

Carver: A Life in Poems Study Guide

Carver: A Life in Poems by Marilyn Nelson

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Out of Slave's Ransom to Washboard Wizard

Out of Slave's Ransom to Washboard Wizard Summary

Carver: A Life in Poems by Marilyn Nelson discusses George Washington Carver's life from childhood, as raised by his white foster parents, the Carvers, to his history-making, agricultural inventions at Tuskegee Institute to his death in 1943.

In the poem "Out of 'Slaves' Ransom," George Washington Carver is born in Diamond Grove, Missouri. His mother, Mary, is a slave owned by Moses and Susan Carver. Mary has an older son, Jim, who is Carver's brother. Mary and George are stolen. Moses hires John Bentley to find them. He only finds George as a sickly infant. The people who care for George give him to Bentley, who in turn gives George to Mrs. Susan Carver. Bentley does not understand how she, a white woman, is so enthusiastic over a black baby. As a reward, Bentley gets a horse and makes a lot of money off the horse. This poem is told from Bentley's point of view, circa 1864.

"Prayer of the Ivory-Handled Knife" is a poem from Susan Carver's perspective. Susan is George's white foster mother. Susan says to God, why did He give her and Moses Mary's orphans, Jim and George? Susan and Moses can never raise them to expect freedom; Jim and George will always be hated because they are black. Susan is thankful for Jim because he is big and strong and helps Moses plow the fields. She is thankful for George because he is a plant doctor who crushes leaves and berries and makes wildflower bouquets. George says to his Aunt Sue that he dreamed of a pocket knife last night and he comes in screaming from the garden saying he finds an ivory-handled knife, exactly as he dreamed, in a watermelon. Susan says to God, how shall she thank Him for giving her these two blessed children? Susan and Moses are childless.

"Watkins Laundry and Apothecary" is told from Mary Watkin's perspective. Watkins takes in George Washington Carver as a boarder in her barn. Carver moves to another town as a young boy to attend the nearest school for black children. Watkins says Carver weeds her garden and paints her flowers in exchange for a meal. He is only ten years old and sleeps in a barn. He does not have any of his biological family. Watkins says she has raised children, but they have never been her own. Carver helps her with washing, cleaning, etc. He prays and is a good boy. She realizes he is destined for greatness when she sees him holding a flower. He says the seed from this flower carries a message from a flower that bloomed a million years ago. Watkins says she will never forget this. Carver leaves the town to find a teacher who knows more than him. He always sends Watkins a dried flower.



"Drifter" discusses Carver is curious about the rain, the corn, etc. He travels, as a teenager, to find somewhere where he can learn. He is on a quest for education.

"The Perceiving Self" is a poem in which Carver witnesses a lynching in Fort Scott, Kansas in 1879. Carver sees the birds and the plants, but then he sees a man running with bruised, bare legs. The man is trampled and torched. People laugh.

"Washboard Wizard" is told from the perspective of a person in the town of Highland, Kansas in 1885. The narrator says everyone takes their clothes to Carver to be washed. He is an amazing launderer. Carver is brilliant and has a college scholarship, but no one in the town knows why he is not at school. Carver lives alone with books and dried plants on Poverty Row. The rumor is when Carver arrived at the university, they turned him away because he is black. But he is the best "washwoman" in town.

Out of Slave's Ransom to Washboard Wizard Analysis

George represents the substitute child that everyone wants or needs. For example, Moses and Susan Carver are childless and they are unhappy about their unfortunate circumstances. As white people living in the Civil War era, it is progressive of them to accept, raise and love their black slave girl's children. It is unheard of. But there is something special about George. He serves as the son both Moses and Sue have always wanted. In comparison, Mary Watkins does not have biological children either. She boards children, but has never had any of her own. She looks at George like a son. He does everything for her and pleases her always. Thus, George is the son everyone wants, even if he is black.

When George finds the pocket knife with the ivory handle, he finds it in a watermelon. This is a symbolic image because the knife has an ivory, or white, handle and it cuts into a watermelon, which is a racist symbol for blacks. Thus, he subconsciously makes the connection of his world of black and white merging together. The interesting part is the watermelon is the symbol for the black part. As Sue says, she will never be able to raise these boys in a world that will accept them. Perhaps young George realizes this on some level as he associates himself with the racist symbol of the watermelon.

Carver begins his self-journey for education. He goes from place to place trying to find a suitable teacher and suitable institution to teach him. It seems as if he fits in nowhere. Finally, when he receives a college scholarship, the college does not accept him. His black skin seems to hinder his self-journey. He must somehow overcome this major obstacle in order to continue his self-journey.



Old Settlers' Reunion to Cafeteria Food

Old Settlers' Reunion to Cafeteria Food Summary

"Old Settlers' Reunion" is from the perspective of a white homesteader in Ness County, Kansas. He says he and his wife built their house together. They own two hundred acres of wheat. Most families around in Ness County have at least a wife. There is one colored boy who lives alone, Carver. He is nice and he is a launderer when he needs money. He plays the accordion. The homesteader does not talk to Carver much. He hears Carver sells his 160 acres. He says he hears George singing through the fields.

"A Ship Without a Rudder" is told from the perspective of Helen Milholland in Winterset, Iowa in 1890. She is in the church and she hears a beautiful voice. She turns around and sees a black boy. She adores him and remembers he wears a snapdragon (flower) in his lapel. She asks the boy, Carver, to come home with her. Helen's husband John says he will talk to the president of Simpson College on George's behalf so George can go to college. Helen is proud of her husband.

"The Prayer of Miss Budd" is told from the perspective of Miss Budd, Carver's art teacher at Simpson College in 1890. Carver majors in art. Miss Budd thanks God for giving her a student like this. Teachers only get one student like this in a lifetime. She feels terrible because she's had to send him home three times, which she infers is due to being black. She asks God to watch over Carver. He paints to reveal the truth and he paints with an incredible sense of loss. She asks God to give her greater gifts in order to teach Carver, who is a master or genius.

"The Last Rose of Summer" discusses singing and how singing leads to painting and piano lessons. He pays for his piano lessons with his paintings. He loves plants. But what good is all this happiness if his brother Jim dies of smallpox?

