The Dark Child Study Guide

The Dark Child by Camara Laye

BOOKRAGS

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Plot Summary

Laye's autobiographical novel *The Dark Child* follows one boy's journey from his earliest memories at age five or six to his first moment of definite adulthood—the day he leaves his native Guinea for Paris, where he will study and ultimately decide his destiny.

Respected and loved throughout his childhood, Laye's life may not seem typical, but his experiences are honestly, if not nostalgically, recorded, and readers will universally identify with many of them, although the culture may be foreign.

Laye's father runs the village forge, but his prominent role in the community stems from more than his status as a blacksmith. According to his young son, Laye's father is something of a prophet. A black snake visits him both in his dreams and while he works in the forge, and the father often knows what will happen during the day before the day even begins. Laye cannot explain this mystery, but knows it to be true. Likewise, Laye claims that his mother has special powers, and that people seek her out when they're in distress because they count on her great faith and virtue.

As a child, Laye loves to visit his grandmother, uncles and cousins in the countryside. As a city boy, he is enthralled with the wild animals and open space he finds in the country. He loves to watch the workers harvest rice and feels proud when he gets to help. However, he knows early in his life that he will not be a laborer.

Laye describes in detail the rites of passage undergone by the village boys. A devout Muslim, Laye fully participates in these rites, though he admits that he doesn't understand all of the symbolism and tradition behind the rites. He does feel, however, that the ceremony and rituals instill bravery and confidence in him.

As Laye grows, he excels in school. In his teens, he is sent to Conakry, a coastal city in Guinea, where he attends a technical school. He stays with his mother's brother during the weekends and is treated like a son by this uncle. While at school he suffers a sickness that hospitalizes him for months. He is miserable and homesick, but after a summer vacation at home he is ready to return to school and resume his studies.

At school, he makes friends and develops an interest in girls. He particularly likes a girl named Marie. Their affection for one another is sweet and very innocent. His aunts tease him about his fondness for her and do their best to set them up.

At the end of his studies, Laye is offered a scholarship to go to Paris, but his mother, who is extremely attached to him, forbids him to go. His father agrees with Laye that it is in his best interest to go to Paris to study, but it breaks his mother's heart.

Laye wrote *The Dark Child* at age nineteen as a student in Paris, homesick for his mother and his homeland.

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary

Laye's autobiographical novel *The Dark Child* follows one boy's journey from his earliest memories at age five or six to his first moment of definite adulthood—the day he leaves his native Guinea for Paris, where he will study and ultimately decide his destiny.

Camara Laye's earliest memories revolve around his father's forge, where he listened to the sounds of anvils and customers. He remembers seeing a snake and being fascinated with its glittering eyes. He offers a reed to the snake. The snake takes the bait and the boy's fingers are nearly consumed before his father notices the danger and sweeps the little boy off his feet and away from the danger. Laye remembers his mother's shrieks and a few hard slaps.

The forge is a busy place, for Laye's father is well known far and wide for his superior skills as a blacksmith. Parents send their sons to him as apprentices, and customers come every day requesting delicate mechanisms, tools, and even jewelry. Some linger around the shop just to watch him work. Laye enjoys crouching in a corner of the workshop to see the comings and goings and to watch the fire blazing.

Laye's father is a generous man and his mother is forever having to feed unexpected visitors. To complicate her work, their huts are located close to a railroad, and sparks from the trains frequently set fire to their fence. These fires must be put out quickly so the entire concession doesn't catch fire.

After the snake encounter, Laye finds it amusing to yell to his mother, "There's a snake!" She runs to him to see what kind of a snake he's found and then she becomes a woman possessed, beating the snake to a pulp. One day, when Laye finds a snake to report, his mother says that this snake, a little black one with a strikingly marked body, is a special snake and should never be harmed.

Everyone in the concession seems to know about this snake. Laye's mother explains that this snake is his father's guiding spirit. Laye is confused, so later in the day he asks his father about the black snake. Laye's father doesn't answer right away but seems to be considering how much to tell his son.

Finally he says that the snake is the guiding spirit of their race, that it has always been with them, choosing one of their race to guide. In their time, the snake has chosen Laye's father. The snake first appeared to Laye's father in a dream and explained that he would be coming to visit the next day. That next day, the snake did appear, but Laye's father was initially afraid of it. The following night, the snake once more appeared in his dreams, asking why he had been received unkindly. After that, the snake appeared on a regular basis, helping Laye's father know the future and guiding him in all of his endeavors.

Laye's father attributes all of his good fortune and prestige to the snake. He explains to his son that he tells him all of this because he is the eldest son and fathers should keep no secrets from their eldest sons. He also explains that Laye ought to conduct himself in a careful manner if he is to inherit the gifts of the snake. He fears, however, that Laye will not have the gift and that he hasn't spent enough time in the presence of his father.

That night, while waiting to fall asleep in his mother's hut, Laye feels sad and recognizes some sadness in his parents, too. He wishes he could be in his father's hut. That day is the last time they speak of the black snake.

Chapter 1 Analysis

By opening the novel with his earliest memories, Laye sets the structure for the rest of the story. The story is told chronologically, beginning with early childhood and ending as the main character officially enters adulthood and leaves home for good. This structure allows readers to better relate Laye's experiences to their own. As Laye goes through developmental stages, the readers remember their own childhoods. If Laye had written the novel in a series of flashbacks, the theme of growing up wouldn't be as obvious.

Laye claims that he has always been familiar with the supernatural; nonetheless, he is surprised by his discovery that his father has a God/prophet relationship with a snake. In the novel, Laye never actually uses the word *prophet*, but that is exactly what his father is. The snake reveals the future to his father and people acknowledge and seek out his father's spiritual gifts because they have learned to trust and rely upon his prophet status.

Even as a child, Laye seems to understand that his father is special, and this knowledge makes him feel both proud and nervous. Laye realizes that his father's gifts may not be passed down to him, possibly in part because he does not fulfill the requirements necessary to be a spiritual leader among their people in Kouroussa.

This element of the supernatural is a theme that is followed throughout the book. In later chapters, Laye describes his mother's supernatural powers and tries to explain how such things could be. However, he seems content and humble enough to accept the supernatural for what it is. He does not require empirical knowledge to back up his acknowledgement of the supernatural. His faith is enough.

The chapter ends with the black snake curling up near his father in the blacksmith shop. In this image, the snake represents Laye's father's power. His father is powerful enough to not be afraid of a snake, which is highlighted by the fact that earlier in the chapter Laye's mother hacks a snake to pieces for fear it will hurt one of her children. Laye's father has no reason to fear the snake. In fact, he seeks out the snake and treats it like a treasured friend. Laye paints his father as larger than life.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary

Laye watches with great curiosity and satisfaction as a woman brings some gold into the blacksmith shop. Such an occurrence happens from time to time as people in the village find gold in the mud, sometimes spending months on end gathering the gold grains. This woman, a representative of all the women who come to the shop with gold, wants the gold made into a trinket. Generally, the women want trinkets made for a special occasion, such as the festival of Ramadan or the Tabaski. In order to have the trinket made well and on time, the women hire a praise-singer to act as a go-between.

In Laye's culture, praise singing is a full-time, respected profession. In this chapter, the praise-singer pulls out his harp and begins singing the praises of Laye's father. The praise-singer tells of the lofty deeds of Laye's ancestors, going on and on about people Laye has never even heard about.

