God's Bits of Wood Study Guide

God's Bits of Wood by Ousmane Sembène

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Plot Summary

A large cast of characters plays out a complex interweaving of narrative and thematic lines in this fact-based novel. As oppressed male black railroad workers in French colonial Africa struggle to improve their economic and social status, their women who, in many ways, are just as oppressed by tribal and ethnic traditions, struggle to improve their own status, within both their communities and their families. This pursuit of simultaneous personal and communal integrity is the novel's anchoring thematic concern, manifesting in both character transformation and plot.

The narrative begins with a poetically written description of the land in which the story unfolds, a glimpse of nature that provides a vivid contrast to the machine-defined lives the novel's many characters live. From that broad perspective, the narrative zooms on on a particular home, that of the family of Bakayoko, a respected and almost revered union leader. Narration reveals that he and other members of the railway workers union are about to go on strike for better wages and benefits, and also reveals that the women in their lives are somewhat reluctant to go along, given that they fell they will be left with the responsibility of keeping the family homes functioning under increasingly trying circumstances. Bakayoko himself remains physically absent for much of the strike (and indeed for approximately two thirds of the narrative), a main character whose ideas both move and encourage the strikers but whose influence is felt, at least initially, mostly in spite of his absence.

As the action moves back and forth between the Bakayoko family home in Bamako, the base of many of the workers in Thies, and the seat of white power in Dakar, the narrative explores the lives and relationships of its various characters. There are Bakayoko's fellow union leaders (the sensible Lahbib and the practical Doudou), members of the union with different perspectives on the strike (the enthusiastic Samba, the aggressive Tiemoko, the sullen and superficial Beaugosse), and members of management (the judgmental Dejean, drunken Isnard, and idealistic Pierre). There is also a group of increasingly empowered women - the aggressive Penda, the fed-up Ramatoulaye, the disdainful and ambitious N'Deye Touti, the blind and soulful Maimouna, the precocious Ad'jibid'ji.

Men and women alike find themselves profoundly challenged by the circumstances and results of the strike. Water and food become scarce, violence occasionally surges, and a series of increasingly intense confrontations results in a string of deaths, including that of Bakayoko's mother. Eventually, Bakayoko is forced to return to his homeland after a long time away, taking what he and others believe to be his rightful place at the head of the strike movement. When his negotiations with management get nowhere (at least partly because of his inability to control his temper and his words), the women take matters into their own hands, planning a sixty kilometer march from Thies to Dakar.

With the organizational help of the men, the women set off on their march, overcoming obstacles presented by weather, fatigue and hunger to gather more and more supporters, and eventually arrive in the heart of Dakar. There they are met by influential

traditionalists who warn them against behaving in such an outrageous, unfeminine way, but are encouraged by Bakayoko, whose powerful speech to the crowd inspires a national general strike which, in turn, makes the union and government authorities back down.

Seeing the human effects of both the strike and its aftermath leads Bakayoko to the decision to stay home with his family rather than continue his travels. Meanwhile, in the enclosed French community outside Dakar, a small group of French leaders is holed up, resisting orders to leave their positions and return home. One of them, in a fit of temper, grabs a gun and runs outside, only to be shot. And in the silence that follows, from the crowd of women protestors surrounding the community, a solitary voice sings a song in praise of "the man who does battle without hatred".

Chapters 1 and 2

Chapters 1 and 2 Summary

A large cast of characters plays out a complex interweaving of narrative and thematic lines in this fact-based novel. As oppressed male black railroad workers in French colonial Africa struggle to improve their economic and social status, their women (who, in many ways, are just as oppressed by tribal and ethnic traditions) struggle to improve their own status, within both their communities and their families. This pursuit of simultaneous personal and communal integrity is the novel's anchoring thematic concern, manifesting in both character transformation and plot.

"Bamako - Ad'jibid'ji " The elderly Niakoro contemplates the impending train-worker's strike, recalling how a previous strike had resulted in the deaths of her husband and one of her sons, as well as the ongoing absence of another son, the revered union leader Bakayoko. During a conversation with Bakayoko's step-daughter, Ad'jibid'ji, Niakoro becomes furious when the girl accidentally speaks French (the language of management). Shortly afterwards, Ad'jibid'ji is sent on an errand to the men planning the strike. When Ad'jibid'ji arrives at the strike meeting, she makes her way through the crowd to the platform where an elder, Mamadou Keita, is urging the workers to be thoughtful. A brief confrontation with a young worker, Tiemoko, triggers a passionate pro-strike chanting, but Keita calms the crowd, evoking the teachings of Bakayoko. Meanwhile, narration briefly comments on the actions of Diara (a unionist sneaking through the crowd in order to find a better position) and of Tiemoko's violent comments that strike breakers will be punished. Eventually a vote is taken, and a strike is called for the next morning. Keita and Ad'jibid'ji make their way home, where the respectful rituals of mealtime give way to an argument between Keita and Niakoro about the wisdom of the strike. Eventually the household goes to bed, and the elders are left with their thoughts.

"Thies - The City" This chapter begins with a vivid description of the run-down, unkempt workers' community of Thies, and with a narrative of the workers' rising to begin the day of the strike. While most are silent, an argument between two of them (Samba, a pro-strike gossipy networker) and Bachirou (an anti-strike office worker) reflects the nervousness and uncertainty of all the men. As they make their way to the work site, the still-arguing men pass a marketplace where women sell ready-to-eat food. Narration describes two of them, the patient Dieynaba and the aristocratic, blind Maimouna, nursing her twin children. Samba stops by the two women's stands and, while moving towards Maimouna without saying anything, is warned by her not to touch her children. Narration describes how Dieynaba, "like everyone else ... had no idea who was the father of the twins."

Meanwhile, as the men arrive at the worksite, they are observed by Sounkare, the head watchman and Bakary, a retired stoker, with Sounkare challenging the wisdom of the strike. Meanwhile, Samba moves through the crowd, encouraging those who are

becoming more and more unsure. Eventually, the hulking machinist Boubacar threatens Bachirou with violence if Bachirou tries anything to obstruct the strike. At that moment both a company of soldiers and a group of seven union delegates arrives. The crowd suddenly falls still, with the only sound being the distant voice of the blind Maimouna, singing "in praise of the living". A tense standoff is broken by Samba jumping to his feet and crying out "Hurrah for the strike!" This causes the soldiers to attack and the workers and the women of the marketplace to fight back. In the middle of the fight, one of Maimouna's twins is accidentally killed.

Chapters 1 and 2 Analysis

Several key elements of the novel are introduced in this section. Among the more obvious are the large cast of characters (each important in their own way to the novel's thematic and/or narrative explorations), its central narrative context (the strike), and its style of storytelling (interweaving small details of event and relationship that will eventually become important components of the narrative's overall picture). Among these details, there are several worthy of particular note, all of which foreshadow key moments later in the narrative. These include the relationship between Niakoro and Ad'jibid'ji, the juxtaposed references to Diara and Tiemoko, Sounkare's attitude towards the strike, and Maimouna's instruction to Samba.

Another important element introduced in this section is the novel's sense of scope, its expansive breadth and depth. This manifests in several ways, from the geographical (in that Thies and Bamako are on opposite sides of a broad stretch of African land but united in ideology and purpose) to the aforementioned large number of characters to the age of those characters (the very young Ad'jibid'ji to the very old Niakoro and Mamadou Keita). There is also a sense of social expanse (in the issues being dealt with by the characters, essentially involving a struggle to redefine the very nature of their existence) and of emotional expanse (in that the characters experience joy, grief, celebration and fury, all within the range of a few pages and/or a few moments). In short, there is a sense of the epic about the narrative even in these early stages, a sense that this is a big story about big issues triggering big feelings. It's worth noting, however, that like the best epics, within the broad expanses of narrative territory, the individual human experience, and perspective on that experience, is not lost. In other words, the human beings moving through this vast plain of idea, experience and feeling are still that, human beings, and are honored by the story and the style in which it's told for being so.

Chapters 3 and 4

Chapters 3 and 4 Summary

"Thies - Maimouna" In the aftermath of the battle (in which seven workers were killed), Bakayoko's co-leaders Doudou and Lahbib struggle to maintain order, and suggest that there be no further action that day, since management clearly doesn't want to negotiate. They plan to meet early the following morning and set guards around the union offices. At the same time, Maimouna (who doesn't know that the body of her second twin was carried away with the other dead) gropes her way (with her child) out of the market, encountering a group of young apprentices (led by Magatte) and asking for their help in finding her way to Dieynaba's house. Magatte orders Dieynaba's son Gorgui to help Maimouna. When there, Dieynaba tends to Maimouna's wounds.

Meanwhile, a manager of the railway, a white Frenchman named Dejean, assures his superiors that while there was a confrontation at the worksite, he has everything under control. He is then visited by three deputies (including a man named Isnard who, according to narration, helped an African woman give birth by biting through her baby's umbilical cord). Dejean and the deputies discuss plans for ending the strike, including negotiation, waiting it out, buying off the leaders, and secretly starting a rival union. Dejean decides that the idea of starting a rival union is the best one, dismisses them, and calls his superiors.

The chapter concludes with narration of how, over the weeks and months that followed, the situation for the strikers became more and more desperate with soldiers taking over their work on the trains, food and money becoming scarce, and women beginning to make more of an effort to support their families.

"Dakar - Daouda-Beaugosse" In a union office in nearby Dakar, three young union members (Daouda-Beaugosse, Deune, Arona) banter among themselves as they wake up and get ready to start the day, joking about Beaugosse's penchant for expensive clothes. They also argue about Bakayoko, saying he's always talked about but never actually does anything for the union - Doudou, Beaugosse says, is the one really running the strike. Their conversation is interrupted by the arrival of union members eager for news.

Meanwhile a woman, Ramatoulaye, attempts to get credit from a shop but is refused, the argument between her and the shopkeeper revealing that her brother Mabigue, an official aligned with the authorities, actually is getting credit. Her attempt unsuccessful, Ramatoulaye goes out, sees her brother with his pet ram on the street, and confronts him. When he refuses to help her get some rice, she threatens to kill the ram in revenge.