"Four a.m. in the Woods" discusses Carver seeing the mist in the forest and the fireflies. He sits against the bark of a tree and asks questions about the future. He has an epiphany and realizes his purpose in life.

"Cafeteria Food" discusses how Carver transfers to Iowa State College of Agriculture and Mechanic Arts in 1891. He wants to better serve blacks through agriculture. The poem talks about vegetables. The hotel kitchen is run by a black cook. The cook gives Carver food. He eats alone in the basement, but he appreciates the fresh food. He can count on the food always, whether it is good or bad.

Old Settlers' Reunion to Cafeteria Food Analysis

Carver continues his self-journey via the help of a white man, who goes to bat for him and helps Carver go to college. Carver needs this white influence in order to move along his self-journey. He goes to art college, where he continues his self-introspection.



Symbolically, he has his epiphany in the woods. This is symbolic because his epiphany is he will work in agriculture and feed the black masses. He becomes one with nature and it leads to him educating himself in agriculture and beginning his agriculture career. Nature becomes an essential part of Carver's life. Through education, Carver continues his self-journey and discovers that he is a naturalist at heart.

The death of Jim, George's older brother, symbolizes a death of something in George. Carver is stuck in art at this point. He loves it, but he is not continuing on the right path. When Jim dies, Carver is able to let this part of himself die, the part that lives for art. When he looks into heart, he realizes his first love is agriculture and nature. He changes his focus in life. Thus, Jim's death is the variable that helps Carver realizes his future ambitions.



Curve-Breaker to Called

Curve-Breaker to Called Summary

"Curve-Breaker" discusses how does Carver break the ice in college. Is it the prayer group he joins, the agricultural society he founds, writing the class poem, painting the class picture, his great arguments in debate, etc.? He is exceptional at everything. No one knows why Carver is so well-liked. When Sue Carver comes to visit, a woman asks if she is his mother and Carver and Sue laugh. Carver does so well at school that Doc is his nickname.

"The Nervous System of the Beetle" is told from the professor's perspective. Carver is in a class called Intro to Invertebrates (meaning animals that have no backbone). A student describes the nervous system of a beetle and he says the beetle has a backbone. Carver laughs hysterically. The student leaves the room in embarrassment. The teacher does not get the joke. Carver continues laughing.

"Green-Thumb Boy" is told from the perspective of Dr. L.H. Pammel, one of Carver's professors. Pammel says how amazed he is that Carver absorbs all of the information. He is the black Darwin or Mendel. Carver has a gift for observation. He collects an entire new species. He wears a flower in his label, even in January. Pammel says the college had doubts about giving him a class to teach, but Carver is a genius. A new student tries to disturb Carver in the cafeteria, presumably because Carver is black. But the other students move to the new student's table and do the same thing. Then the students go back to sit at Carver's table. Pammel says Carver brings out the best in people.

"Cercospora" discusses how Carver absorbs all the biological information; i.e., species and genus. His classmates are white, but how does he trust them? No one understands how he is able to trust them, but he does.

"A Charmed Life" discusses Carver is a pilgrim. His two paintings exhibit at the Chicago World Fair. He breaks new ground for a black man.

(Carver graduates with his B.A. from Iowa State College in 1894.)

"Called" discusses how Carver rattles on about agriculture. Someone (presumably Booker T. Washington) talks to him about a school of agriculture Carver will establish, his duties, his office key. A flash to twenty years ahead: this is where Carver belongs.

(In 1896 Carver receives his Master's degree and joins the faculty of the Tuskegee Institute via the invitation of Booker T. Washington. Carver starts an agriculture department and is the first black director of a USDA Agricultural Experiment Station.)



Curve-Breaker to Called Analysis

Carver represents an oxymoron. He is black, but he is well-liked and respected. At Iowa State College, he is known as Doc because he is exceptional in everything he does. He excels above the other students and they like him for that. His professor even says that Carver brings out the best in people. Usually, for white people of this time period, black people bring out the worst in them because of their hatred toward blacks. But Carver is unique. He represents the bridge between black and white.

Carver continues his self-journey through agricultural. He absorbs all the information given to him. He still paints and is an exceptional painter. Through all this, he trusts white people, perhaps the biggest accomplishment of all. He trusts them as his classmates, professors and friends. But his self-journey takes an interesting twist as he goes to Tuskegee Institute, an all-black college. He now separates himself from the white world and immerses himself into a world of blacks. This self-journey foreshadows that Carver must examine the blackness within himself. Additionally, he will be around only blacks, so this foreshadows that the reader will see how Carver fits in with other blacks and if they accept him or not.



My People to Coincidence

My People to Coincidence Summary

"My People" is told from the perspective of Carver's black colleague at Tuskegee Institute. The colleague writes in an angry tone. He says everyone knows Carver has a Master's degree from a white man's college. His salary is double his colleagues. Carver has two single rooms, but the rest of the black faculty with Bachelor's degrees share double rooms. He says Carver speaks in a white accent and Carver thinks he is better than his black colleagues. Carver brings his students to the dump for class. The colleague says Carver is always on high horse, as if he is not a nigger.

"Odalisque" is told from the perspective of the same black colleague. He is angry because Carver asks for a lab space and painting studio. Carver says his work will honor blacks and go down in the history of the race. The colleague cannot believe Carver's gall.

"Chemistry 101" discusses how Carver leads his chemistry class into the college dump. The students follow him like ducklings. Carver shows them what to do. The students raise their hands. He helps them imagine the possibilities and become good students.

"Dawn Walk" is a walk through the Tuskegee Institute's twenty acres of crops. It is the first U.S. Agricultural Experiment Station at a black college. It is headed by Carver, a black man. It is underfunded. The students are extremely poor. Their toes stick out of their shoes. Their parents were slaves. They do not have much education and mess up experiments. They incorrectly mix a dip and scald ewes. This is the first free generation. Carver has a hard time teaching them. This poem seems to be told from Carver's point of view due to the last line when he says "and Thee."

"From an Alabama Farmer" is a letter to Carver. A barely literate farmer writes Carver to thank Carver for showing him how to fertilize his crops. He asks Carver another crop question. He says it is a miracle what Carver did for him.

