Ellen Foster Study Guide

Ellen Foster by Kaye Gibbons

The following sections of this BookRags Literature Study Guide is offprint from Gale's For Students Series: Presenting Analysis, Context, and Criticism on Commonly Studied Works: Introduction, Author Biography, Plot Summary, Characters, Themes, Style, Historical Context, Critical Overview, Criticism and Critical Essays, Media Adaptations, Topics for Further Study, Compare & Contrast, What Do I Read Next?, For Further Study, and Sources.

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Encyclopedia of Popular Fiction: "Social Concerns", "Thematic Overview", "Techniques", "Literary Precedents", "Key Questions", "Related Titles", "Adaptations", "Related Web Sites".

The following sections, if they exist, are offprint from Beacham's Guide to Literature for Young Adults: "About the Author", "Overview", "Setting", "Literary Qualities", "Social Sensitivity", "Topics for Discussion", "Ideas for Reports and Papers".

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Introduction

When Kaye Gibbons published *Ellen Foster* in 1987, the novel-her first-met with an enthusiastic audience. Critics admired Gibbons's skillful creation of Ellen's narrative voice, acknowledging its accuracy in representing a child's point of view. Gibbons won two literary awards for *Ellen Foster,* the Sue Kaufman Prize for First Fiction and a citation from the Ernest Hemingway Foundation. While some readers criticized the events of the novel as being melodramatic, others asserted that Ellen's wisdom, resilience, and tenacity save her narrative from becoming a sentimental tearjerker. Gibbons has said that some of the events of the novel-Ellen mother's suicide and Ellen's subsequent movement from one relative's home to another-reflect her own childhood experiences. Ellen is indeed a lonely child, quietly observing the happiness of other families, yearning to belong, and making mental notes about what her perfect family should be like. *Ellen Foster* is ultimately a coming-of-age story, as Ellen engineers for herself a place in the secure, nurturing family she has craved and simultaneously comes to understand herself better through her friendship with Starletta, her black friend. Against the Southern backdrop of racism, Ellen moves from feeling she is superior to Starletta into a new understanding that color has nothing to do with a person's character. *Ellen Foster* belongs not only to the Southern tradition in American literature, with its distinctive voice and its treatment of racism, but also to that of first-person coming-of-age narratives, in which the narrator's innocence is also his or her wisdom.

Author Biography

When Gibbons first published *Ellen Foster* in 1987, journalists writing about the book-her first novel-wanted to know whether narrator Ellen's troubled childhood reflected in any way the early experiences of her creator.

Born in 1960 in Nash County, North Carolina, Gibbons, not wanting to draw attention to her own life as a means of publicizing the book, was reluctant at first to discuss her childhood with the press. Eventually though, she revealed that her mother, like Ellen's, had committed suicide when Gibbons was ten, an event which led to her family's breakup and to Gibbons's having to live in a succession of relatives' homes.

Gibbons went on to graduate from Rocky Mount High School in North Carolina, and while a college student at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, she began writing a poem in the voice of Starletta. Gibbons told Bob Summer in a *Publishers Weekly* interview that she wrote from Starletta' s perspective because "I wanted to see if I could have a child use her voice to talk about life, death, art, eternity-big things from a little person." The poem about Starletta eventually evolved into *Ellen Foster.*

Gibbons gave up her plans for a teaching career once it was clear that *Ellen Foster* was a success. She won the Sue Kaufman Prize for First Fiction from the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters, as well as a citation from the Ernest Hemingway Foundation, for *Ellen Foster.* She cites both Flannery O'Connor and James Weldon Johnson as important literary influences on her work.

In *Hungry Mind Review,* Gibbons admits that an editor's one-time prediction that she "would always write about women's burdens," has mostly come true. She writes, she says, "in part, to discover what those burdens are and how a character's load can be lessened, her pain mitigated." In *Ellen Foster,* Gibbons discovers that Ellen, just on the verge of young womanhood, finds comfort and relief from her burdens within herself.

Plot Summary

The Beginning

Ellen Foster is told from young Ellen's point of view. The narrative shifts between memories of her abusive past and descriptions of her present life in a foster family.

The book opens with Ellen's confession that she used to think of ways to kill her daddy, but she did not kill him. He drank himself to death. She just wished him dead. She then shifts to talking about how much happier she is now that she lives with her foster family in a clean home with plenty of food.

Shifting into the past again, Ellen relates how her sickly mother came home from the hospital but could not rest because she had to tend to her drunken, abusive husband. Ellen tries to shield her mother from her father, effectively serving as parent to both of them, but she cannot save her mother, who overdoses on pills. Ellen tries to call for help, but her father threatens to kill both Ellen and her mother if Ellen leaves the house. He convinces Ellen that all her mama needs is sleep, so Ellen takes her mother back to bed and curls up beside her. Even after she feels her mother's heart stop beating, Ellen continues to lie there, wanting to hold on to her mother for a little longer.

Ellen's Daddy

After the death of his wife, Ellen's father stops doing anything but eating and sleeping. His brothers bring him some papers to sign, and after that they bring him an envelope with money once a month. Ellen makes sure to get to the money before her father does so that she can pay the bills and buy food. Ellen's only friends are Starletta and her parents, a black family that lives nearby. Ellen struggles with her prejudices as she likes Starletta and her family, but secretly feels superior to them and fears that if she drinks from the same cup or eats their food she will catch something from them. Ellen spends Christmas day with them, but although she is hungry she will not eat dinner with them. She returns home, relieved not to find her drunken father there and spends Christmas night alone. This lonely scene is juxtaposed with a scene from Ellen's present life in the foster home, where all of the children are building a terrarium together.

On New Year's eve Ellen's father and other drunken men show up at Ellen's house. Ellen hides when the drunken men make lewd comments about her. When she comes out of hiding and tries to sneak out of the house her father grabs her, calling her by her mother's name. She runs to Starletta's home and asks to spend the night, offering to pay a dollar, which Starletta's mother refuses.

Ellen then decides to leave her father's house. Packing all of her things in a box, she calls her aunt Betsy and asks if she can stay with her. Betsy picks her up and they spend a pleasant weekend together but when Betsy discovers Ellen wants to stay permanently, she refuses to take Ellen in and drives her back home. The narration then

abruptly shifts from this scene of rejection to Ellen's description of how her "new mama" shops for all of her foster children, always providing them with plenty of food and a safe place to stay.

Back at her father's house Ellen decides she will have to lock herself up to avoid her father's advances. Sometimes, however, he gets to her anyway and she has to struggle to escape. When Ellen's teachers notice a bruise on her arm they decide she cannot stay with her father anymore.

Julia and Roy

Ellen moves in with her art teacher, Julia, and Julia's husband, Roy. Roy and Julia are former hippies who moved to the rural south to find themselves. With them, Ellen is able to relax and enjoy herself. They garden, cook, paint, and draw together, and Ellen has her first birthday party, with Starletta as her guest. Ellen's life seems to be improving, until her father shows up one day at her school. Drunk as usual, he drops his pants and stands in the schoolyard shouting for her. Shortly after, the court takes Ellen from Julia and Roy and awards custody to her grandmother, a bitter, angry woman who blames Ellen and her daddy for the death of Ellen's mama.

Again the novel shifts, from the loneliness of Ellen's past to the comfort and companionship of her present. Ellen describes the good food at her foster home and how enjoyable it is to be with her new mama and all the other children

Mama's Mama

The period spent at her grandmother's house is a bad time for Ellen, who quickly learns that her grandmother hates her and blames her for the death of her mama. Ellen is put to work in the fields. The work is physically demanding, but through it Ellen meets Mavis, a black farmhand who grew up on the farm with Ellen's mama. Talking to Mavis, Ellen learns a lot about her own family, and watching Mavis and the other field-hands, she learns a lot about what a family should be.

Ellen's father drinks himself to death and then her grandmother gets sick. Ellen must now leave working in the fields to take care of her. She believes Ellen helped her father to kill her mama, and so she tells Ellen "you best take better care of me than you did of your mama."

Ellen figures out that after her mother's death her grandmother took over the farm deeds belonging to Ellen's father and his brothers. It wa3 she who provided the monthly envelope full of money, and then slowly killing off Ellen's daddy by giving him less money each month, knowing he would waste it all on alcohol.

Ellen cares for her grandmother to the best of her ability and when she dies Ellen even tries to revive her. But when she cannot resuscitate her she tells her" ... the score is two

to one now. I might have my mama's soul to worry over but you've got my daddy's and your own. The score is two to one but I win."

The Foster Home

After her grandmother's death, aunt Nadine and Cousin Dora Ellen reluctantly taken Ellen in. Attending church with them one Sunday, Ellen sees her new mama for the first time. She asks Dora who the woman with all the girls is and Dora tells her they are the foster family. Ellen naively assumes that this means their last name is "Foster." Ellen knows from the woman's dignity and compassion that this is the mother for her, so when Nadine throws her out on Christmas day, Ellen walks to the foster home. She asks if she can stay there, offering all the money she has saved, one hundred and sixty six dollars, as payment. Ellen's new mama refuses the money, but gladly takes in the love-starved child.

In her new foster home Ellen is no longer forced to care for others, and is instead cared for. She is happy, but begins to miss Starletta, who is growing up and whom she fears will not always want to be friends with her. Growing up, Ellen leaves behind old prejudices. She begins to make plans to bring Starletta to spend the night at the foster home.

The book ends with Starletta's visit to Ellen's new home. Ellen confesses her old prejudices to Starletta, and in apologizing for them reveals how much she has learned and matured over the course of the novel.

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary

The story opens with the narrator (Ellen) revealing that she's considered killing her father in her mind. While she tries to lighten her confession with humor (e.g., a tale of a poisonous spider biting her father), her calculated response to his ensuing death (pretending to be upset and sad when she's really not) reveals a darker side to her nature.

Ellen then goes on to reveal that she never had to follow through with her murder plan because in the end her father drank himself to death. Soon after, Ellen is removed by county officials from her father's home and care. A confession that she's better off now that he's dead solidifies the bad blood that existed between daughter and father.

Ellen goes on to describe her living conditions as a ward of the county. Under such institutionalism, she finally receives the care she never had—proper feeding, bathing, dressing and praising. This stands in sharp contrast to her former home life, where she was neglected and surrounded by "crazy" people.

Next, the narrator reveals what occurs during her weekly psych sessions at school, during which she talks about her former life in the hopes of overcoming the damage inflicted upon her. A particular exercise, one involving bats, reveals Ellen's long-held, and pent-up fear, a diagnosis she denies still feeling. She does, however, admit that she used to be scared, describing her home life as a wild ride of sorts.

It is during this revelation that we find out that Ellen's mother is also now dead as a result of "tiredness" with her out of control life. As the scene unfolds, Ellen accepts her mother's hospital confinement prior to her death as lovesickness that has weakened her heart. At the same time, she feels no sympathy for her mother's situation and believes her better off in the hospital—where she is cared for—than at home—where her husband (Ellen's father) verbally abuses her and gives her the constant third degree.

Ellen thinks of her father as a mean monster while she views her mother's silence and lack of action toward his behavior as weak but attributable to her fragile physical condition. Ellen herself fails to act out against her father with the rationalization that "he is just too sorry to talk back to" as her excuse.

Here, Ellen reveals that in her mother's absence she is forced to fend for herself food-wise. In the end, Ellen's mother does what her husband orders as Ellen stands silently by her side, aiding and abetting all the while plotting her revenge.

The story alternates back and forth—a technique that will continue throughout the book—slowly showing the contrast between Ellen's past and present and uncovering a little bit more of the evilness Ellen and her mother have suffered at the hands of Ellen's father (bruises—indicating the mother's "sickness" actually stems from her husband's

abuse). A furtive errand also turns out to be a liquor trip—the more Ellen's father drinks, the nastier he becomes, until he eventually passes out, a condition Ellen is responsible for making right so as not to burden her mother. In Ellen's final estimation, her father is a good-for-nothing failure while her mother is a helpless victim in need of comfort and protection.

Chapter 1 Analysis

As Ellen allows the reader into her private thoughts about killing her father, it quickly becomes apparent that there is a bad relationship between father and daughter. In terms of Ellen the character, the darker side she reveals as exists in her mind hints at a psychological problem, perhaps that of bipolar disease (manic-depression) or obsessive-compulsive behavior.

As Ellen discusses the true nature of father's death, alcoholism and all its accompanying demons are also foreshadowed. Ellen's becoming a ward of the county, meanwhile, foreshadows child abuse and/or a lack of relatives who care about her well-being.

The contrast between Ellen's old home and new home is an example of dualism, or duality, in which one circumstance is the complete opposite of the other.

In Ellen's description of her home life as a wild ride, one sees an example of metaphor, in which a concept is compared to something else to make it clearer. In this case, Ellen's life was like a roller-coaster or tilt-a-whirl—a terrifying experience but one she could not get off of. In saying her mother's life was out of control one gets this same metaphoric sense of a roller-coaster careening out of control, derailing and its occupant plummeting to her death.

Ellen's lack of emotion over her mother's situation foreshadows empathetic indifference, or an inability to feel anything for other people's situations, quite possibly stemming from Ellen's having shut off her emotions as a means of dealing with her own problems. As Ellen plots revenge against her father in her mind, one also witnesses foreshadowing of violence yet to come, another example of contrasting duality in the character of Ellen.

Because Ellen's mother is so dependent on Ellen for care and comfort, we see a reversal of mother-daughter roles, in which Ellen takes on more responsibility than an average girl of her age.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary

It is now the next day, after Ellen's father spends the night in a drunken stupor in his truck and is now ready to start afresh and let bygones be bygones (thinking his wife and daughter want the same thing). Since he is restored to his full faculty and strength, Ellen must be extra careful her father doesn't harm her mother. As Ellen's mother shuffles through her purse, heart pills spill onto the table, giving additional clues into her illness. Ellen's father hurls additional verbal lashes and physical threats at the two females, further illuminating his evil nature and lack of love for his family. In particular, his stroking of a pocketknife is more powerful a threat to Ellen and her mother than his words.

In contrast, in her current life, Ellen's world runs so smoothly that she finds herself constantly contemplating what to do with her time (eating, reading, watching TV—all luxuries she never had the leisure for before). A particular distaste for the type of reading material her peers opt for indicates Ellen's advanced maturity. Ellen also uses reading as an escape from the demons that still haunt her from her past.

Ellen's mother's heart stops beating after taking a lot of pills and Ellen curses her father, putting him at fault for the death but careful to make sure no one else knows.

