

Cane River Study Guide

Cane River by Lalita Tademy

(c)2015 BookRags, Inc. All rights reserved.



Contents

Cane River Study Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Plot Summary.....	3
Suzette, Chapters 1 through 5.....	4
Suzette, Chapters 6 through 10.....	7
Philomene, Chapters 11 through 15.....	10
Philomene, Chapters 16 through 21.....	12
Philomene, Chapters 22 through 30.....	15
Emily, Chapters 31 through 37.....	19
Emily, Chapters 38 through 48.....	22
Characters.....	24
Objects/Places.....	27
Themes.....	29
Style.....	31
Quotes.....	33
Topics for Discussion.....	35

Plot Summary

Suzette is born a slave in 1825. Her mother Elizabeth works in the kitchen of the plantation Rosedew, and when Suzette is old enough, she learns the ways of the kitchen from her mother. While Suzette is hard-working, she is early taught the lesson of keeping her mouth shut when it comes to dealing with the white masters. As a personal companion to Orelie, the niece of her owners, Suzette finds herself on the fringe of life as a free woman, never able to fully participate but near enough to see what she's missing. When a friend of her owner takes an interest in her, Suzette feels powerless to refuse and is soon pregnant with a son by that man, Eugene Daurat. The son is named Gerent, and Suzette later gives birth to a daughter, another child by Eugene, this one named Philomene. When Rosedew's master dies, Suzette knows that her family is likely to be torn apart, and this is the case. Philomene is bought by Orelie and lives as one of only a few slaves on the farm of Orelie's husband.

Orelie manages to avoid the advances of a white man named Narcisse and falls in love instead with a slave named Clement. The two obtain permission to marry, and Philomene gives birth to twins, Thany and Bet. When Orelie's husband dies, Narcisse urges Orelie to settle debts by selling off some of the slaves, including Clement. Soon after, Philomene falls ill, and when she begins to slowly recover, she's told that the twin daughters have died. Narcisse knows that Philomene has experienced uncanny visions she refers to as "glimpsings," and he stands in awe of her for this gift. She uses it to control Narcisse to some degree, convincing him that he will have children only with her. After two childless marriages, Narcisse believes her and indulges her to some degree, building a cabin for Philomene and her growing family. As the Civil War comes to a close, Philomene and her family find themselves facing the new challenges of freedom.

Emily has a relationship with a Frenchman and bears several children by him. They live together as a family, though the law won't allow them to marry and members of the community either shun them or threaten violence. Over the years, the older women die off and the younger women of the family mature and take on the roles of leaders. Emily lives through years of upheaval and continued prejudice, seeking a peace that seems just out of reach. The story is based on factual events with records, letters, photos and other documentation.



Suzette, Chapters 1 through 5

Suzette, Chapters 1 through 5 Summary

As the story opens in 1834, Suzette has been slapped by Madame Françoise Derbanne, the mistress of Rosedew, the plantation house where Suzette works as a slave. Françoise chastises Suzette's mother, Elisabeth, saying that the Madame's husband had become ill the last time Elisabeth had prepared a particular dish. Suzette speaks up, saying that it wasn't her mother's cooking that had caused the master's illness but his excessive drinking. Françoise slaps Suzette sharply. The following morning, before the rest of the household is awake, Suzette slips from her place in the house and pees on Françoise's favorite roses. Suzette is nursemaid to Françoise's niece, Oreline. The two girls are the same age and Suzette has lived most of her life in the house rather than having lived with the slaves in the quarter. She has the opportunity to go to the Church of St. Augustine and sees her godmother, a free woman named Doralise Derbanne who had been acknowledged as the daughter of Françoise's husband, Louise Derbanne.

Suzette's mother, Elisabeth, is the cook for the plantation. Her father, Gerasime, works in the fields and is a fiddler who is often loaned out to other plantations to provide music. Suzette spends a great deal of time with Oreline and her cousin, Narcisse Fredieu, who is a pudgy youngster. On a particular day, Suzette asks Oreline to teach her to read but Oreline, unwilling to hide anything from her aunt and uncle, refuses. Françoise talks to Oreline about her upcoming confirmation and tells Suzette that she has the ability to "rise above your mother and the others in the quarter."

Chapter two begins in 1837. Suzette is to be confirmed in the church with several other youngsters, including Oreline and Narcisse. Elisabeth knows that Suzette is enamored with a young freeman named Nicholas but warns Suzette that his family would never allow him to marry a slave because their children would be born into slavery. Suzette describes a deteriorating relationship between her godmother, Doralise, and her husband, Philippe.

That evening, Eugene Daurat puts in an appearance. He's a relative of the Derbannes. He speaks English and is naturally put off from many of the others who don't share his language. He makes Suzette think of her sister, Palmire, who is deaf and dumb and can only communicate through a series of motions made up by Palmire and Suzette.

In chapter three, Suzette, now thirteen, has become a good cook. Christmas arrives. Gerasime, surrounded by his children, Palmire, Apphia and Solataire, are joined by Suzette and Elisabeth, making the family complete as they await for the gifts from the Derbannes. The slaves each receive Christmas stockings, harmonicas, material and blankets with whiskey handed out to the men. Elisabeth and Suzette slip away to start serving breakfast on this day when the slaves are well-fed and rested. The slaves later



have a party and Suzette slips away from the festivities. Eugene Daurat follows her and insists that she allow him to have sex with her. She is a virgin and her dress is bloodied.

In chapter four, Suzette suffers morning sickness and realizes she's pregnant, but doesn't know what to do about it. She knows that she can't question Eugene simply because he's white and a friend of the Derbannes. She dreads telling her mother. Suzette's work suffers and Francoise is constantly hitting her for making mistakes. Suzette's mother figures it out and demands to know who the father is. Suzette confesses that it's Eugene and Elisabeth believes she must tell Francoise about the pregnancy before Francoise guesses that her husband might be the father. The next day Francoise, after learning of the situation, questions Suzette and seems to believe that it is Eugene's child. Later, Orelene questions Suzette and is angry, citing her betrayal that Suzette didn't come to her for help. Suzette says there's nothing Orelene could have done.

Suzette gives birth to a son and Francoise, who attends the birthing of all slave children born on the plantation, names the boy Gerant. Elisabeth is tender with Suzette after the rough delivery and says that the family loves all its children, regardless of the method of conception. Suzette, after a month-long recuperation time, continues her work and fears Eugene's continued interest. Palmire also gives birth and the father of her children is Louis.

In chapter five, Louis grows ill, and without his oversight, the slaves are treated much worse than had previously been the case. Suzette is again pregnant and has to point out the fact to Eugene. She tells him that he could buy his children and set them free, but he doesn't respond. This child is a girl and Suzette names her Philomene. Suzette learns that Eugene Daurat has moved in with Doralise.

Suzette, Chapters 1 through 5 Analysis

Suzette's sense of right and wrong is sparked by the fact that Madame accuses Elisabeth of adding too much sugar to a particular dish. Suzette stands up for her mother and immediately faces physical punishment for her action. This is a sign of Suzette's personality, that she believes in right and wrong and that she doesn't believe anyone is exempt. Her mother, however, quickly tells Suzette that she was asking for trouble by speaking out. Elisabeth has a more realistic grip on the situation than does Suzette, who has lived most of her life in the plantation house as a relatively well-treated slave. This has probably led Suzette to believe that she can expect more of life than is realistic. Suzette, in fact, spends a great deal of time dreaming of marrying a freeman, of being married in a church and of having a life of her own. Suzette tries to give a good description of the Church of St. Augustine and feels sorry that she and another slave named Old Bertram are the only ones allowed to leave the plantation to go to the church.

On the day of her confirmation, Suzette seems to realize that her dreams are all for nothing without consent. This could be merely the result of the let down of the moment



after she had built the event up in her mind, or it could be that she's finally facing the reality of her situation. In any case, she tells her mother that she wants a church wedding at St. Augustine when she marries. She then acknowledges that it doesn't matter what she wants and that her owners will make those decisions for her. Elisabeth reminds Suzette that she has duties in the plantation house but that her family lives in the slave quarters, apparently trying to remind Suzette of her roots. Elisabeth goes on to say that she knows any one of them - or all of them - could be sold at the whim of their owners. It's around this time that Suzette realizes that the childhood days of companionship with the white children are gone. It's Narcisse who snubs her, telling her rather rudely to fetch a jacket. Suzette spends the rest of that evening trying to avoid the younger people of the household and tending to the men, which puts her in contact with Eugene Daurat for the first time.