"Coincidence" discusses when Carver is on a train around Wakefield on February 15, 1898. He sits in the colored compartment. Carver sits there with his compost. A message comes to the colored compartment saying a whole family sits on the track to commit suicide. This upsets Carver as he tries to figure out why anyone would do this. The train only arrives two hours late.

My People to Coincidence Analysis

The reader finally receives a glimpse into how other blacks perceive Carver. The whites at Iowa State College are impressed by him. But it is different at Tuskegee, an all-black university. They resent his polished ways and his advanced degree. Carver is not the perfect figure that the reader has seen in the poems leading up to this, which have the

perspectives of white people. Thus, Carver does not fit well into this black world. He is frustrated by his black students' lack of education. Thus, Carver seems to fit better in a white world, ironically. This black world does not embrace or welcome him. It shuns him.

The attempted suicide of the family makes Carver wonder why someone would resort to this desperate measure. It brings Carver into a mode of introspection. For some reason, he cannot fathom this, which shows the strength of Carver's character. No matter how much racism he endures, he cannot go to these extremes. Carver represents a strong, black male. He will continue living, no matter how many obstacles stand in his way. He will define history and make it better for the black man.



Beside Reading to The Sweet-Hearts

Beside Reading to The Sweet-Hearts Summary

"Beside Reading" discusses Carver's bedside, which has dried leaves, seeds, notes, letters and a Bible. There is also a Bill of Sale for a thirteen-year-old girl named Mary. It is a bill of sale for his mother's slavery. It works out to fifteen cents a day for every day she lived, \$350 for each son and no charge for two stillborn daughters. It is \$700 for her whole future. He shakes his head. He thinks about his link to his mother. He places the Bible on the table and blows out the light. He goes to sleep.

"Poultry Husbandry" discusses the insanity of Carver's many tasks of his job. He is a botanist. He raises chickens. He is the superintendent of poultry operations, teaches seven classes, etc. There are only a couple work-study students who help him. Booker T. Washington, his boss and founder of Tuskegee Institute, sends him letters to check up on the unaccounted for numbers of chickens in Carver's care. Washington requires daily reports and writes recommendations. The chickens start to kill each other out of boredom. Carver learns if he does not stop them, the chickens will hack each other to death. Carver learns a whole new set of diseases chickens can get. Carver stops at the poultry yard and unlocks the gate. A chicken named Old Teddy Roosevelt flaps his wings and there is hope.

"1905" discusses how a white, German man stands at a blackboard full of impossible math equations. He is Albert Einstein. Meanwhile, Carver takes his open wagon full of compost, fruit and seeds through the countryside to teach former field slaves about farming. His assistants come along and they have fun. Carver explains Einstein's Theory of Relativity to them. They pull up to a farm and a black man and his son welcome Carver.

"Clay" discusses how God makes the elements. The elements of the Earth are like a frescoed, Renaissance cathedral wall. Even the ugliest and poorest things are beautiful. Carver sees beauty in everything. He sees beauty in discarded boards, ugly brown cabins and even in the dirt.

"Egyptian Blue" is a pigment that Carver created. No artist or scientist duplicates it. Only in the days of old King Tut does Egyptian blue exist. It is a vibrant blue—the bluest of blues. Paint factories and manufacturers beg Carver for the formula. Carver sends it. Egyptian blue is such a beautiful, indescribable blue. These days, the color is everywhere: in a desk folder or in a child's dress.

"The Sweet-Hearts" is told from the perspective of Sarah Hunt, an ex-girlfriend of Carver's. Sarah is a teacher. Carver courts her. He comes to the schoolyard every day and gives her a flower. He always has a flower in his lapel. They would walk and talk about flowers and agriculture. Her family is extremely disapproving because he is black. She loves him. She takes care of him. She realizes her children would be half-black.



Carver helps Sarah's fourth grade students start a garden and teaches them about growing things. But then one day, he stops coming around. The children miss him and so does she. She leaves the school and starts a new life. She is married with children. But she says she can no longer live a lie and kills herself.

Beside Reading to The Sweet-Hearts Analysis

Carver begins to self-examine his black identity. He starts with thinking about Mary, his mother, and her slavery. He has a hard time fitting in at Tuskegee between his duties and the other black faculty not liking him. The chickens symbolize the black community. When left to their own devices, they peck each other to death. Blacks do the same thing to each other. Instead of supporting one another, the blacks at Tuskegee "peck" at Carver instead of supporting him. Even Booker T. Washington seems to "peck" at Carver in certain ways. The reader receives a different view of Carver as an imperfect individual. He begins to feel the pressure of his job.

Carver feels free again and in his element when he travels the countryside in his open wagon. Here, he is accepted by the black community. A black father and son welcome him with open arms to their farm. The black farming community seems to bond well with Carver because he helps them. This is the world Carver fits into. Thus, Carver's motivations change to helping the poor black farmer develop his farming skills and become successful in the agriculture world.

Sarah is the first relationship that the reader sees of Carver. It is presumably romantic, at least in Sarah's eyes. But Carver walks away from the relationship, devastating Sarah for life. His abrupt exit signals something is not right with Carver and the way he interacts with a woman. This foreshadows that Carver may have other relationship troubles ahead and not be able to handle relationships with females.



A Patriarch's Blessing to The Year of the Sky-Smear

A Patriarch's Blessing to The Year of the Sky-Smear Summary

"A Patriarch's Blessing" discusses how Carver tries to sleep in a train, but he sees a thin, white face with a beard. It is Uncle Moses (Moses Carver). Moses says "come here" and George kneels by his rocker. George says he has come back to pick fruit from his favorite tree, but Moses says the fruit is not ripe yet. Moses says he can never keep his boys away from the tree. Moses says George will go in front of the Lord to prepare him.

"The Lace-Maker" discusses how Carver likes to crochet, knit and do needlework. Late Sunday morning, Carver sews intently. It is spiritual for him and gives him happiness.

"Chicken-Talk" discusses how chickens go missing from Carver's chicken coops. Booker T. Washington hounds him about it. In 1910, 765 chickens are unaccounted for. Washington sends Carver daily telegrams. Rumors in town say the chickens are freed by Ol' John. John was a slave and in slavery days, John would go in the coops and free the chickens. The Master comes up as John frees them and asks who is in there. But then the Master goes home. According to the folklore of generations of John's children, John never told on Brer Fox.

