in Cleveland to meet Tom's parents for the Thanksgiving holiday. Tom thinks that he is in love with Iris who does not have reciprocal feelings so the trip to Cleveland was easily abandoned in favor of dining with the Savages, with whom a relationship would be much more beneficial to Iris's long term needs. Iris does care for Tom but believes that Tom is in love with a romantic illusion of Iris who does not really understand what love is. In fact, the only people with whom Iris has had any affection at all are Persia, Uncle Leslie and Jinx Fairchild, relationships which are no longer useful to her. Iris does still love Uncle Leslie but he belongs to another point in time in Iris's past which Iris would prefer to forget.

Thanksgiving dinner stretches out for over two hours and Iris moves back and forth from the present of gleaming silver and crystal in front of her to the past filled with thoughts of Jinx. Iris realizes that most of the Savages' guests are already acquainted and their pockets of conversation do not include Iris who sits shyly smiling at the large table. Iris does manage to catch some pieces of chatter and learns that the Savages have a son named Alan who also has an art history background and is currently living in Paris trying to get a book published.

Gwendolyn attempts to draw Iris into the dinner conversation by inquiring about Iris's parents, to which Iris responds that her mother died two years ago from a lengthy illness. This public statement of such a private grief plunges Iris into a nervous fit of nausea and fatigue and Iris spends the night in a guest bedroom at the Savage home.

Part 3: Ceremony, Chapter 5 Analysis

This chapter is important because it marks the official transition of Iris into her new life. Up to this point, Iris has tried to rid herself of the personal grief of her parents' dysfunctional marriage and then Persia's death, but there has been no event or person that has been able to catapult her into a better future. Meeting the Savages is a life-altering event, and Iris will find the sophistication, love, culture, and security that have eluded her all her life.

Symbolically, the author uses Iris's disorientation at the dinner table to mark Iris's rite of passage into a new life. In some cultures, rites of passage are rituals that sometimes



consist of deliberate confusion and deprivation of sensory perceptions when the novice must emerge from the experience as a changed person and presumably better and more mature having endured the challenge.



Part 3: Ceremony, Chapters 6 and 7

Part 3: Ceremony, Chapters 6 and 7 Summary

It is the week before Christmas and Leslie Courtney is searching his studio and apartment to find Persia's cat Houdini, the only other link to Persia that remains besides Iris. Leslie took the cat after Persia died and Iris went off to college and ever since has relied on Houdini's company even though Leslie is allergic to the animal and does not like the cat's sneaky behavior. Leslie searches the studio again and lets himself drift back in time when Persia was still alive and the walls were covered with her portraits. Now the portraits hang in Leslie's bedroom so that Iris will not be upset when she visits the studio in the future.

Since Persia's death, Leslie has resigned himself to a solitary life of simple meals and nights spent alone with the exception of Houdini. When Leslie does find the truant Houdini, Leslie administers a half-hearted lecture and the two friends curl up for the night.

Two months later, in February 1963, Sugar Baby Fairchild is brutally tortured and murdered in Buffalo, New York, reportedly by some gang members in a drug deal gone bad. According to reports, Sugar Baby had tried to cheat his own gang boss who then ordered Sugar Baby murdered as a cautionary warning to anyone else who may be considering the same move. Jinx is understandably devastated by Sugar Baby's death and retreats from Sissy and his parents in his overwhelming grief. The Buffalo police never find Sugar Baby's killers, attributing the death as one of many in the circle of black men killing each other for heroin.

Part 3: Ceremony, Chapters 6 and 7 Analysis

In these chapters, the author transitions the narrative and reverts from Iris's life in Syracuse to activities in Hammond. This technique not only lets the reader understand the recent events related to other main characters such as Uncle Leslie and Jinx, but also to show that although Iris has physically moved away, Hammond will always be a part of her and her of it.



Part 3: Ceremony, Chapters 8, 9, 10 and 11

Part 3: Ceremony, Chapters 8, 9, 10 and 11 Summary

Gwendolyn Savage has developed a special affection for Iris and extends numerous social invitations to Iris who always accepts, although she is usually uncomfortable in the company of the Savages' older friends. Soon Iris finds herself adopting the genteel Southern ways of Mrs. Savage so different from Iris's mother about whom Mrs. Savage continues to gently probe. As the visits increase, Iris is urged to share information about her own family. Iris alters the truth by telling that her early-divorced mother struggled to raise Iris and died nobly from a lengthy illness while Iris's father supposedly is a politician in one of the Western states. Iris maintains her story of Persia's untimely death and avoids any other details about life in Hammond.

Under Mrs. Savage's guidance, Iris begins to bloom with feminine graces and self-confidence, while Dr. Savage encourages Iris's dreams of having a career. Mrs. Savage even confides in Iris and counts on Iris's support during Mrs. Savage's recovery from a hysterectomy operation. Iris basks in the attention bestowed on her but is also leery of the Savages' provincial and religious beliefs. Eventually Iris pulls away from her college-aged friends preferring instead to spend time either with the Savages or alone in her room dreaming of the life she wants to create.

Across the ocean in Paris, France, the Savages' son, Alan, decides to return home for a visit and is promptly introduced to Iris at yet another party at the Savage home. As Alan and Iris play croquet on the lawn, Dr. and Mrs. Savage murmur their agreement to each other that Iris would make a fine wife for Alan who should be getting married and settling down. Iris feels that this day is the best day of her life, but she is not certain if her joyous mood stems from Alan's attentiveness or from feeling as if she belongs in a family for the first time in her life.

Part 3: Ceremony, Chapters 8, 9, 10 and 11 Analysis

The flurry of emotions simmering under the cool demeanor of Mrs. Savage is revealed when the author writes nearly three pages without any end punctuation to indicate Mrs. Savage's rambling thought process during her recovery from a hysterectomy: "my beloved Gwendolyn I realize I am a selfish man a self-absorbed man a creature of infinite vanity but I am no one without you my dear, my darling wife, and though dazed with pain and painkilling pills she knew she must comfort him, she must soothe him, perhaps in his childlike way he had blamed her for the obscenity in her womb and now she was obliged to comfort him, poor Byron Savage to whom the most trivial interruption of his daily schedule is a matter of profound grief..." (pp. 314-315). This technique

allows the reader to understand the urgency and melding of thoughts experienced by Mrs. Savage in a way that would have been stunted by regular punctuation.



Part 3: Ceremony, Chapters 12, 13 and 14

Part 3: Ceremony, Chapters 12, 13 and 14 Summary

Iris and Alan begin to spend time together and Alan introduces Iris to the pleasures of a privileged life such as afternoons spent sailing in the family's twelve-foot sailboat. Alan becomes increasingly enamored of Iris and continues to date Iris after Labor Day when the family returns to Syracuse after having spent the summer at their lake house.