When Eugene rapes Suzette, she is a virgin. After he is finished, she realizes that her dress is bloodied. It's a statement of the times and the societal dictates that Suzette does not rush to the comforting arms of her mother to tell what's happened, but rushes to find a way to hide the evidence of the rape. She realizes that she has to clean her dress right away in order to keep her mother from seeing the blood. She later says that there's nothing a black woman can do except capitulate and will eventually come to compare her forced sexual encounters with Eugene with cleaning the outhouse - a horrible task that has to be completed in order to move on to the next task.

When Elisabeth figures out that Suzette is pregnant, she insists that Suzette tell her who the father is. Suzette's first words are that she "did not want it," indicating that she hadn't sought out male companionship. Elisabeth's are to ask the race of the father. Elisabeth knows that Louis Derbanne has fathered children by Palmire and that Francoise is aware of the situation. Francoise may not have the power to stop her husband's sleeping with the slaves, but she does have the power to make all their lives miserable. Elisabeth seems to immediately fear what the face of another mulatto child will do to Francoise.

At one point, Elisabeth urges one of Palmire's sons to hide when Francoise makes her arrival in the slave quarters, but it's not immediately clear why. Later, it's revealed that the child is the offspring of Louis, Francoise's husband, and everyone knows that the mere sight of the child is enough to make Francoise angry. The slaves work to keep the children out of sight, realizing that she might some day become angry enough to sell them. In fact, the three children belonging to Palmire and Louis are the first Francoise chooses to sell when times demand some instant income.

Eugene Daurat is white and is accepted in the white society, which makes it interesting that he chooses to marry a black woman, Doralise. Doralise is free and is generally accepted but is black, nonetheless. Eugene flaunts convention to live with her, though the relationship is never fully explained. The whites ostracize Eugene for his choice, but he simply turns to the freed blacks of the time for companionship. The attitudes of people will become much less tolerant over the coming years and there will come a time when it's absolutely dangerous for a white to make the choice to live with a black, regardless of the heritage of the black.



Suzette, Chapters 6 through 10

Suzette, Chapters 6 through 10 Summary

In chapter six, Louis has died and Francoise virtually hides from the duties of running the plantation. Francoise worries that Orelene, now twenty-five, will never marry, and finally arranges a marriage between Orelene and a farmer named Joseph Ferrier. One day Francoise is told by the overseer that the bank won't extend their credit for another season and that there has to be an immediate influx of cash. He recommends selling off several slaves and Francoise agrees. Palmire's children, ages five, three and two, are sold. Orelene seems upset by the decision but Francoise notes that it will mean she'll never again have to see the children who resemble Louis.

In chapter seven, ten years pass and Suzette continues to be on hand to answer any requests by the whites she serves. She watches as Francoise ages and begins to ail. While Suzette pretends she cares about Francoise and her ailments, she has come to realize that her family is the only thing that matters to her. One day Suzette slips out to the slave quarters with eggs for Palmire, who eats little and seems to care nothing for her life after her children were sold away from the plantation. Suzette knows she'll be whipped by the overseer if she's caught with the eggs and plans to tell them she's taking them to the house and had stopped in to check on Palmire on the way if she's caught. She also stops to check on Gerasime, who has been lashed by the overseer. Back at the house, Suzette talks to Orelene about her family, knowing that Francoise is near death and seeking a way to keep her family together. When Francoise dies, Suzette is among the first of the slaves to know and sends word to the quarters, alerting the slaves that they now have to fear for their families as most will likely be sold. Suzette works to cook food for the mourners who arrive, and one day Eugene calls out to her. Orelene says she and her husband will buy Suzette and Philomene together. Suzette pleads that Eugene "look after" Gerant and Philomene. Eugene says he'll do his best for Gerant, but doesn't elaborate. Suzette tries to talk to Narcisse, but he says he hasn't the money to buy any of the slaves for himself. Suzette then approaches Doralise, pleading that she and Eugene take Gerant into their home. Doralise says she hasn't much say in Eugene's financial affairs but promises to try to help.

In chapter eight, Philomene goes to Elisabeth with the story of a "glimpsing." She says that she'd had a vision, referred to by those who know her as a "glimpsing," and that in this vision she'd been surrounded by some of the family members. Elisabeth says she believes in Philomene's visions and urges that she tell them to the young man she's fallen in love with, a young slave named Clement. The lives of the slaves improve greatly as the time approaches for a sale. They are fed more and beaten less so that they'll be in good condition for the buyers. The slaves are advertised in the Natchitoches Chronicle. The slaves are initially lined up and assessed. The overseer proudly touts the strengths and weaknesses of each as the assessors come to agree on opening bids for each slave. As they are walking back to the slave quarters, Garasime says that they each now have a price attached to them and Elisabeth says this is nothing new, that



they've always had a price attached. That night, Elisabeth and Gerasime prepare to say their good-byes, each thanking the other for their good life together and each saying that they don't plan to seek out a new mate once they are separated.

In chapter nine, Eugene is obviously torn over his role as executor of Rosedew and is now forced to oversee the splitting up of families of slaves. As the auction is about to get underway, Philomene, now nine years old, goes to Eugene and tells him that her name is Philomene Daurat and that she's aware that Eugene had chosen to buy Gerant but not her. In the actual sale, Eugene does buy Gerant. Orelene and her husband buy Suzette, Philomene and Palmire. Jacques Tessier buys Clement and his mother.

In chapter ten, Suzette notes that her family had been accustomed to the joy of having most of its members living within the confines of Rosedew and that they are now scattered along the Cane River. Family members now live on seven different plantations. Two years pass. Philomene's relationship with Gerant is reaching new levels, fueled by the fact that Doralise carries notes for the two of them. Philomene realizes that Suzette is unhappy and worried because the family is so scattered. Philomene relates a glimpsing of the family reunited. She gives details of family members and of new babies, but says that Gerasime and Palmire are missing from the vision. On Sunday, Philomene, Palmire and Suzette go to visit Elisabeth, who now lives on Narcisse's farm. Doralise drops Gerant off later and Suzette is happy for the brief time she has with both her children and her mother. On Monday, Palmire falls ill and Suzette works the field in her place while Orelene stays with Palmire. That evening, Palmire has grown worse and it's not until the next day that they learn that Narcisse's wife has also fallen ill. Both die of cholera. Suzette, faced now with the death of her sister, slips into a deep melancholy and is only vaguely aware that Philomene is doing more of her chores. Suzette believes that her life's burdens are simply too heavy to carry and notes that "It was up to Philomene now."

Suzette, Chapters 6 through 10 Analysis

Francoise hates being called on to make any decisions about the farm. She somehow believes that handling these makes her less of a woman and more manly. She seeks to put off any requests or demands until one of her male relatives can be on hand to deal with them. She also doesn't want to know anything about the methods the overseer uses to command discipline and hard work from the slaves. The attitude is so consuming that it literally drives Francoise to her bed. It's interesting that she, who has an opportunity to make her life much better by simply taking a grip on the business side of the plantation, doesn't want any part of it. Later, Philomene will hunger for the opportunity to put her back into any kind of manual labor in order to earn the right to be responsible for land and a home of her own.

Suzette and all the slaves know that Francoise's death will mean some serious changes to Rosedew and to them. All fear being separated from their families, and this becomes a recurring theme of the book. Suzette clings to her two children, Gerant and Philomene, in her desire to hold onto them. However, she also finds that her fear of



being sold away from them is so great that she sometimes tries to distance herself from them, apparently feeling that she might grow less attached and be less hurt if they are separated.

Elisabeth tells the story of her own life as a young woman. She says that she'd given birth to two boys, John and Jacob, and that she'd been sold away from them without even having the chance to tell them good-bye. This loss obviously continues to weigh heavily on Elisabeth, but she is a strong personality and urges Philomene to take what happiness she can find in life.