"The Joy of Sewing" discusses threading a needle and how it feels. The cloth lies in one's lap. The fingers make stitches. Sewing makes finished products that one must think about. Carver wears secondhand suits and people laugh at him. But he is happy with sewing.

"Veil-Raisers" discusses Booker T. Washington, who sits night after night writing notes to faculty, philanthropists, family, etc. He goes up to the third floor and a student jumps up in anticipation to serve Washington. In his own room, Carver writes lab notes, prepares tomorrow's classes, does his Bible readings, etc. He always stays up very late. Carver would occasionally see black couples come walking home and eventually they will make babies and keep the race going.

"The Year of the Sky-Smear" happens in 1910. People think it is Halley's Comet and some type of sign of the millennium. It makes history. Back from an afternoon on the road, there is a comet. Carver is fascinated by it. He remembers he must mail a parcel to Uncle Moses. He says he will do it tomorrow. He goes home and there are many letters for him. One is a thank you letter from Mr. Kellogg. There is a letter from Mrs. Goodwin, who is related to Moses. He happily opens it in anticipation. Moses is dead.

(In 1910, Moses Carver died.)

A Patriarch's Blessing to The Year of the Sky-Smear Analysis

While riding on a train, Carver sees Moses' face. This foreshadows Moses' impending death, which is clearly seen in "The Year of the Sky-Smear" when Carver receives the letter of bad news. Moses says that Carver will prepare the Lord. This seems to mean that Carver will prepare the white Lord for all other blacks to be accepted into heaven. Carver is the best of his race and Moses sees this in him. He is the ideal pioneer to go to heaven and show the Lord that blacks belong there as well.

The story of Ol' John is an example of African-American storytelling. In slavery times, slaves did not have access to literacy, thus they used the spoken word as their form of literacy. Stories passed down from generation to generation—even today. Slavery stories of the slave winning over the master were not uncommon as in the story of Ol' John. In African-American folklore, Brer Fox is the naïve character. Brer Rabbit, the trickster character, easily tricks Brer Fox. Thus, Brer Fox in the Ol' John story represents the simpleton who hides in the chicken coop. The Master is tricked by Ol' John and Brer Fox, thus the Master is the ultimate simpleton.



The New Rooster to Ruellia Noctiflora

The New Rooster to Ruellia Noctiflora Summary

"The New Rooster" discusses how Carver has a new assistant, George R. Bridgeforth, in the Tuskegee Poultry Yard in 1902 to 1913. Bridgeforth is brilliant too. He and Carver butt heads. Bridgeforth has ambitions of becoming principal. Booker T. Washington favors both of them. If Bridgeforth were a rooster, he would be handsome, tall and plumed. If Carver were a rooster, he would be some weird mutant. They argue about the chickens. One wants them quarantined; the other does not. They squabble over disappearing eggs. After a ten-year battle over the poultry yard, Carver quits then stays, quits then stays and continues this back and forth cycle. Washington divides them. Carver gets a lab; Bridgeforth gets the poultry yard. A new rooster crows, which means Bridgeforth is in charge.

"How a Dream Dies" discusses how Booker T. Washington dies in his own bed in 1915. Carver is devastated. He will not teach or go into a lab. He sits in his room and rocks in his chair. They had a lifelong friendship. The first World War starts; Carver does not think this is right either. People observe Carver lose his best friend and his faith.

"Out of the Fire" discusses Carver's dream of Washington's daughter-in-law. She dreams that Washington had said Carver will carry on for him. Carver awakes. He is invited to the advisory board of the National Agricultural Society. The British name Carver a Fellow of the Royal Society for the Arts. For a black man, that is a lot of firsts. Tuskegee gives him a professor title. The government calls on Carver to demonstrate his methods of dehydrating food. He feels humbled and triumphant. He feels he is finally successful.

"The Wild Garden" discusses all the plants that grow in Carver's garden; i.e., tulips, leaves, onions. He says God makes nothing that goes to waste. Humans could survive on a balanced diet of wild vegetables. Weeds grow despite people who want to kill them. They keep coming back from God. Weeds are of use too.

"The Dimensions of the Milky Way" discusses Carver watching the light change in the sky. He sees the Milky Way. It is a beautiful world of stardust and a hundred billion stars. He is fascinated by the infinite quality of the universe.

"Ruellia Noctiflora" is a night-blooming petunia in the wild. This poem is told from the perspective of Carver's female student. She says a black man comes running at her from out of the woods on a Sunday morning. He shouts to "come see." He has a tin cylinder, a flower in his lapel and a tweed jacket. He is Professor Carver. He finds a rare specimen, *Ruellia Noctiflora*. He is extremely excited because he has never seen this species before. All night he watched it. They go hand-in-hand into the morning dark woods and he points out the flower to her.



The New Rooster to Ruellia Noctiflora Analysis

This the first time the reader sees Carver have a nemesis. Usually, he is the best at everything and has the last word at everything. But he is not good at keeping the chickens. Thus, Bridgeforth takes over. This is a slight to Carver. He sees Washington like a friend and mentor. For Washington to pick Bridgeforth over him is hurtful. When Washington dies, Carver cannot bear his death. He sits in his room, unable to communicate. Up until this point, Carver deals with death in a reserved way. It is Washington's death that moves him. Carver's motivations change to taking Washington's place in making achievements for black people. He receives awards and honors. Carver now steps into the role of being a mentor and being someone who is revered. He steps into Washington's shoes.

For Carver, nature rules everything. It is the ultimate source. He says God makes all plants useful and no plant should go to waste, even the weeds. This idea represents the idea of not wasting talent in the black community. He wants to ensure that black farmers are not wasted as well. They should be treated as talented individuals who will bring something valuable to this world. He also thinks this way about his students. When he finds the night-blooming petunia, he shares the joy with his student and brings her into the woods to see the flower. She, too, is of value because she can be taught and in turn, she will teach other blacks. Carver sees, like nature, that God put blacks on earth to be valued and utilized in the right way. Every black person is of value and every black person can be used for a higher purpose.