Alan does not persist in probing into Iris's past, a fact which pleases Iris who is so intent on retaining the facade already established with the Savages. Still reluctant to share the real truth about her past, Iris reveals to Alan only sketchy details of the fabricated past she had once revealed to Mrs. Savage. Alan does share his past with Iris though and especially delights in telling Iris about his career as an art historian and his passion for collecting Modernist art.

Soon Iris and Alan become lovers even though Iris still does not know if she can be sure what love really is.

Part 3: Ceremony, Chapters 12, 13 and 14 Analysis

These brief chapters are important because they mark another turning point in Iris's life. For the first time, Iris is able to let someone come into her life on an intimate basis. Alan's first visit to Iris's room in the boarding house is a revelation when Alan is delighted with the ambience, and all the while Iris feels as if Alan will reject her for the shabby interior. The room is symbolic of Iris's life and self esteem, and little by little, Alan's acceptance of Iris will allow Iris to begin loving herself as well.



Part 3: Ceremony, Chapters 15 and 16

Part 3: Ceremony, Chapters 15 and 16 Summary

Jinx Fairchild is now twenty-four years old and is taking stock of his life, especially with thoughts of how to improve the future. Jinx is currently employed as an unskilled factory worker at McKenzie Radiator and feels lucky to be one of only a few black men employed at the company. Many of the boys Jinx knew in school have joined the army to get a career and Jinx ponders the proposition for himself. Jinx is proud to be a father of two little boys as well as the child Sissy had with another man prior to her marriage to Jinx, but Jinx's relationships with Sissy and with Jinx's parents are volatile, especially since Sugar Baby's death. Jinx wonders if he even loves Sissy anymore because she has lied and cheated so many times in their marriage and Jinx is too life-weary to generate much enthusiasm for the relationship anymore.

As one option for improving his situation, Jinx applies for a job at the new plant in town, National Lead of Hammond, where wages are supposed to be better than any other company in the area. Eventually, Jinx's hopes for a better job fade as news leaks out that the new factory will be hiring black men only for janitorial positions.

Jinx also thinks of Iris often and wonders what might have happened had he let Iris's interest in him escalate. Jinx prides himself on not pursuing the relationship with Iris back in high school when he had the chance because if anything intimate had happened between them, Jinx would have never been able to extricate himself from the bond with Iris.

Eventually, Jinx finds his way to the US Army Recruiting Station and enlists in the army where at least he can learn a trade and put some clarity to his future.

On that same day, November 23, 1963, Iris's American Literature class is abruptly interrupted by the news that President Kennedy has been shot in Dallas, Texas. Students spill out from every classroom in order to find answers and to be together after hearing such unbelievable news. Iris's first instinct is to run to Dr. Savage's office, but Dr. Savage is away lecturing in London, so Iris gets caught up in the swarm of frantic students searching for answers and security.

Iris aimlessly walks the streets of Syracuse all day, watching clips of the news flashes from Dallas on televisions in storefront windows. Before Iris realizes it, it is nine o'clock in the evening and she enters a little cafe for something to eat, much to the amazement of the big black woman behind the counter in this all-black establishment. When she finishes, Iris walks back outside and is soon accosted by some young black men who force Iris into the back seat of their car and rape her.



Part 3: Ceremony, Chapters 15 and 16 Analysis

Once again, the author uses a rambling narrative from a mother's bereft state of mind when Minnie Fairchild says, "And please Jinx you got to drop by the house for sure this week to fix the back steps where they're rotted almost through and insulation strips have got to be put in around the window frames and you know your father can't hustle his black ass to do anything useful... and I'm lonely Jinx I miss my children Jinx all grown up and moved out of worse like Sugar Baby but I won't get onto that subject it's just that I'm lonely and thinking if only you hadn't gone for that one basket—that one basket that one minute: that *once*" (p. 355).

The author also uses the literary technique of foreshadowing when she writes about Jinx's thoughts about Iris after all this time but how Jinx will never take the risk in writing a letter, preferring instead to send a photo that will soon be delivered with more significance than even Jinx can imagine.



Epilogue

Epilogue Summary

As the epilogue begins, Iris is having her third fitting for the wedding dress previously worn by Mrs. Savage's mother on her wedding day. In just two days, on September 12, 1964, Iris will marry Alan Savage and obtain the family she has always wanted.

Iris had made a trip back to Hammond in May to visit Uncle Leslie and to find Duke and his new wife. In character, Duke is impressed with the size of Iris's antique engagement ring while Uncle Leslie shares Iris's thoughts that Persia would be so proud. After the trip, Iris determines to withhold wedding invitations from Duke and Aunt Madelyn, whose recent religious fanaticism would certainly repel the stoic Savages. The only family member Iris wants to attend is Uncle Leslie because Iris can trust that he will exhibit some sense of decorum.

During Iris's trip to Hammond, Uncle Leslie presents Iris with a photograph of Jinx Fairchild, a wallet-sized version of the portrait Jinx had taken for his mother before leaving for Vietnam. Visibly upset by the photograph and the inscription on the back—*Honey, Think I'll pass?*—Iris bursts into tears and reveals to Uncle Leslie that she had loved Jinx.

At last, it is the day of the wedding, and as Iris undergoes one last fitting of the wedding dress, she asks Mrs. Savage and the seamstress if they think Iris will look the part.

Epilogue Analysis

By the end of the novel, the reader understands the significance of the title, in that each person has trials and personal demons that if not managed, add bitterness to life's perspectives. The author wants the reader to understand that no one escapes bitter disappointments and hurts, and at the same time, no one else can understand the personal pain experienced by another.

To an outsider, the relationship between Iris and Jinx is highly impractical and improbable, but that does not matter to them. The bitterness of the secret they share and the loving bond that evolves from that secret is theirs alone to experience and judge. The author provides double meaning for the second part of the title, *Because it is my Heart*, in that the story is about the search for love and is obviously heart-related, but also has an emphasis on *my*, which makes the story poignant and relevant only for those who lived it.



Characters

Little Red Garlock

Little Red comes from an indigent family in Hammond, and is well known in the town for being an especially aggressive and foul-mouthed bully. It is never mentioned in the novel but rather insinuated that perhaps Little Red does not have the full mental capacity as other fifteen-year-old boys. Ironically, Little Red Garlock has minimal action in the narrative, yet the entire story hinges on his murder and the secret kept by two people who are guilty of the crime.

Iris Courtney

Iris Courtney is one of two main characters in the novel, the other being Jinx Fairchild. Iris is the slightly built, pale, fragile daughter of Duke and Persia Courtney, whose life is ruled by instability due to the self-serving lifestyles of her dysfunctional parents. Iris virtually raises herself as her parents indulge in a social life of drinking and parties. As an only child left alone most of the time, Iris has difficulty connecting with other people and finds intimate relationships especially difficult. Perhaps it is this feeling of estrangement that propels her toward situations and people who are socially unacceptable, such as her bond with Jinx Fairchild. Because he is black, Jinx is not considered an appropriate friend for Iris, but this does not bother her. She entertains the idea of an intimate relationship with Jinx, but the two never act on it because of societal restraints. At the time of her parents' divorce, Iris has some fleeting hope that she and her mother will become closer, but Persia chooses to spend her time with irresponsible men instead of her daughter, behavior which further entrenches Iris in her own world of isolation. This deprivation of authentic love establishes defense mechanisms and the inability to achieve truly intimate relationships regardless of how hard Iris tries to belong and be in love. However, at the end of the novel, Iris has completed the steps to what she believes will help her make authentic connections as evidenced in her relationship with the Savages and marriage to Alan.

