

The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears Study Guide

**The Beautiful Things That Heaven Bears by Dinaw
Mengestu**

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Plot Summary

The Beautiful Things that Heaven Bears, the award winning debut novel by Ethiopian immigrant, Dinaw Mengestu, opens with the main character, Sepha Stephanos and his friends hanging out at Stephanos' corner store in a Washington DC area known for its poverty. The men have a reoccurring game that they play, where one person names an African dictator and the others have to state the year that the dictator took power and what the name of the country currently is. The reader learns that all three men are from different parts of Africa, and all met when they worked for a hotel shortly after arriving in the U.S.

The men have known one another for 17 years now and have come a long way from those early beginnings at the hotel, where they worked as valets. Ken has become an engineer, Joe works at an upscale restaurant, and Sepha owns his own convenient store. The neighborhood where Sepha lives is called Logan Circle. At one time it was a collection of turn of the century mansions. Now, most of those larger homes have been converted into subsidized apartment buildings. There are still some of the houses that were never converted into other things, and it is one of these houses, located next door to Sepha's apartment building, that was purchased many months earlier by Judith McMasterson. The book offers the reader a glimpse into the past as Sepha recalls their first initial meeting and the days following it.

Judith was an American History professor, recently divorced, that had a bi-racial daughter named Naomi. Naomi, who was 11, had not taken the divorce well. Instead of staying at their newly renovated mansion in the DC neighborhood, Naomi preferred to go to Sepha's corner store and hang out there, talking about books. She had come in to see him every day after school. Judith had taken the year off, a sabbatical, in order to get her life back on track. Judith had invited Sepha to their home shortly after Thanksgiving for dinner. There was an immediate attraction between Judith and Sepha, and the evening ended with a gentle kiss between the two.

The next day Sepha told his longtime friends about Judith, who weren't surprised at the event, given that Sepha had done nothing but talk about her and Naomi. When he had seen Judith on the street the next day he suddenly became very shy. However, when Naomi came into the shop after school that day, Sepha felt more comfortable about the situation and began to allow himself the freedom to dream that they might all be a family some day. Naomi told Sepha about a book called The Brothers Karamazov by Dostoyevsky. Having recently lost her father in the divorce, Naomi easily gravitated towards Sepha as a replacement. It was a connection that Sepha had been missing since leaving Ethiopia, where much of his family still lived.

Not everyone at Logan's Circle was so accommodating or welcoming though. Many of the neighbors believed that soon they would be asked to leave because the upper class wanted to take back the old houses and restore them, just as Judith had. This urbanification, or gentrification, meant that they would not be able to afford to live where



they do for much longer. They had seen Judith as a representative of this urban renewal and began to target her and Naomi.

Christmas arrived and Sepha was handed a sobering and stark dose of reality when he visited Judith and Naomi's home to celebrate. Stacked under the tree were loads of presents for Naomi, sent by her father who was teaching abroad. The obvious wealth was a shocking and glaring reminder to Sepha of the type of life he couldn't hope to offer either one of them. Instead of ending the evening with a kiss, he and Judith shook hands. Sepha was pretty sure this had ended their relationship.

Back in the present, the reader is introduced to Sepha's only relative living in the U.S., his Uncle Berhane, who had helped him to get a job when he'd first arrived in America. Sepha's first dose of America was sobering, and at one point, later, he thought about stealing money from his Uncle although he ultimately did not.

Reflecting back to his time with Judith, Sepha had realized after Christmas that he had behaved badly toward Judith and Naomi and arranged to bring them presents the following day. He was crushed when he received a letter telling him that both Judith and Naomi were going to be out of town to celebrate Christmas with her family out of the area. Despondent about the situation, Sepha had hired a prostitute, and afterwards, he gave her the presents he'd chosen for Judith and Naomi, telling the prostitute to give them to someone she cared about.

Mrs. Davis, one of the organizing women in Logan's Circle had informed Sepha and the other men that there would be a neighborhood meeting to discuss the evictions that had been rising, and the problem that the urban renewal would be going to pose to the "poor working folk." Sepha attended and was shocked to see Judith there. She offered him a seat, but he refused to sit next to her. The crowd was obviously hostile towards Judith, and before the meeting was over she left.

Early the next morning, Judith entered Sepha's store, a gift in her arms. It was a typewriter. Naomi had wanted Judith to bring it to him so that when she is gone, he could write to her. He asked Judith what she was talking about and she told him that Naomi would be attending a boarding school in Connecticut and that the neighborhood had become too dangerous for her to live in. The day before someone had smashed in her car window with a brick. More bricks were thrown at her home, breaking many of the lower floors' windows. However, impulsively, she told him that she wanted to still see him. She gave him a note from Naomi, who says that she really missed him.

Meanwhile, in the present, it is clear that Sepha's store is failing. Both Joe and Ken try to help him out, but Sepha's depression has made him neglect it. The reader learns that he is almost four months behind on the rent for the space. He receives an eviction notice on the same day that he learns that both Judith and Naomi have left Logan's Circle and will never return. They've left because a few days earlier, when they were out of town, someone had set fire to their townhouse and it had burned to the ground. Despondent, he decides to leave the city for a while. He goes to visit his Uncle in Maryland.



When Sepha arrives at his Uncle's place, he finds the apartment empty. He makes himself comfortable to wait for his Uncle's return and finds an old letter that his Uncle had written to President Carter back in the 1970s about the crisis in Ethiopia. His uncle had written about Sepha's father's brutal murder. The reader learns that Sepha has always felt responsible for his father's death. He believes that his father's arrest and execution were due to Sepha's affiliation with a group that opposed the Communist occupation and takeover. He decides he can't wait for his Uncle, and he leaves.

As he arrives back in DC, Sepha realizes that both he and Ken have modified their dreams since landing in America. All of them, initially, had said they would make good in America, then return to Ethiopia. Now, he realizes, none of them ever will. He has an epiphany and realizes that Naomi and Judith had been a chance at redemption for him, and that her example of starting over must be what he must do as well. For the first time since his father's death, Sepha feels that he can hear his father's voice in his mind telling him to pick up and start over. Sepha discards his stubbornly held notions of living in two worlds at the same time, embraces his new reality, and instead of going home, goes to his store with a spring in his step.



Chapters 1-2

Summary

Chapter 1

The main character, Sepha, is waiting for his two friends, Ken and Joe, to come by his store for drinks. All three have been friends for 17 years. Each is an immigrant to America (Washington DC) from a different part of Africa. Joe is from the Congo, Ken is from Kenya, and Sepha is from Ethiopia. Since arriving in America, Ken has become a very successful engineer, and Joe works as a waiter at a high class restaurant. Sepha owns his own store, which he wishes to turn into a deli and eventually a restaurant, but recently he's been having trouble just finding the motivation to open the store at all, blaming it on something that happened with his friend, Judith. Ken tries to motivate him and make him realize there's a problem, but Sepha just doesn't seem to care. They spend the evening drinking and talking about life back in Africa.

When Ken and Joe are leaving, Sepha remembers the day that he and Ken went to buy Ken's car. Ken had gotten all dressed up when he took Sepha to the dealership. He wanted to wait for a salesman to come to them, but nobody ever did. They ended up leaving and he got a car on his own. It was an older, beat up car, but Sepha assured him that it was beautiful, which pleased Ken.

Chapter 2

Sepha thinks back to when Judith first moved into his neighborhood, Logan Circle. Logan Circle is made up of old, mostly fallen apart mansions. Some of them were converted into cheap apartments, which was the only thing that Sepha could afford when he moved in. Judith, an American History professor at a college, bought one of the mansions and had it fixed up. Judith had immediately stood out in the neighborhood because she was the only white person living there. Ken and Joe didn't even believe Sepha when he told them she had moved in.

Judith was accompanied by her 11-year-old, bi-racial daughter, Naomi. Sepha got to know the both of them. Naomi acted very strange for her age, and she had a very commanding attitude. She spent nearly every day at Sepha's store. The two of them eventually developed a friendship. Judith was worried about the neighborhood, since someone had made lewd comments toward Naomi, but Naomi didn't seem to mind, which seemed to put Judith's mind at ease.