Philomene's comments to Eugene, her father, are blunt, and it's obvious that Eugene isn't comfortable with his daughter, citing her enigmatic personality that seems always to leave him baffled. He has, over the years, sometimes brought small gifts for the children, and Philomene has always accepted hers as something he owed her while Gerant was always somewhat shy and retiring in nature. Now Eugene hears Philomene call herself "Philomene Daurat," indicating her use of a last name, which was not permitted except in the cases of freed blacks. This is an indication of Philomene's nature. She is always going to be seeking a way to gain more from life. This is very near how Suzette felt as a young woman and it seems that Philomene may have inherited this from her mother. Eugene himself is chagrined at the fact that this girl - his daughter - is able to keep him off balance. Eugene seems to have had good intentions with regard to his children. It seems that he'd really intended that he would buy their freedom but that he'd never set a date for making it happen and had eventually just let the years slip past him until he is suddenly faced with this situation. He seems not to have the money to buy them both and has chosen Gerant because Philomene and Suzette seem destined for Orelime's house. He notes that if he had bought them, they are both still children and would be dependent on him, and that he doesn't know how he would have handled that situation. Eugene had gone to great lengths to be able to live with Doralise. He bribes the courts to grant her a divorce from her husband, who had been violent and considered crazy. He gives her property and endures the society's snubs that follow. However, Doralise seems disappointed that Eugene hadn't taken better care of his children and he sharply feels her disapproval. This could be his own conscience eating at him over the situation.



Philomene, Chapters 11 through 15

Philomene, Chapters 11 through 15 Summary

Philomene is fully aware that her emerging figure, that of a young woman, is dangerous in that it draws male attention - wanted or not. She notes the changes that have occurred, including that Narcisse has remarried and that it's better for Philomene when Narcisse has his new wife along because he at least cannot make advances toward Philomene. Philomene knows that Narcisse is slightly in awe of her because of her glimpsings, and she builds that up in the hope of keeping him at bay. On wash day, Philomene and Suzette talk about the happenings in the area, including Doralise. Suzette says that Doralise always manipulates a situation to benefit herself and that her relationship with Eugene has been no different. They cite the fact that Eugene signed property over to Doralise and that she now owns the house they'd shared. Philomene asks Suzette if she holds a grudge against Doralise for living with Eugene. Suzette says that she'd never had any relationship with Eugene and that the only thing he'd done for her was to give her children light skin. Philomene says that the light skin hasn't done anything for her and that she remains a slave despite it. Philomene asks Suzette if she'd had any option when Eugene demanded sex and Suzette chastises her for the question, then asks what prompted it. Philomene tells of Narcisse's attention and asks if there's anything she can do if Narcisse approaches her. Suzette doesn't have an answer.

In chapter twelve, Philomene is watching after Orelene's daughter, Josephina, while the rest of the family is away. Clement arrives and Philomene slips away for a few minutes to make love with him. Clement has come by boat and Philomene tells him that she'd had a vision of his death by drowning. He promises to be careful but says he can handle the river. The two plan to get married and have the permission of both their owners and the priest ready to perform the ceremony. The day arrives, though there had been some concern that Narcisse might interfere. That spring, Philomene gives birth to twins, Bethany for Clement's grandmother and Elisabeth for Philomene's grandmother. The names are quickly shortened to Thany and Bet.

In chapter thirteen, Clement is preparing for the trip to visit Philomene. He still living on a plantation a short distance away. Clement has spent many nights working on a rocking chair as a gift to Philomene. Clement built the chair after his regular work was done and paid for it by his share of the profits when his owner hired him out for blacksmith jobs. Clement is also to deliver bear skins for Narcisse during his trip, and his owner, Tessier, tells him to hurry because it appears there will be storms. Clement gets caught in a downpour and almost gets sucked into a whirlpool. When it's evident he can't escape, he throws the rocking chair as far as he can toward the bank and jumps in to swim. He soon catches up with the chair and takes it ashore, though he loses sight of the boat and assumes that it's gone.



Clement goes first to Narcisse's house to explain about the bear skins. Narcisse seems indifferent about the loss and tells Clement to hurry on to Philomene's house. In chapter fourteen, Clement gives Philomene the chair but is beginning to swell and bruise from slamming into rocks as he swam ashore. Suzette goes to Orelie with the story and Joseph Ferrier agrees to take Clement home. In chapter fifteen, Narcisse heads for Tessier's house as soon as Clement is gone toward Philomene's. Narcisse tells Tessier that Clement cost him a great deal of money in the furs he lost and asks Tessier to sell Clement to him. Joseph says that he wants to buy Clement in order to unite Clement with his wife and children. While Tessier is considering the situation, the boat and furs are returned by someone who found them further downriver. Tessier, citing the fact that Narcisse had lost nothing because of Clement's actions and noting that Clement is seriously hurt, agrees to sell to Joseph. Less than a month later, Clement is living with Philomene.

Philomene, Chapters 11 through 15 Analysis

Narcisse's attitude toward Philomene is interesting on several levels. He would be unchallenged if he simply demanded that she enter into a relationship with him. She certainly couldn't refuse, nor could her mother, and it seems unlikely that Orelie would be of any real help. However, Narcisse continues to flirt with her. At one point, he asks what she sees in Clement and tells her that she needs "a man who could protect her." Philomene is unimpressed with the argument, saying that the only thing she actually needs protection from is slavery and that Narcisse isn't going to do that. But it also seems that Narcisse is somewhat in awe of Philomene's power to see the future. He obviously believes in this and Philomene will later play on his belief, stretching her visions to control Narcisse for many years. It seems obvious that Narcisse had been intent on buying Clement, not so that he would have the man as a slave but so that he could sell Clement out of the area in order to eliminate him from Philomene's life. This is another example of Narcisse's attitude with regard to Philomene.

Suzette has held to the idea that a "bleaching" of the family line is a good thing despite the fact that it occurs at the price of the women being raped and forced into sexual relationships with white men who have no intention of offering any life other than one of servitude and slavery. Suzette at one point says that the only thing she got from Eugene was light-skinned children, and she sees this as a step toward a better life for her descendents than what she could otherwise give them. When Philomene chooses Clement, Suzette is derisive, not because Clement is a slave but because his skin is dark. This attitude will continue over the coming generations as Suzette later bears children by a white man. However, this also creates a contradiction within her children who will eventually fight for a place in a world which won't accept them as white though they are eventually more white than black.



Philomene, Chapters 16 through 21

Philomene, Chapters 16 through 21 Summary

One day Philomene sees Clement holding one of their daughters and knows this is the realization of the vision she'd had so long ago. Philomene is happy and says that she is aware that a "jealous God" might remove the source of her happiness, which seems to be the nearness of her family. Though their lives are filled with work, Philomene knows that they aren't beaten and that they have some very important blessings, including a cabin for her own little family, enough food to eat and the support of Orelene.

In chapter seventeen, Clement rushes into the house with Ferrier in his arms. Clement says Ferrier had collapsed in the fields. The weather is overbearingly hot and there is an abundance of mosquitoes. It's soon discovered that Ferrier has yellow fever. As the days pass, Ferrier becomes more ill, loses weight and soon begins to bleed from his eyes and mouth, a sure sign to those nursing him that the end is near. While Orelene is not prepared for her husband's death, she hasn't time to mourn for trying to hold the farm together. She is in serious financial trouble and Narcisse helps arrange her immediate marriage to a school teacher named Valery Houbre. Narcisse tells Orelene that she has to sell off the slaves and she objects, saying they are like family, but gives in to Narcisse's suggestion that she sell only Clement to a family known to Narcisse in Virginia. Narcisse says Suzette will be given a place with his brother. Orelene doesn't tell Philomene of the pending sale, but tells her after Clement is already gone. Philomene is angry and tells Orelene that her actions were not fair, though Orelene tries to justify it, saying that they'd had to get Clement on an immediate steamer to Virginia. Orelene seems a little afraid of Philomene in this situation, though Philomene eventually bows her head, tells Orelene, "Oui," and refuses to speak to her again. Orelene notes that Philomene stops singing to the children as had been her habit in the past.