Ellen's aunt (a woman Ellen does not care for) arrives for her sister's funeral. From her perch in the church's bathroom, Ellen views the funeral scene as an outsider, watching her family put on airs and false displays of grief. She reserves special contempt for her father, who is revealed to go by the name of Bill. She also harbors ill feelings towards her uncle, Bill's brother, but at least considers her mother's sister to have "taste."

Chapter 2 Analysis

The heart pills Ellen's mother is taking are symbolic of a broken heart, one that has been shattered beyond repair by a man she once loved enough to marry and bear a child with.

Because Ellen's reading level is so advanced, one sees evidence once again of her forced maturity. Borne from necessity rather than a superiority desire, her choice in reading material shows how she was forced into adulthood before her time.

In Ellen's careful cover-up of her mother's death, one sees shades of her own guilt in the matter as well as a desire for secrecy, a tendency that many abused children have.

Ellen's deeming of her aunt as more tasteful than the rest of her family members hints at a slight favoritism toward her mother's side of the family. In other words, because she

cared more for he mother than she does for her father, Ellen extends those same feelings toward each parent's blood relations.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary

This chapter opens with more glimpses into the fun and leisure Ellen is afforded at her new home (pony rides, dancing, warm food, shelter). The pony's name is Dolphin and Ellen is so anxious to ride him that she doesn't even care about her clothes or her hair. Ellen also reveals that there are other children at her new home, with whom she must share her new privileges.

Back at the funeral, Ellen is tired of watching her relatives' phoniness. She now turns her inner hatred toward her Aunt Nadine, who gave her the red-checked outfit she's wearing, a hand-me-down from Nadine's daughter, Dora. Ellen contemplates padding her dress and walking out of the bathroom, giving everyone something else (besides her mother) to talk about.

Nadine takes charge of the funeral procession and begins issuing orders. Meanwhile, Ellen's father squirms, fearing Ellen will out him and his evilness in front of everyone. Ellen is directed into the lead and biggest car—which also holds the undertaker, Nadine, Dora and Ellen's father—and the procession is off for the cemetery service.

Fast forwarding to her new life, Ellen stuffs herself with biscuits in preparation for her pony ride, taking along two extras and a thermos for the journey. She points out that everything at her new home isn't really "hers."

Feeling boxed in inside the funeral car, Ellen rolls down a window, all the while thinking unkind thoughts about the other occupants. A changing of the leaves indicates it is autumn. As the car rolls along, Ellen focuses on the changes in the people she sees and in their routines. One neighbor in particular's, Junior's, daughter Trixie rakes a pile of red leaves, which Ellen describes as red enough to explode on fire and burn down Junior's house and barns.

Nadine is revealed to be a high maintenance domestic diva like Martha Stewart, a food slicer demonstrator by trade. Meanwhile, she verbally expresses pity for Ellen's loss and motherless situation. As Ellen predicted when they all piled into the car, Dora has wet her pants, a bad habit Nadine denies her daughter has. Ellen sides closer to the open window, sticks her nose out for fresh air and curses them all.

Chapter 3 Analysis

The pony's name, Dolphin, is symbolic of Ellen's newfound freedom, as a dolphin is free ocean creature.

Dressed in hand-me-downs for her own mother's funeral, one sees once again the neglect Ellen endures. Even her aunt does not have the decency and respect to buy her now motherless niece a new outfit for the funeral.

By stating that the things at her new home aren't really "hers," one gets a feel for Ellen's sense of not belonging.

The changing in the color of the leaves on the day of her mother's funeral symbolizes a change in Ellen's life—moving forward without her mother by her side.

In Ellen's estimation of the red leaves as being capable of destroying by fire, one sees symbolism of Ellen's hatred, anger and desire for destruction.

The description of Nadine as the queen of domesticity reveals her to be the perfect example of materialism (caring about things over people) and phoniness.

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 Summary

A drive through a "colored" (filled with many Black people) town is necessary to get to the location where the funeral service will be held. This fact makes Nadine feel unsafe and she locks her door as they pass through. As they approach the church, the homes get statelier and Nadine would enjoy rubbing shoulders with and gossiping about their occupants. In one yard, Ellen spies an angel fountain she would like to have.

At the graveside, Ellen avoids looking at her mother's body by examining the attendees instead. Included amongst the visitors is Starletta, a friend of Ellen's, and her mother, who eats dirt. Ellen once tried eating dirt herself but was slapped by her father for doing so.

Ellen's well-to-do maternal grandmother is also in attendance and calls Ellen's father a bastard as well as a variety of other names. For years, she has detested her son-in-law for his drunkenness and now creates a loud scene at his expense. In the end, she ups and leaves before the service has ended.

Ellen refuses to watch them shut her mother's casket and put her in the ground. It is raining hard, but Ellen spies her grandmother off to the side, watching through the rain, staring daggers at Ellen's father. Finally the whole ordeal is over.

Fast forwarding to her new life, Ellen rides her pony, settles down to camp and lets Dolphin keep the snakes away.

Chapter 4 Analysis

Nadine's fear of being in a colored town introduces the reader to a theme that will be carried through the book, that of prejudice.

The treatment Ellen's grandmother extends toward her son-in-law raises some questions that will likely be addressed later on in the story, in particular why she hasn't helped out her daughter and her granddaughter either financially or emotionally.

During the graveside service, a lot of symbolism is witnessed. First, Ellen's avoidance of looking at her mother's casket and watching them place it in the ground is a metaphor for refusing to close a past chapter of her life. It indicates hesitancy on her part to move forward without her mother. Second, the fact that it is raining symbolizes the even drearier situation in which Ellen will soon find herself.

The fact that Ellen is concerned with snakes in her new life hints at how she feels about the members of her family: she thinks of them as slimy, lowly reptiles.

Chapter 5

Chapter 5 Summary

Upon their arrival back home, Ellen's father takes off, not to return until the following evening. Ellen enjoys all the funeral food and prepares to attend school the next day, knowing everyone will be talking about her loss. In her mother's memory, Ellen wears some of the dead woman's clothes under her own.

Ellen describes herself physically, referring to her large head as nearly "defective." Before deciding on which items to wear, Ellen riffles through her mother's things. At school, the teachers are curious and one outright asks Ellen how her mother died, a question Ellen walks away from, refusing to answer. Ellen and Starletta walk home together, where Ellen finds her father returned. From that point forward, Ellen stops speaking to her father and he, in turns, does nothing but drink and sleep. On one occasion, his brothers, Rudolph and Ellis, must retrieve him from a drunken stupor in his yard. The next day, he signs the family farm over to them, basking in his freedom from the burden.

The brothers leave an envelope of money in the mailbox each month, which Ellen makes sure she gets to before her father does, taking enough money out for necessities before her father squanders it all on alcohol. Ellen even must feed herself, usually opting for TV dinners over going out with her father (who eats out)—refusing to be seen with him—or starving.

As winter approaches, it is Starletta's father who takes Ellen into town for a new coat (corduroy lined with sheep fur). Jim, the fish man, regularly delivers frozen fish and candy bars to Ellen's house. These items also become staples in Ellen's diet. He cleans them for Ellen and teaches her how to cook them.

Confined indoors because of the cold, Ellen escapes into fantasy catalog play role. She also joins the Girl Scouts. Starletta cannot join with her because she is Black and there is no local colored troop. Ellen tires of Scouts by Christmas—having forged her father's signature so as to obtain all her badges.

To celebrate Christmas, Ellen buys herself gifts and wraps them while her father remains glued to the TV and her grandmother has a feast in her own home, not bothering to invite Ellen. Ellen does not buy her father a present and he doesn't return from a drinking binge in time to celebrate Christmas anyway.

Chapter 5 Analysis

Ellen's wearing of her mother's clothes is symbolic of her wanting to keep her mother close. By clinging to what's left of her mother, one again sees Ellen's reluctance to let go of the past.

In describing herself as defective, one is cued into Ellen's lack of self-confidence and -esteem. Not feeling confident in oneself is a common byproduct of child abuse.

Ellen's father's lack of interest in working or even possessing the prestige that accompanies ownership of the farm shows his utter disregard for anything but booze. Character-wise, it set him up as a lazy, unmotivated drunk. And by leaving him money even though he's not working, his brothers are enabling his addiction.

Ellen's having to scrape together enough money for food, just to survive, once again illustrates the necessity of her growing up before her time. At an age when her father should be providing for her, he would rather blow his money on alcohol than see that his daughter is properly cared for and fed.

Starletta's exclusion from the Girl Scouts based on her skin color cues us into the novels timeframe. In Brown vs. The Board of Education is 1954, the Supreme Court desegregated schools. Since Starletta and Ellen attend the same school, it is after 1954. However, since shades of segregation are still being witnessed, it is likely not too long after that year.

Chapter 6

Chapter 6 Summary

Left all alone, Ellen celebrates Christmas Day at Starletta's home, which is right next door. Here, Ellen gets to experience what a healthy and loving family is all about, despite their meager income. (They are cotton pickers.) Despite her fondness for them, Ellen harbors some hidden abhorrence for their less than clean, one-room home (no bathroom, no TV). In fact, Starletta is the only member of her family who can read.

Ellen stereotypes Black people as having huge, extended families, all of whom live in a single home, and of buying liquor from her father, neither of which pertains to Starletta's family. Unlike at Ellen's house, Santa has visited Starletta's home, and Starletta wants Ellen to play with her new toys. Ellen refuses until Starletta cleans herself up. Ellen also refuses to eat with her host family, claiming that despite how good the food looks, it is still "colored" food.

Unlike her father, Starletta's parents have gotten Ellen a Christmas present—a sweater, which Ellen immediately wants to put on. In turn, Ellen has bought them a rooster spoon rest. Looking out for her well-being, Starletta's parents ask about Ellen's father and invite her to stay or come back at any time she needs or wants to.

When she gets home, Ellen's father is still not back, to her relief. When he is there, Ellen avoids him anyway, finding ways to busy herself. Unfortunately, she can no longer play dress-up with her mother's clothes as her grandmother had one of her maid's take them away. Her message when doing so: "She had rather some real niggers have [Ellen's] mama's things than [Ellen or her father] that drink and carry on like trash." Reading has now become Ellen's alternate escape route, the bookmobile being something she anxiously looks forward to.

Fast forwarding to the present, Ellen realizes she has stayed away with Dolphin too long, but she is in no rush to get back to her new mama and five siblings, whom she barely knows. Upon her return, however, Ellen enthusiastically jumps into the group terrarium project. Later, her new mama washes her hair for her, the physical touch of the task being something Ellen particularly enjoys since she is so starved for it. When Ellen gazes at herself in her new home's mirror, she seems "like a stranger" to herself.

Ellen's father is absent more and more frequently. New Year's Eve is the next time she sees him, when he shows up with a "pack of colored men." Ellen hides and watches and curses them from the sidelines as they eat her food. Then "Missa Bill" (Ellen's dad) gets out his guitar and they all sing drunkenly. In a casual conversation, Bill tells one of his guests that Ellen is 9 or 10 years old (he doesn't even know his own daughter's true age). The man makes a crude and sexually oriented comment in response. More fearful, Ellen fortresses herself in her closet. Despite her attempts to escape outdoors, her father stops Ellen and forces himself on her. As she is violated, Ellen psychologically

escapes her body and the evil being imposed upon her. When the wretched act is over, she runs to Starletta's home.

Chapter 6 Analysis

This chapter is all about revealing Ellen's darker undersides. First, we see her obsessive side when he refuses to play with Starletta until she washes up. Because she has no control over other aspects of her life, Ellen is obsessed with something she can control: cleanliness and perfection. She takes this obsession so far that she won't even use crayons that are broken.

In her refusal to eat with colored people, we also see Ellen's prejudicial side. Despite the fact that her black friend is good enough to play with and spend a lonely Christmas with, she is not good enough to eat with. Likewise, the sweater Starletta's family gives her is good enough to be worn, which begs the question: why are colored clothes and toys not off limits when colored food is?

In this chapter one also witnesses Ellen's grandmother's vengeful side. By taking away her mother's stuff, the grandmother is punishing her granddaughter simply because she hates her father.

Here, one also sees Ellen's self-confidence unfolding. As she looks in the mirror of her new life and views herself as a stranger, she is coming out of her shell, no longer recognizing herself as the abused, neglected girl she once was.

Finally, we return full circle to Ellen's prejudicial mindset. While they're not good enough to break bread with, Starletta's family are the people she turns to when faced with trauma. In other words, they are good enough when she needs them.

Chapter 7

Chapter 7 Summary

Rather than tell them the truth, Ellen offers Starletta's parents $1 (which is refused) if she can stay, choosing instead to say that she got locked out of her house. Ellen agrees to share their bed but sleeps in her coat to avoid touching the covers. Upon returning home the next morning, Ellen hides in the wood until she sees all the men leave. Safely inside, she packs her things, vowing never to return. Now her only problem is figuring out who to call and what to say to them. She finally decides on her mother's sister, her Aunt Betsy, who agrees to come get her. Betsy's husband has recently died and Ellen figures she could use some company.

Betsy, like Ellen's grandmother, has a nice home. Having no children of her own, Betsy enjoys doting on Ellen, buying her all sorts of clothes and giving her bubble baths—luxuries Ellen is unaccustomed to. With Betsy's encouragement, Ellen makes herself at home until Betsy broaches the subject of Ellen "going home." Soon, Ellen realizes her aunt only intended for her to stay the weekend and is taking her back to her father.

Fast forwarding to her new life, Ellen enjoys her occasional grocery store jaunts with her mew mama, who likes to leave her baby boy (Ellen's "brother") at home when she shops. Ellen is ecstatic with the variety of the food selection and the fact that her new mama never seems to run out of money and have to put something back—occurrences that Ellen often faced when trying to keep herself fed.

Aunt Betsy takes Ellen back home. With no other alternative, Ellen decides she'll just lock herself up in the house. It turns out, however, that this strategy doesn't always work and her father continues to abuse and molest her.

A bruise on Ellen's arm draws her teacher's attention. When asked how it happened, Ellen truthfully answers that her father "put the squeeze on" her. Shocked by this confession, the teacher suggests that Ellen call someone to pick her up and keep her safe. The only one she can think of, however, is Starletta's parents. The teacher, the art teacher and the principal have a private conversation to decide what to do with Ellen.

Chapter 7 Analysis

In making manufactured excuses to Starletta's parents Ellen once again reveals her tendency toward covering for her father, no matter how terrible his crime. Despite his molestation of her, Ellen is still maintaining her abused child mentality by not letting anyone else know of the abuse she is suffering.

Ellen's obsession with Starletta's family's lack of cleanliness continues, this time extending into her fear of touching their bedding.