Analysis

Chapter 1



The theme of Friendship is explored right away when Sepha introduces the reader to Ken and Joe. He outright says that they've been friends for 17 years, but the friendship is also shown in the natural way that they all interact with one another. This is made even more evident when Stephanos recalls the story of them going to get a car. Sepha knew how important the car was to Ken, and he was supportive no matter what.

The theme of Racism and Class is very briefly touched upon when Sepha talks about the way their old boss casually nicknamed them based solely on their race. It's shown much more clearly in Sepha's flashback. Ken went out of his way to dress up in his finest suit when he needed to buy a car. He wanted to make a good impression, and show that he was successful and had money. He didn't want to approach any of the salesmen because he wanted them to come to him and acknowledge that he was a customer. They ignored him and Sepha based solely on their race, with the implication being they didn't think two black men would be able to afford a car.

Sepha's depression is mentioned, but at this point in the novel, the reader isn't completely sure why. The only information that is given is that it revolves around Judith. It should be noted that his friendship with Judith, and Naomi, is really the catalyzing action that incites the forward movement of the plot.

Chapter 2

This chapter primarily serves to provide more information about the setting, while touching on the theme of Racism and Class. The moment that Judith moves into Logan's Circle, everyone judges her based solely on her race. They immediately assume she's just another rich white girl. Ken and Joe can't even believe that a white girl would move into his neighborhood. This gives Sepha an opportunity to describe Logan Circle in more detail, showing how run down it had become, and establishing that it was filled mostly with immigrants and Africans. This becomes relevant as the book continues.

Naomi and Sepha interact for the first time and begin their friendship with one another, further establishing the theme of Friendship. This relationship ends up being very important throughout the rest of the book, and has a huge impact on Sepha's life.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss the theme of Friendship in these two chapters, as it pertains to Naomi, Judith, and Sepha.

Discussion Question 2

What does it suggest that none of the salesmen will approach Ken and Sepha at the car dealership?



Discussion Question 3

Discuss the ways in which Racism and Class are depicted for most of the characters in these two chapters.

Vocabulary

abhorrent, abrade, portend, entirety, entwine, perturb, suspension, sympathetic, impulse, wretchedness, vivify



Chapters 3-4

Summary

Chapter 3

In the present, Ken starts to call Sepha each morning, making sure that he gets up and goes to open the store. Sepha remarks that things have changed when he passes by Judith's house, but he doesn't go into more detail. At work, he imagines the way things used to be in the neighborhood. When they first arrived everything was run down and it was like living in a ghetto. Over the years, things have gradually changed, until now it has become 'revitalized' and trendy.

Sepha still sends money to his family back home in Africa, even though they don't need it. He feels like it's his responsibility for having left home. Ken takes Sepha and Joe out to a strip club, because that's what Americans do after a hard day of work. Sepha is reminded of how optimistic they used to be when they first arrived in America.

Chapter 4

This chapter is told in flashback as Sepha remembers his first few meetings with Judith and Naomi. Judith and Naomi had invited Sepha over to dinner once they had settled into their home. Sepha was touched, since it was shortly after Thanksgiving. He went out of his way to dress up and stressed over properly thanking Judith when he showed up. At the house, he was amazed by the size and condition of everything. Judith said she picked out such a large house for Naomi. Since losing her father, Naomi would frequently become upset at Judith. She'd run away and try to hide, which worried Judith. Judith promised her every floor would have a bedroom and bathroom, so if she got upset she could just lock herself up on one of the floors instead of having to leave the house.

Judith and Sepha had shared a very brief kiss at the end of the evening. Sepha returned home and wished he could have stayed with Judith, since his own home then felt so small and empty in comparison. The next day he told Joe and Ken about it. They weren't surprised, having seen how enamored Sepha was whenever he had mentioned Judith.

Analysis

Chapter 3

Sepha goes into a little more detail about the current state of Logan's Circle. This follows up on the previous chapter set in the past, showing that Logan's Circle was more run down. In the present, the reader can see how much the town has started to



change. All of this leads up to why Judith was forced to leave, as revealed near the end of the book.

Both the theme of the American Dream and identity are brought up in the chapter. Ken spends most of the book trying to change his identity. He wants to escape from his old life in America and reinvent himself as a successful American engineer. In the past, all three of them were optimistic about all the possibilities that America presented. They believed just being in America meant they would be successful. This is explored in much greater detail throughout the rest of the book.

Chapter 4

Class difference is a theme that had been hinted at before, but it becomes much more apparent in this chapter when Sepha goes to Judith's mansion for the first time. Sepha frequently mentions how close everyone is in Logan's Circle, and this is seen more clearly towards the end of the book when Mrs. Davis organizes everyone to try and protest the evictions. Everyone treats Judith differently because of her race and her class. In their eyes, she's a rich white girl that can't relate to them, with some even seeing her as being part of the problem.

Sepha immediately realizes how small and empty his home is in comparison to Judith's. This becomes a much bigger problem for him when they try and pursue a relationship. Sepha becomes obsessed with their class difference, and he believes that because he's lower class, he'd never be able to make her happy.

The theme of friendship is also explored in the growing relationship between Sepha and Naomi. Naomi has been shown to be very stubborn and judgmental. She doesn't get along with anyone else in Logan's Circle, and frequently argues with her mother. She has a genuine friendship with Sepha, though, who in turn cares about her. He's not just being nice to Naomi to get into Judith's life; he does it because he genuinely cares about her. That's why he keeps the invitation from Naomi, because it has so much meaning and represents their friendship.

Discussion Question 1

What compels Sepha to send money back home to Ethiopia?

Discussion Question 2

How is the theme of the American Dream demonstrated by Sepha?

Discussion Question 3

What was Judith's reason for purchasing and restoring such a large house in this area?



Vocabulary

vitality, unwieldy, contagious, contiguity, arbiter, bask, bedlam, commute, dissuasion, idyllic, meticulous, fastidious, inglorious



Chapters 5-6

Summary

Chapter 5

Sepha wakes up after his night with Ken and Joe at the strip club. He realizes that he's been wasting his life, and he doesn't want to just drift through the rest of his existence. He remarks that things hadn't been the same since Judith and Naomi left the neighborhood. He leaves early to open the store, but when he arrives he finds a letter from a law firm, informing him that he has 30 days to vacate the store. He starts looking around the store, realizing how much it has fallen apart, how out of date the few remaining products are. He calls Ken and tells him what happened. Ken says it has seemed like this was what Sepha always wanted, since he hasn't been taking care of his store.

A tourist couple comes in, and Sepha tells them about the history of the neighborhood. He ends up leaving the store after them; walking around the city and remembering what things were like when he first arrived, and how everything had changed.

Chapter 6

After that first dinner with Judith, Sepha thought that maybe the next day she would drop in at the store. They didn't. It was several days before he even saw Judith again. She was rushing into her house, and he suddenly became shy and did not want to disturb her. He felt stupid for thinking she would want to see him again. A few days later, she showed up at his house slightly intoxicated. She said she was disappointed that Sepha didn't come up to her when she was at her door, and she even pretended to look in her purse for her keys just to give him more time to come over and talk.

The two had a drink and she ended up falling asleep on his couch. When she woke up, she thanked him for being so sweet. The next day, Naomi was at the store again. She had been on a break from school, so she had checked out a bunch of books she wanted to read over the break. Sepha was happy when she announced that they were going to read the books together.

Analysis

Chapter 5

Both themes of the American Dream and identity are brought up again in this chapter. Ken's character frequently brings up the American Dream. To Ken, that dream means being successful and having a lot of money. Early on in his life, Sepha had a similar idea. That's why he bought the store in the first place. He wanted to be his own boss,



and he believed just having the store meant it would be successful and it would continue to grow.

As Ken points out, Sepha didn't care about the store. Despite everything that is going on in his life, Sepha is actually very optimistic. He's still carrying many burdens in the present, most notably with Judith. He has another crisis of faith later on, but for the most part his mindset is actually very positive. Sepha is starting to realize his own version of the American Dream. To him, it isn't about being successful, but having the freedom to pursue what he wants.