In chapter eighteen, Philomene falls ill, as do her twin daughters and Orelene. Narcisse is the only one not beset by the illness and he does a lot of the care giving. Philomene has a vision while she is ill. She sees Clement and the twins in the water, reaches for Bet, and turns to find that Clement and Thany are out of her reach. When she begins to recover, Narcisse and Orelene wait a couple of days for her to begin recovering her strength before they tell her that the twins had both contracted the fever and died. Suzette returns to help Orelene with Philomene's recuperation, though she's only available "on loan." As soon as Philomene is able, she insists on seeing the graves of her daughters and Narcisse tells her that they'd buried the girls together in a single grave.

Philomene lives in a tiny room off the kitchen in Orelene's new house. Orelene's new husband, Valery Houbre, has children who are missing their mother, who recently died. Philomene has no visions for awhile and wonders if the gift is gone. In chapter nineteen, Narcisse comes to visit Philomene, who is wallowing in self-pity and has lost interest in everything, including bathing herself. Narcisse gives her a lecture, saying that he'd



promised her grandfather to watch after her. Philomene realizes that Narcisse's interest in her is likely pushing him to make a move. She knows that she has to use his lust to her advantage and resolves to move forward in life. Eugene tells Philomene that he's leaving the country and that he'd sold Gerant to a neighbor. Philomene realizes that with these changes, it's time for her to return to life and begin speaking. Philomene visits her grandmother and relates the vision she'd had in which most of the family members had been together. Elizabeth says she believes in the glimpsings and Philomene reveals her plan to control Narcisse. When Philomene again sees Narcisse, she tells him that she's had a vision of their first sexual encounter. She says that Narcisse had come to her in a cabin of her own. Narcisse immediately begins work on a cabin for Philomene, though she remains Orelene's property and the cabin is being built on Orelene's land.

Philomene again tells Narcisse that she's had a glimpsing, this time of the birth of his child. She says that he must provide protection for the child. The year is 1861 and several men from the area join the military, including Orelene's son and Narcisse's brother, Augustine. Narcisse joins the Home Guard, pleading the fact that he's needed to care for his property as reason for not joining the regular military. Gerasime dies. Philomene gives birth to a daughter and she tells Narcisse that the child's name is Emily Fredieu, following that announcement with the statement that Emily "must never work in the fields." In chapter twenty-one, Narcisse arranges a funeral for Gerasime at Philomene's insistence.

Philomene, Chapters 16 through 21 Analysis

The fact that Philomene knows that she is blessed for having the support of Orelene doesn't eliminate the fact that she fully realizes that Orelene owns her. Philomene will later point out that fact and will make a point of showing the complete control slave owners held over the lives, families and existence of their slaves. When Orelene agrees to sell Clement and Suzette, her first objection is that Philomene will miss her husband and mother, facts that Narcisse dismisses out of hand, saying that Philomene still has her twin daughters. It seems evident that Narcisse had actually planned the sale of Clement and Suzette in order to have Philomene more vulnerable so that he could more easily pursue her for himself.

Philomene chooses to stop talking after Clement is sold out of the country and her mother is sent to another farm to live. It seems that Philomene really wants to run away from the situation altogether but is unable to do so, so chooses the next best thing - disappearing into her self-imposed silence. When she needs to communicate, she does so by motions but continues to refuse to speak. At one point, Philomene wonders if Palmire might have felt the same sense of peace through her silence. Soon after the deaths of the twins, Philomene begins to seek a way to go on with her life. It's a statement of her will to live that she recognizes that she has to find something to live for.

When Philomene tells Elizabeth that she's going to try to control Narcisse, she says that her purpose is to gain some specific concessions, including freedom for the various family members, land and financial freedom. Elizabeth warns that Philomene is "playing



with fire." Elizabeth seems ingrained in the life of slavery and unable to see how freedom could be attained. It's also important that the reader remember that Elizabeth has suffered greatly at the hands of her white masters. Her fears are reasonable, given those circumstances.

Philomene seems to have a reason for insisting that Narcisse arrange a funeral for her grandfather, Gerasime. Philomene speaks to her grandfather at the graveside, pleading that he instill his love of life and his ability to enjoy himself regardless of hardships into Philomene's daughter, Emily. Gerasime dies just about the time Emily is born and the two never meet in life, so Philomene seems to be trying to bring them together in the only way she sees as possible. It's also noteworthy that Narcisse is willing to arrange this funeral, which is quite an elaborate affair for a slave such as Gerasime has been. In fact, the birth of Emily seems to be very important to Narcisse because he's been married twice and has yet to father a child. Philomene will use this in the coming years to make him believe that he can father children only by her, and that she's certain of this because of the glimpsings. Narcisse will eventually discover that there's no truth to this, but for now his love of Emily and his desire for more children will bind him to Philomene.



Philomene, Chapters 22 through 30

Philomene, Chapters 22 through 30 Summary

In chapter twenty-two, the situation becomes serious as Confederate money begins to circulate. Narcisse, apparently envisioning the tough times to come, hoards both food and money against that eventuality. The initial letters from Narcisse's brother Augustine arrive, filled with the glory of his mission. Six months later, 1871 is drawing to a close and Augustine's letters are bitter. In 1862, Orelene's son dies and Augustine asks Narcisse to send clothing, indicating that the soldiers have insufficient supplies. That fall, Augustine realizes that Narcisse might be conscripted and warns that he avoid becoming a soldier if he can find any way to that end. Narcisse learns that there is an exception to the conscription law that owners of slaves numbering twenty or more are exempt from the conscription law. Narcisse has twenty, pays the five hundred dollar fee and is exempted.

In chapter twenty-three, Orelene pleads with her new husband, Valery Houbre, to remain at home, but he joins the army though he is exempt from the conscription law because he is fifty - past the age of conscription. With his departure, Orelene takes over as head of the household with Philomene as the anchor. The two women work together with a single goal in mind - protecting the children. They watch over Orelene's two older children, Joseph and Josephine, Valery's child twelve-year-old Mina, and the two children of Orelene and Valery, Valerianne and little Valery, along with Emily, who is the two-year-old daughter of Philomene and Narcisse. The two women, on their remote farm, are virtually self-sufficient. They depend on each other and the traditional roles are somewhat skewed. For example, Philomene would likely work the garden in the heat of the morning hours and come into the house to find that someone - Orelene, Josephine or Mina - had cooked the meal, though cooking is considered a manual labor that would traditionally be left to the slaves.

One day in the winter of 1863, Narcisse tells Philomene that he's going to join the fight. She tells him that she's had a vision. She assures him that he will return but tells him the vision focuses on Emily. She says she's seen Emily at about ten years old with Narcisse, and that she's reading to him. Philomene tells Narcisse that Orelene will teach Emily to read if Narcisse asks it of her. He promises to do so. A few weeks after he leaves, Philomene discovers she is again pregnant, though Narcisse didn't know before his departure.

When a young Confederate soldier arrives and says he's been told to burn the cotton stored in Orelene's barn, the women have only time to get the animals out before he starts the fire. The purpose is to keep the cotton from the hands of enemy soldiers who are advancing. Soon, Union armies are burning everything in their paths and Philomene notes that the smoke smells like freedom.



In chapter twenty-four, the war has come to a close, though there is a great deal of confusion as former slaves, now officially freed, try to figure out what to do and former slave owners try to negotiate wages for workers. Orelina and Philomene argue with Orelina, saying Philomene "owes" her six months of work to help get the farm back on its feet before she leaves. Philomene counters, asking Orelina what she's owed for the fact that her family was split up when Clement was sold. Narcisse is better off than some, owning one cache of cotton that wasn't burned. Philomene calls on Elisabeth, Suzette and Gerant to join her in building a new life and they soon live together with the exception of Suzette, who claims to want the opportunity to decide for herself. Gerant is married to a young girl named Melantine and he's willing to do any amount of work as long as his wife is exempt from the fields. Philomene is torn, wanting to hang onto Narcisse for the things he might help her attain but wondering what she would do if Clement were able to return to her.

In chapter twenty-five, Elisabeth one day encounters a young man who is obviously traveling through. She feeds him leftovers from the family's meal and she discovers that he is John, called "Yellow John," the son she'd been forced to leave behind on Lost Oak Plantation as a child. John reveals that he'd met Clement and it was through their conversations that he'd come to believe Elisabeth to be his mother and to make his plans to reunite with her. He also reveals that Clement drowned after apparently being bitten by a snake. Elisabeth's other son, Jacob, is a shoemaker, lives in Richmond and has a wife and four children. John said his back-up plan, if he hadn't found Elisabeth, was to go live with Jacob.