As soon as Laye's father's vanity is sufficiently stroked, the praise-singer begins making arrangements for the trinket, discussing the fee, how long the process will take, and other details. The woman assures Laye's father that she is in a great hurry. Laye's father remarks, "I have never seen a woman eager to deck herself out who wasn't in a great hurry."

The deal is struck and all the apprentices and workers in the blacksmith shop turn their attention to the production of the trinket, for gold work is both rare and fascinating, though difficult and expensive. Laye's father always does the gold work himself, never leaving it to the apprentices or other workers. Nobody argues with this, for Laye's father's special powers are readily acknowledged and everyone believes that a man must be not only a good blacksmith to work with gold, but also a good man. He must have purified himself with a special ceremony for such a task. Laye's father has already dreamt about this specific task, so Laye assumes that his father underwent the rituals of preparing to work with gold before he even stepped foot in shop in the morning.

Such preparatory rituals include washing himself all over and abstaining from sex during the whole time he will be working with the gold over several days. His body would be smeared with secret potions hidden in his numerous pots of mysterious substances. Laye's father is unbending in his respect for ritual observance.

Laye himself, though a child, finds a way to watch the process and wants to shout for joy when he sees the gold begin to melt in the clay pot. Laye finds it extraordinary and miraculous that the black snake is always present, coiled under the sheepskin, when his father works with gold. His father breathes unknown cantations as he works with the gold, and Laye knows these mysterious words must have something to do with the black snake.

After the trinket is completed, the woman returns to the blacksmith shop and trembles as it is presented to her. The men like to watch the women in such a state, and they laugh at them. The praise-singer at this point can no longer contain himself and bursts into the *douga*, the great chant and dance reserved only for celebrated men. The *douga* is rarely sung, for evil genies may be set free. However, when Laye's father hears the *douga* he cannot keep from dancing.

Laye leaves the blacksmith workshop to tell his mother about the gold and the *douga*. His mother is not impressed and worries that her husband will ruin his health. Gold causes his eyes and lungs to suffer, for there is so much smoke and blowing involved when working with the metal. Although she is a strictly honest woman, she does not complain about the custom that the blacksmith leaves half of the gold out of the final product because other metals have been mixed with the gold to strengthen it.

Chapter 2 Analysis

After having shown his father to be almost godlike in the last chapter, Laye shows his father to be human when gold arrives on the scene in chapter 2. Still, Laye's father recognizes worldliness and its effects on people when he comments on the great haste shown by the woman who wants her gold trinket as soon as possible. He recognizes her vanity and even points it out, but then, when the praise-singer flatters him, he succumbs to the flattery, even dancing the *douga*, which is reserved for exceptional achievements.

Laye is ever impressed with his father's uprightness and integrity. He whole-heartedly believes that the snake has shown his father that this woman would come into the workshop requesting a gold trinket, so he assumes that his father has already performed all the rituals required to properly work with gold. Ritual and spirituality are inextricable to Laye, so the stricter the observance to ritual, the stronger Laye believes convictions to be.

Also striking in this chapter is the awe exhibited when people see gold. Gold is treated reverentially, but nearly worshipped. This theme appears several times in the book as characters can't help but feel blessed by the beauties around them. It is logical to Laye that the omniscient godlike snake should be present when the gold trinket is being produced.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary

Laye's mother grew up in a tiny village west of Kouroussa called Tindican. Laye loves to take the two-hour walk to Tindican to stay with his grandmother and uncles. His youngest uncle, a teenager, comes to fetch him occasionally from Kouroussa, and together they turn a two-hour walk into a four-hour walk, enjoying the peaceful trip in the countryside.

When Laye arrives in Tindican his grandmother embraces him and asks about his health and how his parents are doing. She always tells him that he's too skinny from being in the city. She takes him around her village, telling everyone that her "little husband" has arrived and shows him off.

Laye's uncle Lansana inherited the concession when his grandfather died. Lansana has a twin brother but was born first. Under Lansana's jurisdiction, the concession has grown large and prosperous. He is a quiet man, content to spend his time alone in the fields with his thoughts. Lansana's twin, on the other hand, is restless and never stays in one place very long. He has a taste for adventure, and when he shows up at Tindican, Laye loves listening to the stories of his adventurous uncle.

While in Tindican, Laye stays in his grandmother's hut. He notices that it is almost exactly like his mother's hut. It is clean and has ropes hung in exactly the same way for hanging garlands of ears of corn to keep them away from the farm animals. His grandmother also has a calabash just like his mother's for storing milk.

Laye's grandmother always washes him as soon as he arrives. She soaps him down from head to foot and rubs him vigorously until he is pristine. After he is clean, Laye finds his friends. The boys talk about how they look and whether or not they've grown since Laye's last visit. They play with their slingshots and do their best to keep the birds away from the crops.

Laye feels self-conscious in his school clothes because they look different from the other boys' clothes. He wears a short-sleeved khaki shirt, khaki shorts and sandals. He also has a beret, but he hardly ever wears it. While in Tindican, Laye despises his school clothes, for he has to be very careful with them. He can't get too close to the fire or help clean the lizards the boys catch and cook over live coals. He has to take care that his clothes don't get caught on the rungs of ladders, while the other boys run around with abandon, never worrying about their clothes. Laye doesn't have such freedom because he doesn't have anything else to wear besides his school clothes.

In the evenings, Laye loves to sit with the whole family at mealtimes and study everyone. He wonders what his Uncle Lansana is thinking about now and what he has

thought about all day long by himself in the fields. Laye's grandmother urges him to eat more and more. Laye does eat a lot and then gets drowsy sitting around the fire.

Chapter 3 Analysis

The story switches scenes in chapter 3, transporting the main character from a city to a rural setting. The foot journey with his uncle between his city home and his grandmother's country home makes a wonderful transition. Laye expresses his childlike wonder at the animals and plants he sees along the way, and his uncle finds great amusement in this.

Once in Tindican, Laye's compare and contrast method of writing continues. He notices how similar his mother's hut is to his grandmother's, establishing a firm family connection in this somewhat foreign place. The reader also notices similarities between the characters of Uncle Lansana and Laye's father. They are both strong, humble men, successful and well respected.

The greatest contrast is seen in Laye's comments about his school clothes. His clothes are a constant reminder that he is different from the rural boys of Tindican. They can play and work as carelessly as they want to without worrying about spoiling their clothes. Laye, however, because he attends a structured school where uniforms are worn, must always be careful lest he ruin his clothes.

It's telling that Laye doesn't have another set of clothes besides his school uniform. Economics surely dictate this, but this set of school clothes symbolizes his place in the world. Although he feels jealous of the simple country life, he realizes from a very young age that his life will not and cannot be like theirs. Nonetheless, he finds great pleasure in his stay at Tindican. At the evening meal, surrounded by loved ones at the campfire, he feels full of good food lovingly prepared and full of love from these kind people.

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 Summary

In Tindican, rice season always occurs in December, so Laye manages to find a way to be there at that time. On the day of the harvest, the head of each family rises at dawn to cut the first swath of rice from the field. As soon as the first swaths are cut, the tom-tom announces that the harvest has begun.