The neighborhood changing is representative of that dream. For years, Sepha stayed the same while the world around him changed. The neighborhood began to improve because people were actively trying to make it a better place. They were following their dream. Sepha didn't know what he wanted to do. He thought just owning the store was enough, but his heart clearly wasn't in it. The only time he really becomes motivated is when Naomi and Judith enter into his life, because they show him what he's missing. He lapses into depression when they leave, but he's starting to open his eyes and realize that there's more to life, but he has to work towards achieving his dream.

Judith, herself, is a symbol of change. Not only does she come in and physically restore a building in the neighborhood, but it is her inclusion in Sepha's life that begins to transform him, too. Additionally, it is easy to see a correlation between the success of the store, and his continued success, or lack thereof, of his relationship with Judith. When that relationship starts to fail, so does the business. It is only at the end of the story, when he's been able to forgive himself, and make himself whole, that he views his business in a different light.

Chapter 6

A reoccurring trait of Sepha is him coming up with excuses not to take initiative. With Judith, it typically has something to do with their class difference. Anytime things take even a slightly negative turn with Judith, he assumes it's because she wants nothing to do with him because someone so rich would never want to be with someone poor like him.

Sepha rarely thinks that something might just be going on in her life, and he never tries to ask. This actually ties into the previous chapter, establishing why Sepha positive attitude is such a change, since he was never the type of person to really pursue anything in life. The reader is never told explicitly what happened during those few days, but based on what Judith has said before; it's likely that she and Naomi were having trouble, explaining why Naomi also hadn't gone out to see Sepha.

It was made clear that Judith was stressed when she showed up at Sepha's drunk. She was drinking because of her stress, and she went to see Sepha because she needed a friend, one of the main themes of the book. This theme is expanded on with Naomi showing up the next day to read with Sepha. Like her mother, she likely needed a friend to cope with her stress.



Discussion Question 1

Discuss Sepha's main character flaw.

Discussion Question 2

What does it indicate that both Judith and Naomi reach out to Sepha in their time of crisis and stress?

Discussion Question 3

How is Judith connected symbolically to Sepha's store?

Vocabulary

ingratiate, callow, delude, piteous, encumber, rudimentary, sequester, unbridled, vestige, gullible



Chapters 7-8

Summary

Chapter 7

Sepha decides to visit his Uncle, now that he doesn't have to worry about going to work. He's only seen his Uncle a few times since they lived together when Sepha first came to America. He places telephone calls to his Uncle, as well as Ken, Joe, and his store. Each time he doesn't leave a message, unable to bring himself to speak. He remembers what it was like when he first arrived in America. Like Ken and Joe, he was there as a student. Joe eagerly took a bunch of philosophical classes that ultimately didn't end up leading him anywhere. He'd always relate his lessons to life back in Africa. Ken finally snapped one day and accused Joe of romanticizing Africa. He said Joe would rather live comfortably in America instead of returning to Africa.

Chapter 8

Naomi visited Sepha every day during her break, each time bringing a book with her. She had Sepha read the books to her, and he was happy to do it, since it reminded him of his own childhood. His father used to enthusiastically tell stories to Sepha, and Sepha tried to bring that enthusiasm when he read. Judith showed up to pick up Naomi, who begged to stay longer. Judith promised her that she could stay as long as she wanted the next day. That day, Judith came down and read with them. Sepha started to take better care of the store in between their reading sessions, cleaning up old messes and getting rid of expired products.

Analysis

Chapter 7

Joe is another character that represents the American Dream theme. Joe believes just being in America means he will be successful. This is because he always had an outsider's view of America. When he first arrived he assumed everyone would be happy and life would be so different from the Congo. He expects he'll be able to get his PHD, and pursue all the degrees that he wants. Joe continues to talk about this dream, but Sepha makes it clear that Joe had long since stopped working towards it.

When Joe gives up on getting his PHD, he starts talking about the Congo again. He treats Africa the same way that he treated America. This leads to an argument later between Ken and Joe, where Ken finally calls out Joe for being so misguided. Ken accuses Joe of romanticizing Africa, just like he used to do with America. Ken is upset because he's actively been working to pursue his dream of being successful. He's been getting what he wants, while Joe hasn't put any real effort towards his dream. Instead, he expects to just go somewhere and have everything handed to him. Ken points out



Joe's hypocrisy, knowing full well that he'd never want to return to Africa, and that things wouldn't be any better for him.

Joe's delusion plays a role in Sepha realizing that the American Dream is something that requires effort and needs to be worked for, it isn't just given for free.

Chapter 8

Sepha hasn't talked too much about his life in Africa, or gone into that much detail about his family. In this chapter, he recounts the positive relationship that he shared with his father. Sepha's father was actually a huge part of his life, which is gradually revealed as the book continues. Sepha comes to realize that a large part of his depression is as much from losing his father as it is everything else going on in his life. This chapter foreshadows how important his father is, with Sepha trying to emulate that behavior. This also plays a role in the theme of Identity. Sepha is choosing to become more like his father because of the respect and love he had for him, and not just because it's part of his history.

The theme of Friendship is brought up as well. Naomi has a huge impact on Sepha. He starts taking care of his store again because of how friendly Naomi is being towards him. He wants to take care of her, and he wants to create a good environment for them to be together and read. Judith recognizes how important this friendship is and starts to actively encourage it; both by letting Naomi go to the store at all, but also by showing up herself.

Discussion Question 1

Compare Ken and Joe's perception of the American Dream.

Discussion Question 2

What transformation begins to take place in Sepha's life as a result of having Judith and Naomi in his life?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss the symbolism of Sepha's cleaning and fixing up of his store.

Vocabulary

habitable, rotation, hygiene, hypocrisy, exerted, insincerity, tending, luminous, ghastly, superfluous, sumptuously



Chapters 9-10

Summary

Chapter 9

Sepha shows up at his Uncle's apartment. The apartment is still filled with mostly Ethiopian tenants, which is one of the reasons why Sepha originally felt like he had to move out. Sepha fondly remembers the way that his Uncle took care of him when he first arrived. He starts to go through the apartment, reading the letters that his Uncle used to write to politicians, pleading for help in Ethiopia. It makes Sepha think back to his childhood, and the final days of his father. His father used to be a major politician, until a regime change took that away.

Soldiers stormed into the house one evening looking for him. They found flyers that Sepha had been handing out for a group called, Students for Democracy. His father claimed that the fliers were his. The soldiers beat up his father and eventually brought him outside to be executed.

Chapter 10

Sepha, Naomi, and Judith continued to spend time together during Naomi's break. Judith brought dinner one evening, referring to it as a picnic at his shop. During Christmas, they started to spend even more time together. Sepha, when he came over to Judith's home, saw the pile of presents from Naomi's father, who was a Professor teaching abroad. Judith made a joke about their wealth, which cut deep for Sepha. He imagined what kind of future he could possibly have with someone who was in a much higher class than himself. He ended up making an excuse to leave, even though Judith was trying to get him to stay. They ended up shaking hands at the end of the night, which Sepha thought was the end of their relationship.

Analysis

Chapter 9

The theme of Identity is subtly brought up again. Sepha left his Uncle because he didn't want to live in a predominantly Ethiopian environment. It isn't because Sepha is ashamed of his ethnicity, but he wants to become his own person, not just another Ethiopian. His Uncle has never been able to change. That's why he has stayed in the same community and kept writing letters to politicians. Seeing that his Uncle is living this way gives Sepha more motivation to do something with his life and pursue his own dreams.



Sepha's relationship with his father is explored in more detail. It's clear that his father loved Sepha, which is why he was willing to protect Sepha when the soldiers raided their home and found the flyers that Sepha was supposed to hand out.

The flyers themselves also reveal a very different side of Sepha. With a few exceptions, Sepha hasn't been shown to take any initiative. In Africa, Sepha was actually being very active and wanted to fight for democracy. His action is what caused his father to die, which helps to explain why he became so passive later on in life. Sepha doesn't seem to even realize this until much later in the book, when he acknowledges how damaging it was to lose his father. The flyers, then, represent a part of Sepha that was once involved and active in his community, a time when he cared passionately about something. He hasn't felt that way in a long time.

