

Boy, Snow, Bird Study Guide

Boy, Snow, Bird by Helen Oyeyemi

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Plot Summary

The action of “Boy, Snow, Bird” begins in New York City in the mid-1950’s. Narrator Boy Novak describes both the desperation-triggering circumstances in which she’s raised at the hands of a violently abusive father, and her flight from both the city and her family of origin to Flax Hill, a small conservative town removed from her other life by several miles, several states, and several different moral values and choices.

As she struggles to find and keep a job, the blond and beautiful Boy makes friends (including investigative journalist Mia) and finds a boyfriend – the insistent Arturo Whitman, who eventually convinces Boy to marry him, in spite of the apparent ill-wishes of his mother, Olivia, and the complications of his beautiful, spoiled daughter, Snow.

Shortly after the wedding, Boy gives birth to a baby whom she names Bird, a girl who, as it turns out, has “colored” features and pigmentation (the word “colored” is used throughout the narrative to define those who would, in more contemporary language, be described as African-American, or of African-American heritage). As the result of Bird’s birth, Boy learns that her husband and his family (including his first wife, Snow’s mother) are pale-skinned “colored” people descended from slaves who, way back in the family tree, made marriage choices and child-bearing choices that enabled them to preserve, and even deepen, their history of being able to pass as white and thereby avoid the systemic, cultural racism of mid-20th Century America. Eventually, after she learns more about the Whitman family and why its members are simultaneously rejecting of the dark-skinned Bird and adoring of the pale-skinned Snow, Boy decides to send Snow to live with a dark-skinned aunt and keep Bird with her at home.

In the novel’s second part, the narrative focus and voice shift to Bird, thirteen years old and fully aware that much of her family (including the particularly strict Olivia) barely tolerates her. Boy, however, is forcefully yet somehow distantly protective of her, insisting as much as she can that Bird be treated if not as well as Snow, at least humanely. Bird, meanwhile, discovers that Snow has been writing letters to Boy and to her, letters which Bird had no idea even existed. Bird steals the letters, reads, them, and eventually writes back. A correspondence springs up between Bird and Snow in which they discuss their respective situations, tell each other fairy tales, and make plans to become friends. Part 2 ends with the announcement of the likelihood that Snow will be visiting the rest of her family for Thanksgiving.

In Part Three, the narrative’s perspective shifts back to Boy, who describes the tension-filled atmosphere at Thanksgiving dinner, and how afterwards, her friend Mia revealed a secret she’s been keeping about Boy for some time. That secret involves Boy’s father who, Mia’s investigations have revealed, is in fact a woman – an intellectual lesbian who conceived Boy after being raped, and who soon realized that the only way to have the kind of life she wanted and to keep her daughter was to pose as a man. At first, this news makes Boy upset, but she soon decides that her father/mother needs her help, rounds up Bird and Snow, and leaves with them for New York City, where she hopes

that all three of them will be able to bring some apparently much needed happiness into the man/woman's life.



Part 1, Section 1 – Chapters 1-3

Summary

Set in the 1950's and 60's, this novel explores America's history of racial tension and/or conflict from the perspective of a "colored" family obsessed with passing as white ("colored" being the term used, at the time, by both African-Americans and whites). As the narrative explores tensions between those who have successfully "passed" and the young girl whose darkness of skin threatens to undo decades of careful (and mostly successful) lies, it also explores issues related to the relationships between mothers and daughters, and to the relationships between people and their self-images.

Chapter 1 – In first person narration, protagonist Boy Novak (a 15-yearold girl) describes her unhappy home life, which includes a violently abusive father (whom she nicknames the Rat-Catcher because of his job) and a long-absent mother. She narrates her sudden departure from home, during which she takes her one precious possession – a flag, given to her by a boy from school, Charlie Vacic. After making her way to the Port Authority transit terminal in New York City, and after imagining (several times) that she sees the Rat Catcher coming after her, Boy manages to get on a bus which she plans to ride to the very end of the line – a New England town named Flax Hill.

Chapter 2 – Upon her arrival in Flax Hill, Boy follows a pair of young women from the bus depot through a decrepit part of town, in hopes that the "landlady" they referred to in overheard conversation will also give her a room. The landlady does in fact give Boy a small room, and Boy begins her new life – making friends with the other girls in the boarding house (including the flighty Veronica Webster), getting to know the town, and looking for a job. Veronica (whom Boy refers to as Webster) has several dates a week, usually with men who want to double date with friends, and Boy goes along on many of these dates. One of Webster's regulars has a regular friend, Arturo, and he and Boy begin a relationship of their own.

As the relationship develops, Boy discovers that Arturo has a daughter named Snow, whose mother had died in childbirth. On one of their dates, Arturo (previously a university professor) tells Boy about the private, conservative nature of the town, and suggests to her that there's no way she'll ever fit in. Meanwhile, Boy gets into the habit of taking long walks through the town and the nearby woods, eventually coming across a street (Ivorydown) of houses on the way back of the woods that mostly look abandoned, but some of which have families in them. A girl comes out from one of the larger houses, and startles Boy by saying hello. Boy says "Hi Snow" and runs off, frightened.

Chapter 3 – Boy takes a one-night job as a hostess for a party being thrown by wealthy industrialists, at which she and the other hostesses are all blondes. While on the job, she makes friends with a sharp-eyed, note-taking girl named Mia, who works with Boy at the party's coat check. Boy discovers that Arturo is at the party, and also discovers



that Mia is one of his students, one with whom he still keeps in touch. As Mia and Arturo discuss philosophy, Boy eavesdrops on their conversation and becomes more and more resentful until, when they're back at the coat-check, Mia tells Boy that her (Mia's) relationship with Arturo is friends-only, that he's got a dark side, and that she (Mia) knows he likes Boy. Later, as the party is winding down, Arturo tells Boy how he left his university teaching job and found work he loved when he became a jeweler following a chance encounter with another Flax Hill jeweler on a train. Shortly afterwards, he adds, his wife died. Later, Mia gives both Boy and Arturo a ride home, revealing that her blonde hair is a wig and that she's a journalist writing a feature story about the secret life of blondes. Back in her boarding house, Boy writes a brief note to Charlie Vacic, saying how well things are going but asking him to keep her address a secret. Later, she looks closely at herself in her mirror, experiencing glimpses of painfully emerging sexual feelings.

Analysis

This section introduces several of the book's key elements. In terms of characters, there are introductions to the protagonist (Boy), key supporting characters (Mia and Arturo) whose relationships with Boy play significant roles in the unfolding of the action, and a character (The Rat Catcher) whose secrets eventually play a key role in the unfolding of the book's climax, several chapters down the narrative road. In terms of story and/or plot, Chapter 1 establishes both the circumstances out of which key events of the story emerge (i.e. Boy's unhappy life in New York) and the choices made by protagonist Boy that move her and the story out of those circumstances and into a new setting and a new focus.

Meanwhile, and as the result of this section's establishment of plot and character, several of the book's themes are also set in motion – it's important to note, however, that because several important plot and/or situational elements aren't introduced and/or defined until later in the narrative (i.e. at the end of Part 1), some of the thematic elements introduced here become apparent only in retrospect. In other words, the reader may notice authorial emphasis on certain elements but in all likelihood, won't know what that emphasis implies until later in the story. The primary example in this section has to do with the narrative's frequent references to paleness, blonde-ness, and whiteness, the metaphoric value of which becomes clear later in the book.

Thematic elements that ARE clearly explored here include the book's thematic interest in deception, in reflections (that is, in how people see themselves, both in physical mirrors and in the more emotional, psychological mirrors provided and/or defined by in relationships), and in mother / daughter relations. This last is explored glancingly in its brief references to Boy's long dead mother, which foreshadows important revelations at the book's climax, and in the references to Snow and her mother Julia, which foreshadows somewhat less significant eventual developments.

Other elements of this section that foreshadow later events include the references to Charlie Vacic (who reappears at key points in the story, such as in the following section)



and his flag; Arturo's reference to jewelry making (which foreshadows his giving of a handmade gift to Boy, also in the following section); and the reference to Mia's investigative journalism (which foreshadows investigations that play a key role in defining and motivating the novel's climax).

Finally, this section introduces a key stylistic element – its incorporation of so-called “magic realism”, a narrative convention or technique in which a situation of relative realism (in this case, Boy's moving to a small town to escape a troubled past) contains elements of other-worldliness, or mysticism. In this section, elements and events which could be described as manifesting “magic realism” include Boy's encounter in Ivorydown with a girl that she calls “Snow”, who is not in fact Snow but whose appearance can be seen as triggering a key narrative revelation about Boy.

Discussion Question 1

What situation in this section explores the narrative's overall thematic interest in deception?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Boy ask Charlie to keep her address a secret?

Discussion Question 3

What is the narrative suggesting by having Boy refer to the girl in Ivorydown as Snow?

Vocabulary

automaton, selective, complexion, perversity, invariable, departure, appraisal, anonymous, discreet, peroxide, spontaneous, conscientious, flinch, cower, priority, adamant, primal, incandescent talisman, scenario, prim, prospective, slapdash, hangdog, illegible, irresistible, vivacious, stingy, garish, puce, tawny, amaryllis, cryptic, contemplate, insipid, eligible, shantung, affable, methodically, genetic, atelier, tapestry, sheen, commotion, deft, bramble, fanciful, retrieve, malignant, indecisive, canapé, tsar, sultan, rajah, jitterbug, finery, drowsy, malicious, silhouette, expertise, despicable, emphatic, vanity, fractal, painstaking, wanton



Part 1, Section 2 – Chapters 4-6

Summary

Chapter 4 – Boy attempts to stay with a couple of different jobs (as a telephone operator and an usher at a movie theatre) but can't keep either. Meanwhile, she ends whatever relationships she had with both Arturo (in person) and Charlie (by correspondence), revealing in narration (in response to one of Charlie's comments) that she stole money from her father. At the same time, her friendship with Mia deepens, with Mia first commenting that she (Boy) shouldn't let go of a man who really loves her (like Charlie), and then celebrating the six-month anniversary of Boy's leaving the Rat Catcher. As part of the celebration, Mia tells Boy to make a wish, and she does, wishing for a family but, at the same time, reflecting on how bad a wife she'd be. Also at the celebration, Mia shares the beginnings of the newspaper article she's trying to write. Boy describes it as "wacky", and then starts writing another story – one that Mia recognizes. Together they complete the story of a powerful wizard who attempted to change the appearance and character of a beautiful woman, but couldn't, and discovered the true nature of her evil – specifically, that she had a snake inside her. Later, Boy makes plans to try out another new job – at a bookstore – but then reflects on how her ideal job would be one in which she had minimal, but positive, interaction with strangers.