In chapter twenty-six, Suzette arrives in Cloutierville at a party being given by Doralise. Elisabeth had chosen Jackson as her last name after the war brought an end to slavery, though Suzette had come up with the idea of the last name "DeNegre." When Elisabeth refuses Suzette's name, Suzette opts to take Jackson as well in order to maintain a tie with her mother. Suzette had remained infatuated with Nicolas Mulon, the young man who'd caught her attention as a child, and Suzette becomes reacquainted with him now. During a Sunday dinner, she tells the rest of the family that Nicolas wants to marry her, and that she has accepted. She says that Doralise and Yellow John also plan to marry. Suzette notes that there's something very satisfying about having plans for the future.

In chapter twenty-seven, Philomene tells Narcisse that she's had a vision. She tells him that he's welcome to go marry as many white women as he pleases, but that it's only she who will give him children. In 1872, Narcisse tells Emily that she'll be going to New Orleans to further the education she's begun under Valery Houbre, who'd been a private tutor since Orelina's death. Emily objects, saying she's afraid, but Narcisse tells her that he'll accompany her. In chapter twenty-eight, Emily and Narcisse make the trip to new Orleans where Narcisse stays with a distant maternal relative named Joseph Billes. Joseph goes to the convent school with Narcisse to meet Emily and tells her that he'll be helping occupy her free time after Narcisse returns to Cane River. Narcisse arranges with an artist for Emily's portrait.

Narcisse sees an opportunity to make some money by buying tracts of land bordering government land, then harvesting the timber from his own land as well as the



government property, though he realizes that he needs a partner for the venture and calls on Joseph. Joseph's reply takes some time, but two months later he is living on the Red River, working with Narcisse. In chapter twenty-nine, Emily is fourteen and is thinking about Joseph a great deal. Joseph begins spending a great deal of time with Emily though Philomene try to always arrange chaperones. When Emily announces that she is pregnant, the women of the family immediately become her support system. She gives birth to a daughter, Angelite. By now, Joseph is operating a store and Emily is living on Philomene's farm, though she spends most days with Joseph.

In chapter thirty, Narcisse and Philomene argue over the future of the children, because Narcisse has now fathered children by white women. Narcisse promises that he'll "do right by" his children with Philomene but says that it's time he "got back to his own kind." It's because of his anger at having been tricked by Philomene into believing that he could only have children with her that Narcisse tells her that her visions haven't been very accurate. He then reveals that only one of her twin daughters died, and that Bet has actually been living on a nearby plantation. When Philomene asks why he lied, he says only that he doesn't know why and insists that Orelene had nothing to do with it. By 1880, Philomene has one hundred and sixty-three acres legally in her possession. Suzette moves in with them after Nicolas's death in 1880. Philomene reunites with Bet, who is married to a man named Isaac Purnell, and her family lives nearby. Philomene is again pregnant. This is her tenth child, including Thany and two others who died. One day as the family is sitting down to dinner, Philomene sees that this is the realization of a vision she'd shared with Elisabeth so many years earlier when they'd all been slaves, with freedom still nothing more than a dream.

Philomene, Chapters 22 through 30 Analysis

Narcisse has hoarded money from the beginning of the war and it's this foresight plus a piece of sheer luck that puts him in a position to be exempted from the conscription law. When asked how many slaves he has, he says twenty, but doesn't know the significance of that number until after he's answered. While Narcisse does manage to avoid being sent into battle, he apparently draws the scorn or anger of some for having dodged the conscription. It's noted that he receives a package just days after paying the five hundred dollar fee. The package contains "tattered white petticoats" along with a note that read, "Rich Man's War, Poor Man's Fight." There's never any indication as to the origin of this package, but it seems likely that it's some of his neighbors who have lost loved ones in the war.

Narcisse is pressed into the role of "manager and benefactor" due to the circumstances of the war. He seems never to visit Orelene and Philomene without bringing some gift, and it seems likely that the majority of these are available only because of his keen business sense. As he visits the various farms, he borrows or trades to fill needs of others but never arrives anywhere without bringing gifts of some much-needed commodity. The interesting thing about this role is that the people who benefit from this are deeply indebted, while others outside this tight-knit circle are again angry that Narcisse has managed to avoid service in the military.



Elisabeth realizes that the only reason she's managed to reunite with her son John is because Clement was sold to the plantation where John was, enabling the two men to meet and discuss their families. John can read and Elisabeth is relieved to have him at her side. She tells him that he's "home," and he apparently has every intention of staying with her. The fact that Elisabeth seeks the good that came from Clement's being sold is a testament of the belief she has in reason. While Philomene hasn't held out any great hope that Clement was going to return to her, the fact that she now knows for certain that he's dead is a blow. She seems to be seeking some consolation and says that he at least didn't know that Bet and Thany had died and that she'd entered into a relationship with Narcisse. It's interesting that Narcisse has never mentioned Clement or the fact that Clement might be returning, which raises the possibility that Narcisse had known of Clement's death.



Emily, Chapters 31 through 37

Emily, Chapters 31 through 37 Summary

In chapter thirty-one, Emily invites Joseph to her home for Sunday dinner, an event that is serious in that it makes their relationship official. The women of her family take the opportunity to evaluate him, trying to guess how long he'll remain with Emily and whether he'll be good to her and responsible for their children. Joseph's life has had trials and it's noted that he'd been in France during the days of slavery and had been cheated by his brothers so that he lost what he believes should have been his inheritance. Emily says that the older women of the family, including Elisabeth, Suzette, Philomene and Bet, still live with the mentality of submission. This annoys Emily, who swears that she is going to grab onto all the happiness she can find.

In chapter thirty-two, Narcisse plans to marry. Toward making the house ready for his new wife, he removes from his wall the picture that had been painted of Emily during her time in school in New Orleans. He presets the picture to Emily. Narcisse has fathered five children over recent years and notes that one of the white children holds his hope for an heir to carry on the family name and act as heir. Despite this, he remains pleased with the children he fathered by Philomene and even the two who died at birth and who carried the Fredieu name. Narcisse worries about Emily, saying that her situation as his daughter will forgive her a lot but that she won't be forgiven for "forgetting her place."

In chapter thirty-three, Joseph's store is called Billes General Store and it's located in the community called Aloha. The couple have several children, though Joseph is often away on business. One day, Emily's mother tells Joseph that he's going to "suck the life right out of her." Emily is mortified, hating that he has been called down by her mother. Philomene goes on to cite Emily's devotion to him so that she would follow him anywhere. She says that it's up to Joseph to take better care of Emily. Joseph calls on his cousins from New Orleans to come live with them, planning that they would be help for Emily. The problem is that they assume Emily is to be their servant from their arrival. Joseph asks Philomene for the painting of Emily, saying that he wants it to hang in the home he's built and wants Emily to live with him. Philomene agrees. Joseph tells his cousins that Emily is moving into his house and the cousins are immediately derisive and say it's unnatural.

One day Bet arrives at the store to talk to Emily, saying that Philomene had felt that Emily needed someone to cheer her up. The conversation turns to Narcisse, and Bet reminds Emily that Narcisse is the man who arranged for Bet's father to be sold away from his family and who sent Bet to live at another plantation, depriving her of her mother and father. Bet says that Emily's life was different from her own, and points out that Emily was petted by the family. Emily says that she knows there are people who call her "uppity," though not anyone from her own family. Bet says she's learned a lot



from Philomene and the other women in the family. She tells Emily that Joseph will likely give her many things, if she asks.

In chapter thirty-four, Elisabeth, at eighty-five, is at home when a young man arrives taking information for the census. Elisabeth tells about the women who live in the house, though she notes that the man isn't interested in the lives of the women and stops asking when he realizes she can't spell any of their names. Emily is carrying her third child and Joseph treats her well. In chapter thirty-five, Joseph arrives home and takes time to greet his children, Josephine and T.O. before learning that Elisabeth has died. Emily says that she believes Elisabeth had "judged her harshly" near the end of Elisabeth's life. Emily's family also includes her oldest daughter, Angelite, and a babe-in-arms, Joe. Later, Emily is talking with Bet and admits that she'd been "ashamed" of her grandmother because of Elisabeth's "nappy hair and broken speech."