This chapter introduces Ellen's Aunt Betsy for the first time, which begs the question of where she was during Ellen's mother's funeral. As her sister, she should have been there but again, no one in Ellen's family seems to value blood relationship or make family a priority.

In this chapter, there is a strong focus on contrasts: a contrast between life at Aunt Betsy's and life at home and a contrast between Ellen's new home and her old home. In both cases, Ellen having escaped from her father finds her being treated to luxuries she's unaccustomed to. Aunt Betsy's home, however, unlike her new mama's home, is only a fleeting place of rescue while Ellen's new home appears to be permanent.

Even when faced with the prospect of being returned to her abusive father, Ellen cannot bring herself to tell her aunt the truth, thereby further solidifying the fact that she has no family member she feels close enough to trust. This fact is further solidified when Ellen selects Starletta's parents as the only people who can keep her safe from her father.

Chapter 8

Chapter 8 Summary

The art teacher agrees to take Ellen in temporarily. Her name is Julia and her husband's name is Roy. Here, Ellen is exposed to a variety of new things, like the movies. Ellen stays in the guest room, knowing she won't be there for long. The kids at school begin talking about Ellen's situation.

Ellen begins to enjoy being part of a normal family, laughing, displaying affection and having an all-around good time. Julia encourages Ellen to "let it all hang out," thereby imposing a bit of psychiatry on the girl. Ellen thinks Julia and her husband are "off their rockers" but Julia explains that they are just happy.

Julia and Roy moved to the South from the Northeast so she could teach and he could "do his thing" in a peaceful setting. Julia used to be a flower child. Julia admits that she once wanted to save the world from people like Ellen's father. This mention brings the paternal monster back into Ellen's mind and she finds it hard to conceive there could be others like him in the world. In her new setting, Ellen has put her father out of her mind and thinks only of her mother, particularly when gardening: a hobby they used to share together and the only time Ellen witnessed her mother well.

To celebrate Ellen's eleventh birthday, which she nearly forgot, Roy asks her what she would like to do. Ellen can't decide, so to help her, Julia asks her what she normally does on her birthday. Ellen frankly replies that she turns a year older and goes to bed feeling different. A celebration is proposed but Ellen stresses over that prospect, having no on to invite but Starletta. So, a party with one guest is arranged.

Ellen is proud to show off her new home to Starletta, who is fascinated with all it contains—carpeting included. Julia drops the two girls off at the movies, where Starletta is the only colored girl. Back at home Roy has a cake prepared. The prospect of making a wish scares Ellen. After cake—which Ellen does not at first know what to do with—Ellen is bombarded with gifts. From Starletta she receives a Dutch girl pillow, handmade by the girl's mother. From Julia and Roy she receives colored pencils and oil paints. Knowing Starletta would love to get her hands on the art supplies—and destroy them like she breaks her crayons—Ellen is protective of her gifts. Roy takes Starletta home but Ellen stays behind so as not to inadvertently encounter her father.

Chapter 8 Analysis

This chapter gives us a glimpse into Ellen's sense of a lack of belonging. Already sent away from her aunt's house after only a few days, Ellen is convinced that her art teacher's home is only another brief stop on her journey before she's returned to the horror of life with her father.

That Julia must explain to Ellen that her off-the-wall behavior is just a byproduct of her happiness reveals that Ellen has never previously been exposed to enough happiness to recognize it properly when she sees it.

In this chapter we are given a hint as to the book's setting when it is revealed that Julia and her husband moved south. That the story takes place in the South coincides with the slow rate with which racial prejudice is peeling away.

The fact that Roy is revealed as a "peacenik" also stands in sharp contrast to Ellen's father who is anything but peaceful. Meanwhile, Julia's confession that she used to be a "flower child" better cues the reader into the story's timeframe. Since flower children were products of the 1960s, the novel takes place quite a few years after the 1954 ban on educational segregation, indicating that despite court orders, bigotry remained alive and well in the South for many years following desegregation.

Ellen's fear of making a wish before blowing out her birthday candles is a powerful piece of symbolism. It represents the fact that Ellen has never dared to hope for anything before in her life. At the party, we once again see Ellen's judgment of Starletta as unworthy of playing with her gifts, even though the girl is obviously Ellen's only friend in the world and even though Starletta was more than willing to share her own gifts with Ellen on Christmas.

Chapter 9

Chapter 9 Summary

Eventually, Ellen's father comes looking for her, arriving at her school one day during naptime. Ellen senses that he is there before she actually lays eyes upon him. Ellen's teacher just happens to be on coffee break when he arrives, and from his parking space in the marigold beds, he orders Ellen outside, waving money at her as incentive. The teacher returns and tries to get Ellen and the class to return to their nap. Ellen can't resist responding, however, and tells her father to drop the money and go home. Eventually, the police come, handcuff Ellen's father and take him away. Julia comes to Ellen's rescue and takes her home. Later, Roy and Julia come to break the news to Ellen that the courts have decided she must return to her family. Ellen is flabbergasted but three weeks later finds herself in front of the judge. Both her father and her grandmother are in the courtroom. Ellen doesn't understand the legal proceedings but ultimately the judge sides with her grandmother.

Church is mandatory every Sunday at Ellen's new home. The money for Ellen's care comes from the weekly congregation collection. Ellen never complains, knowing her old life was much worse. Dora and her mother, Nadine, attend the same church on holidays only, making appearances only when necessary. It is revealed that Ellen once had to live with them for a while. It was during this interlude that Ellen first caught a glimpse of her new mama and was drawn to her. Ellen is grateful to finally have her wish after church: a big meal always takes place and then cooking for the upcoming week's lunches. Stella, Francis and Jo Jo (Ellen's new siblings) are all involved in the weekly food ritual, with Stella and Ellen manning the stove thanks to their previous cooking experience. Jo Jo is the dancer of the group and gets time off for lessons. After cooking, Ellen is ordered to wash and do her homework in her room, into which Roger, the baby, sometimes crawls in to root through Ellen's things.

Chapter 9 Analysis

Why Ellen's grandmother is suddenly appearing in the picture begs the question of motivation. All the while Ellen has been abused and under the care of Julia, she's been nowhere in sight. Now that Ellen's father is legally asserting his right to care for his daughter, she reappears. Is this a foreshadowing of an act of revenge against the son-in-law she so hates or does she harbor some deep-seated love for her granddaughter?

Although Ellen has now become a charity case, she has learned to appreciate what she has. In comparison to her old life, being dependent on the generosity of others doesn't seem so bad to Ellen.

The fact that Ellen once stayed with her Aunt Nadine yet no longer does foreshadows a falling out between them.

Chapter 10

Chapter 10 Summary

Summer arrives and Ellen is sent to her grandmother's house. Ellen hates it there—in fact, finds it sad—but Julia and Roy can do nothing about her situation. Eventually, Julia is fired from her teaching job and she and Roy move away. When Ellen leaves for her grandmother's she takes only what she really needs and leaves the rest behind. All that really matters to her nowadays is money.

On the drive to her house, Ellen's grandmother doesn't even speak to her except to ask when school starts again, despite the fact that summer has just begun. In regards to her grandmother, Ellen states, "But if I knew then all I know about her now I would have jumped out of her car moving and hightailed it." Despite her grandmother's meanness toward her, Ellen decides to make the best of the situation for the sake of the woman's money. By July, however, Ellen is so sick of the "witch" that the money no longer matters.

The first few days at her grandmother's home, Ellen looks but doesn't touch any of the high-priced furnishings. Her grandmother has Black servants (a cook and a maid), expensive knick-knacks and fancy antique furniture. While there, Ellen stays in her mother's old room, which is given to her because her grandmother thinks she "deserves" it, something Ellen soon comes to realize is not a privilege but rather a curse. Ellen's grandmother soon becomes mean, threatening to break Ellen's hand just for touching things.

After just one week, her grandmother puts Ellen to work, making her toil in the cotton fields all day like a "nigger." At first, Ellen refuses to work but the overseer, Mavis, forces her. All of the cotton workers attend church with Starletta's family. Ellen becomes sick working so hard in the heat. Mavis comments to Ellen that "it must be a mighty bad debt you is out here working off."

Ellen makes the best of things and learns to kill time in her head as she works. She also befriends Mavis, who asks why she has been sent to the fields. Ellen repeats her grandmother's response because she "was under her feet and besides she could not bear to look at her [Ellen's] face day in and day out."

One day, Mavis points out how much Ellen looks like her mother. That Mavis knew her mother all the way back to childhood excites Ellen and so she asks a lot of questions of her work supervisor. She learns that her mother was never made to work in the fields like she is. Eventually, Mavis reveals that Ellen's grandmother's behavior has gotten worse since Ellen's mother died.

Ellen toughens up and browns in the fields and soon realizes she could pass for colored herself. This revelation, however, "did not make much of a difference to her anymore."

The only time Ellen and her grandmother get together is on Sundays, for dinner, but they never talk when they do. In her free time, Ellen spies on Mavis, whose family activity "looked like slavery times." Ellen doesn't think the black women she works with are paid well, but then Ellen isn't paid at all, except in the form of room and board.

Ellen doesn't understand why the women don't just save up their money and leave. Mavis's family life makes Ellen yearn for a family of her own, one that is "white and with a little more money." She contemplates selling her grandmother's "things" to raise money to get away herself. Ellen thinks that her grandmother's meanness stems from her using Ellen as a whipping boy substitute for Ellen's father. Her grandmother even takes pleasure in reminding Ellen how much she is like her father, which disturbs Ellen immensely.

One day, Ellen's grandmother tells Ellen that her daddy is dead, emphasizing the news with a slap to the face. Having wished it for so long, Ellen does not cry upon hearing the news, but her grandmother taunts her to do so. Neither of them attends his funeral. Rudolph, Ellen's dad's brother, brings Ellen the flag they laid on his coffin in tribute to his war service. While she does not like the thought of him being buried next to her mother, Ellen hopes they nail her father in his coffin so he can never lay hands on her again.

Rudolph sometimes visits Ellen's grandmother. When he is there, Ellen is always sent to her room but she spies anyway. When he brings the flag, Ellen's grandmother spits on it and scolds him for taking so much money from her, which he justifies as "due him." Before he runs away, Ellen's grandmother threatens Rudolph, telling him to remember whose name the farm is in (hers!). That night, Ellen spies her grandmother burning the flag.

In her eternal belief that everyone is out to get her, Ellen's grandmother fires the colored household help, claiming they stole from her. That leaves Ellen alone to take care of her grandmother, another instance of a central running theme: role reversal. On the plus side, this gets Ellen out of the fields. One day, her grandmother gets the flu and while Ellen nurses her, she talks nonstop about Ellen's dad, none of which makes much sense to Ellen. In her delusional state, she asks Ellen, "You helped him, didn't you?" in reference to killing Ellen's mother.

Chapter 10 Analysis

Julia and Roy's leaving make Ellen's prediction that living with them was only a temporary arrangement come true. In fact, because she has become so used to being shuffled from home to home, she has her packing routine down to a science. Metaphorically, she is a lost, homeless sail set adrift on a rocky sea.

Ellen's over-interest in money foreshadows an obsession for cash. Because she had to scrape money together for basic necessities in her past, she is becoming obsessed with having substantial savings to fall back on in the event that she finds herself in a similar

situation and needs it again. This gives us glimpse into Ellen's mindset, which is still convinced she can trust no one and must depend on herself alone.

This state of mind appears to be a smart one on Ellen's part since right away we see Ellen's grandmother's desire to be rid of her granddaughter. So anxious is she to have Ellen out of her hair that she is already counting down the days until summer break is over. At the same time, Ellen's comment about jumping out of her grandmother's moving vehicle foreshadows rough storms ahead for the grandmother/granddaughter relationship.

Mavis's comment about Ellen working off a debt begs the question of what a young girl like Ellen could possibly owe her own grandmother.

As Ellen's skin darkens and she doesn't even care that it is, we see that she is learning tolerance of others. In particular, by being exposed to Black people every day, she is discovering that aside from their skin color, they are just like she is. In fact, in many ways they are superior to her own white kin.

This chapter uses the image of a magician as a piece of metaphoric symbolism, first when Ellen wishes her father be nailed in his coffin so he can't ever get out and again when her delusional grandmother makes accusations at Ellen over her mother's death. Both images Ellen would like to rid from her mind, an act of magic is likely the only thing that will truly banish them forever.

Chapter 11

Chapter 11 Summary

Left to herself, Ellen begins to figure out her family's secrets:

1) Her grandmother kept tabs on Ellen and her father through Ellis and Rudolph until Ellis died, leaving the full burden on Rudolph, who shared everything he knew with Ellen's grandmother. In exchange, Ellen's grandmother pays him when she sends money to Ellen's dad.

2) In the process, Ellen's grandmother got the farm and all the land off Rudolph—Ellen isn't sure how she does it—but she knows that it transpired once she ran away. No longer having to feel guilty for starving a child, Ellen's grandmother started putting less and less money in the envelopes so that Ellen's dad wasted it very quickly. In that way, she confused him and got him at her mercy, until he had a "stroke" and died.

Ellen's grandmother's flu gets worse and Ellen tries her best to care for the woman who shuns both her medicine and her doctor. Ellen's grandmother never complains about the care Ellen gives her but makes sure she regularly reminds Ellen that she "got that bastard's eyes."

Ellen worries how it will look if her grandmother dies while under her care and vows to wake her up if she starts to die, which she "should have done with the first one" in reference to Ellen's mother. Ellen decides to take advantage of her grandmother's weakened condition and asks her why she hates her so much. Her grandmother responds that every time she looks at Ellen, she sees Ellen's father and what he did to her daughter (Ellen's mother). Ellen responds that she didn't do anything, thinking in the back of her mind that there was something she *didn't* do for her mother: save her. As if reading Ellen's mind, her grandmother lays into her, saying Ellen and her dad let her mother take the pills that ultimately killed her, leaving her to die. Ellen's grandmother vows that Ellen will never stop paying for her role in the death. Believing her grandmother's accusations in the back of her mind, Ellen decides to spend the rest of her life "making up for it."

Despite Ellen's attempts at resuscitation, her grandmother dies, leaving "the score two to one," with Ellen having to worry over one soul (her mother's) but her grandmother having to worry over two souls (her own and Ellen's dad's).

Chapter 11 Analysis

This chapter reveals Ellen's guilt over her own mother's death. While not actively murdering her, Ellen feels responsible nonetheless, simply because she stood by and allowed it to happen. As Ellen's grandmother is on the verge of dying, all of these feelings resurface and attack Ellen.