At the same time, a tired horse struggles to pull a stuck cart out of the sand. The three women in the cart (Mame Sofi, N'Deye Touti, and Bineta) argue about whether N'Deye

Touti should marry Bakayoko (who already has one wife) or Beaugosse (who has none). After the cart finally gets moving again, the women encounter Ramatoulaye who is on her way home, with the women revealing that they have food thanks to the efforts of the beautiful, sexy N'Deye Touti.

Chapters 3 and 4 Analysis

The first point to note about this section has to do with the narrative's shifts in focus within its chapters, and specifically how the narrative, to use the terminology of film zooms in and out, moving from consideration of individual experience (zooming in) to consideration of communal experience (zooming out). Or, to use a different metaphor,that of a tapestry, the narrative shifts from focusing on the individual threads making up the tapestry (i.e., the lives and experiences of the characters) to the larger picture being shaped by those threads (i.e., the experiences of the community and society in which those individuals life and function).

The second point to note in this section is the way it introduces the narrative's thematic exploration of the increasing role/power of women in a hitherto patriarchal society. In other words, in a land, community and circumstances dominated and defined by men, the struggles of women like Ramatoulaye and N'Deye Touti (and later Penda and even the tragic Houdia M'Baye) are the struggles of a community within a community. They are oppressed by the oppressed, and therefore have to cut their way through two levels of subjugation in order to achieve freedom, integrity and empowerment.

Also in this section, the narrative includes its first reference to the "God's bits of wood" of the title, an image that suggests faith, humility, and a relationship with the divine that, in turn, suggests an innate human dignity. It is the inhumanity of some of those "bits" towards others that defines the novel's narrative and thematic considerations.

Finally, the novel introduces the complex relationship between N'Deye Touti, Bakahoko and Beaugosse, a relationship involving a complex layering of emotional, sexual, ideological and economic factors. It's important to note that, as is the case with most of the relationships and characters in the first two thirds of the novel, one of the primary players (Bakayoko) is absent, referred to and/or involved only in a theoretical way. This, in turn, makes the relationships and situations themselves somewhat theoretical, creating a narrative tension between fantasy/idealism and reality that manifests in just about every character, relationship, and narrative line in the novel.

Chapters 5 and 6

Chapters 5 and 6 Summary

"Dakar - Houdia M'Baye" The compound named N'diayene is home to several women and their children. One of the women is Houdia M'Baye, who attempts to feed her child Strike (the youngest of nine) from flat, empty breasts. Meanwhile, Mame Sofi, Ramatoulaye, N'Daye Touti and Bineta arrive back at the compound after their ride in the once-stuck cart. Shortly after they return, a water seller stops by, and Mame Sofi first tricks and then bullies him into leaving them water as well as the pitcher he brought it in. Later, as N'Deye Touti leaves the house for a rendezvous with Beaugosse, narration describes how much of an outcast she feels - because of her beauty, because of her worldliness (having seen so many movies and read so many books), and because of her ability to read and write. She encounters a friend who teases her about whether she's going to marry Beaugosse, who soon shows up.

After the friend disappears, conversation between N'Deye Touti and Beaugosse reveals that Beaugosse is frustrated with the strike, that he has plans to leave the military for a civilian job, and that he's anxious to know how N'Deye Touti truly feels about Bakayoko, with whom (he says) she spends a lot of time. N'Deye Touti speaks at length about how she finds Bakayoko fascinating and intriguing, and of how she and he both reject polygamy (which is the basic form of marriage in their communities). Beaugosse impulsively asks a sharp question that he doesn't finish, but N'Deye Touti finishes it for him, asking if he wants to know if she and Bakayoko have been to bed together. Beaugosse abruptly leaves without hearing the answer.

"Dakar - Ramatoulaye" Ramatoulaye is shocked and infuriated to find that Mabigue's ram has broken into her home and consumed what little food there was. In a rage, she calls for a knife, attacks the ram, and kills it. As the men take away the carcass for butchering, the women celebrate God's providence (i.e., the meat from the ram will provide food for some time), and Ramatoulaye reminds them of the importance of courage.

Meanwhile, at the union office, Beaugosse and the other officers argue about the value of the strike, rejoicing when they receive news that Dejean has agreed to meet with a delegation from the strikers. One of the officers suggests that Beaugosse should be with the delegation, since that way he would get a chance to meet Bakayoko. Beaugosse angrily reveals his plans to leave the union, but before the conversation can go any further, the office receives word from N'Deye Touti of Ramatoulaye's killing of the ram. When police arrive at N'diayene, Ramatoulaye refuses to go with them. The other women are surprised by her courage, but nevertheless gather around the police with a variety of household weapons. Out in the streets, however, more police arrive, and in a few moments, "the battle between the women and the police" begins.

The chapter concludes with a poetically-written narration of the experiences of the people as the strike continued - the gradual ceasing of talking about the strike, the sudden feverish celebrating of long-neglected rituals, and the longing for the security of "the machine" (see "Quotes", p. 74). "Something was being born inside them," narration comments, "as if the past and the future were coupling to breed a new kind of man..." Narration also describes a sudden rainstorm, describing how "when the rains came down, little rivers formed in the cracks ... the trespass by the forces of nature into the land of the machine tore at the men's hearts and left them humbled."

Chapters 5 and 6 Analysis

An important element to note about this section is the way in which it dramatizes several aspects of the male/female relationship, defined in these circumstances as much by tradition as by actuality. Both the relationship between Beaugosse and N'Deye Touti and that between N'Deye Touti and Bakayoko (as theoretical as it is at this point) can be seen as manifesting tension between traditional and newer, freer ways of thinking. There is also the relationship, as fleeting as it is, between Mame Sofi and the milk seller, which can be seen as a manifestation of the novel's thematic interest in women's challenging and/or confrontation of traditional male beliefs and practices. Finally, and in all seriousness, there is the relationship between Ramatoulaye and the ram (interesting that the first syllable of Ramatoulaye's name is, in fact, "ram") which can be seen as a metaphoric representation of how females, in the narrative, essentially destroy the male oppression under which they've functioned for so long. Granted, the women gain their power (for the most part) in much less violent ways than Ramatoulaye does, but the killing of the ram is nevertheless a metaphoric foreshadowing of the socio-economic power gained by her and the other women.

Meanwhile, in the final moments of the chapter, the narrative again "zooms out", looking at the experiences of the community as a while, essentially defining them as both manifestations and triggers of individual transformations discussed pages before. This is the primary means by which the narrative creates the sense that it is telling the story of both a people and of individuals.

Chapters 7 and 8

Chapters 7 and 8 Summary

"Bamako - Tiemoko" Diara, a member of the union who had gone back to work in spite of the strike, is brought to trial by Tiemoko. Narration recounts how Tiemoko discovered five union members had gone back to work, how four were beaten (as tradition dictated), and how Tiemoko realized (according to what he had been taught by Bakayoko) that punitive beatings were of less value than public instruction by trial. Narration then describes how Tiemoko tracked Diara with the help of Diara's son but was unsuccessful, and later visited Bakayoko's home in search of a particular book that he wants to use to support his ideas. That night he convinces the union leadership of the wisdom of his idea, and walks home happily. He spends the night reading, and the following morning leads a small group of unionists, disguised as police officers, on a trip to arrest Diara.

"Bamako - The Trial" After Tiemoko concludes his story, he asks whether anyone has anything to add. Several women come forward with stories of how Diara treated them badly, and narration comments on how many of the men present reacted unhappily to their presence - women, it seems, were not traditionally allowed into such meetings. An angry male worker then argues that Diara should be regarded as a traitor and flogged, according to the rules set down in the Koran. Mamadou Keita argues quietly that Diara has already been punished enough by being publicly denounced as a traitor. As the crowd quietly murmurs its agreement, Tiemoko thinks to himself angrily that he has been humiliated by Keita and that he must communicate with Bakayoko. Meanwhile, narration comments on the humiliation felt by both Diara and his son.

When he returns home, the troubled Keita goes into a self imposed retreat. Left alone in the house after Assitan and the other women go in search of food, Niakoro and Ad'jibid'ji banter about language and Bakayoko, with Niakoro resentful of Ad'jibid'ji's intelligence and longing for education. She asks her a question to test her mind - "What washes the water?" Ad'jibid'ji is unable to provide an answer, but resolves to find one. Three days later, French militiamen come in search of Keita, and in spite of being told by both Niakoro and Ad'jibid'ji that he's not there, break into the house, beat the two women, and drag Keita out of his room. After they go, Ad'jibid'ji struggles to get to her feet so she can go for help, but is unable to. The wounded Niakoro dies. Later that day Tiemoko (who has shut himself away to study) goes in search of Keita to give him news that negotiations to end the strike are about to begin. He discovers Niakoro and Ad'jibid'ji, and cries out for help. As Ad'jibid'ji's injuries are treated and Niakoro is prepared for burial, Assitan and the other women return, and are stricken with grief. Narration comments on how submissive a woman Assitan is (and believes she should be), reveals that the negotiations have failed, and that the tearful Ad'jibid'ji is still searching for the answer to Niakoro's question.

Chapters 7 and 8 Analysis

In this section, the first point to note is the way narration explores and defines another manifestation of the novel's thematic concern with the battle between tradition and transformation. In this case, the battle plays out in the courtroom, where tradition dictates that traitors like Diara are to be punished through beating but transformation (as defined in theory by Bakayoko and in practice by Mamadou Keita and Tiemoko) suggests a different, less violent, more spiritually and emotionally effective alternative. Other primary examples of this tension between, as it were, past and present are the strike plot (in which the traditional relationships between white and black, between industry and worker) are profoundly challenged, and the ongoing exploration of the empowerment of women.

A related point is the way Bakayoko's influence begins to become less theoretical and more literal and/or actual. Granted, that influence is understood through a book which, it could be argued, is itself theoretical. It does, nevertheless, and in this manifestation, have an actual physical presence and effect. People literally act on Bakayoko's ideas and ideals, as opposed to just thinking about them.