Jinx Fairchild

Jinx Fairchild is the other main character in the novel. Jinx develops an unusual bond with Iris Courtney after Jinx kills Little Red Garlock while defending Iris. Because Jinx is a young black man, societal pressures will not allow an outright acknowledgement of the link between Jinx and Iris, which serves to make the bond even more attractive to both. Jinx lives in the low income, black section of town, and his only public success is his basketball prowess, which seems to be his track to a college scholarship and a more hopeful future. Unfortunately, Little Red's murder ends any hope of a better life; not because Jinx is convicted of the crime, but because he undermines his success by not properly tying his basketball shoes and lands incorrectly during a game, resulting in a



broken ankle. It is almost as if Jinx feels he must punish himself in some way because he has never received any sort of punishment for murdering Little Red. Jinx is like Iris in that they are both secretive and cannot maintain intimate relationships. Jinx marries Sissy Weaver, but the relationship is more physical and violent as opposed to being based on any strong emotional connection. Jinx experiences conflict internally because he thinks that sexual prowess and power over women is the way to make lasting connections, as evidenced by his volatile relationship with Sissy and his sexually aggressive thoughts about Iris. Jinx meets a tragic end by dying in the Vietnam War, a story doubly saddened because Jinx had thought that joining the military was the only way out of his pitiful life.

Persia Courtney

Persia Courtney is the vivacious wife of Duke Courtney and mother of Iris Courtney. Persia lives in constant conflict, being torn over the need for an active social life and the means by which her husband chooses to provide that life. Persia is typical of many women born in her generation: marrying early without the benefit of any higher education or career experience. Therefore, Persia lives to please her husband and indulge his extravagances even if they are not beneficial for the family. Because Persia believes that her value is based only on her attractiveness, she is overly consumed with gaudy clothes and cosmetics. Persia is essentially single-minded in her pursuit of entertainment and pleasure, exhibiting shallow behavior when it comes to raising Iris or improving the family's situation. Eventually, Persia does tire of Duke's inability to provide security for the family and the couple divorces, leaving Persia even more financially and emotionally vulnerable. Persia's solution is a string of low-paying jobs and relationships with men with only short-term pleasure in mind. Ultimately, Persia's descent into alcohol abuse kills her when she is in her mid 40s. On her deathbed, Persia shares with Iris the errors of a life not founded in goodness and the pursuit of shallow pleasures, and implores Iris to not follow the paths Persia has taken.

Duke Courtney

Duke Courtney is the happy-go-lucky husband of Persia Courtney and father of Iris Courtney. Duke has the affable personality of a salesman but does not have the tenacity to remain in any job for any appreciable length of time. Duke, like Persia, is very attractive, and the couple sets much store in their appearance and social contacts. Duke is happiest when he is in the company of a notable person, and thinks that association with these people socially elevates him. Unfortunately, Duke does not have the financial resources to attain the social status he seeks, so he pursues risky business propositions and gambling, much to Persia's chagrin. Although Duke would like to please Persia by providing more stability, he just isn't able to lead an ordinary life, preferring instead to risk everything by gambling. Duke just cannot get a firm footing in life and his relationships are all based on appearances and momentary pleasures, characteristics that will seriously affect his marriage as well as Iris's diminished self-esteem. Duke never intentionally sets out to cause harm, but because he is a dreamer,



he cannot project reactions to the things he does. He prefers to live in an almost imaginary world where he appears heroic to his wife and daughter, although has no substance with which to back it up. Duke is also more of an artist or poet at heart and speaks lyrically to Persia, telling her that the two of them are fated to be together, and even sends poems and roses to Persia to mark the day of their divorce. Duke eventually remarries, but he and Iris lose contact. Iris does not invite Duke to her wedding because of the estrangement and the potential for embarrassment in front of her new in-laws.

Leslie Courtney

Leslie Courtney is shy and reserved, the complete opposite of his brother, Duke Courtney. While Duke loves to socialize, Leslie prefers to view the world through the lens of his camera, where he can see people at a comfortable distance. Leslie has both more emotional depth and a greater capacity for sensitivity, and feels that he could provide a better life for Persia Courtney with whom Leslie has been secretly in love for many years. Leslie is the only real source of stability available to Iris as a girl and she delights in visiting his photography studio where history and a sense of belonging are evident in the photos of the people hanging in the studio. By the time Iris marries, Leslie is the only person from Hammond invited to attend the nuptials.

Sissy Weaver

Sissy Weaver is the girl who marries Jinx Fairchild when Jinx realizes that he will not be attending college but will instead remain in Hammond. Sissy is very extroverted in contrast to Jinx's quiet, sometimes brooding demeanor. Although Sissy would like to provide a good home for Jinx and their two children, the effects of poverty and no future limit what she can do, and Sissy turns to alcohol abuse to numb herself to the pain of reality.

Minnie Fairchild

Minnie Fairchild is the mother of Jinx and Sugar Baby Fairchild. Minnie is very aware of the socio-economic status of her situation as a black woman in the 1950s, but tries to elevate her life by working for a local physician doing both domestic and clerical work. By being regularly employed by a white doctor, Minnie has the perception that she is better situated than other black women in her neighborhood. Minnie's world is severely diminished when Jinx's chance for a basketball scholarship is destroyed and after Sugar Baby is killed. Eventually, Minnie's employer retires and she slips into the role of a poor black woman when she loses her job with the doctor.

Woodrow Fairchild

Woodrow Fairchild is Minnie's husband and father of Jinx and Sugar Baby Fairchild. Woodrow is several years older than Minnie and is not able to participate actively in



raising Jinx and Sugar Baby. Woodrow's health is also compromised, but he is the parent Jinx trusts more, and Jinx feels that Woodrow can sense that Jinx had something to do with Little Red's murder even though Woodrow never says anything to Jinx directly.

Dr. Byron Savage

Dr. Byron Savage is Iris Courtney's art professor when she attends college in Syracuse, New York. Dr. Savage is fond of Iris and invites her into his family life as well as encourages the prospects for a good career for Iris, providing the paternal guidance Iris has sorely lacked throughout her entire life. Iris eventually marries Dr. and Mrs. Savage's son, Alan.

Mrs. Savage

Mrs. Gwendolyn Savage befriends Iris and grooms her to adapt to a life among wealthy people who are well traveled and cultured. Mrs. Savage becomes a mother figure for Iris, providing the support and encouragement Iris never received from her own mother, Persia.