The previous foreshadowing of Ellen's grandmother acting out her revenge for Ellen's father on Ellen comes to light in this chapter when Ellen's grandmother admits this line of reasoning to be the truth.

Chapter 12

Chapter 12 Summary

Fast forwarding to her new life, Ellen is woken up by her new mama for school. As she lies in bed, Ellen mentally lists what she likes about her new life: 1) she doesn't plan to leave until she is old: 2) she doesn't owe anyone money; 3) she can count on food to eat; and 4) her new mama's "saying good morning like she means it."

Stella, who is in 7th grade, is Roger's mother and he cries when she leaves for school with Ellen. Despite the fact she is already a mother, Stella fools around with boys in the back of the school bus. On her way to music class, Ellen passes Starletta's classroom and muses over how much she misses her old friend and how much she has grown and matured in Ellen's absence. Starletta even has a crush on a white boy, Tom, now. Ellen figures it's because Starletta knows white boys can give her more financially.

To make up for their time apart, Ellen and Starletta keep lists of what they need to tell each other. Ellen dreads the day when Starletta will "forget about her." She then wonders if she is the same girl who two years ago would not eat or drink after Starletta. While she reasons that she is the same person, she has learned that she has to worry more about the people she knows and trusts than casual coloreds. Ellen wants to maintain her friendship with Starletta so badly that she considers asking her new mama if Starletta can come and spend the night. Finding her new mama waiting or her, just because, at home always tops off Ellen's day.

Every Tuesday, Ellen sees a school counselor, who grills her about her past. In her current session, the counselor asks Ellen why she has been signing her papers differently, with the last name Foster. Thinking it is an identity problem, he presses Ellen for an answer. Ellen explains that her "old family wore the other name out," so she figured she's adopt the name of her new family, whom she'd heard referred to as the "foster family." The counselor explains the real meaning of a "foster family," making Ellen feel like a fool then turns his attention back to her "identity problem."

Chapter 12 Analysis

This chapter is all about Ellen's yearning not to lose her one and only link to her past: Starletta. Now that time and distance have allowed her perspective on her old life, Ellen is able to reflect back on it and separate the good from the bad. Despite all the prejudice she once held for Starletta and her family, she now realizes they were the positive side of her former life.

In learning this lesson, we see growth and maturity in the character of Ellen. In desiring to invite Starletta to her new home, Ellen hopes she can atone for her past bad thoughts and actions toward her one and only true friend.

Finally, the play on words of "Foster" explain how Ellen came to have her current last name.

Chapter 13

Chapter 13 Summary

Ellen calls a funeral home to report her grandmother's death. Then she calls her Aunt Betsy and Aunt Nadine to break the news that their mother has died. Betsy and Nadine are irked by the fact that they have to deal with this situation so close to Christmas. Nevertheless, Nadine comes right away. Ellen takes pains to make sure her grandmother is respectably presentable—to the point of gaudiness—so there can be no question that she "didn't do her part." Once her grandmother's body is removed from the house, Betsy and Nadine start fighting over the fact that each other's ignoring of the old woman led to her death. Ellen is grateful she carries no guilt over this death and hopes her extra efforts will somehow compensate in God's eyes for her lack of assistance when her own mother died. In fact, she tries to make a deal with God to take her grandmother for the sake of Ellen's mother's goodness.

Nadine informs Ellen that she will now be living with her and Dora. Ellen packs up her things once again. As he leaves, Ellen realizes that she will miss most the family life she got to witness when she spied on the colored help, for deep down a real home is all Ellen craves. Knowing Nadine's will never be a true home, Ellen decides to treat it like a hotel, staying only until she finds another place.

Ellen doesn't attend her grandmother's small and simple funeral but is warned by Dora to keep away from her room in her absence. Ellen does not obey this order. In her search, Ellen discovers romance books in Dora's underwear drawer and male movie star photos under her mattress. Ellen knows Nadine would be disappointed to learn her daughter hid such things and would likely accuse Ellen of planting them. Knowing they would gang up on her, Ellen keeps her distance from Nadine and Dora, staying in her room as much a possible and only leaving for meals.

While Nadine and Dora are at the funeral, Ellen begins planning a new life for herself. Ellen's room belonged to Nadine's old husband, who died of a stroke.

Because she is growing so much, Ellen must ask Nadine for new clothes, Dora refusing to lend Ellen her extras. Ellen requests that Nadine drop her off, give her money and let her do the shopping herself. Ellen has a shopping system, whereby she writes down sizes, makes sure everything goes together and takes her time in trying everything on. She is most pleased with her purchase of a beautiful dress, even though she has no real occasion to wear it. Ellen sees the dress as the "first sign that her luck is changing." The following Sunday, she wears the dress to church and spies her new mama for the first time. After the service, Ellen grills Dora for information about "the lady with the girls." It is then that Dora explains that they are the "Foster" family and that the woman would take in anyone or anything.

Fast forwarding to her new life, Ellen's new mama agrees to let Starletta come visit the following weekend. Ellen is thrilled and starts planning the weekend in her head. She wants to repay Starletta for the friendship and kindness she and her family have extended to Ellen over the years, gratitude she never expressed in the past. Ellen gets into house-cleaning and preparation mode in anticipation of Starletta's arrival. Then, Ellen starts spreading the word about her weekend plans at school, making sure Dora doesn't get wind of them.

Chapter 13 Analysis

Betsy and Nadine's irritation with the timing of their mother's death shows their complete lack of grief or feeling for the loss of their mother. Christmas plans are more important than the death of the woman who raised them. This again illustrates how cold and distant Ellen's real family is with each other. While neither woman cares about her mother, she is careful to place the blame for the death on her sister to ensure no feelings of guilt.

In making deals with God, we witness Ellen's faith in a higher power despite the hardship and suffering she has suffered. Her God rewards the good (Ellen's mother), symbolically explaining Ellen's belief—in death, the good will be rewarded and the evil will be punished. Hence, Ellen can carry on with her life, despite her grief and trauma because God will even things out in the end.

Betsy and Nadine's utter disregard for the memory of their dead mother is seen in the small funeral they plan. Knowing full well that few people will attend—their mother had more enemies than friends—they refuse to spend big money on the affair.

Again, in planning her weekend with Starletta, we see shades of regret and remorse for how Ellen treated Starletta and her family in the past. Finally, in her refusal to let Dora in on her plans, we see foreshadowing of a blowout between Ellen and Dora.

Chapter 14

Chapter 14 Summary

Left to her own devices so much, Ellen does a lot of thinking while at Nadine's. When asked, she just tells Nadine and Dora that she is reading. This pleases Nadine. In actuality, Ellen kills time with her microscope, which she hides from Nadine and Dora. Her favorite slide is Euglena, a name she thinks would be good for a daughter one day. The other slides are diatoms and paramecia.

Nadine asks Ellen what she would like for Christmas. Ellen tells her to keep the money, that the clothes she just got were gift enough, but Nadine insists. Ellen asks only for white painting paper so she can draw what she sees on her slides. Ellen thinks maybe Nadine and Dora are starting to care for her and that this Christmas will be different then reminds herself to be careful with such wishful thinking.

Ellen enjoys being in a holiday-decorated house and wonders what she will get Dora and Nadine for gifts, knowing she needs to hold on to her saved money for future plans. So, she decides to paint them a picture of fuzzy cats, figuring they would miss the point of a brooding ocean.

When Ellen asks Dora what she and her mother usually do for Christmas, Dora spitefully and jealously refuses to share what she and her mother do "alone." When Ellen mentions the word "present," however, Dora suddenly changes her tune and shares memories of her past Christmases with Ellen. Ellen delights in knowing that Dora lives in a fantasy world—where Santa still exists—knowing full well that one day that bubble will be burst as it was for Ellen. In fact, having to share this Christmas and her mother with Ellen will be shock enough for the spoiled girl.

On Christmas Eve, Ellen's present doesn't go over as well as she hoped with Nadine and Dora. Dora accuses Ellen of tracing it and Nadine says she'll hang it once she gets a frame, Ellen's paper frames not being good enough. Ellen, hurt by their reaction, fortresses herself in her room where she overhears Nadine explain to Dora that they have hurt Ellen's feelings and that they'll put the picture up while Ellen is there then take it down when she's gone. Hearing this makes Ellen angry.

The next morning, Christmas Day, Ellen is woken to celebrate as if nothing happened the night before. Dora gets everything she wanted, but Ellen secretly wishes she were back with Starletta and her meager Christmas instead. And like she requested, Ellen gets only what she asked for: drawing paper. Livid that she's been so slighted, Ellen throws the paper at Nadine's feet and stomps off to her room. There, Ellen puts into motion her plan to leave, ignoring Nadine's knocks and requests to come out.

After finally calming down, Ellen decides that revenge is in store for Nadine and Dora. Knowing the only thing Dora wants but doesn't have is a boyfriend, Ellen decides she

will pretend she has a boyfriend to make Dora jealous. She acts as if the microscope, which she has thus far hidden from her aunt and cousin, is a Christmas gift from her imaginary boyfriend, Nick Adams. Dora is unconvinced and in trying to convince her, Ellen insults her, hinting that Dora is stupid. Nadine, angry with Ellen for insulting her daughter, prepares to hit Ellen, but Ellen threatens to kill her if she does, mimicking her father to make the threat appear convincing. It's then that Nadine orders Ellen to get out, saying none of them ever wanted her in the first place. After having words with her aunt, Ellen packs her things and asks Dora what the "Foster" lady's first name is, which Dora doesn't know, and where she lives. Ellen dresses up nicely, walks out of the house and heads for her new mama's home.

Chapter 14 Analysis

This chapter constitutes the book's climax in that it sets the stage for Ellen's finally obtaining the goal—a home—she always wanted. The blowout that was foreshadowed between Dora and Ellen comes to fruition and Nadine and Dora's materialism and viewing of Ellen as only a temporary resident of their home are brought to light.

Having learned a thing or two from her father after all—how to extend believable death threats—Ellen finally sets into motion her plan of escape from the family that has tortured her all her life.

Chapter 15

Chapter 15 Summary

Ellen already knows what she will say to the "Foster" woman, so she just prays she'll make a good impression and won't be turned away. Saved-up cash in hand ($160), Ellen finally rouses up the courage to knock. The woman answers then bombards Ellen with questions. Ellen asks if she can come in and the woman encourages her to warm up. The woman comments on Ellen's pretty dress, a compliment which pleases Ellen. Ellen then tells the woman that she needs to know who Ellen's parents are and whether she ran away before she can grant such a "strange" request. Ellen explains that her parents are dead and that her aunt threw her out. She also explains that she knew to come there because she saw the woman at church with other girls her size. While the woman contemplates the complicated logistics of the situation, Ellen offers up her money in exchange for room and board until Ellen graduates high school.

The woman refuses the money, explaining that she must get county Social Service approval before she can take Ellen in. She then hugs Ellen, reassuring her and saying, "I bet you never thought old Santa Claus would bring you a new mama for Christmas." The name "new mama" sticks. Ellen grills the woman on her lifestyle before she will settle in the woman's empty bedroom. The woman assures her that she's healthy (won't die like Ellen's mother), that she doesn't drink (is not an alcoholic like Ellen's father) and isn't crazy or mean (like Ellen's grandmother). Satisfied with the response, Ellen unpacks.

Ellen is grateful for all her new life affords her, including someone "decent" to love her. Her new mama never spent Ellen's money but rather keeps it in the hall closet. Ellen knows that she is lucky that things turned out the way they did. With her new mama's support, Ellen is slowly dealing with getting over her past. With someone who now truly cares about her by her side, Ellen's only worry is straightening things out with Starletta, which she intends to do during their weekend sleepover.

That Friday morning, Ellen is bouncing with excitement. She can't wait for Starletta to share her new world with her. Ellen's new mama treats Starletta just as Ellen hoped she would, with respect and kindness. Once Ellen has Starletta alone, Ellen confides that she not only used to run to Starletta's house to get away from her father, but also because she liked Starletta so much. She then apologizes for feeling sorry for Starletta in the past (because of her poverty and skin color) and silently expresses gratitude for finally learning that there are no rules when it comes to how you treat somebody.

Chapter 15 Analysis

This chapter represents the book's denouement. Ellen finally gets the loving home she always wanted (complete with a new mama who possesses none of the character faults

her previous caregivers had), she makes amends with her one and only true friend and she finally comes to the realization that it's what's on the inside of a person that counts.

Characters

Art teacher

See Julia

Aunt Betsy

One of Ellen's mother's two sisters, Aunt Betsy is willing to have Ellen come stay with her for a weekend, but ultimately won't help her or take responsibility for her.

Aunt Nadine

Ellen's mother's sister, Aunt Nadine, is a self-important, selfish phony who treats Ellen as if she is beneath her. Aunt Nadine avoids the truth, refusing, for instance, to admit that her daughter Dora still wets her pants at the age of ten. Nadine takes charge at Ellen's mama's funeral, but Ellen is disgusted by her pretension and cheerfulness as she chats with the undertaker. According to Ellen, when Aunt Nadine "is not redecorating or shopping With Dora she demonstrates food slicers in your home."

When Ellen goes to live with Dora and Aunt Nadine after her grandmother dies, she sees that she is not welcome and decides to keep to herself as much as possible. For Christmas, after Ellen gives Nadine and Dora a painting she worked hard to make, they ridicule the painting behind her back. Ellen's Christmas gift from them is a pack of white art paper, a meager gift next to Dora's mountain of toys and clothes. Crushed and angered by their selfishness, Ellen tells Nadine she is crazy and that she and Dora are "the same as the people who would not believe the world was round." Aunt Nadine thereupon tells Ellen to get out, that she never wanted Ellen to come, and that she and Dora just want to live in their house alone. This is Ellen's impetus to make her move to find herself a new family.

big lady

See Mavis

Dora

Ellen's first cousin, the daughter of Ellen's mother's sister, Aunt Nadine. Dora is ten years old and still wets her pants, according to Ellen. A spoiled only child, Dora is taught by her mother to look down on Ellen and not to see the truth.

Dora's mama

See Aunt Nadine

Ellen's daddy

Abusive toward his wife and daughter, Ellen's daddy is a self-destructive and selfish alcoholic. For Ellen, he is "a monster," "a mistake for a person." His cruelty to Ellen's mother is the reason for her suicide.

Following her death, he neglects Ellen, staying away from home for long periods and leaving Ellen alone in the house. When he is home, he often brings groups of friends home with him to drink. They take over the house and frighten Ellen, who hides when they are around. When her father begins to make sexual advances toward her, Ellen runs away. In the book's opening sentence, Ellen confesses "When I was little I would think of ways to kill my daddy." She hates him for the way he treats her mama and her. Ellen's mama's family also hate Ellen's daddy because they feel their daughter and sister married far beneath her and they condemn his cruel treatment of her.