Chapter 10

This chapter focuses on two themes, Friendship and Race/Class issues. Sepha, Judith, and Naomi all continue to get closer. Each has been having a clear positive impact on the other. Naomi has been calmer compared to when she first arrived and started acting out against her mother. Both she and Judith clearly needed a friend, especially since nobody wanted to approach them because of their race.

Sepha is hurt when he sees all of the presents that Naomi's father has sent. To him, this is a reminder of how poor Sepha is. He immediately feels inferior, and jumps to the conclusion that Judith would only be interested in someone with wealth who could constantly provide presents like that every Christmas. Judith makes it clear that she isn't interested in wealth. This should be obvious to Sepha, but it's not.

If Judith did care that much about wealth, she never would have left her husband in the first place. It was insensitive for Judith to bring up, but Sepha had never spoken to her before about their class differences. This was likely the first time that Judith even thought about it at all. This is another example of Sepha causing trouble by not just being more open and forward.

Discussion Question 1

Discuss the theme of Identity as it pertains to Naomi, Sepha and Judith.

Discussion Question 2

Why was Sepha so upset when he saw all of the presents under the tree?

Discussion Question 3

From Judith's perspective, why is she surprised at Sepha's reaction to the presents?

Vocabulary

keepsake, sash, deceitfulness, homogeneous, dormant, distinction, dexterously, bequest, legislate, liberate, lieu, quarrelsome



Chapters 11-12

Summary

Chapter 11

Sepha continues to think about his past. When he first arrived in America, he wasn't planning on staying for long. It took him two months to finally admit he was staying. His Uncle helped him get a job at a hotel, where he met Joe and Ken. He felt like he was wasting his life, working all day just to pay for rent in a meager apartment. He decided he wanted to do something bigger, which is why he bought his store. It inspired Ken and Joe too. Both of them talked about how they were going to do big things with their life. Sepha knows that none of them have accomplished what they wanted to.

Back in the present, and still at his Uncle's house, he realizes that he has nothing, and he doesn't know how to turn his life around. He considers stealing money from his Uncle, but ultimately decides against it. He leaves, feeling disgusted with himself for even thinking about stealing.

Chapter 12

Sepha, allows himself to think, once again, back to shortly after he left Judith's home, upset about the gifts. During that time, Sepha was too depressed to open his store. When he returned to work, Naomi was upset that he hadn't been there. He apologized and the two started to read together again. Sepha realized he made a mistake. Christmas was right around the corner, and he wanted to surprise everyone with a gift. Not just Judith and Naomi, but also his own family in Ethiopia. He wrote a note to Judith, apologizing for leaving the other night. He said he wanted to meet with Judith and Naomi later that evening to give them presents.

Sepha spent the rest of the day finding presents for everyone. He went home and did his best to wrap the presents. He found a note from Judith, apologizing because she and Naomi were leaving that night to spend Christmas with her family. Sepha was crushed. He wandered around outside and ultimately ended up hiring a prostitute. When she left, he let her take one of the presents he bought, insisting she give it to someone she cared about.

Analysis

Chapter 11

This is another chapter that primarily focuses on the American Dream. Early on, all of the immigrants thought that their lives were going to improve just because they were in America. It's implied that they were overwhelmed with the opportunities before them. In Africa, they wouldn't have been able to pursue each of their individual dreams. Sepha



buys his store, which for a time makes him happy because he thinks he's successful. As the reader has seen, the store eventually fails because Sepha just doesn't care enough about it. As Ken pointed out earlier, it isn't what Sepha really wants to be doing with his life. Sepha is starting to learn that the American Dream is about having freedom to pursue whatever a person wants, but it isn't something that just happens automatically.

Sepha considers stealing from his Uncle so he can pursue a new dream, but he manages to stop himself. He realizes that part of the dream is earning what you want, and he can't just take shortcuts. That was the same problem he and Joe have always had. Joe thought going to college would just lead to him being successful and having a career. Sepha thought just buying a store would be enough to launch him into success, and his store would just naturally grow into a restaurant. Ken was the only one that kept actively working towards his dream, and he keeps trying to get his friends to do the same.

Chapter 12

The positive effects of friendship are shown again at the start of the chapter. Sepha is wallowing in depression, but Naomi is able to snap him out of that. Not only does she encourage him to keep coming to the store, but she even makes him care about Christmas. Christmas was something that Sepha normally didn't even acknowledge. He'd make a call to his family and send them some money and that was that. This year, Sepha wants to go out and get presents for everyone, carefully selecting each gift because of the meaning it has to the person he's delivering them to.

Sepha shows a moment of character growth when he receives the note from Judith and Naomi. In the past, he would have mistakenly believed Judith and Naomi were leaving because they didn't care about him. While he's hurt that they aren't around, he's much more accepting of the fact that them leaving was simply because of family plans, not because they disliked him.

Sepha knows that he needs someone to support him, which is why he goes out to hire a prostitute. Him giving her a gift isn't him giving up on Christmas, but it's actually him acknowledging that friendship is important. He wants her to give the gift to someone because he knows they will appreciate it. If he didn't care, he'd either give all of the gifts over, or not send them out later on in the book.

Discussion Question 1

What is Sepha realizing about ownership of the store?

Discussion Question 2

What are some of the positive affects of friendship that are pointed out in Chapter 12?



Discussion Question 3

What reaction by Sepha shows that his character is experiencing growth?

Vocabulary

livid, averse, collectively, nimble, antiquated, subsistence, livelihood, lucrative, mandate, intention, peculiarity, severely, pliant



Chapters 13-14

Summary

Chapter 13

Still in the past, Sepha eventually made his way over to the restaurant where Joe worked. Joe always asked Ken and Sepha to visit him, but he seemed surprised and horrified when Sepha arrived. Sepha doesn't say anything or go inside, he just noted how different Joe looked in his work outfit, which he always changed out of. He was reminded how much Joe had changed in the last 17 years, how he gave up on his dream of getting a PHD and how he hadn't completed any of his poems.

Sepha started returning home, wondering if it would just be better to go past Logan Circle and start a new life somewhere else. He was reminded of his life in Ethiopia, the first life that he abandoned. He realized that his life there ended when he lost the support of his father.

Chapter 14

Still recalling the past, Sepha had spent his Christmas drinking with Ken and Joe, after finding out that Judith and Naomi had left. Sepha and Joe arrived at the bar first, since Ken was working late for the holidays. Joe mocked Ken when he showed up in his suit after a 12-hour day, referring to him as the perfect immigrant. Ken was upset and talked about how his father had nothing when he lived in Africa. He was jobless and illiterate, with no possessions. Ken went on to say how if he died, his sister would get \$100,000, all of his suits would be sent to his brother, and Joe would get his car. That's why he had come to America in the first place. After that, he had angrily left.

Analysis

Chapter 13

One of the central conflicts between Ken and Joe is how they disagree about Africa. Joe acts like he's proud of his heritage, and implies that he has always intended to return. He accuses Ken of betraying his roots, implying that he dresses up exactly like the white man wants and serves them. The reader now realizes this is Joe lashing out because he's unhappy with his own position in life. Joe is the one that feels like he's being forced to dress in a fancy outfit to serve white people. He's focused solely on race and not on his job, or on bettering himself.

The themes of Identity, Race/Class, and The American Dream are woven together in this chapter. Sepha sees that he and Joe have been very similar. Neither one of them has been happy with their jobs, but they never acknowledged it or tried to get something different. They weren't able to make identities for themselves. They weren't trying to



pursue their own American Dream; they had just given up and accepted this is the way their lives were. Sepha is finally waking up and realizing that if he's going to achieve his dreams, he needs to put forth the effort.

This chapter isn't just about exploring themes. Sepha admits to himself how important his father was. Losing his father hurt Sepha deeply. He's been trying to run away from what happened, but now he's finally realizing what his father meant to him, and how painful it was to lose him.