Chapter 5 – After Webster leaves on a ski trip with her boyfriend (which she hopes is going to lead to a marriage proposal), Boy goes for a walk, and has a strange encounter with a young woman with bloody hands who, Boy realizes, is a future version of herself. The young woman quickly disappears, and Boy encounters Arturo, who helps her recover from her upsetting experience. Boy, entranced by his sensuality, kisses him. All this makes Boy late for her job at the bookstore, and after first being fired by the volatile owner, Mrs. Fletcher, she then resumes work. At one point, three "colored" (sic) students come into the store and spend the afternoon reading without paying for any books. Boy comes close to asking them to leave, but Mrs. Fletcher tells her to leave them alone. As she goes home, Boy reflects on how good it feels to have Charlie's flag draped around her shoulders, and on how the feeling of having Arturo's arms around her is less pleasant, but how she feels "more certain of it because it lasted longer."

Chapter 6 – Narration reveals that Webster came back from her ski trip with a large engagement ring, that Mia's article on blondes got her a lot of attention and another assignment, and that Boy and Arturo began spending more time together. That time, Boy reveals, was occasionally filled with Boy waiting while Arturo worked, the waiting filled with looking through the lists of possible baby names, recipes, and plans for life left behind by Arturo's wife Julia. Boy also describes her and Arturo's first awkward but playfully passionate attempt at lovemaking and her reactions to spending time with Snow, whom Boy says is sometimes a typically awkward seven-year-old and at other times mature and loving. This leads Boy to a recollection of the first time she met Snow – at the home of Arturo's mother Olivia, in the company of Arturo's sister Vivian and Julia's mother Agnes. Boy describes how the conversation, and her part in it, is careful



and polite; how that conversation reminded Boy of Sidonie, one of the “colored” students who comes into the bookstore, and her entwined beauty and strength. As the visit to Olivia’s home concludes, Boy is introduced to the chatty Snow, and later congratulated by Agnes on how she (Boy) handled the potentially difficult situation. In narration, Boy reflects on various forms of beauty – primarily Sidonie’s, Olivia’s, and Snow’s – and how beauty is both expected to fade and what people want to see.

Analysis

The main point to note about this section is that once again, there are several events, comments, and situations that are portrayed in narration as being important without the reasons for that emphasis being defined until later in the narrative – in hindsight, or retrospect. These elements include the reference to the “colored” students in the bookstore, the reference to Julia’s list of baby names (which foreshadows Boy making her own list of baby names when she too becomes pregnant), and, perhaps most notably, Boy’s comments about beauty, seeing / drawing connections between the beauty of three ostensibly very different characters – Olivia, Snow, and Sidonie who, as the narrative eventually reveals, share a connection that is barely hinted at here, if at all.

(A word about the use of the word “colored”, here and throughout the narrative / analysis: the term is used to describe people who would, in more contemporary language, be described as “black” or “African-American”. The word “colored” was the term used to describe individuals of that heritage at the time in which the novel is set – specifically, the 1950’s and 60’s. Its use in the book is therefore appropriate, full of the racist implications carried at the time by both the word and the concept. The word is used in this analysis to create a sense of continuity with the book, and of the racism inherent in the use of this language, often about themselves and each other, by the characters.)

Other important elements in this section include Boy’s strange encounter with what she perceives as her future self, and the juxtaposition of Boy’s beliefs about her potential as a wife with the story she concocts with Mia about the beautiful woman with the snake inside her. This juxtaposition foreshadows two key events: Arturo’s later gift to Boy of a snake-themed piece of jewelry, and Boy’s still-later contemplation of herself as “evil”. Both these moments, in turn, can be seen as evocative of two of the book’s themes: its interest in fairy tales (as it develops here an image of Boy as potentially the “wicked stepmother” of fairy tale tradition), and its exploration of various sorts of mother/daughter relationships.

Important foreshadowings here include Mia’s reference to Charlie’s love of Boy (which resurfaces in future sections of the narrative)

Discussion Question 1

Why does Boy think she would make a bad wife?



Discussion Question 2

What does Boy's encounter with her apparent "future self" suggest about Boy's feelings about herself? How does this encounter reflect other moments or incidents in this section?

Discussion Question 3

What events in this section manifest the novel's stylistic interest in "magic realism"?

Vocabulary

guff, tyrannical, placid, sapling, rakish, equivalent, capability, banal, symmetry, passive, resistance, cassava, align, precise, allocation, geisha, notable, gangly, sarsaparilla, catechism, variant, notorious, comparison, multitude, provocation, configuration, diabolical, ominous, muster, incoherent, chintzy, incredulous, imperious, satchel, impromptu, crone, frailty, minx



Part 1, Section 3 – Chapters 7-10

Summary

Chapter 7 – On the day of her twenty second birthday party, Boy gives Mia, who is going to New York, a check to give her (Boy's) father, repaying the money she took. Later, after reflecting on the implications of the chess set in the bookstore's window, Boy walks home with Sidonie and Phoebe (the second of the three regular "colored" students). When Boy thinks she sees the third student, Kazim, in a group of boys instructing a parakeet to say "fuck whitey", Sidonie and Phoebe try to convince her that she's imagining things. After dropping Phoebe off at the intersection of "Tubman and Jefferson", Sidonie invites Boy in to meet her mother Merveille, a wheelchair-bound hairdresser. Boy realizes that Sidonie must have told Merveille that she (Boy) is a teacher, and answers Merveille's questions accordingly. That night, as Boy puts the finishing touches on her birthday dinner, she and Snow chat about the kind of mother that Snow wants – in particular, one that will chase away the "trolls". At the dinner, which is attended by Boy's friends (including Mia and Webster) and Arturo's family (including Olivia and Snow), Boy keeps smiling at her reflection in the brass water pitcher in the middle of the table, and notices that Snow is doing the same thing.

Chapter 8 – When Boy reveals that she met Sidonie's mother, and that she thought Merveille believed she (Boy) was a teacher, Mrs. Fletcher worries that the time has come for Sidonie, Phoebe, and Kazim to go to school. When the three students come in later that day, Mrs. Fletcher tells Sidonie and Phoebe they can't come in anymore, and both Sidonie and Phoebe blame Boy who, they think, told Mrs. Fletcher about Kazim and the parakeet. Meanwhile, Kazim shows Boy one of the comic strips he's drawn – about a king and queen killed and replaced by younger versions of themselves, who then age and are themselves killed by younger versions of THEM-selves. She realizes, in narration, that Kazim is basically saying that "What's next is what happened before."

Chapter 9 – For a birthday present, Arturo takes Boy (and Snow) to Florida, where Snow takes Julia's picture everywhere. One night, walking home from the beach, Boy asks Arturo to tell her about Julia, and he explains how much he loved her, how much he gave her, how she was a musician and lived on in the recordings she made before she died, and how much he grieved after her death. The next morning, Boy wakes up to find him next to her bed, begging her to tell him she loves him. Knowing that Snow is listening, Boy is unable to. This leads Arturo to get out a bracelet he made for Boy instead of an engagement ring – a bracelet shaped like a snake. Boy, uneasy about the bracelet, nevertheless accepts it and agrees to marry him. Snow reacts happily. Back at home Mia comments that the bracelet screams "wicked stepmother", but assures Boy that that's not what the family is going to really be like.

Chapter 10 – As Webster gets ready to marry Ted, Boy receives a surprise visit from Charlie Vacic, who has come to see her in response to a letter she wrote telling him of her impending marriage to Arturo. Their intense connection leads them to confess that



they love each other, and Charlie to urge Boy to run away with him – he wants so desperately to take care of her and give her everything she wants. Boy confesses that she doesn't want to be taken care of, narration revealing that she's already starting to think of Snow as "hers". Further conversation is interrupted by Mia, who later tells Boy that she (Boy) should have let Charlie down easy. Shortly after Webster and Ted's wedding, Boy marries Arturo, more convinced than ever that she can be sure of him.

Analysis

The key element of this section is how it opens the door to consideration of the book's primary theme – specifically, its examination of racism. There are several situations in this section that vividly and powerfully communicate this theme – among the most powerful is Boy's encounter with the boys teaching the parakeet, which aside from being the only notable use of curse words in the book, is also the most vivid example of pushback by "colored" people against the pervasively destructive white influence around them. Most of the characters, with relative passivity, accept their circumstances and adapt: the incident with the parakeet can be seen as revealing a hidden anger about their situation that other "colored" characters keep hidden – in other words, a thematically significant deception, or reverse reflection.

Another example of this section's racist over/under tones, one which has less overt impact but which is still effective, is the passing reference to the street corner where Phoebe is dropped off - given that Harriet "Tubman" was a known anti-slavery activist, and Thomas "Jefferson" was an anti-slavery president who kept slaves and had a long-time affair with one, the intersection as described is a deeply ironic, darkly humorous one. Ultimately, this the sudden rush of racism-defined encounters, conversations, and imagery foreshadows developments in the next section, and in the rest of the book, which establish the book's central relationships and situation as, in fact, being defined by pervasive, corruptive, self-loathing racist attitudes.

Meanwhile, another of the book's key thematic elements – its interest in various mother / daughter relationships - is developed in several ways throughout this section.

A third thematic element similarly explored here is the experience of / reaction to reflections, manifesting here in Boy's and Snow's simultaneous contemplations of themselves in the polished water pitcher. Finally, the book's thematic interest in fairy tales shows up in the brief glimpse of Kazim's fantasy world (which is one of several fantastical stories in the book in which real-life situations and/or experiences are transformed into magical revelations of difficult truths), and, perhaps more overtly, in the incident of the bracelet, which in turn triggers Mia's comments about wicked stepmothers, which are something of a fairy tale stock character, and brings the motif into a more realistic context (i.e. Boy's fears that she is a REAL evil stepmother).

Other significant elements in this section include the revelations about Julia and her music (which foreshadows developments in Snow's experiences of her deceased



mother later in the narrative), and the revelation that Charlie still loves Boy, an aspect of their relationship that likewise has narrative repercussions down the road.

Discussion Question 1

What does Boy's decision to return the money she took to The Rat Catcher say about her?

Discussion Question 2

What incidents / encounters in this section develop the novel's thematic exploration of various types of mother / daughter relationships? What does each of these incidents have to say about those relationships?

Discussion Question 3

What are the thematic / narrative implications of Boy's interpretation of Kazim's comic strip? What do her comments suggest about her perception of what's going on around her, on both the family level and the socio-cultural level? Consider, in your discussions, the racial context of those comments: Kazim's race, and the novel's strongly emerging racism-defined themes.

Vocabulary

restraint, correspondence, jeer, baleful, proverb, gullible, misfit, indeterminate, meticulous, intimidate, palate, sentimental, interpretation, enigmatic, abnormal, ghoulish, reminisce, abash, confiscate, contradict, preternatural, merciless, picturesque, pirouette, equivalent, monstrosity, falter, endearing, bespoke, beseech, intervene, banister, winsome, hypochondria, rationale



Part 1, Section 4 – Chapters 11-13

Summary

Chapter 11 – Shortly after the wedding, Boy receives a potted plant from someone she's never heard of – Arturo's sister Clara. This reminds her of a comment made by Vivian, about how Olivia only wanted one daughter, but the one she had didn't turn out so well. When Boy questions Snow, she has no knowledge of an Aunt Clara, and neither Mia nor Webster knows about her. Arturo says only that Clara is estranged from the rest of the family. Boy asks Mrs. Fletcher what she knows, and Mrs. Fletcher, who comments on the oddness of Arturo's family never telling Boy about Clara, reveals that she knows Clara (who is now married to a man named Baxter) from a book she borrowed – a story about "Frederick Douglass". Boy senses a secret running underneath all her conversations about Clara, and asks Mrs. Fletcher for Clara's phone number. When she tries calling, however, there is no answer.

