

Corregidora Study Guide

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Plot Summary

Ursa is a singer at Happy's club but her husband, Mutt, doesn't like it, saying that the men touch Ursa with their eyes. They argue one evening and Ursa "falls" down the steps, though she later reveals that Mutt threw her down. She loses the baby she is carrying and has to have surgery to remove her womb. The owner of Happy's, Tadpole McCormick, agrees to take her home, takes her to his place and bans Mutt from Happy's. Tadpole cares for Ursa until she recovers and she agrees to marry him soon after her divorce is finalized.

Ursa soon returns to the stage but things are not smooth for the newlyweds. When Ursa is offered a job singing at Spider's, she takes it, citing the fact that she's singing and living in the same building and that she needs a change. She comes home one night to find Tadpole drunk in bed with her replacement, a young singer named Vivian. Ursa leaves and refuses when Tadpole asks her to come home. She soon goes to work fulltime at the Spider and remains there many years, eventually reconnecting with Mutt.

While Ursa is living her life, she is constantly remembering the lives of her grandmother and great-grandmother, both owned and abused by a Portuguese plantation owner, Corregidora. The stories she's been told are vividly recreated and related to her from an early age. She recalls sitting in the lap of her great-grandmother who had been among the women Corregidora used as a whore for men, keeping the money generated, selling of many of the offspring born of these unions and keeping a tight control. When slavery is abolished, all the papers proving lineage are destroyed but Ursa's grandmother and great-grandmother point out that as long as there are Corregidora women alive, the proof of the slave master remains.

The stories told by her grandmother and great-grandmother include the fact that Corregidora took Great Gram to his bed and fathered Ursa's grandmother. There were apparently some boys born as well, but those were sold off by Corregidora. Grandmama never knows what happened between her mother and father - Great Gram and Corregidora - but her mother has to run away to escape his wrath. Corregidora raises Ursa's Grandmama, his daughter, and takes her to his bed once she is of age. He fathers a child by her as well, Ursa's mother.

Having been raised with the knowledge that her goal in life is that of "making generations," the loss of her womb becomes especially painful. Tadpole and others are merciless in their taunting and Ursa herself is frightened of what her life will be without that vital part. Ursa knows the story of Corregidora by heart but is an adult before her mother is willing to talk frankly about the father Ursa never knew



Chapter I, Pages 1 through 36

Chapter I, Pages 1 through 36 Summary

Ursa is a singer at Happy's Café but her husband, Mutt, doesn't like it, saying that the men touch Ursa with their eyes. They argue one evening and Ursa falls down the steps. She goes to the hospital where she's told that her womb will have to come out. Tadpole McCormick, the owner of Happy's, comes to visit her in the hospital and she asks him to take her home when she's released. He takes her back to his place, an apartment above Happy's, saying that Mutt might have bothered her had he taken her home to the Drake where they lived. Ursa, having undergone surgery to remove her womb following the fall, says that she knows she and Mutt will never again be together and soon asks Tadpole to take care of the paperwork to make a divorce happen.

Tadpole feeds Ursa soup provided by Catherine Lawson, called Cat by those in the neighborhood. Cat straightens hair for women though she isn't a licensed beautician. Catherine calls Ursa, "U.C." Tadpole says he knows the first name is Ursa but continually has trouble with the last name, Corregidora. Ursa explains that Corregidora is her maiden name that she continued to use after her marriage to Mutt. Corregidora was a "Portuguese slave breeder and whoremonger." According to Ursa, Corregidora himself fathered many of the slaves that were sold and he prostituted out his slaves. Ursa says that "my grandmamma was his daughter, but he was fucking her too." Ursa says that slavery was then abolished and all the papers were burned so that there was no record of the parentage of Ursa's family and others like them.

Ursa lapses into the recounting of the story told her by her great-grandmother, the "darkest woman in the house" where Ursa lived as a child with her mother, grandmother and great-grandmother. Her great-grandmother says that Corregidora forced his slave girls into prostitution, forcing them to give the money they made back to him. Ursa knows what he looked like because of a picture, stolen by her great-grandmother so that she would never forget him as the embodiment of evil.

Ursa's memories are disturbed by Tadpole, bringing in boxes of her possessions. He says that Mutt has moved out and that he doesn't know where he's gone. Ursa has told Tadpole a little about Corregidora and now shows him the picture. Tadpole says that his grandmother was white but was treated like a slave and raised by a black man who married her when she was old enough. Though he doesn't berate Ursa for her hatred, he says that his grandmother never went crazy with hate.

Cat comes to visit and asks Ursa if she was "big" when she fell and Ursa says the doctors said she was about a month into a pregnancy, but that she hadn't told Mutt or anyone else. Time passes and Tadpole continues to tend to Ursa's needs. One day when he's helping her out of the tub, she points out that the stitches have dissolved and that he hasn't seen her scar. Once she's back in bed, she pulls his hand under the covers to feel the scar. Tadpole tells her that Mutt continues to hang around outside



Happy's, apparently hoping for a glimpse of Ursa. Tadpole kisses her as he leaves the room.

At her next doctor's appointment, the doctor mistakes Tadpole for her husband and says that he'd thought she'd forgiven Mutt. She says that she's filed for divorce. She is told she can go back to work anytime she feels like it but warned not to overdo it, a situation Tadpole worries about. After the next appointment, Ursa says the doctor indicated the scar looks "good," and that she'd hate to see one that looked bad. Tadpole raises her blouse and looks at the scar and asks what she'd like to do. She says that she wants to do what all women of her family have wanted to do - "make generations."

Ursa lapses back into her great-grandmother's story. She says Corregidora's hair was black, straight and greasy but that he hated to be told he resembled an Indian. She says his wife was strange, not prostituting herself out as many did to earn a little "pocket change." Instead, "she would sleep with you herself." His wife produced one heir, a "little sick rabbit that didn't live but to be a day old." She's interrupted by another visit from Cat who says it will be good to have Ursa singing again. Ursa says that she and Mutt are no longer together, from the moment he threw her down the stairs. Cat says it was an accident and Ursa says she doesn't want to hear any of Mutt's excuses. Cat warns Ursa that it's not the right time for her to "grab onto" anyone and that it seems she's grabbing onto Tadpole in a time of need. Cat says that it's obvious Ursa needs Tadpole but that she should think about what she can - and can't - give in return. Ursa agrees that she should probably go stay with Cat for awhile though she tells Tadpole he can visit as often as he wants.