Chapter 14

Despite Joe and Ken fighting, this chapter still shows how important their friendship is, thus demonstrating the theme of Friendship. Sepha is hurt from Judith and Naomi being gone, but both longtime friends are there to support him. Despite constantly disagreeing, Ken also makes it clear that Joe is his friend, remarking that he's in his will. Their argument also touches on the theme of Identity. Ken has completely remade himself since arriving in America. Joe sees this as a betrayal, but Ken is just pursuing his American Dream. Ken doesn't want to be like his father, who had nothing. He's not letting his past define him. He's actively working to reshape his life and achieve his dream.

While Ken has achieved a great deal of success, it's also clear that he isn't getting the level of respect he deserves. His boss expected him to work alone just because of his race.

Discussion Question 1

What was the fight between Ken and Joe really about?

Discussion Question 2

Discuss the theme of Identity for the three African immigrants.

Discussion Question 3

Why has Ken made a success of his life whereas the other two really haven't?

Vocabulary

aspirant, attained, eminent, abstinence, applicable, resemblance, astringent, discernment, keen, atonement, berated, sheepish



Chapters 15-16

Summary

Chapter 15

Still remembering the past, Sepha recalls that he had kept waiting for Judith and Naomi to return from their Christmas break. At first he was depressed when they didn't come back sooner. He spoke with his family on Christmas, which was enough to reinvigorate him. He started taking care of his store again, but there was trouble in the neighborhood. People were getting evicted, creating a very hostile attitude. Sepha neighbor, Mrs. Davis, invited him to a meeting later that evening to discuss what was happening in Logan Circle.

Sepha was surprised to find Judith there. She offered him a seat, but he had chosen to sit in the front. Everyone was upset about the evictions. Judith tried to show her support, but she was told to shut up by the crowd. Judith went to the store the next day. She told Sepha she had only arrived a few days ago. Naomi was doing well in Connecticut, so Judith set her up at a boarding school there. Naomi left a gift for Sepha, a typewriter that her father got her. She wanted Sepha to write to her while she was gone.

The next day, someone smashed in Judith's car window. Sepha had seen the window and went to tell her, but instead of Judith greeting him at the door, it was her husband. Sepha grimly left. More bricks were thrown over the next few days, mostly at buildings. Sepha could hear shouting from Judith's house. A few days later, she returned to the store. She said that her husband had left, and it was a mistake to let him come back with her. She told Sepha they should get together again, and she had given him a letter from Naomi, who said that she missed him.

Chapter 16

Sepha, in the present, returns home, only briefly passing by the store he is going to lose. He thinks back to his last few encounters with Judith. As he walks by her house, he finally reveals why she left. Judith's house was burned down, thankfully while she was out. The fire was started by the same person who was throwing bricks, Franklin Henry Thomas, one of the men that got evicted. Sepha realized how much the two of them had in common, and how he could have easily gone down that same path.

Judith decided to leave Logan Circle after that. She promised to keep in touch with Sepha, but the two of them never spoke again after that. Sepha only wrote a single letter to Naomi, and he never ended up sending it. In the present, Sepha looks on the life that he has. For once, he feels happy with everything that he has in his life. He's decided that he has had enough of being suspended between two worlds, going nowhere, and that the time for being indecisive is over.



Analysis

Chapter 15

Stephanos continues to show some growth at the start of the chapter. He's still sad that Naomi and Judith aren't around, but he's not jumping to the conclusion that they're gone from his life. Unfortunately, he starts to slip into his old habits as the chapter continues. When Judith shows up at the town meeting, he doesn't sit with her. This is a clear example of the theme of Racism and Class Distinction. Sepha says if he had sat with Judith, everyone would take it as him choosing a side, meaning he was siding with someone who was rich and white. All the tenants are upset with Judith because they think she's part of the problem because of her race and money, even though she cares about the neighborhood and doesn't want anyone else to be evicted. This theme is continued with her car being smashed in by a brick.

Sepha also ends up momentarily writing off the friendship that he had with Naomi. He tries to convince himself that she didn't actually care about him. This is likely just his way of trying to cope with the pain of her being gone. If he can convince himself that they weren't close, it might hurt less. This changes when he gets the letter from Naomi, another item that he ends up keeping because it represents the friendship that they have. Another clear example of the friendship is the typewriter that Naomi leaves behind, her way of telling Sepha that she wants him to write to her. The typewriter symbolizes Naomi's desire and attempt to reach out to Sepha, to continue the relationship, but in the end, Sepha isn't able to reciprocate.

The theme of Class Differences is brought up in another way when Sepha meets Judith's husband. Sepha takes that as a sign that Judith would never want to be with someone like him, and that's why she went back to her rich husband. The reader is never told why Judith asked him to come back with her in the first place, but it's clear that she regrets it based on how much they are fighting, and how she ultimately ends up throwing him out.

Chapter 16

The theme of Class Differences is explored again through the character of Franklin Henry Thomas. Franklin lashed out at Judith because he felt like rich people were ruining the neighborhood. He saw her house as insulting, because it was so clean and well-kept compared to everything else. Sepha relates to Franklin because he realizes he had a similar line of thinking. He kept trying to create issues between him and Judith based on their social class. Judith never once looked down on Sepha and she kept trying to pursue a relationship. He was the one inventing problems, and he sees that if he kept going down that path, he might end up exactly like Franklin.

Sepha loses contact with Judith and Naomi. Even though he wrote a letter, he couldn't bring himself to send it despite that being what he wanted. This ties into Sepha's mindset in the present. In the past, he wasn't willing to pursue his dream. That's why he ended up losing Judith and Naomi. That's why he ended up losing the store. Now, he



wants to do something with his life. He knows what the American Dream is, and he knows that he has the opportunity to turn his life around and pursue happiness. That's why he's no longer depressed, despite the fact that Judith and Naomi are gone, and he's about to be evicted from his store. He knows that he has a second chance, and he's not going to end up lashing out and becoming bitter like Franklin Henry Thomas.

Discussion Question 1

What does it indicate that Sepha doesn't want to sit with Judith at the meeting?

Discussion Question 2

How does Sepha's view Franklin as a cautionary tale?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss the character of Franklin Henry Thomas.

Vocabulary

offense, dismay, indignation, supplementary, disclaimer, dispute, capriciously, cultivation, obsolete, intrinsic, arraignment, optimistic



Characters

Sepha Stephanos

Sepha Stephanos is the protagonist of the novel. He is an Ethiopian immigrant who came to the U.S. after he watched his father be brutally executed by the new government in Ethiopia.

His father's death haunts him, and it is only until he can forgive himself for his possible part in his father's death (Sepha was affiliated with an anti-communist group) that he is able to move on. Now in America for more than 17 years, Stephanos owns a small convenient store where his friends, Ken and Joe come to visit with him each week.

Ken and Joe are also both from Africa. They all met one another while working at a hotel as valets. Sepha's Uncle Berhane had gotten him the job when he first arrived in America.

Stephanos struggles with a sense of who he is. Is he Ethiopian? Is he American? Is he both? His greatest trouble in the novel is reconciling his immigrant status in his heart and mind. As a result of this lack of understanding of himself, he is unable to commit to a relationship that he finds himself drawn to with Judith. It is only when he makes peace with his father's death, and with what his new identity is, that he is able to find peace.

Ken

Originally from Kenya, Ken is a successful engineer. When he worked at the hotel with Joe and Sepha, the manager called him Ken the Kenyan. Despite having a good career and being well off financially, he, like Sepha, struggles to fit into the greater fabric of the American Dream.

Ken also faces extreme racism when he and Stephanos go to a car dealership to purchase a car. Because he is black, none of the salespeople will approach him to even attempt to sell him a car. Later, he buys a used car and though Sepha thinks it is a very ugly car, he lies to Ken about it, because he doesn't want his friend to be any more upset or hurt than he already is by the incident. Ken is a very good friend, as he encourages Stephanos to continue making a go of running his store. He even opens the store up for him some days when Sepha just can't seem to get the energy to do so.

Joe

Originally from the Congo, Joe works in a five star restaurant. The hotel manager that he used to work for nicknamed him Congo Joe. Joe works at a very nice restaurant in the present time, but Sepha knows that it isn't what he wants to be doing.