Chapter 12 – A letter from Charlie asking for help to understand his Aunt Jozsa (an Eastern European, recently released from a prison camp and still defiantly Communist) makes Boy reflect on how Charlie is probably his aunt's favorite because they're both true believers –Charlie, for his part, believing in Boy's love. These reflections lead Boy to recall a time when the Rat Catcher attempted to scar her in the aftermath of hearing that Charlie thought she was beautiful. It was this event, Boy's narration reveals, that was the final factor in Boy's decision to run away. All this, in turn, leads to Boy telling how, over time, Arturo seemed to understand that there was another important man in Boy's life, and began making chains. On the night that Boy tells him to stop, she also reveals that she's pregnant. Conversations over names lead Boy to make up a list of potential names the same way Julia did, but it's a conversation with Snow (about how Boy is now her mother too, and about different kinds of birds) that makes up Boy's mind to call the baby Bird, no matter what gender it is.

Chapter 13 – When Bird is born, a nurse comments that "that little girl is a Negro". Shortly afterwards, Arturo explains how this is possible, revealing to Boy that both his parents were born in the (American) South, but because they were both light-skinned and Caucasian-featured enough to pass for white, they moved north, away from overt southern racism of the south. He also explains that his parents recognized the same situation in Julia's parents, with all four of the potential grandparents being worried when Julia became pregnant, and eventually deeply relieved when Snow turned out to be as Caucasian-featured as she is. For her part, Olivia tries to blame Boy for Bird's appearance, suggesting that Boy had an affair. But when Boy confronts her what Arturo said, Olivia admits the truth, and then suggests that Boy send Bird to live with Clara who, Olivia admits, is her dark-skinned daughter.

Still later, after Boy and Bird have come home, they both meet Sidonie and her mother, who are both supportive and affectionate, leaving Boy feeling even more upset and angry with Snow, who for her becomes increasingly representative of the self-loathing,



inverted racism of her grandparents. As she has dreams about being trapped in a hall of mirrors with Snow (mirrors that reflect Boy as Bird and as being alone), Boy struggles to restrain her temper with Snow, at one point coming close to hitting her, but choosing not to. Finally, Boy manages to get hold of Clara, who indicates that she is glad that things turned out as they did, and who offers to take care of Bird. Boy, however, decides to send Snow to her, who leaves for a week-long visit with some of Julia's records in her suitcase. One of the last sentences of this chapter suggests that "Snow is not the fairest of them all."

Analysis

This section contains Part 1's narrative and thematic climaxes, with the birth of Boy's baby catalyzing and/or triggering events in both plot and theme. In terms of the former, key events triggered include the unveiling of the Whitman family's secrets (including the identity of the hitherto mysterious Clara), the revealing of Boy's personal integrity (i.e. prioritizing her own daughter's well-being over that of her stepdaughter), and perhaps most notably, the meaning of several hitherto unexplained moments of emphasis. For example: in this section, the events and revelations of this section illuminate, without explicitly explaining, Julia's reasons for both making her list of potential baby names and choosing the name she did. The events of this chapter clearly and almost inexorably lead the reader to understand that Julia was looking for just the right name to indicate just what the baby meant to both sides of its family, with "Snow", in its evocation of whiteness and purity, clearly identifying that meaning to both the families and to the reader.

Another important - and somewhat disturbing - element in this section is the revelation that Arturo, at one point, began making chains in his workshop. While neither Arturo nor the narrative explicitly suggests that they are intended for Boy to wear, the implication of the image is as clear to the reader as it is to Boy: that Arturo wants to control her. However, and as the narrative has previously indicated in a variety of circumstances, Boy is not prepared to accept the control of anyone, particularly any man, in her life. One other point to note in relation to this particular event / circumstance: it is another one of those incidents which has a fuller, deeper meaning in retrospect (i.e. once all the book's secrets are revealed in the final chapter) than it has even at this point. For now, it's worth mentioning that the incident of the chains, and Boy's reaction to it, is evocative of the book's thematic examination of mother/daughter relationships, an evocation that becomes clear and more vivid as the final chapters of the book unfold.

In terms of thematic developments, and aside from the intensification of the way in which the book's primary theme (its exploration of racism) is explored, there are also developments and deeper explorations of the "mother/daughter relationships" theme; the "deceptions" theme (manifest primarily in the revelation of just what deceptions the Whitman family have been practicing); the "reflections" theme (in Boy's dream about Snow and the hall of mirrors); and the "fairy tales" theme. This last manifests in a couple of ways. The first is in Boy's sending her step-daughter (Snow) into exile in exactly the same way as other wicked step-mothers send THEIR stepdaughters into exile, either



literal – as in the case of Snow White – or simply the exile of a false name and servitude, as in the case of Cinderella. Then there is the quoted line from later in the chapter, which is just about the most overt, direct linkage between “Snow White” and “Snow Whitman” that the book makes.

Finally, another note on language: in the same way as “colored”, as discussed earlier, was/is an evocation of both the terminology and the attitudes towards dark-skinned Americans at the time in which the book is set, “Negro” is likewise a word of its period, and is used here in relation to its terms of use in the book.

Discussion Question 1

Who is Frederick Douglass? Why is the fact that Clara borrowed a book about him significant?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Charlie think Boy can help him understand his Aunt Josza?

Discussion Question 3

In what ways do the events and relationships portrayed in this chapter manifest and/or explore the book’s thematic emphasis on mother/daughter relationships?

Vocabulary

hothouse, inquisitive, estranged, impartial, sinister, incriminating, tenacious, exquisite, falter, skeletal, luxurious, cubicle, rendition, astray, eavesdrop, insinuate, unfathomable, criteria, intuition, literate, mawkish, excruciating, spontaneous, piteous



Part 2, Section 1 – Chapters 1-2

Summary

Chapter 1 – In rambling first person narration, Bird contemplates the secrets and circumstances of her life, revealing several things. Among them: Snow is away at college, and Arturo (referred to as Dad) visits her every couple of weeks, bringing back gifts for Bird that he says are from Snow but which Bird tends to feel ambivalent about, at best. Bird's narration also reveals that she is closer to her grandmother Agnes (Gee-ma) than she is to her grandmother Olivia (Grammy); that she (Bird) has a talent for imitating others, including Gee-ma; and that Grammy is very distant and unloving, resentful of the fact that Bird has brought colored-ness into her family. She also describes how Gee-Ma told her that she has an "enemy", and how she (Bird) is always on the lookout to identify who that might be. In terms of her Mom (Boy), Bird says they're close; that their time together is generally silent, content, and intimate; and that her Mom is really good at giving her what she wants as soon as she asks for it (but not, it seems, spoiling her). Bird also discusses her infatuation with her best friend (Louis Chen), the happy life Louis lives with his taxi-driver mother and jazz-pianist father, and how Louis' (Asian) father is regarded with a degree of suspicion by the "colored" jazz lovers at the club where he plays. There are passing references to a housemaid named Phoebe, a teacher named Miss Fairfax, and an artist named Kazim.

Meanwhile, Mrs. Fletcher is described as having found steady male companionship, while "Aunt" Mia is described as being outspoken, a snappy dresser, and unpopular with the women of Flax Hill. She is also described as being best friends with Mom who, in the middle of one cold night, helps Mia through a difficult time that Bird doesn't understand, but remains curious about. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, Bird reveals that "sometimes mirrors can't find [her]." The latter half of the chapter is written as though Bird is writing about herself in the third person in an attempt to analyze and understand why mirrors don't always reflect her. Here her narration reveals that she's thirteen years old, and that one time, her mom and dad were on their way to take her to see Snow, but that for some reason, her mom (Boy) insisted that they turn back.

Chapter 2 – In the first part of the chapter, narration about her slack school habits leads Bird into a discussion of a confrontation that developed as a result of graffiti, written in yellow chalk, that accused Louis Chen of being a "Viet Cong". As tension and rumors build, Louis lets it be known that he will fight whoever wrote the graffiti. Bird skips a detention and accompanies him to the fight, and is both happy and scared when, on the way, Louis tells her he thinks she's the prettiest girl in school. When they arrive at the site of the fight, whoever wrote the graffiti doesn't show up, but a group of kids from the school does, and they taunt both Bird and Louis until they're interrupted by the stern arrival of Grammy Olivia, who breaks up the gathering.

Later that night, Bird watches her mom (Boy) get ready for a dinner date with her dad (Arturo), and contemplates the different ways people in her life react to their reflections



in mirrors. After her mom and dad have gone, Bird looks in her mom's jewelry box for letters from Snow that she (Bird) knows are there. She discovers that Snow's letters to her mom become more distant and less affectionate, at the same time discovering that Snow has also written one to her, wanting to know more about her. Bird struggles to write a response, eventually coming up with one that reveals that Snow is now twenty-one, explains more about who she (Bird) is, asks for a reply to be sent care of Louis Chen, and asks Snow whether she knows / understands how beautiful she is.

Analysis

Chapter 1 consists primarily of exposition – or rather, information that the reader needs to know in order to more fully understand the events that are to come. In this case, that information consists primarily of descriptions of how people and relationships have changed in the thirteen years since the end of Part 1. Much of this information is plot and / or situation related – specifically, the descriptions of how the Whitmans, Bird, and Snow all interact, all of which defines moments at the end of this section (i.e. the beginning of the correspondence between Snow and Bird) and lay the groundwork for events and incidents in both the second section of Part 2 and Part 3.

At the same time as all this circumstantial information is revealed (and not just in Chapter 1), Bird's narration also continues many of the book's thematic explorations. Tense race relations issues, the book's primary theme, form the subtext, the unspoken reasons, why relationships and events are what they are, and turn out the way they do. There are also explorations of mother / daughter relationships (primarily through portrayals of the Boy / Bird and Boy / Snow relationships), deception (i.e. Bird's skill at imitating people, which plays a significant role in two key events down the road), and reflections. This last is explored in Bird's commentary on how she doesn't always see herself in the mirror, which is important in two other ways: it forms the basis of the developing Bird / Snow relationship in the following section, and is another example of the book's stylistic use of magic realism.

Other noteworthy elements / moments in this section include the glimpses of Miss (Sidonie) Fairfax, Phoebe, and Kazim (who, the narrative implies, are the same three characters who had those names in Part 1), and the reference to Boy's late-night visit to Mia, the reasons for which are revealed in the book's final chapters. Finally, there is the glimpse of Louis Chen and his family, and their encounters with racism. Of these, the most notable involves the graffiti written in yellow chalk that suggests Louis is a member of the "Viet Cong". The latter is the name given to violent Communist North Vietnamese during the Vietnam War of the 1960's. The graffiti implies that Louis is as corrupt, as violent, and as morally worthy of hate as those against whom America was fighting during that war.



Discussion Question 1

What do you think is the reason that Bird's mother (Boy) insists that Arturo turn the car around and not continue with the planned visit to see Snow?