Ellen's mama

Ellen's mama dies in the second chapter of the novel, and it is her loss that sets in motion the disintegration of Ellen's world. A gentle woman who married beneath her in the eyes of her well-to-do family, Ellen's mama endures the abuses of her husband; returning home from the hospital after heart surgery, she drags herself around the kitchen, waiting on him as he yells insults at her. Unable to stand her life with him any longer, Ellen's mama swallows nearly the whole bottle of her heart pills and dies, lying in her bed with Ellen beside her.

Ellen's mama's mama

Mean, angry, and vengeful, Ellen's mama's mama-her maternal grandmother-hates Ellen's daddy for his treatment of Ellen's mama-her daughter-and extends her hostile feelings to Ellen. A wealthy woman, she had not wanted her daughter to marry Ellen's daddy, whom she felt was beneath them socially, and now that he has caused her daughter's death, Ellen's grandmother is enraged.

When Ellen's daddy makes sexual advances toward Ellen, she runs away, and Ellen's case ultimately ends up in court, where a judge sends her to live with her grandmother because he believes families should stay together. Ellen thinks, "He had us all mixed up with a different group of folks," but she goes to live with her grandmother, who sends her every day to work in her cotton fields to get rid of her and to get revenge on Ellen's daddy. Her grandmother accuses Ellen of helping her daddy kill her mama and of being

"in cahoots" with him. When her grandmother becomes desperately ill with the flu, Ellen nurses her and is by her side when she dies.

Ellen's new mama

Ellen notices the woman who is to become her "new mama" in church and it becomes clear to Ellen that this woman has dignity and character and "eyes that would flush all the ugly out of your system." After her own mama dies, Ellen thinks constantly about how to get a new, better family, and once she starts noticing the woman in church, she is determined to make this woman her new mama.

Once she does take Ellen into her home, which turns out to be a foster home for children, Ellen's new mama is all that Ellen could have hoped for in a mama: she is warm, nurturing, and supportive, and yet her home has structure and discipline. She is "always willing to help if it matters to you"; she not only allows Ellen to invite Starletta to sleep over, she also embroiders towels with Starletta's initials at Ellen's request, so that Starletta will feel especially welcome. In her new family-"the Foster family" -Ellen is made to feel she belongs.

Ellen Foster

Ellen, 'the eleven-year-old narrator of the novel, renames herself "Ellen Foster" when she decides she wants to be part of the "Foster family" or foster family-she sees at church. Ellen is wise beyond her years because of the cruel treatment she has received from her "real" family, and she dreams and plans constantly about how to get herself a new family. She is a determined, resilient, resourceful girl who knows what she needs and how to fu1fil1 those needs. She buys her own Christmas gifts and mix-and-match clothes, and she cooks frozen TV dinners for herself when her daddy isn't around.

But while Ellen is self-reliant, she also knows when she needs help, and she is driven to find the right place for herself in the world. She studies other families--Starletta's family, the "Foster family," Mavis's family-and makes mental notes of what she does and does not want in a family. As she watches Mavis and her family, Ellen declares she "would bust open if [she] did not get one of them for [her] own self soon"

She is troubled by her conflicting feelings about Starletta. At first she believes she is superior to Starletta because she is white and Starletta is black, but she comes to realize that the ones to watch out for are "the people you know and trusted they would be like you because you were all made in the same batch." Skin color does not determine what is inside that skin. White people can be low and evil.

After Ellen moves into her new mama's home, and finds her safe haven at last, she has the capacity to think about her relationship with Starletta in larger terms. She does the unthinkable in this racist Southern town and invites her black friend to sleep over at her new house. As they wait for supper in Ellen's room, Ellen recognizes that "I came a long

way to get here but when you think about it real hard you will see that old Starletta came even farther. And all this time I thought I had the hardest row to hoe."

Julia

Julia, the art teacher at Ellen's school, kindly takes Ellen home to live with her after she notices a bruise on Ellen's arm and Ellen admits her father has been hurting her. Julia is a goodhearted free spirit who loves to garden and be silly. Ellen says "she used to be a flower child [in the sixties] but now she is low key so she can hold a job." She treats Ellen like she is special.

Mavis

Mavis is a large, strong, African American woman who comes to Ellen's rescue. She helps her do the hard work in the cotton fields when Ellen's grandmother puts her to work after she comes to live with her. Ellen observes that Mavis's family is happy, and this prompts her to make "a list of all that a family should have."

psychologist

"The man [who] comes and asks me questions about the past,"_ according to Ellen. He meets with her at school but she hates talking to him. She notices that he twists what she says to suit himself.

Roy

Julia's husband, Roy, amazes Ellen with his ability to cook, wash dishes, and clean. He is an enthusiastic organic gardener. Like Julia, Roy is kind to Ellen.

Starletta

She is Ellen's only friend. Younger than Ellen, she is an African American girl whose intact, happy family is a temporary refuge for Ellen when life with her father becomes unbearable. Starletta "hates to talk," according to Ellen, and she does not speak throughout the novel; rather, Ellen projects her emotions and longing for security onto her silent friend. Ellen loves Starletta and says of her "She is not as smart as I am but she is more fun." But Ellen is also confused about her feelings for Starletta because Starletta is "colored" and Ellen has been conditioned by her white Southern world to feel superior to her.

Starletta's daddy

Like Starletta's mama, her daddy is hospitable and warm toward Ellen. He is a family man, and Ellen notices that "he is the only colored man that does not buy liquor from my daddy."

Starletta's mama

Starletta's mama is kind to Ellen. Understanding that Ellen's life alone with her father is hard, she welcomes Ellen into her home. She and Starletta's father provide a warm and loving home for Starletta, a fact that does not escape Ellen's notice.

Stella

The unmarried "official mama" of baby Roger, Stella is also in the seventh grade. Stella and Roger live together at Ellen's new mama's house.

Themes

Alienation and Loneliness

Ellen Foster's story is one of movement, from alienation and loneliness to acceptance and belonging. Ellen herself effects this major change by force of her own will. Realizing her own family "is and always has been crumbly old brick," not meant to stick together, she targets a "foster" family that looks nice and decides to belong to them. She saves her money and on Christmas Day appears on the foster family's doorstep, ready to present $160 to her new mama and secure a place in the family.

Before Ellen targets the foster family as the one she wants, she is nearly alone in the world-her own mama is dead, her father neglects and abuses her, her aunts and grandmother don't want her, and her only friend, Starletta, is a little black girl who eats dirt and appears not to speak. While Starletta's parents are kind, Ellen is always aware they are "colored" and, in the context of the Southern town where they all live, she is not "supposed to" be friendly with them.

Her outsider status is emphasized by the fact that most of the happy families she knows are black and she "wanted one [that is] white." She feels she cannot be a part of either Starletta' s or Mavis's families, both of whom are so close knit. Ellen's sense of herself as "not just a face in the crowd," but as someone deserving of a place in a loving family, finally enables her to find such a place and gain a sense of belonging.

Coming of Age

Ellen Foster is a coming-of-age novel in the sense that it portrays the defining events of Ellen's young life: her mother's death when Ellen is ten, her subsequent discovery that her remaining family isn't really a family at all, her planning and achieving acceptance into a new, better family, and her learning, through it all, that her black friend Starletta is worthy of her love and admiration in spite of her skin color and background.

Ellen's coming of age begins when she is propelled into the world after her mother dies and her father attempts to sexually abuse her. She struggles to find a new family and her subsequent discoveries about life and people come from her distinct way of seeing the world. She is empowered by what she learns.

Living with the remaining members of her mother's family, she learns that cruelty comes in many forms and also what she does not want in a family. Similarly, she discovers what she does want by observing other, happier, families. She notes that the happier families she sees are usually "colored" and concludes that racism is meaningless and based on lies.

At age eleven Ellen begins to shape her own life with a vision of what she wants and then she goes after it.

Friendship

Ellen's friendship with Starletta, a black girl younger than herself, is a refuge for Ellen through much of the novel. In spite of Starletta's silence, she and her family represent a kind of safety net for Ellen. Starletta and her mother attend Ellen's mother's funeral, and Ellen wishes she could sit with them because they are the only mourners that Ellen can't condemn for being mean-spirited.

When Ellen is alone on Christmas or when her father becomes abusive, she goes to Starletta's house, knowing that Starletta's family will welcome her and make her feel safe.

Starletta's presence makes Ellen feel secure in another way too. Ellen feels superior to Starletta, criticizing her for eating dirt, picking at her bug bites, and breaking her crayons. She tells Starletta, "when I thought about you I always felt glad for myself."

Ellen knows she is not "supposed to" be friends with a black girl, but she says Starletta is "more fun" than she is and she knows Starletta will always be glad to see her. Through her friendship with Starletta, Ellen learns empathy and humility. She comes to see Starletta's life as more difficult than her own, and that she has no right to feel superior to anyone Ellen also learns about happy families from her association with Starletta, and it is this understanding that enables her to find her own secure place in the world.

Race and Racism

Ellen is conditioned by her environment-the rural South-to look down on black people. She tries to figure out whether "colored" people are different from her. Are their germs different, is their food different? At Starletta's house, Ellen avoids drinking out of the same glass as Starletta or eating the "colored" biscuits Starletta's mother offers her. She likes Starletta even though she feels superior to her and sorry for her.

Ellen scrupulously observes Mavis and Starletta's families. She sees the love and kindness they have for each other, and knows her own extended family is not this way

By the end of the novel, Ellen realizes color doesn't matter. Her own white family, given the chance, would stab her in the back. "Sometimes I even think I was cut out to be colored and I got bleached and sent to the wrong bunch of folks."

Her desire to have Starletta sleep over at her new house reflects how far she has come. She wants to entertain Starletta and make her feel special by having her new mama embroider towels with Starletta's Initials. At first, Ellen is self-conscious about breaking "every rule in the book" by having a black girl sleep over, but then she remembers "that they changed that rule. So It does not make any sense for me to feel like I'm breaking the law." Ellen has learned that what she thinks is more Important than what "the rules"

are. She has seen how those in authority don't always know what is right or what is best for her.

Style

Point of View

The first-person narration in *Ellen Foster* makes the book distinctive. Ellen's unique perspective-that of a child lost amidst the swirling anger and cruelty in her family-Is like the eye of a storm Though only eleven, wise Ellen quietly perceives that her dysfunctional family "never was the kind that would fit into a handy category." Through her eyes we see that the adults around her are less capable of nurturing her than she is herself. She is sensible enough to know she needs a family and a "new mama" to take care of her.

Ellen's wisdom about the world contrasts with her often-incorrect vocabulary and grammar, emphasizing the concept that insight and authority can come from unlikely places. While a third-person rendering of Ellen's wretched circumstances might become maudlin, Ellen's good humor and resourcefulness are revealed in her dogged yet spirited first-person narration.

Setting

Ellen Foster takes place in the post-Civil Rights South, yet the racist values that Ellen struggles with throughout the novel reflect her upbringing in a South still divided by color. The racism of Ellen's world permeates the novel. Ellen's mother's funeral procession has "to drive through colored town to get to church," and Ellen's maternal grandmother calls her white father "a nigger and trash"-the worst insults she can think of-because she believes he is responsible for Ellen's mother's death.

Ellen is self-conscious about her friendship with Starletta, knowing that "every rule in the book says" she should not be friends with a "colored" girl, yet Ellen herself feels superior to Starletta because she is white and Starletta is black.

The setting is crucial to Ellen's story because the racist values of her larger world reflect the way her family treats her like a second-class citizen As Ellen moves away from her harsh, chaotic family and toward the secure life she wants so badly, her own racism begins to fall away. She no longer needs to look down on someone in order to feel better about herself. Her change of circumstances allows her to see Starletta as a real person.

Structure

Throughout the novel, Ellen's narrative moves back and forth in time, from her present life to the events of the past year that lead up to it.

The present consists of Ellen' s new life with her "new mama" in "the Foster family." This time period is marked by passages describing how orderly, nurturing, and secure life is in this new family.

Ellen's descriptions of her recent past begin with her mother's final illness and suicide, then moves through the downward spiral her life follows after this devastating event.

Gibbons's use of flashbacks to reveal the most painful times in Ellen's life allows Ellen as narrator to shape her past experiences around her happy ending. From her secure vantage point in the foster family, Ellen looks back at the turmoil and pain she lived through in her own family and feels "glad to rest" in her new home, as if she "would not ever move from there."

Images/Imagery

"Mamas" and food images permeate *Ellen Foster,* both reflecting Ellen's deep need for nurturing and love. Ellen's "real mama" commits suicide in chapter two, and the loss reverberates throughout the novel. Following her mother's death, Ellen notices "mamas" everywhere, referring to many of the women she knows not by name but in terms of their status as mothers. Her grandmother is "mama's mama," Aunt Nadine is "Dora's mama," Starletta's mother is known only as "Starletta's mama," young Stella is baby Roger's "official mama," and Ellen's foster mother *is* her "new mama."

"Mama," often a baby's first word, illustrates Ellen's very basic, almost infantile, need for a mother. After her mother swallows most of and too much of her heart medicine, Ellen snuggles close to her mother's side in bed and says, "I will crawl in and make room for myself. My heart can be the one that beats." This moment suggests Ellen's desire both to return to the safety of the womb and to reverse roles with her mother so that she provides life for her.

A similar hunger for nurturing and sustenance is reflected by Ellen's preoccupation with food throughout the novel. Following her mother's funeral, she goes home alone and eats "right out of the bowls" the food the ladies from church have sent When her father neglects her and forgets to buy food for her, Ellen buys herself frozen dinners, "the plate froze with the food already on it. A meat, two vegetables, and a dab of dessert." Yet, in spite of her constant hunger, Ellen will not eat the food Starletta's mama makes because It is "colored" food. When she stays with her mama's mama, there is plenty to eat but no sense of togetherness at mealtime. "We both picked at our little individual chickens or turkeys and did not talk." Even when she is living at her new mama's house, where making and eating food are central activities, Ellen says "I stay starved though" and predicts "I know that in ten years from now I will be a member of the food industry." Her hunger and preoccupation with food, as well as her fixation on mother figures, reflect her twin needs: to be taken care of and to belong.

Bildungsroman

Ellen Foster is a *bildungsroman,* or coming-of-age novel, tracing Ellen's movement from isolation into community, from abandonment into nurturance and her own role in making this transformation occur.