Alan Savage

Alan Savage, the son of Dr. and Mrs. Savage, marries Iris Courtney after a brief courtship. Alan, like his father, has a career in the arts and provides the sensitivity and sense of security that has been missing from Iris's life.

Sugar Baby Fairchild

Sugar Baby is Jinx's older brother who is both proud and envious of Jinx's athletic triumphs. Sugar Baby has no hope of higher education and turns to a life of drug addiction and crime, ultimately resulting in his brutal murder.

Aunt Madelyn

Aunt Madelyn Daiches is not actually Iris's aunt, but is Persia's cousin twice removed. Madelyn is older than Persia and has regular contact with the Courtneys, which prompts Iris to call her Aunt Madelyn.

Nancy Dorsey

Nancy Dorsey is Iris's best friend during her schools years attended at Belknap Junior High School.



Virgil Starling

Virgil Starling is Persia Courtney's mulatto boyfriend whose seductive behaviors cannot compete with Persia's undying love for her ex-husband Duke.

Houdini

Houdini is the midnight black cat belonging to Persia and Iris when they live in the apartment on Jarrett Street.

Claude St. Germain

Claude St. Germain is the Jamaican student who lives in the same student boarding house as Iris does in Syracuse. Iris is attracted to Claude because he is black and therefore not socially acceptable, but when Claude's attentions turn violent, Iris rejects Claude and he leaves the school.



Objects/Places

Hammond, New York

Hammond, a city of thirty-five thousand people, is the main location for the events and activities of the novel. Hammond is located sixty miles south of Lake Ontario.

Gowanda Street

Gowanda Street is in a section of Hammond called Lowertown because it is the poor section of town. It is also the street where many of the Garlock family live.

Cassadaga River

The Cassadaga River flows through Hammond and is the river in which Little Red Garlock's body is found.

Schoharie Downs

Schoharie Downs is the local racetrack frequented by the Courtney's, and where Duke Courtney gambles on the harness races.

Rialto Theater

The Rialto is one of two movie theaters located in Hammond and the one frequented by Iris and her friends.

Belknap Junior High School

Belknap Junior High School is where Iris attends school during the ninth grade.

372 Holland Street

Persia and Iris live in a four-floor walk-up apartment located at 372 Holland Street in Lowertown during Iris's junior high years.



Cheney's Variety Store

Cheney's Variety Store is the Negro hangout located on Gowanda Street, and is where Iris encounters Jinx Fairchild who works there late at night. Iris and Jinx encounter Little Red Garfield on the night he is killed after they exit Cheney's.

The Golden Slipper Lounge

The Golden Slipper is a roadhouse three miles north of Hammond where Persia works nights as a cocktail waitress during the end of the 1950s.

Leslie Courtney's Photography Studio

Uncle Leslie'

Kitty's Korner

Kitty's Korner is Iris's favorite restaurant located at the corner of Buena Vista and Fifteenth Streets. Iris frequents Kitty's after she leaves work at the library in the evenings.

2117 South Salina Street in Syracuse, New York

Iris lives in a boarding house on South Salina Street when she attends college in Syracuse, New York, in the early 1960s.

U.S. Army Recruiting Station

In November 1963, Jinx takes a bus ride to South Main Street to enlist in the army at the Hammond US Army Recruiting Station.



Social Concerns And Themes

The central event of *Because It Is Bitter, and Because It Is My Heart* is Jinx Fairchild's murder of Little Red Garlock while Iris Courtney, the girl Garlock has been chasing, watches.

Like *Marya* (1986) and *You Must Remember This* (1987), *Because It Is Bitter, and Because It Is My Heart* examines the connection between adolescence and violence, and, like them, it is more controlled and purposeful in its intent than Oates's early fiction. Iris Courtney's journey from her adolescence in the small upstate New York city of Hammond to Syracuse University replicates *Marya's* journey. Like *Marya*, Iris protects herself from the scars of her father's drinking and gambling, of her mother's alcoholism and promiscuity, and of her parents' eventual divorce by adopting a cold, shell-like exterior. Despite its bleak view of the quality of life in mid-twentieth-century America, Oates finds a way of endorsing the fact that this kind of life is better than no life at all.

Where *You Must Remember This* found something sustaining in the metaphor of the controlled violence of boxing, *Because It Is Bitter, and Because It Is My Heart* finds beauty in the metaphor of art and photography. Iris becomes an art major at Syracuse and her uncle is a photographer who regularly photographs her and her mother. The photograph is a pose, just as Iris's parents' early life together was a pose and Iris's marriage to the son of one of her art professors will be a pose. She marries without ever telling her fiance or his family about her past; the novel closes with Iris being fitted into an heirloom wedding gown in which she can adopt the perfect pose. Some editorial intrusions indicate that Iris's marriage will last and that, even though she will be an emotionless wife, she will survive her life experiences, which include not only witnessing a murder but also being attacked by a gang of young males.

The position of the adolescent within the family or within society, the pervasiveness of violence, and the nature of art have all been concerns that Oates has explored throughout her career.

Although she has always implied an interest in how social and class structures shape lives, *Because It Is Bitter, and Because It Is My Heart* is her most sustained look at these structures.

Oates achieves her purpose by juxtaposing the Courtneys' varying social class against the hillbilly Garlock family and against the African-American Fairchild family. But Oates does more than create stereotypes of social class.

When she makes Jinx Fairchild a murderer and has Iris attacked by a car full of black toughs, one has to ask why she chooses to equate violence with the black community. Because she has chosen also to show Jinx saving Iris from white violence, she not only stereotypes the black community as violent but highlights as well how much class and race struggles have defined the modern world. Filled with references to Kennedy, to the civil rights movement, and to Vietnam, the novel forces us to ask how we can cope in



such a bitter world. As Stephen Crane suggested in the poem from which Oates takes her title, we can cope only if we force ourselves to acknowledge that life is bitter and only if we eat of it anyway. Like Crane's beast that "Held his heart in his hands, / And ate of it," and liked it "Because it is bitter, / and because it is my heart," Oates's novel insists, as her work has always insisted, that confronting the real nature of the world we have created is a first step toward transcending that world.



Techniques/Literary Precedents

As in *You Must Remember This*, Oates creates the atmosphere of the 1950s and 1960s by numerous references to popular culture and political movements: Jack Palance and Ava Gardner; Hell's Angels and "Great Balls of Fire"; the Kennedy assassination that precipitates the opportunity for Iris being attacked and that, along with the Vietnam War, is the central metaphor for the character of the twentieth century.

Oates cuts back and forth between families. Iris is at the center of the Courtney family and connects it to the Garlock and Savage families; Jinx is at the center of the Fairchild family, which Oates examines less closely than the Courtneys. Perhaps this is because she feels better able to fictionalize a white, female experience than a black, male experience. She juxtaposes Iris's upward mobility against the downward mobility of most of the other characters. With its quick cuts between families, the novel is a bit like one of Leslie Courtney's photographs, a snapshot look at how social structures frame who we are and become. Its title places it in the tradition of Stephen Crane, a writer who also used a photographic technique but whose vision of life was more bitter than that of Oates.