When she arrives at Cat's house, a girl named Jeffy is there who says she's seen Mutt, referring to him as Ursa's "sweet daddy." Jeffy goes home but Cat says she'll return because her mother, Lurene, works the nightshift at a factory and Cat says there's a man there who at least lifts a bit of the drudgery. Cat and Ursa discuss that they are fortunate in their jobs. Tadpole comes to visit after a dinner of fried chicken. After he leaves, Cat says that she knows Ursa has to live with the consequences of Mutt's action, but that Mutt will live with a lifetime of guilt. She says that Tadpole has been in love with Ursa ever since he first saw her singing and theorizes that he bought Happy's just because Ursa sings there. She says that Ursa never saw Tadpole's devotion before and certainly can't see it now. Ursa responds that she can see what she needs to see.

Ursa overhears a conversation between Cat and Lorene with Cat saying that she's known women who have had worse illnesses than Ursa's but spent less time recovering. Lorene says that Ursa will be up soon if Cat continues to be "evil." When Lorene leaves, Ursa calls out to Cat, saying that if Mutt had loved her he wouldn't have thrown her down the stairs. She counters by saying that men who love women have done much worse than that.



Chapter I, Pages 1 through 36 Analysis

Ursa says she fell down the steps but will later reveal that Mutt pushed her. She was pregnant at the time and lost that child but it will be some time before that becomes clear. Ursa says she wouldn't let Mutt come see her at the hospital and that she cursed him when she was delirious.

Soon after Ursa arrives at Tadpole's house, she says that she worries about their emerging relationship. She says that she feels that she's forcing the issue and that she'll be taking more from him than she'll be giving back. It seems that Ursa is suffering the depression that's bound to follow the loss of an unborn child and the surgery that precludes any more children.

It's when Ursa begins to tell Tadpole about her grandmother's parentage and the end of slavery that prompted the burning of all the papers that would have proven parentage that Ursa first hints at the reason she knows that Corregidora fathered her grandmother and so many other children. Ursa will eventually use the term, "making generations." It seems likely that the term means that each woman of the family is to produce an heir who will resemble Corregidora, serving as proof of what he did to Ursa's great-grandmother and mother - the only proof once all the papers were burned.

Ursa picks up the story told by Great Gram, who says that Corregidora was married to a "skinny stuck-up little woman" who refused to sleep with Corregidora but demanded that Great Gram sleep with her as well. From the time she's about thirteen, she is "sleeping with" both of them, but doesn't elaborate on what that meant though it seems obvious that it involves sex.

When Ursa questions the story, Great Gram slaps her and says, "they burned all the papers, so there wouldn't be no evidence to hold up against them." Great Gram then says that she's "leaving evidence," apparently by relating the facts to Ursa. She also says that there will come a time when they have to "hold up the evidence." This could refer to the appearance of the children in the household who resemble Corregidora enough to prove parentage. If this lineage is so vital, it seems the loss of the ability to have children would weigh even more heavily on Ursa.



Chapter I, Pages 37 through 68

Chapter I, Pages 37 through 68 Summary

Jeffy prepares to sleep on the floor in Ursa's room but Ursa tells her to get in the bed. Jeffy taunts Ursa, saying that "her nigger" is outside and accusing Ursa of being afraid of Mutt. Jeffy says that her mother had warned her not to bother Ursa because "she got enough trouble." She goes on for some time, saying that the surgery Ursa had "mess up their minds and then fuck up their pussy." Ursa tries once to explain the surgery, gives up and threatens to tell that Jeffy was in the alley with a boy. Jeffy says that she was only watching which Ursa says makes her "twice as nasty." When Jeffy says that she's going to tell Mutt where Ursa is staying, Ursa decides to slap Jeffy when the next word comes out of her mouth, but Jeffy apparently feels it and says nothing more.

Ursa is awakened during the night when Jeffy is feeling Ursa's breasts. She screams, knocking the girl on the floor. Cat comes in, says that she knew Jeffy was "like that," and that was why she'd instructed her to sleep on the floor. Ursa counters that Cat should have shared the information. Cat seems to condemn Ursa's actions but Ursa thinks to herself that if Jeffy had done that to Cat, Cat would have knocked her on the floor as well.

The next day, Cat promises to keep Jeffy away from Ursa and Ursa sings for Cat. Cat says her voice has changed, as if relating all that Ursa has been through. Ursa makes plans to return to work in two days, though Cat says that she should just do one show a night at first rather than two. Ursa continues to think about her life, that of her mother, grandmother and great-grandmother, and notes that everyone is the "consequence" of the lives of others, and that "their past" is "in my blood." She dreams good times with Mutt, wonderful sex, but says that it's Mutt's fault that she is now unable to have children and that a person can't treat love like that. She says that she's heard dreams are what a person wants, but doesn't believe that to be true. When she wakes, she steps out into the living room and hears Cat talking to Jeffy. It's apparent from the conversation that Cat and Jeffy have had sexual encounters and Ursa goes quietly back to her room where she packs her belongings in her boxes, dresses and goes to Tadpole's asking if she can stay there. She tells Tadpole about the encounter with Jeffy, leaving out Cat's role in the scene. Later, Tadpole and Ursa have sex. Ursa prepares to start back to work though Tadpole says she can only do one show and must rest during the day.

Mutt's cousin Jimmy comes into Happy's and Ursa talks to him, noting that Tadpole is watching from inside and Mutt is watching through the window. She tells Jimmy to tell Mutt that she's fine and that he should go away. Jimmy says Tadpole just wants her to say something to him and she says that she already cussed him out at the hospital. She says that she has no pity for Mutt. Jimmy says that he believes "Tadpole Mac-I-want-my-woman-back" wants Ursa and leaves. Later that night, Tadpole asks her to marry



him and she says yes. Ursa remembers her question, asking what a husband is for, and Mutt's reply, "Somebody to give your piece of ass to."

The next morning, Mutt notes that she's dark under her eyes but she says it's just mascara. He insists that she have a checkup with the doctor and chastises her for rushing. The doctor says everything looks fine but puts her on iron pills. Jimmy shows up for a show the following day and Tadpole asks if she wants him to bar Jimmy as well, but Ursa says she doesn't really like the way he says it, emphasizing "him."