Professor Carver's Bible Class to Friends in the Klan

Professor Carver's Bible Class to Friends in the Klan Summary

"Professor Carver's Bible Class" discusses how a student pictures God as a white man who has been watching and keeping score. The student fears God's wrath. Carver liberates him from this idea by saying God lives within oneself and speaks to a person through prayer and nature. It is a broadcast system where God contacts the person.

"Goliath" discusses there is another lynching in the South. A black man's hacked-off penis is in his mouth as his body is set on fire. A student in Carver's Bible class asks Carver, where is God now? Carver says God is here and do not lose contact with him. Never yield to fear because hate destroys a person. Carver likens them to killing Goliath, the feared Philistine warrior who was killed by David, leader of the Israelites. David killed Goliath with only a slingshot and pebble. Carver says they kill Goliath by spreading universal good.

"House of Ways and Means" discusses how Carver appears before the U.S. House of Representatives Committee of Ways and Means in 1921. He speaks in support of a protective tariff on peanuts. He says he is an agricultural researcher from Tuskegee and the most remarkable plant is the peanut. Peanuts can be used for many different things; i.e., peanut milk, chocolate-covered peanuts, etc. A representative interrupts him to say: "Do you want a watermelon to go with that?" (p. 77). Carver answers World War I has taught them they can go without dessert. Carver starts discussing peanuts again.

"Arachis Hypogaea" is an attractive plant that may have been smuggled to North America by slaves. It loves the warmth and the sun. It bears flowers of both the female and male genders. Carver's research begins to flourish. From the laboratory of a slave (Carver) emerges all of these peanut inventions. He has promise and purpose. He is his slave ancestor's dream.

"Lovingly Sons" discusses how Carver's Boys pray for him. His "Boys" are students that he mentors. The Boys write letters to him from schools all over the US where Carver has guest lectured. The Boys write Carver must have been praying for them. They feel near him and Jesus. Carver smiles.

"Friends in the Klan" discusses how the black veterans of World War I experience racism in veteran hospitals, so Tuskegee opens their brand-new hospital for blacks only. But it is run by whites. White nurses are legally excused from touching black patients so they order the black maids to touch the patients. Carver and other blacks protest. A black doctor arrives, to everyone's happiness. The Ku Klux Klan (KKK) marches. Carver prays for his friend in the Klan.



Professor Carver's Bible Class to Friends in the Klan Analysis

Carver's motivations change to religion in this section. He wants to teach the students not only about nature but about religion as well. The idea of God being a broadcast system within a person symbolizes how God works in Carver. Carver contacts God whenever he wishes to and receives spiritual healing. Carver does not believe in revenge against whites; he believes in spreading goodness. Thus, Carver's motivations are to have peace in the community. He is a prophet-like character or even a Buddhist character who spreads the word of peace. When the Boys write to Carver, they say they feel close to Jesus and him. They think of him as a God-like figure, a being higher than themselves. Therefore, Carver serves as an in-between for them and God.

The idea of the watermelon arises again, as seen previously in the first section. The representative is blatantly racist when he asks Carver if he wants a watermelon to go with his peanuts. The watermelon symbolizes a common stereotype for blacks. Carver practices his idea of spreading goodness and answers the representative in a polite way. His answer infers that blacks and whites fought together in World War I, so there is no need for racism anymore. Carver speaks with dignity and poise. The fact that Carver has these peanut inventions is a slave's dream. Carver represents the potential of what a slave can be. He was born a slave and now he is extremely successful. He is the slave everyman who has succeeded. The plant smuggled from Africa symbolizes Carver. Both the plant and Carver go to the light and warmth of life and carry the blood of their female and male ancestors. The plant and Carver grow, develop and succeed.



My Dear Spiritual Boy to The Penol Cures

My Dear Spiritual Boy to The Penol Cures Summary

"My Dear Spiritual Boy" is a letter to Jim Hardwick in October 1923. Hardwick is a student at Virginia Polytechnic Institute where Carver speaks. Hardwick is the first of Carver's Boys. Hardwick is white. Carver says to Hardwick he loves him for what he is and what he hopes to be. God has given Hardwick to Carver to give him strength and confirm his faith in humanity. Hardwick is white, a college athlete and a soul mate to Carver.

"God's Little Workshop" discusses how Carver tries a peanut oil experiment in his workshop. Carver tries to work through it. He has a Do Not Disturb sign up. The students walk quietly in the hallways not to disturb him. He takes all his peanut inventions on a lecture tour. It is his science, his miracles.

"Eureka" discusses how Carver arrives for the first time in New York in November 1924. He speaks at a conference about how he gets inspired to create something new. The New York Times criticizes him harshly because a scientist should not rely on inspiration. The paper says Carver casts shame on Tuskegee and the black race, which has come so far. Real scientists do not credit their successes to inspiration.

"My Beloved Friend" is a letter to Jim Hardwick in April 1924. God uses Hardwick to teach the world to dispel of evil and have goodness here on earth. Carver says it is Christ in Hardwick. Carver is happy to have met someone from the white race who embodies goodness.

"Driving Mr. Carver" discusses how Al Zissler and Jim Hardwick go on a driving tour/lecture circuit in spring 1933. Zissler and Hardwick drive with Carver through the South in the midst of the Great Depression for several weeks. They play pranks on each other. Carver loves mischief and puts a toad in Hardwick's pocket. They sing happily on the open road.

"The Penol Cures" discusses how Carver's peanut-oil massages are a cure for polio. Carver massages the first child victim for a few weeks. The child gains forty pounds and runs around. Word gets out in the press. Polio victims flood to Tuskegee. Carver massages as many victims as he can. There were successes and many failures alike. Carver refuses to massage a mean victim. Carver says this victim's soul cannot be fixed. The results of Carver's Penol experiments are not satisfactory nor are they able to be reproduced. The cause of the cures remains unknown.



My Dear Spiritual Boy to The Penol Cures Analysis

Carver's Boys represent a makeshift family for Carver. He is not married and does not have children. Thus, he takes on the father and mentor role with these students. Many of them are white. Thus, Carver crosses racial boundaries to have white men look up to him. The Boys give Carver a sense of purpose and a sense of fulfillment because they show him that whites and blacks can be friends and can relate to one another. Carver sees the Boys as coming from a higher power, or God. Thus, this goes back to his theory that God is a broadcast system to be contacted. Carver contacts God through his Boys.