Laye doesn't understand where this tradition came from. He considers that the first swaths destroy the inviolability of the fields but admits that he never bothered to ask and didn't spend enough time there to learn much about the traditions. Once the tom-tom sounds, the reapers head out to the fields to begin their arduous work. These reapers are sturdy young men, precise in their movements and not easily tired. They sing as they work, their sickles rising and falling, naked to the loins.

Laye's young uncle, the one who fetches him from Kouroussa, is a reaper. Laye follows him proudly and bundles the stalks of rice as they are cut. He also transports the tied bundles to the middle of the field to get them out of the men's way. As the morning sun rises, the reapers need water and Laye runs to fetch it.

Laye wishes that he could be a reaper, but he knows he probably never will be. In the rice fields he begins daydreaming, wondering which life would be better, the life of a scholar or the life of a farmer. The farmer's life seems so picturesque to him. The reapers sing in harmony as a chorus, united in their movements and their voices. Instead of competing with each other they adjust their different rates and strengths so they can all stay together. Laye's uncle slows down so he doesn't get too far ahead of the rest of the reapers. He tells Laye that he doesn't want them to feel bad.

Laye feels that country people are often misrepresented. Many people think that country people are uncivilized and coarse, but in Laye's experience they are far more dignified and considerate than city people. Their slowness of speech and simplicity are often mistaken for lack of intelligence, but Laye attributes their slowness to careful consideration of the effects of their actions.

At noon the women bring platters of couscous to the men. The men are famished and eat until they're stuffed. Then they lie down in the shade to rest for a full two hours. Some sleep and some sharpen their sickles. The afternoon's work is much shorter than the morning's. They return to the village in the evening preceded by the tom-tom player and then everyone sings the song of the rice.

Chapter 4 Analysis

The imagery in chapter 4 is idyllic with its pastoral descriptions of the golden rice fields. The people are also portrayed as beautiful and godlike, their muscular torsos bending

and moving in harmony as they harvest the rice. In a way, these descriptions are reminiscent of the socialist propaganda artwork of the mid twentieth century, especially as produced by eastern bloc countries. Laye's descriptions, though, come off as pure and free of political intentions. Indeed, his memories are touched with nothing more sinister than nostalgia.

As in the previous chapter, the main character compares his city life with the rural life he admires. Instead of his clothing as the counterpoint, this time he compares the work. Laye idolizes the reapers as they labor and sweat. He wants to be like them but then gets lost in thought, thinking that he probably will never be a reaper.

The theme of tradition runs through this chapter, too. Laye notices the traditions, especially with the beginning of the harvest and the tom-toms, but he doesn't understand them. In not understanding the local tradition he feels like an outsider, just as he felt like an outsider in the last chapter in his school clothes.

People and nature work in harmony, an attribute of country life unfamiliar to a city boy. To Laye, the brilliance of the blue sky and sun are connected to the happy singing of the reapers. The flowering plants of December respond to the exciting sounds of the tom-tom. The scent of the flowers "clothe [them] in fresh garlands." This interconnection of humanity and nature makes the world seem peaceful and unified to the main character. He feels that he has never been happier. The idea of unity is also represented in the way the reapers work. As they sing in harmony, their bodies bend and straighten and their sickles work at exact angles.

Chapter 5

Chapter 5 Summary

The huts in Kouroussa are so small that not all of Laye's brothers and sisters can sleep in their mother's hut. Some of them must sleep in their father's mother's hut. Laye sleeps in his mother's hut but he doesn't get his own bed. He must share his bed with his father's younger apprentices.

Because his father is so well known, there are always many apprentices staying at his forge. These apprentices are treated like children of the family, eating and sleeping with them. Laye thinks his mother treats the apprentices better than she treats her own children, but he doesn't hold a grudge about this.

Laye remembers one particular apprentice named Sidafa. Laye and Sidafa like to stay up late talking about their days, Sidafa having spent the day in the forge and Laye having been at school. Laye's mother doesn't like to be kept awake by the chattering of young boys and yells at them to be quiet.

In the morning, Laye's father presides over breakfast but it is Laye's mother who makes the meal special. Of course she prepares the food, but it is her presence that maintains order and tradition. She is very strict about the meal and how it is served and eaten. Laye is forbidden to look at guests older than him and he is also forbidden to speak. Being a temperate man, Laye's father makes sure that his children don't take too much food. At the end of the meal, Laye bows to his father and mother and thanks them for the meal. All of his brothers and sisters and the apprentices do likewise.

Laye talks about his mother's authoritarian attitude, which isn't uncommon in their part of Africa. Women have a fundamental independence and inner pride that people may not expect from their part of the world. Beyond this, Laye believes that his mother has special powers.

One day, some men come and request Laye's mother to use her powers to get a horse on its feet after they have tried everything they could think of. The horse is lying out in a pasture and refuses to move. Laye's mother agrees to go look at the horse. After examining the horse, she forbids the men to hit the horse, saying it won't do any good. She walks up to the horse and says, "If it is true that from the day of my birth I had knowledge of no man until the day of my marriage: and if it is true that from the day of my marriage I have had knowledge of no man other than my lawful husband—if these things be true, then I command you, horse, rise up!"

The horse gets up and quietly follows his master away. Laye wonders where his mother's powers have come from. He explains her powers this way: His mother was the next child born after his twin uncles in Tindican. Legend says that twin brothers are wiser than other children, practically magicians. The child who is born directly after twin

brothers, however, is also endowed with magic and may in fact be considered more powerful than the twins. His mother is this child. Besides being wise, the *sayon*, the child born after twins, has the added responsibility of settling disputes between the twins, thus making her even wiser.

Laye also sees his mother using her special powers as physical protection. Normally, everyone draws water from the river. The Niger flows slowly, so people feel safe drawing their water and even bathing freely there; but when the water rises the crocodiles are abundant and dangerous and everyone keeps away from the river—everyone except for Laye's mother. Danger doesn't seem to exist for her. She doesn't fear the crocodiles and they don't even seem to notice her.

Chapter 5 Analysis

By introducing daily culture and family legend, readers come to better understand the characters. Knowing how the family eats and how they explain themselves to each other does not further the plot, but it adds immeasurably to characterization. For example, knowing that Laye loves to talk with the apprentices far into the night lets us know that he is a talkative child. Therefore, when he doesn't speak a word at mealtimes other than a polite "thank you" at the end of the meal, we understand that he is strictly obedient to his parents and that his parents are authoritarian and well respected.

The theme of the supernatural integrating with everyday life continues in this chapter where it was left off in chapter 2. In chapter 2, Laye describes his father's god/prophet relationship with the black snake. In this chapter, Laye retells stories about his mother's magical powers. Laye's mother seems willing to drop whatever she is doing to use her powers to help others, as she does when the men come to ask her help with their horse. Using powers to help others is another attribute of a prophet, as is seeing the future like her husband does. However, being unafraid of crocodiles is a departure from the prophet symbol. Laye attributes her lack of fear to her inherent privileges as *sayon*, younger sibling of twin brothers. Laye admits that he still doesn't understand his own privileges, his own totem. His lack of understanding about his role is foreshadowing.