Ursa thinks about the fact that her great-grandmother was "coffee-bean" colored, and that her grandmother was the first mulatto of their line. She says that she'd once asks her mother whether her grandmother had any siblings, and that her Mama had given her "this real hateful look." She says that she'd heard there were some boys, but that Corregidora had sold the boys. Tadpole wakes her from the dream, reassuring her that it's a nightmare. The next morning he tells her that she has to "get their devils off your back," and reminds her that the demons - the stories of Corregidora - belong to her mother, grandmother and great-grandmother. Ursa pretends that she doesn't understand.

Tadpole asks Cat to be the witness at their marriage and Ursa agrees because she can't explain to Tadpole why she doesn't want Cat there. Tadpole insists that Cat join them for champagne and Ursa excuses herself as soon as possible. Later, Cat comes into the apartment and says that she knows Ursa heard her conversation with Jeffy. When Ursa remains unresponsive, Cat asks if Ursa enjoys treating her that way and Ursa says she doesn't feel good about any part of the situation. Cat says that she spent a great deal of her time "feeling foolish" in bed with a man and feeling the same way at work for white people, including the husband who makes a pass at her. Ursa says that she wanted to ask what happens to Jeffy "when it comes her time," but doesn't. Ursa says that she doesn't judge Cat but doesn't embrace her. Cat stands to leave, saying this is apparently "the end of it."

Tadpole comes back into the room and offers to take Ursa out but she says she'd expected to sing that night. He says he won't have her singing on her wedding night, which briefly reminds her of Mutt's attitude about her work, though she lets the comment pass. He asks that she sing for him instead, which she does before they make love.

Chapter I, Pages 37 through 68 Analysis

Ursa analyzes what Cat said about Mutt suffering the consequences as well, and almost softens toward him but reminds herself that it is Mutt who's to blame. She then lapses into memories of her mother's voice saying that she remembers when Ursa was a seed growing inside her and how careful she was with that seed, warning Ursa that she will also have to be careful. She relates the story of Ursa's great-grandmother, thinking she had to go to the outhouse but using the slop jar instead and giving birth to Ursa's grandmother right there. Ursa's mother then says that everyone is born the same. She says that "they think they hid everything," apparently referring to judgment on



Corregidora. Ursa then considers a question, "Ursa, what makes your hair so long?" She answers, "I got evil in me. Corregidor's evil."

Ursa says that it's not until years later that she realizes that she was so upset over the obvious relationship between Jeffy and Cat because she was having doubts about herself, fearing what it would now be like to be with a man. She says that at that moment, she didn't realize that but only felt "evil."

After a night singing at Happy's, Ursa thinks of her mother's words, saying that her voice singing the blues was "a devil" and that her voice was supposed to glorify God. Ursa says that the words of her song, "The Portuguese who bought slaves paid attention only to the genitals," are the only way Ursa can "give witness." There are many sections similar to this and it's unclear whether they are Ursa's memories, dreams or just her own thoughts. It's up to the reader, in many cases, to decide.

Ursa thinks about an explanation to her mother. She says that explanations are "somewhere behind the words" of a blues song. She relates the story of a woman "over on the next plantation" whose master "shipped her husband out of bed" and climbed into bed with her. She cut "his thing off" with a razor and he bled to death. As retaliation, her husband penis was cut off and stuffed into her mouth. The husband bled to death and she was hanged. There seems to be little point in the story other than an exhibit of the control that masters had over their slaves and the fact that the slaves had no recourse against brutality.



Chapter II, Pages 69 through 96

Chapter II, Pages 69 through 96 Summary

Though Sal Cooper has never been among Ursa's friends, she now comes over and asks Ursa about the ceremony. Ursa says it was nice. They then have a discussion about race and Sal seems somewhat vindictive about Ursa's fair complexion. Later, Tadpole shares the news that Cat is making plans to return to Versailles. Ursa says that it seems Cat wants someone to plead with her to stay, but vows that she won't.

Days pass and Jimmy occasionally comes in, though he and Ursa never talk to each other. She doesn't see Mutt at all and believes that he must be gone. She details a sex scene in which she can't become fully aroused unless Tadpole fingers her clitoris.

Ursa has a complicated dream in which she gives birth "without a struggle" and doesn't look at the baby, which isn't a baby at all but is Corregidor and immediately has his penis inside her. She notes that the man who will have sex with the daughter will not hesitate to do so with his own mother. In the dream she asks who he is and he asks if she doesn't recognize him, her own father. He asks what Mutt did to hear and says that it's "ugly in there," referring to her womb. She says that it's "no worse than what you did."

Tadpole wakes her again and she asks what he knows of his family. He says his mother was dark and that his father was a blacksmith, during slavery and afterwards, and that he'd spend every dime he could save on land for the next generations. Tadpole said that his mother has a tiny piece of land and the house, but that someone destroyed the page containing his father's claim to the land. Tadpole says there's nothing a person can do when the records are destroyed.

Ursa asks Tadpole about his father and learns that he "went off to France during the war" and never returned home. Ursa says that she doesn't know what her father is like, that her mother said he died in New York, poisoned by a woman. They talk awhile longer and Tadpole says he has to get some sleep before it's time to get up. Ursa wants him, but doesn't say so. Later that morning, he says that her hair looks like rivers. She says she wants to ask why he married her, but fears the answer. He says he loves her but she doesn't say it back. Tadpole says several times that he knows something's hurting her and begs her to tell him what, but she doesn't. Later they try to have sex standing up but Ursa can't get him inside her. He blames her, says he's not going to stand around all day, and goes into the bathroom. Ursa is reminded of an argument with Mutt in similar circumstances. She says that she'd followed Mutt that time. This time, she is lying on the bed facing the wall when he returns to the bedroom. He says that he knew about "that other shit" in the hospital, apparently referring to the pregnancy but not saying anything more.

Ursa is offered a singing position at a place called the Spider, tries to talk to Tadpole who says only that she's her own woman, and decides she wants the change so



accepts the job. Ursa suggests Tadpole could get Eddy's Combo to come in to Happy's but Tadpole says he has a girl who'll fill the spot. Ursa doesn't see her at first but Sal relays information, including that the girl looks about fifteen. Ursa sees Jimmy at the Spider who says her replacement at Happy's is "a pretty little thing" named Vivian.