Carver continues to represent a spiritual figure. He massages polio victims and some of them get better. There is no scientific explanation for this. Via Carver's broadcast system of God, spirituality seems to run through him. With this spirituality, Carver can heal people. Carver symbolizes Christ, a figure who heals others via spirituality. Also, Carver refuses to massage a man who is a nasty soul, thus the man symbolizes the devil. As a man of God, Carver refuses to engage with evil.



Letter to Mrs. Hardwick to Moton Field

Letter to Mrs. Hardwick to Moton Field Summary

"Letter to Mrs. Hardwick" discusses how Carver writes a letter to Hardwick's new wife in December 1934. He says Jim never mentioned his marriage to him. So Carver is in shock. He thinks about Jim's joy and how they will never share marriage as a relation point.

"Baby Carver" discusses how in 1935 Austin W. Curtis becomes Carver's assistant. Potential assistants come in and out and Carver is not happy with any of them. Carver prefers to work alone than with young scientists who do not know what they are doing. Austin Curtis comes and impresses him. Carver writes to Curtis' father saying Curtis is more like a son than an assistant. Curtis has the nickname "Baby Carver."

"Mineralogy" discusses how Henry Ford, famed car maker, dedicates The George Washington Carver Museum at Tuskegee in 1941. Ford wants a huge diamond. Carver brings out a box labeled minerals and shows Ford a bunch of stones. Carver shows Ford the diamond, which is a gift to Ford. Carver holds up the diamond to the window and Ford sees Carver's eyes are citrine, or yellow-orange.

"Last Talks with Jim Hardwick" discusses how Carver believes in reincarnation. When he dies, he will live again. Nature is a conserver, so is he. Carver believes he is not done in this world after he dies. God conserves the human soul. Carver's spirit will not die.

"Moton Field" discusses how in January 1943, there are crowds and laughter from the airfield a few miles down the road. Carver hears an airplane zooming by. It is as high as a black man has been, but Carver thinks it is a shame. The flight instructor smiles and does an acrobatic roll of his plane.

(George Washington Carver dies in his sleep on January 5, 1943.)

Letter to Mrs. Hardwick to Moton Field Analysis

Carver discusses the Buddhist principle of reincarnation. He states that his soul will never die. Thus, Carver continues on his self-journey as a Christ-like figure. He represents the spirituality of nature and all living beings. When Henry Ford looks at Carver's eyes, he does not see black. He sees citrine eyes, or something unworldly. Carver again is a spiritual figure. Even to white people, he represents a higher being. Carver's spirituality influences the world around him. He dies in 1943 and his spirit continues to live on in his inventions and in American history for both white and black Americans alike.



Characters

George Washington Carver appears in Carver: A Life in Poems

George Washington Carver is born a slave in Missouri circa 1864. He and his mother, Mary, a black slave, are stolen. Mary goes missing, but George is found and is returned to Mary's white owners, Moses and Susan Carver. They happily raise George. George is an intelligent black child. He loves to roam in the garden and pick bouquets. He loves nature and makes brilliant observations about nature at a young age. He goes on a quest for education, even though he faces extreme racism. George overcomes racism through his talents. He is a multi-talented person. He paints, sews and is a botanist. He is brilliant in everything he does, especially academically. His ultimate love is nature.

George receives a Master's degree from a white college, unheard of in those days. He seems to fit in better with the white community at times. Whites appreciate his poise and talent, but blacks think he is uppity and a snob. George begins to examine his blackness at Tuskegee Institute when he is around other blacks. George is a thinker and a doer. He creates inventions and is a famous scientist. But he is also spiritual and takes a spiritual journey of his own in which he finds white friends. Right before his death, George believes his spirit will continue to live on. Above all, nature recycles everything and he will be reincarnated in nature.

Susan (Sue) Carver appears in Prayer of the Ivory-Handled Knife

Susan or Sue Carver is George Washington Carver's foster mother. When George and his slave mother Mary are stolen, George is the only one found. Sue and her husband Moses raise George. She loves George dearly and when he is found, she cries with happiness. Sue believes that God sends her George (and his brother) because she and Moses are childless. But she struggles as a mother with raising two black children in a racist society. Sue's downfall is she realizes these children will always be hated and there is nothing she can do about that. Sue wishes to protect George and his brother from hatred.

Sue is a loving, caring person. She does not care about George's race. She loves unconditionally. She sees the goodness in George. She is also the first to recognize George's intelligence and talent. She sees that George loves nature and flowers and he understands the natural world. She calls him her little "plant-doctor." Sue looks to George for happiness and fulfillment. Raising two black children fulfill her and Moses. As George grows older, she fully supports his dream of education and lets him go to find that dream. Without the support of Sue Carver, George Washington Carver could not have achieved as much as he did. Thus, Sue is an important figure in Carver's life.



Jim Washington Carver appears in The Last Rose of Summer

Jim Washington Carver is George's older brother. He is also raised by the Carvers and he dies of smallpox. When he dies, George has an epiphany that he should be an agriculturist.

Black Colleague appears in My People and Odalisque

A black colleague at Tuskegee Institute writes how he is angry because Carver gets preferential treatment because he graduated from a white college with a Master's degree. Carver receives more perks than the other black faculty and it angers this colleague.

Sarah Hunt appears in The Sweet-Hearts

Sarah Hunt is an ex-girlfriend of Carver's. Before she commits suicide, she has fond memories of Carver courting her. Carver brings her flowers and teaches her fourth graders about gardening, but he just stops coming around one day.

George R. Bridgeforth appears in The New Rooster

George R. Bridgeforth is Carver's nemesis. He is hired at Tuskegee and he is brilliant too. He and Carver fight over their poultry duties and eventually Booker T. Washington awards Bridgeforth the Poultry Yard, which he takes away from Carver.

Booker T. Washington appears in Veil-Raisers and How a Dream Dies

Booker T. Washington is the founder of Tuskegee Institute. Washington is a workaholic and Carver's boss and mentor. Everyone is scared of him. When Washington dies, Carver is depressed.