Yet another related point is the outcome of the confrontation between Niakoro, Ad'Jibid'ji and the militiamen. It could be argued that the death of Niakoro (who, in earlier chapters, had been portrayed as a highly vocal advocate of tradition) can be seen as a metaphoric representation of the death of tradition, a casualty of the (different) battles of transformation being waged by the men and women of her community. In any case, Niakoro's question to Ad'jibid'ji is the key to unlocking one of the novel's central thematic truths, said truth being unlocked at the end of the book. A seemingly unrelated point is a second question raised in this section, the fate of Mamadou Keita. The answer to that question is also revealed in Chapter 19, and the reader should take note of the juxtaposition of two answers to two key questions within paragraphs of each other.

Chapter 9

Chapter 9 Summary

"Dakar - Mame Sofi" Narration describes how after the short confrontation between the women and the police, the women patrolled the streets of the neighborhood, and how Mame Sofi unsuccessfully tried to confront Ramatoulaye's brother, Mebigue. Meanwhile, N'Deye Touti tells Ramatoulaye and the other women of the compound that they had been foolish to confront the police who, she says, will return for them. As she is returning, Mame Sofi overhears hears the conversation and tells the women they will fight back. Police on horseback are heard, and Mame Sofi tells the women to prepare to fight them back with flaming torches. The police are scattered, but a stray flame accidentally ignites a small hut, which is quickly engulfed in flames that, just as quickly, spread up and down the street.

The next morning at N'Diayene, which escaped the fire intact, Beaugosse (who had fought the fire for hours) is told by other members of the union that he is to travel to Thies for negotiations. Meanwhile, the troubled N'Deye Touti explores the burnt out hovels, recalling her childhood and contemplating her feelings for Bakayoko. She discovers three French police officers discussing the fire and their assignment to arrest Ramatoulaye. When one of them sees N'Deye Touti, he shouts for her to go, but she is too shocked to move. Unaware that she understands them, another officer comments on how sexy she is. Infuriated, she leaves, joining Mame Sofi and the other women back at N'Diayene as they defy the police having come for Ramatoulaye. Before the tensions can escalate, however, Ramatoulaye appears, saying she has caused too much trouble and that she will go with the police. Mame Sofi cries out that they will all go with her, standing vigil around the police station while Ramatoulaye and N'Deye Touti are inside with the police.

The women outside are sprayed by water from fire hoses, and most of them are pushed back, leaving only Mame Sofi and Houdia M'Baye, who is killed when a jet of water hits her straight in the face. Seeing this, the crowds surge forward and overturn the trucks. Tensions are stilled by the arrival of the Imam (the Muslim high priest) who tells the women that the strike is the work of Communists and that "God has decided that we should live side by side with the French..." He orders the women to return home, and then goes in to the police station to negotiate for Ramatoulaye's freedom. Mame Sofi, however, calls for the women to wait.

The Imam tells Ramatoulaye to apologize and N'Deye Touti urges her to comply. Ramatoulaye refuses and leads N'Deye Touti out, but then discovers the body of Houdia M'baye and speaks of regretting what she's done. Mame Sofi reassures her and begins to lead the journey back to N'Diayene.

Chapter 9 Analysis

There are several points to note about this section. The first is how the struggle of women for power and influence, their confrontation with tradition and circumstances reaches a sort of climax, the literal flames of the fire metaphorically representing the emotional and ideological flames fueling both desire for and action to achieve change. The resulting destruction of the poorly constructed homes of the neighborhood can therefore be seen as representing and/or foreshadowing the destruction of the controlling power of poverty and racial/economic/political oppression. Another point to note is how, in the aftermath of the fire, N'Deye Touti sets a blaze of her own, confronting the Europeans who speak disparagingly of her and setting their preconceptions and beliefs ablaze. Meanwhile, it's interesting to note how water is then used to subdue the women, to douse the "flames" of their passionate desire. In spite of the tragic death of Houdia M'Baye, however, those flames are not in fact quenched but are left in embers to rise, like a phoenix, from the ashes and soar into a new claiming of power, identity, and freedom.

Another manifestation of the forces standing in opposition to the women, the men, and the communities to which they belong (i.e., the racially and economically oppressed) is another representative of tradition - the Imam, speaking for traditional Islamic faith and practice. It's interesting to note that references to Islam are made throughout the narrative, but understatedly so. Islam is never demonized, in the way the French/whites are, perhaps because the Islamic leadership is still black. It could be argued, in fact, that the Imam and the faith he represents are one of the components of the so-called "machine" that make seem to be a more welcoming, a safer, more affirming place than it actually is. That said, there is still the sense that from the author's perspective, Islam and its traditions still form a component of the oppression keeping the strikers and their women/families in their place.

Finally, because this chapter is focused almost exclusively on the women, the effects of the strike on them and their struggles (both individual and community) for identity, this seems like an appropriate place to introduce consideration of the archetype of "woman" and its various manifestations throughout the novel. An archetype is, in broadest terms, a core image, an essential understanding, a symbolic and universal representation of a particular aspect of life/existence. The various female characters in "God's Bits of Wood" embody various aspects of the archetype of "woman", viewed throughout history, literature and myth as simultaneously being mother and warrior, submissive and fierce, loving and pragmatic, nurturing and vengeful. In other words, an archetype suggests that individuals embodying it (like the female characters in this particular novel) all have within them, albeit expressed and experienced to varying degrees, all the aspects of the archetype ... or at least the potential for them.

Chapters 10, 11 and 12

Chapters 10, 11 and 12 Summary

This section marks the first of a series of chapters chronicling life in Thies during the strike.

"Thies - Sounkare, the Watchman" Narration describes how Sounkare reflects on how foolish the strikers now seem to be, and on the short-lived circumstances in which he and the other strikers live. He attempts to kill a couple of rats for food, but they evade him. He goes in search of food, first stopping at Dieynaba's home (where the blind Maimouna continues to sing). Dieynaba politely but firmly tells him there is not enough food. He then goes to the office of the strike committee (reflecting on his hard, unhappy life) where there too he is rejected. As he's leaving, he goes through the motor repair shop, where the large trains await servicing. There he again sees the two rats, is overcome by dizziness, falls, hits his head, and dies. The two rats approach his body and then, when they realize there is no longer a threat, start to eat him. Soon they are joined at their feast by a large number of other rats.

"Thies - Penda" Narration describes how "the women of Thies" had formed the habit of gathering at Dieynaba's, inspired by her strength, and how in the evenings they kept their spirits up by singing. "It was always," narration comments, "a song which was a kind of vow by the women to their men." One night, Dieynaba's ill-tempered foster daughter Penda returns, and is unhappy when she discovers Maimouna sleeping in her bed. Dieynaba convinces Penda to be more accommodating, and Penda agrees that Maimouna can stay. As Penda and Maimouna gradually come to terms with each other, Penda asks who the father of Maimouna's children is, saying that she (Penda) has decided to go looking for him. With Maimouna not answering, and as she and Penda argue over whether men are "dogs", Maimouna asks whether her one remaining child is pretty. Penda looks at the "sickly" child with pus oozing from her eyes and comments that she is beautiful. Later, Penda is asked to help distribute food rations among the women, with narration commenting on how well she does it - keeping the other women in line and insisting that the male strikers treat her with respect. The chapter concludes with Maimouna asking why, if Penda hates men as much as she seems to, she is helping the strikers. Narration describes how Penda asks herself the same question, but always falls asleep before she can answer herself.

"Thies - Doudou" Narration describes how Doudou (one of Bakayoko's fellow union leaders), who once gloried in his status with the union, is now unhappy. The next day, after paying a brief visit to the union office (and evading all the arguments), Doudou encounters a former supervisor, who says he (Doudou) is being considered for both an advancement and a raise ... if he agrees to help get the strikers back to work. Avoiding the interruption of the drunken and abusive Isnard, Doudou is offered a substantial amount of money "as an advance". He refuses both offers and walks away, leaving the supervisor angry and frustrated. Back at the union office, excitement over Doudou's

story blends with that aroused by news that Bakayoko is on his way and, as the union staff celebrates both turns of events, Doudou relishes once again being the positive center of attention.

Chapters 10, 11 and 12 Analysis

This section marks the first of a series of chapters chronicling life in Thies during the strike.

"Thies - Sounkare, the Watchman" Narration describes how Sounkare reflects on how foolish the strikers now seem to be, and on the short-lived circumstances in which he and the other strikers live. He attempts to kill a couple of rats for food, but they evade him. He goes in search of food, first stopping at Dieynaba's home (where the blind Maimouna continues to sing). Dieynaba politely but firmly tells him there is not enough food. He then goes to the office of the strike committee (reflecting on his hard, unhappy life) where there too he is rejected. As he's leaving, he goes through the motor repair shop, where the large trains await servicing. There he again sees the two rats, is overcome by dizziness, falls, hits his head, and dies. The two rats approach his body and then, when they realize there is no longer a threat, start to eat him. Soon they are joined at their feast by a large number of other rats.

"Thies - Penda" Narration describes how "the women of Thies" had formed the habit of gathering at Dieynaba's, inspired by her strength, and how in the evenings they kept their spirits up by singing. "It was always," narration comments, "a song which was a kind of vow by the women to their men." One night, Dieynaba's ill-tempered foster daughter Penda returns, and is unhappy when she discovers Maimouna sleeping in her bed. Dieynaba convinces Penda to be more accommodating, and Penda agrees that Maimouna can stay. As Penda and Maimouna gradually come to terms with each other, Penda asks who the father of Maimouna's children is, saying that she (Penda) has decided to go looking for him. With Maimouna not answering, and as she and Penda argue over whether men are "dogs", Maimouna asks whether her one remaining child is pretty. Penda looks at the "sickly" child with pus oozing from her eyes and comments that she is beautiful. Later, Penda is asked to help distribute food rations among the women, with narration commenting on how well she does it - keeping the other women in line and insisting that the male strikers treat her with respect. The chapter concludes with Maimouna asking why, if Penda hates men as much as she seems to, she is helping the strikers. Narration describes how Penda asks herself the same question, but always falls asleep before she can answer herself.