Discussion Question 2

Why is the color of the chalk, in which the graffiti about Louis is written, significant?

Discussion Question 3

What do you think Agnes means when she tells Bird she has an enemy? Who, or what, might that enemy be?

Vocabulary

aniseed, tortoiseshell, pompadour, inequality, hone, deduction, pistachio, tendril, imminent, stucco, circumstance, elocution, residential, lapis lazuli, harem, unsavory, stealthy, wince, detention, idiocy, persuasive, persecute, anatomical, cursive



Part 2, Section 2 – Chapters 3-4

Summary

Chapter 3 – Bird’s father brings her a gift from Snow – a birdcage with a broken door. In return, Bird sends Snow a pen that writes in invisible ink to give. Bird’s narration, meanwhile, reveals that Mom (Boy) knows that Bird kept the letter addressed to her by Snow, and narrates how her Mom at first tried to talk to her about it, but then commented that Snow was a “replica of an all-around sweetie pie.” This adds to Bird’s store of resentment towards her mother.

Meanwhile, Bird attends a conference for young journalists in the hopes of getting some material for Mia, who’s writing a story about them. At the conference, she befriends a young woman named Yasmin: together they form the Brown People’s Alliance, and Yasmin tells her she should break up with Louis: boyfriends, Yasmin says, take up too much thinking time.

Later, Louis gives Bird a letter from Snow, and the rest of the chapter is taken up by the correspondence between them, Snow referring to how the invisible ink pen got her into trouble, and that she too disappears from mirrors. Unsettled by Snow’s comments, Bird’s letters become more distant, and she urges Snow to write about something else.

Chapter 4 – This chapter consists almost entirely of lengthy letters between Bird and Snow. The first is from Snow, and lists the unhappy histories of several Whitmans and Millers (“Miller” is the maiden name of Snow’s mother Julia) who, over time, suffered as the result of the intense struggle to pass for white. Snow also talks about how wonderful Clara is, and how good a life she had with the woman who raised her, Aunt Effie, who was a cook for a wealthy white family. Also in this letter, Snow comments that “you can’t feel nauseated by the Whitmans and the Millers without feeling nauseated by the kind of world that’s rewarded them for adapting to it like this.”

Finally, Snow refers to being able to tell stories about Brer Anansi, a talking spider. This leads Bird, in her response to tell Snow how she calmed the President of the Spiders, who was angry that Bird knew the Brer Anansi stories, with a story about La Belle Capuchine, a beautiful slave whose father was a white plantation owner, who was identical to the man’s other daughter in every way except skin color, and who earned the resentment of other slaves (and a hero sent to rescue them) because she tried to be so much like her white “sister”. This, in turn, leads Snow to tell her version of the La Belle Capuchine story, in which La Belle Capuchine is a destroyer goddess who grows poisonous plants in her garden, who lets the poisons take over the world, who falls asleep every time the world ends, but wakes up when the world renews itself and starts the whole process over again.

Also in this letter, Snow describes an occasion in which she was going out with some darker skinned friends and had an opportunity to proclaim her racial connection to them,



but instead just avoided the situation. She also describes how she never actually attended the secretarial college her family thinks she went to because she discovered that there was “an alphabet’s worth” of Whitmans, and that she found another job, one in which she says involves a lot more “deceiving” than even she’s practiced to this point. In response to a comment from Snow about how strange it is that Bird talks to spiders, Bird says it’s the result of paying attention to something important, and asks about Snow’s job. When Snow doesn’t answer, Bird threatens to tell their father, but Snow reassures her, adding that she’s looking forward to seeing Bird at Thanksgiving. When Bird asks her Mom about whether Snow is coming, Boy says it’s up to her. Bird says yes.

Analysis

There isn’t a great deal of story in this section – that is, there aren’t a great many narratively significant events or plot points. The major event comes at the end of this section, with the announcement that Snow is going to be coming for Thanksgiving dinner, an event that sets up the family fireworks in Section 3. Otherwise, the emphasis here is on character, relationship, and theme.

In terms of character and relationship (elements that interact quite intensely here), the most apparent developments are those in the identities of, and connections between Boy and Snow. Both the birdcage and the invisible ink are important symbolic elements, while the intimacy and honesty of certain subjects of their conversations are a powerful, telling contrast to the layers of (thematically relevant) deception, racism, and fairy-tale sensibility that surround them. This contrast is defined by the fact that important truths (about family history, about individual attitude and belief, and about individual discovery, particularly by Snow) are told in this section, by the characters to each other and by the author to the reader: the sense is that for the moment, at least, a story doesn’t necessarily have to have a great deal of plot to be engaging and/or to have meaning.

In terms of themes, all five of the book’s primary thematic considerations come into play in this section. Again, racism – with all its personal and societal implications – is the most significant of these, and what is particularly noteworthy about this section is the way in which it becomes entwined with another of the major themes, deception ... perhaps more so in this section than anywhere else in the book. Specifically, the layers and depths of how the deceptions practiced by the characters are motivated by racism, not to mention the consequences of acting on that motivation, are clearer here than anywhere else. The result of this clarity, in the following / final section of the book, is that the characters (particularly Snow and Bird, but eventually Boy as well) make extreme choices of a sort and/or intensity that they’ve never made before.

The other three themes – mother/daughter relationships, a fairy tale sensibility, and the recurrence of reflections - all play out, in varying ways, and to varying degrees, in this section. Perhaps more than in relation to the other two themes developed here, “magic realism” manifests more vividly and has greater impact on both the characters and the reader.



One final note: the character and history of “Brer Anansi” are not inventions of this author, or for this book. The spider Anansi is a powerful figure in African mythology, his stories and exploits having been transported to America in the minds and hearts and mouths of African slaves.

Discussion Question 1

What do you think the birdcage and invisible ink gifts represent to Snow? to Bird? to the author?

Discussion Question 2

What do you think are the parallels between the two stories of La Belle Capuchine and the experiences of Bird, Snow, and the Whitman families? Consider both personal and racial issues.

Discussion Question 3

What does Snow mean when she refers to “the kind of world” that made the Whitmans and the Millers make the choices they did in relation to their race?

Vocabulary

asbestos, spate, mortified, maladjusted, “replica, introvert, lobotomy, garble, delinquent (n.), primitive, vengeance, hideous, gratin, quadroon, octoroon, treachery, marionette, serenade, cowrie, paranoid



Part 2, Section 3 – Chapters 5-6

Summary

Chapter 5 – As family and friends become more and more excited about Snow's impending visit, Bird becomes increasingly unhappy. She manages to forget her unhappiness when she goes on a picnic with Louis and some friends to celebrate Louis' birthday (Boy allows Bird to take her precious flag, now revealed to be an American one, as a blanket). After playing and eating, everyone in the group lies down for a nap, but the others quietly steal away, leaving Louis and Bird alone. For a moment, it seems as though something is about to happen between them, but then Louis disappears and Bird is left alone with an unknown boy, who kisses her neck and then disappears.

The next week, Bird answers a telephone call from a strange man, who hangs up before he gives his name. A day or two later, Bird is shaken out of the tree she's climbing by the same man, who tells her he's his grandfather and that he's been looking for her, then takes her out for a meal. While she and her grandfather eat, Bird takes notes – about her grandfather's practice of killing rats, about how Boy was born prematurely and how he helped her survive, and how he believes she's evil ... not in terms of "the powers of darkness", but in terms of spite that "goes so deep, it is a thing beyond personality," a spite, he says, that made her fight dirty. Their conversation is interrupted by the arrival of Bird's dad who, once he learns the identity of the man who bought his daughter dinner, chases him away and warns him to never come back. Later, Bird eavesdrops on a conversation between her mother and Charlie Vacic, in which he denies telling the Rat-Catcher where she is and she says "I love you", causing Charlie to hang up. Still later, Bird sends Mia her notes from the conversation, and tries to find out what Mia thinks about Boy being called "evil". Mia consistently avoids both her and the question, refusing even to respond to the notes Bird took during the conversation with Frank.

Chapter 6 – Snow arrives three days early, bringing with her a bouquet of flowers, some of which (Snow says) only bloom at night. When they look at each other in the mirror, their reflection, Bird says in narration, shows them with their arms around each other, not as they actually were: Snow with her hands on Bird's shoulders, Bird with her arms at her side. As they talk the afternoon away (with Bird telling Snow what The Rat Catcher said about Boy, and Snow saying Boy is something, but not evil), people keep bringing food and cards of greeting. When they look at the collection of gifts in the kitchen, Bird realizes that Snow is bored by all the attention, and then realizes something else – that Snow doesn't know she "does this to people", and that "this is something we do to her."



Analysis

Structurally and narratively, this section continues to build suspense towards the Whitman family Thanksgiving dinner, which is the primary plot point in Part 3 and arguably in the entire book – the point at which the more painful aspects of the family's racial history and experience, not to mention the effects that the family's choices had / are having on its young people, are all revealed. That narrative momentum is diverted only slightly by the appearance of Boy's father, which sets off a chain of events that, rather than diffusing the deepening suspense, only adds to it. Further suspense is added to the mix by Boy's conversation with Charlie and by Mia's apparent distancing of herself, the latter an important piece of foreshadowing of events that define and motivate the story in the book's final chapters.

Meanwhile, this section also contains important pieces of information: the revelation that Boy's precious flag is American, the revelation of the circumstances of Boy's birth; and, perhaps most notably, the contention made by The Rat Catcher (Frank Novak) that Boy is "evil". On the one hand, and from the psychological point of view, this could very well be perceived as projection, a psychological process by which someone with a particular characteristic "projects" that characteristic onto another, saying that the second person has it but not the first, and thereby deflecting attention and/or blame from the person who actually DOES have it. On the other hand, and as Boy herself says in the following section, there might truly be something to Novak's comment ... is Boy evil, or is she just determined and strong willed? She herself explores the question in Part 3.

Also in this section, there is the latest in a series of events / narrative circumstances that show up once, get a significant amount of attention, and then disappear without substantial development. Earlier examples include Boy's encounter with her future self in Part 1 and Bird's conversations with spiders in Part 2. Here, the example is the mysterious boy who kisses Bird's neck: his identity is never revealed, and the repercussions of that kiss are never explored. It could be argued, and quite reasonably given the book's stylistic context, that these unexplained events are manifestations of "magic realism", events that have import in the moment but relatively little meaning in terms of the book's overall narrative. On the other hand, it could also be argued that giving moments like this such relative weight without tying them in thoroughly to the story is inefficient and unfocused storytelling. Either, and both, are possible.

Discussion Question 1

Consider this quote from Frank Novak's conversation with Bird. "...maybe it wasn't [Boy] that pulled through. Maybe it was just that will to exist in the world. I mean, it wasn't the will of someone young, it was the will of – something that has had life before and knows that life is good." In what ways does this quote reflect / echo the experiences of the Whitmans / Millers in trying to pass as white?



Discussion Question 2

What is it that Bird realizes, at the end of Chapter 6, that people “do” to Snow? How does what they “do” tie into the book’s thematic consideration of racism?

