

# **Grace: A Novel Study Guide**

## **Grace: A Novel by Natasha Deon**

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# Plot Summary

The following version of the novel was used to create this study guide: Deon, Natashia. *Grace: A Novel*. Counterpoint, May 16, 2016. Kindle.

“Grace is getting a good thing, even when you don’t deserve it” says Naomi, the young narrator in the novel *Grace* by Natashia Deon. Naomi, a black slave, tells the story of the South in the time period surrounding the Civil War through her own memories of her life as well as her observation of her daughter, Josey’s life. Naomi was unjustly killed the night Josey was born. Unwilling to leave her daughter alone, Naomi remains on Earth as a spirit who watches over Josey. Naomi discovers the problem with being a spirit is that she cannot intervene when George, a white man, rapes her daughter. In a bittersweet ending, Naomi is able to help save her granddaughter from falling prey to George and assists Josey in getting revenge on the man who so badly abused her.

Naomi is 15 when she kills the owner of the plantation where she lives because he killed her sister’s fiancée and then tried to make her sister have sex with another man. Her sister, Hazel, makes Naomi run away. Hazel hopes that Naomi will make it to freedom in the North but Naomi only makes it as far as Conyers, Georgia. She is injured and taken in by Cynthia, a woman who owns a saloon and brothel.

While working for Cynthia, Naomi is charmed by Jeremy, the white man who plays piano in the bar. She has sex with him and gets pregnant with his baby. Jeremy denies that the baby is his and calls Naomi a whore. Albert, a friend of Naomi, asks Naomi that he be allowed to help care for the baby when it is born.

Meanwhile, Soledad, a woman jealous of Naomi because of her close relationship with Cynthia, kills her husband and blames his death on Naomi. It is for this reason that Naomi is run down by dogs and shot. She is only 17 when she dies.

Bobby Lee, one of the men chasing Naomi, realizes that Naomi’s newborn baby, named Josey, is still alive. Because the girl is light skinned with blonde hair, he takes the baby to a plantation where the mistress there agrees to adopt the child. Later, Josey is sent to live with Albert, who has changed his name to Charles, after the owners of the plantation learn that Josey has black lineage.

The day after Josey’s fourteenth birthday she is raped by George, a man with an affinity for young girls and an addiction to alcohol. Naomi is able to watch the rape but is not able to intervene. She plots her revenge against George but is unable to do anything until the day that George tries to rape Rachel, Josey’s daughter. Naomi gives Josey the strength to fight against George, keep him from hurting Rachel, and to get her revenge on the man who hurt Josey so badly years before.



## Part I, 1-4

### Summary

The narrator, a seventeen year old black girl, tells how she died in 1848. She claims it was love that brought her to the place where she died. The girl has been running from three men and their dogs regardless of the fact she is in labor. The men following her believe that she has killed a man but she is innocent.

The girl's contractions become so hard she has to stop and push the baby out of her. When it does not cry, she thinks it is because the baby knows she has to be quiet so they can live. The dogs attack the girl. She struggles to save her baby. There is a gunshot and the girl tries to keep from falling on the baby.

Even though she is dead, the girl is able to see herself lying on the ground as the white men and the dogs circle around her. The dogs grab for the baby and she cries. One of the men, named Bobby Lee, pulls the baby free. Even though Henry and Ray, the men with him tell him he has gone crazy, Bobby Lee takes care of the baby. He notices it has blonde hair. He tells the men with him that he can sell it to some slave traders.

Bobby Lee came back to the men four hours later and told them the baby had died. He had thrown it into a field. Naomi, the girl who is dead but is still aware of what is happening around her, notes it was the first time a man lied to her but also was what caused her to being having flashes of her past life.

In her first "Flash" in 1838, Naomi remembers hiding with her older sister, Hazel, while their master brings in a black men to have sex with their mother. He wanted to make money by selling her babies. Her mother was able to keep Naomi only because she was premature. The master thinks she died. Before he leaves, the master asks if Hazel has come of age yet. He wants her to make babies too. He pressures Naomi's mother to have a boy so he can make the highest amount of money from the sale.

In her second "Flash" the year is 1846. Naomi watches Mamma Dean work with her spinning wheel. Mamma Dean was a house worker for the Hilden household and Naomi notes that she speaks better most black slaves do. Naomi and Hazel's mother stopped talking with she had twin girls who were taken from her. Hazel comes running through the woods with James, her boyfriend. She tells Naomi that they are going to get married. She also tells Naomi that they plan on escaping to the north, a plan that scares Naomi.

In Naomi's third "Flash" it is still 1846. Hazel and Naomi practice reading. It is raining outside. There is a knock on the door, unusual because it is a Sunday evening. Hazel peeks and sees it is Master Hilden. Naomi takes their mother into the bedroom. Naomi hears Hazel make excuses for her mother not being able to see him. He tells he Hazel that it is she he is there to see because he needs babies to sell. Hazel fights to get



away from the black man who comes into the house. He is the same black man who had sex with their mother.

Their mother runs from the room and talks for the first time in years. She tells the master that she will do what he wants her to do. Naomi follows and the master realizes she is still alive. Another knock on the door is James coming to visit Hazel. He holds flowers in his hands. The master tells him to come inside. He realizes Hazel and James were planning to get married. He shoots James. Realizing what has happened, Naomi gets the poker and forces it through the master's belly. Boss, the black man that the master brought with him beats Naomi, trying to get her to let go of the poker. She crawls, trying to get to Hazel. Their mother takes over the poker, stabbing Boss in the back. Before he dies he gets off one more shot with the pistol, killing their mother.

Hazel prays over James. When she finishes, she tells Naomi she has to go. She hugs her sister and gives her the Bible from which they had been reading. Hazel pulls the poker from Boss and cuts herself with it, making it appear she was attacked as well. She gives Naomi the poker for protection. She explains Hazel can run away because no one even knew she was there. She tells her to run and not look back.

In Naomi's fourth "Flash" Naomi admits to her reader that her life did not flash before her eyes when she died. She only began having these flashes after she was dead. It was as if she were reliving her past but could do nothing to change the past. Naomi indicates that God had mercy on her. She did not get the bad that she deserved. She instead got grace, a good thing she felt she did not deserve, her baby. Had she had the choice, she would have named the baby Grace, but someone else named her Josephine.

## Analysis

Right away, the reader is grabbed by the unique perspective from which this story is told. Naomi, the narrator, tells the story after her death. She speaks directly to the reader as she tells the story. She informs him that the story she is telling took place: "Before you were born, before your mother was born, 'fore your grandmother" (1). The "you" to whom she refers is the reader. Naomi will tell her story through what she calls "flashes" of memory. She also follows her daughter, Josephine "Josey," as a ghost or spirit.

The writing itself is unique because the author mimics the dialect of the black slaves during the time of the Civil War and shortly before. Naomi refers to herself as a "nigga" (1). In this quote, for instance: "We always quiet, though. We got to be so Massa don't remember we here" (7). The incorrect use of verbs, omission of verbs and mispronunciation of words demonstrates how uneducated the slaves were. Naomi points out the difference between the way she talks and the way Mamma Dean, a house servant, speaks. Her quotes reflect the proper grammar with which slaves who worked in the houses were expected to use: "Simply trial and error, Naomi. Would you like to try?" (16).



The differences in speech is also illustrated when Naomi and Hazel are reading the Bible. Naomi finds it difficult to understand the language of the King James Version of the Bible they read. She asks Hazel if God hears and understands their prayers even they do not speak in the same language as the Bible.

The relationship between Naomi and Hazel, and their mother is of significance because it shows what a mother is willing to do to protect her children. Of the nine children that Letti has born, she has been allowed to keep only two. She has Naomi because the master of the plantation does not realize Naomi even exists. She was premature, so her mother and older sister have hidden her since her birth. Since her last two babies were taken from her, Letti has stopped talking and does little but sit in a rocker all day. When the master comes with the intention of having another slave have sex with Hazel, Letti begins talking, begging the master to use her instead of her daughter.

The way that Letti was used by her owner demonstrates the terrible way that the slaves were viewed as possessions and not as people. The master of the plantation brings another slave to have sex with Letti. He presses Letti to have boy children because he can sell male babies for a higher price than female babies. He uses Letti as a baby mill to sell her children as slaves. When he sees that Hazel is of age, the master realizes that he could begin using her in his baby production scheme.

Two years pass between the time that Naomi kills the master and the time that Bobby Lee and his friends track her down. This period of time and what happens to Naomi in that space of time is unaccounted for. She mentions that she did not kill the man that Bobby Lee and the others believe that she did. In the missing years between the time that Naomi left her family and the time that she was killed, Naomi has apparently learned a good deal about life. For instance, she refers to her baby as “the good part of love” (2). This indicates she is also aware that there is a bad part of love. Naomi also points out that Bobby Lee’s lie about having thrown the baby away when it died was the first time a man had lied for her. This indicates that Naomi’s relationship with men has not been positive.

Even though she does not recognize it, Naomi shows courage when she uses Hazel’s fire poker to kill the master. He had just shot her sister’s fiancé for no reason, besides he did not want them to marry because he considered Hazel his property. Naomi takes revenge by killing him. It is in her act of getting revenge on James’ death that Naomi’s mother is shot.

There are mentions of freedom and running away to the North even in this part of the novel. It is thirteen years before the beginning of the Civil War but slaves are grouping up and planning their escape to freedom. When Hazel tells Naomi to run it is understood that she hopes her sister will reach the freedom of the North.

The Bible, the poker and the marks that Hazel makes on the wall are both significant objects in this section. The Bible is a symbol of Naomi’s family and her early years. It is from this book that Hazel helps Naomi learn to read. The poker is also a significant object because it had actually been prepared in advance of Naomi’s use of it as a



weapon to be used in just that way. Hazel had sharpened the point on the poker to give them a way to protect themselves. The marks that Hazel makes on the wall are also significant because they symbolize the things that Hazel has lost. She puts a mark on the wall for each of the children her mothers births that are taken away from her.

## **Discussion Question 1**

Discuss the language of the novel.

## **Discussion Question 2**

How does the use of Naomi as the narrator impact the tone of the novel?

## **Discussion Question 3**

In what ways do Hazel and Letti show courage in the way they care for Naomi? How is Naomi courageous in her own way?

## **Vocabulary**

muffling, betraying, aglow, anchors, hovering



## Part II, 5 / 1850 - 9 / 1855

### Summary

In section "5 / 1850," Naomi explains that although Charles was not the biological father of her baby or the one who was with her when Josey was born, he should have been. Charles chose Josey, and Josey loved him, despite the scars where he got burned, like Naomi wishes she had been able to. Josey and Charles found a home in East Tallahassee.

In section "6 / Flash," Naomi remembers how she ran for four days. On the fourth day it is raining. She reaches a road but a carriage is coming in her direction, lighting a sign that says she has reached Conyers, Georgia. She jumps out of sight. When she wakes, she is in a room. Her whole body hurts but someone is taking care of her.

Naomi finally wakes enough to realize she is laying on a trunk someone has dressed like a bed. She wakes again when she hears a knocking sound. There is a white woman and black man having sex in the room with her. Another time that Naomi wakes, two men are in the room with her, talking about having sex with her. A woman named Cynthia runs them away from her. Naomi wakes again to see Cynthia dancing with a young boy whom she calls Johnny.

Naomi wakes again. One of the men who pays Cynthia for sex tells her that he wants to marry her. She refuses and is hateful to him. He hits her, busting her lip. When Cynthia sees Naomi looking at her she tries to find out who Naomi and from where she came but Naomi will not talk to her. Cynthia tells her that Albert was the one who found her. Cynthia throws Naomi her Bible. She tells her that the Bible will do her no good because god is dead.

Cynthia gives Naomi a dress and tells her that she will have to earn her keep. Naomi was afraid Cynthia was going to make her a prostitute but Cynthia indicates she wants Naomi to keep the house clean. She warns Naomi that if she steals from her or tries to run away, she will kill her.

In section "7 / 1855" Naomi's heartbreak comes when Josey is eighteen months old. She has fallen and calls out the word "Momma" (53) to Annie Graham, not Naomi. Naomi admits she had not intended to stay, she wanted to find her own mother and apologize for not loving her the way she should have when they were alive. Instead of leaving, she was distracted by Josey's cry and stayed to watch over Josey because there were things she wanted to make sure her daughter knew. She followed her baby's crying and watched as Bobby Lee took her to Annie's.

Naomi watches seven year old Josey in the cotton fields, singing in a deep voice. She is irritating her friend, Ada Mae. Josey begins to cough as Ada Mae argues with her that she is not black. Josey's breath begins to whistle and Ada Mae tries to run for Charles.





In section “8 / Flash,” Naomi tries to run from Cynthia despite her warning. She does not get far when her head starts to hurt and her nose begins bleeding. She passes out and wakes back in Cynthia’s house. From that point on, Cynthia will not let Naomi go any further than the side garden. Even though she still wants to go north, Naomi admits that her life with Cynthia is not bad.

Johnny, Cynthia’s son, comes to her in the garden. Naomi remembers how the little boy would attack even grown men if he thought they were hurting his mother. Naomi tells the boy he can have the sweet potato in his apron if he wants it. She warns him that he cannot tell anyone that she can talk. He laughs because he is a mute. Naomi feels sorry for him because he has no big brother or sister to take care of him.

In section “9 / 1855,” Charles takes Josey, who is suffering with the vapors, to Annie’s house. Annie sends Charles home because he makes her nervous. Bessie, a light-skinned black house servant, and Annie watch over Josey. Instead of being concerned about Josey’s illness, Dr. Mitchell is more concerned that Annie is caring for Josey inside the house. He warns her that he worries what Richard might think if he were to come home.