Uncle Moses appears in A Patriarch's Blessing and The Year of the Sky-Smear

Uncle Moses is George Washing Carver's foster father. He loves George and sees him as great. Moses is a disciplinarian. He dies in 1910.



Jim Hardwick appears in My Dear Spiritual Boy, My Beloved Friend and Driving Mr. Car

Jim Hardwick is a white student who is the first of Carver's Boys. Carver is a mentor and friend to Hardwick. Hardwick's friendship is important to Carver because it restores his faith in white people.

Austin Curtis appears in Baby Carver

Austin Curtis is nicknamed Baby Carver because Carver thinks of him like a son, not just as an assistant. After a long line of failed assistants, Curtis impresses Carver and they work together for a long time.



Objects/Places

whooping cough appears in **Out of Slave's Ransom**, p. 9

Whooping cough is a contagious bacterial disease. It causes violent coughing and severe infection.

black-eyed Susan appears in **Watkins Laundry and Apothecary**, p. 14

A black-eyed Susan is a flower with yellow petals and a brown middle.

stamens appears in **The Perceiving Self**, p. 17

Stamens are the male reproductive structure of a flower.

boutonniere appears in **The Last Rose of Summer**, p. 24

A boutonniere is a corsage, or decorative flower piece, for a man.

Bunsen burner appears in **Chemistry 101**, p. 37

A Bunsen burner is a piece of laboratory equipment used to produce a controllable, open flame.

Halley's Comet appears in **The Year of the Sky-Smear**, p 62

Halley's Comet is a comet that is visible with the naked eye from Earth every seventy-five to seventy-six years.

Ku Klux Klan appears in **Friends in the Klan**, p. 81

Ku Klux Klan is a hate group of whites that originated in the South after the Civil War. They hate blacks and certain religions. They want to keep white control of the South through fear, murder, lynching, etc.



Penol treatment appears in *The Penol Cures*, p. 88

Penol treatment is the peanut-oil massage treatment Carver uses for polio victims.

whippersnapper appears in *Baby Carver*, p. 91

A whippersnapper is a young person who assumes things and is outspoken.

Tuskegee Institute appears in *Carver: A Life in Poems*

Tuskegee Institute is the black college that Booker T. Washington founded. Carver creates the agriculture center at Tuskegee and works there all his life.



Themes

Self-Journey

One of the major themes of *Carver: A Life in Poems* is self-journey. Carver takes a self-journey throughout his life in which he examines himself closely. He starts by taking a literal journey on a search for education. As a black youth, he cannot find a school that will educate him. He must live apart from the Carvers to be educated. When he goes to college, he is initially rejected by the white administration. But that does not stop his journey for education. He goes to Simpson College as an art major. He must stop his self-journey and reflect upon his brother's death. He realizes this is not the right life journey for him. He transfers to Iowa State College and becomes an agriculturalist.

As he continues his pursuit of education, his self-journey begins to take the form of self-introspection. He teaches at Tuskegee Institute, an all-black college. This is the first time he is surrounded by blacks in education. Thus, he must now examine how blacks treat him and how he fits into the black world. He begins a self-journey that lasts a lifetime about race and racism. He sees his journey start with Mary, his slave mother. He continues life as a brilliant scientist, but whites discriminate against him. His self-journey becomes enlightening when he befriends, Jim Hardwick, a white man. Carver's faith is restored in the white race. Carver turns to spirituality and sees God in this friendship and in Nature. The self-journey ends with Carver's death, a journey he believes will continue on in reincarnation.

Spirituality

One of the major themes in *Carver: A Life in Poems* is spirituality. Carver is close to Nature and lives by the ways of Nature. Even as a child, he respected Nature to the fullest. He understands and loves the plants, weeds, etc. In this Nature, he finds a spiritual being. To Carver, God is a higher being who does not waste anything in Nature. For example, God makes weeds for a reason. Weeds are for humans to use, not cut down. Weeds make great food and great tea, for example. Through Nature, Carver has a spiritual awakening that everything must be recycled. Even human life is recycled. As Carver faces his impending death, he realizes his soul will be recycled in Nature. In the form of reincarnation, his spirit will continue to live on in Nature.

Carver also sees spirituality in people. He says that God is a broadcast system and one must contact God. He sees this in people; for example, he sees this in Jim Hardwick. Carver believes God brings him Jim in order to restore his faith in white humanity. In Jim, he sees God. Also, vice-versa, in Carver, Jim sees Christ. Spirituality is everywhere in the form of love for people. This spirituality enlightens Carver to believe the world is not such a terrible place. Carver uses this spirituality to also forgive people. When he finds out his white friend is a member of the Ku Klux Klan, he prays for him instead of hating him. When his students are troubled because another black man gets lynched,



Carver advises them to find the spiritual goodness within themselves and act upon that. He says do not hate; love and God are the answers.

Being an Outsider

One of the major themes of Carver: A Life in Poems is being an outsider. No matter what George Washington Carver does, he is an outsider in his community. For example, he is raised by white people, but he is a black slave. Then he pursues an education only to find out he is initially rejected by the white administration at a college. When he finally goes there, he is the only black student. He is brilliant and is accepted by the staff and students, but he is still a black man—as one student reminds him when he tries to annoy Carver. He takes his journey onto Tuskegee where he is among blacks. But he does not fit in there either. He is an outsider because he received his Master's degree from a white college. His fellow colleagues received only Bachelor's degrees from black colleges. He is viewed as a snob and as a black man who does not remember his black roots. Even at a black college, Carver is an outsider.

As he continues his work at Tuskegee, he gains recognition as a brilliant scientist. He gives lectures at various schools. He tours amongst the black farmers teaching them agricultural methods. He seems to be accepted, but he still rides in the colored compartment of the train. When he goes to talk in front of representatives in Washington, a white representative makes a racist comment to him. No matter how educated and brilliant Carver is, he is still a black man. He is an outsider in a white man's world.