One day Emily answers to the door to find Narcisse, a man named Antoine Morat who is Joseph's business partner, and Orelime's son, Joseph Ferrier asking to see Joseph. The men tell Joseph that there are rumblings of anger over the fact that Joseph is living outright with Emily. Joseph moves to New Orleans, citing the fact that it will be safer for Emily and the children if he leaves. He continues to visit occasionally and they have another child, a daughter named Mary. Joseph faces the derision of people in public and those who do speak to him tell him that he has to leave Mary, though they say they understand if he feels the need to take care of his children. One day Joseph is visiting with Narcisse and the two men discuss a state petition that would make "co-habitation between the races" a felony offense. Joseph, surrounded with Emily, their children and a few close friends, celebrate Joseph's fifty-fifth birthday together. The party is interrupted by a group of men who warn Joseph to stop living with Emily. Later, their barn is burned and some chickens killed.

In chapter thirty-seven, Narcisse dies of pneumonia in 1896. Emily goes to visit the grave with her mother and grandmother. As the three women are talking, Angelite reveals that a young Frenchman has asked that she return with him to France where they can be married. She wavers but decides that she can't leave her family behind. Soon after this, Joseph marries a woman named Lola Grandchamp. She is past typical marriage age, has no children of her own, and had thought by most of the society people to be destined a spinster. Joseph builds a house for Emily in the middle of a tract of land he'd deeded to their children and waits for her to move in on her own. Emily refuses. One morning some men arrive and prepare to move her. Emily has the children dressed in their best and demands the best manners as she is moved to Cornfine Bayou.

Emily, Chapters 31 through 37 Analysis

Emily seems to feel cramped in the presence of so many of her relatives, a fact that can likely be attributed to the fact that Bet is also present. Emily has never accepted Bet as a sister and seems to resent Bet's place in Philomene's life. It's only when Emily and Bet are taking in Joseph's store that Emily realizes that Bet may not be nearly as



submissive as she'd seemed during her previous interactions with Emily. This conversation brings the two girls somewhat closer. It's here that Emily takes a piece of advice from Bet, to stop and listen to what the older women of the family are saying in order to gain insight into their lives. It's advice that Emily will take seriously.

Narcisse has fathered children by Philomene and has coveted a former slave, but notes that he'd known how far he could take his relationship and his infatuation. When Emily is enamored with Joseph, it's obvious that Joseph returns her interest and Narcisse worries because the two seem intent on living together, just as husband and wife would even though they don't have the right under the law to marry. Narcisse seems to worry about repercussions against Joseph and Emily for their decision, but it may also be that he's envious of their decision.

There seems little doubt that Emily would have held an important place in Narcisse's affection. She was his first child and he spent a great deal of time and energy on her, ensuring that she was at least marginally educated, which was unusual for women of mixed race during this time and giving her a great deal more freedom than many other children had. Emily's feelings for her father are less defined but it is noted that she feels his absence, at least partly because of the protection she always felt was her due as his child. Emily seems to have believed she could avoid the anger of public opinion as long as she had Narcisse's protection as her father and Joseph's as her husband. With Narcisse's death, Joseph soon gives in to pressure to end his relationship with Emily. Emily is bound to feel this change and doesn't seem to take it well.

Joseph seems to love Emily but his fear for the safety of all concerned pushes him to distance himself from her. It seems to be the pressure from friends that makes him marry the white woman and to relegate Emily and their children to a home away from his property. Joseph is correct to be frightened and his love for Emily and their children will eventually cost him his life. An interesting aspect of this prejudice is that Joseph seems to be in more danger than Emily, as long as Emily isn't with Joseph. Joseph obviously believes this to be true and the men who kill Joseph will also kill his white wife, apparently just because she is with him at the time of his murder. Emily's reaction to Joseph's decision to move her out is a testament of her determination and pride. She insists that the children dress in their best clothing and she shows no sign of anger to the men who are moving her possessions, apparently believing that to do so would be a sign of poor manners.



Emily, Chapters 38 through 48

Emily, Chapters 38 through 48 Summary

In chapter thirty-eight, T.O. goes to visit his grandmother and great-grandmother. He tells Suzette and Philomene that Emily won't get out of bed. Philomene's reaction is immediate and she decides that the family must move into the house with Emily in order to take care of her and the children. Suzette is upset by the move but is persuaded. Suzette decides that she's going to take DeNegre as her new last name. She notes that it "amuses" her to decide that she's going to have a new last name and that she might decide to do so again at some point.

Their family begins working together and Emily eventually returns to life, sharing Sunday dinners with her family. Angelite enjoys the attention of several suitors and settles on a young man named Dennis Coutee. The children occasionally visit Joseph and his life with the family is tenuous at best. T.O works in the sawmill and Josephine seems happy to remain at home without any suitors of her own. Angelite gives birth to a child but dies in childbirth with her second child in 1904. Emily spends a great deal of time working at raising Angelite's two sons. Angelite's death seems to prompt a longing in Joseph and he calls for the children to spend more time at his house.

In chapter thirty-nine, T.O. has turned twenty-four and Angelite's baby turns one. Joseph has told T.O. that he will leave his property to the children. One day Lola is angry and calls Joseph's children "mongrels," prompting Joseph to stop inviting them. T.O. encounters a man named A.J. Morat, son of Antoine Morat who was Joseph's cousin and business partner. T.O. doesn't know exactly what an overheard conversation between Antoine and Joseph means but feels it was something significant.

In chapter forty, Joseph is apparently contemplating suicide. Joseph writes a letter he intends to be his last will and testament. In chapter forty-one, the relationship between Joseph and Lola grows more strained. In chapter forty-two, T.O. refuses to go to work and is home with his mother when the police arrive with the word that Joseph and Lola are dead. Rumors about the murders are rampant, with some saying that it was murder-suicide. In chapter forty-three, T.O. begins trying to clear his father's name, believing that Joseph and Lola were both murdered and trying to find a way to combat the will that left T.O. and the other children with nothing. Antoine confronts T.O., warning that T.O. will end up like his father if he doesn't stop. In chapter forty-four, Lola's relatives are facing Antoine Morat over the contested will. T.O. also wants to contest the will but is turned away by a judge who says he'll hear the case if T.O. can produce a marriage certificate between Joseph and Emily.

In chapter forty-five, Suzette is aging and in poor health and dies peacefully in her sleep. In chapter forty-six, T.O. marries a young black woman named Eva, though he knows his mother won't approve of the fact that she has such a dark complexion. The pair have five children. In chapter forty-seven, Emily's life has gone on for twenty-four



years after her mother's death. One day Emily begins the trip by bus to "town" in Colfax to do some shopping. In chapter forty-eight, Emily talks with a young man at the store. She doesn't know him because she seldom comes to town. When he ignores her in favor of another customer, she is angry and leaves without making her purchases.

Emily, Chapters 38 through 48 Analysis

It's noted that Lola is angry whenever Joseph invites the children to his house but is ineffective in her objections. Joseph continues to invite the children to visit, now including Angelite's son, and they continue to go despite the cool reception by Lola. Joseph seems to have the opinion that he doesn't have to make any changes because Lola knew about the children before their marriage. Lola will eventually accuse Joseph of having married her only to have respectability that he'd been denied as the live-in lover of a black woman.

T.O. spends a great deal of time at his father's house, even when he's not there on an official invitation and isn't letting anyone know that he's there. He hides in various places where he can watch without being seen. It's interesting that he so badly wants to know what his father is doing even when trying to hide the fact that he's there.

The final scene of the story in which Emily makes a trip to town is probably a symbol for the journey taken by the family over the course of the lives of the women, Suzette, Philomene and Emily. The fact that Emily is pushed to the side in favor of the white customer is reasonable as to what might have actually occurred during the time period. But there seems to be a symbolism here in that Emily has seldom gone to town, sending relatives and friends for the few items she needs to buy and choosing to remain in her rural home. On this particular trip to town, she is pushed aside and then allows her pride to come to the front so that she feels she has no choice but to return home. There may also be some symbolism of a return to her roots. T.O.'s life is an example of the quest this family has toward self-realization. The family's women have tended toward men who were light-skinned, sometimes by choice. There have been several discussions related to the fact that this has resulted in a "bleaching" of their line. T.O. seems to purposely choose a darker woman.