One night, Tadpole fails to show up to give Ursa a ride home after her show at the Spider. When Ursa arrives, Sal says that Tadpole went out. When Ursa announces that she's going upstairs to their apartment, another of the employees says that Tadpole is up there with Vivian. Ursa isn't surprised to find Tadpole drunk and the two of them in bed together. She orders Vivian out and Tadpole says that Vivian does "more for me than yours does." The argument grows heated with Ursa saying Tadpole knew what was wrong with her when he married her and Tadpole saying he knew women who had had the surgery and that their sex life wasn't affected. Ursa imagines a conversation with Mutt in which she admits that she's afraid of never feeling anything and of being unable to "make generations."

Tadpole comes to her room, saying it was "the first time" and asking her to work something out. Ursa remains fixed, saying that she knows his idea of working something out means he gets some on the side whenever he wants. He slams out and she remains in the motel room for two more days before going to the Spider in search of a full time job. Ursa is hired on and a short time later the owner, Man Monroe, makes a pass at her. She refuses and seems to expect that she'll be fired but he admits that she's a valuable asset to his business and keeps her on with the agreement that he'll never make another advance.

Chapter II, Pages 69 through 96 Analysis

Ursa says it's much later that she realizes that Sal's feelings toward Ursa changed when she married Tadpole, who had a dark complexion like Sal. Sal says that she believes Ursa may be a long-lost relative, that her mother's parents had not claimed her because she was too dark. Sal says that she believes her grandparents to be in New York, "passing." The word "passing" is a term meaning that they are passing for white." Though Sal says they probably couldn't pass for white, she says they probably could pass for "Spanish or something." Ursa recalls an incident when she was seventeen and a man named Urban Jones had tried to pick her up while Ursa was visiting in Detroit. He had asked her if she was Spanish. Sal says that her own mother married a light-skinned man, hoping that her children would be light. Sal, very dark, says that it obviously didn't work. Ursa recalls a woman in Bracktown calling her a "red-headed heifer." Ursa notes that she didn't stay in Bracktown long.

Tadpole's account of his family's loss of land seems to be a parallel to Ursa's story. Tadpole says that "they ain't nothing you can do when they tear the pages out of the book and they ain't no record of it." Ursa's great-grandmother and grandmother have told Ursa the story of Corregidora's action, burning the papers listing lineage of the slaves on his plantation.



Tadpole's attack on Ursa after she catches him in bed with Vivian is viciously on target with her own fears and doubts about herself. Ursa admits to having been frightened that she would never again feel, and Tadpole zeroes in on that fear by saying that Vivian can please him like Ursa can't.



Part II, Pages 97 through 132

Part II, Pages 97 through 132 Summary

Ursa returns to Bracktown with the intention of having her mother talk about Ursa's father. She takes her mama some avocados, though her mother says they're too expensive. Ursa's mother lives in the house where she had lived when Ursa was born. Ursa's grandmother and great-grandmother had also lived in that house though Mama is now alone. Ursa remembers being in town for Grandmama's funeral. Ursa now encounters some of the local people who talk for a moment before she goes on her way. Ursa says she'd invited her mother to come stay with her after she'd gotten the job at the Spider, but that her mother refused to leave. Ursa says that house contains too many memories and that it seems the memories are more her mother's now than "theirs."

Mama is canning preserves for Mr. Floyd, a service she does for people of the community. She also cleans house for a white woman three days each week though Ursa offers to send her more money so that she can quit. Ursa realizes that her mother must be lonely without the older two women. Mama says that she knows what happened to Ursa. Ursa says she doesn't ask how she knew because there's always someone running with news of that nature.

Mama says that she didn't meet Ursa's father in a depot as she'd previously said. His name was Martin and he worked at a diner where Mama often had lunch. One evening she eats dinner there as well and Martin strikes up a conversation. Though they get off to a rocky start, they eventually make love. When he finds out about Ursa, he marries her but leaves immediately. Ursa says she wants to know whether her mama would have stayed with him if he hadn't left, but hasn't the nerve to ask. Mama goes on to say that she saw him one time after that. He'd sent money and she returned it, though she admits that was only an excuse to go to him. He says that money isn't how he helps her, that he "helped you that night." Martin then asks, "The other times were all miss, weren't they baby?" He begins to hit her, eventually bruising up her face and tearing her pants, then sends her out into the street looking like that. She says that it was obvious that he hated her. She says that would have been the outcome with any relationship.

As it's time for Ursa to catch the bus back to the city, Mama walks with her, talking. She says she and Martin once listened to Great-Gram talking about Corregidora and how he'd refused to allow her to see some man because that man was too black. Corregidora had said that having his prostitutes have sex with black men was "a waste of pussy." Great-Gram's story had gone on, that Corregidora had once seen her talking to a black man who was planning to run away. The man, knowing he'd earned Corregidora's wrath, ran away sooner than he'd planned. She says that while the white men and the hounds were out chasing the boy, Corregidora was "jumping up and down between my legs." Three days later, the boy's body was found in the river where he'd drowned.



Mama goes on to say that Martin had lived in the house with them for awhile, but that she hadn't had sex with him. At the time, she'd said it was because her own mother and grandmother were in the house but said she wouldn't have anyway. She says that her mother and grandmother hated Martin and that it was because he'd had the nerve to ask them whether their constant talk about Corregidora was love or hate.

At the bus stop, Mama asks Ursa if she now understands her better. Ursa only smiles in response. Ursa says that her mother must be lonely. Her mother, having now gotten the entire story out in the open, might find a man. Ursa then considers that she is using the excuse of a man named Logan who has been hired by Max to see that Ursa isn't bothered by the male customers is her own excuse to keep men at bay.

Part II, Pages 97 through 132 Analysis

Ursa imagines Mutt saying to her that he wants her, that he's sorry and that he's give back what she lost if it was in his power to do so. He refers to himself as her "original man." She declines his offers. She says that she never remembers seeing her mother with a man, and though she knows her mother isn't a virgin she remains "heavy with virginity." She says that her mother passes down the "monstrous" memories - apparently referring to those stories of Corregidora - but doesn't pass down her own "terrible" ones. Ursa says that it's her grandmother who reveals that a man left her mother and Ursa cries for her mama, though she never let on to her that she knew. Ursa tells the stories as if she is telling them to Mutt, or has told them to him in the past. There is no real indication whether this is a memory, a dream or an imaginary conversation Ursa carries on with herself.