Joe wanted to be a writer, and wanted to go to school to earn an degree. Instead, he is still in a subservient role to rich white patrons that come into the restaurant. Joe is as disenchanted with the American Dream as Sepha is.

Judith

Judith is the recently divorced mother of an 11-year old girl, named Naomi. A college History professor, she has taken a sabbatical to focus on restoring an old mansion in Logan's Circle, and to help her daughter adjust to their new lifestyle. The reader learns that her ex-husband is also a professor and is teaching abroad. They are quite wealthy.

Judith is white, and as such, she and her daughter stand out in Logan's Circle, which is comprised mostly of immigrants and African Americans. Naomi is bi-racial, so perhaps she figures that they would be accepted into the community. She was very wrong. During her short stay there they are threatened and harassed, and eventually, their newly renovated home is burned to the ground by residents in the area that resent the growing revitalization movement that is going to evict them from their homes.

Naomi

Naomi is 11 when the story's action begins. She has taken to hanging out at Stephanos's corner store. Since the divorce she's had little contact with her own father and it seems that in Sepha, she has found a surrogate.

Naomi is bi-racial, very intelligent, and in many aspects very naive. She is harassed and taunted when she walks on the sidewalk in their neighborhood, but she blows it off as if it were nothing. Judith worries about her safety.

Naomi discovers that Sepha loves books as much as she does, so they take to spending hours reading and discussing various works of classical fiction. The reader learns that Naomi is very bitter about the divorce, and often, just to get back at her mother, runs away from home. Naomi and Sepha bond over their loss of their fathers in their lives.

Berhane Stephanos

Uncle Berhane Stephanos is Sepha's uncle who takes him in when he first arrives in America. Sepha lives with him for about two months before getting the convenient store and a place of his own. His uncle had been a rich man in Ethiopia, but had been able to flee the country when the uprising had begun.

Now, in America, he is no longer wealthy and has to hold down two different jobs to make ends meet. He lives in an apartment complex that is peopled primarily by other Ethiopian immigrants. This is where Sepha runs when he finds out that Naomi and Judith are gone.



Mrs. Davis

Mrs. Davis is an older woman that lives in the same community as Sepha, Judith, and Naomi. She does not want the white people living in her community, nor does she want revitalization to take place because it would mean displacing many of the residents who have lived there for so many years.

Unnamed Prostitute

Around Christmas time, when Stephanos learns that Judith and Naomi aren't even in town to celebrate Christmas, he takes the presents that he's purchased for them, and after he hires the services of this prostitute, gives her the gifts so that she can give them to someone she cares for.

Franklin Henry Thomas

Franklin Henry Thomas lives in the neighborhood of Logan's Circle, and is one of the first in the area to be evicted because their building is going to be made into luxury apartment buildings for the young and trendy. He is the one that throws the bricks through Judith's windows, and most likely is the one that set the fire that burned her house down.

Additionally, in Franklin Henry Thomas, Sepha sees a cautionary tale. He could very easily have ended up like Franklin Henry Thomas, as they both came from similar backgrounds.

Sepha's Father

Though he is already long since deceased when the novel opens, his death and his life, still have a great influence over Sepha's life in the present. His father was arrested when fliers against the communists were found in their family's home. Though they had belonged to Sepha, his father was arrested and executed.

In the end, it is his father's advice that he hears in his mind. His father had told him once that a bird that is stuck between two branches is usually bitten on both wings. Sepha realizes from this early advice of his father that a man who is stuck between two worlds will be alone in the world.



Symbols and Symbolism

Map of Africa/Coup Game

One of the traditions that Stepha, Ken, and Joe have is naming African coups, usually around the map of Africa in Stepha's store. This is their way of acknowledging everything that has happened in Africa, which is still part of all their history. It's also a reminder of the lives that they left behind, but also of what they had to escape from.

Ken's Suits/Speech

Ken always wears his business suits and tries his best to speak like an American. He goes through phases where he changes his speech patterns based on what he hears at work. Sometimes that means ending his sentences with questions, while other times he'd be repetitive. Joe often remarks that Ken is trying to hide his African heritage when he does this, and he sees it as an insult. Joe is partially correct, but Ken isn't trying to distance himself because of shame. He wants to be so much more than his father, who was illiterate, never worked, and had no possessions. Acting like a big shot engineer is his way of accomplishing this.

Judith's Home

Before Judith moves in, Logan Circle is a ghetto. There are mansions, but they are all run down and converted into slums. Judith purchases one of the mansions using her inheritance money and cleans it up. Once she is done, it is a majestic building, which makes it stand out. Franklin Henry Thomas sees this as an insult when he is evicted from his run down home, which is why he decides to burn it down.

Judith's Race

Judith stands out not only because of her house, but because she is the first white person to move in. When everyone gets evicted, she is the only white person who attends the town meeting. When she tries to speak up, she is rudely told to shut up. Nobody wants to sit around her either, since in their eyes she is part of the problem. She is rich and white; she isn't like any of the tenets being evicted.

Dinner Invitation/Naomi's Letter

Stepha keeps the dinner invitation from Naomi. For him, it represents how close that not only he and Naomi had become, but also him and Judith. It marked them wanting to bring him into their lives. At the end of the book, Naomi writes a letter to Stepha, which



he also holds onto. This letter serves as confirmation of their friendship, and reassures Stepha that he meant something to Naomi.

Judith's Purse

Judith's purse is always a mess because of all the items she carries. She brings important documentations for both her and Naomi everywhere she goes. Stepha remarks that this is because she's always ready to go on the run.

Cleaning the Store

Throughout most of the book, Stepha doesn't care about the state of his store. He constantly keeps out-of-date products on the shelf, and never bothers to clean. Once Naomi enters into his life, he starts to take care of the store, cleaning it up and getting rid of dated products. He does this because he wants to impress Naomi, and make the store feel more homely for the both of them.

Students for Democracy Fliers

Back in Ethiopia, Stephanos was carrying these flyers to hand out to other likeminded people. It was his way of resisting a corrupt government. When soldiers raided the house, Stephanos's father claimed that the flyers belonged to him. This was one final act to protect his son, who would have likely been executed if he admitted to owning them.

Opening the Store

When Stepha opened the store, it was a very inspiring act to Ken and Joe. At the time, both of them were still working at the hotel, a job they hated. Seeing Stepha open a store filled them with hope. In their eyes, it was a sign that they could pursue the American dream, despite their immigrant status.

Christmas Gifts

Stepha never cared much about Christmas. He would call his family, but never get them presents. After meeting Judith and Naomi, he is inspired to get Christmas gifts for not only them, but also for his family back home. This represents the newfound hope that Judith and Naomi give him.



The Novel's Title

The title of the novel is a quote from a line from Dante's Inferno. Joe reads it in a class when he was attempting to get his PHD. The line appears in Dante's Inferno right when the main character is emerging from hell. He sees some of the beautiful things in heaven, but can't see them clearly, yet. This is an allegory of the type of experiences that those fleeing Africa have been through. As Joe says later of the quote, they live in hell everyday, with only glimpses of heaven in between.

The Brothers' Karamazov

One of the first books that Naomi and Sepha read together is the The Brothers' Karamazov. Reading the book together makes Sepha feel as if someone values him, and needs him. This is something that he hasn't had in a very long time.

The book, from a literary standpoint, is significant because of the line that Sepha recalls at the end of the novel. The quote states that if one has only one good memory left, then it can be the one thing that becomes a saving grace. It ends up being the memory of his father's goodness and passion for life that inspires Sepha to change his life for the better.

Alexis de Tocqueville's Democracy in America

This is a book that Judith is particularly interested in and brings to Sepha. This novel is significant because the French historian talks about more than anywhere else on the face of the planet, those living in America have the ability to change their circumstance because they wish to do so. Americans are not bound by factors such as family tradition, or caste systems. Both Judith and Sepha believe that they can reinvent themselves in America, and in the end, they both do.



Settings

Logan's Circle

This is the area of Washington D.C. that is comprised mostly of old dilapidated mansions from around the turn of the century. They have now all been turned into apartment complexes. There are a few townhomes that have not been converted, and it is one of those that Judith purchases.