"Thies - Doudou" Narration describes how Doudou (one of Bakayoko's fellow union leaders), who once gloried in his status with the union, is now unhappy. The next day, after paying a brief visit to the union office (and evading all the arguments), Doudou encounters a former supervisor, who says he (Doudou) is being considered for both an advancement and a raise ... if he agrees to help get the strikers back to work. Avoiding the interruption of the drunken and abusive Isnard, Doudou is offered a substantial amount of money "as an advance". He refuses both offers and walks away, leaving the

supervisor angry and frustrated. Back at the union office, excitement over Doudou's story blends with that aroused by news that Bakayoko is on his way and, as the union staff celebrates both turns of events, Doudou relishes once again being the positive center of attention.

Chapters 13 and 14

Chapters 13 and 14 Summary

Thies - The Apprentices" Narration describes how the young apprentices (including Magatte and Gorgui) at first treated the strike as a holiday, but then became bored. They decide, one day, that they should have slingshots, and steal some inner-tubes for bicycle tires. They make their slingshots, practicing their marksmanship on wild birds. A chance comment by his mother Dieynaba inspires Gorgui to suggest that the "crew" of apprentices should use the slingshots to steal some chickens, which they do, their success then inspiring Penda to lead them on a successful raid on a supply store for rice. As the crew becomes more and more confident and more daring, they begin using the windows and streetlights of the French whites as targets. One day, however, as the crew is targeting some small lizards, Isnard suddenly appears, draws a gun and fires, killing two and wounding Gorgui. News of the shootings spread quickly, with the people of the area collecting the bodies and marching in a large procession through the town, angry and grieving by turns. "On their faces," narration comments, "hunger, sleeplessness, pain, and fear had been graven into the single image of anger." Three days later, narration comments, "the directors of the company notified the strikers that their representatives would be received."

"Thies - The Vatican" Isnard and his wife Beatrice host a dinner party for some of the other Frenchmen in the area. One of the guests is a young, idealistic man nicknamed Pierrot who expresses his desire to get to know the Africans better. As most of the other dinner guests try to talk him out of it, referring repeatedly to the Africans as children, one of them (Leblanc) drunkenly comments that he tried befriending the Africans, but was repeatedly and universally rejected. He also confesses that he gave the strikers twenty thousand francs and warns the others that Bakayoko is on his way back. He is escorted out of the house by most of the other guests, but Pierrot is left behind. He is encouraged by the apparently flirtatious Beatrice to ignore everything he heard.

Chapters 13 and 14 Analysis

Among the noteworthy aspects of this section, the first is the emergence of the apprentices who are, it could be argued, another sub-group of oppressed people, children having even less value in the male-dominated society of the time than the women. The actions of Magatte and the others in chapter thirteen can therefore be seen as yet another way in which the narrative explores the desperation of the oppressed for freedom and dignity. Meanwhile, Isnard's attack reiterates the idea that the French white oppressors are not going to give up without a fight, and that the rules and ways those oppressors represent are profoundly destructive. In its turn, the aftermath of the attack suggests that those being oppressed are digging in for a confrontation that is now, more than ever, grounded in emotional as much as economic circumstances.

The second noteworthy aspect of this section is its "detour" into the world/experience of the French oppressors. Here it's important to note that the narrative makes a clear effort to paint the group, as a whole, as not all bad. The character of Pierre offers a breath of hope, albeit a small one, for some kind of open-mindedness in the French camp. That breath, however, is overwhelmed by the other, prevailing attitudes of the French community, attitudes that eventually result in their defeat (a situation represented by the death of Mme. Isnard in the novel's epilogue, itself foreshadowed by her attitudes here.

Chapter 15

Chapter 15 Summary

"Thies - The Return of Bakayoko" After a short, poetically written paragraph describing the night and its quietness, narration describes Bakayoko's arrival at the home of his elderly friend Bakary, who greets him joyfully. When Bakary awakens the next day, he is surprised to discover that Bakayoko has already left, and is later somewhat annoyed when other union leaders tease him about imagining Bakayoko's return. When Bakayoko does arrive at the union office, however, he is celebrated by everyone including the women who, having heard of his return, gather in the streets and begin a steady drumming, chanting dance. Bakayoko and the other delegates meet with Edouard, management's representative, and Bakayoko's quiet, but pointedly angry, comments send Edouard fuming out of the room. The other delegates support Bakayoko, and everyone agrees they should all go to meet the rest of the managers together.

The managers, including young Pierre (referred to in chapter fourteen as Pierrette) and Dejean react angrily when they hear of Bakayoko's return, with Dejean vowing to humiliate him. When the union delegates arrive, Dejean explains that none of their demands will be met, principally because the Africans practice polygamy. Bakayoko's responses make Dejean come close to losing his temper, and the other delegates urge Bakayoko to stay silent. Bakayoko refuses, quietly suggesting that while none of the people he represents are anti-French, they will nevertheless fight for their rights. When Dejean complains about the music of the women coming from the streets, Bakayoko's quietly sarcastic response makes Dejean slap him across the face. This, in turn, triggers Bakayoko to jump to his feet and attempt to strangle the Frenchman. The two are pulled apart and the strikers prepare to leave, Dejean shouting after them that they will get absolutely nothing. The strikers leave the building and make their way through the crowd, assuring them all they will hear the story of what happened sooner rather than later.

Chapter 15 Analysis

Here, two thirds of the way through the narrative, Bakayoko makes his first actual appearance, an entrance that to some readers may actually come across as something of an anti-climax in its initial quietness and understatedness. Later, however, in his confrontation with the white French managers, both the power and the passion fueling Bakayoko's ideas and actions come to the forefront, as do some of his flaws of character, principally his arrogance and his lack of self control. In short, Bakayoko is portrayed as both savior and trigger, in simple terms someone able and determined to make things better but, because of his passion and his temper, unable to help making things worse.

Chapter 16

Chapter 16 Summary

"From Thies to Dakar - The March of the Women" Coming outside after the failed negotiations, Bakayoko and Lahbib address the waiting crowd of women. Before they get very far, they are respectfully interrupted by Penda, who announces a plan for the women of Thies to march to Dakar as a demonstration of support. As the crowd murmurs in surprise, Bakayoko takes her to the union office, where he and Lahbib help her organize the march. That evening, as the women prepare to leave, Bakayoko receives word of what happened to his family, but chooses to go to Dakar rather than back to his home. Bakary wonders aloud whether Bakayoko truly has a heart. A short time later, after the women have left on the march, Bakayoko visits Dieynaba, learns that Gorgui has died, and becomes intensely angry. Lahbib calms him, saying the boy will have a proper burial. Bakayoko then leaves, determined to be in Dakar before the women.

Narration then focuses on the march, led by Penda and Maimouna and escorted by a small group of men including Boubacar and Samba. The first few days are relatively easy, but on the third day, and with the help of Boubacar (who, narration comments, seems to be enjoying being Penda's assistant more than he perhaps should), Penda has to bully a group of stragglers into rejoining the march. Later, in conversation with Maimouna, Penda notices that the mention of Samba's name makes Maimouna jump, and again asks who the father of her children is. Instead of responding, Maimouna warns Penda about falling for Boubacar, announces her intention to stay in Dakar after the march. After an altercation between two of the women and a relatively mid windstorm, the day's journey ends when the marchers are welcomed, with water and festivities, by the citizens of another small village.

The next day, encouraged and reinforced by both women and men from other villages, the marchers enter Dakar in spite of being warned that soldiers are massing to block their way. Although some of the women want to retreat, Penda inspires them to keep going. As they press on, Maimouna is visited by Samba who, narration reveals, is the father of her children. He asks to take care of the remaining child, but Maimouna refuses, claiming her independence from him and assuring him that no one will ever know what he did. Samba withdraws, and soon the marchers come face to face with their uniformed opposition. The marchers press forward, reinforced by women from the city. The soldiers become overwhelmed and withdraw, but not before they fire their rifles into the crowd, killing Penda and Samba.

Chapter 16 Analysis

The primary point to note here is how the narrative is shaped to suggest that the actions and spirit of the women are more powerful, and ultimately gain more results, than those

of the men. As led by Bakayoko, the men are directly and angrily confrontational, in every choice they make from calling the strike in the first place to Bakayoko's abrasive challenges to Edouard in the previous chapter. As led by Penda, the women are also confrontational, but in a more indirect way, with the fact that the strike is resolved primarily as the result of their actions in marching to Dakar suggesting that the female, rather than the male, way of working and/or confronting challenge is, or at least can be, more effective.

Other points to note in this section include Bakary's pointed comments about Bakayoko and Penda's discussion with Maimouna about her children. This, when taken into consideration with Maimouna's reaction to Samba in chapter two, clearly foreshadows the revelation at the end of the chapter that Samba is the children's father.

Finally, there are the deaths of Penda and Samba, both of which are viewed by those on the march as martyrdoms. They are the latest in a series of deaths that begins in chapter two with the accidental death of Maimouna's unnamed second twin and that continues with the deaths of Hiakoro, Houdia M'Baye and even Sounkare. The thematic and narrative suggestion here is that there is no price too high to pay for freedom.

Chapter 17

Chapter 17 Summary

"Dakar - The Meeting" Narration describes the blend of desperation and celebration sustaining the strikers as well as the manipulations of the business leaders intended to keep the strikers under control. When Bakayoko arrives in Dakar, he becomes convinced that there is nothing left for the unions to fight for, and also learns of Beaugosse's departure from the union. Bakayoko comments that he and Beugosse have never liked each other, and the local union leader (Alioune) reflects that it probably has something to do with N'Daye Touti as well as with Bakayoko's attitude. When he hears what the other leader is thinking, Bakayoko explains that when he is working for the good of the people, he can think of nothing else.