Annie’s brother George comes into the room. He is drunk. He applauds Annie for the way she ran off Ada Mae, Josey’s friend and asks if the performance was for the doctor’s benefit. He torments his sister by asking when Richard, her husband who has been gone for years, is coming back. Annie mentions to George she heard what happened in Montgomery. It is suggested he had some sort of improper relationship with a girl there as well as one from up the road earlier in his life. George defends himself telling Annie that he only gave the girl a toy, and that children were bad about lying.

## Analysis

The structure becomes more clear in this second section of the novel. Naomi not only shares with her reader what happened to her after she left her mother through her flashes, she also tells the reader the details of Josey’s life. So far, there is still a good many questions surrounding not only the outcome of Naomi’s life but also Josey and her young life. Even though Josey was taken to Annie Graham, a white woman, and at one point called her momma, Josey has been demoted at some point to a slave.

When Naomi talks about her intentions after she died, she says that she had intended to find her mother and apologize to her. She realizes how much she must have hurt her mother because she wanted her to be someone else. She wanted her mother to love her differently, but did not understand where her mother was in her life after she’d had so many children taken away from her. “I didn’t understand life then. What it meant to be wrung dry” (54). Just in the short amount of time that Naomi has been away from her mother, she has learned how life can diminish one’s ability to show love and emotion.



Naomi also speaks of Charles, a man whom Josey loves but Naomi could never bring herself to love. After her death, Naomi realizes Charles is the man who would have been good for her. She wishes she had been attracted to him. Naomi notes the scars that Charles has on his head and face from when he got burned. He is so disfigured that Annie cannot stand to have him in the house when he brings Josey to her for medical care. Naomi describes the father-daughter pair of Charles and Josey as being “as wrong as a dog nursing a kitten” (39). Naomi notes, of course that Charles is not Josey’s biological father. Since she has light skin and light hair, it is assumed that Naomi had a relationship with a white man.

It is not until after she has lived several more years that Naomi realizes how unfair she was to her mother but she began to feel guilty because she believed she had caused her mother and Hazel trouble. This feeling comes out when Cynthia says to Naomi: “My pappy used to say, ‘everythang cost somethin.’ But you ain’t gon’ cost me, are you?’ I costed Momma. Costed Hazel” (52). Naomi believes it was her fault that her mother was killed and that Hazel had to lie to cover Naomi’s murder of their master.

Because Josey is so light skinned, one of her black friends argues with her that she is not really black. Josey tells the girl “‘One day,’ Josey say, ‘I’m gon’ marry me a black man . . . dark as blue. . . . Then there ain’t gon’ be no mistakin who I am” (58) Josey believes that if she marries a black man, everyone will realize that she really is black. It would be a confusing place for a young girl to be. She looks different from the other slaves, yet she is treated like them. The reader knows at one point that Annie acted as a mother to Josey but in this section she refers to Josey as her “property” (69) not her daughter or even a person.

Even though Annie allows Josey to be brought into the house to have her vapors, asthma perhaps, treated, it is clear that both the doctor and Annie’s brother do not approve of the child being inside the house. To them she is a black slave. In their mindset, it is not proper for a black slave to be brought inside a white man’s house for medical treatment. There is conflicting information given about how Annie feels about the slaves. She makes Charles leave her house because he is different, he is black and his is disfigured by his burns, a combination that makes Annie uncomfortable. She is hateful to Ada Mae when she comes in the house to see how Josey is. Annie is strict with Bessie, the house servant, but not hateful. This contrasts with the love she seems to have for Josey but is trying to cover.

Naomi also explains to the reader that the lighter skinned blacks were always those chosen to work as house servants. It seems ironic as Naomi explains these light skinned slaves were generally the products of rapes by white men. Even though these light skinned servants were the products of violence, their white owners believed they were more suitable to work in the house than those who were born to relationships between two blacks.

There are a good deal of mysteries surrounding Annie and her family. Her husband, Richard, has been gone for years. Annie is not sure if he will return. Annie’s brother definitely has a problem with alcohol since he is described as being sloppy drunk in the



middle of the day. It is also suspected that he has some problem with young girls. There are two instances in particular when it is suspected George had inappropriate relationships with two different girls.

Notice the way Naomi takes time to describe the things she sees around her. A variety of literary techniques are used to describe the things that she encounters. In the Graham house, for instance, Naomi describes the way in which “ a gold frame holds prisoner the likenesses of a sad white woman and sad white man dressed in black” (67-68). Personification is used in describing the picture frame as it “hold prisoner” the subjects of the painting. Personification is also used to describe the way the “curtains climb the height of two tall windows” (68). Naomi also describes what must be a four poster bed as being “shaped like a dead horse on its back” (68). This comparison using the word like is a simile. Naomi describes the things she does not understand by comparing them to things that she does understand. As a slave, she would never have seen a four poster bed but she can imagine that it looked like a horse might look on its back with its legs sticking up in the air.

## Discussion Question 1

Discuss the encounter that Annie has with both George and the doctor when she allows Josey to be cared for inside her house. What does this encounter say about racism? What does the reader learn about Annie in the responses she makes to the doctor and George?

## Discussion Question 2

Discuss the way that Cynthia treats Naomi. Why do you think she saved and kept the girl?

## Discussion Question 3

Discuss Josey’s belief that if she married a black man, everyone will believe that she is black even though she is so light skinned with light hair. How is it ironic that the racism shown against Josey does not even have anything to do with skin color? How must Josey feel because she does not fit in with either the blacks or the whites?

## Vocabulary

nudged, relentless, torrent, pelting, desperate, kneading, quaking, lurk, brothel, liberties, apothecary, discard, remiss, vile, cordial, verging, poised



## Part II, 10 / Flash - 13 / 1860

### Summary

“Section 10 / Flash” is set in 1847. Naomi and Johnny are shooting marbles in the yard. He motions to her to come to the barn with her. She hesitates because she is not supposed to go that far but follows him because Cynthia is gone. Johnny shows her a litter of puppies. When she believes she hears Cynthia’s voice, Naomi runs back to the garden. It turns out what she heard was two men, one of them imitating Cynthia. The three men, the ones who came to her room when she was sick, notice Naomi and begin to act as if they plan to rape her. Cynthia yells at them to leave Naomi alone. She is shooting two pistols into the air. As she taunts them with the guns, even shooting one in the hand, the men back off. It is at this point that Naomi realizes that Cynthia plans to protect her.

In Section “11 / 1860,” Josey is with the rest of the slave children, pulling weeds from the cotton. George rides his horse down the road, straight toward Slavedriver Nelson who is sitting on his horse whom he calls Maybelle. George torments Nelson about his affection for his horse for a while before he asks where Josey is. He takes a toy, a rolling hoop, he has with him out to where Josey and Ada Mae are working. He gives the hoop to Ada Mae who is excited about the gift. Josey tells her no good will come from the gift.

Section “12 / Flash” is set in 1847. Cynthia makes Naomi stay inside after the three men tried to rape her. She is pretending to read the Bible when Albert enters the room to fix a chair. Cynthia had told her that Albert was a free slave who had never made it north. He has wild, unkempt red hair. When Naomi asks him why he never cuts it, he says it is because his hair is his freedom. When Naomi pushes Albert, he admits to her that he has plans to go south to Mexico, not north. He explains that the Mexicans are like the slaves because they are captives as well.

After Albert leaves, Naomi goes back to reading aloud from the Bible. Cynthia walks into the room, hears her reading and realizes that she is able to talk. Naomi thanks Cynthia for making the men leave her alone. Cynthia tells Naomi it is a trick she learned to keep the men distracted while her girls picked their pockets. She is not concerned about dying in the pistol play.

She orders Naomi to fix her bath and Naomi does so. After the bath, Cynthia shows Naomi a trap door hidden under the bathtub. They go down into the cellar where Cynthia told Naomi she often went to think. The two sit on a bench underneath the saloon area. They are able to see up through the floorboards. Cynthia points out Mr. Shepard, the new dealer for the gambling. His wife, Soledad, is next to him. Soledad had worked for Cynthia but had quit one day in a drunken rage. She told Naomi that when Cynthia got tired of her she should come to her house on Hummingbird Lane. Cynthia also points out the cousins — Bobby Lee, Henry and Ray — she says that they



are bounty hunters and that Bobby Lee is the only one of the three who is any good. Bandits had killed his wife and infant baby.

In Section “13 / 1860,” Josey walks to an old house she had seen in the woods. An old woman who calls herself Sissy discovers Josey and walk in a circle around her. The woman tells Josey that she knows her and accuses her of trying to pretend to be white. Sissy tells the girl she had been a servant in the big house when Josey had come. Sissy had recognized that Josey was not a full blooded white.

Naomi remembers how she meet Sissy the night that Bobby Lee had taken her baby to Annie’s house. He persuaded Annie to take the baby by telling her that it was his and that his wife was dead. Sissy had been working in the house. She discouraged Annie from taking the baby. Annie asked Bobby Lee what he named that baby. When Bobby Lee indicated he had not picked out a name yet, Sissy commented she would have named her baby Josephine if she’d had a baby.

Back with Josey and Sissy, Sissy is blaming Josey that her friendship with Annie was ended when it was discovered that Annie was black. The door of the house opens and the boy whom Naomi has nicknamed Wayward because he does not seem to belong to anyone calls out to Sissy, referring to him as her mother. This is strange because Sissy had told Annie she did not have a baby before her husband died.

## Analysis

From Josey’s meeting with Sissy, the reader can infer that Sissy had something to do with it being discovered that Josey was not a fully white-blooded child. As Sissy tells Josey “Just one drop. One drop, law say. One drop of our blood can ruin any God-created man, poison so strong that maybe we don’t even know our own power. It’s what got white folks scared” (101). Sissy indicates that white people are scared of the blacks, that is the reason they separate themselves and try to rule over the blacks to keep them in line.

Meanwhile, there is an indication that George is attracted to Josey. When he rides his horse out to the fields, he appears to do so with the intention of giving her a toy. Remember in the previous section that when Annie mentions what she heard about George that he claims he had only given the girl in question a doll. It appears that he uses toys to try to get close to children. It can be assumed that George is going to try to do something to hurt Josey.

Even though the slave driver is a white man, notice how disrespectfully George treats even him. He accuses the man of being a black but the man retorts that he has no black blood in his veins. Almost as if he is trying to impress George he brags about not going easy on any of the slaves, regardless of age, if they are not working. He also discourages George from showing any of the slaves any favors, even the children, because it will just cause jealousy and make his job harder. George does not listen to his warning.



Meanwhile, in Naomi's flashes, she describes the first time she saw Henry and Ray, the brothers who would later hunt her down, and Bobby Lee, the man who saved her baby. Cynthia details Bobby Lee's background, that his wife and infant were killed by a bandit. Bobby Lee uses his actions of saving Josey as a way to redeem himself for not being able to save his own wife and child. Bobby Lee had gone to Annie's house without even realizing that Annie was barren or that she wanted a baby. She credits God with having brought Bobby Lee to her.

Naomi still thinks about going north to freedom and goes so far as to ask Albert, a free black man who works for Cynthia, if he will take her north with him if she ever goes. He tells her that he is not seeking freedom to the north but instead to the south. He believes going to Mexico will be a better bet because the Mexicans understand what it is like to be forced to do things they do not want to. He explains they were forced out of their own land by the white people. For this reason, Albert believes that two groups of people have a kinship.

Albert's hair is a significant object in this section of the novel. When Naomi points out to him that he is not really free because he still has people telling him what to do, she asks him why he lets his hair grow out long and unkept. He tells her that his long bushy hair is a sign that he is free. He is able to let it grow any way he wants it to.

Remember in this section that Cynthia tells Naomi that her ability to distract men with her guns is a way for her girls to steal from the men whom she is distracting. Later on in the novel, Cynthia will use her guns again in an attempt to distract men who are trying to hurt Naomi. Remember also Soledad's invitation to Naomi that she come to her house for shelter if things were to ever go back with her relationship with Cynthia.

## Discussion Question 1

How did Sissy react to Josey the night that Bobby Lee brought her as a baby? How does she react to her when she finds Josey poking around her house? Of what does Sissy seem to be accusing Josey?

## Discussion Question 2

Why is it significant that George brings a toy that he obviously intends to give to Josey? What does it mean that he gives it to Ada May instead?

## Discussion Question 3

Discuss Albert's rationalization for wanting to go south to freedom instead of north. Does this make sense to you? Why or why not?

## Vocabulary

stalemate, calloused, feisty, migrate, etched



## Part II, 14 / Flash - 17 / 1862

### Summary

Section “14 / Flash” is another of Naomi’s flashes from 1847, as she plays marbles with Johnny, Naomi thinks about the information Albert gave her when she talked to him about escaping to freedom. He had explained they could take the Underground Railroad to the North, or go with the Freedom Fighters to the South. He said there were problems with both choices. The Railroad did not start until Virginia so they would have to find a way to Virginia on their own. On the other hand, the slave owners were beginning to get wise to the Freedom Fighters’ ways of getting slaves off their owner’s property by saying they were looking to pay for slave help for a day or two, and then leaving with the slaves they received. The Freedom Fighters were set to make a trip through that town in the next six months. Albert said Soledad had made the arrangements. He explained that her father was a Freedom Fighter. Men from the group were known by an orange stripe on their satchels.