Chapter 6

Chapter 6 Summary

Laye is very young when he first starts attending the Koran school. Shortly thereafter he transfers to the French school. Every school day, as soon as they finish breakfast, Laye and his sister start out for school carrying their books and notebooks with them. Laye participates in the childish games of pulling girls' hair until one day a friend named Fanta asks him why he always pulls her hair. He says he pulls it because she's a girl. She reminds him that she doesn't pull his hair. After this conversation he feels foolish about pulling her hair and doesn't do it anymore. Laye's sister notices that he's feeling awkward around Fanta and makes fun of him for it.

The schoolteacher is more than strict; he beats the students and abuses them for the slightest infraction. The children wouldn't think of interrupting him. If their handwriting on the chalkboard is not precisely exact, he deals out blows. Besides corporal punishment, the students also receive work-related punishments, such as sweeping the schoolyard, working in the kitchen garden, and herding the unruly school cowherd.

Years of abuse wear on the children, and the older children begin to take their frustration out on the younger children, stealing their lunches and forcing them to do their physical work. The older boys whip the younger boys and extort from them anything they can. Occasionally, a child complains to the director, but this only brings more abuse from the older boys.

One day, Laye's friend Kouyate Karmoko says that he's had enough after a particularly cruel beating. He is very small and thin and has been forced to give up his lunch many times. Kouyate tells his father what has been happening to him at school. Kouyate's father is one of the most respected praise-singers in the district and has a good standing in the community. The next day, Kouyate invites the boy who beat him to dinner at his house, saying that his father wants to meet the upper form boy who has been kindest to him. That evening at the Karmoko house, after the older boy confesses to being unkind to Kouyate, Kouyate's father gives the boy a thrashing and then permits him to leave.

The next day at school, the story spreads like wildfire, and Kouyate and his sister Mariama are ostracized. The older boys tell everyone, even the younger children that they should not associate with them, but Laye defies the order and is beaten by a group of older boys. Laye runs off crying, and Fanta brings him a wheat-cake. Laye tells his father about what has been happening at school, and the next day his father and his apprentices accompany him to school. The apprentices beat up the meanest culprit and then Laye's father goes to talk with the director.

Until this point, the parents have been unaware of the brutal atmosphere at the school. Laye's father explains to the director that he is sending his children to school to learn,

not to be treated like slaves. Laye's father hits the director in the jaw and knocks him down. The next day, the director's motorcycle shows up at Laye's home and the men appear to have a friendly conversation. A few months later, however, the director is forced to resign because of a petition signed by all the parents. Rumors of his treatment of the students had gotten around. After this turbulent school year, the younger boys are never again bullied by the older boys.

Chapter 6 Analysis

The innocent hair pulling at the beginning of the chapter foreshadows the chapter's end. The boys and girls flirting by pulling each other's hair is innocent, and readers smile at the scene, but when the violence turns serious in the chapter, readers wonder where the line was drawn. Is violence a slippery slope that begins with seeming innocence?

Fanta's character is further developed when she offers Laye one of her mother's famous wheat-cakes after he has suffered a beating at the hands of an older boy. Laye and Fanta are the same age, but Fanta gives the appearance of being older and wise, more like a mother figure than a childish playmate. She makes him think twice about pulling her hair; she makes him examine his motives and actions and then comforts him later on.

Laye's father's character also takes on a new dimension. We have seen his spiritual side from the first chapter. He observes ritual religiously and is gentle enough to co-exist peacefully with a snake. In this chapter, however, he hits the school director without missing a beat. Beneath the calm, cool exterior, Laye's father has passion when he feels his family has not been treated justly.

Chapter 7

Chapter 7 Summary

Laye is now a teenager and must prepare for his culture's important rite of passage: circumcision. Along with other twelve, thirteen and fourteen year olds, Laye begins the ritual one evening before the feast of Ramadan. As soon as the sun sets, the tom-tom begins to beat and the crowd of villagers follows the tom-tom player from hut to hut as he gathers the boys to take them away. The tom-tom strikes fear into Laye's heart because he has heard the tales of Konden Diara.

Konden Diara is a terrible bogeyman, a lion that eats little boys. Laye isn't sure if Konden Diara is a man or an animal or maybe half-man, half-animal, but he is certainly afraid of it. Laye's father asks if he is afraid and then tells him he must not be afraid, reminding his son that he, too, went through this test. Laye is instructed to control his fear and control himself. His father says that Konden Diara will do nothing more to him than roar.

Toward the middle of the night, the procession around the town finishes, and all the boys are led out into the brush. The women and girls go home, and the older boys and men stay out for the night. Laye notices that the women and girls look afraid, and he imagines that they are making sure their huts are securely locked for the night to ward of Konden Diara.

The boys follow their leader out to an enormous bombax tree. They walk in silence, always on the lookout for the great beast. Then their leader tells them to kneel and put their heads right on the ground as if in prayer. They hide their eyes and begin hearing terrible roars. It sounds like twenty, maybe thirty lions, right on the other side of the bonfire in front of them. Laye is sure that Konden Diara can leap the fire in a single bound and eat up all the boys. Laye remembers the reassuring words of his father and tries to be as brave as possible, though he trembles from head to foot. He wonders if people can die from fright.

Then, suddenly the roaring ceases and the boys are commanded to get up. They spend the rest of the night learning the chants of the uncircumcised. Laye's joints are cold and stiff, and he is ever so grateful to see the dawn. When the sun comes up, the boys see white threads hung from the bombax trees and huts. They walk back singing their new songs and trying to figure out how those threads got so high up in the trees. Laye's friend Kouyate says that swallows tie the threads on the trees. An older boy says it is their great chief who does it. The great chief turns himself into a swallow during the night and flies from tree to tree and from hut to hut. Laye's mother is happy and relieved to see him. She says all the men are mad and it's foolish to take such risks, that little boys should not be made to stay awake all night. She sends him to bed right away.

Later on, Laye learns the secrets of the ritual. The older boys make the roaring sound by swinging ellipsoidal-shaped boards around with a sling. The threads in the trees are not so easy to explain. The men of the village put the strings on the trees, but Laye, never having seen it done himself, wonders how they could get the strings so high. The men never breathe a word about the ritual to the women or children. The ceremony of the lions is a test. It gives the boys confidence and courage for their circumcisions, which will soon follow.

Chapter 7 Analysis

The ceremony of the lions is symbolic of Laye's transition from childhood to adulthood. As a young teenager, he is still a child in many ways, but his life will not be so innocent and carefree after he has participated in the ceremony. The fear he feels during the ceremony is greater than any fear he has previously experienced, and he cannot regain the innocence he felt before.

The tom-tom weaves all the rituals together throughout the book. Readers can hear the tom-tom every time something important happens in the village, and important things happen quite often. The tom-tom accompanies the praise-singer to big events. It signals the beginning of the harvest and announces the ceremony of the lions and the beginning of the feast of Ramadan. Senses, such as smell and sight, allow readers to more fully enter a story. The tom-tom gives sound to the story, and acts as a sort of Greek chorus for this African story.

Chapter 8

Chapter 8 Summary

Of course, following their encounter with Konden Diara, the young boys face the real test of circumcision. Laye is now in his final year of school and is apprehensive about his transition from childhood to manhood. All the young men feel nervous about the circumcision, but the outward manifestations of the ceremony are joyous. The main square in Kouroussa is filled with music and dancing all week long. The young men to be circumcised have special clothing made for the occasion. They wear a boubou, a long tunic that reaches to the heels but is split up the sides, a skullcap decorated with a pompom, and a brightly colored silk handkerchief tied about their loins. The handkerchiefs are given to them by their acknowledged sweethearts, so while they're dancing they kick up their heels to make their boubous fly more freely so everyone can see their handkerchiefs.