Discussion Question 3

What do you think is the significance of the flag given to Boy by Charlie in Part 1, Chapter 1 is only identified as American at this point in the narrative? Why was its nationality not revealed before now – and what is the significance of it being revealed at this particular point?

Vocabulary

ghoulish, prophecy, hominy, linden, gargoyle, squeamish, disinfectant, parlor, stamen, tulle, crockery

Part 3, Chapters 1-3

Summary

Chapter 1, Part 1 – In Part 3 of the novel, Boy returns as narrator. She describes family Thanksgiving dinner, which is attended by Clara and her husband John (who behave, according to Boy, with dignity and restraint); Olivia and her husband Gerald; Agnes and Vivian; Arturo and Bird; and Snow. The atmosphere is tense, with confrontations about the choices made by various members of the family threatening to explode into the open. Boy marvels at the ability of both Clara and Olivia to restrain themselves, and notices that both Bird and Snow are watching and listening closely.

Later, while doing the dishes after dinner, Boy and Snow try to make peace with each other, but don't look at each other – instead, they look at their reflections in the dishwasher. Boy convinces Snow that the only way they can make their relationship work is if Snow releases her anger the way kids on the playground do – by hitting and forgetting. Snow is at first reluctant, but then is goaded by Boy to the point where she (Snow) gives Boy a black eye. Boy covers up by explaining to everyone that she tripped over a chair and hit her face on the kitchen counter.

Part 2 – Boy then shifts narrative focus quite abruptly, and narrates a lengthy conversation she had with Mia in the aftermath of her (Boy's) conversation with Snow. Mia reveals that she's been absent for so long because she's been in search of something new to write about – specifically, mother / child relationships. Conversation reveals that Mia's interest in the topic springs from the aftermath of the midnight visit Boy paid to Mia (Part 2, Chapter 1), a visit that became necessary after a botched abortion that robbed Mia of the possibility of having children herself. Mia then reveals that she went in search of Boy's mother and eventually discovered her – Frances Amelia Novak, a university graduate and a lesbian who was raped by a male student, became pregnant, refused to have an abortion, and eventually began to live life as a man following an encounter with a masculine version of her reflection in a mirror. At first Boy reacts with anger and disgust, trying to get Mia to stop referring to Frances (who changed her name to Frank) as "him". Mia tells her that Frank has been Frank longer than he was ever Frances. Boy begs Mia not to tell the story, but Mia says she's got to, if only for Bird's sake, admitting that she received the notes from Bird's conversation with Frank. When Boy asks whether Frances has gone forever, Mia says she can't say – she never met Frances. In narration, Boy comments that somehow, this was a comfort.

Chapter 2 – In the aftermath of Mia's revelations, Boy reads the notes Mia got from Bird and the comfort disappears as she contemplates Frank's comments about her being evil – she realizes that he's probably right, in that her inaction, her refusing to take opportunities to ease other peoples' sufferings, could be seen as evil. She recalls several examples of this inaction from when she was a child, and realizes that everyone in the building where she and Fran (k) (ces) lived "all got a little less human so we could



keep living together". Later, Boy reads Bird's notes about the conversation with Frank/Frances, and discovers that there was one moment (when Boy had to be breast fed by someone else) when "Frank" said that he wished he was a woman. As a result, Boy tries to figure out how to "break a spell". Mrs. Fletcher tells her the only way to do it is to pester the person under the spell until they see its falseness, and want to come out of it themselves. Later, on a contemplative morning, Boy and Snow have a companionable conversation in which Snow reveals that she's an operative for a private investigator, getting the goods on cheating wives in order to ease their husbands' divorces. Boy urges her to stay a while longer, and Snow agrees.

Chapter 3 - Boy talks the reluctant Arturo into agreeing to let Bird go with her to meet Frances, eventually realizing that "he's been handling the difference between the mother you want and the mother you get for years". When Boy goes to get Snow, to take her on the trip to see Frances as well, she discovers that Bird has been singing outside Snow's window in imitation of Julia, and making Snow upset. Boy speaks sharply to Bird, and then with Mia's help gets them ready to go into New York to see Frank / Frances who, Boy says, needs their help. As Bird packs, Mia and Boy tell Snow about Frances. When Bird is ready, and Mia is driving her, Boy, and Snow to the bus station, Olivia asks where they're going. Bird startles Olivia by kissing her, and Boy comments that "I told her to wait there, and that we'd be back for her, and Olivia stood aside and let Mia drive on."

Analysis

Structurally, narratively, and thematically, there are several climaxes in this section. The first comes at Thanksgiving dinner, where the long-simmering (and thematically central) racially defined tensions between various members of the Whitman family come to a head – for the most part politely and quietly, but the confrontations and tensions are all very much there. The second, and more personal, climax comes in the middle of Chapter 1, in which Boy and Snow finally release the tension that THEY'VE been harboring for so long. The results of that release of tension can be seen in Chapters 2 and 3, in which Snow seems to feel comfortable enough to reveal the truth of her situation to Boy, and in which Boy feels a strong enough connection to Snow to bring her along on her trip into New York.

This, in turn, is the result of the novel's third climax, the revelation of Frank / Frances' identity. It could be argued that this is not, in fact, a climax, since the rest of the narrative apparently hasn't been shaped in that direction. This, however, is where the idea of thematic climax, or thematic high point, comes into play: the revelation that Frank is, in fact, Frances, is the climax of the book's thematic exploration of mother/daughter relationships, and if viewed from that perspective, the Frank/Frances/Boy sequence of events here is clearly the climax of a SERIES of similar thematic considerations, with Boy making the ultimate effort at HAVING a mother daughter relationship ... getting past what her "father" has done to reconnect with the "mother" she never really knew she had. At the same time, there is arguably the climax of the novel's "reflections" theme , specifically in the description of the male figure that



Frances saw in her mirror. Finally, the novel's thematic consideration of deception also climaxes here, with the deception perpetrated by Frank / Frances for so many years finally being unveiled (not to mentioned echoed by Bird's vocal / musical impersonation of Snow's mother, Julia, and by the revelation of Snow's job – uncovering the “deceptions” of cheating wives).

Other thematic and / or stylistic elements that make their presence felt in this section include one more reference to reflections (i.e. Boy and Snow looking at their reflections in the sink), and a few more instances of “magic realism”, including the reference to Boy trying to break a spell (another of the previously discussed ideas given vivid presence and then dropped). Stylistic “magic realism” might also manifest in the revelation of Frank/Frances' gender identity, which has an air of the fantastical about it.

One last noteworthy element: the revelation of what really went on for Mia and Boy during their urgent late night visit originally referred to in Part 2, Chapter 1.

Discussion Question 1

Given both Frank's and Boy's perspectives and insights, do you think the description of Boy as “evil” is accurate, or appropriate? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 2

In what ways are the experiences of Frank/Frances, Snow, and Bird parallel? What do you think the author is saying, in relation to the book's overall exploration of racism, by concluding the story with an attempt being made by the central characters to help another, deeply troubled character come to terms with the truth of who she is?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss Boy's name, given what this part of the book explores in terms of gender identity and, specifically, the situation of Boy's mother/father.

Vocabulary

convenient, uncanny, repulse, allegiance, convention, futile, integrity, scenario, impenetrable, platitude, ardent, amiable, pedigree, dissect, tolerate, assertive, aggressive, inquisitive, caustic, brazen, inseparable, indulgent, avert, adoration, devastate, incongruous, affidavit, linguistic, fluent, platonic, raunchy, glamorous, disheveled, bluestocking, rationalize, monographs, delusion, dysfunction, myriad, fleeting, articulate, diaphanous, concede, discrepancy



Characters

Boy Novak

Boy is the novel's central character and protagonist. She is also its narrator for two out of the book's three sections.

Because physical appearance is a key component of both the book's plot elements and its themes, analysis of Boy's character and identity has to begin with how she looks – pale, slender, and blonde, arguably the stereotypical Caucasian. Her fairness is, at times, an advantage – it is the reason, for example, she gets involved in a situation that turns out to be a key turning point in her life (Part 1, Chapter 3). Her appearance can also be seen as a key reason that Arturo wants to marry her: as someone whose “colored” family has, for generations, sought to pass as white, the prospect of marrying someone who is just about as “white” as can be must have its appeal. On the other hand, Boy's white-ness also serves as a disadvantage, particularly when her daughter Bird turns out to be a genetic throwback – that is, dark-skinned like Arturo's ancestors. The disparity between the skin tones of Boy and her daughter creates tension in the family, and in the community in which they live.

In terms of her inner identity, Boy is determined, feisty, and outspoken, although she also becomes somewhat watchful and wise, learning how to read the moods of her father, and eventually her mother-in-law, in order to know when it's safe to be herself and when to hold her tongue. This, in turn, is an example of her patience – she bides her time with her father (in that when she's a teenager, she watches for the right moment to leave her abusive home life) and her daughter (allowing Bird time to grow and find her identity, but at the same time judging when it's the right time to take action). In short, she is a survivor.

Boy is also a loyal friend, as evidenced by her support of Mia when the latter is going through a difficult time (Part 2, Chapter 1), an action which can be seen as foreshadowing of the compassionate loyalty she eventually / ultimately shows to her mother, Frances.

Snow

Snow is the daughter of Arturo Whitman (who becomes Boy Novak's husband) and Julia Whitman, who died shortly after Snow was born. Like Boy, Snow is fair-skinned with dark hair, and as such is idolized by everyone in her family as, arguably, the ideal child to be born into a family of “colored” people trying to pass for white. Her name, therefore, is emblematic of both who she is and what she is desired to be (and, incidentally, one of the most apparent examples of the novel's thematic interest in fairy tales).



It's interesting to note that unlike those of her step-mother (Boy) and half-sister (Bird), Snow's character and identity are only revealed as the result of other people's interpretations and/or contemplations of her. This occurs primarily through the narrations of Boy (in Parts 1 and 3) and Bird (in Part 2), but it also occurs in the commentary made by other characters TO Boy and Bird ABOUT Snow. The reader never really gets to know her – most significantly, what she believes and/or understands about herself, her racial background, and her family. The novel does offer a glimpse, particularly in Part 2 when, during Snow's correspondence with Bird, she reveals a growing awareness of herself (i.e. as a "deceiver"), and of the emerging Civil Rights struggle (i.e. as someone whose looks actually contradict her heritage). For the most part, however, Snow comes across throughout the narrative as a reactive and/or catalytic character, one who triggers events and/or changes in other characters without her own identity being explored in any depth.

Bird

Bird is the dark-skinned daughter of the pale Arturo and Boy. She knows she is not what the paternal side of her family want in a descendant, feeling quite clearly and strongly the distaste of her grandmother Olivia in particular Bird also knows that she is a trigger for at least a degree of unhappiness in her mother's life and in the marriage of her parents, but she is not bitter: angry and resentful at times, but realistic and aware, to a significant degree, of the complications of the life (and skin pigmentation) she was born into. She has moments of being somewhat otherworldly – her gifts for imitating people, what she describes as her ability to communicate with spiders, and the experiences she shares with Snow of being invisible in mirrors all suggest that on some level, Bird's existence is not thoroughly or exclusively confined to the physical world. She is perhaps the most vivid example of how the novel integrates the stylistic element of "magic realism" into a relatively realistic context. Meanwhile, Bird is also curious, watchful, smart, and occasionally just a little devious. In that sense, she is very much her mother's daughter, in some ways more like Boy than either would perhaps be happy to admit.