During the same game of marbles, Jeremy, the new piano player, comes outside and tells Naomi he had never seen such a pretty girl playing marbles before. She is enchanted by Jeremy, who is white. She thinks he is perfect. Jeremy calls Naomi his lucky charm and makes her roll the dice for him in the next game. Some of the men complain because Naomi is black. Naomi leaves the game when she hears Cynthia calling her.

Section “15 / 1862” is set one year after the Civil War started. Naomi notes she does not know what it means to be American and thinks it humorous that the American Civil war was begun by a Frenchman. She goes to the cabin where Josey and Charles live and watch as Josey unwraps new clothes, her gift for her fourteenth birthday. Later that night, Josey goes to scrape their leftover food outside so the animals can have it. She is interrupted by the boy whom Naomi calls Wayward. She jumps him because she thinks he is spying on her. When she finishes he tells her he had just come to tell her happy birthday. He put a bracelet he had made of red yarn on her arm. He tells her that his name is Jackson Hayes, he is Sissy’s son. He asks if he can see her the following day.

In Section “16 / Flash,” Naomi goes to Cynthia’s room after she met Jeremy and rolled the dice with him. She thinks the woman is asleep when she first enters the room. There is the leftover carcass of a chicken and two open bottles of wine. Cynthia tells Naomi that she was not sleeping but instead praying. Cynthia tells Naomi that it is Yom Kippur, a religious holiday. As a Jew, it is Cynthia’s day of atonement. She explains to Naomi that she is supposed to be asking forgiveness for the things she has done wrong and trying to live her life better. She does not consider giving up her brothel, as Naomi suggests, a way to make her life better. She says God understands that she and the girls have to make a living.





Naomi gets frustrated with her drunk mistress when Cynthia spills wine on her dress. She asks Cynthia if there is something she needs to do for her. Cynthia asks Naomi if she thinks she will be saved. Cynthia asks Naomi to read from the Bible and Naomi chooses the 23rd Psalm. Cynthia continues to talk and poke fun at Naomi. She laughs when she learns Naomi has never slept with a man. Cynthia admits she slept with a man when she was ten in order to pay one of her father's debts. She tells Naomi to go back to her reading but then interrupts her a few words later by telling her that she killed her father. Cynthia's confession makes Naomi remember what she did.

Cynthia mentions that the book she has is her mother's diary. She believes her mother was worthless and does not want to read about her life. She wonders if God has punished her mother for what she allowed to happen to Cynthia. She tells Naomi how she would curse her for killing herself if she ever saw her again. Naomi reminded Cynthia that not all women had the same amount of strength in them. When Cynthia sees Naomi crying she guesses that Naomi had done something bad in her past as well. Cynthia guessed she had killed a plantation owner though she incorrectly guessed he had been trying to rape her. Cynthia told Naomi that she would help her protect her innocence so that perhaps God could forgive her for all the wrongs she had done.

In Section "17 / 1862," Josey is excited about her planned meeting with Jackson. Ada Mae runs to her excited because she has heard a rumor that they are free. Everett joins the conversation and tells the girls that the president had signed paperwork setting the slaves free. Everett tells Josey there is going to be a meeting where they will be told what the Emancipation Proclamation means. Josey runs to find her father to tell him about the meeting. He is not inside their cabin.

Outside the cabin Josey sees movement in the woods and believes it is Jackson. She runs to the place where they met, but he is not there. Naomi is distracted by the things she wants to tell Josey about love when she hears Josey talking to George and her scream as he grabs her. Naomi is able to do nothing but pray that God will intervene as she watches her daughter fight against George. There is no intervention and George rapes Josey.

## Analysis

Part II ends with a life changing event for Josey. Just as it had been suspected, George is attracted to Josey. He happens to find her alone and takes the opportunity to rape her. It is one day after her fourteenth birthday. Making this rape scene all the more grotesque and showing the future of a woman who had been raped, Cynthia had admitted to Naomi earlier in the novel that her father had allowed her to be raped when she was ten years old. Cynthia grew up to kill her father and make her living as a prostitute. Does this sort of life await Josey because of the way she is attacked?

God and religion becomes important as Cynthia attempts to celebrate Yom Kippur, a Jewish day of atonement. Because Naomi does not know much about the Jewish religion she does not understand that Jews believe in God but do not believe Jesus



Christ was the true redeemer of the world. It is for this reason that Cynthia tells her that she does not believe in Jesus. Cynthia does believe that she can somehow make things up to God if she is able to help Naomi protect her virginity.

Meanwhile, Cynthia and Naomi develop an unusual camaraderie. As Cynthia admits to Naomi that she killed her father, Naomi remembers how she killed her master. Cynthia can tell by the way that Naomi reacts to her questions that Naomi had killed someone and that it had been someone important, a person's death for whom she might get into trouble.

Note Naomi's thoughts when Cynthia warns her that the law will not believe her if she tries to tell anyone that Cynthia killed her father. This is perhaps the statement that upsets Naomi most. She knows that Cynthia is indicating the law will not believe the story of a black person about a white man's death. Her hope for her sister has been built on her hope that the law would believe the lies that Hazel would tell them about how she and the others had been attacked.

As Cynthia talks about her own mother and how weak she believed her mother was, Naomi remembers her mother. Because of the repeated rapes and taking of her babies, Naomi's mother had turned into a shell of herself. Whatever had gone wrong in Cynthia's mother's life had caused her to take her own life. Cynthia is angry with her mother for leaving her alone with her abusive father but Naomi reminds her that: "Not every woman got the same strong" (128). This beautiful statement comes from Naomi because she believes that her mother and Hazel were both stronger than she is. Even though Naomi tried to protect her family, and now tries to protect Johnny, she does not see herself as a strong woman. For this reason she believes she understands how Cynthia's mother might have wanted to give up simply because she was not as strong as some other women, Cynthia in particular, are.

On a more positive note, both Naomi and Josey experience their first loves in this section of the novel. For Josey it is Jackson Hayes, the son of Sissy. He comes to tell her happy birthday and give her the gift of a bracelet that he made himself. For Naomi it is Jeremy, the slick talking white man who pretends he does not care, or notice, that Naomi is black. When the men in the saloon complain because Jeremy brings Naomi inside as his "lucky charm" (110) the men complain. Jeremy pretends that he thinks they are complaining because Naomi is a woman. One man does not mince words when he informs Jackson that it is not because Naomi is a woman but because she is black.

The first mentions of the two groups who move blacks to the safety of freedom are mentioned in this section of the novel. Naomi asks Albert again about the differences between going to the North and the South to freedom. He explains the closest stop on the Underground Railroad is in Virginia. Though the Railroad is very organized and safe, the journey to get to Virginia is difficult and unsafe. The group that helps slaves go south for freedom are called the Freedom Fighters. They move the slaves south under cover of hiring them out for a day or two, but the plantation owners are getting wise to their ways. He notes that Soledad's father was among the Freedom Fighters and that she was arranging for that group to come through Conyers in the next six months.



Important symbols in this section of the novel include the orange stripes on the satchels that the Freedom Fighters carry as well as the red yarn bracelet that Jackson makes for Josey. Albert tells Naomi that they will be able to recognize the Freedom Fighters by the orange stripe they have on their satchels, a stripe that he says symbolizes “sunsets and sweet fruit” (109) of their freedom. The red yarn bracelet that Jackson makes for Josey symbolizes his young crush on her.

Also important in this section is the signing of the Emancipation Proclamation. Although it is a physical symbol that the slaves have been granted their freedom, this freedom is still beyond reach for many of those in slavery.

## **Discussion Question 1**

Discuss Naomi’s feelings about her inability to do anything to protect Josey from George. How does she comfort Josey in the best way she knows how?

## **Discussion Question 2**

What does the reader learn about Cynthia and her life in this section of the novel? How does this information help develop Cynthia’s personality?

## **Discussion Question 3**

Why is Naomi so upset when Cynthia tells her that the law will not believe her if she tries to turn Cynthia in for killing her father?

## **Vocabulary**

duped, cleft, atonement, repenting, contemplation



## Part III, 18 / Flash - 20 / April 1863

### Summary

In Section "18 / Flash," Naomi thinks how unfair it is that on hot days women have to stay fully dressed but men can wear only thin shirts and pants that show their privates. Back at the brothel, Sam is talking to some men outside. When Sam finally comes back inside, he tells them the authorities had found the body of a plantation owner in Alabama. Ray adds some black person had killed a whole household including a "nigger stud" (141). Naomi knows they are talking about her family. Ray turns to Naomi and asks from where she came. Cynthia tells him it is none of his business.

In Section "19 / 1863," six months have passed since George raped Josey. Naomi plans to get revenge on George. She walks in the woods hoping that she can find someone who can teach her how to make contact with the living so that she can kill George.

Naomi visits Josey in her room. Even though the physical injuries of the rape have healed, Naomi can still see the horror in her eyes. Charles is so busy trying to plan a life for them in freedom that he has not noticed there is anything wrong with Josey. One night, she wakes from a nightmare and Charles sees fresh cuts on her legs. At this point, Charles worries that Josey is going crazy. He knows what that means for a slave. One woman had been killed after she admitted she had disturbing thoughts. In the morning when she comes through the curtain with a small smile, Charles tries to convince himself that she is not really sick.

The rumor that the blacks had been freed had never been verified by Annie. Slavedriver Nelson disappeared without warning and they were not sure where he had gone but they continued work as usual with another man taking his place. A preacher had told them they were free and had arranged a meeting for the slaves to talk about their freedom. Charles talks to Josey about freedom but she just sits at the table blank faced. He does not understand her reaction because she never told him about what George did to her. Naomi wishes she could tell Charles so that he could kill George. Naomi knows that even if Charles knew, however, George was gone. Naomi had heard Annie say that George had joined the fighting. Naomi also knows that Nelson has been fired by Annie because he told her that he had overheard her and George arguing about the cuts and bruises he had. Nelson assumed it had been because George had raped a woman.

Meanwhile, Charles continues to talk to Josey. She fidgets under the table. Naomi notices that Josey is using a sharp rock to cut her arm. When Charles notices, he yells at her to stop. He looks at the cut she has made on her wrist and she asks him why she cannot feel anything. She starts to tell him how George raped her the day they first learned they were free. She goes as far as telling him she had not wanted to ruin his happiness when he asks her not to ruin it. Naomi notices the weariness on his face. She knows it came from the night Naomi died, when Charles still went by the name of Albert.



On the night she died, Naomi discovered that Albert had followed her, hoping to save her. He had gotten to her before the other men and tried to cut the cord connecting Josey to her but the white men and the dogs found her. Slavedriver Nelson had found Charles laying in the woods. While Nelson was trying to determine if Albert was a free man or a slave, George had ridden up to tell Nelson that a man had just given Annie a baby. When Albert heard that, he said his name was Charles and that he was not free. Naomi realized he had given up his freedom for her.

In Section "20 / 1863," the blacks meet near the slave quarters at the Graham plantation. The preacher who had organized the escape tells them to divide themselves into two groups, one going west and the other going north. Charles asks Josey to decide and she says she wants them to go west. Shots are fired scaring those gathered. Slavedriver Nelson tells the people, with the exception of those from the Brown plantation, they are not free. The preacher tells the group those slaves will leave the next day and that anyone who wants can go with them. Dr. Mitchell joins the group, angry because he had given Nelson a job and Nelson had not done that job. As Charles and Josey stand among the blacks who are leaving, Dr. Mitchell reminds Charles specifically that if they leave they will be persecuted as run aways. Charles indicates to Josey that they need to get back to work.

## Analysis

Even though the slaves have been granted their freedom by the president of the United States, there is conflicting information given to the slave and sometimes no information at all. Charles and the others at the Graham plantation have been told nothing about their freedom. The owners of the slaves on the Brown plantation have been freed by their owners as commanded by the Emancipation Proclamation. Because most of the people in the South have separated from the North, they believe they are not required to abide by the rules set forth by the president. For this reason, many slave owners still plan to treat their slaves like runaways if they try to take advantage of their freedom.

In a major breakthrough the reader learns that the Charles who cares for Josey and the Albert who found Naomi and brought her to Cynthia's brothel are the same person. Even though Albert was black, he had been granted his freedom and had papers stating that fact. In order to try to stay with Naomi's baby, Albert lied to Slavedriver Nelson when he found Albert laying in the woods after Naomi was killed. He told Slavedriver Nelson the papers were not his and that his name was Charles.

This new information helps the reader to understand why Charles is so excited about the freedom granted to the slaves. Even though he had been treated like a black person when he was Albert, he knew he was free. He even had plans to go south where he could live in freedom. Now that a new chance had been offered for Charles to enjoy his freedom, he is excited by the prospects.

Meanwhile, Josey is caught up in a type of slavery from which she may never be free. She struggles to overcome the attack by George. She suffers nightmare and lacks



emotion. When Charles catches her cutting herself, she asks him why she cannot feel anything. Naomi worries that her daughter will be locked up in emotional slavery all of her life. Charles, who is unaware of what happened to Josey, worries that she is going mad. He knows if anyone discovers her emotional disturbances that she will be killed because a mentally unstable slave is too much trouble.

Even though Josey feels emotionally numb, she is still upset by the differences between herself and the man who raised her. When he talks about their opportunities if they are allowed to go free he says, “You can pass for white, he told her. Got more chances, he said. None like I got” (147). The irony of Josey’s appearance is that she does not look black. Because the people in the South are so prejudiced against black people, they consider a person black if he has just a small amount of black in his heritage. Because Josey’s mother was black, Josey is outcast from the whites and treated like a slave. In the South her lineage is a stumbling block for her. In free states, however, Charles tells her that people will judge her by her appearance. For this reason, Josey has better opportunities, even in free states, than a black person.