From time to time, an older man will break through the crowd and pay tribute to one of the young men about to be circumcised. Also, guests shower the boys with gifts and hold aloft symbols of their future careers. Most of the boys will be farmers, so their families hold hoes up in the air. Laye's father's second wife holds up an exercise book and fountain pen as the symbol of Laye's profession. He knows she means well but it embarrasses him. Laye's mother doesn't hold anything up but stands back and watches from a distance. Laye appreciates her discretion.

This dancing goes on for a week before the boys are taken to a special hut where they will stay for a month after the circumcisions to recover together. Their boubous are then sewn up along the sides, so they must take tiny steps when they walk. As the boys finally line up for their circumcisions, they do their best to be brave. They refuse to let anyone else see their fear, for a future father-in-law or future relative may be standing nearby.

The surgeon does his job quickly and then the blood begins to spill. They all feel sick to their stomachs. A messenger is sent to tell the families that all went well and that their sons were very brave. Food from the feast is sent to the boys, but they all feel too sick to eat much.

Over the course of the next weeks they are well cared for by their healer and his helpers. A helper stays awake all night to make sure nobody rolls over in his sleep and hurts himself. Their fathers come to visit, but any contact with women is strictly forbidden during the healing process, so Laye can't see his mother. He misses her terribly. When his mother finally comes to see him after more than three weeks, he can see sadness in her eyes. He realizes that she is sad because he is a man now and not her little boy any longer. During his stay in the hut, his family has built him his own hut. His hut is very close to his mother's, with the door facing her door. She has also provided him with real men's clothing

Chapter 8 Analysis

The circumcision ceremony marks the end of Laye's childhood with finality. He will no longer be living in his mother's hut, and he will have all the markings and trappings of a full-grown man. The joyous parties and dancing leading up to the ceremony, the feasting and boasting, and even the triumph over pain in the circumcision itself, do not measure up to the emotion he feels at seeing his mother's sad smile when he moves his things into his own hut.

Blood in this chapter symbolizes both new life and equality between women and men. During childbirth, blood flows freely and accompanies a child into the world, but the blood spilt is usually just the mother's. In this ceremony, free-flowing blood also marks the beginning of a man's reproductive life, putting men and women on a more level plane when it comes to reproduction. Besides giving birth to new humans, the blood in the circumcision ceremony also represents new life for the boy-turned-man. When he returns home after the circumcision he is not the same. He is a newly born man.

Chapter 9

Chapter 9 Summary

Laye leaves home for Conakry when he is fifteen years old to attend a school called the Technical College. On the morning of his departure, Laye's mother wakes him early. She is already suffering from the loss of her son but tries very hard to keep her emotions under control. She has obtained a bottle of liquid that is supposed to be good for the brain. It is made from the washing water used to clean small boards that have prayers from the Koran written on them. Honey is added to this water and an elixir is made and sold at a very high price. Laye's father gives him a he-goat's horn containing talismans to protect him against evil spirits.

Laye says goodbye to all the elders of the village and then returns to find his mother crying. He begs her to not accompany him to the station because he's afraid he won't be able to tear himself from her arms. She consents and his father takes him to the station. Laye cries on the way and his father reminds him that he's a big boy now and that he must be brave. He also reminds him that he has tremendous opportunities that no one in his family has had before and that he needs to work hard and make something of himself. Several praise-singers have arrived to celebrate his departure. Their chants make him feel determined to do well in school so he doesn't let them down. The praise-singers also make him feel sad. He thinks about Fanta and how he won't see her for a long time.

The train departs the station and by midday he has regained an interest in what is going on around him. He is interested in the landscape as he has never before seen foothills. The mountains amaze and terrify him; he thinks the train may fall over the precipice. He hears different dialects he can hardly understand and then feels oppressive heat as the train makes its way into Conakry.

His father's brother Mamadou meets him at the station, and Laye loves him from the moment they meet. Mamadou treats him like a son. Uncle Mamadou lives in a European-style house, and Laye sleeps in a large soft bed there. He doesn't sleep well that first night, wishing he could be in his little hut with his mother just a few steps away.

The next day he visits the ocean for the first time. Of course, Laye had heard of the ocean but he hadn't been able to imagine its vastness and movement. His Uncle Mamadou has two wives. Each wife has her own room that she occupies with her own children. The aunts are very fond of Laye and treat him like one of their own. Uncle Mamadou is a little younger than Laye's father and works as chief accountant in a French business. His observance of the Koran is scrupulous. He doesn't drink or smoke and is always honest. Laye stays at Uncle Mamadou's home on weekends and during holidays, but lives at the school during the week.

After his first week of school, Laye is ready to quit. He is learning nothing and feels that the education is too elementary, that he is wasting his time. Uncle Mamadou encourages him to stay with it. He explains that great changes will be coming to the school and that he won't want to miss it. He says the education will change drastically in the following year, that it will be as good as any other school in the country. Soon thereafter, Laye gets an infection, possibly from a splinter in the workshop, and must be hospitalized. He spends most of the rest of the school year in the hospital and when he is finally well he sets "off for Kouroussa as if for the promised land."

Chapter 9 Analysis

Ever looking backward to his childhood, Laye finds leaving home very difficult. He is so attached to his mother that he fears he will not be able to get on the train if she accompanies him to the station. Young and malleable, however, the boy finds that once he is away from his family he can look at his journey as an adventure. It helps that his Uncle Mamadou and aunts accept him as one of their own.

The ocean at Conakry both symbolizes and foreshadows Laye's future. Until he has seen the ocean, he hasn't realized its possibilities. He hasn't understood how vast and alive the ocean is, but once he has seen it, it has a powerful pull on him. Likewise, his future will be opened up to him at Conakry, though at first he feels that it's a dead end. Later on he will find that his beloved ocean will even be crossed in his future paths.

Chapter 10

Chapter 10 Summary

Laye returns to Conakry in October to find that, true to his Uncle Mamadou's words, his school has been entirely reorganized. The instruction is now excellent in both technical and general subjects. He no longer envies any other students in the country. Laye works hard and finds his name on the honor roll every term.

This is the year that Laye meets Marie. Nothing in his school years means more to Laye than his friendship with Marie. Marie is a student at the girls' high school. Her father is a good friend of Uncle Mamadou's, so Marie spends her Sundays at Laye's uncle's house. Marie's skin is very light and Laye thinks she is as beautiful as a fairy. Laye's aunts tease him and Marie about each other and try to get them to be more intimate, but Marie and Laye are both reserved and don't fall for the aunts' manipulation.

Marie and Laye like to listen to the phonograph and dance. In Guinea, "it is not customary for couples to dance in each other's arms." At the very most they hold hands, but not very often. He pedals her to the beach and they sit and talk. He helps her with her homework, which makes him feel very smart and helpful. They love each other but feel they are not old enough to really love each other. Laye admits that most of the boys are in love with Marie, and they feel jealous when he puts her on his bicycle and takes her down to the sea. When Lay is around Marie time flies, but during the week when they are separated time drags on

At the end of Laye's third year of school he takes his proficiency examinations. Laye is determined to do the very best he can, having never forgotten his promise to his father that he would work hard and make something of himself. His aunts and Marie offer up sacrifices and worry about his exams, which last three days. Of the seven candidates who pass the exam, Laye achieves the highest score.