Arturo Whitman

Arturo Whitman is Boy's husband, the pale-skinned latest in the long line of similarly pale "colored" people who have, for years, passed as white. Arturo is initially someone that Boy hangs around with as the second couple on a double date, and the narrative makes it clear that she doesn't love him passionately. It is clear, however, that he loves her, given that he goes to significant lengths to convince her to marry him, and to be a good father / husband.



Olivia Whitman, Vivian Whitman

Olivia is Arturo's mother, strict and morally upright, determined that things in her life should be exactly what she believes and/or wants them to be – most significantly, based in a set of perspectives, values, and actions that define her and her family as white. She rejects anyone in her family (including her daughter Clara and granddaughter Bird) who don't meet her physical standards of what is appropriate.

Meanwhile, Vivian is Olivia's younger daughter and Arturo's sister. Pale enough and smart enough to earn her mother's approval, she is nevertheless neurotic about her appearance and relationships, striving to stay on her mother's good side and on the good side of the white culture in which they both desire desperately to live.

Aunt Clara, Aunt Effie

Clara is Olivia's oldest daughter, born with darker skin than her mother thought appropriate, and so sent to live with the similarly dark Aunt Effie. Clara is compassionate and warm, fully aware of the situations in which the various members of her family (including Snow and Bird) find themselves, content with how her own situation has turned out, and ultimately not afraid to tactfully speak her mind about any of it. Meanwhile, Effie is the family relation (the cook for a wealthy white family) with whom Clara is sent to live while still a girl, resigned to her fate and determined to make the best of her life. She treats and teaches Clara well, instilling in her the values that make her such a warm and admirable contrast to her mother.

Julia Whitman

Julia Whitman (maiden name Miller) is the first wife of Arturo Whitman and the mother of Snow. Like Arturo, Julia comes from a long line of pale skinned "coloreds" passing as white. Two notable things about Julia are that she was a classical singer, and recordings of her voice are the only thing Bird knows of her; and that she, according to Boy, deliberated carefully (agonized?) over what name to give her daughter, eventually settling on a name that in its evocation of white purity, suggested all the hopes and desires that both the Whitmans and the Millers wanted in a descendant.

Agnes Miller

Agnes is Julia's mother, and a widow. She lives with Olivia and her husband, and although not quite as rigid in her ways as Olivia, she is just as focused on race (and particularly on Snow's apparent "purity") as other members of both families.



Frank Novak

Frank is Boy's father. In the first chapters of the book, he is portrayed as violent, sadistic, and controlling, the main reason Boy flees her home for a new life. Later (i.e. in Part 2), Frank reappears, coming to Flax Hill in search of his granddaughter (Bird). Eventually, the narrative reveals that Frank is, in fact, Frances: a lesbian who gave birth to Boy after being raped, and who, over time, transformed her external gender into the opposite of what it actually was. This aspect of the character's life and identity is a key component of the novel's thematic consideration of the relationships between mothers and daughters.

Charlie Vacic

Charlie is a boy in New York who is very much attracted to Boy, but whom she refuses to get involved with. He manages to track her down in her new life and attempts to persuade her to come home with him, but she stays where she is. Later, Bird overhears a conversation between Charlie and her mother in which Boy says she loves him.

Mia Cabrini

Mia is Boy's best friend. An investigative journalist, they meet when they are both hired to work as hostesses on a cruise for businessmen. Mia is ambitious and determined, always on the lookout for the next big story. Her investigation of Boy's history and background leads to the revelation of the true gender identity of Frank Novak.

Mrs. Fletcher

British immigrant Mrs. Fletcher hires Boy when she moves to Flax Hill, and in spite of being sharp tongued and a bit hard-edged, she becomes Boy's mentor, and confidante.

Sidonie, Phoebe, Kazim

At the bookstore where she works for Mrs. Fletcher, Boy befriends three "colored" students: beautiful Sidonie, flighty Phoebe, and artistic Kazim. Aware that by continuing their friendship she is courting controversy, Boy nevertheless continues the relationship, particularly with Sidonie (and her handicapped hairdresser mother, Merveille). Later in the narrative, there are strong suggestions of what happened to the three students when they grew up: Sidonie became a teacher (who actually taught Bird), Phoebe became a maid (working for the Whitman family), and Kazim became a comic book illustrator.

Louis Chen

This character appears first in Part 2, and is Bird's best friend. He is very much attracted to her, becoming even closer to her when she defends him from a racial slur scrawled in graffiti on their school playground.



Symbols and Symbolism

Mirrors / Reflections

Mirrors, and the reflections therein, are an important repeated image / motif throughout the narrative. Boy, Snow, and Bird each see themselves not just in mirrors, but in other forms of reflection – at times, they even see themselves in each other.

Rats

In the first chapter of the narrative, in which Boy describes her early life in New York City, rats are a constant presence: her father is a rat catcher, and keeps rats in the basement of the family home to use as bait for other rats. At one point, he uses a feral rat as an instrument of punishment on Boy.

Charlie's Flag

Early in the narrative, Charlie Vacic (a young man her age who cares for Boy very much) gives Boy a flag as a gift. It's important to note that only later in the narrative (Part 2, Chapter 5) that Bird's narration reveals the flag (which she is given by Boy to use as a blanket on a picnic) is American.

Julia's Records

Early in Boy's relationship with Snow's father, Snow's dead mother Julia is identified as having been a singer, and as having left several recordings of her voice. Several times throughout the narrative, there are references to these recordings and to Julia's music in general, the sense being that the records are the only connection to her mother that Snow actually has. This makes the records, and Snow's relationship to them, an important manifestation of the narrative's thematic interest in the relationships between mothers and daughters.

Pale Skin

Throughout the narrative, and in a variety of circumstances, pale skin plays a key role in how people are judged, both by others and by themselves. While the initial manifestation of this motif (repeated image) is in relation to the character of Boy, it plays out even more significantly as the story unfolds, turning out to be a key component in the book's thematic and narrative considerations of race.



The Bookstore Chess Set

In the bookstore where Boy eventually finds a job, there is a beautiful chess set on display in the front window. The board and the pieces are both black and white, with narration describing the two sides facing each other across the board in what might best be described as near-eternal readiness for combat. The chess set can be seen as metaphorically representing the racial tensions (primarily between black and white) that motivate and define the relationships, plot, and central theme of much of the novel.

Snakes

Early in the narrative, Boy has a dream in which the evil, destructive power of snakes plays an important, frightening role. A short while later, jewelry maker Arturo presents Boy (his fiancé) with a bracelet in the form of an entwined snake, a gift that Boy doesn't initially take to and which is referred to, later in the narrative, as the sort of jewelry that an evil stepmother (of the sort that Boy fears she is becoming to Snow) might wear.

Snow's Letters

Late in Part 2, Bird discovers that Boy has been hiding a bundle of letters that have been sent by Snow. Bird reads them, and begins a correspondence with Snow in which the two young women learn more about themselves, about each other, and about their relationship(s) with their complicated family.

Spiders

In one of her letters to Snow, Bird reveals that she can communicate with spiders. She also describes, in narration, her fantasies about wearing a hat made of spider webs. Finally, both Bird and Snow refer, in their letters, to stories told to them about Brother Anansi, a mysterious, powerful, mythic spider.

Mia's Writing

The pieces of investigative journalism written by Boy's best friend Mia are, at a couple of key points in the narrative, important plot / life changing elements. The first is her story on the secret lives of blondes (Part 1, Chapter 3), the research for which is the catalyst for her meeting Boy in the first place. Later, at the end of the narrative, Mia's investigation into the experience of motherhood leads to the discovery of a long-kept secret in Boy's past, one that when revealed, proves transformative to Boy, her daughter Bird, and her step-daughter Snow.



Settings

New York City

The first chapter of the first part of the novel is set in New York City, where protagonist Boy lives with her violent, abusive father. While there are moments of happiness for Boy in the city (due primarily to her relationship with the warmhearted Charlie), she remains desperate to get out, and takes a bus to the furthest possible place that her money can buy: Flax Hill.

Flax Hill

Flax Hill, in the New England / North-Eastern section of the United States, is the setting for most of the narrative. Following her urgent, desperate escape from New York, Boy finds herself in this small, conservative, image-conscious town.

1950's – 1960's

The novel's setting in time is noteworthy in that it straddles two important periods of American history: the boom in prosperity and conservative values of the 1950's, and the emergence of the Civil Rights movement in the 1960's. Both time periods and their respective socio-cultural environments define the context in which the novel's more personal and intimate conflicts about race and propriety play out.

Themes and Motifs

Race Relations

The relationship between the races, particularly the Caucasian and “colored” races (to use the word in common usage at the time in which the book is set), is the book’s primary thematic consideration, and plays out in a variety of levels. The most significant of these can be found at the heart of the book’s primary events, characters, and relationships, most of which are motivated, to one degree or another, by the way in which “colored” people are viewed and/or treated by the white-dominated society in which they live – as intellectually, psychologically, emotionally, and culturally inferior. Several characters, primarily those associated with the (ironically named) Whitman family (notice the close connection between Whitman – White Man) struggle desperately to escape this racially-oriented definition of their identity, going to extreme lengths to ensure that they are perceived as being as successful and worthy of respect (i.e. perceived as white) as they feel they deserve to be.

The character of Snow exists at the center of the book’s racially defined elements. She is viewed by the Whitman family as the pinnacle of their efforts at passing / assimilation, and is treated as such – it would not be going too far to suggest that in many ways, she is treated by the Whitmans as a princess, an aspect of her character and of the story that ties in with one of the book’s other themes, its fairy-tale sensibility and narrative roots. Bird, on the other hand and in great contrast to Snow, is perceived by the family as being a throwback and a danger because of her darker skin and more “colored” features. As such, she is an embodiment of everything her family is trying to escape, her experience of being rejected because of her apparent race serving as a microcosmic (i.e. personal) representation of prevailing societal attitudes of the time.

It’s important to note, however, that by the end of the narrative both Snow and Bird are portrayed as becoming increasingly aware not only of who they are racially, but of how both their family and societal situations affect them. Their awareness of the ramifications of their race sends a clear message to the reader that transformation of racial attitudes, in both those who have them and those who are victimized by them, is both possible and necessary.

Fairy Tales

Snow White. Snow Whitman. It’s right there, even down to the latter being treated and/or viewed as “the fairest of them all” by her whiteness-obsessed family (the exact words are never used, but the implication is clear). What else is there? Snow’s “evil” stepmother (Boy) who sends her into exile and who is described as “evil” by her own father, although here the author begins to ironically twist the fairy tale tropes / traditions she began with. Snow’s exile is not into a dark, dangerous forest and into a relationship with seven dwarfs: instead, she is sent into the life and safety of what could be



described as a fairy godmother ... her stable, loving, racially sensitive and aware Aunt Clara who, like the best fairy godmothers, protects Snow from danger and, at the same time, introduces her to the best and /or truest parts of herself.