Style

Point of View

The point of view of Carver: A Life in Poems is varying. The point of view depends on each individual poem. For example, Susan Carver tells her perspective from the first person in "Prayer of the Ivory-Handled Knife." She gives the reader a personal, close up perspective of how much she loves George and his brother Jim. She discusses her deep feelings of being a mother. Mariah Watkins does the same thing in "Watkins Laundry and Apothecary." Watkins' first person point of view allows the reader to see how much she loves and enjoys young Carver. She also notices his talents and sees his intelligence. In other poems, the first person point of view is given by outsiders or characters without names who give an outside perspective of Carver. For example, in "Old Settlers' Reunion", the first person perspective is of a homesteader who lives near Carver. He hardly knows him but he says Carver keeps to himself, is nice and can hear his singing voice through the fields. The reader sees what an outsider can see of Carver.

Many of the other poems are told from an omniscient, third person perspective. The reader still receives a personal point of view. For instance, in "Four a.m. in the Woods", the reader gains a personal perspective of Carver's epiphany of becoming an agriculturalist. It is not told from Carver's perspective, but from a third person perspective. Yet the result is a personal glimpse into Carver's thinking. This point of view encompasses many of the poems. Only one poem, "Dawn Walk", seems to be from Carver's first person point of view because in the last line he says "Thee." But this is an exception.

Setting

The setting of these poems varies. The setting begins in rural Missouri as black George Washington Carver roams the gardens and the rural town his white foster parents live in. He then moves eight miles away to the Watkins house, in which he helps do chores in exchange for food and to sleep in the barn. When he moves to college, he lives on Poverty Row in a shack and has a washboard to make money as a launderer. When he goes to Simpson College, the setting is Carver's art class in which he paints. When he goes to Iowa State College, agriculture and science overtake him. The natural settings have various plants, weeds and birds. The classrooms are laboratories and regular classrooms. When he makes his final move to Tuskegee, he lives in two rooms in the college hall. He has a laboratory in which he conducts experiments.

At Tuskegee, he begins major experiments with plant species. The setting is described by different plant species and genus. He runs a poultry yard, which are chicken coops. He takes walks in the woods and is close to nature. Overall in these poems, setting is hardly described, except when the poet describes a specific plant. Not much attention is



given to describing the college or the poultry yard or even Carver's accommodations in the faculty hall.

Language and Meaning

The language of the poem is one of an educated person. There is no slang that one might expect from a black slave. Instead, the poems are told in a formal way from an educated, outside source. Though Carver is educated, the poems are not told from his point of view. The poet, Marilyn Nelson, is the authoritative voice shaping his life in these poems. She forms his poetry in various ways as she plays with form. Some of the stanzas have simple language while others are more intricate. She uses italics to show when a character speaks directly and this language gives the reader a personal voice.

The characters speak in a grammatically perfect way, which seems to be a reflection of the author's language. The people of this time period, especially the uneducated people, would probably speak in an uneducated, informal way. This is shown in one poem titled "From an Alabama Farmer." The farmer is hardly literate and misspells many words. His cadence and slang reflect his uneducated upbringing. But this poem is an exception. The norm for these poems is a formal language that has some difficult vocabulary interspersed throughout and the language itself can be complicated so the reader must extract meaning from the context of the poem. The meaning can be deciphered from the context, but there is also a philosophical quality to the poetry, which allows the reader to extract her/his own meaning and apply it to the poem.

Structure

This book is comprised of fifty-nine poems. Each poem has a title that reflects the theme of the poem. Each poem ranges in length from one page to approximately three pages long. The poems have varying stanza length; some have short stanzas and some have long stanzas that last a full page. The lines can be long, lasting several words, or short, lasting two words, since the poet plays with form. The poet uses italics to reflect when a character speaks in a personal way or has a personal message. The poems lack description as a whole. The book follows the time line of George Washington Carver's birth in 1864 as a slave in Missouri to his death in 1943.

The plot of the book is easy to understand. The book is about George Washington Carver's life from birth to death, including his great achievements in agricultural, education, art and breaking down racial barriers.

The book's pace is normal and moves moderately. It is neither fast-paced or slow. It is the right speed for a modern day, young adult reader. It is a moderate read with some moderately-difficult vocabulary interspersed throughout the story. There is hardly any slang and no swearing. The plot engrosses the reader into this world of George Washington Carver's life. The book is a moderate read and entertains as a whole.



Quotes

"What kind of freedom can we raise them to?"
Prayer of the Ivory-Handled Knife, p. 11

"He always sends a dried flower."
Watkins Laundry and Apothecary, p. 15

"And behold, the purpose of his / life dawns on him."
Four a.m. in the Woods, p. 25

"Something about the / man does that, raises the best / in you."
Green-Thumb Boy, p. 30

"Carver takes the school to the poor."
1905, p. 46

"Beauty is commonplace, as cheap as dirt."
Clay, p. 48

"Carver will carry on for me. / I have faith in him."
Out of the Fire, p. 68

"The Creator makes nothing / for which there is no use."
The Wild Garden, p. 70

And he prayed for his friend in the Klan."
Friends in the Klan, p. 81

"I love you more dearly because you are of another race."
My Beloved Friend, p. 86

"It is faith, his science / his miracles."
God's Little Workshop, p. 83

"Nothing is wasted or permanently lost in Nature."
Last Talk with Jim Hardwick, p. 95



Topics for Discussion

How does George Washington Carver overcome racism? What spiritual techniques does he use? What does he do as a person to combat racism?

Does Carver fit better in the white world or the black world? Who accepts him more and why? Does Carver see himself as fully black? Do you see Carver as fully black?

How does Moses' death influence Carver? How does his brother Jim's death influence Carver? How does Carver deal with death? How does that compare to how he deals with new life in nature studies? How does he deal with his own impending death?

Carver seems to adhere to Buddhist principles. How is Carver spiritual? How does this spirituality help or hinder him? Is Carver a spiritual person or more of a religious person? What is the difference between spirituality and religion?

Who influences Carver the most? Booker T. Washington or his white foster parents? How does his relationship with Jim Hardwick influence him? How does each of these people bring out Carver's strengths?

What are Carver's weaknesses? In these poems, Carver seems to be good at everything. But what are his downfalls? How do they shape him as a person? How do they shape him as a black man?

How does Carver feel about war? World War I is mentioned a couple times in these poems. Is Carver an aggressor or a pacifist? How does war influence him? If Carver lived today, what would he think of the ongoing wars around the globe, especially the war in Afghanistan?