As the marchers make their way into the town, they are welcomed ritually in the way warriors were traditionally welcomed. During the celebrations, however, Bakayoko learns that Penda and Samba were killed, and he reacts with both grief and fear. The marchers proudly attend their official welcome, where Bakayoko observes that Beugosse, now dressed like a Frenchman, is in fact standing with the French. He (Bakayoko) is then visited by an elderly woman who, upon learning that his mother (Niakoro) is dead, says that from now on, she will be his mother and he will always be welcome in her home. After she goes, Bakayoko tells Alioune that if he is prevented from speaking, he (Alioune) is to "tell them to shout like they have never shouted before". Meanwhile, N'Daye Touti (in the midst of recalling a fleeting encounter with Bakayoko earlier that day) is met by Edouard and other members of the French community, who tell her that being with Beaugosse will be good for her.

Eventually the speeches begin. The local Imam, the governor of the region, and the deputy mayor of Dakar all speak (in languages that many of the workers cannot understand) of how dangerous and foolish the strike has been. Bakayoko becomes increasingly angry, and orders Alioune to put the plan for shouting into effect. Alioune does, and soon the shouting is so loud that the organizers have no choice but to allow Bakayoko to speak. When he steps to the microphone, Bakayoko speaks (in several languages so most people can understand) and rebuts everything said by the other speakers, encouraging the strikers and the marchers to be strong and to continue challenging the authorities. After he finishes, and as the crowd is singing and chanting and the authorities reacting with alarm, Bakayoko apologizes to Alioune for being confrontational but explains he had to say what he said - a general strike, he points out, is the only way the workers will achieve their goals.

Narration comments that the day after Bakayoko's speech, a national general strike was called that lasted ten days and forced an agreement with management. Narration also describes how the women of Thies went home but Maimouna stayed in Dakar with the women of N'diayene, feeding Houdia M'Baye's orphaned son Strike with her own breast milk and singing soft stories about Penda and Samba.

Chapter 17 Analysis

The first point to note here is the comment made by Bakayoko that he is so devoted to the cause of the union that when he is acting on that devotion he can think of nothing else. There are two ways of interpreting this comment, either of which is valid (in the context of the novel's characterization of Bakayoko) and neither of which is mutually exclusive. In other words, the comment comes across as self-rationalization (bordering on delusion), as fanaticism defined by passion, or as some combination of both. Either way, his making the comment is an important step along his journey of transformation, in that he and the reader both come to understand that he is in a sense closed and obsessive, hard and narrow-focused. His decision later in the novel to open himself to a broader human experience of family and connection reinforces this idea - in other words, an evident and admitted change in itself implies what the changer has changed FROM, a situation that suggests Alioune's comment here (and Bakary's similar comment earlier) are both perceptive and accurate.

A second point to note in this section is the importance of language, specifically of the various dialects used by the characters. Throughout the novel, there are references to those dialects and the circumstances in which they are used - to impress, to include, to exclude. Here, narration comments that all of the speakers, Bakayoko included, choose the languages they do for maximum impact. The French choose French to speak to those whom they believe have the most power and the most intellectual capacity to understand, while Bakayoko chooses the language he does to reach the workers, the common people, who by sheer numbers and passion have the capacity to truly affect change.

Thirdly, the end of the chapter marks yet another example of how the narrative zooms in and out of the action, zooming out of Bakayoko's experience at the stadium to portray the larger, national, community-defined consequences of his actions. In that moment, the narrative looks at what might be called "the big picture" and then, within the space of a few sentences, "zooms" back in to look at perhaps the smallest, most intimate picture of the novel ... that of a baby at a woman's breast. The metaphoric implications of this final image are fairly obvious - the "strike" has been nourished by woman, and the success and freedom and possibility inspired by, and inspiring, the strike will, as the result of the women's efforts, have a chance to life and thrive.

Chapters 18 and 19

Chapters 18 and 19 Summary

"Dakar - The Edge of the Sea" Bakayoko and N'Deye Touti sit by the seashore, with narration commenting on how friends, family and co-workers all think they're involved. N'Deye Touti asks when Bakayoko whether he will stay in Dakar, and when he says he is leaving she asks when he will be back. He tells her he doesn't know. Later, as they're walking home under cover of darkness (so Bakayoko won't be seen and arrested) they discuss Penda , who N'Deye Touti says was a prostitute. Bakayoko comments that he and the other union leaders also prostitute themselves for their cause. N'Deye Touti then reveals that she wants to become Bakayoko's second wife, saying that in spite of not believing in polygamy, "it happens sometimes that you come to like something you thought you hated." Narration reveals that as he considers the possibility, Bakayoko remembers all the other women he's been with on his travels - he never, narration comments, attached much importance to sex. A moment later, he tells N'Deye Touti that what she wants will not be possible.

Back at N'Diayene, Bakayoko is told that Doudou is dead and that someone needs to go to the funeral. When he refuses, saying he has to go to the Sudan, he is berated for being insensitive. Later, as he gathers his things before leaving, he is confronted by a tearful, willing N'Deye Touti, but leaves without responding. N'Deye Touti, as he leaves, calls him a pig. Narration then describes how she began to work ever harder around the compound and even allowed her precious notebooks to be used to light the fire ... all of them but one, in which she writes a poem which, narration comments, "might have been the swan song of her youth". Meanwhile, Bakayoko continues to travel, carrying with him a letter from Lahbib urging him to return home. Narration reveals that Bakayoko had contemplated taking Penda as a second wife, and that while he's distracted (by a hawk killing a rat), his precious tobacco is blown away by the wind, something he considers an indication that he should go home.

"Bamako - The Camp" Narration describes the filthy, crowded prison into which Mamadou Keita was thrown after he was taken from his family. He finds himself in the company of imprisoned strikers, all of whom praise Bakayoko and anticipate his return. Uncounted days after his imprisonment, Keita is taken outside for "exercise", and is a shocked witness to torture inflicted upon a union member by the sadistic commandant of the prison. Keita turns to the east to pray, but is kicked into the barbed wire fence, which cuts into his forehead and hands. Later, when he is returned to the prison, for the first time in his life he questions his faith.

Meanwhile, narration describes how Tiemoko and others at the union office receive word that the strike is over. Tiemoko takes the news to Bakayoko who, narration reveals, returned to Bamako and who has begun treating his wife (Assitan) much better. As plans are made to resume work, Bakayoko announces there will be no return to work until the prisoners are released. Later that day, however, all the prisoners (including

Mamadou Keita) are freed. Keita returns home, and after a short ritual cleansing, he is visited by the men imprisoned with him, as well as by Tiemoko and Bakahoko. Ad'jibid'ji, pretending to be asleep, listens as Keita speaks of the importance of forgiveness and of transcending evil. This, in turn, leads Ad'jibid'ji to realize that she knows what washes the water ... it is spirit.

Chapters 18 and 19 Analysis

In the aftermath of the resolution of the strike, the narrative then resolves the internal conflicts of its central character. Bakayoko, as the result of his encounters with N'Deye Touti, Lahbib, and Keita, comes to realize that his public, community oriented mission also has a personal, intimate, immediate resonance. He has changed his society and his culture, now he realizes that that as the result of those changes he has to change himself, in the same way as the people who inspired that societal and cultural change changed THEM-selves in order to accomplish the larger change. In other words, here again the novel entwines the broad strokes and the fine tuned, the cultural and the individual except that in Bakayoko's case the process is reversed. For other transformed individuals, the personal came first. For Bakayoko, the individual came second, a concept that could also be used to describe Bakayoko's essential personal perspective at the beginning of both the strike and the novel.

Bakayoko's experience of transformation is powerfully and vividly paralleled in Ad'jibid'ji's discovery of the answer to Niakoro's question, an answer embodied in the actions of so many of the novel's characters. The image of spirit cleansing water crystallizes the experience and the fundamental human truth at the core of just about every action in the narrative, that the human spirit, as manifest in the drive for dignity, integrity, respect and compassion, is what defines and motivates positive transformation, both on the personal and societal level. Here once again, the novel entwines the personal with the cultural, the individual with the societal.

Other important points include the glimpse of "Christ" imagery in the description of Keita's injuries in the camp (the blood on his forehead paralleling that resulting from Christ's wearing the Crown of Thorns, the blood on his hands paralleling that resulting from Christ's being nailed to the cross). The suggestion here is that Keita's spiritual, selfless sacrifice is akin to that made by Christ during his crucifixion. Finally, there is the transformation of N'Deye Touti which, like Bakayoko's, is a movement from selfishness to selfless-ness, from me first to me with others.

Epilogue

Epilogue Summary

"Thies - Epilogue" Narration describes how, in the aftermath of the strike's resolution, the women continue the independent ways begun during the march. Meanwhile, Lahbib calls a meeting of the union leadership to decide what is to be done about Isnard, who is to retain his job. Narration then describes how, while they return to their jobs, the strikers refuse to do any work until Isnard is removed from his position of management. Later, as the workers protest and as train whistles shriek out their anger, the women re-form the march and advance on the Vatican. They are met by soldiers who promise not to shoot but who tell them they can go no further. In the Isnard's home, Edouard and Pierre try to convince the furious, resentful Isnard that he needs to leave, but he and his wife both refuse, his wife claiming that Edouard and Pierre have sided with the Africans. In a rage of fury, she grabs a gun and goes outside, where she is shot to death. The men inside go out and collect her body.

"At the sound of the shots," narration comments, "an echoing silence had fallen on the crowd, as if they had written a brutal ending to a long, long story whose climax, until then, had been unknown." In the silence, Maimouna begins to sing (p. 248).

Epilogue Analysis

In the novel's final moments, the white French symbolically experience retribution for the acts of oppression they have perpetrated on the black Africans. While Mme. Isnard did not play as active a role in that oppression as her husband, her arrogance and insensitivity represent those of a whole people, an ironic counterpoint of the individual/community relationship that dominates so much of the rest of the book, albeit in a much more life affirming fashion. It's interesting to note that the narrative never explicitly makes clear who shoots Mme. Isnard. The implication is that she is killed by one of the protestors, but because the protestors are mostly women, there is the possibility that Mme. Isnard was shot by a French officer, a possibility supported by the fact that the French government wants the Isnards to leave.