Naomi is haunted by her past when news of the murders in Faunsdale finally makes its way to Conyers. Notice that even though Naomi does not fit the description of the man believed to have been seen running away from the scene, Ray is still suspicious of her. Cynthia breaks in when Ray asks where Naomi is from. She knows Ray’s suspicion and knows that Ray will blame Naomi for the murders just because she is black. Of course, Cynthia also knows that Naomi really did kill a plantation owner, so she is also protecting Naomi for this reason.

## Discussion Question 1

Why are the Graham slaves not allowed to leave even though they have been granted their freedom? What makes Charles decide to take Dr. Mitchell’s advice and stay in Tallahassee?

## Discussion Question 2

How is Josey a slave to her emotions just like she and Charles are slaves on the plantation?

## Discussion Question 3

What might happen to Naomi if it were discovered she was the one responsible for killing the plantation owner? How does Cynthia help to protect Naomi’s secret?

## Vocabulary

scrunched, garments, heirlooms, riled, inciting



## Part III, 21 / April 1863 - 24 / April 1863

### Summary

In Section "21 / April 1863," Naomi follows a buggy headed toward Annie's house. She believes it is George but instead it turns out to be Richard. Bessie wakes Annie to warn her. Annie does not tell Bessie to open the door the first time that Richard knocks on it. Richard is angry when he is finally allowed inside. He scolds Bessie. Annie comments to him that she had not been expecting him. When Annie is instructing Bessie to make up a bed for Richard, he tells her that he has someone with him, a pregnant woman. Realizing the woman was pregnant with Richard's baby, Annie tries to hit him. When he returns with the woman Annie spits in her face. Richard slaps her. He says they will tell everyone that Katherine is a cousin visiting with them. He takes her upstairs to Annie's bed.

In Section "22 / Flash," Jeremy has taken Naomi fishing. For the first time, Naomi begins thinking about sex and how people say a woman who has had sex outside marriage had been devalued. Naomi wishes she could determine her own value. During their picnic lunch, Jeremy persuades her to drink some wine. When he touches her, she stops him because she does not want him touching her that way but then she remembers it is Cynthia who does not want him touching Naomi that way. Jeremy promises Naomi that he will take her from Conyers and live with her like a husband and a wife. She asked him to be the first one to have sex with her.

In Section "23 / April 1863" Naomi tries to step inside Annie's body. There is instant burning pain. Naomi steels herself and goes completely inside Annie. She can hear Annie's thoughts. She remembers how much they loved one another when they were first married. After his stroke, he had lost his sense of self-esteem and had pulled away from her. Now that he had come back she was determined that it would not be she who declared that their marriage was finished. She thinks perhaps if he can see how she can be kind even to the pregnant woman he brought home with him that she will win his love back.

When Bessie comes outside to ask Annie if she needs anything Naomi comes out of Annie. She follows Bessie into the house. In the kitchen, Bessie finally speaks to her asking what she is going to do. Naomi is surprised that Bessie can actually see her and communicate with her. Bessie warns Naomi that it will kill her if she keeps trying to get inside people. Bessie tells Annie that if she wants to go home, she has to forgive. Forgiveness, she says, is not about the man who hurt Josey, but should be done to help Naomi and Josey.

In Section "24 / April 1863," as Naomi is leaving the Graham house, Bessie is ushering Kathy out onto the porch with Annie. Kathy is loud and talks nonstop about the weather. Annie asks if they can just sit quietly but Kathy cannot be quiet. She makes jabs at Annie mentioning how hot it was when she married Richard and how they had learned



how Annie had brought Josey into the house for medical treatment. She tells Annie that Richard hired Nelson back even though Annie had fired him. Kathy goes on to tell Annie how Richard had said that marrying Annie was the worst mistake of his life. Bessie offers more tea and Kathy refers to her as a savage and says she does not trust them. She wishes there was a way to get rid of them.

Hoping to silence Kathy, Annie tells her that she does not know everything. Josey and Richard's accident are both secrets between Richard and Annie of which Kathy has no knowledge. The accident happened the day of Josey's first birthday. He'd had the stroke when he was speeding in his carriage. He hit a tree and was thrown into a creek. When Richard woke, he had lost his memory. He would only allow Charles, who was the one who found him, to take care of him. Richard never regained the love he had for Annie and Josey. When he discovered that Josey was part black, he gave her to Charles. Annie was secretly happy that Kathy did not know that Josey was the first baby Richard had loved.

Kathy continues to be crude and asks Annie if Richard left her because she could not have children or because she was old. Annie responds that should not be the question Kathy should be asking, she should be trying to figure out how to keep her baby from being born without a father. Annie seems ashamed for the first time and admits to Annie that she had not realized that Richard was married. Kathy suggested they needed a safe place to raise the baby and Annie asked if Kathy had come with the intention of taking her property. Kathy replied they could not survive in the world alone and Annie informed her "Whores survive. Women live" (194).

## Analysis

Even though she had thought Bessie could see her a few times before when they crossed paths, Naomi is certain that Bessie knows she is there when the woman speaks to her. Naomi is apparently not the first spirit who has approached Bessie because Bessie comments that Naomi's sort were always coming and bothering her. Bessie warns Naomi that if Naomi continues with her experimental possessions of the living, even her spirit form will be killed.

Bessie additionally tries to give Naomi some advice about the way that she needs to handle her anger toward George. Naomi wants desperately to be able to get revenge on George but Bessie tells her that there is nothing that Naomi can do that will bring justice. Bessie tells Naomi the best way to handle her anger and help her daughter is to forgive George. Naomi considers Bessie's words but thinks that because she does not have any children, she is not the person who should be giving advice to a mother about her child.

An individual's value is discussed in this section as Naomi tells herself that she wants to be able to determine her own value. She feels that she is devalued because she is a woman and she is black. Meanwhile, the one thing that people say add to her value is her virginity. She wants to be able to decide if and when she gives her virginity away.





She knows that Cynthia wants her to remain a virgin because Cynthia believes it will somehow redeem her. Naomi, however, has the feelings and desires of any other woman and wants her first time to have sex to be with Jeremy. She decides to accept his advances regardless of what Cynthia or anyone else wants for her.

Although she behaves herself as a lady, Annie is an example of a strong female character. Her husband has returned with the intention of moving in with his mistress and her baby, and perhaps even forcing Annie out. Kathy is sly and abrasive, trying to get Annie to lash out at her even as she pretends that she wants to be friends with Annie. Annie gets the upper hand on Kathy when she tells Kathy she should spend less time worrying about Annie and Richard's relationship and more time on trying to keep her baby from being born a bastard. Annie has the last word when she calls Kathy a whore.

Naomi shares with the reader the accident that changed Richard. He had his stroke when he was driving in his carriage and Charles rescued him from the creek bed into which he had fallen. Richard recognized no one and would only let Charles come close to him. After he regained his memory, Richard did not regain his love for Annie and Josey. Even though he had adored Josey before the wreck, he sent her away to live with Charles after he discovered that she was not a full blooded white child. This explains not only what happened in Richard and Annie's marriage but also how Charles came to have care of Josey.

Notice also Annie's response to Kathy's comment that blacks are savages and that she does not trust them. Annie suggests to Kathy that blacks are people, just like they are. Her defense of her house servant makes it appear that Annie is not as racist as some of the other characters in the novel. Even though she does allow these people to serve her and work her plantation, she considers them to be people, just like whites.

## Discussion Question 1

Discuss the encounter on the porch between Kathy and Annie. How does Annie manage to silence Kathy without stooping to her level?

## Discussion Question 2

Is Bessie right? Should Naomi forgive George for what he did to Josey? Is that her best course of action? Why do you think so? Support your answer with information from the novel.

## Discussion Question 3

As a black woman, how is Naomi's value different from others in the time period in which she lives? Why is it so important for her to be able to name her own value?

## Vocabulary

quivering, infringe, tandem, fathom, ascend



## Part III, 25 / Flash - 27 / Flash

### Summary

In Section “25 / Flash,” after two unsuccessful attempts at sex, Naomi thinks about the way that she and Jeremy finally had intercourse the night before. Cynthia interrupts her train of thought by pointing out that a priest had just ridden up to the saloon. She allows the priest into the bar only after she confirms he is not there to save her soul. She is angry, however, when she sees that he had dropped a pamphlet on her chair as he passed.

Jeremy walks past the two women on the porch and Cynthia knows right away from the reaction that Naomi has to his touch that the two have slept together. In her anger, she throws Jeremy from the porch and beats him. She tells Naomi that she has doomed them to hell. Naomi sees disappointment and spite in her eyes.

In Section “26 / May 1864,” Naomi has not been able to take her revenge on George even though he has been back home for three weeks. Meanwhile, Josey has stopped leaving the house. She will not even go to wash unless Charles goes with her.

In Section “27 / Flash,” Naomi realizes that Cynthia will not let her stay around much longer because she is no longer of worth to her. Even though she continues to work every day, Naomi does not eat at Cynthia’s house. She eats with Albert instead. Jeremy continues to promise that he will take her with him when he goes.

During their breakfast one morning, Albert tells her that the Railroad will be coming through Conyers in the coming week. Back in the saloon, Naomi hears the songs of the church goers. She thinks how they do not need to pray for her because she is different from the other prostitutes who live there. She thinks that the love that she and Jeremy have is different from the relationships the prostitutes have with their men as they give away their bodies for Earthly pleasures.

Because it is her birthday, Naomi wonders what Jeremy will do to celebrate. As she walks past the doors to the gambling parlor, Jeremy walks out. He does not notice her at first. When he does see her, he asks her for the money he gave her. When she gives it to him he accuses her of having spent some because he remembered giving her more. He needs the money because he has lost in a poker game. Naomi suggests it is time for him to stop gambling.

Jeremy talks to Naomi, whom he calls Mimi, getting her to admit that she would do anything for him. He asks her to offer oral sex to Mr. Shepard in exchange for the expungement of Jeremy’s debts. Naomi slaps him. When she sees that he is about to walk away from her, she calls him back. She walks into the gambling parlor and closes the door. Mr. Shepard knows right away that Jeremy had sent Naomi in to try to pay for his debts. He suggests to Naomi that she leave Jeremy. When Naomi still does not



leave he asks Naomi to tell him what she would do for him. He is rough with her, pushing her cheek against the door as he tells her about the things he could do to her. He finally pushes her out of the room.

Jeremy holds her and tells her that he does not care about the money. He does stop and ask how much she got. When she tells him she got nothing he is at first angry with Mr. Shepard believing the man did not pay her. When Naomi tells Jeremy that Mr. Shepard did not want her, he asks only how hard she tried.

## Analysis

In her innocence, Naomi continues to believe that Jeremy means what he says to her even though he treats her badly. She believes that he will take her with him when he goes away even though he does not even provide her with food after her fall out with Cynthia. Naomi's biggest heartbreak comes when Jeremy asks Naomi to offer Mr. Shepard oral sex after he lost such a good deal of money gambling. Mr. Shepard, like many others, tells Naomi that she needs to leave Jeremy before he corrupts her. He treats her roughly, perhaps hoping it will be such a bad experience that Naomi will break things off with Jeremy.

There are a good deal of behaviors on Jeremy's part that prove Naomi can do better. First of all is his addiction to gambling. He has had to sell all of the valuables in his house and has used any money he had saved to pay off his gambling debts. He lies to Naomi and tells her that he is gambling with the hopes he will make money for their future. Mr. Shepard even comments how pitiful Jeremy is compared to the other men who send their women in to offer sex acts in exchange for money. He indicates the men will usually wait a week or at least a day before stooping to asking their women to earn back their money. Jeremy makes one statement to Naomi that makes the reader wish that Naomi would slap him. When Naomi tells Jeremy that Mr. Shepard did not pay her because he did not want her, Jeremy asks Naomi how hard she tried. The indication is that Naomi did not do enough to sell herself, a situation into which no good man would even force a woman.

After losing her virginity, Naomi has to rethink her identity. "I ain't like these whores here. We're alike in the way that all women are, but the root of us ain't the same. They value things that ain't worth nothin, throw away their lives for pretty things that Albert can melt down and burn up" (208). Even though she, like the women who work for Cynthia has had sex outside the bounds of marriage, Naomi does not consider herself on the same level as the prostitutes. She draws this line of difference because the women who are prostitutes are selling themselves for things that can easily be destroyed. Naomi believes that her relationship with Jeremy is based on love. Even though the prostitutes believe they are getting what they want for the services they provide, Naomi believes that they pay dearly for what they get. "But in private, they earn every bit of it, trading their God-made bodies for man-made shit. Exchange their everlasting souls for combustibles" (208).



Cynthia continues to show evidence that her relationship with God and her opinion of redemption is strange. Cynthia gets angry when the priest comes to the saloon for a drink and even angrier when he leaves a religious pamphlet there. She claims she does not want the priest to try to redeem her. Instead, Cynthia puts pressure on Naomi to redeem her through her virginity. Naomi crosses Cynthia when she decides that she should be able to do what she wants with her body. When Cynthia learns that Naomi is no longer a virgin, Cynthia tells her that her actions have doomed them all to hell.

## Discussion Question 1

What is your opinion of Jeremy at this point in the novel? Give examples from the novel to support your opinion.

## Discussion Question 2

Discuss Cynthia's belief that Naomi's act of having sex with Jeremy has doomed her to hell. Do you think Cynthia's belief that somehow Naomi's virginity can help her redeem herself is rational? Why or why not?

## Discussion Question 3

What do you think of Naomi's plan to take revenge on George? Do you think she will be successful in doing so? Why or why not?