Other fairy tale / Snow White elements in the piece include the presence of a magic mirror – or, in this case, several such mirrors, in which Boy, Snow, and Bird all experience different, often troubling aspects of their reflection. There are also a few Princes Charming – Charlie, Arturo, and Louis - although there is the sense that the female characters with whom they're involved (Boy and Bird) are too strong, too independent, and too fearful of overly dominant male influence to let themselves be completely swept off their feet.

But perhaps more significantly in relationship to the play's fairy tale elements, there are manifestations of magic – or more specifically, of “magic realism”, a narrative style in which relatively realistic events, circumstances, and/or characters encounter, manifest, or play out experiences that might best be described as other-worldly. It's important to note the difference – in fairy tales, magic is the rule: in magic realism, magic (such as the sort encountered by the characters in mirrors, in conversations with spiders, and in mysterious insights) is the exception ... no less powerful or influential, but relatively rare and not the prime motivator of action.

Reflections

Both literal and metaphorical manifestations of reflection recur as motifs throughout the narrative.

In terms of the former, there are several places in which literal reflections of characters (mostly in mirrors, but in other reflective surfaces as well) serve as triggers for contemplations in those characters on who they are, the different aspects of who they are, and what aspects of themselves they do, and sometimes do not, see in the mirror. Examples of this are found in Boy's experience in Part 1, Chapter 1, Boy's and Bird's experiences with mirrors both before and during their actual meeting, and in Frank/Frances' experience as described in Part 3, Chapter 1. At other times, characters see themselves in non-mirror surfaces that nevertheless show them themselves – in a metal water pitcher, and in the dishwater in a sink. On each of these occasions, and on similar occasions throughout the book, the physical reflections encountered by the characters trigger inner “reflections”, to use the word in another way, on identity and relationship.

In terms of more metaphorical manifestations of reflection, key examples are in the relationships of Snow, Boy, and Bird to the Whitman family. Snow, in her white Caucasian beauty, is the ultimate “reflection” of the Whitman family's desire to pass as “white”, and not “colored”. Boy, with HER white Caucasian beauty, is a similar reflection of those desires, one who, in the goals of the Whitmans, is likely to increase the possibility of the family's evolving white “purity” into future generations. By contrast, Bird is a reflection of the truth – specifically, of the family's true genetic heritage. She is by far



the most troubling of the book's reflections – not to herself, not to the reader, and not to her sister, mother, and father, but to her grandmothers and her other white relatives, who see all their hard work and sacrifice (i.e. everything they did to be perceived as white) as being endangered.

Deception

There are several forms and/or degrees of deception at work in the narrative. While there are more simple, and more relatively innocent, deceptions based on vocal quality (i.e. Bird's impersonations of both her grandmother and Snow's mother), more significant deceptions are based primarily on issues relating to race (in which characters of "colored" heritage are determined to deceive the people around them into believing they are of "white" heritage) and to gender (i.e. the revelation in the book's final section that for years, Boy's mother has been deceiving her, and arguably the rest of the world, into believing that she is a man).

For the most part, these more narratively and thematically significant deceptions emerge from a complexity of needs and motivations. For the Whitmans, that complexity includes a desire for financial and social success, which they perceive as being impossible should they be perceived / known as "colored"; for Boy's father/mother, that complexity includes what seems to be a basic gender identity issue, both in terms of how she feels in her own skin and how society perceives her independence, strong-mindedness, and ambition (i.e. as non-feminine characteristics). It must be noted that on some level, both of these perspectives, the beliefs in the need for deception are, if not reasonable, at least understandable given the conservative, ignorant, socio-cultural periods in which the characters lived.

Ultimately, though, these significant forms of deception are primarily motivated by a desire for freedom and safety – freedom for the individuals involved to live the best and fullest lives they can, and safety while doing so. There is significant irony here, in that while striving to live what they believe to be the best lives possible, those lives are, in fact, full of lies. The freedom desired, and lived, by these characters is, in fact, a life within a cage of secrets – if the truths of their identities were known, their freedom could conceivably be severely curtailed, if not outright denied. In these two cases, therefore, the deceptions undertaken can be seen as ambivalently successful at best, delusionally self-destructive at worst.

Mothers and Daughters

This theme manifests in several ways and on several different levels throughout the narrative, primarily through its portrayal of several different variations on the mother-daughter relationship. There are biological mothers and daughters (Olivia / Clara - Vivian, Julia / Snow, Boy / Bird) ... non-biological mother figures and daughters (Effie / Clara, Mrs. Fletcher / Boy) ... step-mothers and daughters (Boy / Snow) ... and, as manifest in the book's final chapters, father-mothers and daughters (Frank-Frances and



Boy). Each of these specific relationships explores the archetypal / universal mother daughter experience in a different way, offering a wide range of interpretations on both the core values of that experience and how those values and/or ideals play out in the characters' reality.

What exactly are those core values? The first that needs to be considered is the biological relationship, the fact that the mother actually gave birth to the daughter and the implication that the act of giving birth suggests that an emotional relationship will naturally follow. That emotional relationship, in archetypal terms, is generally regarded as one of mutual love, which is admittedly often challenged over time and over the course of events, but which ultimately, eventually endures. Arising from that love are corollary, or associated, emotional experiences (in which both mother and daughter experience trust, joy, and intimacy); moral experiences (in which both mother and daughter experience the development of values, principles, and belief systems); and growth experiences (in which both mother and daughter experience a growth, an expansion, and/or a deepening of wisdom, insight and knowledge). All these experiences, in general, define and shape the mother-daughter relationship in ways that are simultaneously universal and individual, defined by the particular life circumstances of each member of such a relationship.

Each of the very different mother/daughter relationships portrayed throughout the narrative manifests each of these elements, very often from opposing perspectives. Biological mothers and daughters aren't always available to each other in the ways they would like, and non-biological mothers and daughters sometimes find things in each other that they (reasonably? logically?) expect to receive from their biological relations. Meanwhile, questions about the nature, evolution, and motivations of the various relationships are not always played out overtly or obviously, they do form an important part of the work's overall subtext, particularly in relationship to its ending, which is arguably under-motivated and under-developed, in relationship to the rest of the work, but which, within the context of a thematic consideration of mother / daughter relationships, can be seen as providing a key resolution to the book's many conflicts over the perception of, and reaction to, self-identity.

Styles

Point of View

The three parts of the book are narrated from two different points of view – the first and third parts from Boy's, the second from Bird's. All three parts are written in first person past tense narration, which means that in Parts 1 and 3, Boy is telling her story from her perspective, while in Part 2, Bird is telling her story in hers.

The primary effect of an authorial choice to write in first person narration is generally to draw the reader further into the experiences of the narrating character. In the case of this particular story, the reader is connected strongly to the discoveries made by the narrating characters as they make them in the telling of their stories (even though the narrative unfolds in past tense (as opposed to present), the writing is shaped and defined in such a way that the sense of discovery and/or surprise about a character's particular experience is preserved). For example: the reader discovers, at the same time in her life as Boy did, that the apparent racial background of her husband's family is not what she believed it to be. Likewise: the reader discovers, at the same time in her life as Bird did, the content of the letters sent by Snow first to Boy, and then to her.

The other noteworthy element of first person narration, both generally and specifically in the case of this book, is that the actions of the non-narrating characters (for lack of a better term) are presented through a filter – that is, through the eyes and interpretations of the characters (Boy and Bird) describing the events in question. Some might say this is the negative aspect of first person point of view – that the actions of intriguing characters like Snow, Olivia, Mia, and Arturo are described only from the limited perspectives of the narrators. The reader never really sees those characters through a lens unfiltered by the narrators' opinion. This leaves the actions of those characters open to interpretations that, by nature of the narrative point of view, can only be limited - focused and defined, but limited.

Language and Meaning

The first point to note about the book's use of language is that in several places, it uses the language of the time to denote / define the situations of the characters and their relationships. This is most apparent in its use of the term "colored" to describe people who, in more recent language, would be called either "black" or "African-American". The term "colored", with all its implications (i.e. of racist attitudes) is not only appropriate and accurate for the time and place in which the narrative is set: with its implications of racist attitudes, it can be seen as appropriately and accurately describing the attitudes of the characters, who use the word about themselves, towards themselves and their situation,



The second noteworthy point about the book's use of language is that it is, in many places, written in quite a poetic style, with words and phrases rich in imagery, in metaphor, and in evocation of something almost otherworldly about the story, its characters, and its events. The term for this sort of writing, in relation to both the types of events included in the plot and the language in which those events are described, is "magic realism". This is a narrative style that for the most part anchors plot and character in realistic situations and experiences but adds a layer of both action and interpretation that goes beyond the realistic into the mystic, the fairytale-like. Examples in this book include Boy's experience in the woods (Part 1, Chapter 5) and Bird's conversations with spiders (Part 2, Chapter 4). The overall effect / function of this stylistic choice tends, in most cases, to suggest to the reader the sense that all about the life of the characters, and perhaps about not only the readers as well but life in general, is that there is more to existing than just what the five senses, the mind, and the heart can communicate.

The other key point about the book's use of language is that it frequently includes information, ideas, images, and references that add depth, meaning, and irony to the story without doing so overtly, or without explaining meaning in narration. In other words, there is a great deal of storytelling and/or illumination by implication. Two key examples: the reference in Part 1, Chapter 7 to the street intersection in the "colored" part of town referred to as "Tubman and Jefferson" (Tubman and Jefferson both being the last names of important figures in the anti-slavery movement), and the references in Part 2 of the narrative to three peripheral, but significant, characters first mentioned in Part 1 – Sidonie, Phoebe, and Kazim. By including these references without additional explanation or information, the author clearly intends readers to draw inferences or conclusions about the events and situations on their own. The author opens the door, or the window, but leaves it up to the reader to walk, or look, through. It should be mentioned here, though, that overall understanding of the book, its story, and its themes is not impaired if the reader does not pick up on these dropped hints: picking up on them, however, does enrich the reader's overall experience.

Structure

On one level, the book's overall structure is fairly straightforward. Despite occasional diversions into flashback, memory, and storytelling, the events of the book's narrative unfold in a relatively linear, straightforward way – event A leads to event B which leads to event C; action leads to reaction leads to reaction; cause leads to effect and so on and so on. What's particularly interesting to note is that this sense of what might be described as traditional structure is (ironically? paradoxically?) juxtaposed with the magic realism outlined in "Language and Meaning" above – the linear, rather logical, and clearly comprehensible juxtaposed with the non-linear, the apparently illogical, and the mysterious. This is a juxtaposition in which the two opposites involved highlight and draw attention to each other: the linear structure making the magic realism more apparent, the magic realism giving the fairly straight-forward structure a sense of meaning that simply goes beyond physical and / or emotional experience.