In any case, the ultimate point of the final chapter rests not in the shooting, but in its final moments - specifically, in the music of the enigmatic, deeply passionate Maimouna. She, in the sheer fact of her survival but also in the grace with which she accomplishes it, defines the transcendent power of spirit as referred to by Ad'jibid'ji and as embodied by the transformations of both the disempowered communities to which she (Maimouna) belongs and the individuals within those communities. In other words, Maimouna's song evokes both courage and transcendent compassion, qualities at the heart of every transformative action, and every result of that action, narrated throughout the book.

Characters

Bakayoko

Bakayoko is the novel's central character, in spite of the fact that he doesn't actually appear in person until more than two thirds of the way through. Until his return to the Thies / Bamako / Dakar region, (Chapter 16), his presence is theoretical and inspirational rather than physical, his beliefs and actions defining choices for both pro- and anti- strikers, for both those who respect him and those who don't (here it's important to note that not all the pro-strike characters respect him, and vice versa). In short, even while the narrative line is defined by the actions and circumstances of other characters, Bakayoko is a constant presence, undeniably a leader, and a profoundly complex human being, simultaneously idealistic and pragmatic, restrained and passionate, charismatic and reserved, personally arrogant and professionally a servant of the people.

It could be argued that although Bakayoko is clearly the book's central character, he is not actively central enough to its action to be its protagonist. There is the sense that from the novel's perspective, the protagonist-ship is shared among all the strikers - the people, the true heroes, undergoing as a community the sort of expansive journey of transformation undergone by most traditionally defined protagonists. There is also the sense that other characters (Ramatoulaye, N'Deye Touti, perhaps Maimouna) undergo transformations more significant than Bakayoko's, moving out of a life of constriction into a life of freedom. It could also be argued, however, that Bakayoko's transformation, although taking up considerably less page time and narrative space, is nonetheless just as significant as those of some of the other characters, moving from a life of freedom (in which he can go where he chooses, when he chooses, for whatever reason) into a life of meaningful boundaries.

There are repeated comments that Bakayoko has no heart, hints that he is selfish and self-centered, suggestions that he is so focused on his ideals, on being a leader and perhaps even on being a celebrity, that he has lost touch with the traditional values (family, home, respect) of his community. The novel makes it clear, however, that as the action unfolds and the effects of the strike come closer and closer to home, Bakayoko becomes more aware of, and more connected to, the humanity at the heart of his ideals, the human spirit that defines both the reasons for and the manifestations of his work. In short, he transforms from an icon into a human being.

Niakoro, Ad'jibid'ji, Assitan

These are members of Bakayoko's family. Niakoro is his elderly, opinionated mother, Assitan his submissive wife, Ad'jibid'ji (Assitan's daughter) his precocious stepdaughter. Assitan plays a relatively minor role in the action, her submissiveness representing and embodying the traditional state of women in the African culture of the time. Niakoro is a

voice of sharp-tongued wisdom, a catalyst for the revelation of one of the novel's key themes. Specifically, the question she asks Ad'jibid'ji about what washes the water is the trigger for Ad'jibid'ji's revelation at the book's climax (Chapter 19) of the ultimate power of the human spirit.

Mamadou Keita

Keita is a wise, revered elder who makes his home with Bakayoko's family. Spiritual and sensitive, he receives appalling treatment at the hands of the anti-union French military. His transcendence of that treatment, however, parallels and compliments Ad'jibid'ji's comment (referred to above) in its evocation of the transcendent power of spirit, an aspect of his character reiterated in the Christ imagery associated with his time in prison (see Chapter 19).

Doudou, Lahbib

These are Bakayoko's fellow union leaders. Narration refers to Bakayoko being the soul of the union while Lahbib is its mind and Doudou its key organizer. Bakayoko has vision, Lahbib has foresight, Doudou has practicality.

Ramatoulaye

Ramatoulaye is one of the narrative's strongest female characters, her actions and transformation embodying its three key themes. She is essentially the leader, or at least the dominant personality, at N'Diayene, a family compound in Dakar.

Mame Sofi, Houdia M'Baye, N'Deye Touti

These characters all live with Ramatoulaye at N'Diayene and all, in various ways, embody the narrative's themes of empowerment and identity development. Mame Sofi is a strong, opinionated middle-aged woman who already has a degree of confidence but who develops more as the strike and its circumstances call upon her to do so. Houdia M'Baye is worn out with childbirth, having given birth to nine. Her quest for empowerment ends tragically when she dies as the result of a blast from a firehose intended to subdue the rebellious women. The young, beautiful N'Deye Touti is ambitious, proud and arrogant, in many ways a female parallel to Bakayoko (it is no surprise that they share an attraction). The parallel extends to their similar choices, at the conclusion of the strike, to focus more on family and home and traditional values rather than on an arrogance-defined independence.

Strike

Strike is Houdia M'Baye's youngest child, orphaned when his mother is killed but offered comfort by Maimouna. Named in honor of the first train strike, his name combines with his receipt of nourishment from the perhaps archetypal, or spiritual or even maternal Maimouna suggests, along with Ad'jibid'ji's revelation and Keita's transcendence, the importance of connection with the human spirit.

Mabigue

Mabigue is Ramatoulaye's brother, arrogant and self-centered. He provides a vivid, defining, self-interested contrast to the many characters throughout the novel who behave and act selflessly.

Tiemoko, Boubacar, Bachiru

These three characters are active in the striking union, each playing different roles in the relationship between union and management. Tiemoko is angry and passionate but eager to learn from the example of Bakayoko. Boubacar is not as smart as Tiemoko but just as passionate, able to use his great strength to enforce the will of the union leaders. Bachiru is pro-management, obsequious, and a coward, speaking up for himself and his beliefs only when he feels it's safe to do so.

Samba

Samba is another pro-strike unionist. Gossipy and impulsive, his enthusiasm triggering an initial, fatal confrontation with management and leading to his tragic end when he is shot near the end of the march to Dakar. The fact that he is revealed to be the father of Maimouna's twins can be seen as further defining his perhaps archetypally male irresponsibility, a contrast to Maimouna's perhaps equally archetypal responsibility and maternal instincts.

Diara

Another member of the union, he goes on trial as a strike breaker. Rather than receive the physical punishment usually handed out to such "traitors" (as Tiemoko calls them), he receives what might be described as a moral punishment - being publicly shamed.

Beaugosse. Deune, Arona, Alioune

These characters are second-tier union administrators, functioning below Lahbib, Doudou and Bakayoko. While Deune, Arona and Alioune prove loyal allies to both the ideals and practicalities of the strike, the vain and ambitious Beaugosse eventually

leaves the union to further his own goals. He is professionally and personally jealous of Bakayoko, but it's important to note that while for the most part his (Beaugosse's) self-interest is a clear parallel to that of Bakayoko, as Bakayoko later realizes the mistakes he's made and begins his transformation, Beaugosse's vanity becomes a vivid, and defining, contrast.

Dieynaba, Maimouna, Penda

These three characters are women of Thies, each embodying aspects of female life in the culture of the time and of female transformation in the context of the novel. Dieynaba has a mask of gruff edginess but is a decisive caregiver. Penda, defined by many characters but never by narration as a prostitute, is strong-willed, at times ruthless and at other times roughly compassionate. Her courage and determination to transform her life and the lives of others inspires the march and, as the march nears its conclusion, results in her tragic death.

The blind Maimouna is perhaps one of the most touching, and the most symbolically important, characters in the book. Her singing represents the transcendent spiritual power of music, her blindness represents unconditional love and compassion and courage (unable to see physical flaws, she only connects with spirit), her selfless choices represent the archetypal spirit of maternity. She is, in many ways, an Earth Mother. In fact, all three of these characters can be seen as manifestations of the Mother Archetype, in its nurturing (Dieynaba), its violent force and capacity to survive (Penda), its transcendent, unconditional compassion (Maimouna).

Magatte, Gorgui

Magatte is Dieynaba's son, Gorgui is his best friend. Together they lead the young, school-age boys apprenticed to the striking workers. Their youthful, strike-triggered courage and independence can be seen as a manifestation of the hope for the future at the core of the striker's choices to take action and to persevere.

M. Dejean, Pierre (Pierrot), Leblanc, Edouard, M. and Mme. I

These characters are all figures in the oppressive French management regime challenged by the strikers. M. Dejean is the harsh, volatile, senior administrator, a vivid contrast to the much younger, idealistic, open-minded Pierre. He, Leblanc and Edouard all function as Dejean's advisors. M. Isnard is a mid-level manager, whose racist attitudes, essential corruption and destructive tendencies result in him and his wife becoming increasingly isolated both from the strikers and their fellow managers. Mme. Isnard's death in the book's final moments can be seen as representing/foreshadowing the inevitable "death" of French authority in the region.

Objects/Places

French West Africa

In the late 1800s and early 1900s, a substantial portion of West-Central Africa was under French control and governance. Eventually, this section of the continent was divided into several countries, including what is now Senegal in the west and Mali in the east. The action of the novel is set within the borders of this now non-existent socio-political regime.

Dakar

This port city on the west coast of Africa is now the capital of Senegal. At the time in which the novel is set, it was a key economic and political center of governance for French West Africa. The fact that the women and strikers march to Dakar was, therefore, a significant demonstration of courage and power aimed directly at an equally significant source of oppression and control.

Thies

Thies lies sixty kilometers outside of Dakar. In contemporary society it has become a thriving center of industry and manufacturing, and is essentially a suburb. In the novel, however, Thies is portrayed as slum-like and spiritually barren. It's important to note that while a march of sixty kilometers is still a substantial distance today, at the time in which the novel is set (the mid-late 1940s), the trek of the women of Thies to Dakar was a remarkable accomplishment.