Chapter 10 Analysis

With the ocean symbolizing Laye's future, Marie adds another dimension to that symbol. Falling in love is the next logical step for a young man after having left home. It is on the coast, gazing at the waves rolling in, that Marie and Laye have their most heartfelt and meaningful conversations. Sitting on the shore they talk about the past, Laye's holidays at Tindican, their schoolwork, their friends, their idle thoughts about islands and boats and fishermen. They gather up their young lives and send that communion out to sea.

They have a conversation one day about an island they can see from the shore. Laye wants to get a boat and row out to it, but Marie sees that the waves are large and quite rough and that the short journey would be dangerous and certainly not worth the risk. Laye suggests that they get a fisherman to take them. Marie says they don't need a fisherman; all they need is their eyes, that if they stare at the island long enough,

without blinking, it's almost as though they're on the island. Or perhaps they are the island. In this conversation, the two young lovers have projected themselves away from their current realities out to something greater and further where they can be alone, where they can enjoy the happiness they feel on weekends when their studies don't interfere.

Chapter 11

Chapter 11 Summary

Every time Laye returns home for vacation he notices that his mother has made improvements to his hut, and this touches him. He can see that his hut is gradually acquiring a European look. She has gone to great pains to make it exactly what she thinks he likes. She has even constructed a divan bed where he hangs out with his friends until late at night.

Laye's mother is concerned about some of the young women he associates with when he is home. Being away at school most of the year, Laye doesn't hear the local gossip, but his mother does. Being her authoritarian self, she has no problem pulling a girl out of his group of friends and shoving her through the door, telling the girl to go home and not come back. Laye doesn't like this behavior from his mother. He finds it irritating, but he doesn't argue with her about it. He notices that she is not as particular about his male friends. Laye's mother often gets up in the middle of the night to see if he's in bed alone. She strikes a match to light up his bed. Laye complains of this treatment to his friends Kouyate and Check Omar.

Laye, Kouyate and Check have been friends since primary school, but their real friendship began after Laye left to go to school at Conakry. While in school, the three write long letters to each other describing school life. During holidays the trio is inseparable. They disappear for entire days together and then show up at Laye's mother's hut for dinner one day.

Because of his illness in his first year at Conakry, Laye has lost a year of school and still has one year until graduation, while Kouyate and Check have finished and are waiting for teaching positions. This summer, Check looks exhausted. Kouyate notices that Check is losing weight and doesn't have an appetite. Laye's mother speaks to Check's mother about his condition and Check is taken to the medicine men. Check doesn't want to give the appearance of thinking the medicine men are charlatans; he doesn't at all think this, but he realizes that he may need a doctor's help.

Laye and Kouyate stay at Check's bedside for a week, watching him grow weaker and weaker. After the week, Kouyate tells his friends how they should distribute his books and to whom they should give his banjo. Then he says goodbye to them and slips away. It is forbidden to speak the name of the deceased, but Laye keeps saying Check's name over and over in his head. He wakes up in the night bathed in sweat. He thinks of that time as the most wretched he's ever spent and feels like the happy days are all over.

Chapter 11 Analysis

Check's death further divides into childhood and adulthood. Check's death is the next-to-last transition between innocence and experience. The author enhances this contrast

by beginning the chapter with the characters' most carefree experiences of the entire story. They stay out for days at a time with each other. They sing and play the banjo late into the evening with groups of male and female friends in their huts. They show up to meals when they feel like it, never announcing their intentions ahead of time because their plans may change at a moment's notice. So it is unexpected and particularly cruel that death strikes these young men at the height of their joy and freedom. The juxtaposition of death at the pinnacle of youth makes the loss all the more terrible and brings their youthful optimism to a screeching halt.

After Check's death, Laye has nothing left to do but to grow up, to really grow up, not just in ritual and ceremony, but also in demeanor and attitude. With his youthful optimism gone, his fears return. He dreams terrible dreams about Check, so much so that he doesn't want to sleep alone. These fears are different than his fears of Konden Diara, for Konden Diara is an imagined foe, and death is as imminent a foe as any on earth, and he has now experienced its cruel inviolability for himself.

Chapter 12

Chapter 12 Summary

Before leaving Conakry upon successfully completing his exams, the director of the school asks Laye if he would like to go to France to finish his studies. Without thinking about his parents Laye answers yes, but as he returns to Kouroussa to celebrate his school successes he begins to worry about how his mother will react to such news. His relatives in Conakry have told him that he should not turn down such a unique opportunity, but now he's not sure how his parents will react.

When he tells his mother that the director wants him to go to France her face falls and she tells him that he's not going. Laye's father is more supportive, and he tries to convince her that a year is not that long. Laye's mother feels that there has been a conspiracy to keep her son away from her all these years and continues to oppose him leaving for France.

Laye speaks to his father alone, and his father agrees that he should not turn down such a rare and valuable opportunity, but they will have to try and convince his mother to see it their way. Father and son go together to talk to her. When they find her she is crushing millet with a mortar and pestle for the evening meal. As they speak she pounds the meal harder and harder. She rants that the people at that school must not have mothers for them to want to send boys so far away from their mothers. She doesn't understand why he should want more schooling; he's had so much already. When Laye tries to explain his viewpoint she tells him to be quiet because he's just a little boy, a nobody. Finally, though, with her rage spent, she concedes and allows him to go. Laye describes that goodbye as being torn apart.

The director in Conakry explains the journey to France to Laye and gives him a map of the metro. Laye cannot vaguely conceive what the metro is like, but he takes the map and gets ready to leave for the airport. Uncle Mamadou and Marie accompany Laye to the airport. With tears in her eyes, Marie asks if Laye will be coming back. He says he will. Then he gets on the plane with tears in his eyes and tries to stifle the sobs that rack him. After he recovers he notices something hard in his pocket and pulls out the map of the metro.

Chapter 12 Analysis

For this final goodbye, the tables have turned somewhat. In the past, when Laye has had to say goodbye to his mother, he has all but fallen apart. This time it is his mother who can barely contain herself. However, when Laye has to say goodbye to Marie, he behaves more like his mother does during their goodbyes. His affections have been somewhat displaced from mother to lover.

This journey can also be compared to Laye's first journey to Conakry. In his first journey to Conakry, the mountains and ocean amaze him. This time he is riding in an airplane and will see even more new and different sights in Paris. These new things are symbolized by the map of the metro, which links him from his current life to his future life.

The setting of this final scene completes the foreshadowing of the ocean from earlier chapters. In his conversation with Marie about the island, Laye wanted to travel across the waves to explore a new place. His achievements have sent him soaring above the waves to an even more magnificent and unknown place than he had dreamed of sitting on that shore. The praise-singers' magnification of his achievements made him want to be better. Now soaring off into the clouds, their prophecies are fulfilled.

Characters

Camara Laye

Laye is the main character and narrator who begins the story as a very small boy and ends as a man leaving his native country of Guinea to study in Paris. Laye comes from a respected family and is very intelligent from a young age. He excels in school and loves to do well. All through his youth, Laye goes back and forth between his hometown Kouroussa and his mother's hometown Tindican. He feels happy and comfortable in both environments but always knows he is destined for something different than the farmers around him.