Themes

Racial Tension

An important theme throughout the novel is the racial tension between blacks and whites. During the 1950s and early '60s in America, the feeling of unrest among black people is gathering momentum, which further adds to the fear and hatred felt by many white people. As a young girl, Iris is warned by her family about associating with blacks and the inherent dangers that will certainly befall her should she venture into that world. Prejudices are very clear throughout the book, and the usual situations that have now become stereotypical are exhibited. For example, Jinx is not accepted into white society, yet his athletic prowess has the potential to garner a scholarship and a better future in a white world. In another example, Iris and a girlfriend watch Jinx and Sugar Baby swim and dive in a lake one summer day, and yet the girls cannot join the boys in the water because it would not be socially acceptable. In addition to the unspoken rules of segregation, there are also geographic boundaries separating the races. The Fairchild family lives in the black section of town, which is very clearly defined and there is no integration of black families in the white neighborhoods. The occasions of black people finding employment in white establishments is rare, such as exhibited by Minnie Fairchild, whose standing is minutely elevated by her long-time association with a white physician. When Minnie loses her employment, her social and personal standing is diminished and she falls into a deep depression with no real hope of emerging again.

Class Distinction

Another theme that is important in the novel is the class distinction between the people of Hammond. All three families in the story, the Courtneys, the Fairchilds, and the Garlocks are all lower class, and therefore designated to less desirable positions in society. Within the lower class in Hammond, there are even further distinctions; the Courtneys are in the upper level of the lower class because they are white and because they had had a comfortable life at one time and there is always hope to reclaim that life; the Garlocks are in the poverty level of the lower class and their social stigma is complicated even further because they are transplants from the South who have too many children unsupervised by a mentally off balanced mother; and finally, the Fairchilds are even lower on the scale because they are black and the hope of ever rising above their circumstances is almost impossible. On the other end of the spectrum are the Savages, who enter Iris's life when she attends college in Syracuse. The Savages live a privileged life of culture and artistic pursuits, far from the life Iris has known as a girl. Because Iris is white and is what the Savages perceive as being refined, Iris can make the leap from the lower class to an upper class status. Iris is pleased to have made the transition but is careful not to reveal any information about her own family or the life she led in Hammond. As the novel ends, Iris is about to marry into this wealthy family but feels quite sure that she will spend her life playing a role because the position is not one with which she is familiar.



Quest for Love

The third major theme in the novel is the eternal search for love and, hopefully, resulting happiness. Each character experiences this desire in his or her own way. For example, Duke tries to woo Persia after every time he disappoints her and Persia always relents; Persia seeks out the company of inappropriate men after the divorce from Duke because she needs male attention and validation; Uncle Leslie spends his life fruitlessly trying to convince Persia to love him; Iris seeks love or some sort of connection with Jinx and then with Alan Savage, both relationships which prove to be unsatisfying; and Jinx marries Sissy Weaver, and although their relationship is volatile, at least it is a connection. The quest for parental love and approval is also strong in the novel. Iris tries futilely to win Duke's validation for years and eventually gives up hope. Persia is almost as equally distant to Iris even though she lives with Iris during Iris's childhood. Persia cannot be available to Iris because of her own needs, but Iris never stops wanting her mother's affection, and in actuality, ends up parenting Persia, her own mother. In the Fairchild household, Jinx wants to please his mother and excels at basketball as a means to earn her approval and validation. Not even Alan Savage is immune from the need to please his parents, and therefore enters a career in the art world just like his father, and ultimately marries Iris, a young woman whom his mother has essentially groomed for him.

Style

Point of View

The novel is written from the third person omniscient point of view, which means that there is no narrator and the story is not told from the perspective of one of the characters as in the first person point of view. With the third person point of view the author is able to share the plot line as well as the thoughts and feelings of the main characters. By utilizing this style, the author is able to tell the events of the main characters lives both in the present and in the past in addition to their thoughts and feelings about those events. This added dimension of emotional revelation helps to further the development of the characters in a way that a pure narrative would not be able to. This technique is especially important in the telling of Iris and Jinx's story, which is based heavily on the characters' sensitivities and emotional wounds. The author could have chosen to tell the story in third person limited point of view, but that perspective limits the insight to only one character and it is important to understand the thoughts and feelings of the separate characters in this novel. Had the author opted to tell the story from a strictly narrative point of view, the reader would never understand the inner conflicts of the troubled characters.

Setting

The setting of the novel takes place primarily in Hammond, New York, in the 1950s and early '60s. Hammond is an industrial town supported by an economy that relies on a dwindling manufacturing industry. The scenes set by the author are bleak, and the reader can vividly imagine the abandoned storefronts and factories that now stand silent and covered with graffiti. The author takes particular interest in describing the neighborhoods and streets where the story takes place, but essentially Hammond is divided into sections of diminishing social class like most other cities. Geographically, the author writes, "Hammond, New York, Waukesha County, sixty miles south of Lake Ontario, is a city of thirty-five thousand inhabitants, a place of Ice Age terrain, saw-notched ridges, hills steep as attic steps. As it approaches the river valley the land gives a sense of hunching down, preparing for a drop. There are hills in Hammond where drivers are obliged to park their vehicles with the front wheels turned sharp against the curb and the emergency brake on full force and other hills where no one in his right mind would park at all. Fog and mists appear to ooze upward out of the earth, concentrating in the low-lying areas." This is an appropriate setting for the personal secrets and harsh lives experienced by Iris, Jinx, and their families. The end of the novel takes place primarily in Syracuse, New York, a stark contrast to Hammond because of its college and cultural amenities that serve as the backdrop for Iris's venture into a more refined life.



Language and Meaning

The author's language style is at once both lyrical and raw. Descriptions of scenes, moods, and emotions are vividly poignant and sometimes poetic, and then the mood can change abruptly with the insertion of vulgar language or the crude sensibilities of some of the characters. The author very accurately reflects the different characters in their dialogue and thoughts, switching from the mentally challenged Garlocks to the black Fairchilds to the shallow Courtneys and ultimately the refined Savages. Language is an important characteristic of social standing, education, and ethnicity, and the author remains true to each of the characters as they represent their social standing or position in the novel. The dialogue exchanged between the characters is so realistic that it seems as if the author must have inhabited the characters bodies at some point to be able to relay the manner of speaking, dialects, rhythms, etc. One very important technique the author uses is the integration of popular culture elements such as brand names, song names, and more to fix the time and place in the reader's mind.