## Vocabulary

cinched, establishments, convert, tones



## Part III, 28 / May 1864 - 32 / June 1865

### Summary

In Section “28 / May 1864,” Naomi imagines how the love between Annie and Richard must have been when it was new. Despite the love they must have once had for each other, Richard has brought another woman to sleep in Annie’s bed.

Dr. Mitchell is examining Kathy as she lays in Annie’s bed. The men talk war and Kathy tries to join but they downplay her comments, especially when she speaks badly of the Confederate soldiers. She does commend the doctor for agreeing to deliver her baby. She comments that she does not want blacks touching it. As he examines her, Kathy notices the doctor rubbing her hair between his fingers and looking at the cleavage exposed by her sundress. Kathy draws his attention to her breasts asking if they will be enough for her baby to nurse. She then lifts her dress over her baby bulge when the doctor began to examine her belly, shocking both Richard and the doctor. Kathy continues to flirt with the doctor, telling him her husband was dead and crying so the doctor would comfort her. She told him that if she could find a new husband like him, she and her baby would be blessed.

When the doctor is gone, Kathy tells Richard that her baby will have a father. She also tells Richard that she does not want to live there. She does not want to take the house away from Annie. He tells her that he will sell everything in the house to get money so they can have their own future. Intending to prove he is sincere, Richard goes to Annie and tells her that he wants a divorce.

In Section “29 / January 1865,” Naomi notes that even though the Civil War is bringing the blacks freedom, everyone is hungry and needs work as a result of the war. There are only 14 slaves remaining at the Graham plantation, including Josey and Charles.

Naomi has a bittersweet memory of a night when Josey had woken Charles and asked him what happened to her mother. Charles had told Josey that Naomi was beautiful and courageous. He believes Josey has the same courage. Now, Charles watches Josey carefully. He keeps sharp and jagged things away from her. He even covers her hands with socks at night so she will not scratch herself.

As Josey is hanging up the clothes, she imagines she is racing Ada Mae with a rolling hoop. Josey has learned to determine for herself what is real and what is not real but she still does not recognize that a feral looking girl who has joined the game is real. Another woman runs out of the woods to hold Josey down while the first one steals their clothes. They disappear but Josey hears noises in the woods. A black man in a uniform steps out of the woods holding Josey and Charles’ clothes. It is Jackson. He picks Josey up and takes her into the house.



In Section “30 / Flash,” Naomi has been waiting two weeks for Jeremy to come back to work. When the Freedom Fighter had come by for her, Naomi had refused to go with him. Albert had been standing across the road in a field, watching her. She saw there was already a teenaged girl and a young boy in his wagon. Naomi still believed that Jeremy was her future so she told the man they were not open yet.

As she waits for Jeremy, Naomi wears the yellow dress he bought her so that he will be able to see how much she loves him. Albert comes into the saloon. She is afraid he is going to scold her for not going with the Freedom Fighter. Instead he tells her that the Freedom Fighter was caught. He was hanged and burned. The girl was maimed before she was returned to her owner. He does not know what happened to the boy. Albert explains someone who knew the route they took must have turned them in.

Naomi hears another set of shoes on the porch. It is the priest. He asks for Cynthia and she comes out even though she is not yet dressed and already drunk. The priest gives Cynthia a roll of money and then tells her about a temple up the road where there is a women’s group where she could find some help.

After the priest leaves, Cynthia starts a fight with Naomi. Cynthia threatens to send Naomi back to Alabama to be punished for killing the white man. Naomi shoots back and says she will tell others what Cynthia did to her father. Jeremy’s voice interrupts them. Cynthia orders Jeremy to take Naomi with him when he leaves. After Cynthia is gone, Jeremy tells Naomi that he is leaving. When she begins to talk about packing, he tells her that he is not taking her with him. Naomi does not understand when he walks away without her.

In Section “31 / Flash,” Naomi sits in the saloon waiting for Jeremy to come back until her nausea forces her out onto the porch to throw up over the rail. Cynthia tells Naomi that she will not let her stay there another night and throws Naomi’s things out on the porch. Albert sees what is happening and tries to help but Naomi says that she does not want to see him. Cynthia throws a bottle at Naomi, barely missing her. Naomi runs as Cynthia draws back to throw another bottle.

In Section “32 / June 1865,” Naomi notes that in April 1865 the Confederacy surrenders the war. A bill is being passed to make slavery illegal. At the Graham plantation, George is missing again. Josey seems better because Jackson keeps her and Charles entertained with stories from the war. Jackson seems to have brought life back to the cabin. He is like a son to Charles and a savior to Josey. She had been shy around him at first and had refused to talk to him until he noticed she was still wearing the string bracelet he gave her for her fourteenth birthday.

Meanwhile, Richard did leave Annie. He took everything with the exception of one gun and one gun cabinet. Annie blames herself for the things that she did wrong, like giving up Josey. Meanwhile, a minister and his family travels through the area seeking food and rest at Charles’ cabin. While he is there, he performs a marriage ceremony for Josey and Jackson.



## Analysis

Relationships in marriage are discussed in this section of the novel. Naomi reminds the reader how Annie and Richard must have flirted with one another and felt excited just to be near one another like Jackson and Josey feel when they are married. At the end of their relationship, however, Richard has betrayed Annie by bringing another woman, who is carrying his child, into Annie's house. Even relationships started in joy and deep love can end in disappointment and betrayal.

The woman for whom Richard gives up Annie is not worthy of Annie's position. She is a manipulative liar proven by the way she notices the doctor's attraction to her and plays on it. She lies to the doctor telling him that her husband has died and that she wishes she could have a new husband like the doctor. The doctor is drawn in by Kathy's lies while Richard is angered. Kathy is intending to manipulate him into divorcing Annie. Kathy shows some humanity only when she tells Richard that she does not want to take Annie's house away from her.

The interaction between Kathy and the doctor shows the strength of women and the way these strong women use their bodies to manipulate the weaknesses of men. Kathy is aware that the doctor is attracted to her and she uses this attraction to get what she wants out of him. With a question about her ability to nurse a baby, Kathy draws attention to her breasts, features of which she has noticed the doctor has already taken note. By the time the appointment is finished, Kathy has gotten the doctor so aroused sexually that he is ready to commit to marriage. Of course, Kathy's intent is not to get the doctor to marry her, but to get Richard to agree to marry her.

On a more innocent note, Jackson and Josey, childhood sweethearts do get married. Two objects are significant in their relationship. The first of these is the red string bracelet that Jackson gave Josey as a gift on her fourteenth birthday. When Jackson returned home from the Civil War, Josey did not speak to him until the day that he pointed out she was still wearing the bracelet that he had given her. The second significant object in the relationship between Jackson and Josey is the yellow ribbon that Charles ties on the back of the wagon taking the newly weds to their new home. This ribbon indicates that the two were married in freedom.

The dangers for slaves attempting to escape the South is illustrated in this section of the novel. Albert and Naomi had discussed traveling south to Texas with the Freedom Fighters but Naomi chooses to turn down the invitation when a member of this group comes by her door. At this point she still believes that Jeremy will take her away to safety. Naomi later learns that the Freedom Fighter who offered her passage was caught and killed. He was burned and left hanging from a tree. One of the slaves who had tried to escape with him was maimed before she was returned to her owners. Albert and Naomi both seem to feel a bit of unease since they had considered seriously joining the group.

Even though Naomi is still under the spell of Jeremy's love, she realizes what a good man Albert is. She tells her reader, "He'd never push me the way my sister Hazel did





that night she told me to run, and this satchel man was my chance to make her sacrifice worth something, make James's and Momma's killings meaningful. Make it so I belong to myself and my future" (235). Even though Albert might believe that running was in Naomi's best interests, he was going to let her make up her mind by herself.

## **Discussion Question 1**

Compare and contrast the relationship between Annie and Richard with that of Josey and Jackson. What is the author trying to say through the description of Annie and Richard's early relationship as well as what their lives have turned into?

## **Discussion Question 2**

Discuss the way that Kathy manipulates the doctor. What is she trying to prove?

## **Discussion Question 3**

How does Jackson's return to Tallahassee change life for Josey and Charles?

## **Vocabulary**

utilize, marauding, aversion, anarchy, feral, maimed



## Part IV, 33 / Flash - 34 / June-November 1865

### Summary

In Section “33 / Flash,” Naomi goes to Soledad’s house, hoping that she will give her a place to stay. When she smells the food cooking in Soledad’s house, Naomi gets sick again. As she is sitting next to the house, Naomi hears Bobby Lee telling Soledad that he cannot go through with their plans even though Mr. Shepard is out of town. Bobby Lee tells her that even though they had slept together before, it was not right and he did not want to do it again.

After Bobby Lee left, Naomi finally gets up the courage to knock on Soledad’s door. Soledad prepares food for Naomi then promises to fix up a bed for her after they are done eating. Soledad claims they have a bond because they understand who Cynthia is. As they talk, however, Soledad realizes that Naomi had a closer relationship with Cynthia than she did. Soledad remembers eating Cynthia’s left overs and being made to sleep on the floor. Soledad seems to be upset when Naomi indicates that Cynthia does not talk about her or anybody. The tone of the conversation changes when Naomi admits that Cynthia never sold her for sex. At this point in the conversation, Soledad asks Naomi if she knew that Cynthia’s father owned slaves whom he mistreated. Before going to the kitchen, Soledad comments that Naomi and Cynthia were apparently better friends that she and Cynthia ever were.

Soledad returns from the kitchen with a glass of gin. She asks from where Naomi came and then mentions the murders in Faunsdale. After several minutes of silence, Soledad asks Naomi why she is there. Naomi finally admits that she has heard that Soledad helps people go south to freedom. Soledad says she can help Naomi but Naomi notices the way she is looking at her, that she is not making eye contact and realizes she is lying. Naomi changes her story and says she does not want to go anywhere. Soledad informs Naomi she is not like her father, a Freedom Fighter, who she refers to as a fool.

Soledad begins talking about the way she met Cynthia. Her father had taken care of Cynthia after he found her beside her dead father. Soledad adored Cynthia and wanted to be just like her. Soledad’s father arranged for her to be married to an old man. She went to Cynthia and begged her to take her away so she would not have to marry him. Soledad indicates she did one thing wrong and that was all it took for Cynthia to dispose of her. As Soledad begins cleaning up the dining room she tells Naomi that she does not have a place for her to stay. She also says that no more Freedom Fighters will be coming to offer her passage to freedom.

In Section “34 / June-November 1865,” Jackson and Josey travel in a wagon with a yellow ribbon tied on it to the house where Jackson grew up with his mother. It is where they will live. Jackson had begun cutting a path through the woods, a direct line to



Charles' cabin so Josey could visit without being afraid of the woods. When he mentioned his mother could also use it if she needed to escape the house, Sissy was angry because she believed she was being demoted to second place. She belittled Jackson but Josey loved him anyway. He loved her because she was not like his mother. He hoped he would be what she needed to keep her sickness away.

It was out of his love for Josey and his desire to see her well that he built an outhouse indoors. Despite all of his hard work, both of the females said they would not use the indoor outhouse. When Josey remarked she also would not shovel the waste from under the house Jackson reminded her that she could not do that work because she was pregnant. Sissy was angry because Josey was two months along but she had not been told about the pregnancy yet. When Sissy belittles Jackson again, he destroys the seat he had fixed up for the outhouse and goes outside. Sissy is the only one he will allow near him. Josey tries to fix the damage Jackson did to the outhouse. She cuts herself using a piece of wood.

## Analysis

Naomi took Soledad up on her offer to let her stay there if anything ever happened between her and Cynthia, but it appears right from the start that Soledad is trouble. As Naomi is sitting beside the house, waiting to get up the courage to knock on Soledad's door, Bobby Lee leaves the house. Soledad had apparently invited him there with the intention of having a romantic evening while her husband was away. While they are on front porch, Naomi hears enough of the conversation to indicate to her that Soledad might have tricked Bobby Lee into having sex with her because he thought Mr. Shepard had abused her. He reminds Soledad that he had confronted Mr. Shepard about the alleged abuse but Mr. Shepard had denied it. Bobby Lee regrets having slept with Soledad that night and refuses to do it again.

Once she is inside Soledad's house, it appears that Soledad is pumping Naomi for information. She asks about Naomi's relationship with Cynthia and discovers that Cynthia treated Naomi better than she did her. This angers Soledad. Soledad explains to Naomi that she was once one of Cynthia's projects also but that she had done one thing wrong and had fallen out of grace. The story she tells is similar to Naomi's experience with Cynthia.

More sinister are Soledad's questions about Naomi's background and her suggestion that perhaps she was somehow involved in the murders in Faunsdale. While she has heard that Soledad is a representative with the Freedom Fighters, Naomi does not admit she wants to travel to freedom when she sees that Soledad's expression has changed and that her eyes are no longer focused on Naomi's eyes. Before she throws Naomi out of the house, Soledad threatens Naomi by telling her that no more members of the Freedom Fighters will be coming to offer her trips to freedom.

This unusual conversation between Soledad and Naomi raises the question if perhaps it was Soledad who turned in the Freedom Fighter and escaping slaves. If Albert is right in



his knowledge that Soledad helps to arrange the visits by the Freedom Fighters, she would probably have known the route the group would take out of the town. If Soledad has held a grudge all along against Naomi because of her friendship with Cynthia, Soledad could have arranged the massacre thinking that Naomi would be among the slaves being snuck out of town. It appears that Soledad's relationship with Cynthia was that of romantic love as well as infatuation on Soledad's part. Seeing herself replaced by Naomi would have made her angry and jealous enough to want to cause Naomi harm or even death. Her manipulative use of the Freedom Fighters allows her to practice her racism by picking and choosing which slaves were granted freedom and which were bound for more abuse.