Ursa's thoughts go on. She says that Corregidora make his women make love many men so that they couldn't truly love anyone. That is a foreshadowing of the conversation Ursa is soon to have with her mother regarding her parentage.

When Ursa asks Mama to tell the story of Ursa's conception, Mama says, "Corregidora's never been enough for you, has it?" It seems that she's indicating that the hardships of her grandmother and great-grandmother have been told to Ursa and that she's been taught that history, but still wants to know more of her family - her mother's story. Mama says that part of her life would never have happened if Corregidora hadn't been part of the lives the women before her. This seems to be Mama's way of saying that learning that history impacted her and may have led to her inability to love fully or to trust. It's up to the reader to decide the meaning.

Mama says that Martin asks her if "the other times were all miss." It's up to the reader to decide what he means, but it seems likely he's accusing her of having tried to get pregnant prior to their encounter. Martin also asks why she didn't tell him, apparently referring to the pregnancy, and asks what she's afraid of. She responds that she never could tell him and just let him think she was afraid of him because he's a big man.



Chapter III

Chapter III Summary

Ursa recalls Mary Alice, her best friend from her childhood. Mary Alice is two years ahead of Ursa in school and is often sharing information from her status as the older of the two. Ursa tells Mary Alice about the monthly cycle, which she calls "bleeding." Ursa already has the basic facts, having found evidence of her mother's cycle and screaming about the blood until the women explained it to her. Mary Alice says the blood is bright red and when Ursa starts her period, she is excited that Mary Alice was wrong, saying it's more the color of chocolate, then finding out that the color changes after the initial phase and that Mary Alice is right after all.

Ursa relates the story of a twenty-year-old woman who committed suicide and how the adults say there must have been a man involved somehow. Her father goes to find out who caused his daughter such anguish because, in the words of a local store owner, the police aren't going to pay attention to the case of a Black who committed suicide. The man says that report will go into "the nigger file." Years later Ursa discovers that the father apparently did uncover some fact because he was involved in a fight with a man. Ursa relates the story, saying that in her mind the young suicide and Mary Alice become tangled and she imagines Mary Alice, dead somewhere in an alley.

Mary Alice is soon having sex on a regular basis with a boy named Harold. Ursa warns her that she must stop or she'll wind up pregnant but Mary Alice says that once you've had sex, you can't abstain. She says that Ursa will someday understand. Mary Alice and Harold continue to slip off, sometimes even from the playground at school. Once, Harold tries to get in Ursa's house but she refuses. Ursa is so afraid of becoming pregnant that when a boy rubs against her with the heat radiating from his groin, she fears she might have become pregnant and starves herself for several days in an effort to do away with the seed. Then comes the month Mary Alice fears she's pregnant but her cycle begins late. A month later, she really is pregnant and Ursa goes with her to the doctor's appointment. When Mary Alice receives the positive results, her mother slaps her, saying that the only reason she isn't giving her what she really deserves is that she doesn't want to be responsible for harming the baby. Later, Mary Alice and Ursa watch from the living room window as Mary Alice's mother talks with Harold's mother.

Ursa doesn't see Mary Alice again until after the baby is born. She visits Mary Alice in the hospital but feels uncomfortable and knows that she won't be back. After Mary Alice returns home, she's inside for some time though Ursa says she isn't certain whether it's because Mary Alice's mother was ashamed or because she believed Mary Alice shouldn't do anything strenuous for forty days.

Ursa meets Mary Alice in town after she's up and around. Mary Alice immediately asks why Ursa is mad at her and Ursa denies it. She says she goes home and practices all the things she could have said to Mary Alice to put her in her place. When her mother



hears something she's said, she slaps her, saying that she doesn't know where Ursa learned to talk like that.

Ursa's mother catches her singing at Preston's. Ursa says this is the point where she learns that people like to hear her sing. Her mother unceremoniously pulls her away, saying that it's the devil's music. Mama says she sings in church and isn't going to have Ursa across town singing to the devil. Ursa goes to Happy's but fears going inside until a man outside begins to ask who her man is and she goes in to get rid of him. Tadpole likes her and hires her on the spot. That's where she meets Mutt, singing a song about a train in a tunnel.

They come to know each other, Mutt guessing that she's not as tough as she tries to pretend she is and she saying that she knows her way around. Mutt says Happy's isn't the place for her but it's not until later that he presses the point. Ursa notes that the first night he appeared in Happy's, his hair wasn't combed but that he'd combed it every night since. She comes to sing only for him though it's some time before she even knows his name.

They grow close though she won't let him all the way inside her until their wedding night. Even then she is reluctant. When Mutt tells her that no one else would put up with her, she says that he doesn't have to either, but he then turns soothing, seeming to want to help her with her fears. Ursa admits that she's spend her entire life holding things close to her and that she seldom wants to sing about opening up.

About four months into their marriage, Mutt begins withholding sex anytime he feels Ursa wants it. He often goes into Happy's, looks around without sitting down, and leaves. It becomes a joke though Ursa is just waiting for Mutt to start a fight, but he doesn't. At a dance later, Mutt embarrasses Ursa by grinding into her. She says he acts as if he is in the bedroom and he says she's "playing" at sex, just as she does in the bedroom. He shows up at Happy's during her show on a Saturday night in April and demands that she go home with him. When she refuses, he tries to pull her from the stage but it grabbed by some men. Ursa insists to Tadpole that she can finish the show, and does so. Later that night, Mutt shoves her down the stairs.

Chapter III Analysis

When Ursa's mother learns about Mary Alice's pregnancy, she says that she's always known the girl was no good. Mama says she's seen Mary Alice in the grass and that the girl seems to regard sex as nothing more serious than "shaking hands." It's then that Mama says that Mary Alice will now pay the price for her deeds and that she'll find out there's more to it than she thought. Mary Alice begins trying to tell Ursa about the birthing process, including how it felt. Ursa interrupts and is appalled. This seems to be evidence of the differences between the girls, including the difference in age.