Laye's family firmly believes in supernatural powers and beings and he has seen amazing things happen, but can't explain how or why they happen. He is honest about what he has seen and also honest about how it doesn't makes sense to him. He participates in all of the religious and cultural rituals and ceremonies but admits that he often doesn't know the traditions or meanings behind them. Nonetheless, he always finds value in such rituals. For example, he recognizes that the ceremony of the lions helps young boys prepare to handle their fears.

Laye's Father

Laye's Father is never given a name in the book, but he is extremely influential in his son's life. Laye's father has special prophetic powers. He dreams about the future and because he knows what is going to happen the following day, he can prepare for upcoming events and help others in this way. His powers are similar to those of a prophet.

Although he is generally calm, orderly and strictly religious, Laye's father has a passionate side, as seen when he accompanies his son to school and hits the school director. Laye's father's influence is so great that it isn't long after this event that enough parents sign a petition that the director must leave the school.

He is also an ambitious man, expanding his forge business until it is known far and wide. Parents from all around send their sons to Laye's father to be apprentices. Laye's father wants his son to have all possible opportunities and arranges as many opportunities for his children as he can, sending Laye to Conakry to school be means of his brother Mamadou.

Laye's Mother

Like Laye's father, Laye's mother also has supernatural powers. Laye attributes his mother's powers to her birth order in her family. She has two older brothers who are twins, and it is generally acknowledged that the child who follows twins has extra

wisdom and protection. Laye's mother takes care of her own children as well as her husband's apprentices. She is very authoritarian in manner and never backs down, except when Laye goes to Paris at the end of the story.

Laye feels throughout his childhood that he is her favorite child. This may be, but she may also be able to make everyone feel like a favorite. Laye's mother is a realist who doesn't like the ceremony of the lions because she thinks it's unhealthy for little boys to be required to stay out all night. Always devoted to her son, she becomes very emotional whenever her son leaves her.

Laye's Grandmother

Laye's grandmother lives in Tindican, where his mother grew up. She is the epitome of a grandmother, always worried that he isn't eating enough, scrubbing his skin and hair until he can feel his blood coursing through his veins, and bragging about her smart city boy to everyone in her village. Laye feels so good in her presence because she has nothing but good things to say about him.

She is a very clean woman, keeping her hut immaculate and making sure that her family has plenty of good wholesome food and adequate supplies. Her children are successful and respected, and those around her feel more comfortable for her presence.

Sidafa

Sidafa is one of the young apprentices who lives and works at Laye's father's forger. Laye and Sidafa share a bed in Laye's mother's hut and like to stay up late into the night talking about their days. Sidafa likes to hear about what Laye is learning at school because he doesn't get to go to school. In exchange for this information, Sidafa keeps Laye informed about everything that goes on at the forge while he is at school during the day.

Kayoute

Kayoute is a schoolmate of Laye's. As a child, Laye describes Kayoute as a bird, small and thin and with an appetite only for fruit. Kayoute is present at the important rites of passage in Laye's life. He is there during the ceremony of lions when they are scared little boys. When the boys go on to secondary school, they go to different schools but write each other letters weekly to keep in touch. Most importantly, Laye and Kayoute are together when their dear friend Check Omar passes away just after graduation. These shared rites of passage strengthen their friendship.

Fanta

Fanta is first introduced as a little girl at school who challenges Laye on his immature behavior. He pulls her hair to show his affection and she doesn't like this. She asks him why he does it and reminds him that she doesn't pull his hair. Later, she comforts Laye when the older boys bully him. As teenagers, Laye describes Fanta as "his steady," but he falls in love with Marie while in Conakry. We don't know what happens to Fanta after high school.

Marie

Marie is the most beautiful girl in Conakry, a half-white girl with waist-length hair that all the boys admire. She likes Laye and has plenty of opportunity to see him because her father is a close friend of Laye's uncle. Marie attends a girls' high school and spends her Sundays at Uncle Mamadou's house, talking and dancing with Laye. When Laye leaves for Paris, she goes to the airport with him and cries, causing Laye to feel heartbroken at his separation from her.

Uncle Mamadou

Uncle Mamadou is Laye's father's younger brother. He lives in Conakry, so Laye spends a lot of time at his house while he's in school there. Uncle Mamadou is a successful businessman and devout Mohammedan. When he gets home from work he changes out of his European business clothes into traditional Guinean clothes. He never drinks or smokes and is scrupulously honest in his dealings. Uncle Mamadou has two wives. Each wife has her own room that she shares with her own children. His home is harmonious, and Laye attributes this to Mamadou's good nature spreading over his entire household.

Check Omar

Check Omar is a childhood friend of Kayoute's and Laye's. Although not mentioned in the earlier chapters about school and the ceremony of the lions, Check Omar is a key figure in Laye's transition to adulthood because he dies from an illness on the cusp of adulthood. Check has just graduated with his teaching certificate when he falls ill. He sees the medicine men first and then goes to a doctor at the hospital, but there is nothing that can be done and he dies within a week of going to the hospital. Kayoute and Laye despair at the loss of Check.

Objects/Places

Kouroussa

Kouroussa is the name of Camara Laye's hometown.

Tindican

Tindican is the town where Laye's mother grew up. Laye visits his relatives there.

Conakry

Conakry is the coastal town where Laye attends secondary school.

The Forge

The forge is where Laye's father works and teaches his apprentices. Laye's earliest memories take place in the forge.

Konden Diara

Konden Diara is the mythical figure used to teach the uncircumcised boys to be brave.

Boubou

The boubou is a brownish-red tunic worn by the young men during the rite of circumcision.

Douga

The douga is a dance reserved for very special occasions, such as when Laye's father produces a gold trinket at the forge.

Technical School

The school Laye attends in Conakry

Camille Guy

Camille Guy is a rival school of the Technical School

Kankan

Kankan is a strong Mohammedan town and the holiest of their native places.

Themes

Coming of Age

Beginning with his earliest memories, Camara Laye takes readers through his childhood and finishes his tale as he flies into adulthood, leaving his parents and childhood on a different continent. Laye begins as a toddler, innocent of the danger that faces him as he plays with a snake in his father's forge. From that first chapter on, each chapter contains some lesson learned, some rite of passage to advance the coming of age theme. With each chapter he gets wiser and older, if not humbler.

In his culture, Laye's coming of age rites are mostly formalized. The ceremony of the lions, at age twelve, begins the journey from childhood to adulthood. In the ceremony of the lions, the boys must learn to face their fears and master themselves. They stay outside all night long, facing the possibility that lions could rip them apart at any moment. This mastery of fear helps them in their next great rite of passage: circumcision. Circumcision is certainly more dangerous than conjured lions. An infected operation could cause death, and even a successful operation is very painful. Once they have passed this second rite of passage they move into their own huts and begin dressing and acting like men.

However, several of the rites of passage explained in the book are not formal. For example, Laye falls in love with Marie while he lives in Conakry. Falling in love is indeed a rite of passage but it can't be formalized. Likewise, death comes unexpectedly, but the first time a person faces death, especially of a beloved friend, he is changed forever and undoubtedly loses some innocence and the carefree ways of you.

Unity of Man and Nature

Having grown up in a city in a forge, Laye is continually surprised and amazed by nature when he goes to visit his relatives in Tindican. All along the road as he walks with his uncle, he points out animals he hasn't seen before or beautiful plants he doesn't see in the city.