Meanwhile, Josey and Naomi's lives seem to parallel as they are both living with the consequences of their first loves. Naomi's heart is broken because Jeremy has left her even though he promised that he would take her with him. Her sickness suggests she is possibly pregnant. It is in this delicate condition that Cynthia decides to kick Naomi out with no place to stay.

Josey, on the other hand, has married Jackson. Her troubles come from their decision to move in with Sissy, Jackson's mother. Sissy is jealous of Josey and competes with her for Jackson's attention. Meanwhile, Josey continues to struggle with her sickness. Jackson hopes to be able to cure her with his love. At the end of the section it is learned that Josey, also, is pregnant. Because of Sissy's anger and jealousy, it is not the happy announcement Jackson and Josey hoped it would be.

A significant object mentioned in this section of the novel is the yellow ribbon tied on Jackson and Josey's wagon as they drive away. It is a symbol that the two were married in freedom, something blacks were not able to do before the Civil War. Another significant object mentioned are the satchels with the orange stripes. When Soledad tells Naomi that no men bearing satchels with orange stripes will be coming to pay her a visit, the reader knows she is referring to the Freedom Fighters even though Soledad does not name that organization. Because Naomi has angered Soledad, she has lost the opportunity to use that organization for passage to freedom.

Literary devices continue to be used in this section of the novel. When Josey leaves with Jackson after their wedding, Charles is described as being "perched on the edge of his empty nest" (271). The analogy compares Charles to a bird whose babies have just flown away. When Jackson and Josey pass the plantation house, its broken shutters described in a simile as looking "like the saggy lids of an old man" (271).

## Discussion Question 1

Discuss the conversation between Naomi and Soledad. What kind of vibe do you get from Soledad? Is she a good character or an evil one? Use examples from the novel to support your answer.



## Discussion Question 2

Compare and contrast Naomi and Josey's places in life as described in this section of the novel.

## Discussion Question 3

Why is it significant that Jackson and Josey are able to marry in freedom? What does this mean to them?

## Vocabulary

righteous, jots, muddle, revolutionist, chastised



## Part IV, 35 / May 1866 - 38 / Flash

### Summary

In Section "35 / May 1866" Josey goes into labor. She is by herself because Jackson left to fight in the Indian War to the west. Like many of the other men in the area he felt he needed to fighting in order to be whole. Jackson had been beaten down by the responsibilities placed on him by having a sick, pregnant wife and an uncooperative mother. He had begun praying for healing for Josey when he snuck up behind her in the kitchen during her fifth month of pregnancy and discovered that she had cut her arms. He stopped praying when he found her laying at the edge of the woods. He fell beside her and cried, cried because he was ashamed of himself because he could not care for her properly. For a while, Charles had gone every day to visit Josey. He was lonely. Finally, he told Josey he was going west to fight in the war as well. He finally had felt Jackson could take care of Josey properly. By the time Josey's pregnancy was in its sixth month Jackson doubted his ability to care for her properly.

Meanwhile, Josey tries to be quiet in her labor pains because she does not want to wake Sissy. Sissy had accused Josey of being a whore because she did not bleed the night of her wedding to Jackson. When Josey finally screams in her pain, Sissy pulls her out of the cupboard to a birthing mat she had ready. Sissy belittles Josey and is cruel. Josey screams at her to shut up and get away.

Blood drips from Josey onto the sheets, something that Naomi knows it not supposed to happen. Josey slumps, unconscious. Sissy finally goes to Josey and shakes her, trying to wake her. She moves the unconscious woman into position and can see the head of the baby. She hollers at Josey to push. After the baby is free she takes it to Josey telling her that she has to wake up and take care of the baby boy. Josey groans again and Sissy sees the top of a second baby's head. The baby is silent by Sissy gets it breathing. It is a girl. Josey chose for her babies the last name Freeman.

In Section "36 / Flash," after leaving Soledad's house, Naomi went to Albert's shop. She lay on his bench and wondered if she was pregnant. When Albert sees her, she admits to him that she thinks she is pregnant. Albert tells her that if Cynthia agrees, she can stay with him until the baby comes. She asks what he wants in return, believing he will expect sexual favors, but he tells her that she has him confused with someone else.

Naomi asks Albert why he did not leave with the Freedom Fighter. She learns he had had opportunities to leave before and had not taken them because he sensed something was wrong. He said he had been trying to leave the night he found her but the people leading the group were disorganized. Albert described the signals given by the members of the Railroad to call for blacks wanting to escape to freedom.



In Section “37 / Flash,” Cynthia grudgingly allows Naomi to stay with Albert. In preparation for the baby, Naomi walks and tries to build her strength. She also takes care of Albert and tries to keep him alive after his accident.

Naomi describes hearing his screams coming from the shop. Albert runs out of the shop with his hair on fire and throws himself into the watering trough. Naomi tries to help him but he is so panicked she is not sure what to do. Layers of burnt skin are peeling off his head and face. He keeps dunking his head in the water trying to keep the burns from getting worse. After he finishes with the water, Naomi leads him back to the shop and goes for Cynthia.

When Cynthia arrives, she tries to give him medicine but he will not take it. She hangs up curtains around him to keep soot and dirt out of his wounds. She takes the bottle of whiskey he is holding from him and adds a syrup to it, turning her back to him as she does so. When she gives it back she orders him to drink. The medicine she added makes him sleep. Cynthia takes the opportunity to wash the burns. She instructs Naomi on how to take care of Albert. Before she leaves, she gives Naomi a soft look but warns her that it does not make them friends.

In Section “38 / Flash,” when Albert finally wakes, Naomi wonders if he wants to live but cannot see his eyes to tell. Albert looks around his shop and Naomi tells him she has been keeping it clean. She tries to keep him from talking but he does anyway. His attempts to talk make the scabs on his face crack and bleed.

## Analysis

The reader learns more of the background of Naomi and Albert’s relationship. Naomi, with Cynthia’s help is the one who nurses him through the injuries he receives in a blacksmithing accident. Albert’s unruly hair, his symbol of freedom, catches fire. The fire spreads to his scalp and face before he can get it put out. Naomi and Albert both believe that it was a new lotion that had been given to Albert that perhaps acted as an accelerant for the fire.

Before his accident, Albert agreed to let Naomi stay with him until the baby was born. Even while he is kind to her, he is still truthful. She asks what he expects from her in exchange for her room and board. Remembering what Cynthia has said to her about men and women not being able to be friends, Naomi expects that he will want sexual favors. He tells her that she has “got me mistaken for somebody else — maybe your baby’s father” (289). The insinuation is that Albert would not pressure Naomi for sex, even in exchange for favors he is doing for her. This action and statement reveals Albert’s kind and respectful character.

Notice the analogy that Naomi uses of the suspenders and pants to explain how the men of the country felt uncomfortable without a war to keep them occupied. Again, Naomi does not fully understand the workings of war or the workings of the men’s brains so she uses what she does know to describe what she believes the men are



experiencing. What she describes sound like what we call post traumatic stress disorder in modern times. She says of the men: “The ones who weren’t flinching at every loud sound and sinking into madness, seemed like they needed guns and to be afraid and needed somebody else to pay with their lives for new anger” (278). It is for this reason, and also because he feels overwhelmed by Josey’s illness and Sissy’s hatefulness, that Jackson signs up to fight in the war against the Indians.

Jackson leaves Josey alone in a bad relationship with his mother. Josey so dislikes Sissy that Josey will not even call her when she goes into labor. Of course, Sissy has been unfair to Josey since their first encounter with each other. Sissy was the one who saw to it that Josey did not get to grow up as Annie and Richard’s daughter. Josey is also careful to check the sheets the morning after Jackson and Josey’s wedding. When she sees there is no blood on the sheets she accuses Josey of being a whore. Her judgement is unfair because Josey did not bleed because she had been raped.

Significant for Josey is that she gives her children the last name of Freeman. Just like she and Jackson were married in freedom, her children were born in freedom. Being born in freedom is a great step forward for the children compared to the things blacks had to do in the past in order to get their freedom. Before his accident, Albert and Naomi have a discussion about the Railroad and why Albert had not yet left the South. Even though the Underground Railroad and Freedom Fighters alike offer blacks passage to freedom, their safety is not guaranteed. Albert had met with conductors for the Railroad before and found them so disorganized he feared they would not reach their destination safely. He shares with Naomi that the night he had found her in the woods, he was on his way back from meeting with a group from the Railroad. He had not gone with that group, just like he had not gone with the Freedom Fighter, because he sensed something was not right.

Remember in this section the signals that Albert describes to Naomi. These signals indicate that the Railroad is nearby, taking people to safety. He tells Naomi these signals include strange sounding bird calls and whistles, along with three flashes of light.

## Discussion Question 1

Remember Naomi’s indication from Section “5 / 1850” that she wished Charles (who we know is the same person as Albert) had been the one she loved. Do you sense that Charles is in love with Naomi? Why or why not? Use information from the book to explain your answer.

## Discussion Question 2

Discuss Josey’s desire not to have Sissy involved in the labor and delivery of her babies. How does Sissy’s attitude change when Josey yells at her and then Sissy realizes that Josey is really having trouble in the birthing process?





## Discussion Question 3

Compare and contrast the ways that Jackson and Charles responded to Josey's sickness. Do you fault Jackson for not being able to handle what Josey does to herself? Is he being unrealistic because he believes his love should be able to cure her? Why or why not?

## Vocabulary

flinching, dependency, vulnerable, taut, compromise



## Part IV, 39 / 1870 - 41 / Flash

### Summary

In Section “39 / 1870,” Josey and her children walk to the market. The children are nearly five. Rachel looks like Josey but Squiggy has Jackson’s coloring. He is mentally handicapped. Because of her children, Josey’s sickness has left her. She realizes their care is more important than her pain. They are on their way to a new market that Annie has opened.

As they walk, a wagon passes. A man tries to help Squiggy because he fell. Naomi recognizes that the man is George. He recognizes Rachel and Squiggy, commenting that they are Josey’s children. He mentions that Rachel looks just like Josey. A woman notices George is too close to Rachel but George covers his actions by pretending to pull a coin from behind Rachel’s ear. George indicates to Rachel that she is special and that he will see her again.

In Section “40 / Flash,” Naomi indicates that the relationship between herself and Albert is close now because he came so close to dying. They help each other with almost everything. She compares their relationship to that of a sister and brother. One day she cajoles him into putting grease on her feet. She notices the way he takes his time and is careful with his motions. When he finishes he asks why she bothers and she comments without thinking: “Ain’t everybody gotta walk around ugly as you” (315). He turns his back to her and Naomi realizes he is crying. She tries to comfort him by kissing him but only stirs up emotions she wishes she had not.

Albert finally confronts Naomi because she has become so uncomfortable around him. He tells her that he wants to spend the rest of his life with her. He asks her to tell him if she feels the same way. Naomi apologizes and tell him that Jeremy took all the room she had in her heart for love. Naomi does agree to let her baby love Albert.

In Section “41 / Flash,” Naomi answers the door at Albert’s shop when Cynthia knocks. Cynthia asks Albert to leave, tells him that she needs to talk to Naomi in private. When he is gone she pulls her mother’s diary out and tells Naomi that things might have been different if she had actually read the diary earlier in her life. Naomi reads in the first entry that Cynthia points out to her that her mother was afraid that she was pregnant. She had been wooed by a rag salesman who had come to the house. Naomi stopped reading after the woman described how she and the salesman had sex. Cynthia encouraged her to start reading again with an entry in July when Cynthia was seven years old. In this entry the woman notes how her husband kept remarking that Cynthia did not look like him and that the males in his family only had male children.

Naomi handed the book back to Cynthia and commented that it must have been hard for her to not know who her father was. Cynthia told Naomi she had missed the point. Cynthia read from loose piece of paper one more entry. In it, Cynthia’s mother writes



how her husband found the diary and read a good deal of it before she realized what was happening. When her husband commented to her one day that Cynthia was not his, she paused and he took the pause as proof that the baby was not his. He beat her so badly that she could not even see. Cynthia's mother decided that she was going to leave him but was not able to do so. In a final letter written directly to Cynthia, whom she calls Leah, Cynthia's mother apologizes for what her father did to her and tells her that she always loved her.

Cynthia tells Naomi that since she has learned who her father was not and how her mother tried to get away, that she understands her mother better. She claims that she knows what she needs to do to help Johnny and Naomi. She asks Naomi to come back to the house so Cynthia can help her with the baby. Naomi refuses to leave if Albert cannot come with her so Cynthia arranges for him to come as well.

## Analysis

Most significant in this section is the change in Cynthia since she has read her mother's diary. Knowing that the man who sold her for sex was not her biological father gives Cynthia the strength she needs to forgive her mother. Once Cynthia forgives and stops living in the past, she is able to see the ways in which she can become a better person. It is just like Bessie told Naomi in a past section of the novel that trying to get revenge was not productive but it was through forgiveness that Naomi could move forward with her life.

Because of her changed perspective, Cynthia allows Naomi to move back into the house with her. When Naomi refuses to come if Albert is not allowed as well, Cynthia makes room for him too.

There finally comes a point in the relationship between Albert and Naomi that they have to face the sexual tension between them. Because Naomi is still in love with Jeremy, she tells Albert that she cannot love him. Even though Albert is disappointed and hurt by Naomi's response to him, he is delighted when she tells him that she will encourage the baby to love him.