Ursa tells Mutt about Corregidora and he says that he knows only one thing about his family and slavery. He says his great-grandfather bought his own freedom then bought



that of his wife. He later got in debt to some men who took his wife. Ursa is saddened by the story but Mutt says that "we ain't them." To Ursa, this is a foreign thought. She's been raised to believe that everything Corregidora did to her grandmother and great-grandmother is important to her. Mutt later threatens to auction off Ursa at Happy's and when she sees him come in she expects that he's going to do it. He doesn't and later says that the only reason he didn't was because his great-grandfather worked so hard to buy his wife's freedom that he didn't feel it would be right to sell Ursa.

Ursa seems to draw a parallel between Mutt's treatment of her and Corregidora's treatment of her grandmother and great-grandmother. She says that he quickly tries to teach her words and phrases, such as requiring her to respond to his question of "What am I doing to you" with "Fucking me." She says that when she eventually fires back at him in that language, he asks where it came from and she says that he taught her, just as Corregidora taught Great Gram. Mutt later tells Ursa that is one of Corregidora's women, that if she wasn't like them she wouldn't like the men looking at her while she sang.

While Ursa fears opening up herself to Mutt, she also wants to. It seems that when she works up the nerve to do so, Mutt pushes her away, wanting something different. When Ursa tells him one night that the thunder is "talking," he says she believes that because she always has music in her head and abruptly changes the subject, saying that he's seen how Tyrone Davis looks at her. When she calls him crazy, he says if she does so again he'll show her how crazy he can get.



Chapters IV and V

Chapters IV and V Summary

In June of 1969, Ursa is still singing at the Spider. A drunk tells her he's gotten his first job at the Drake Hotel and asks her to come watch him. Ursa says she occasionally sees Tadpole and heard that he and Vivian got together. She receives divorce papers that make her a "free woman." A man named Austin Bradley buys Happy's and asks Ursa to come to work for him, but she declines. He hires a woman from Detroit instead.

One day Ursa meets Jeffy, now all grown up and called Jeffrene. She is a nurse at the Narcotics Hospital. Ursa would have passed by without speaking but Jeffy calls out to her. She says Cat was injured in an industrial accident that pulled a portion of her scalp off so that she now has to wear a wig. Jeffy can't seem to resist a parting shot, saying "You know it felt good that time."

Sal comes in one day and tells Ursa that Mutt's in town and that he'd come by Happy's looking for her. When he shows up at Spider's, she's not surprised and says she would have known him, even though he has a beard and she has had warning. He says he tired of the tobacco work and that he's working at a local cemetery and living at the Drake. He then asks if she'll go back with him and she considers the situation for a moment, knowing that the demands will be different but that there will be demands. She says simply, "yes."

At the Drake, they quickly undress and Ursa goes between his legs, performing oral sex, something he says she's never done before. After she points out that she could kill him in that moment, he ejaculates then pulls her to him and says he doesn't "want a kind of woman that hurts you." She responds, "Then you don't want me." When she falls against him crying, she says that she doesn't want a man that will hurt her either and he holds her tightly.

Chapters IV and V Analysis

Ursa recalls her grandmother talking more about Corregidora. She says that Ursa's great-grandmother did something to anger the man and that she'd had to run for her life. Grandmama says that she never knew what it was that her mother had done, and that the older woman had never been willing to tell. Grandmama says that Corregidora raised her, taking her to his bed as soon as she was old enough. She says that his wife would call on her to fan her between the legs and that one day the woman had attacked her with a poker, but was interrupted by Corregidora who locked his wife in a bedroom where she died not long after.

It's later, when Ursa is having oral sex with Mutt, that she realizes what her grandmother must have done to Corregidora. She tells Mutt that she could kill him in that moment.

She relates to an act that would include sex but also pain, and that would make a man hate a woman forever but that would make it so that he couldn't get her out of his mind.



Characters

Ursa Corregidora

Ursa Corregidora is a singer who uses her voice to explain things she can't relate in any other way since she was very young. Ursa marries a man named Mutt but they divorce after he throws her down some stairs, causing her to lose their unborn child and prompting an operation that makes her sterile. To any woman, this would likely be devastating, but it's especially difficult for Ursa who has been taught by her grandmother and great-grandmother that her duty in life is that of "making generations" that will serve as the evidence of the cruelty done to the older women of the family.

Ursa is scarred by the constant telling of the abusive slaver and sometimes seems unable to differentiate between what happened to her grandmothers that was related to her through a story and what happened to her personally. She comes to understand that what was done by Corregidora probably wasn't any worse that she and Mutt have done to each other, or that her own mother did to her father.

Corregidora

Corregidora was a slave owner who owned and abused Ursa's great-grandmother. It's noted that though he had other women, he loved her best and that it seemed her "coffee-bean" complexion was at least part of the reason. Corregidora takes Ursa's great-grandmother to his own bed, saying that he's breaking her in for her life as a prostitute.

When she has a child - Ursa's grandmother - something happens between Corregidora and Great Gram that prompts her to run away. Corregidora then takes his daughter - Ursa's grandmother - into the same bed and fathers another child, Ursa's mother. When Corregidora is ill, he calls all the women of the plantation into his bedroom, promising them wealth and anything else they want if they will just call off the curse that has him. They all deny that they had anything to do with it.

Tadpole McCormick

The man who owns Happy's and who goes to Ursa while she's in the hospital. Tadpole agrees to pick Ursa up once she's released from the hospital and does so, taking her to his home to recover. He says that he has banned Mutt from Happy's but that Mutt could have approached Ursa at the Drake Hotel where the couple lived. Tadpole cares for her at his apartment and eventually marries her. The marriage ends abruptly when Ursa arrives home to find Tadpole drunk and in bed with the young girl who sings at Happy's on the nights Ursa sings at Spider's.



Catherine Lawson

The woman who lives across the street from Happy's. She is called "Cat" by most and straightens hair for those in the neighborhood though she isn't a licensed beautician. She and Ursa seem to be good friends until Ursa discovers that Cat is apparently gay. Cat continues to seek out Ursa's friendship but Ursa can't give it back. Ursa does have the opportunity to tell Tadpole about Cat's tendencies, but doesn't. At Tadpole's urging, it's Cat who serves as a witness when Tadpole and Ursa are married.