Unfortunately, Judith's purchase is just the beginning of a urban renewal that will see many of the poorer residents of the community having to move elsewhere. This sets the tone for the conflict that resonates in the area.

Washington, D.C.

Washington D.C. is the area where Logan Circle is. Ironically, the statues and monuments to freedom and the American Dream are wasted on Ken, Joe, and Sepha, as they have little meaning to them.

Ethiopia

Ethiopia is where Sepha Stephanos is originally from. He fled the country during the uprising and because he feared for his life. His father was pulled from their home and executed in the street right in front of Sepha, so as a result, he has never gone home.

Sepha's Store

Sepha owns a small convenient store in one of the worst sections of the Logan Circle area. He purchased it, he says, because there wasn't a lot of foot traffic and it gave him plenty of time to sit and read books.

Sepha's store, in many respects, becomes an extension of himself, and of his feelings about his own identity and ability to succeed in life. When things are going well for him, especially when he's with Judith, the store begins to look nicer, too.

Judith and Naomi's Home

This is a restored townhome in Logan Circle. They are the only white people living there, and suffer as much racial prejudice as the black people living there. When it becomes evident that they are not welcome there, and when the townhome is burned to the ground by those living in the community, Judith and Naomi leave. This home is

where Judith first invites Sepha over for dinner, where their interest in one another is kindled, and eventually where their relationship ends.

Themes and Motifs

The American Dream

The American Dream is constantly referenced throughout the book, and is explored in great detail through Stepha, Joe, and Ken. When all three of the immigrants arrive in America they are very optimistic about the American Dream. They all expect to go to college and end up with great jobs. This is especially shown through the character of Joe, who has dreams of getting a PHD. In the early days, Joe consistently spoke about getting his PHD and earning a fortune. Even after leaving school and accepting a job as a waiter, he still kept talking about his desire to get his PHD.

Ken embraces the idea of the American Dream as well. He changes his mannerisms because he wants to be exactly like the American engineers and businessmen that he sees. In his mind, the American dream represents financial success. At one point, he yells at Joe for being too nostalgic about Africa. He points out that if they were still in Africa, he would be poor and have nothing to his name. By coming to America he's become successful and educated.

To Stepha, both Ken and Joe have unrealistic views on the American Dream. Stepha realizes that just being in America doesn't automatically mean that people will be successful. He recognizes that America is filled with hopefuls that all want to be rich and successful. There is the opportunity for a better life, but it is something that requires a great deal of effort. This is demonstrated through Stepha's story as a storeowner.

When Stepha first got his store, he was excited and hopeful at the prospect. He enjoyed getting to be his own boss, and he genuinely wanted to run his store. As time went on, he let the store fall into disarray. He stopped putting forth the effort and the store fell apart. Naomi and Judith momentarily made him care again, and he started to clean up the store and get rid of expired products. When they moved away, he became too depressed to take care of the store, often times getting up late or closing it early.

By the end of the book Stepha accepts that the American Dream exists. To him, the dream is the possibility of being able to pursue happiness. In Africa, this simply wasn't possible because of the corrupt government and all the revolutions. Just having the possibility doesn't guarantee success, and it's something that has to be actively pursued.

Class Differences

A major conflict in the book occurs in Logan Circle. When Stephanos first arrived in Logan Circle, it was a rundown ghetto. It was part of what drew Stephanos there in the first place, since the housing was cheap enough for him to afford. Over the course of 17 years, things begin to change in the neighborhood. Stephanos talks about a few small changes before Judith arrived, but he marks that as the biggest changing point. At the



end of the book, he points out how Judith's house was a shining beacon amongst all of the dirty rundown buildings. He also mentions that Judith was the first white person to move into the neighborhood, but soon more began to move in.

In the wake of the neighborhood improving, many families were being evicted because they couldn't afford to live in a classier, improved neighborhood. This directly paralleled the problem that Stephanos was facing with Judith. He wanted to enter into a relationship with her, but he felt like he was a lower class citizen compared to her. His home was a mess compared to her mansion. He didn't have lavish silverware and expensive drinks.

The theme of class difference is more directly brought up again towards the end of the book. Mrs. Davis organized a town meeting to talk about the recent evictions. Judith attended the meeting, but she clearly wasn't accepted by everyone else. When Judith tried to speak up, she was told to shut up by other members at the church. Afterwards, her car and her home were targeted because they were seen as symbols of wealth by Franklin Henry Thomas.

The theme is demonstrated through Stepha's past as well. Before the fall of his government, Stepha's father lived as an elite member of society. All of that was taken away when the government fell, and Stepha's father was killed by the new government. Stepha learns to look beyond class differences, but he's also aware that it's a very real issue for other people. He even remarks that he could have become exactly like Franklin Henry Thomas.

People Make Their Own Identity

Identity is another theme that is constantly brought up throughout the book. One of the first introductions of this theme is right at the beginning of the book. Joe and Ken are both nicknamed based on the parts of Africa they came from. Joe is Congo Joe and Ken is Ken the Kenyan. Joe wears this as a badge of honor. He's proud of his African heritage and constantly tries to relate everything in his life to his history as an African. To him, it is a large part of his identity.

Ken tries to act the opposite. Stepha notes how he always tries to emulate the engineers he works with. He changes his speech patterns based on what they do. He takes them to a strip club because he thinks that's what Americans do after a stressful day. When Ken shouts at Joe he makes it clear that his African heritage is still part of his identity, just a part that he wants to bury. He wants to escape the poverty that he left behind in Kenya, but it will always be part of his life, always motivating him to be more successful and embrace more of America.

Stepha is a little more subtle with his identity. He only makes a few passing references towards Africa until the end of the book, when he starts discussing his father. His father had a huge impact on his life, and Stepha realizes that he's been trying to emulate his



father. When he reads to Naomi, he tries to capture the same energy that his father had in telling stories.

Stepha understands that people are responsible for shaping their own identity. It doesn't matter where they come from or who their families are, but at the same time those could be influencing factors. Stepha wanted to reject most of his Ethiopian heritage, which is why he moved away from his Uncle, but he's still choosing to mimic traits from his father.

Friendship is Important

This is another theme that is demonstrated from the start of the book. One of the first things that Stepha does is talk about his friendship with Ken and Joe, mentioning that they've all been together for 17 years. This friendship is shown right away when the two of them show up. All three joke together and have their own game that they play, naming famous coups and revolutions in Africa.

Stepha explores their friendship in more detail throughout the book. While they might sometimes disagree with one another, they're also consistently supportive. Stepha went out with Ken when he wanted to buy his car. He knew how important it was for Ken, so he told him that car he picked out was beautiful, even though it was clearly old and beat up. Ken is always trying to support Stepha with his store. He calls him and encourages him to open it up on time, and he helps with his finances.

The theme of friendship is demonstrated through Judith and Naomi's relationship with Stepha as well. At the start of the story, Naomi was very troubled. She was constantly acting out, and she didn't have any friends in Logan's Circle. Judith was equally lonely. Stepha reached out to both of them, and soon Naomi was spending every day at his shop. The two of them would read together, which led to him being invited over. When Naomi left, she wrote to Stepha, stressing how important their friendship was, and how much she missed him. Stepha clearly valued her friendship, even saying that it energized and motivated him.

Stepha cleaned his store and got up on time because he wanted to impress Naomi, and give them a place where they could read together. When Judith moved away, Stepha was devastated because he lost her and Naomi as a friend. While this was happening, both Ken and Joe were again there to support Stepha and try to get him through the difficult time.

Racism

Despite the book being about immigrants, the theme of racism is usually expressed very subtly. The first time that it comes up is through Judith. Judith is the first white person to move into Logan's Circle, which is filled with immigrants like Stepha. Everyone immediately judges her based on her wealth. Everyone but Stepha treats her like an outsider.



This is shown when she tries to support them at the town meeting, and she's immediately silenced. Stepha couldn't sit with her, because he knew that everyone would see it as a betrayal to his race. Nobody else seems to care that Judith is just there to help.