Although Naomi may not have a sexual love for Albert, she does love him in other ways. During the encounter in which Albert is hurt by Naomi's offhanded comment that he is ugly, Naomi cries at her crudeness. "I cried because being negro is hard enough. I cried because I wished I had his courage. And because, in that moment, I was certain that even if he didn't want for me to be his family, I wanted him to be my friend" (312). In this section Naomi cries for Albert because she knows the burn scars on his face and head will cause him to be more alienated than just the fact that he is a negro. She also cries because she realizes how much courage Albert has. She admires this courage and wishes she had something worthwhile to offer Albert in return.

A problem is developing in Josey's world because George has come back. He has his sights set on Rachel, whom he recognizes as Josey's daughter. He goes through the



same pattern of activities he did with the other children he has tried to sexually abuse. He tries to befriend her by performing a magic trick, similar to his earlier enticements of giving the children a toy. His words to Rachel that she is special and that he will see her again have the sound of a threat as they foreshadow that George intends to try to rape Rachel, just like he did Josey.

In this section Josey demonstrates how strong a woman can be when she has children whom she needs to care for and protect. The sickness that has bothered her since she was raped by George has been healed because Josey realizes her children need her energy and her care. They need her whole more than she needs to dwell on the hurts of her past.

## Discussion Question 1

Why is it so important to Cynthia that she has learned who she is not? What does this mean to her?

## Discussion Question 2

Discuss Naomi's inability to love Albert. Do you admire her for her honesty or do you think she is a fool for passing up a good man? Use examples from the novel to support your answer.

## Discussion Question 3

What does George's interest in Rachel foreshadow? How will this affect both Josey and Naomi?

## Vocabulary

taut, bantam, pauper, fortnight, engorge



## Part IV, 42 / 1869 - 45 / Flash

### Summary

In Section "42 / 1869," Naomi tries to determine if it would be best for her to kill her spirit by possessing someone in order to kill George or stay alive to watch over her daughter and grandchildren. Naomi believes it is sometimes just important to be there for someone. She thinks that Sissy learned this when she discovered a dead body floating in a creek. The person looked just like Sissy and spooked the old woman. Since that time she has been more cooperative about helping Josey.

Sissy had put a lock on the cabinet in which Jackson had built the inside outhouse. She is the only one who had a key. One day she brought a box of food out of the locked cabinet and apologized to Josey for hiding the food from her. Being in a confessional mood, Sissy told Josey how she and Annie had once been best friends. They had gotten married about the same time and had hoped that they would get pregnant at the same time. Neither of them got pregnant. Sissy's husband died but she still hoped Annie would have a baby. Annie got a baby the night that Bobby Lee brought Josey to her. Caring for the new baby took Annie's time away from Josey. Even though they no longer spent time together, Annie still trusted Sissy and Sissy told her she thought the baby had some black blood. Instead of being grateful, Annie resented Sissy for telling her the truth about Josey. Because Sissy did not want Annie to have a chance to cover up Josey's suspected blood lines, Sissy spread some rumors to the right people. Annie's heart was broken when Richard gave Josey to Charles and Josey eventually forgot that Annie had ever been her mother.

In Section "43 / Flash," Cynthia celebrates her Bat Mitzvah with a private party. This celebration is traditionally the coming of age ceremony for a Jewish girl. She had been taking Hebrew lessons and religious classes from the son of a Rabbi. She claimed she had come to believe there must be more to life than just chasing what felt good.

After the party is over and Naomi is helping Sam clean up, there is a knock on the door. It is Jeremy. Naomi has her back to Jeremy. He tells her that he does not blame her for not wanting to see him. She is able to see his reflection in the window and believes that it is her tears that are keeping her from seeing Jeremy's left arm and hand. At the same time she turns to ask what happened to his arm, he notices she is pregnant. Albert walks in on the scene, asking if Naomi has saved him a plate. When he sees Jeremy, he leaves. Jeremy makes an assumption and tells her he thinks the baby is overdue if it is his. He points out how small she is and tells her that he thinks she is a whore. Naomi tells Jeremy that Albert is not the baby's father but that he did take care of her after Jeremy left her. He suggests when the baby is born they can see who it looks like. Naomi tells him it will favor Albert. This time Naomi was not sad that Jeremy had left.



In Section “44 / Flash,” Naomi is unable to sleep because of the baby. She cleans the saloon even though there is not much to do because Cynthia has closed her business. She is trying to decide what she wants to do next.

In Section “45 / Flash,” Naomi indicates that a person will not completely understand things that other people did and how those things influenced their lives until they are dead and have their own flashes. In this flash, Naomi is in the cellar arranging bottles of liquor. Albert had just finished laying a wood floor in the cellar and Naomi has been cleaning up down there. It is the last day they have to work on the liquor storage before Cynthia reopens. She plans to have only a saloon and gambling parlor.

Naomi indicates that across town at the Shepard house, Mr. Shepard had just recovered from food poisoning. He had intended to do a good deal of different things before he helped Cynthia with her grand opening but instead he was resting. His intentions had been ended by Soledad. She sat eating her stew. It is when she reaches for a tortilla that she notices the blood on her hands. At the same time, Naomi is helping Albert put the liquor cabinet into the cellar.

Back at Soledad’s house, Mr. Shepard lays gurgling on the floor. Soledad tells him that she deserved better than him. He had been woken from a nap by a stab to the chest. He began fighting, causing the wounds on his arms and hands. There was a wound on his neck and another in his gut where the knife had been driven and twisted. It was still there. Meanwhile, Albert tells Naomi that he will understand if she still wants to leave and be with Jeremy. She asks him what Jeremy has that he does not. When he smiles his crooked smile, Naomi thinks that she loves him. As Albert and Naomi are talking, Soledad is shaking Mr. Shepard. She runs through the house and out the front doors. She is screaming that her husband is dead and that Naomi killed him.

## Analysis

Tension peaks at the end of this section of the novel as the reader sees what is happening to Naomi. Just like Naomi says: “Other people will make choices for you, about you — win or lose, work or won’t, live or die — and you’ll have missed it” (351). The choice to which Naomi refers is the choice that Soledad made, either consciously or unconsciously, to kill her husband and then blame his death on Naomi. It is this lie on Soledad’s part that leads to the end of Naomi’s life.

Rumor has circulated that Soledad was crazy. Naomi’s evening with the woman seems to back up that rumor. Now, Soledad has killed her husband. Her act of sitting at the table and eating even while her husband lays dying indicates that she is not in a proper mindset. The reader may want to take note that Mr. Shepard is at home because he has been suffering with food poisoning. One has to wonder if Mr. Shepard got this food poisoning from something he ate that Cynthia fixed and if perhaps that was her first attempt at killing him. When he survives the poisoning, she decides to stab him to death. The scene is gruesome with Mr. Shepard riddled with stab wounds. The knife still



sticks out of his stomach. It is a scene of a killing done in anger, hate and perhaps madness. Soledad blames this murder on Naomi.

Naomi has had a final encounter with Jeremy, one that seems to cure her of her love for him once and for all. He accuses her of being a whore and having slept with someone else while he was away. Jeremy suggests that they wait until the baby is born so they can see who the child favors. When Naomi tells him “My baby’ll favor Albert” (344) this statement can be given more than one meaning. Because Naomi is certain the baby will not look like Albert because it is not his child, she is perhaps telling Jeremy that the child will be like Albert in the way it behaves and treats others. The idea of the baby favoring Albert can also mean that Naomi intends to see to it that the baby loves Albert as its father instead of Jeremy.

Meanwhile, true to her word, Cynthia makes major changes in her life. She celebrates her Jewish coming of age ceremony, a rite of passage generally for a girl of 12 years old. She additionally decides to reopen her business with just a saloon and gambling, no prostitution. While some see gambling and drinking as deadly sins, this is definitely a step in the right direction for Cynthia.

## Discussion Question 1

Why is it significant that Cynthia wears her wedding dress for the celebration of her Bat Mizvahed?

## Discussion Question 2

Discuss what Soledad does to her husband. Do you think she intends to frame Naomi for the murder or does she come up with this explanation after she sees what she has done? Give reasons to support your answer.

## Discussion Question 3

How does Jeremy’s insistence that Naomi’s baby is not his finally cure her of her love for him? What do you think Naomi means when she says that her baby will favor Albert?

## Vocabulary

redeem, consequence, confessional, mischief, unrequited



## Part V

### Summary

In Section “46 / Homecoming 1869,” Naomi mentions that President Johnson has offered pardons to all Civil War soldiers who are deserters and war criminals. Despite the pardon, men who deserted the war are still killed. Naomi notes that even though the Civil War had been over for four years, there is still a good deal of anger.

Jackson has come home from the war. When he arrived home, his mother first asked if he had left with permission. He told her the army had not held up its end of the bargain and had given them bad supplies and rations. He also said that he was not going to treat the Indians the way that the blacks had been treated.

About a month later Jackson and Josey are playing with the children in the yard when they are spotted by a soldier who had deserted the war. He went back to his three friends who are camped in the woods and tells them he saw a black man and white woman living together like they were married. The Colonel is disgusted by the news and cocks his pistol indicating that he wants to kill the pair.

In her flash in Section “47 / Judgement,” even though it is dark outside Naomi is still busy arranging bottles of liquor in the cellar. She hears the feet of three men on the porch. There is beating and kicking on the door. Cynthia gets her gun and opens to door to find Henry, Ray and Bobby Lee there. Inside, Ray and Henry begin searching the building. Cynthia asks them what they are doing. They want to know where Naomi is. Cynthia lies and says she has been gone for months.

On their way to find what they believe is a multiracial family, the soldiers discover George. They tell him they are looking for a white woman and black man. George tells them the only white woman around is his sister. After one of the men, called the Colonel, throws George against a tree and threatens him, George tells them he thinks they are talking about Josey and Jackson. He points out where they live.

Back in Naomi’s flash, Bobby Lee tells Cynthia that Naomi killed Mr. Shepard. He tells her that Soledad said Naomi killed her husband because he found out she had killed the plantation owner in Faunsdale and was going to turn her in to the authorities. Cynthia kneels down to talk to Johnny. Meanwhile, she makes eye contact with Naomi and indicates that she run out the cellar door. Naomi knows she cannot do so without making a good deal of noise on the squeaky new floors.

Meanwhile in Josey’s story, Naomi runs to Josey trying to warn her about the soldiers coming. Rachel believes she hears a voice calling her mother’s name but they decide it is just the wind.





Back in Naomi's flash, Cynthia refuses to tell them men where Naomi is. Cynthia suggests they play a game. She empties her pistol's chamber of bullets and replaces only one.

Jackson and Josey are busy preparing lunch when the soldiers ride up in the yard. Jackson sees them when he opens the door. He slams the door and locks it. He orders his mother to open the pantry and Jackson directs them to leave the house through the hole in the floor. Once Josey and the children are outside he tells them to go to the old servants' quarters. He tries to get his mother to let him lower her through the hole but she refuses. She says she will not be run out of her house. She shoves him backward, closes the door to the pantry and locks him inside. As he struggles, she opens the door to the soldiers.

Meanwhile, Cynthia has the men's attention with her game. The noise they make covers the squeaks from the wood floor. As Naomi tries to run to the door leading outside, however, she is hit by the first labor pain.

Sissy greets the soldiers at her front door. They ask where Josey and Jackson are. They tell her they know that he was with a white woman. Sissy tries to tell them that Josey is not white but they cut her off. When she continues to try to reason with them, one of the men shoots her.

Back in Naomi's flash, Cynthia begins to pull the trigger on her gun. Naomi also hears the call of a bird, and then another strange birdcall. Cynthia pulls the trigger again. Naomi takes another step and the dogs hear the sound. They begin barking. Cynthia continues pulling the trigger. Naomi hears the birdcalls again along with flashes of light. She recognizes the signals of the Underground Railroad. Naomi hears a voice telling her to go. She makes a run for the cellar door.

Back with Jackson and Josey, Naomi heads to the plantation house, hoping to find Rachel there. She had located Josey and Squiggy in the woods but cannot find Rachel. She hears Jackson's footsteps as he runs toward the house. He is alone. He gets into the house through the library and tries to take Annie's gun but she catches him.

Outside the saloon, Soledad calls to the men asking if they have caught the person who killed her husband. Cynthia goes to Soledad and takes her hand. They seem hopeful for a moment before Cynthia puts the gun to her head again. This time the gun fires and blood seeps between the floorboards. Knowing that Cynthia is dead, Naomi jerks open the door and runs for the Railroad operators. She realizes that if she goes to the Railroad she will be putting all those people in danger so she changes directions.

As the soldiers ride into the yard, Jackson tells Annie that Josey is his wife and the love of his life, he asks that she see that no harm comes to Josey or her children. Annie goes to open the door when the soldiers knock. They ask for Jackson but Annie claims not to have seen him. When they tell her that Jackson has been accused of raping Josey, she tells them that even though Josey is light-skinned, she is not white.



Because she will not let them in, the men attack Annie. Jackson has left the rifle in the hallway. He jumps out the window in the library. The Colonel shoots at Jackson with his gun and Jackson falls. He starts to run to where Jackson is but Annie stops him with the rifle to his head. Just as the men are ganging up on Annie again, a General with the name of Bobby Lee Smith rides up. He stops the men from tormenting Annie and shooting Jackson again. Bobby Lee tells him if they turn themselves in, they will not be charged for their war crimes. The men leave and Annie turns to Bobby Lee. She asks if she knows him.