Mutt Philmore Thomas

Ursa's first husband. Mutt says that he doesn't want her singing at Happy's because the men there are "touching her" with their eyes. Mutt demands that she quit and when she refuses he pushes her down some steps that cause her to miscarry and prompts the surgery that leaves her unable to conceive. Mutt later hangs around, seeming to want her forgiveness and sending his brother to ask her to meet with him. Mutt had thrown Ursa down the stairs after a fight over Ursa's decision to continue to work, singing at Happy's. Mutt eventually leaves town but returns years later and finds Ursa working at Spider's. When he asks if she'll return to him, she agrees.

Vivian

Vivian is the young girl who takes Ursa's place at Happy's when Ursa begins singing at the Spider. When Ursa comes home unexpectedly one day, she discovers Vivian in bed with Tadpole. Vivian, seemingly self-assured of her hold over Tadpole, is in no hurry to leave but doesn't respond when Tadpole tries to call her back.

Max Monroe

Max is the owner of the Spider. One day Max makes a pass at Ursa and seems to expect that she'll welcome it. When she objects, she fully expects that he'll fire her. Max considers it for awhile but apparently comes to the conclusion that she's a valuable business asset and agrees that he won't ever again lay a hand on her.

Martin

Ursa's father. Martin meets Ursa's mother at a diner where Mama goes for lunches. Martin eventually asks Mama out and the two spend time together until the night they have sex and Mama becomes pregnant. She admits that she didn't want a man but did want a child, an admission Martin had apparently already discovered. Mama admits that Martin hates her, and that she made him hate her.



Mama

Ursa's mother and the illegitimate daughter of Corregidora. Mama says that she never intended to have a man but did seduce one because her body was aching for the seed that would become Ursa. Mama has related the stories of Corregidora's abuse and the trials of Ursa's grandmother and great-grandmother but did not relate those of her own failed marriage until Ursa specifically asks.

Grandmama

Ursa's grandmother. She is the illegitimate child of Corregidora. When her mother angered Corregidora to the point that she had to run away or be killed, Grandmama is left behind. Corregidora raises her and later takes her into his own bed, fathering a child by her as well.

Great Gram

Ursa's great-grandmother. Great Gram is the first of Ursa's ancestors to be forced into prostitution by Corregidora. She says that he forbade her to have anything to do with black men. Great Gram tells the stories of her abuse in graphic detail, urging Ursa to remember them all and to pass them on to the next generations as well.



Objects/Places

Happy's

A club owned by a man named Tadpole where Ursa sings.

Deleware Street

Where Happy's Café is located.

Drake Hotel

Where Ursa and Mutt live as the story opens and where they return as the story closes.

Spider's

Owned by Max Monroe, this is where Ursa sings and plays piano.

Bracktown, Kentucky

Where Ursa grew up and where her mother, grandmother and great-grandmother lived in the house her mother lives in now.

Georgetown, Kentucky

Where Mary Alice moves with her mother after giving birth to a child.

New Jersey

Where Mary Alice's father reportedly lives.

Preston's

Where Ursa is when she first realizes people like to hear her sing.

Chicago

Where Tadpole moves after selling Happy's.

The Narcotics Hospital

Where Jeffy works as an aide after she becomes an adult.



Themes

Coming of Age

Ursa ages, both physically and emotionally, over the course of the book. Physically, twenty-two years pass from the time of her marriage to Mutt in 1947 until he returns to her in 1969. The early years are filled with turmoil though Ursa comes to find a peace as the years wear on.

Emotionally, Ursa works through the years of remembering the stories of cruelty by the slaver, Corregidora, to the point that she finds herself able to look at the situation more realistically. During the early part of her life, she is constantly doing what she's taught: remembering the stories. She does this to the point that she can no longer fully distinguish what happens to her and what happened to her grandmother and great-grandmother at the hand of their cruel master. By the time she reunites with Mutt, Ursa has come to understand that what was done to her ancestors under the laws of slavery is no worse than what she and Mutt have done to each other and what her mother did to her father. That realization seems to come at a price and Ursa finds herself both defensive and vulnerable at the moment of realization.

Race

Race is an important theme, in this case shown brutally honest through the eyes of a light-skinned black woman. Ursa is never really described, but it is evident that she has a light complexion. At one point, Ursa is talking to a woman named Sal who says that her mother was one of two children born to a couple who abandoned Sal's mother because she was dark. Sal says that she believes her grandparents might be living somewhere and "passing," indicating that they were "passing" for whites. It seems evident that Sal is directing the talk to Ursa who denies that she could pass for white. Sal counters, saying that Ursa could probably pass for Spanish or something similar. Ursa admits that it's happened. Ursa also notes that Sal wasn't friendly toward her until Ursa and Tadpole married, and that she suspects it's because Tadpole is dark - like Sal.

Ursa says that her grandmother had said that Corregidora preferred Ursa's great-grandmother, and that she was the only one of the four women with a "coffee-bean" complexion. Corregidora also instructs his prostitutes not to waste their sexual favors on black men.

The Importance of Family

Ursa was raised knowing her mother, grandmother and great-grandmother and each of these women had a common hatred in their lives that was passed on to Ursa. That common thread seems to be one of the things that binds this family of women together. Regardless of the substance of this tie, it is strong.



Ursa relates, at length, details of the lives of her grandmother and great-grandmother at the hands of the cruel slaver. While others don't have the same depth of information, there are similar stories of family told by others. For example, Mutt explains to her that his own grandfather worked to buy first his own freedom and then that of his wife, Mutt's grandmother. When the elder man found himself in a position of owing a debt that he couldn't pay, his wife was taken. That story was important enough to Mutt that he cited it when declaring his reason for not auctioning Ursa off during one of her shows at Happy's.



Style

Point of View

The story is written in first person from Ursa Corregidora's point of view. The perspective is limited to Ursa but historical information is presented through several methods, chiefly through stories told to Ursa by her mother, grandmother and great-grandmother. Many of these are told when Ursa is a child but she remembers them or relates them to other people as an adult, thereby presenting them to the reader.