Ellen learns from her experiences. Her family teaches her what she does not want in a family, and she goes on to find one in which she can succeed. Her larger world, permeated by racism, tells her she should feel superior to black people simply because she is white, but eventually she sees the error and injustice of that view. Ellen grows into a self-empowered, empathetic girl by virtue of her ability to think for herself and her will to effect change in her world.

Historical Context

Conservatism in the 1980s

The existence of Julia-the former 1960s flower child turned respectable art teacher-helps to locate the action in *Ellen Foster* within the late 1970s or early 1980s. Gibbons began working on her Ideas for the novel around 1980 while in college and published the novel in 1987.

A conservative political agenda centered on dismantling liberal programs and beliefs that held sway during the 1930s and the 1960s serve as the backdrop while Gibbons wrote her novel in the 1980s.

The civil rights and feminist movements, having accomplished much in the 1960s, now faced uphill battles against a conservative government of the 1980s. Efforts to help the homeless, fund AIDS research, and prevent drug abuse and urban violence met with resistance. The poor grew poorer while the rich grew richer. Helping those in need was viewed as encouraging the needy not to help themselves.

The contrast between Julia's flower child past and her present "low key so she can hold a job" demeanor speaks to the conservative political and social climate of the 1980s. Julia's free spirit and social-mindedness are portrayed as ultimately doing her no good in the present world of the novel. Recalling the I 960s, Julia describes herself as wanting to "change the world," but here in the 1980s her efforts to change Ellen's world fail, crushed by a court system which senselessly sends Ellen to live with a cruel, manipulative grandmother.

Conservatives in the 1980s leaned heavily on "traditional family values," values culled from a nostalgic view of family life as it supposedly was in the past. The judge who places Ellen with her grandmother "talks about family [as] society's cornerstone," but Ellen protests in her mind that hers "was never a Roman pillar but is and always has been crumbly old brick."

Ellen and Julia both know that real families are not based on the myth of a particular set of values. The outcome of Ellen's quest for a "normal" family is ironically a group of people who are not blood-related but can still call themselves a family, thus contesting the conservative image of the "traditional" family.

Child Abuse

Reported incidents of child abuse in the United States rose dramatically during the 1980s. The number of cases reported in 1988 was four times the number reported in 1980, and in 1989 the number of reported cases stood at 2.4 million. Although these figures clearly show the prevalence of child abuse. this apparent increase may not be quite what it seems. The Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act, passed in 1974,

requires more diligent reporting of child abuse than had previously been required. The increase in numbers may be indicative of the number of cases that professionals would not have reported previous to the passage of the 1974 act.

In the 1980s, Social Service agencies, already overburdened with the increase of child abuse cases, found they were up against a conservative social climate inhospitable to efforts to address child abuse as a social problem. Ellen Foster's abuse by her father occurs against the background of this social conservatism that includes a repulsion for families who didn't adhere to so-called "traditional family values."

Consequently, Ellen falls through the cracks of the system. Her father's neglect and abuse do not come to light until Ellen's teacher notices a bruise on her arm and for awhile she goes to live with Julia, her art teacher. When the judge sends her to live with her grandmother, Ellen is verbally and psychologically abused by other members of her extended family. The only sign of intervention comes from an ineffectual psychologist who she despises. He meets with her at school to discuss her "high degree of trauma."

Ellen finally achieves security not because anyone has helped her, but because she has helped herself. The irony of an abused child having to help herself find a home speaks of the harsh social climate of the 1980s, in which society's unfortunates received little help from those in power.

Racial Tensions

The gains made in race relations in the United States during the 1960s experienced a backlash in the 1980s. African Americans lost ground as the gap in income between blacks and whites grew. Racial tension accompanied the widening economic breach between the races, creating fear and anger on both sides.

When Ellen talks about "the law" that dictates separation between her and her black friend, Starletta, she could be referring to the Jim Crow laws of the South abolished during the 1960s civil rights movement. The reference could also be about the separation of the races that accompanied pre-Civil War slavery. "I figure that if they could fight a war over how I'm supposed to think about her then I'm obligated to do it."

In spite of her affection for Starletta, Ellen is open about her feelings of superiority over Starletta and her fear of catching "colored germs." Her matter-of-fact attitude towards her own racism-repented as the novel nears its end-reflects a larger social trend in the 1980s toward open hostility of whites toward blacks.

Critical Overview

Critics responded favorably to *Ellen Foster* when it first appeared in 1987, praising Gibbons' skill crafting Ellen's narrative voice and the sensitivity she portrayed in Ellen's struggle with racism. Some critics deliberated the believability of Ellen's position as narrator, questioning whether she is too wise for her years. A critic for *Kirkus Reviews* suggested that Ellen's instinctual wisdom belies her eleven years yet in her "innocence" and "tough stoicism" the voice of this young narrator "rings true" A *Publishers Weekly* reviewer spoke in the same vein, calling Ellen's narrative voice a correct portrayal of the world from a child's view but one that was sometimes "too knowing."

Other critics focused on Gibbons's treatment of her subject matter, commenting that the terrible events of Ellen's young life could be read as melodramatic if not for Ellen's narrative voice. The *Publishers Weekly* reviewer, unsure about Ellen's capacity for saving the narrative from insipidness, claimed the book's plot is similar to a "Victorian tearjerker." But Brad Hooper, reviewing the work for *Booklist,* wrote that it was "never weepy or grim, despite the subject matter." Deanna D'Errico, in *Belles Lettres,* referred to "the artful, humorous style with which Ellen tells her tale," commenting specifically on Gibbons's use of "interweaving past and present in alternate chapters."

In agreement with both Hooper and D'Errico, Alice Hoffman wrote in *The New York Times Book Review* that "What might have been grim, melodramatic material in the hands of a less talented author is instead filled With lively humor... compassion and intimacy," Hoffman went on to point out that the novel "focuses on Ellen's strengths rather than her victimization, presenting a memorable heroine who rescues herself."

Other critics, such as Pearl K. Bell, credited Gibbons for not falling into familiar traps by giving narrative authority to a child. Bell wrote in *The New Republic,* "Gibbons never allows us to feel the slightest doubt that [Ellen] is only 11. Nor does she ever lapse into the condescending cuteness that afflicts so many stones about precocious children." Linda Taylor asserted in *The Sunday Times* of London that Ellen is believable "because although she has a dark tale to tell, she will not engineer sympathy for her effects".

Some early critics found the theme of racism in *Ellen Foster* particularly compelling and skillfully handled by Gibbons. *Publishers Weekly* noted that the author artfully brings a reflective Ellen, given her own set of troubles, to know the injustice of discrimination by color. Again, in *The New Republic,* reviewer Pearl K. Bell claimed that "Gibbons, unlike so many writers of the New South, doesn't evade the racism of Southern life, which she subtly reveals through the tenacious child's mind." In addition to racism, Linda Taylor, critic for *The Sunday Times* saw Gibbons presenting a number of difficult social issues "through revelation rather than moral axe-grinding."

Ellen Foster suggests itself as part of the American literary tradition to some critics. The reviewer in *Kirkus Reviews* saw in Ellen's humor, intelligence, and resourcefulness, a likeness to Huck Finn and in the abusive, neglectful, alcoholic behavior of Ellen's father, a strong resemblance to "Huck's Pap." Veronica Makowsky, in *Southern Quarterly,* took

the comparison further, contending that "although [Ellen's] gutsy, vernacular voice recalls Huck Finn, she does not light out for the territories in an attempt to maintain ... autonomy." Rather, Makowsky suggested, Ellen's self-reliance is demonstrated in her new mama's home by her "act of faith in others... that allows [her] to contribute to, as well as receive from, the female tradition of community and nurturance." The novel, according to Makowsky, is "Gibbons's attempt to rewrite the saga of the American hero by changing 'him' to 'her' and to rewrite the southern female *bildungsroman* by changing its privileged, sheltered, upper-class heroine to a poor, abused outcast."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

Donna Woodford is a doctoral candidate at Washington University and has written for a wide variety of academic journals and educational publishers. In the following essay she discusses the narrator's search for a mother figure in Ellen Foster.

Noting the many similarities between Kaye Gibbons's childhood and that of Ellen Foster, critics often focus on the autobiographical nature of Gibbons's first novel. In a 1993 interview with *Publishers Weekly,* Gibbons admits that *Ellen Foster* is "emotionally autobiographical," but she spent many years denying the parallels between the book and her own life, afraid that a focus on her own unhappy childhood would detract from the novel. But even when she was denying the autobiographical nature of *Ellen Foster,* Gibbons always credited her mother with having influenced her decision to become a writer. In "My mother, literature, and a life split neatly into two halves," she notes that the "writing urge" began with her mother, even though her mother never read to her or specifically encouraged her to write.

Her name was Shine, which is exactly what she did through all the heat and poverty and the sad certainty that life would not be any other way Her strength was a fine thing to see, to remember if I had not known that strength, that pure perseverance, I could not have become a writer. I would have chosen something that takes far less courage

It therefore comes as no surprise that *Ellen Foster,* which is dedicated to Gibbons's mother, is largely about a young girl's quest to find a mother figure and to learn how to nurture herself and others Ellen's story is, in fact, a coming of age story, but one in which the protagonist must achieve the childhood of which she has been deprived before she can begin to truly mature.

Ellen's recurring memory of working with her mother in the garden suggests the type of nurture for which she is searching. Describing her mother's tender care of the garden and of her, Ellen says.

She nursed all the plants and put even the weeds she pulled up in little plies along the rows My Job was to pick the piles up and dispose of them. I was small my own self and did not have the sense to tell between weeds and plants

I just worked in the trail my mama left This remembered moment is one of the few times, prior to the foster home, that Ellen is allowed to behave as a child. Being small, she is not expected to take on the responsibilities of an adult. Rather she is given her own, age-appropriate job, and it is her mother who nurses the plants and leaves a trail in winch her young daughter can work. But her mother's illness and her father's abuse soon rob Ellen of her nurturing mother figure. Her mother becomes unable to care either for Ellen or for herself, and Ellen is expected to serve as a parent for both her mother and father. Watching the way her father treats her invalid mother, Ellen describes him as "more like a big mean baby than a grown man," and when he is drunk she says, "you got to be firm when he is like this."

In this strange reversal of roles, the ten-year-old Ellen becomes the "firm" disciplinarian for her "mean baby" of a father. With her mother, Ellen is gentle and loving, but the roles of mother and daughter are still disturbingly reversed. Ellen helps her mother to undress and get into bed, just as a mother would do with a young child: "We peel her dress off over the head and slip on something loose to sleep in." Most disturbing of all, however, is Ellen's role as her mother's protector.

I try not to leave her by herself With him Not even when they are both asleep in the bed My baby crib is still up in their bedroom so when I hear them at night I throw a fit and will not stop until I can sleep in the baby bed. He will think twice when I am around.

By climbing into her crib in order to protect her mother, Ellen simultaneously regresses to infancy and becomes a parent and protector. The fact that the screaming child in a crib is the only one who will make her father "think twice" is symbolic of the disturbingly reversed parent-child roles in their family.

The death of Ellen's mother only makes matters worse for Ellen since her father expects her to take her mother's place. Ellen takes control of paying the bills and preparing the food, but her father also expects her to take her mother's place sexually. He literally mistakes her for her mother, calling her by her mother's name: "he does not listen to me but touches his hands harder on me. That is not me. Oh no that was her name. Do not oh you do not say her name to me." Though this scene is shocking, it is only the most extreme example of the many ways in which the young Ellen is expected to take on the role of an adult woman long before she is ready to do so.

Neither does Ellen's extended family offer her the nurturing shelter which she needs. Her aunts are unwilling to care for her, and her grandmother not only fails to provide Ellen with the love and nurturing that she needs, but repeats the mistakes of Ellen's parents by expecting Ellen to take on the responsibilities of an adult.

Just as Ellen's father expected Ellen to take on her mother's role, Ellen's grandmother sees Ellen's father in her and transfers all her hate and resentment of him to his daughter. When she looks at Ellen she sees not her granddaughter, a young girl and the child of her daughter, but the accomplice of the man who took her daughter from her. Playing on the child's own guilt over her mother's death, she blames her for being "in cahoots" with her father and accuses her of having helped him to murder her mother. She refuses to see that Ellen was only a child and incapable of caring for her mother or standing up to her violent father.

Furthermore, Ellen's grandmother again places Ellen in the position of having to parent an adult: "And through all the churning and spinning I saw her face. A big clown smile looking down at me while she said to me you best take better care of me than you did of your mama." Once again, the adults in Ellen's life are reduced to absurd, childlike figures. Her grandmother is the "big clown" who saddles Ellen with the adult responsibility of caring for a dying woman.

Julia and Roy offer Ellen a brief respite from her adult responsibilities. While living with them she is allowed to enjoy childhood pleasures and does not have to care for anyone else. But though the three of them could "pass for a family on the street," Julia and Roy cannot provide Ellen With the stability and long term nurture that she needs. They are unable to protect her from the violence of her father or the anger of her grandmother, and when the judge takes Ellen from them they are as helpless as she is.

All the arrangements are made they said so why bring me in here and do this in front of everybody like Julia who wants to scream she says. What do you do when the judge talks about the family society's cornerstone but you know yours was never a Roman pillar but is and always has been crumbly old brick? I was in my seat frustrated like when my teacher makes a mistake on the chalkboard and it will not do any good to tell her because so quick she can erase It all and on to the next problem.

Once again Ellen feels betrayed by adults who do not take adult responsibility. Teachers can erase their mistakes, and a judge can decide a child' s fate even when he has her family "all mixed up with a different group of folks." In the face of such bureaucracy Julia can do nothing but "scream," and then relinquish Ellen and send her a letter "when you least expect it." Though well meaning and caring, Julia and *Roy* are not the stable, nurturing parents that Ellen seeks.

Throughout Ellen's troubled childhood, the two most positive examples of families in her life are Starletta's and Mavis's families. Starletta's parents are the first ones to offer Ellen shelter from her abusive father, and they are the ones who give her a Christmas present and offer to feed her on Christmas day. And just as Ellen's new mama will later refuse Ellen's money, Starletta's mother takes Ellen in when she needs protection and tells her to "put [her] money up that they do not take money from children." They are the first people to recognize that Ellen is only a child and still needs to be protected and nurtured. Mavis's family provides a similar example of a loving home. By watching Mavis's family Ellen begins to learn what a family should be.

Of course there is the mama and the daddy but if one has to be missing then it is OK If the one left can count for two But not just anybody can count for more than his or her self.
While I watched Mavis and her family I thought I would bust open if I did not get one of them for my own self soon. I only wanted one white and with a little more money.