Bamako

Bamako is the capital of Mali, on the opposite side of what was known as French West Africa to Dakar. In the novel, it is the home community of Bakayoko. Bamako's geographical distance from both Dakar and Thies metaphorically reinforces the idea that the novel is as much about the struggle of a whole community of people who may be separated by space and time but are united by the transcendent call of spirit and dignity.

The Marketplace in Thies

On the first day of the strike, the marketplace of Thies (located just outside the rail-yards) is the setting for the first confrontation between the strikers and the law. The marketplace is also the setting for an important, if subtly dramatized, confrontation

between Samba and Maimouna, and also the death of one of Maimouna's beloved children.

N'diayene

N'Diayene is the name of the compound (housing complex) in Dakar that is home to several of the narrative's important characters - Ramatoulaye, N'Deye Touti, Houdia M'Baye. Later, after the march from Thies to Dakar, Maimouna makes her home there and moves into a position of caregiving to Houdia M'Baye's orphaned son Strike. Because so many of the women who live there undergo significant journeys of transformation, N'Diayene can be seen as a metaphoric birthplace or womb for the female power that defines one of the novel's key themes.

Polygamy

In many traditional African cultures, the practice of polygamy (of one man having more than one wife) was a common, if not standard, marital state. The practice is the moral trigger for much of the French outrage that, in turn, fuels the refusals of both government and management to even negotiate with the strikers, let alone accommodate them. The practice is also the trigger for self-examination in the otherwise self-centered N'Deye Touti and Bakayoko.

Samba's Bicycle

Throughout the narrative, the character of Samba is rarely seen without his bicycle. At the end of the narrative, after Samba has been shot in the act of supporting the strike, the bicycle hangs in the union office as a memorial to both his personal sacrifice and those of other union members.

Water

Throughout the narrative, water (more than food) is the primary concern of those whose way of life is challenged or compromised by the strike. Late in the narrative, water is symbolically linked to spirit.

Themes

Humanity versus Machine

The novel's three main themes are closely intertwined with each other. If there is a primary among the three, it is the exploration of the relationship between machine and humanity, machine in this context being defined in two different ways. The first is more literal, the railway "machine" (its rails, engines, cars, maintenance shops) which, in turn, is part of the larger industrial "machine" that began to dominate and define the human condition in the mid to late eighteenth century and continued its dominance well into the twentieth century. This "machine" is portrayed as simultaneously demanding and nurturing, dominating and essential, providing a way of life and security for those who work to maintain it. Several times throughout the narrative characters, even the striking ones, refer to the value and necessity of the "machine" in their lives, and their gratitude for it.

It's important to note in this context that several of the human characters, particularly the French overseers, are portrayed as being part of this machine, not sustained by it as many of the black characters are but as actual functioning parts, cogs, in that machine with the same relentless energy and drive. This last leads to the second, metaphorical meaning of the term "machine" in the book, the machine of man's inhumanity to man. The strike is, in essence, not a rebellion against the former machine (since so many of the workers acknowledge the necessity for that particular machine) but against the latter, the human "cogs" of the first machine defining the ways in which the workers who make the machine run and keep it running function. In other words, it is the human cogs who decide salary, who decide benefits, who believe that the human workers should be treated like animals, and who refuse to acknowledge their essential, intrinsic human value. This, in turn, defines the novel's second main thematic consideration, the discovery of and growth into pride and identity.

Discovery of Pride and Identity

On a fundamental level, the novel's action, the narrative journeys of its many characters are all defined by this main theme. Here again there are two levels of meaning, and again both are intertwined. The first is the claiming of individual pride and identity, with each of the characters striving to better their personal lot in life, struggling for respect, for freedom, for financial security, and for employment integrity. What's particularly noteworthy in this context is that each character has the same basic needs (enough food, enough water, enough money), but what constitutes respect, freedom, security and integrity is subtly different for each one.

The second level of meaning associated with this theme relates to the idea that the struggles of the individual characters affect and/or define the struggles of the communities to which they belong. This is true of what might be called sub-

communities, and also the larger communities to which the sub-communities belong. In other words, the smaller-context struggles of individuals represent, embody and support the mid context struggles of workers and women, said struggles in turn embodying and sustaining the large context struggles of blacks, physical laborers, and the poor. All three levels of struggle and achievement simultaneously reflect and support the other levels, with the achievements of the community supporting and defining the achievements of the individual, and vice versa - individual pride and identity fuels the courage of the community.

The Empowering of Women

While the struggles of the male railway workers initiate and define the novel's overall narrative line, the struggles of the women in their lives (their wives, children, co-leaders) define, for the most part, the more human aspects of both the novel's narrative and thematic concerns. While the men essentially struggle to improve the economic terms of their way of life, the women struggle on a more fundamental level simply to keep life going. The narrative rarely, if ever, shows an adult male looking for food, searching for water, or struggling to stay clothed, all of which, the novel suggests, are the function of women in the society of that time and place. The character of Sounkare is a noteworthy exception. It could be argued, however, that Sounkare is treated and/or looked at by the men in the same unseeing, uncomprehending, uncompassionate way as the women.

Here again, the novel develops a theme on both the individual and community levels. As individual women like Ramatoulaye, Penda and Maimouna tap into inner strength they never knew they had, they inspire and are inspired by the struggles of similar women to rise not only above the individual circumstances of their lives but the socio-economic circumstances imposed upon them by both the French and the patriarchal perspectives of the males in their lives. The march of the women from Thies to Dakar can therefore be seen as crucial to the empowerment of both individuals and a community striving to achieve new power and new respect, for/of self, and for/of their oppressors whether they are conscious oppressors, like the French, or unconscious oppressors, like their men.

It's also important to note the different ways in which that empowerment manifests. The more external displays of power shown by characters like Ramatoulaye, for example, is different from, but no less significant than, the more internalized transformation.

Style

Point of View

The story is told from the third person, past tense, omniscient point of view. This means it recounts actions, events, and circumstances from a variety of perspectives, weaving together a multi-textured tapestry of emotional colors and experiences that combine to create a complex, yet thematically unified, narrative portrait of individual and societal transformation. There are two principal benefits to this emotionally and spiritually panoramic point of view. The first is to create a strong sense that in spite of differences in individual circumstance, the journeys of the various characters are all essentially the same. As discussed above, some of these journeys are more inwardly directed (Bakayoko, N'Daye Touti, Mamadou Keita, Maimouna) while others are more outward (Ramatoulaye, Penda). All, however, are ultimately defined by movement towards strength, self awareness, courage, and connection to a spiritual, humanist truth.

The second benefit to this tapestry-like perspective is the reinforcement of the sense that the novel is as much about the growth of community as it is about the growth of individuals within that community. In other words, narrative point of view simultaneously reinforces and manifests the novel's primary themes, creating a sense of both shared experience and individual transformation, the one entwined with, motivating, and defining the other. It could be argued, in fact, that ultimately, the story is told from the point of view of a people, rather than of a particular narrative voice and/or individual. This, in turn, serves to define the story as archetypal, an embodiment of the universal need and/or struggle for dignity, freedom, and humanity.

Setting

There are several important components of the novel's setting. The first relates to time and place - specifically, French West Africa in the 1940s. The noteworthy point here is the fact that at that time, much of what might be described as black Africa was under white, Christian control. Indigenous peoples and their ways were oppressed and disrespected on almost every conceivable level, as indeed they were in many countries around the world. Here again, while the narrative effectively portrays a true to life set of circumstances, bringing a powerful true-life story to broader public attention, the specific struggles of a particular community within an identifiable set of circumstances can also be seen as representative of a larger human experience.

The second important component of setting has to do with the various communities in which the action takes place, and their contrasting levels of economic prosperity and/or socio-political power. On the one hand there is the poverty of Thies, the relative prosperity of Bamako, and the poverty of the African community in the capital of Dakar contrasted with the financial and political power of the French community there. The point to note here is that the socio-political-economic circumstances of all these

communities, black and white alike, define each community's needs - the black community's need for change, the white community's need to preserve the status quo.

The final component to note about setting relates to the individual homes of the various main characters - specifically, the communal style of family living that, it could be argued, reinforces and supports the sense of larger community at work in the larger black community, community of women, community of the poor, and/or community of the oppressed.

Language and Meaning

The first point to note about the language used in this book is that it is a translation, meaning that, as in the case with any/all translations, there is the possibility of variation and/or misinterpretation from original intent. That said, there is the sense about this particular translation that there is a strong connection with the original, a sense of poetry and location/community specific ideas and imagery that creates a powerfully evocative sense of world and experience. Traditions, day-to-day activities, as well as surprises and transformations to both are communicated with careful attention to detail and specifics, to context and aftermath, all creating a richly textured sense of immediacy, intimacy, and deeply personal experience. In other words, language combines with vivid characterization and detailed plotting to draw the reader closely into the experience and truth of the characters and their situations.

All that said, while much of the narrative is focused on the individual experiences of the characters, occasionally narration focuses on description with a broader scope. To use photographic terms, the perspective expands into that of a wide angle lens rather than a more narrowly focused one, again creating the sense that the novel is as much about a world and/or a community as it is about individuals. Language is the key component here, taking both the context and the content of the story from the personal to the universal, expanding the reader's horizons of understanding at the same time as the events of the narrative expand the horizons of the characters. In this context, the journey of the women of Thies to Dakar must be considered, the language chronicling that journey exploring the relationship between individual, horizon (literal and moral/spiritual), the distance between the two, and the physical and moral/spiritual courage necessary to transcend that distance.

Structure

On one level, the narrative's structure is as essentially linear as the railroad around which the novel's events and communities are set, moving through the before, during and after the strike in a basic, one event after another progression. There is a sense of steadily escalating tension and obstacle, of increasing desperation and of stakes intensifying along every step of the novel's narrative journey, the characters' individual journeys towards freedom and integrity, and their community's journeys towards

empowerment and respect. In other words, structure supports narrative intention, both supporting theme, all defining and defined by character.