Another key point to note about the book's structure relates to its shifting point of view. Specifically: more than a dozen years pass between Parts 1 and 2 (Part 1 ending with Bird's birth, Part 2 beginning when she is thirteen years old), while almost no time at all passes between Parts 2 and 3. The narrative doesn't seem to suggest what the author's reasons for making such a choice might be, and it could be argued that by jumping so many years, the narrative misses the opportunity to explore and/or define much of the narrative's central conflict (i.e. the tension in the Whitman family arising from the darkness of Bird's skin). On the other hand, it could also be argued that by leaping into the time when Bird is about to enter the volatile period of adolescence, it gives both story and reader the opportunity of experiencing the family, its situation, and its circumstances from the more articulate, questioning perspective of a character who is just learning to understand what both are actually about.



Quotes

Nobody ever warned me about mirrors, so for many years I was fond of them, and believed them to be trustworthy. I'd hide myself away inside them, setting two mirrors up to face each other so that when I stood between them I was infinitely reflected in either direction. Many, many me's.

-- Narration (Boy) (Part 1, Chapter paragraph Page 3)

Importance: This quote, the first sentence in the novel, introduces a key element of the book's thematic and narrative perspectives – specifically, the different types of reflections one can encounter in life, and how they can both appear and have various effects in magical ways.

...I've always been pretty sure I could kill someone if I had to. Myself, or my father – whichever option proved most practical. I wouldn't kill for hatred's sake; I'd only do it to solve a problem. And only after other solutions have failed. That kind of bottom line is either in your character or it isn't, and like I said, it develops early.

-- Narration (Boy) (Part 1, Chapter 1 paragraph Page 7)

Importance: Here Boy reveals the darker side of her nature and foreshadows the emotional violence she believes she perpetrates on people around her.

'People make beautiful things here. We're interested in the process, not the end product. Now, you – you don't have what it takes to start that kind of process, let alone see it through. So. There's nothing here for you.

-- Arturo (to Boy) (Part 1, Chapter 2 paragraph Page 22-3)

Importance: With this quote, Arturo is seriously patronizing to Boy with a comment that almost dares her to prove him wrong, a dare she seems to accept. The quote proves ironic, in that she never does find an arts/crafts way to express herself, but she does find a family, and deep truths about herself, both positive and negative.

'...he's a nice guy, but there are thoughts he doesn't allow himself to think. So you can't think aloud around him – it's too risky. You might accidentally hit a nerve ... you just stumble across one of those thoughts he hates to think and – it ain't pretty. When I die, they'll make me the patron saint of lucky escapes.

-- Mia (to Boy) (Part 1, Chapter 3 paragraph Page 33)

Importance: This comment, made by hostess Mia Cabrini after Boy has discovered Mia's history with Arturo, foreshadows later instances in the narrative when some of the dark thoughts Mia refers to show up in Arturo's relationship, and his family's relationship, with Boy.

The best line of work for me would be roadside sprite. I'd live quietly by a dust-covered track that people never came across unless they took a wrong turn, and I'd offer the baffled travelers lemonade and sandwiches, maybe even fix their engines if they asked



nicely ... then the travelers would go on their way, relaxed and refreshed, and they'd forget they'd ever met me. That's the ideal meeting – once upon a time, only once, unexpectedly, then never again.

-- Narration (Boy) (Part 1, Chapter 4 paragraph Page 57)

Importance: Here, in narration, Boy reveals a side of herself that's simultaneously dreamy and hard-edged realistic – she has a wish, but a wish that's grounded in clear-eyed self-awareness.

Somewhere in among the names of all those mermaids, warriors, saints, goddesses, queens, scientists, and poets I could see a woman trying to cover all the bases, searching for things her daughter would need in order to make friends with life ... I've always wanted to know whether Boy is the name my mother wanted for me, and if so, what kind of person the name was supposed to help me grow up into.

-- Narration (Boy) (Part 1, Chapter 6 paragraph Page 68)

Importance: This is the first comment in the narrative on Boy's unusual name, juxtaposed with a comment on Snow's similarly unusual name, and on the process Snow's mother Julia went through to choose it. In retrospect - that is, viewed from the perspective of the end of the novel, with all its racial and gender-based revelations - both comments have much more weight than their appearance at this point in the narrative might suggest.

... if you saw her without talking to her, she'd make you paranoid in a way that only a colored girl can make a white woman paranoid. That unreadable look they give us; it's really shocking somehow ... a stare that says 'I don't particularly like being outside, but I don't want to come in, either.

-- Narration (Boy) (Part 1, Chapter 6 paragraph Page 77)

Importance: This description of Sidonie Fairfax, one of the "colored" customers at the bookstore where Boy works, can be seen as summarizing the experience of most, if not all, the novel's "colored" characters, both those whose true racial identity is apparent, and those for whom it isn't.

First you try to find a reason, try to understand what you've done wrong so you can be sure not to do it anymore. After that you look for signs of a Jekyll and Hyde situation, the good and the bad in a person sifted into separate compartments by some weird accident. Then, gradually, you realize that there isn't a reason, and it isn't two people you're dealing with, just one. The same one every time.

-- Narration (Boy) (Part 1, Chapter 10 paragraph Page 108)

Importance: Here the narrative restates / re-develops the thematically central idea of deception, the idea that people have the part of themselves they want / need to keep secret hidden behind some mask or another.

...sitting at the bar or at the candle-lit table you'd try to imagine what dinnertime remarks the real people were making – yes, the real people at the restaurant two blocks away,



the white folks we were shadows of ... what was it like in those other establishments? What was it that was so sacred about them, what was it that our being there would destroy? I had to know. I broke the law because I had to know.

-- Olivia (Part 1, Chapter 13 paragraph Page 136)

Importance: In this quote, Olivia sums up not only her own experience, but that of other non-whites in America in the age of segregation.

The Whitmans need someone to love, and have found too much to hate in each other, and so this lifelike little projection walks around and around a reel, untouchable.

-- Narration (Boy) (Part 1, Chapter 13 paragraph Page 142)

Importance: For Boy, this quote sums up her interpretation of why Arturo, Olivia, and the rest of the family worship Snow so much.

I'll go into a room with a mirror in it and look around, and I'm not there. Not all the time, not even most of the time, but often enough. Sometimes when other people are there, but nobody ever notices that my reflection's a no-show ... maybe I catch the mirror of guard somehow ... the image in the glass shifts just a little bit off center ... like it's wondering why it isn't reflecting all that stands in front of it.

-- Narration (Bird) (Part 2, Chapter 1 paragraph Page 157)

Importance: This quote of Bird's exists in clear contrast to the earlier quote of Boy's – the latter quote suggests that Boy sees too many selves in the mirror, while this quote suggests that Bird doesn't see enough. In this case, "reflections" can be taken to mean "truths".

Grammy Olivia avoids her own gaze and looks at her hair. Gee-Ma Agnes peeps reluctantly and then looks glad, like her reflections so much better than she could have hoped for. Aunt Mia shakes her head a little, 'Oh it's you again, is it?' Louis tenses and relaxes – 'Who's that? Oh all right, I guess I can live with him.' Dad looks quietly irritated by his reflection, like it just said something he strongly disagrees with. Mom locks eyes with hers ... trying to catch her reflection out, willing it to make one false move.

-- Narration (Bird) (Part 2, Chapter 2 paragraph Page 185)

Importance: Here, through Bird's investigative-minded narration, the novel continues its thematic exploration of the nature and meaning of reflections, summarizing the relationships several of the characters have with their images in a mirror.

She ought to know that if you want to set yourself up as a queen and have everything the way you want it and keep sisters apart then you're not going to have a big fan club. She ought to know that where there's a queen there's often a plot to overthrow her.

-- Narration (Bird) (Part 2, Chapter 3 paragraph Page 195)

Importance: This quote sums up Bird's increasing unhappiness with her mother (Boy), and with the latter's efforts to keep her and Snow apart.



If I was able to mimic Mom's voice ... I could have called Aunt Mia up and got her talking. But Mom is impossible to copy. I try and try, and each try sounds less like her. I'm not able to play Mom's voice back in my head the way I can other people's. I'm beginning to think that it's my ear. Maybe I don't hear Mom properly in the first place.
-- Narration (Bird) (Part 2, Chapter 3 paragraph Page 201)

Importance: This quote metaphorically comments on the difficulty Bird has in connecting / communicating with her mother.

... they were making Snow sound like some kind of ornament just passing by – not even passing by, but being passed around. Everybody agreed that Snow was valuable, but she was far too valuable to have around for keeps. Nice to look at for an afternoon, but we'd all breathe easier once she's safely back at the museum. I was beginning to hate people because of the way they talked about my sister, because of the way they didn't really want her.
-- Narration (Bird) (Part 2, Chapter 5 paragraph Page 243)

Importance: In this quote, as narrative and personal tension (in the characters) builds towards Snow's return to Flax Hill, Bird comments on how all the attention the impending visit of Snow is getting.

... it's not whiteness itself that sets Them against Us, but the worship of whiteness. Same goes if you swap whiteness out for other things – fancy possessions for sure, pedigree, maybe youth too ... we beat Them ... by declining to worship.
-- Narration (Boy) (Part 3, Chapter 1 paragraph Page 275)

Importance: This quote sums up what has become Boy's perspective on the racial situation in which she and her family find themselves.

... when I look [at Snow], I find another face in the way, and hear another voice, not Snow's at all, but distorted versions of my own face and voice, I think. And even though this screen and eye have become aware of each other, the screen rests easy, banking on its history of standing between people and my own aversion to closeness. I've been so afraid of getting closeness wrong, because I don't know how to do it, I don't know what my mistakes reveal – maybe they reveal very good reasons for my having been unloved as a child ...
-- Narration (Boy) (Part 3, Chapter 1 paragraph Page 282)

Importance: In this quote, Boy reflects on the difficulty she's always had connecting / relating to Snow, and how consideration of that difficult takes her into consideration of her past.

She had the look of someone who sings inside themselves, silently and continually; at least I hope that's what people mean when they say someone has a twinkle in their eye. Hers was there even when she was playing possessive, her arms tangled around the woman on her lap.
-- Narration (Boy) (Part 3, Chapter 1 paragraph Page 292)



Importance: In this quote, Boy comes to an understanding of / insight into the identity of her long-lost mother, an understanding that triggers her later choices to attempt a reconciliation of sorts.

You know how Frank says he became Frank? He says he looked in the mirror one morning when he was still Frances, and this man she'd never seen before was just standing there, looking back. Frances washed her face and fixed her hair and looked again, and the man was still there, wearing an exact copy of her skirt and sweater ... he flicked the surface of his side of the mirror with his finger and thumb and he said "hi". After that he acted just like a normal reflection ...

-- Mia (Part 3, Chapter 1 paragraph Page 294)

Importance: This moment is arguably the most significant development of the novel's thematic interest in reflections, and its utilization of "magic realism".

Frank's claim that I'm evil doesn't shock me so much, partly because I've questioned myself on the very same subject before. It's not my actions that raise the questions, but my inaction, the way I've consciously and consistently avoided chances to reduce other people's unhappiness. I call it a side effect of growing up in a building full of families and thin walls and floors ...

-- Narration (Boy) (Part 3, Chapter 2 paragraph Page 298)

Importance: This quote explains a great deal about Boy and her actions throughout the narrative – most relevantly, her choices in sending Snow away to live with Clara.