Ellen's inability to recognize that the nurturing qualities of these families are not diminished by the color of their skin merely demonstrates that although she has been forced to assume many adult responsibilities, she is not yet mature enough to make adult judgments. She will later realize that it was Starletta's family that offered her shelter when her own father threatened her.

I wonder to myself am I the same girl who would not drink after Starletta two years ago or eat a colored biscuit when I was starved?
It is the same girl but I am old now I know It is not the germs you cannot see that slide off her lips and on to a glass then to your white lips that will hurt you or turn you colored.

What you need to worry about though is the people you know and trusted they would be like you because you were all made in the same batch You need to look over your shoulder at the one who is in charge of holding you up and see if that is a knife he has in his hand And It might not be a colored hand, but it is a knife

But that realization will come only after she has found a parent who will nurture her as a child and allow her to mature at a natural pace.

She finds that parent in her "new mama." In the foster home Ellen finally has someone to care for her and love her. Describing life in the foster home Ellen says, "Nobody has died or blamed me for anything worse than over-watering the terrarium. But you can always stick some more ferns in the dirt. My new mama said it was not the end of the world." Ellen's only responsibilities here are age appropriate, as they were in the garden with her mother. Once again she has a mother in whose path she can work.

Once Ellen reaches this safe, nurturing home, she is able to mature and begins to care for others. She puts aside her prejudices and reaches out to Starletta now that she realizes that her own difficult childhood has not been "the hardest row to hoe." In this coming of age story, Ellen must return to a safe and sheltered childhood in which she is nurtured by a mother before she can progress to the adult responsibilities of caring for others.

Source: Donna Woodford, in an essay for *Novels for Students,* Gale, 1998.

Critical Essay #2

Henningfeld is a professor at Adrian College and has written widely for academic journals and educational publishers. In the following essay, she applies reader-response theory to Ellen Foster *in order to explore how Ellen's reading of her life parallels a reading of* Ellen Foster.

Ellen Foster is Kaye Gibbon's first novel. Published in 1987, the novel has been well received by Critics and readers alike. Set in a rural Southern community, it is the story of an eleven-year-old child who endures grief and abuse before settling herself in a loving foster family.

The novel can be read as a coming-of-age story, a genre in which the main character passes from a child-like understanding of the world to an adult maturity. Books such as *Huckleberry Finn* and *Catcher in the Rye* represent this genre and are two novels to which *Ellen Foster* has been compared.

Some Critics have viewed *Ellen Foster* as a story of Ellen's search for atonement. These reviewers argue that Ellen tries to redeem herself from the guilt she feels over her mother's death. In addition, these critics suggest that it is Ellen's quest for atonement that leads her to invite Starletta to her new home at the end of the novel. Ellen, they say, is attempting to atone for her earlier, racially biased attitudes that may have hurt Starletta and her family.

Finally, some critics read *Ellen Foster* as a study of free will and destiny. From the opening inscription from Ralph Waldo Emerson's "Self-Reliance" through Ellen's decision to find a home for herself, Gibbons addresses the question of personal responsibility. Although Ellen apparently believes that she is in charge of her own destiny, the question of control seems to remain ambiguous for the author.

That it is possible for *Ellen Foster* to be read in so many different ways illustrates the "openness" of the text. An open text is one which encourages readers to actively interpret rather than simply accept the text passively as something with a single meaning, complete and apart from the reader's action. Such an idea is at the heart of a literary practice known as "reader-response criticism."

Reader-response theorists argue that a text has meaning only when it is read. That is, a reader and a text work together to establish meaning. They believe that the most interesting texts are those with "gaps" that the reader must fill in. Further, literary critic Stanley Fish argues in his 1972 book, *Self-Consuming Artifacts: The Experience of Seventeenth-Century Literature,* that texts themselves are "self-consuming artifacts." Because reading is an event that takes place in time, each reading produces a unique meaning, informed by the reader's background and experience. Second readings of the same text by the same reader produce different meanings. Thus, as a reader works with a text to produce meaning, this meaning "consumes" itself nearly in the moment of its own creation. In some ways, this is parallel to the production of a play. The same group

of actors performing the same script night after night will never produce two identical performances. Likewise, as we read, our understanding of earlier passages changes as we read later passages.

How might we apply these ideas to *Ellen Foster?* There are a number of strategies that illuminate the novel as not only a book in which reading takes place, but also a book about the act of reading itself. Kaye Gibbons' story is a text filled with gaps, one that requires active participation on the part of the reader. She creates gaps through the use of a limited point of view, shifts in the time sequence, and the lack of punctuation in the dialogue.

Ellen is the narrator of her own story. Consequently, everything we learn about the story is filtered through Ellen's eyes. This limited point of view hides the "big picture" from us. Rather, we are forced to piece the story together, bit by bit. Gibbons, however, offers us additional clues by allowing Ellen to report on the reactions of others, reactions that are interpreted one way by Ellen and another way by readers. Thus, we know more about the situation than Ellen does. For example, when Ellen's mama's mama dies, Ellen wants her to look nice when people arrive. She does this to atone for her own lack of response to her mother's death:

Anybody with decency would honor the dead and fix them up in their own bed
Especially after my experience.
You learn by your mistakes
But I had this one fixed pretty as a picture I did not want a soul to say I had not done my part even down to the decorations.
I found her Sunday hat she never wore and tilted it on her head the way a live woman might pop a hat on to ride to town in. Then the best part I will always be proud of was the nice frame I made all around her body. I put all the artificial flowers I could find from all those show jars around her end to end so she looked set off like a picture.

While we are within Ellen's limited point of view, this makes perfect sense. We are reading the scene in the same way she reads it. However, we shift out of this perspective when Ellen tells us, "The colored boys that loaded her up got a big kick out of my project but Nadine said I was sick to do such a thing." Suddenly, we realize how odd this little girl must appear to others. Likewise, when Ellen tells us that her new mama sits and holds Ellen's hands until her breathing slows and she stops shaking, we know that Ellen is far more traumatized than her narration leads us to believe. These moments allow us to read Ellen as other characters read her.

Gibbons also opens gaps in the text by using a chronologically-fragmented time structure. In the opening chapter, we are catapulted between Ellen's present in the home with her new mama and her past with her real mama who dies. In this first chapter, we discover that it will be our task to organize the details into a coherent story, a story that will allow us to understand Ellen's journey from past to present.

Gibbons' choice to omit punctuation around the dialogue also opens gaps. It is often unclear how much of the dialogue is spoken aloud, and how much occurs only in Ellen's head. Further, there are shifts in just who is being addressed, as in this scene just after the death of Ellen's mama's mama:

You two go ahead and fight over who did not take care of the other one's mama. You two pass the blame back and forth like butter at your tables and I'll stay out of this circle. And even when she was so dead I could not help her anymore I made her like a present to Jesus so maybe he would take her. Take this one I got prettied up and mark it down by my name to balance against this one I held back from you before.

Here, at the beginning of the paragraph, Ellen seems to be talking to her two aunts. Suddenly, we realize that she is praying to God. Such devices force us to reread passages, and as we reread, our understanding of the text shifts and grows

Another strategy used by reader-response critics is to examine instances of reading in the text.

Certainly, *Ellen Foster* is filled with such instances. Ellen is a reader, although she "can hardly tolerate the stories we read for school." The happy families in her school books hold no interest for her; she would rather read "old books." One of her early favorites is the "laughing Middle Ages lady that wore red boots." This reference is clearly to Chaucer's Wife of Bath, a character who believes that experience, not authority, ought to be at the heart of learning. The Wife, a victim of spousal abuse, tells a story in which the main character must discover the answer to the question, "What do women most desire?" The answer is control over their own lives

The inclusion of this small allusion offers us insight into Ellen and into what she desires most herself.

There are many instances of reading in *Ellen Foster* that do not concern books, however. Her teacher "reads" a bruise on Ellen's arm, using her understanding of the bruise to fill in Ellen's story of her treatment at her father's hands. This reading demonstrates the power of text: by fixing meaning on the bruise, the teacher is able to effect real change in Ellen's life, leading to removal from her father's home.

Further, Ellen's "reading" of the ink blots put in front of her by the school social worker (the "man who comes and gets [her] out of social studies") clues us in to the depths of her distress, even as she denies it:

Then I saw big holes a body could fall right into. Big black deep holes through the table and the floor and then he took off his glasses and screwed his face up to mine and tells me I'm scared
I used to be but I am not now is what I told him I might get a little nervous but I am never scared.

Ellen also reveals that she has a sophisticated understanding of the reading process and the importance of text She understands that the made-up stories Nadine and Dora

tell each other offer them some comfort, and that these stories "help them get along." Ellen also understands the ways texts change as the reader rereads. She revisits her own experiences with Starletta's family, changing the way she reads race and its importance in human relationships.

Ellen's rereading of Starletta and her family offers us a final focus on the reading process. Certainly, Ellen's reconstruction of her interactions with Starletta's family allows her to reach a better understanding of race; but we need to remember that Starletta has not participated. As Ellen lies in bed next to the silent Starletta, she reads Starletta in much the same way that the school social worker reads Ellen.

And then he will not let go of a word but he has to bend and pull and stretch what I said into something he can see on paper and see how it has changed like a miracle into exactly what he wanted me to say.

Ellen reads Starletta's life as a text, bending, pulling, and stretching that life *in* order to make meaning out of her own life. Further, Ellen uses Starletta's life as a yardstick against which to measure her own Journey toward adulthood: "I came a way to get here but when you think about it real hard you will see that old Starletta came even farther."

Likewise, as readers, we want this to be a story with a happy ending about racial harmony and maturity. We, too, read like Ellen, (and like the school social worker), as we make meaning out of her relationship with Starletta. However, although this is the ending we want (and perhaps need), we ought to recall Starletta's difficulty with reading, and with speaking. When we do this, we see that the text is here at its most open. Starletta's life is an open text in the same way that *Ellen Foster is* an open text, offering the reader multiple avenues for interpretation, and raising the moral implications of reading another's life in order to make meaning of one's own. Source: Diane Andrews Henningfeld, in an essay for *Novels for Students,* Gale, 1998.

Critical Essay #3

In the following excerpt, critic Veronica Makowsky explores Kaye Gibbons's use of food as a major metaphor to describe the main character of Ellen Foster as she develops in Gibbons's novel of the same name.

Ellen Foster is Gibbons's attempt to rewrite the saga of the American hero by changing "him" to "her" and to rewrite the southern female *bildungsroman* by changing its privileged, sheltered, upper-class heroine to a poor, abused outcast.... Ellen faces the psychological and spiritual problems of growing up, but she must also confront sexual abuse, homelessness and, above all, hunger....

The novel opens with ten-year-old Ellen trying to shield her sick mother from her father's abuse. Ellen's mother has just returned from the hospital for treatment of the chronic heart condition she acquired in her youth from rheumatic fever, which Ellen calls "romantic fever." Ellen's malapropism is actually quite accurate since her mother married beneath her class in what she must have believed to be a romantic escape from her own overbearing mother. Her mistake is glaringly obvious as Ellen's boorish father insists that her invalid mother make dinner, though she is plainly incapable of feeding anyone. Ellen comments that her mother "would prop herself up by the refrigerator" and "looks like she could crawl under the table." Because these props of domesticity-the refrigerator and kitchen table-are inadequate, Ellen herself must act as substitute homemaker. Her thoughts turn more to contamination, however, than to nurture: "What can I do but go and reach the tall things for her? I set that dinner table and like to take a notion to spit on his fork."

With Ellen's help, her mother gets dinner on the table and fulfills her physical role as nurturer, but she never learns to nurture herself. All she wants to ingest is an overdose of her medication in order to escape her unbearable marriage. Again, Ellen takes on the parental role as she implores: "Vomit them up, marina. I'll stick my finger down your throat and you can vomit them up. She looks at me and I see she will not vomit. She will not move." Ellen's mother is so debilitated physically and mentally that she poisons herself and can look at, but not nurture, her only child. Her father refuses to allow Ellen to call for help and later, as Ellen rests in bed beside her dying mother, she asserts, "And I will crawl in and make room for myself. My heart can be the one that beats." Ellen is expressing contradictory desires: to return to the womb's safety where she was fed and to take over the life-sustaining role of the mother's heartbeat and nourishing bloodstream.

Although Ellen's mother is totally unable to nurture her child at the beginning of the novel, in her earlier seasons of relatively good health she taught Ellen the lessons about life to which Ellen clings after her death. Ellen's favorite memory is of gardening with her mother.

She nursed all the plants and put even the weeds she pulled up in little piles along the rows. My job was to pick the piles up and dispose of them. I was small my own self and

did not have the sense to tell between weeds and plants.
I just worked in the time my mama left.
When the beans were grown ready to eat she would let me help pick. Weeds do not bear fruit. She would give me a example of a bean that is grown good to hold in one hand while I picked With the other if I was not sure if a particular bean was at the right stage I could hold up my example of a bean to that bean in question and know

Once again, through the production of food, Gibbons suggests that from her mother Ellen learned not only right from wrong, beans from weeds, but also what an exemplary adult is, a model who has grown "to the right stage." After her mother's death, Ellen desperately needs these lessons as she confronts a series of caretakers who cannot or will not feed her, physically or mentally.

Ellen's father has plainly not grown to the "right stage" -he still expects others to nurture him. When her mother was in the hospital, Ellen had to supply her place as nurturer. "If I did not feed us both we had to go into town and get takeout chicken." After her mother's death, he expects ten-year-old Ellen to replace her mother sexually as well. The perverse immaturity of his sexuality is evident in his focus on Ellen's body as baby food, milk and candy "You got girl ninnies he might say. Somebody else calling out sugar blossom britches might sound sweet but it was nasty from him." Although we might like to believe Ellen's father is a rare monster, Gibbons evidently intends him to represent a socially pervasive view of women as objects for consumption. His black drinking buddies advise him, again in eating imagery, on the night that he rapes her: "Yours is just about ripe. You gots to git em when they is still soff when you mashum."

While her father is attempting to consume her, Ellen is trying to feed herself.

The only hard part was the food The whole time I stayed with him he either ate at the Dinette in town or did without. I would not go to the restaurant with him because I did not want to be seen with him. That is all. I fed myself OK. I tried to make what we had at school but I found the best deal was the plate froze with food already on it. A meat, two vegetables, and a dab of dessert.

Ellen is not just putting food in her stomach; she is attempting to maintain her standards. She will not eat with her father, especially in public, but she still manages to fulfill the nutritional requirements she learned in school. Although she may be keeping her dignity before the outside world, eating the proper food groups, and physically starving, the "froze food" indicates spiritually cold comfort.