Structure

The novel is separated into three sections called The Body, Torsion, and Ceremony. In "The Body", the author writes about Little Red Garlock's murder and the events prior and afterward. This section is followed by "Torsion", which aptly describes the tension and pressure experienced by the characters, primarily Iris and Jinx, in their struggles to come to terms with the reality of their lives as opposed to the pull of their dreams. Finally, the last section is called "Ceremony", for the allusion to Iris's wedding, a point not only of her becoming a married woman, but also for making the transition into a family where she will be accepted, encouraged, and loved. The author does not take advantage of many flashbacks, preferring instead to indicate the characters' most important thoughts indicated in italic. This is especially evident with Iris, whose most frantic or soul-searching statements are called out as part of journal entries. The author utilizes a compare and contrast structural style which reverts back and forth between the lives of the main characters. This technique allows the author to keep the reader informed of the activities of the main characters at the same time, even though they may not interact with each other.



Quotes

"Don't stare, Iris. Haven't I told you that's rude?' She wonders if their blood too, like their skin, is darker than the blood of Caucasians. Of 'whites.' She has heard the mysterious words 'black blood,' 'Negro blood.' Aunt Madelyn murmuring with a fierce shake of her head, 'That's black blood for you!'" Part 1, Chapter 3, p. 21

"Colored' is acceptable too, sometimes; it's the word Aunt Madelyn prefers. (Madelyn Daiches, whom Iris loves, isn't Iris's aunt, really, but a cousin-twice-removed of Persia's.) Aunt Madelyn has many 'colored' friends, she says, women friends, and fine people they are too, but the race as a whole... 'the-race-as-a-whole'... can't be trusted." Part 1, Chapter 3, p. 23

"For as long as Iris can remember her parents have joked and complained and worried aloud about her uncle Leslie: his lack of 'normal' ambition... the 'squalor' of his little shop... the mystery of how he makes a living. And he's a brilliant man, a true original, Duke insists extravagantly: 'My superior in every way.' For as long too as Iris can remember Persia has been bringing her to sit for double portraits in Leslie's studio—'Persia-and-Iris portraits,' Leslie calls them—though the sessions leave Persia increasingly restless. Her vanity has long since been sated." Part 1, Chapter 7, p. 54

"At what do we smile when we smile into the lens of a camera? Why this trust, this instant's elation? Iris peers at the negatives without touching them—she knows better than to touch them—sees that the subjects, a hand-holding young couple in Sunday clothes, are no one she knows. They have luridly black face and arms... meaning they are 'white' people." Part 1, Chapter 7, p. 57

"Duke says, lowering his voice as if imparting a secret, 'Sometimes, honey, it's the hardest thing on earth, I'd say it was the most courageous thing, to keep your distance from the very people you love more than your own life. Because you can love too much and you can do injury with your love, lose sight of proportion, perspective. Someday when you're older you'll understand.'" Part 1, Chapter 8, p. 72

"You understand, don't you? My love for my family has always come first. I'd kill any man who tried to interfere with my family, any man that ever... it's just that life sometimes fights life.' This peculiar remark hovers in the air; Iris Courtney will remember it forever—*life sometimes fights life*—even as Duke Courtney's voice lifts, evaporates." Part 1, Chapter 8, p. 74

"Duke says, 'All sports are artificial, Persia. Sports and games. That's how we tell them from life. They have beginnings and endings; they have rules... boundaries... absolute winners and absolute losers, most of the time.' He's speaking rapidly, aware of the time monitored on the payoff board; he's starting to sweat inside his clothes, thinking of the upcoming race. He forces himself to smile at his wife; he squeezes her fingers in his... these many fingers surprisingly cool, considering the heat of the discussion. 'As far as



that goes, sweetheart, who isn't an animal? On two legs or four? Aren't *you*? Inside your clothes? Inside your makeup? Inside *you*?" Part 1, Chapter 8, p. 79

"God, help me to be good. God, if there is God... I know I am icy-hearted. God, is there God? And who is 'Iris,' and why?" Part 1, Chapter 10, p. 86

"Duke says, 'These colored kids, you know... don't get too friendly with them. And don't ever be alone with them. The things a black man would like to do to a white girl... Christ, you wouldn't even want to think.' Duke says, 'They'd peel the skin off us if they could, they hate us so. But they can't. So they're courteous to our faces when they have to be and we're courteous to them, but don't ever confuse it, Iris, for anything else.'" Part 1, Chapter 10, p. 93

"So sighting the Courtney girl crossing the street Little Red swerves coasting in her direction and croons out. 'Hey girlie! Hey liii-ris!'—in that sly sliding way he's perfected as if it's a song he's singing to himself, no special meanness to it, or nastiness—'hey titties wanna suck my cock?' and as he hurtles by he gives this white-faced little cunt his best toothy grin and locks eyes with her; she's too surprised to look away in time: 'Yummmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmmm!' Part 1, Chapter 11, p. 95

"Iris stands in the doorway, shivering, not knowing if she should be angry or worried or deeply embarrassed; it seems to her that Jinx Fairchild is disgusted at her too. It strikes her for the first time in her life that, to a black person, two whites might have more in common—more that's deep-cored, familial, ineluctable—than any white might have with him." Part 1, Chapter 12, p. 110

"She'll get help but she doesn't move, she's transfixed watching Jinx Fairchild and Little Red Garlock scrambling about on the ground; they're ravenous to get at each other, grunting like lovers now they're stuck together, the burning flesh of one stuck to the flesh of the other; Jinx's nose is bleeding badly, there's a slash on his forehead that's bleeding badly, and the blood is on Little Red Garlock too... Jinx's sweatshirt with the white *H* has been rudely yanked up to his shoulders, his gleaming dark back is exposed, and Iris wishes she could pull the sweatshirt back down, shield him... *Jinx, kill him. Jinx, don't let him live.*" Part 1, Chapter 12, p. 116

"Iris Courtney, watching Little Red Garlock die, stands transfixed. I've got to get help, she thinks. She watches. Can't look away." Part 1, Chapter 12, p. 116

"Jinx Fairchild's hands. That have administered Death. Long skinny fingers he'd thought he knew and owned. Like his penis that isn't always his exactly... charged with blood, flexing like a fist... and that blood too not his. The most important part of that blood not his. I have dealt Death. With these hands." Part 2, Chapter 2, p. 127

"Does he believe in God? In the Lord Jesus Christ? Does he believe in the devil? That night, the thought comes to him, light as the gossamer of milkweed seed, *If that white girl wasn't living, wouldn't anybody know.*" Part 2, Chapter 2, p. 144



"Iris notes without comment how, the many hours they're moving into the new apartment—and at one point, helping with the heavier pieces of furniture, Virgil Starling works with a friend, darker-skinned than he—the downstairs tenants of the house and the neighbors on both sides observe them covertly, coldly. Not a hand lifted in greeting, not a smile. No offer of help, of course. *White woman and her daughter and a light-skinned nigger... what the hell?*" Part 2, Chapter 4, p. 151

"Death makes of us abstractions. Remorse cannot be extracted from us. These somber and illuminating truths Iris Courtney will recall through her life." Part 2, Chapter 4, p. 156