The lives of the family are explained as the book draws to a close. The family members include T.O., his wife and their five children, and Josephine and Mary, who are Emily's daughters and who never marry.



Characters

Suzette

Daughter of Elisabeth and Gerasime, Suzette is born into slavery and lives in the plantation house as nursemaid and companion to the niece of the plantation owner, though Suzette and the young girl are the same age. Suzette's life is difficult but perhaps less so than that of the slaves who work the fields of the plantation. Suzette's mother worries that Suzette's ideas and priorities have been skewed by the fact that she spends so much time in the plantation house rather than in the slave quarters where her family lives. Suzette, though conscientious in her work, cannot seem to help dreaming of a better life, first for herself and later for her children. As she ages, Suzette is obviously torn and sometimes feels that she spends too little time in the slave quarters. After the slaves are freed, Suzette is the one member of the family who holds back, waiting for some time before making a decision as to where to live and work. She cites the ability to make that decision for herself as the reason for the delay. She eventually marries and later moves into the house with her daughter where she spends the rest of her years, surrounded by her family.

Philomene

Daughter of Suzette and Eugene, she is born into slavery and is destined to live through the Civil War to become among those slaves freed at the end of the war. Philomene falls in love with a young man named Clement, a slave who lives at a neighboring plantation, and Philomene gives birth to twins, daughters who become known by their nicknames, Thany and Bet. Philomene's owner buys Clement, but their owner's death prompts Orelie to sell Clement to meet debts. Philomene soon falls ill and one of the twins dies, though Philomene is told that both had died. Years will pass before Philomene learns that her surviving daughter, Bet, was raised on a neighboring plantation. Philomene is dedicated to her family, and when she is taken as a mistress by Narcisse, she spends a great deal of time and thought working to make the lives of her family better. She eventually gives birth to eight children by Narcisse, though two die. A prime example of how Philomene feels about her life and family is seen immediately after the end of the Civil War. When Orelie tells Philomene that she should stay to help get the farm back on its feet, Philomene doesn't hesitate to point out that Orelie had been ready and willing to tear Philomene's family apart when it was in the best interests of the farm and that Philomene is now going to do only what's best for her own family without regard for what's best for Orelie's.

Emily

Daughter of Philomene and Narcisse Fredieu, Emily is the first member of the family who is in a situation in which she can be "petted" and spoiled to some degree. Though



her life is filled with hard work, she is less troubled and treated much better than her mother and grandmother had been. Emily learns to read and write and is sent away to New Orleans to a convent school by Narcisse. She is light-skinned and bears children by a light-skinned man, further "bleaching" the line. Emily is, like her mother, grandmother and great-grandmother, strong-willed and proud. She has several children by the Frenchman, Joseph Billes, though there is public derision over the relationship.

Narcisse Fredieu

Described by Suzette as a "pudgy" boy, Narcisse is the first of the group to snub Suzette in public, thereby making it clear that Suzette's place is not with Orelaine and her friends and reminding Suzette that she is merely a slave. Narcisse eventually takes Philomene as his mistress and fathers several children by her. He takes care of the children but marries several white women and fathers white children as well.

Orelaine Derbanne

The niece of the owner of Rosedew, Orelaine is raised as the young mistress of the house, though she doesn't seem to inherit anything upon the deaths of her aunt and uncle. She also doesn't marry young, and her aunt finally manages to make a match with an ordinary farmer nearby. Orelaine's husband purchases Suzette, Philomene and Palmire when Rosedew is sold off. She later marries Joseph Ferrier and then Valery Houbre.

Eugene Daurat

Eugene Daurat is the white man who is cousin of the Durbannes who own Rosedew, and who forces himself on Suzette and fathers two children by her. He notes that he'd always intended to do something for his children but that he'd never quite gotten around to freeing them. His attitudes toward blacks is interesting. He lives with a freed black woman for a period of time and gives her property. It seems he would have married her if the law had allowed that.

Palmire

Suzette's sister Palmire is deaf and dumb from birth. She is the third child of Elisabeth, the first two sons having been ripped from Elisabeth as youngsters when she was sold away from their plantation home. Palmire is a hard worker and is known for her skill with a hoe, which is heavy field work. She is sold to Orelaine with Suzette. She dies of cholera, one of the first victims of an outbreak.



Gerant

The name given Suzette's son and first-born child, Gerant is born on Rosedew as a slave. He is somewhat shy but is skilled at handcrafts. He is purchased by his father, Eugene Daurat, upon the dissolution of the Rosedew properties. At the home of his father, he is supposed to be helping with the store owned by Eugene.

T.O.

Son of Emily and Joseph, T.O. seems to crave his father's attention even after Joseph marries a white woman and sends his wife and children to live in another house. T.O. realizes that Joseph has been married and seeks initially to clear his name and later to claim his rightful inheritance, but is thwarted on both counts. He marries a black woman named Eva and the two have five children.

Angelite

The oldest child of Joseph and Emily, Angelite is a pretty young woman who is pursued by several young suitors. She eventually chooses Dennis Coutree and they have two children. Angelite dies in childbirth with the second.



Objects/Places

Rosedew

Rosedew is the plantation where Suzette is raised as a slave.

Bayou Derbanne

Bayou Derbanne is the name of the body of water near Rosedew, obviously named for the owners of the land.

Bordeaux, France

Bordeaux, France is where Eugene Daurat is from.

St. Augustine

St. Augustine is where many of the freed blacks go to worship and where Suzette sometimes meets up with her godmother.

Natchitoches Chronicle

The Natchitoches Chronicle is the newspaper where the sale of Rosedew is advertised.

Glimpsing

"Glimpsing" is a type of a vision described by Philomene.

Lost Oak Plantation

The Lost Oak Plantation is where Elisabeth was parted from her children.

Cloutierville

Cloutierville is where Suzette attends a party given by Doralise.

Cornfine Bayou

Cornfine Bayou is where Emily is moved with her children after Joseph marries Lola.

Colfax

Colfax is where Emily goes "to town" to do some shopping.



Themes

The Importance of Family

The importance of family is a central theme of this story, made more important to the families that are torn apart when slaves are sold off. This is clearly seen when the slaves of Rosedew are about to be auctioned. As they are being "assessed" prior to the auction, the men and women are fearful and stand clustered in family groups. As they are forced to break up from these groups and line up, it's Suzette's father who explains repeatedly that they will be free to return to their families after the assessors have finished their work. The fear of being forced from their families seems to outweigh any personal fear of what kind of situation they'll be sold into. Another example of the importance of family is seen when Philomene first chooses the man she is to marry. Suzette is disappointed that the man is not light-skinned, seeing this as a step toward Philomene's eventual happiness. However, she comes to accept him because Philomene is in love with him. Philomene tells her future husband that her mother had referred to him as "family," indicating that there is nothing more important than family. Suzette herself explains feelings of depression as her unease at not having her parents and siblings close by, as had been her life on Rosedew. Her mother, Elisabeth, has already described the horror because she was sold away from her first two sons. Suzette also watches as Palmire wastes away, unwilling to stir herself even to eat, after having her own three children sold away from her.

Dreams

The women of the story are living incredibly difficult lives, especially going back to the beginning of the story and looking at Elisabeth, Suzette, Palmire and Philomene during their years as slaves. Suzette is taken from the slave quarters as a young child and raised in the plantation house, where she serves as "nurse" and companion to the young lady of the house. This could account for some of Suzette's dreams, but it seems just as likely that the desire to create a better life for herself is an integral part of her personality. Suzette's dream of a better life is, from an early age, that she will marry in a large church as her godmother had done. Suzette's dreams are likely fueled by the fact that she's told by the mistress of the house that she can rise above the slaves in the quarter if she works hard.