There are also scenes in which Ursa is either dreaming, recalling or imagining situations and conversations. While only a few are clearly presented as either dreams or memories, the details offered are relevant to the storyline and are used as a method of presenting pertinent information to the reader. For example, Ursa's longing for Mutt after their divorce is evident in her imagined or remembered conversations in which Mutt asks her to return to him. She refuses which seems to indicate a desire to be rid of his memory and the hold he has over her, but the fact that she imagines him asking her to return seems significant.

Setting

The story divided into two distinct settings: that of Ursa's lifetime and that of her grandmother and great-grandmother.

Ursa's life is set in the years between 1947 and 1969, somewhere in Kentucky. The majority of the story occurs in Happy's club, the Spider, and the home of Ursa's mother in Bracktown. There is a flashback to the years of Ursa's childhood, specifically her sixth grade year in school when her best friend, and eighth grader named Mary Alice, got pregnant. The home of Ursa's childhood - Bracktown - does exist in Kentucky. Bracktown is discussed to some degree, with the descriptions indicating a small rural community complete with its gossip and colorful characters.

The remainder of the setting is prior to and just after the abolishment of slavery. In that time, Ursa's grandmother and great-grandmother were used and abused by their slave master, Corregidora. Corregidora exploits his female slaves, prostituting them out and running what amounts to a slave farm. There are few details about that scene, other than the fact that it's a plantation owned by Corregidora. The lack of details about the scenes may be somewhat distracting to readers who require visualization.

Language and Meaning

There is extensive foul language throughout the book that some readers may find offensive. The language often refers to female anatomy in crude terms. The propensity



toward the language may be distracting to some readers. The number of terms is such that there are very few scenes that do not include this language.

The story line is somewhat complex with convoluted issues that run deeply. In many cases, the words cannot be taken at face value. An example of this occurs within the first scene described by Ursa. In that scene, Ursa says that she and Mutt argued and she "fell." Some readers may assume from the tone of the story, even at that early point, that Mutt pushed her and that is borne out later. This same situation occurs in the conversations between Ursa and her mother, grandmother and great-grandmother. The surface conversations often cover deeper meanings that some readers may not immediately grasp.

There are also some terms that won't likely be familiar to all readers. For example, Catherine Lawson says that she won't be by to see Ursa for several days. She says that Ursa, having just gotten home from the hospital, will be "evil." This term is used several times and seems to refer to a woman's tendency to be outwardly angry in specific situations rather than any reference to a deep-rooted evil.

Structure

The book is written in five chapters, each titled only with a Roman numeral. The chapters range from just five pages in the final chapter to more than sixty pages in the first two chapters. The story is divided between dialog and exposition. The dialog includes slang such as "naw," that seem relevant to the characters and setting of the story.

The book has flashbacks which are memories of Ursa listening to or having conversations with her mother, grandmother and great-grandmother. These memories are set apart from the story by italics, making it easier for the reader to realize that the scene is not a current event to Ursa's situation. However, these scenes are filled with innuendo and suggestions that may leave unanswered questions in the reader's mind. In some cases, these sections are not memories but dreams. With only a few exceptions, it's left to the reader to distinguish between the two.



Quotes

"I lay on my back, feeling as if something more than the womb had been taken out."
Chapter I, Page 6

"I stole it because I said whenever afterward when evil come I wanted something to point to and say, "That's what evil look like." Ursa's great-grandmother pointing out a picture of Corregidora, Chapter I, Page 12

"And what if I'd thrown Mutt Thomas down those stairs instead and done away with the source of his sex, or inspiration, or whatever the hell it is for a man, What would he feel now?" Chapter I, Page 41

"Shit, we're all consequences of something. Stained with another's past as well as our own." Their past in my blood." Chapter I, Page 45

"I tried to be friendly at first, but she didn't act friendly back, and I've always been the kind of person that when I see somebody don't want to be bothered with me, I don't be bothered with them." - Ursa, Chapter II, Page 69

"I am Ursa Corregidora. I have tears for eyes. I was made to touch my past at an early age. I found it on my mother's tiddies. In her milk. Let no one pollute my music. I will dig out their temples. I will pluck out their eyes." Chapter II, Page 77

"The older men still kept him, but the younger ones, who had started wearing afros, were saying they had their own scissors and comb. Mr. Grundy said, then they never used the scissors and he wasn't too sure they used the comb." Chapter II, Page 105

"Like my body or something knew what it wanted even if I didn't want no man." Chapter II, Page 114

"They just go on like that, and then get in to talking about the importance of passing things like that down. I've heard that so much it's like I've learned it by heart." Chapter II, Page 128

"You know they ain't gon take they time to find out nothing about a nigger woman. Somebody go down there and file a complain, they write it down, all right, while you



standing there, but as soon as you leave, they say, 'Here put it in the nigger file.' That mean they get to it if they can. And most times they can't." Chapter III, Page 134

"She just kept looking at me, and then she told me she better not catch me down there at Preston's no more or else I have the devil coming out of my behind as well as my mouth." Ursa, referring to her mother, Chapter III, Page 147

"Mutt kept peeking in, the mean and hateful look on his face, his collar pulled up. And then it was when I was on my way home, he knocked his pieces of shit down the stairs." Chapter IV, Page 167

"What is it that a woman can do to a man that make him hate her so bad he wont to kill her one minute and keep thinking about her and can't get her out of his mind the next?" Chapter IV, Page 173

"It was like I didn't know how much was me and Mutt and how much was Great Gram and Corregidora - like Mama when she had started talking like Great Gram. But was what Corregidora had done to her, to them, any worse that what we had done to each other, than what Mama had done to Daddy or what he had done to her in return, making her walk down the street looking like a whore?" Chapter V, Page 184

Topics for Discussion

Who is Corregidora? What is the role he plays in the lives of Ursa's family?

What is "making generations?" What is the "evidence" Ursa's grandmother and great-grandmother talk about?

What is the impact of Ursa's condition? Why is that a deeper impact than it might have been?

Who is Mutt? Tadpole? What is it that keeps Ursa from giving herself to Mutt when they first meet? What is it that keeps her from giving herself to Tadpole? What is it about Ursa's music that epitomizes that trait?

Who is Cat? Jeffy? What happens to distance Ursa from the two?

Who is Mary Alice? What is her fate?

Who is Max Monroe? Martin? Sal? Harold? What is Happy's? Spider's? The Drake?