"He's thinking, he hates white people. White men, especially. Just hates them, as if the color of *their* skin is their fault 'cause it's their choice while the color of *his* skin isn't." Part 2, Chapter 5, p. 159

"Then Iris Courtney hurries across the street to him; he sees yes it *is* her and no mistake... exactly as he remembers her except today, in the quiet of the afternoon, only gulls squawking and the sounds of traffic in the distance, Iris Courtney isn't distraught and she isn't fearful and her eyes seem to blaze up in certainty. She comes right up to Jinx Fairchild, seizes his hand, raises it to her lips... kisses it. Whispers, 'You were never to blame. I'm the one.'" Part 2, Chapter 5, p. 161

"She staggers into Iris's room, wakes Iris from a deep sleep, sits on the edge of the bed, weeps in Iris's arms, frightening the girl with her own fear and rage and rambling drunken-sounding despair. Saying, 'So awful... seeing a man crawl... seeing a man crawl and he can't not know you've seen... and the two of you aren't ever going to *not know*... what it is you've seen.'" Part 2, Chapter 6, p. 165

"'Iceman,' they start to call him, his senior year. 'Cause he's so cool and controlled and deadpan no matter what he's thinking or feeling or the voices inside his head. *Hey, Jinx! Iceman! Baby, you are beau-ti-ful!* The college scouts from Syracuse, Cornell, Seton Hall, Villanova, Penn State, Ohio State: Iceman's name and photograph in the local papers from the start of basketball season to the close. Ain't nobody gonna touch that boy. Yah, he the man." Part 2, Chapter 7, p. 167

"That white girl, Iris Courtney. Now she's at the high school, Jinx Fairchild sees her frequently. And she sees him. That look in her eyes, so raw in appeal, so without guile or girlish subterfuge... or pride. Jinx Fairchild is fearful of it even as he's excited, sexually stirred. She has told him, No one is so close to me as you, no one is so close to us as we are to each other. Jinx supposes, yes, it's true. But he doesn't want to think why it's true or what he can do about it." Part 2, Chapter 7, p. 182

"But he's happy here, can lose himself for hours. Hours, days, weeks. Sometimes the air has the taste of autumn already: scalpel-sharp winds slicing down from Canada. Other days, it's still summer, a region of torpor and deadly peace, the stench of rotting fish, broken oyster shells, tangled seaweed lifting to his nostrils. *What, then, do I love when I love? Who is this Being who is so far above my soul?* Whether he pauses to



take pictures or not, Leslie Courtney requires his camera. All the time. Without the hefty Kodak slung around his neck on a strap, he'd be blind." Part 2, Chapter 9, p. 211

"As if testing out the words: *alcoholic, alcoholic*. Daring to commit them to the terrible authority of ink on paper, its impersonality. *I despise her: can't wait to escape her!* Gouging the paper with her pen's sharp point as she hears the anguished sounds of her mother emptying out her guts in the bathroom beside Iris's room... spasms of helpless vomiting, sobs and vomiting, that go on and on and on. *I love her too OH JESUS WHAT CAN I DO.*" Part 2, Chapter 10, p. 212

"I wanted not to be lonely. That's all I ever wanted. When you were born I thought I'd never be lonely or unhappy again... my heart swelled almost to bursting. It was like God made me a promise: I would never be lonely or unhappy again in my life with my baby girl my sweet little baby Iris." Part 2, Chapter 12, p. 219

"'But there's the library,' she says, disappointed. 'I have to be there by four-thirty, I can't be late again.' Persia links her arm snug through Iris's. She's thinking of Clancy's across the street from the Palace where she'll have a drink to steady her nerves, placate her queasy stomach. 'Oh, hell, honey,' she says, mischievous as a truant schoolgirl. 'Call in sick.'" Part 2, Chapter 15, p. 233

"Persia once said, You know? You're your father's daughter. Iris asked what did she mean. Persia said, Cold as ice." Part 2, Chapter 16, p. 235

"Iris says, 'You know what I'm talking about. We know each other. That basketball game... you did it deliberately... ruined everything for yourself. And *why?*' 'You crazy? Shut up.' 'Nobody knows, but I know. You never fooled me. And it was a mistake, we didn't do anything wrong. We don't deserve to be punished.'" Part 2, Chapter 16, p. 240

"'Don't lie, damn you, there isn't time, don't try to lie to *me*, just promise... promise you won't make the mistake I made.' Iris says, 'What mistake, Momma?' and Persia says, her voice beginning to wander, to weaken, 'Just like me. Iris. But *don't* be like me,' and Iris says desperately, 'Momma, what do you mean? What mistake?' and Persia says vaguely, 'Knew what goodness was. But I was always...bored with it. That kind of...man. That kind of life. Don't make that mistake, honey...don't turn away from goodness if you can find it. I knew what your father was...didn't care, I loved him so...I don't care now, I guess...it's too late now...and other things...'" Part 2, Chapter 18, p. 260

"Iris Courtney has neither seen nor spoken with Jinx Fairchild for a very long time. She has no right to him, no right even to think of him really, he's the husband of a woman she doesn't know, he's the father of children, she has no right to telephone him and interfere with the distance between them and his indifference to her, she swears she doesn't even think of him much in her new life: except tonight she took up a knife in revenge for him... Jinx Fairchild's pride, honor, manhood debased in another." Part 3, Chapter 4, p. 279

"It isn't by design that Iris Courtney seems to have fallen into the practice of cultivating people, or allowing herself to be cultivated by people, for temporary and expedient



purposes...then to move on, or break away, or, simply, forget. She means nothing deliberate by her behavior with friends, acquaintances, would-be lovers...she's never cruel...and always reacts with surprise when others respond with anger. *What did I promise you? What did you imagine I meant?*" Part 3, Chapter 5, p. 287

"Iris is trying to explain something but the words won't come. Mrs. Savage sits beside her on the bed stroking her hand, squeezing the weak icy unresisting fingers, saying gently, Never do we know why, Iris, never never do we know why, why such things happen and we must bear such grief, such heartbreak for which we're unprepared, why God expects so much of us, what His plan for us is. Iris begins to cry. Iris begins to cry and stops. Forces herself to stop. Otherwise she'll begin to laugh. Talk of God, Duke Courtney used to say is fancy jargon for 'What's the odds?'" Part 3, Chapter 5, p. 297

"And now there is a family in Syracuse, it seems, that has befriended her...she spoke evasively of them, and with girlish pride, the last time she called. She won't be coming home over the lengthy Christmas recess because she has so much schoolwork to do. And because this family—the Savages—has been kind enough to invite her for Christmas Eve and for other holiday events. Leslie said, 'I'll miss you, Iris, but I certainly understand.' Iris didn't say a word to that. Leslie said, 'As long as you're happy, Iris: that's the main thing.' Iris didn't say a word to that either." Part 3, Chapter 6, p. 303