The theme is shown again through Stepha's flashbacks when he first met Joe and Ken. All of them were working together at the hotel, where they were given nicknames solely based on their race. Their boss treats them like second class citizens. When Stepha's Uncle initially goes to get him the job, he has to put on a whole performance, being overly respectful to his boss. He hates that Stepha has to see him like that.

A similar scene is repeated later when Stepha goes to visit Joe. Joe feels humiliated, because he's forced to dress up in fancy clothing and respectfully serve food and drinks to rich white politicians. Even though it's a good job, he's embarrassed by it.

Joe accuses Ken of doing the very same thing, being in a job where he's serving white people. He says that they have Ken dressing up just like him, but they don't treat him like an equal. This is supported by the fact that they expect Ken to work alone on Christmas, simply because of his race.

Styles

Point of View

The novel is told from the first person point of view, from the viewpoint of Sepha Stephanos, an immigrant from Ethiopia. The point of view doesn't change, but the timeline does. Alternating between past and present within one chapter, the reader is given the viewpoint of a younger Sepha, as an older Sepha narrates the memory. The older Sepha is a more reliable narrator than the younger Sepha, and yet, both ring with the same hope for a chance at the American Dream.

Language and Meaning

The novel, itself, utilizes accessible language, and offers readers a poignant look at what it means to lose a family and a country, and to finally come to terms with how to make a new home in a new country.

Structure

The structure is non-linear in nature and tends to focus on three primary points of time in Sepha's life: The time when he first met Judith, the time when Judith has left the area and Sepha has to come to terms with what he truly wants out of life, and various scenes from living in Ethiopia, most notably his father's arrest and execution.



Quotes

“So far we’ve named more than thirty different coups in Africa. It’s become a game with us. Name a dictator and then guess the year and country. We’ve been playing the game for over a year now. We’ve expanded our playing field to include failed coups, rebellions, minor insurrections, guerrilla leaders, and the acronyms of as many rebel groups as we can find—the SPLA, TPLF, LRA, UNITA—anyone who has picked up a gun in the name of revolution.”

-- Stephanos (chapter 1 paragraph 47)

Importance: History is something that’s important to all of their characters. This shows how attached they still are to Africa. It’s also an example of the friendship they all share.

We waited ten and then twenty minutes before we finally realized that no one was coming to us, regardless of what we wore or how long we stood there.”

-- Stephanos (chapter 1 paragraph 91)

Importance: One of the themes of the book centers on not treating or judging someone differently because of their race. None of the salesmen wanted to approach Ken, because they assumed a black man couldn’t possibly be able to afford a car.

When I moved into the neighborhood I did so because it was all I could afford, and because secretly I loved the circle for what it had become: proof that wealth and power were not immutable, and America was not always so great after all.”

-- Stephanos (chapter 2 paragraph 26)

Importance: Stepha starts the book very bitter because he doesn’t have what he wants. He doesn’t quite understand the American Dream. Rather than try and figure it out, he’d rather write it off as not existing. He wants to use Logan’s Circle as an example of that dream failing. This actually ends up having the opposite effect, as the town begins to slowly improve over the course of the story.

I was still there, with all of my flaws, in Judith’s immaculate living room, which was larger and grander than anything I had ever sat and eaten in since coming to Logan Circle. I kept my legs close together and limited my movements to a few simple nods of the head. My plate teetered on a few occasions, and had it fallen on the newly restored hardwood floors, I’m confident I would have shattered with it.”

-- Stephanos (chapter 4 paragraph 47)

Importance: Another theme brought up in the book is the differences between class. It’s something that Stepha constantly obsesses over with Judith. Judith just wants to be his friend, but Stepha keeps trying to convince himself that can’t be possible because he is poor and she is wealthy.

All around me people are walking, rushing, and for the first time since Judith and Naomi left the neighborhood, I am one of them. The morning is bright and mild; it is a picture-



perfect May day with low humidity and surges of cool air that dry the sweat on my forehead as quickly as it forms. The day, I tell myself, is nothing to be afraid of. Life ticks on just as it always has.”

-- Stephanos (chapter 5 paragraph 2)

Importance: Although he hasn't fully recovered, Stepha is starting to improve his life. The majority of the book is Stepha exploring his past and coming to accept that the American Dream is real, but it's something that he has to actively work for. This is one of the first steps Stepha takes to improving his life.

It was that simple with her. She claimed me without even trying, while I, for my part, gratefully accepted her designation as one half of a “we” with nothing but pride.”

-- Stephanos (chapter 6 paragraph 81)

Importance: Naomi and Stepha's friendship has a huge impact on both characters. Up until Stepha, Naomi hasn't accepted anyone as a friendship. Stepha understands how much it means for her to extend this offer of friendship to him, and he's very proud to accept it.

It took him almost two years to remove my name from that recording. Every time I hear that greeting I feel a small pang of regret for having left him in that apartment alone. I don't have the heart to leave him a message and tell him I'm coming. It would only worry him, so instead I do what I do best. I close my eyes and hang up.”

-- Stephanos (chapter 7 paragraph 5)

Importance: While this is an example of Stepha trying to hide from his problems again, it's still an important moment for him simply because he's acknowledging how much of a problem it is. Many of the flashback scenes show how things could have been drastically different for Stepha if he had been more open and upfront with people

Think about it,” he says. “Dante is finally coming out of hell, and that is what he sees. ‘Some of the beautiful things that heaven bears.’ It's perfect, I tell you. Simply perfect. I told my teacher that no one can understand that line like an African because that is what we lived through. Hell every day with only glimpses of heaven in between.””

-- Joe (chapter 7 paragraph 22)

Importance: Not only does this passage explain the title of the book, but it also talks about the American Dream. Joe is comparing the poem to what they went through. They're escaping the hell of Africa and going to America where they finally have a chance of living their life in Heaven.

Here we were, an older man and a girl young enough to be the man's daughter, sitting in a store on a winter morning reading a novel together. I tried not to notice too much, to simply just live, but that was impossible. Every time I looked at her I became aware of just how seemingly perfect this time was.”

-- Stephanos (chapter 8 paragraph 7)



Importance: This is another example of how much the friendship is growing between Naomi and Stepha, and how important it is for both characters. It also helps to explain why Stepha is so devastated later on when he loses Naomi and Judith from his life.

Sometimes I think of my decision to leave this building as an escape, while at other times it seems more like an abandonment.”

-- Joe (chapter 9 paragraph 7)

Importance: Identity is another one of the themes of the book. Joe believes that his identity comes from being African. Stepha acknowledges that is part of his life, but he doesn't want it to define him. He felt conflicted about leaving because he didn't want to insult anyone, but at the same time he had to become his own person and couldn't keep living the way others expected just because of where he came from.

That's the breaking moment. Regardless of how I get here, everything unfolds straight from that point, with no room for deviation or digression. As soon as he spits, one of the soldiers steps to the front and, with the butt of his rifle, knocks my father across the head. Is it possible that they practiced this routine before coming over? Or is it something that's grown organically out of their previous experiences? Spit and then hit. The two soldiers take turns kicking my father in the head and ribs.”

-- Stephanos (chapter 9 paragraph 26)

Importance: Losing his father is a traumatic event that has a huge impact on the rest of Stepha's life.

I stared at the boxes and tried to guess their contents. It was obvious just from looking at them that whoever Naomi's father may have been, and regardless of how far away he may have lived, he had me beat.”

-- Stephanos (chapter 10 paragraph 22)

Importance: This is another example of Stepha focusing on wealth and the class division between him and Judith. In his mind, he's losing some nonexistent competition. Judith doesn't care wealth. She and Naomi just want Stepha to be part of their life, but he keeps pulling away because he feels like he's lower class and doesn't deserve to be with them.

I was saying earlier that I couldn't remember at which point I understood that I had left home for good. I can't seem to remember, either, when we stopped having these conversations. The two are connected, aren't they? I never understood that until right now: that everything went with you.”

-- Stephanos (chapter 13 paragraph 40)

Importance: Stepha is finally acknowledging how hard it was for him to lose his father, and the profound effect that it has had on the rest of his life.