It's while he's in Tindican, and much later in Conakry, that Laye notices the beauties of both man and nature and how they work in harmony. During the rice harvest in Tindican, Laye sees the muscular black torsos of the reapers against the golden fields of rice and sees beauty in the juxtaposition. That night, as the villagers and reapers walk back to their huts, he smells the flowers in the trees and describes how the sweet smell of those flowers cover their bodies like garlands.

When he goes to school in Conakry, Laye discovers the ocean. Its vastness and movement enchant him, and his feelings of love for Marie become intertwined in his love for the ocean. They sit together on the shore and talk about their lives and their dreams. In his descriptions of human relations and the scenery surrounding those

humans, it's difficult to separate the one from the other. Man and nature combine to make one harmonious, balanced whole.

Sacrifice

Sacrifice appears as a reoccurring theme in the story. In chapter two, Laye's father sacrifices his time to make the gold trinket for the woman, and she sacrifices some of the gold she has painstakingly collected. When characters in the story need a favor from their god, they make sacrifices to add weight to their prayers. Laye's father makes sacrifices that his son might be able to go to the best schools and have any opportunities he is willing to take. During the rice harvest, Laye's young uncle sacrifices his ego for the good of the group. He could harvest the rice faster than he does, but he doesn't want anyone to feel badly. He wants the group to work in unison, so he sacrifices his will for the betterment and morale of the group.

Possibly the greatest sacrifice occurs at the end of the story when Laye's mother gives in (sacrifices) and lets her son go to France to study. Interestingly, this is a sacrifice that parents make every day in every culture. The sacrifice to let a child go for his own good when the parent wants nothing more than to keep him with her is heartbreaking, for we all feel it poignantly.

Style

Points of View

The point of view of this autobiographical novel is first person. This point of view is honest and reliable, though some of the stories seem far-fetched, such as the story about the black snake in the forge. Nevertheless, the narrator is honest in so many other things, things that could be embarrassing if he were trying to conceal anything, that the voice is trustworthy.

Despite the first-person point of view, we're able to see the story fairly objectively through dialogue and through the well-told actions of others. The chapters usually end with an introspective thought by the narrator, which sums up the chapter and explains what Laye has learned from this particular episode in his life.

Because of the first-person point of view and because this book is so autobiographical, there has been debate over whether this book is fiction or non-fiction. In form and in substance, the book fits the description of novel better, though it would be far easier to state that it is unequivocally a novel if it were written in third person.

Setting

The novel is set in several towns in Guinea, which is on the west coast of Africa. Kouroussa, the first and foremost setting of the novel is inland. It is a town of considerable size where Laye's family lives and his father works as a blacksmith. Laye's mother is from Tindican, a small rural town a two hours' walk from Kouroussa. Laye spends portions of his child at Tindican, most notable the rice harvest in December.

The setting changes to Conakry when Laye attends secondary school there. Conakry is a much larger town than Kouroussa and is on the coast. There is a peninsula there, and Laye lives with his uncle and aunts in a spacious European-style house instead of a hut like he is accustomed to.

In the last scene of the novel, Laye is aboard an airplane headed for Paris, France. We have heard much about Paris because he discusses it at length with his parents and the director of his school, but the novel doesn't take us there.

Language and Meaning

Originally written in French, *The Dark Child*, sometimes translated as *The African Child*, contains many African words and names. The reader should keep in mind that a translation of a work might not have the same quality, sound, or rhythm as it does in its original language.

The sentence structure is simple and straightforward, which lends trust and honesty to the text. Imagery is scattered here and there between explanations of ritual and rites, and this interspersed imagery adds beauty to the narrative. The dialogue is very natural and doesn't sound old-fashioned as one might expect from a novel written more than half a century ago and translated into another language. Dialogue is often left free of tags, which can be a bit confusing at times.

Structure

This novel is constructed of twelve chapters, each about fourteen pages long. Each chapter relates a story or rite of passage that moves young Laye along the path from childhood to adulthood. Each chapter tells of a lesson learned in his coming of age. These episodes usually only cover a few days or even just one scene, though some of the later chapters cover a year or two at a time.

The novel proceeds chronologically, spending almost equal time on different parts of Laye's growing up years. The plot is very simple. A privileged, intelligent boy makes his way through childhood, struggling with typical problems such as bullying, fear, attraction to girls, death of a loved one, and struggling to find his way in the world.

The novel's pace is fairly quick for a plot-light story because the chapters are fairly short and the narrator's voice is so pleasant. The characters are warm and inviting, and their family life is quite appealing. Most amazing are the bits of wisdom interspersed here and there, especially at the ends of chapters. What makes them so amazing is that they were written by a nineteen-year-old, homesick for his family while away at school in Paris.

Quotes

"My perplexity was boundless as the sky, and mine was a sky, alas, without any stars..." Chap. 1, p. 27.

"At the first notes of the douga my father would arise and emit a cry in which happiness and triumph were equally mingled; and brandishing in his right hand the hammer that was the symbol of his profession and in his left a ram's horn filled with magic substances, he would dance the glorious dance." Chap. 2, p. 39.

"It is easy for men who work in the fields all day long to fall into the habit of silence as they mull endlessly over one thing and another." Chap. 3, p. 53.

"Singing in chorus, they reaped, voices and gestures in harmony. They were together!—united by the same task, the same song. It was as if the same soul bound them." Chap. 4, p. 61.

"Yes, the world rolls on, the world changes; it rolls on and changes, and the proof of it is that my own totem—I too have my totem—is still unknown to me." Chap. 5, p. 75.

"This was our nightmare. The blackboard's blank surface was an exact replica of our minds." Chapter 6, p. 80.

"There was a rumor that Konden Diara sometimes pounced with fearsome claws on someone or other and carried him far away, far, far away into the depths of the bush; and then, days and days afterwards, months or even years later, quite by chance a huntsman might discover some whitened bones." Chap. 7, pp 101-102

"Yes, the hut was opposite my mother's, I was still within earshot of her voice, but the clothes on the bed were men's clothes. I was a man!" Chap. 8, p. 134

"I was choking, bubbling over with impatience... .I set off for Kouroussa as if for the promised land." Chap. 9, p. 155.

"For I was not the only one in love with her, though I was perhaps the only one who loved her so innocently." Chap. 10, p. 163

"I think of those days and think only that Check has gone before us along God's highway, and that all of us will one day walk along that highway which is no more frightening that the others, indeed far less frightening. The others? ...Yes, the others, the highways of life, the ones we set foot on when we are born an which are only the temporary highways of exile..." Chap. 11, p. 178.

"The earth, the land of Guinea, began to drop rapidly away." Chap. 12, p. 187.

Topics for Discussion

Laye's culture provides several rites of passage for its children as they grow up. What are those rites of passage? What similar rites belong to your culture?

How does the ceremony of the lions prepare young boys for circumcision?

What role does the black snake play in Laye's father's good fortune?

Laye's mother plays a very authoritarian role in her family and village. How does her role compare with women's roles in general? Compare and contrast.

Compare and contrast Laye's mother with her own mother in Tindican.

Discuss the symbolism of the ocean in Conakry. What does the ocean mean to Laye?

The supernatural plays a large role in everyday life in Kouroussa. Why?