When Suzette is forced into a relationship with a white man and bears two children by this man, she knows that her dreams of marrying are gone, but holds to the idea that Philomene might make a better life for herself. An important part of the lives of these women is their work for their white masters. Elisabeth, Philomene and Suzette each work very hard, rushing from task to task with determination. While some slaves obviously feared retribution, these women seem driven to perform their best in their roles, though their jobs are thankless and their masters often demanding and hateful. These women, even when life deals them heartache of separation, seem to hold to the



dream of families brought together, health, happiness, and later, of freedom. Philomene has what is referred to as "glimpses" of the future. Whether these are real is left to the reader to decide. It seems evident that, regardless of whether these are fact, the visions are sometimes used by Philomene to reassure herself and members of family that their dreams of happiness are going to come true.

The Need for Freedom

Elisabeth, Suzette and Philomene are at the heart of the story during the days of slavery. The three women, along with their families and their fellow slaves, are naturally unhappy with their situations and desire freedom. What's important is that the women, along with their families, work hard toward their dreams of freedom after the Civil War makes slavery illegal. Philomene is especially interested in recovering her family and works very hard toward effecting this dream. As a slave, Philomene had had no power over her ability to keep her family nearby and her desire for freedom is caught up in her need to have her family close. Philomene isn't the only former slave who holds a desire to be near her family in connection with her desire for freedom. As soon as John is freed, he travels to find Elisabeth, his mother. Another important aspect connected to this desire for freedom is seen in the life of Suzette. Though Suzette is invited to live with Philomene, she doesn't immediately agree. Suzette is also asked by her former employer to work for a wage after she is freed by law, but she doesn't agree to that either. Suzette says it's not really a matter of which she wants to do, but the fact that she has a choice as part of her new freedom. She savors this.



Style

Point of View

The story is written in third person from a limited point of view. The story moves to the perspective of the character who is the focus of that section. This perspective begins with Suzette, who is a child slave in the household of her owners. This perspective remains with Suzette throughout the early section, though the reader learns about Suzette's family, including her siblings and her parents, specifically focusing on her mother, Elisabeth. The story's focus then switches to Philomene and the perspective also changes at that point so that the reader sees the events from Philomene's perspective though her mother, Suzette, is still among the main characters. The reader then learns that Suzette had implored her owner to buy Philomene's future husband but learns it from Philomene's words rather than the event itself. The story switches to Emily, with the same journalistic tactics. The perspective is limited by the perspective of the person in the focus at the time. The action that is presented in this story is typically only what is related to the focus character. For example, Suzette remains at the heart of the story and the majority of the action occurs around her until the story switches to Philomene. At that point, Suzette is still alive but is relegated to the role of the secondary character.

Setting

The story is set in an area of New Orleans known as Cane River because of the proximity of the Cane River, a subsidiary of the Red River. The area is real and the history of the region has been preserved through several historical organizations. The region is known for its agricultural base. The agriculture, houses and land related in the story is typical of what actually exists, making the story more believable. Anyone familiar with the area could probably locate specific settings based on the author's descriptions and references to real places. The story begins in 1834, when Suzette is still a youngster living as a slave on a Cane River plantation. The story wraps up more than a century later, in 1936, with Suzette's granddaughter, Emily. The fact that the setting and events are real lend a level of credence to the story, though the author obviously embellishes to make the story come alive. The use of historically accurate people and events is vital to the setting and the author uses this history as a base for the story. It should be noted that the author uses documentation and other information freely, such as a receipt for the sale of slaves from Rosedew, artists' renderings of places and people, maps and photographs.

Language and Meaning

The story is written in a straight-forward manner with a positive though sometimes forbidding and dark tone. The lives of the characters are difficult with Suzette,



Philomene and Elisabeth all telling the stories of having families torn apart when they, as slaves, are sold. While these women go about their daily lives, they live with this fear in the backs of their minds. Elisabeth is particularly aware of it as she has already been sold away from two sons who were very young when they were parted from their mother. The women are also susceptible to the abuse and misuse by the white men in their lives. This is a situation that all feel powerless to avoid, though the women cherish the children fathered by these men. In the case of Suzette, she realizes there is nothing she can do to protect either herself or her children and so reaches out to a free black woman and to the father of the children, pleading for help. Despite these fears and trials, the women remain strong and survive incredible difficulties and hardships. Philomene notes that there is hardly a moment during the day when someone isn't calling for her to perform some task. Early in her life, Philomene mentions "glimpses", which seem to be a form of fortune-telling. Her grandmother seems comfortable with Philomene's gift, though her mother is not. The superstitions and cultural habits of the women change over the course of the story, as is appropriate for a story spanning this length of years.

Structure

The story is divided into forty-eight chapters. Chapters vary greatly in length from as few as four pages up to as many as twelve or more. Chapters are titled only by number. The story is further divided into three sections. The sections are named for each of the three women who are the focus of each of the sections. The first is Suzette, the second Philomene, and the third Emily. Suzette is Philomene's mother and Emily is Philomene's daughter. The relationships of the women are as family members, but they are also united by their situation as slaves. The first section is devoted to the life of Suzette and her parents, moving on to the point where Philomene is born. This section continues to introduce Philomene as a young woman before beginning the section that focuses on Philomene. The same is true of Philomene's daughter, Emily, who is the focus of the final section. The book includes a great many official documents and photos. These documents are presented as photos of the real document, meaning the writing is sometimes difficult to decipher. The book also includes photographs of the people in the later sections. These photos are the people of the story and lend a level of realism and believability to the story that might otherwise be seen only as a novel.



Quotes

"She was eight years old today, would be nine tomorrow, and she was meant for the house, not the field. Everyone, white, colored, and Negro, told her how much pride there was in that." Chap. 1, p. 8

"He looked the part of the older-generation Creole French planter, from his pomaded thinning gray hair to his black suit and riding boots. The role had been handed to him whole on the day he was born." Chap. 1, p. 16

"But all that Suzette could make out was a sound just this side of hearing, like dreams drifting out of reach, slight as a soft spring wind." Chap. 3, p. 46

"The mouse had dashed to freedom, damaged, probably easy game for the next predator, but it had gotten away. Escape was unlikely but it was possible." Chap. 4, p. 64

"Suzette approached her meetings with Eugene Daurat with the same state of mind she had when cleaning the outhouse. The task had to be performed from time to time, and when finished she could go on to other things she didn't mind as much." Chap. 5, p. 69

"Her family had been divided up among seven different plantations along the nineteen mile length of the Cane River, scattered like the fuzzy dandelion wish-seeds she'd dreamed on as a child." Chap. 10, p. 131

"The only thing he gave me was children closer to white. That makes you better than most." Chap. 11, p. 156

"The upturned palm was an old signal between the two of them at Rosedew. Then it had meant 'I'm here, you're there. But we'll manage to be together later.'" Chap. 12, p. 159

"This was the face of slavery. To have nothing and still have something more to lose." Chap. 19, p. 225

"If 1861 was a year for righteous idealism and hopes for a swift conclusion to the war, and 1862 was the year of dislocation and disarray, 1863 was the time for facing the sobering reality of permanent adjustment." Chap. 23, p. 262



"She was Joseph Billes's woman and Narciesse Fredieu's daughter, an implicit warning to others to think twice, to keep their hands to themselves. It had always meant a pass, the benefit of the doubt." Chap. 37, p. 407

"It wasn't often any more that Emily could be persuaded to leave the home place for any reason, even to keep the graves clean, but she had been feeling lately that if she didn't keep moving, God might think she was done and come to collect her early." Chap. 47, p. 518



Topics for Discussion

Describe the lives of Elisabeth, Suzette, Philomene and Emily. How do the lives of the women change over the course of their lives? How are they similar?

Who are the men who father the children of Suzette, Philomene and Emily? How do the four men come into the lives of the women?

How does Philomene react when Orelene asks her to remain at the farm at the end of the war? How does Suzette react? What does Philomene immediately set out to do for her family? Is she successful?

Elisabeth is separated from two of her children during the days of slavery. How does this separation occur? Is she reunited with the children? How? Similarly, Philomene is separated from two children during the days of slavery while she is ill. How does this separation occur? Is she reunited with these children? How?

Who is Palmire? Who is the father of Palmire's children? What is the fate of Palmire and her children?

What are the attitudes of the people with regard to the co-habitation of the races? What are the laws cited in the story? What is the impact of these social dictates and laws on the lives of Suzette, Philomene and Emily?

What is the relationship between the women of the story? While there are familial bounds, are there others as well? Defend your answer. What is the relationship between Bet and Emily? How does this change as the two women age?