Not all the standards she retains from her past help nurture her. Ellen's refuge is the house of her black friend Starletta which "always smells like fried meat" and where Starletta's "mama is at the stove boiling and frying." Starletta's parents welcome Ellen, assure her of a haven against her father's abuse and even take her shopping for clothes, but Ellen cannot accept them as a substitute family because, as she says, "I would not even eat in a colored house." The tenacity With which Ellen clings to her standards betrays her in this instance because she cannot differentiate between the

content of nourishing love and the packaging color: "No matter how good it looks to you it is still a colored biscuit."

By court order Ellen is sent to live with her maternal grandmother who, unfortunately, is not a sweet, white-haired old lady ready to feed the poor child milk and cookies, as Ellen quickly perceives: "My mama's mama picked me up in her long car that was like the undertaking car only hers was cream." Ellen's recognition of her grandmother's poisonous propensities is evident in her association of her grandmother's car with a hearse and food ("cream"), as well as her refusal to use the word "grandmother." Ellen's intuitions are accurate since her grandmother is taking Ellen not to nurture her, but to punish her for her mother's death, persisting in the belief that a ten-year-old child could and would connive with her father to poison her mother

Ellen's grandmother will not acknowledge that her mistreatment of her daughter helped precipitate her fatal marriage but projects the blame on Ellen and makes the small girl work in the fields in the intense heat of summer.

Ellen's grandmother provides her with sufficient food 'just because she did not have it in her to starve a girl" but does not mind starving her for affection. "We ate right many miniature chickens or turkeys. I do not know the difference. But they were baked and not crunchy the way I most enjoy chicken. When we both ate at the same Sunday table we both picked at our little individual chickens and turkeys and did not talk. And still it was OK by me."

Her grandmother upholds class distinctions at the expense of pleasure and communion as they eat baked chicken, instead of the satisfyingly vulgar fried, and "individual chickens and turkeys" instead of food from a common serving dish. Ellen's insistence that she was glad they did not talk shows how much she has lost hope in her grandmother as nurturer. She had early decided that "she might be a witch but she has the dough"; later, "I called her the damn witch to myself and all the money she had did not matter anymore. That is something when you consider how greedy I am." Ellen has learned that there is more to a meal than food on the table and that society's substitution of money for "dough" produces an inedible mess.

Once again Ellen is placed in a situation in which she must nurture an adult, first mentally and then physically. Her grandmother feeds her hate on the sight of Ellen. "Her power was the sucking kind that takes your good sense and leaves you limp like a old zombie.. .. She would take all the feeling she needed from somebody and then stir it up with some money and turn the recipe back on you." Ellen is force-fed her grandmother's hate, but is unable to regurgitate it because she cannot separate the hatred from her identity. "It is like when you are sick and you know all the things you ever ate or Just wanted to eat are churning in you now and you will be sick to relieve yourself but the relief is a dream you let yourself believe because you know the churning is all there is to you."

Although she recognizes her grandmother's hatred, Ellen takes care of her in her final illness and follows the doctor's advice to "feed her particular foods." Ellen does not feed

her grandmother out of love but because her grandmother has perversely fed Ellen's feelings of irrational guilt over her mother's death, consuming Ellen's "good sense" in knowing that a ten-year-old child could not prevail against her father.

Despite Ellen's care, her grandmother dies, and she is reluctantly taken in by her mother's widowed sister Nadine, who has a daughter about Ellen's age. As Ellen expects, Nadine is solely concerned with nurturing Dora and regards Ellen as an intruder on their relationship, much as her late husband must have been. Ellen comments, "I stayed in the spare bedroom Nadine's old husband lived in. He did not die flat out but he had a stroke or something and wasted away in here." Ellen foresees a similar starvation for herself but tries to avert it. "I thought about taking my meals in my room but I did not like the picture of me eating off a tray slid to me like I was on death row. So I would eat at the table like normal." "Like normal" appears to be a false simulacrum because Nadine rids herself of the indigestible intruder by throwing Ellen out of the house on Christmas day.

Having learned that blood ties do not necessarily nurture, Ellen tries a nontraditional family. She throws herself on the mercy of a woman who takes foster children. Naively, she believes that "foster" is the family's name and renames herself accordingly, but once again her linguistic error points to truth since "to foster" means to further growth, or, in other words, to nurture. The reader knows Ellen's hunch about this woman is correct when Ellen smells fried chicken as she enters the house, picking up a three-day-old scent that she, in her desperation, apprehends.

Ellen repeatedly refers to her new home in terms of gratified hunger. "There is a plenty to eat here and if we run out of something we just go to the store and get some more." Cooking becomes associated with the rituals of community and love as the children and their foster mother cook their week's lunches on Sunday and receive individual cooking lessons during the week. The kitchen is no longer a place of conflict or empty routines, but is filled with affection. Ellen says of her foster mother that "she is there each day in the kitchen and that is something when you consider she does not have to be there but she is there so I can squeeze her and be glad."

Although Ellen is certainly much happier, her continuing obsession with food shows how deeply traumatized she is from years without nourishing affection.

If I am very hungry my dress comes off of me in a heartbeat. Sometimes I hurry too fast and I forget to unzip my back. It is helpless to smell lunch through a dress that is hung on your face I have busted a zipper and ripped two neck collars trying to strip and my new mama told me some things about patience.
I stay starved though.

This comment comes approximately midway through the novel, which is narrated in a series of contrasting flashbacks to Ellen's life at her foster home. As the novel continues, Ellen's references to food decline dramatically, as if she begins to feel secure about food and affection.

By the end of the novel Ellen has learned the folly of social distinctions according to class and race, in addition to those she had learned about "blood" kin. She can assert that if Starletta "tells me to I will lick the glass she uses just to show that I love her and being colored is just the way she is." When her foster mother allows her to invite Starletta to spend the weekend and to request her favorite dishes, Ellen remarks that Starletta "could see how I enjoy staying laid up in my bed waiting for supper to cook And you can guess what all is on the menu." Since Ellen is now nurtured by an adult, she can share that nurturing With someone younger and less privileged than herself, as evidenced in the last lines of the novel. "And all this time I thought I had the hardest row to hoe. That will always amaze me." The imagery recalls Ellen's favorite memory of growing beans with her mother and indicates that she sees woman's lot as hard, "work[ing] in the trail [her] mama left," but she can lend a hand to the next woman down the trail, so that all will be fed.

Ellen has certainly mastered Emerson's lesson of self-reliance, but that is not an end in itself, and although her gutsy, vernacular voice recalls Huck Finn, she does not light out for the territories in an attempt to maintain that autonomy. Through Ellen, Gibbons redefines self-reliance, not as a willed and threatened isolation, but as the maturity that enables an act of faith in others and, in turn, that allows a girl to contribute to, as well as receive from, the female tradition of community and nurturance.

Source: Veronica Makowsky, "'The Only Hard Part Was the Food'. Recipes for Self-Nurture in Kaye Gibbon's Novels," in *The Southern Quarterly,* Vol 30, Nos. 2-3, Winter Spring, 1992, pp. 103-12.

Adaptations

Ellen Foster was adapted as a Hallmark Hall of Fame television movie starring Glynnis O'Connor, Jena Malone, Julie Hams, and Debra Monk, 1997.

Kaye Gibbons reads *Ellen Foster* on an audio cassette (three hours), published by Simon & Schuster (Audio), 1996.

Topics for Further Study

Research the history of race relations in the American South during the second half of the 20th century. How did integration change the lives of blacks and whites in the South, and how have both races felt about these changes?

Investigate the effects of foster care on American children who live in foster homes. Explore autobiographical narratives as well as research studies about life in foster care. How might living in foster homes impact-positively or negatively-a child's ability to build relationships with others?

Has the incidence of Child abuse increased in the last 25 years of the 20th century, or has increased reporting of child abuse made it seem as though child abuse is on the rise in American society? What social conditions might make child abuse a more likely occurrence?

The definition of "family" and "family values" changed dramatically in the 20th century. Research views of the family from each twenty-five-year period of the 1900s: what was the "typical" American family like from 1900-1925? from 1926-1950? from 1951-1975? from 1976-the present? Who has been responsible for defining what is "typical" during each of these periods? How realistic is the "typical" family from each period?

What Do I Read Next?

The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn (1883) novel by Mark Twain (Samuel Langhorne Clemens). The sensible and resourceful Huck narrates this story, in which he, a poor near-orphan, becomes the moral center when everyone around him seems to be hypocritical or corrupt. Against what he knows is the law, Huck befriends Jim, an escaped black slave, and Huck struggles with his conscience as he helps Jim make his way to freedom.

William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* (1930) follows the difficult Anse Bundren and his children is they travel through Mississippi, bringing their dead wife and mother, Addle, to her birthplace for burial. The disjointed narrative is told through the interior monologues of fifteen different characters, among them the Bundren children.

Sights Unseen by Kaye Gibbons (1995) is narrated by Hattie, who looks back from adulthood at how her mother's mental Illness affected their family when Hattie was a girl Like Ellen Foster, Hattie at 12 wants to be normal and to belong, and is wise beyond her years.

Dorothy E. Allison's novel *Bastard Out of Carolina* (1992) is the first-person story of Bone, a young girl born out of wedlock into a poor South Carolina family who is sexually abused by her stepfather Bone's voice captures the sensitive perceptions of a girl who is coming of age.

Lost in the System (1996) by Charlotte Lopez with Susan Dworkin is the true story of Lopez's experiences as a foster child moved from one foster home to another, hoping to find love and security. Lopez emerged successfully from her difficult beginnings and went on to win the 1993 Miss Teen USA title.

Further Study

Leonore Fleischer, "Is It Art Yet?," in *Publishers Weekly,* Vol. 231, May 8, 1987, p. 34.

An account of how *Ellen Foster* was written and published.

Kaye Gibbons, "My Mother, Literature, and a Life Split Neatly into Two Halves," in *The Writer on Her Work, Vol. II,* edited by Janet Stemburg, Norton, 1991, pp. 52-60. An autobiographical account of how Gibbons became a writer and the influence her mother has had on her.

Veronica Makowsky, "Walker Percy and Southern Literature," in *The Walker Percy Project,* December 3, 1997, http://sunsite.unc edu/wpercy/makowsky html.

Focusing mainly on the works of Walker Percy, this article answers the question "What is Southern Literature?," giving rich historical and cultural background to this literary tradition Gibbons is mentioned as an example of a writer in the Southern women's tradition

Julian Mason, "Kaye Gibbons (1960-)," in *Contemporary Fiction Writers of the South. A Bio-bibliographical Sourcebook,* edited by Joseph M Flora and Robert Bam, Greenwood Press, 1993, pp. 156-68.

Mason provides a brief biographical account of Gibbons, along with an analysis of some of the major themes in her writing.

Don O'Briant, "Seeing Beyond Illness," in *y' all the arts: arts, entertainment, fun and silly things people do,* December 2, 1997, http //www yall.com/thearts/quill/gibbons html

An interview with Gibbons that touches on her beginnings as a writer, her family life, her novels, and her manic depression.

Bob Summer, "PW interviews," in *Publishers Weekly,* Vol 240, February 8, 1993, pp. 60-61.

An interview With Kaye Gibbons in which she discusses the autobiographical aspects of *Ellen Foster* and the difficulties she encountered when writing her fourth novel, *Charms for the Easy Life.*

Bibliography

Pearl K. Bell, "Southern Discomfort," *The New Republic,* Vol. 198, No.9, February 29, 1988, pp. 38-41.

Deanna D'Errico, Review in *Belles Lettres: A Review of Books by Women,* Vol 3, No 1, September-October, 1987, p. 9.

Review of *Ellen Foster,* in *Kirkus Reviews,* Vol LV, No 6, March 15, 1987, p. 404.

Review of *Ellen Foster,* in *Publishers Weekly,* Vol. 231, No. 11, March 20, 1987, p. 70.

Stanley Fish, *Self-Consuming Artifacts' The Experience of Seventeenth-Century Literature,* University of California Press, 1972.

Alice Hoffman, "Shopping for a New Family," in *The New York Times Book Review,* May 31,1987, p. 13.

Brad Hooper, review in *Booklist,* Vol. 84, No.1, September 1, 1987, p. 27.

Veronica Makowsky, "'The Only Hard Part Was the Food" Recipes for Self-Nurture in Kaye Gibbons's Novels,'" in *Southern Quarterly,* Vol 30, Nos 2-3, Winter-Spring 1992, pp. 103-112.

"On Tour' Kaye Gibbons," in *Hungry Mind Review. An Independent Book Review,* November 22, 1997, http://www.bookwire.com/hmr/REVIEW/tgibbons html.

Linda Taylor, "A Kind of Primitive Charm," in *The Sunday Times,* London, May 8, 1988, p. G6.

Copyright Information

This Premium Study Guide is an offprint from *Novels for Students*.

Project Editor
David Galens

Editorial
Sara Constantakis, Elizabeth A. Cranston, Kristen A. Dorsch, Anne Marie Hacht, Madeline S. Harris, Arlene Johnson, Michelle Kazensky, Ira Mark Milne, Polly Rapp, Pam Revitzer, Mary Ruby, Kathy Sauer, Jennifer Smith, Daniel Toronto, Carol Ullmann

Research
Michelle Campbell, Nicodemus Ford, Sarah Genik, Tamara C. Nott, Tracie Richardson

Data Capture
Beverly Jendrowski

Permissions
Mary Ann Bahr, Margaret Chamberlain, Kim Davis, Debra Freitas, Lori Hines, Jackie Jones, Jacqueline Key, Shalice Shah-Caldwell

Imaging and Multimedia
Randy Bassett, Dean Dauphinais, Robert Duncan, Leitha Etheridge-Sims, Mary Grimes, Lezlie Light, Jeffrey Matlock, Dan Newell, Dave Oblender, Christine O'Bryan, Kelly A. Quin, Luke Rademacher, Robyn V. Young

Product Design
Michelle DiMercurio, Pamela A. E. Galbreath, Michael Logusz

Manufacturing
Stacy Melson

For more information, contact
The Gale Group, Inc
27500 Drake Rd.
Farmington Hills, MI 48334-3535
Or you can visit our Internet site at
http://www.gale.com

Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Novels for Students (NfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, NfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of NfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of NfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in NfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by NfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

NfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Novels for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Novels for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Novels for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from NfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from NfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of NfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of NfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Novels for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

Editor, Novels for Students
Gale Group
27500 Drake Road
Farmington Hills, MI 48331-3535