"For days it lasts. Days and days. A smothering drowning cascading sensation inside his body and out like applause bouncing off the walls of a gym that just goes on and on...on and on...no end to it. Jinx pushes Sissy away when she tries to comfort him 'cause he doesn't trust that woman any longer (too many times she's tricked him, wheedled him into forgiving her, then tricked him again) and he can't face Minnie and Woodrow for a long time 'cause he can't imagine himself looking them in the eye, the terrible knowledge passing between them of how Sugar Baby died...not just the stabbing and the scalding water, so his body was nearly unrecognizable, but his killers jeering at him, pissing on him, up to the very moment of his death." Part 3, Chapter 7, p. 306

"Thinking afterward, borne away by taxi back into the city of Syracuse and the busyness of more ordinary lives, How easy, if you're a Savage, to believe in God! Seeing that, obviously, God believes in *you*." Part 3, Chapter 8, p. 310

"All three of the Savages looking on, she says, 'Well. Your mother hasn't told me a word about you,' and naturally they laugh in delight; Dr. Savage's laughter is always explosive and hearty, wonderfully infectious, and Iris's vision mists over in the warmth and wonder and hope of the moment even as she's calmly calculating: Families like to laugh together: remember that." Part 3, Chapter 11, p. 320

"How happy HOW HAPPY I AM. You didn't think, did you, that I COULD BE SO HAPPY." Part 3, Chapter 14, p. 347

"Folks in Lowertown who know him or know of him continue to say to this day, Oh, Jinx, oh, Iceman, weren't that a shame, that was the saddest thing, and Jinx makes an effort to be polite or maybe laughs, saying, naw, he never thinks about it none any more:



basketball's for kids and you got to grow up sometime. But you was going to college too, wasn't you, Jinx? Like I say, you got to grow up sometime." Part 3, Chapter 15, pp. 352-353

"His murderer hands: he's shamefaced in the eyes of God could he be sure there is a God, but in the eyes of man, the white man, men like Bull Hudkins and Mort Garlock and the others, and the Hammond city police, and the criminal justice system of the United States, naw, can't say Jinx Fairchild feels any shame or even much regret. Wishes he hadn't done it, Jesus yes, but doesn't feel regret for the fact that his victim is dead, long dead, and nearly forgotten. Like the white girl Iris Courtney said, Garlock was so crazy and so mean, someone would surely have killed him someday. Bad luck it had to be Jinx Fairchild. Part 3, Chapter 15, p. 359

"Not to police, not to the doctor in charge of the Syracuse Memorial Hospital emergency room or any of the nurses there, not to Alan Savage, not to any of the Savages will Iris Courtney make any attempt to explain why...what logic, what purpose, walking alone at night in a neighborhood so far from her own, a part of her mind not numbed with fatigue but brightly alert, even hopeful, imagining she's in Hammond somehow...in Hammond, in Lowertown...the slow-smiling eyes, the bared teeth glistening, *Mmmmmmmmmmm!* *hey girl!* But you must never look, it's dangerous. She'll say, I didn't see their faces. She'll say, Yes they were black but I didn't see their faces." Part 3, Chapter 16, p. 381

"Mrs. Savage arranges too the bridal veil, the subtly yellowed Brussels lace, how lovely, how angelic, the women murmur, and Iris is smiling, seeing only her bride's costume in the mirror, silken luminous white, dazzling white; her heart lifts with a kind of anxious pleasure. It's of both older women she asks her question: 'Do you think I'll look the part?'" Epilogue, p. 405



Key Questions

Like many of Oates's novels, *Because It Is Bitter*, and *Because It Is My Heart* can be read as a coming-of-age story in a society where too many adolescents grow up surrounded by violence. The novel will prompt discussion of the violence and racism that continue to mark the United States in the second half of the twentieth century. Some will object to Oates's language and her graphic depictions of violence, but rather than dismiss her because of this, readers would do well to ask why Oates offends them, and perhaps even wants to offend them.

1. Oates takes the title of her novel from the beast's words in a Stephen Crane poem. What do you think the beast means when he says that he eats his heart "Because it is bitter/And because it is my heart"? Why do you think Oates chose this title?

2. How do class and race shape the Garlock family? the Fairchild family?

the Courtney family? the Savage family? In what ways do the individuals in these families hope to reach the American dream? Do any of them reach it?

3. In what ways are Iris and Jinx mirror characters? Why the names?

4. In what ways does Iris transform herself into an art object? Do you find this response to her life experiences destructive? protective? sustaining?

5. Does Iris marry successfully? Why does Alan marry her? Why is Jenny estranged from the family?

6. Why does Jinx marry Sissy Weaver? How are his motives for marrying similar to Iris's?

7. How do the Courtney's marriage, the Fairchild's, and the Savage's compare and contrast?

8. Why does Oates include Leslie Courtney? How does his photography become a metaphor for how we construct and value our lives?

9. How does Oates use a photographic technique as she constructs her various scenes?

10. How does Oates pace the basketball scenes? Does she get them right?

11. What is the function of some of the minor characters in the novel; for example, St.Germain, Madelyn Daiches, Mercedes, Houdini the cat?



12. Do Oates's references to popular culture, historical events, and political movements add to the novel? Consider, for example, song titles like "The Great Pretender" and "Great Balls of Fire" as well as major events like the Kennedy assassination and the Vietnam War.



Topics for Discussion

Do you think the trouble that Iris and Jinx experienced as a white girl and a black boy would be different today than it was in the 1950s?

Why do you think Jinx came to the defense of Iris, a white girl whom he really didn't even know?

Explain how the relationship between Iris and Jinx might evolve today as opposed to the 1950s.

What techniques do the characters use to protect their vulnerabilities? Explain.

Discuss the role of conscience as it pertains to both Iris and Jinx. Why is Iris essentially free of any remorse about Little Red Garlock and Jinx is constantly haunted by it?

How are Iris and Jinx similar in their personalities, outlooks, and behaviors? How are they different?

Discuss the final choices made by Iris and Jinx: Iris marrying Alan Savage and Jinx signing up to go to war in Vietnam.

What is Uncle Leslie's role in the story and what significance does his photography business hold?

Describe any sympathies you may have for Iris and Jinx and explain why you can or cannot understand their actions and motives.

Discuss how Iris and Jinx would have been different people had they lived in the 21st century as opposed to the 1950s and '60s.

Related Titles

Since 1985 Oates has returned to the unmitigated look at violence that drew negative criticism in her early work. In *Marya, You Must Remember This*, and *Because It Is Bitter, and Because It Is My Heart* she looks at violence in the lower and middle classes, while in *American Appetites* (1989) she shows that the American appetite for material and intellectual success can turn as nightmarish as the appetites of any of the social classes. With its theme of racism, *Because It Is Bitter, and Because It Is My Heart* most recalls them (1969), although Oates in her later fiction is spending less time creating a consciousness of violence and more time using art to shape a way to respond to violence.



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