Within that essential structure, however, there are moments when narrative time doubles back on itself, when a chapter narrates events going on at the same time as events in another chapter. This creates a sense of fullness and activity, of multi-layered and multi-textured action ... of a battle (i.e., the strike) being fought on more than one front. Here structure can be seen as reinforcing theme in a second way. In the same manner as the struggles of individuals manifest and/or reflect the struggles of community and vice versa, the narrative line in one chapter illuminates and/or contrasts events and circumstances in another. In other words, the layering of narrative structure parallels the layering of thematic and dramatic intent, entwining with the book's multi-textured point of view to suggest and define the depth of transformation (i.e., societal, personal) at work over the course of the strike.

Quotes

"Striking brutally through the cloud curtain, like the beam from some celestial projector, a single ray of light lashed at the Koulouba, the governor's residence, poised like a sugar castle on the heights that bore its name."
p. 1

"The faces seemed to have lost all trace of personality. As if some giant eraser had rubbed out their individual traits they had taken on a common mask, the anonymous mask of a crowd."
p. 7

"The night no longer brought [the old people] rest. At the moment the eyes of the body closed, the eyes of the mind were opened ... in the darkness that enclosed the city the deep-toned drumming seemed now to come from everywhere at once, twisting and turning through the heads of those to whom sleep would not come."
p. 12

"The workmen rose early that morning. In truth, they had scarcely closed their eyes. The night before they had made a decision, and today they must abide by it, but there was not one of them who did not experience a feeling of uneasiness, a void in the pit of his stomach."
p. 14

"For as long as they could remember, that sound had meant obedience. As children they had seen their fathers, and even their grandfathers, begin to run when they heard it call. It had always told them when to leave their houses, and to walk up here and pass through the gate, and it had punctuated their working day."
p. 21

"When the smoke from the trains no longer drifted above the savanna, they realized that an age had ended - an age their elders had told them about, when all of Africa was just a garden for food. Now the machine ruled over their lands, and when they forced every machine within a thousand miles to halt they became conscious of their strength, but conscious also of their dependence."
p. 32

"And them men began to understand that if the times were bringing forth a new breed of men, they were also bringing forth a new breed of women."
p. 34

"Since the beginning of the strike Ramatoulaye had become more withdrawn ... her responsibilities had become very great, because the house of which she was the eldest was large; there were no less than twenty of 'God's bits of wood'. It would never have occurred to Ramatoulaye to count the members of her household in any way but the old

way; to give them names might attract the attention of some evil that would fatefully alter their lives."
p. 40

"'The men have not consulted their women, and it is not the task of the women to urge them to go back. They are men, and they know what they are doing. But the women must still eat, and the children too.'"
p. 44

"'Real misfortune is not just a matter of being hungry and thirsty; it is a matter of knowing that there are people who want you to be hungry and thirsty - and that is the way it is with us.'"
p. 53

"[i]t was hard to fill out tax forms, and write letters applying for jobs, and even love letters, for all of your family and friends without beginning to feel more and more remote from them."
p. 57

"[h]is thoughts twisted bitterly around the image of Bakayoko. Who was this man whose shadow reached into every house, touching every object? His words and his ideas were everywhere, and even his name filled the air like an echo."
p. 64

"Their mouths hung open, and their eyes were fixed hungrily on a single drop of water which had appeared on the spout of the faucet, like a pearl held in the beak of a bird."
p. 66

"The women ... scarcely recognized the woman beside them as the Ramatoulaye they had always known, and they asked themselves where she had found this new strength. She had always been quiet and unassuming and gentle with the children ... where, then, had this violence been born ... the answer was as simple as the woman herself. It had been born beside a cold fireplace, in an empty kitchen."
p. 74

"Even in the midst of their confusion, however, they were conscious that the machine was the source of their common welfare, and they sensed that the frustration they faced in these dark days was also common to them all."
p. 76

"For the first time in his life, an idea of his was gong to play a part in the lives of thousands of others. It was not pride or vanity he was experiencing, but the astonishing discovery of his worth as a human being."
p. 89

"She was curiously drawn to this hard man who seemed sometimes to live in another world, but who was he, after all? A workman. Was she to be the wife of a workman, a

workman who was no longer young? What then, was the purpose of having gone to school?"
p. 116

"'She is dead ... and I am living. And everything I did was done so that she and her baby would not die of hunger. What would her family say?'"
p. 126

"'I'm getting very old. I was here when all of these machines were installed ... they have a big advantage over us - they can be repaired, recast, made new again.'"
p. 129.

"He would have liked to recapture the spirit of the first days of the strike, but he ... knew that, from this point on, he would never be able to free himself from the thought of the thousands of men and women who had listened to him and trusted him, and to whom he no longer knew what to say. Bakayoko's patient and thorough preparation for just such a time as this was a thing he had never known."
p. 147

"They had tasted the bitter fruits of danger and now nothing else had any flavor."
p. 160

"Some of the older people did not approve of ... the 'crew's' activities ... others, however, could not help thinking that every window that broke, every light that went out, helped to establish a kind of balance: they were no longer alone in carrying the burden of the strike."
p. 161

"The villas of the European employees of the company stood in a district, well outside the city proper, which Lahbib - without knowing quite why - had once christened 'The Vatican.'"
p. 164

"His heart held neither spite nor malice, but he had traveled over a thousand miles among the strikers and their families, and the sufferings, the privations, and the tragedies he had witnessed had shaken him more than he realized."
p. 177

"A discussion between employer and employees presupposes the fact that there are employees and there is an employer. But he, Dejean, was not an employer; he was simply exercising a fuction which rested on ... the right to an absolute authority over beings whose color made of them ... men of another, inferior condition, fit only for unqualified obedience."
pp. 179-80

"[a]lthough Bakayoko, with his manner of disregarding destiny or bending it to his will, was the soul of this strike, it was Lahbib, the serious, thoughtful, calm and modest

Lahbib, who was its brain. Lahbib counted each one of God's bits of wood, weighed them, and balanced them, but the strength that was in them came from Bakayoko."
p. 188

"Certainly he was one of them, he was fighting for them and with them, and yet sometimes he felt himself far from them, very far away, and lonely."
p. 192

"'[w]e love a man when we know nothing of him, and we want to know everything. And we will pursue the one we have chosen no matter what happens, no matter how he treats us. But when we have learned what we want to know, and there is nothing left, no longer any mystery, then our interest is gone.'"
pp. 197-98

"'[t]he difficult thing about you is that although you understand the problems very well, you don't understand men - or if you do understand them, you never show it. But you expect them to understand every word you say, and if they don't, you lose your temper ... and they don't like to be made fools of. So the result is that no one dares to do anything when you are not around.'"
p. 209

"[s]uddenly discouragement stabbed at him like the claws of a hawk plunging on its prey. Was all of the learning he had managed to acquire, all of the effort of a mind he had harnessed so rigidly to the service of this cause - was all of that to vanish now, before the specter of these two corpses?"
p. 213

"Bakayoko ... felt no fear at all. It was no longer the crowd he saw in front of him, but two shining rails, tracking a path into the future. Even his voice seemed turned to steel."
p. 219

"As the earth hardens beneath the harsh suns of the dry season, the heart also hardens in the flames of unhappiness."
p. 226

"The debasement of which human beings were capable was a thing he could neither conceive nor bear. He had never shared the feelings which had brought the men around him to where they were now, but he was beginning to wonder if his wisdom had been only ignorance."
p. 236

"'[i]f God is just, how can He let men be treated so? In all my life, and in the lives of my parents, we have done no wrong to anyone - why then should we be treated so ... something must be done so that we are treated with respect, as men ...'"
p. 237

"'[t]o act so that no man dares to strike you because he knows you speak the truth, to act so that you can no longer be arrested because you are asking for the right to live, to act so that all of this will end, both here and elsewhere ... that is what you must explain to others, so that you will never again be forced to bow down before anyone, but also so that no one shall be asked to bow down before you.'"
p. 240

"From one sun to another / The combat lasted / And fighting together, blood-covered / They transfixed their enemies / But happy is the man who does battle without hatred."
p. 248

Topics for Discussion

In many cases, the chapter titles seem to represent metaphorical values of the people and places to which they refer, as much as to the specific people/places. Discuss the metaphorical values of each chapter title, as manifest in the individual chapters and in the narrative as a whole.

In what ways do the various glimpses of character and relationship in Chapters 1 and 2 play important roles in the development of the novel? Consider specifically the generation-defined tension relationship between Niakoro and Ad'jibid'ji, the juxtaposed references to Diara and Tiemoko, Sounkare's attitude towards the strike, and Maimouna's instruction to Samba. In what ways do later events in the characters' lives reflect, illuminate and/or ironically comment on events in the first two chapters?

Discuss the different ways in which the various characters define, for themselves, respect ... freedom ... and security. Discuss also the ways in which those definitions change in characters including, but not limited to, Bakayoko, Penda, Maimouna, and Mme. Isbard.

Research the meaning and function of the actual "Vatican", and discuss the metaphoric implications of the name as used in the novel.

What do you think is the symbolic connection between Ad'jibid's contention that it is spirit that washes water (see Chapter 19) with the fact that water is the primary, repeatedly referred to, and increasingly desperate need of those affected by the strike?

Discuss ways in which the tension between idealism and reality manifests throughout the narrative. Consider the characters (both black and white, both French and African), their situations large (i.e., the strike) and small (i.e., their relationships), and their individual perspectives, both how they begin and how they're transformed.

What do you think is the relationship, both literal and metaphoric, between Ad'jibid'ji's sudden insight into Niakoro's question ("What washes the water?") and the release of Mamadou Keita from prison, both of which take place at the end of the novel (Chapter 19)?

Research the concept of archetype, and specifically the archetype of "woman". Discuss the novel's various female characters in terms of the aspect of the archetype they embody.

What circumstances and/or situations in your life, what issues, would make you take the kind of desperate action, or make the kind of desperate statement made by the female marchers? What do you believe in strongly enough to risk your life? In other words, what situation in your life/experience makes you identify with the experiences of the novel's characters?