In Section “48 / The Rigor,” Josey is carrying Squiggy and calling for Rachel. Naomi recognizes that Josey is breathing hard and is not okay. Naomi has never seen her that afraid. Naomi fears that her daughter is giving up because she fears she has lost Rachel and Jackson as well. Knowing she can help her daughter, Naomi goes inside Josey. Just as she inhabits Josey’s body, Squiggy takes his mother’s hand. Naomi is able to feel her grandson through her daughter’s skin.

Naomi’s moment inside her daughter gives Josey strength. She hears Rachel crying. George has her. Josey hollers at him to leave Rachel alone before she collapses. When George finally recognizes who she is, he kicks her. He goes back to Rachel and cocks his pistol. He tells her it is a shame that they did not get a chance to play.

Knowing what she must do to protect her granddaughter, Naomi goes back inside Josey. Even though layers of herself are burning away, she makes Josey breathe and stand. Together they pick up a heavy rock. Josey takes over to slam it into the back of George’s head. Josey bashes George again and again with the rock. Naomi begins to lose all of her senses.

In Section “49,” Naomi realizes her time as a spirit is done. She stands in front of a tunnel of light. Her mother is holding her hand out for her and calling to her. Behind her, Naomi sees Josey walking away from George with both her children. Naomi feels caught between her daughter and her mother, but she also feels loved and no longer afraid.

## Analysis

In order to build tension, the author switches back and forth between Josey’s story and Naomi’s story in this final section of the novel. Many sacrifices are made. Cynthia sacrifices herself to give Naomi a chance to get to freedom. Naomi sacrifices her spirit self to allow Josey to be able to help her children. Sissy sacrifices herself to help Jackson get away from the Confederate soldiers. Naomi sacrifices the ability to perhaps get to freedom using the Underground Railroad because she does not want to put all of those people in danger.

Even though Bessie told Naomi she needed to try to forgive George, not get revenge, Naomi does get her revenge in a way. George has kidnapped Rachel with the intention of raping her, just like he did Josey. Because George is trying to hurt another child, the



murder of George is really done more in self-defense than out of revenge. Josey's anger as she bashes the man again and again with the rock does allow her to get some closure for all of the pain that he put her through.

Because Sissy has been so jealous and uncooperative for most of her life, the reader must wonder what she hoped to prove when she met with Confederate soldiers at the door of her house. Even though he claimed it was not the truth, Sissy believes that Jackson is a deserter from the army. She believes that is why the soldiers are after him. When she opens her door, she learns they are after him because they believe that he is sleeping with a white woman. Like Cynthia says at one point: "People don't get caught for the real thing they did wrong, Sam. They get caught for some lesser thing" (350). Sissy believes her son is a deserter while the men after him trying to kill him because he is married to Josey. Even though Sissy tries to tell them that Josey is black, the soldiers do not listen.

All of her life, Josey has had to argue about which race she belonged. Once again men are assuming because she has light skin and blonde hair that she is white. They choose not to listen to the people who tell them that Josey has black blood in her lineage.

At the end of her story, Naomi is finally able to accept the love of her mother. She is also able to accept the idea that she is courageous, just like her mother was. The imagery of Naomi's clothes peeling off and leaving her naked symbolizes the peeling off of the layers of lies and labels that have hidden Naomi's true self. Standing with her true self exposed, Naomi feels both loved and no longer afraid.

## Discussion Question 1

Of the many times that Cynthia has played her Russian Roulette game, why do you think she is killed this time, the time she is using her game for good?

## Discussion Question 2

What do you think is going on in Sissy's mind when she asks Jackson if he left the war with permission? Why is that so important to her?

## Discussion Question 3

Is George's death deserved? Why or why not? Under the circumstances is it a revenge killing or is it an act of self-defense?

## Vocabulary

treasonous, veering, battalion, diligent, rigarmortis, slough



# Characters

## Naomi

Naomi is the narrator and main character of this novel. She is a black slave who is killed by bounty hunters because it is believed she killed a man in Conyers, Georgia. Naomi did kill a man but it was a plantation owner in Faunsdale, Alabama. She was never accused of that murder.

Naomi narrates the story as a spirit after her death. She remains a spirit because she wants to watch her daughter grow up. Naomi also hopes to be able to protect Josey but realizes that she is not able to do so because she is only a spirit.

When Naomi is born, she is able to stay with her family only because her mother hid her from the plantation owner. All of Naomi's other sisters, with the exception of Hazel, were sold as slaves by the master. When the plantation owner comes in one day with the intention of having his man, Boss, have sex with Hazel, Naomi rams the plantation owner with a fire poker after he shot Hazel's fiancé.

To keep her sister from being killed, Hazel makes Naomi run away. Naomi is taken in by Cynthia, the owner of a brothel. Even though Cynthia hopes to keep Naomi innocent, Naomi is charmed by a white man, Jeremy, who gets her pregnant. Even though Jeremy promised he would take Naomi with him when he left, he leaves Naomi alone. Naomi is confused and hurt.

Her friend, Albert, offers to take her with him when he flees to the south on the Railroad. Even though Naomi thinks that it would make her mother and sister's sacrifices make sense, Naomi decides not to go because she thinks that Jeremy will come back for her. When Jeremy does come back, he calls Naomi a whore and says that the baby is not his.

As a spirit, Naomi is able to do little but just watch over her daughter and her family. She does get background on what happened to her when she was killed and learns why the men came after her.

Naomi is present with Josey when George rapes her. She is devastated because there is nothing she can do to help her daughter. Naomi swears to herself to find some way to get revenge on George. Bessie, the only character in the novel who is able to see Naomi, tells Naomi that she does not need to try to get revenge on George. She tells her instead that she needs to forgive him. Naomi does not think that Bessie knows what she is talking about as far as the forgiveness goes but worries that she is right when she tells Naomi that if she continues to try to invade other people's bodies, she will eventually kill even her spirit.

Naomi does not try to invade any bodies any more until the day that George kidnaps Rachel. Seeing that Josey is so stressed and weak that she is having asthma attacks,



Naomi uses what is left of herself to inhabit Josey's body and give her the strength that she needs to save her daughter. In the end of the novel comes a bittersweet moment when Naomi is able to touch her grandson through her daughter's body. Naomi is also able to give Josey the strength that she needs to kill George, saving her daughter from the experience that she had.

## **Albert Pyle aka Charles**

This character is significant because he plays important roles in both Naomi and Josey's lives. He is identified by two different names through the course of the novel. In Naomi's lifetime he is known as Albert. It is on the night of Naomi's death that Albert changes his identity to Charles. Albert is a free black man with papers stating he is free. When he is accosted by Slavedriver Nelson, and learns that Naomi's baby has been taken to the plantation where that slavedriver works, Albert tells the man that his name is Charles. He does this so that Slavedriver Nelson will take custody of him and take him to work on the plantation to which Naomi's baby had been taken.

In Naomi's story, Albert is the one who finds Naomi in the woods where she was suffering from injuries after jumping from the road to avoid a carriage. He works in a blacksmith shop near Cynthia's saloon and brothel. Even though Naomi is not attracted to Albert sexually, it is clear that he is attracted to her from the beginning. The two become friends and Albert tells Naomi the different ways that slaves can escape from the south. He promises to take her with him if he decides to go.

After Cynthia kicks Naomi out of her house for sleeping with Jeremy, Naomi winds up living with Albert in his blacksmith shop. Even though she is carrying Jeremy's baby, Albert agrees to take care of her. During her time there, Albert is burned badly on his head and face while doing his work as a blacksmith. Naomi takes care of him and grows very close to him at that point. Regardless of their closeness, Naomi still does not want to marry Albert. It is only after Jeremy accuses Naomi of being a whore that Naomi seems interested in Albert. It appears they might marry, if only out of convenience, but Naomi is killed before that can happen.

Through a series of strange incidents, Albert, who has changed his name to Charles and is working at Slavedriver Nelson's plantation, winds up raising Josey. Josey had first been taken to Annie, the plantation mistress, but Richard, Annie's husband, demands the baby be given away when he learns that it has black lineage. Because Charles had nursed Richard back to health after a serious accident and stroke, Richard gives Josey to Charles to raise. Charles is both a mother and father to Josey. After she marries Jackson and Charles sees that Jackson could take proper care of Josey, he joins the Indian War. No word is heard from Charles after this point in the novel.

## **Josephine "Josey"**

Josephine, most often called Josey, is the daughter of Naomi and Jeremy. Even though she is light skinned and has blonde hair, Josey works as a slave on the Graham



plantation. She had been adopted by Annie and Richard Graham when she was an infant but Sissy told the couple that Josey had black blood in her. Because of this, after Richard had his stroke, he forced Annie to give Josey up to Charles.

The day after she turned fourteen, Josey is violently raped by George. He catches her in the woods near her home where he abuses her sexually and emotionally for nearly six hours. Josey never tells Charles what happened to her. Charles does notice Josey shows signs of being sick in her mind. She has terrible nightmares, cuts herself and sometimes is too scared to even leave the house.

When Jackson, Sissy's son, returns from war, Josey begins to have some relief from her sickness. He arrives at the time some vagrants are stealing clothes from Josey while she is hanging those clothes on the line. Jackson gets the clothes back from the women and carries Josey, who passed out, into the house. Josey and Jackson were married by a pastor who stopped at Charles' house for shelter and food.

After several months of marriage, Jackson becomes overwhelmed by Josey's illness. Even though Josey is pregnant, Jackson signs up for another stint in the war to get some relief from his stress. Josey is left with only Sissy to help her have her babies. After a difficult delivery, Josey gives birth to twins, a boy and girl. The children help Josey recover from her illness because she realizes they need her to be healthy and whole.

Because Josey is light skinned. The Confederate soldiers who see her and Jackson playing with their children believe that she is a white woman. They decide to kill Jackson on the charge that he is raping a white woman. It is while the soldiers are chasing Jackson that Josey gets separated from Rachel. George finds Rachel and he tries to rape her, like he did Josey. Even though Josey is suffering with her asthma and barely able to stay conscious, her mother inhabits her body and together they kill George before he has the chance to hurt Rachel.

## Cynthia aka Leah

Cynthia, whom the reader later learns was given the name Leah, is the woman who takes Naomi in after she runs from her home. Cynthia owns a brothel and saloon. She believes that she can somehow redeem herself by helping Naomi remain a virgin. Cynthia is hurt when she learns that Naomi had sex with Jeremy, the slick white man who plays piano for her. She throws Naomi out of her house.

After Albert's accident, Cynthia teaches Naomi how to take care of him and tend to his wounds. She also provides Albert with a drug to help numb the burned areas and keep him asleep. Cynthia looks at Naomi with a soft look while she is giving her instructions but warns the girl that they are still not friends.

After Cynthia finally reads her mother's diary and learns that the man who sold her for sex was not her biological father, she has a different outlook on life. She additionally learns through the diary that her mother tried to leave the man who was her husband,



who abused them both, but was not able to do so. Cynthia finishes her religious training through the Jewish temple and closes down her brothel. She also allows Naomi back into the house for the baby to be born.

When Henry, Ray and Bobby Lee come looking for Naomi because they believe she killed Mr. Shepard, Cynthia does everything in her power to give Naomi a chance to escape from the cellar of her house, where Naomi had been arranging bottles of liquor. She attempts to distract the men from their search by playing her version of Russian Roulette. Unfortunately, Cynthia does not win this game and winds up shooting herself. Her sacrifice gives Naomi an opportunity to escape from the cellar.

## Soledad

Soledad is Charlie Shepard's wife. She worked for Cynthia before she got married and had her own home. As she is leaving Cynthia's house, in a drunken rage, Soledad tells Naomi she can come to her house for shelter if Cynthia ever kicks her out.

When Naomi does take Soledad up on her offer, Soledad is at first nice to Naomi but when she learns that Naomi, a black girl, was closer to Cynthia than Soledad ever was, she becomes jealous. She eventually tells Naomi that she does not have room for her to stay there.

During the course of the conversation, Soledad mentions her affiliation with the Freedom Fighters. Her tone indicates that while her father was a believer in transporting the slaves to safety, Soledad does not have much respect for the people whom she is supposed to be helping. In fact, it is suspected that it was Soledad who turned in the Freedom Fighter who had approached Naomi about transportation south. That Freedom Fighter was burned and hanged. One of the slaves he was trying to help was maimed before she was returned to her owners. Before Naomi leaves Soledad's house, Soledad tells her that no more Freedom Fighters will be coming to offer her safe passage. Soledad seems to be sending the message that she uses her affiliation with that group to help only those she wants to help.

One day after Mr. Shepard was recovering from food poisoning, Soledad stabbed him multiple times with a knife resulting in his death. She appears to be mentally unstable because she continues to eat while her husband lies dying on the floor behind her. When she realizes what has happened, she blames his death on Naomi.

## Jackson aka Wayward

Jackson is the son of Sissy. He becomes the husband of Josey, and father of Rachel and Squiggy. For a short while, before his given name is known, Naomi refers to the boy by the name Wayward because of his strange behavior.

As a young teen, Jackson gives Josey the gift of a red string bracelet on her fourteenth birthday. When he returns from fighting in the Civil War, Jackson arrives in time to stop



the vagrant women who had taken clothes from Josey. He becomes her salvation. For a short while, the symptoms of her mental illness seem to subside while Jackson is around.

Jackson is significant because he tries his best to care for Josey and hopes that his love will make her well. He prays ceaselessly for her after he catches her cutting herself one day. After they have been married several months, Jackson finds Josey passed out near the woods. He realizes he is not strong enough to make her better by himself. In order to get some relief, Jackson decides to go away to war. Josey encourages him to go.

When he returns home from his second stint at war, Jackson, Josey and the children have a happy life together until some Confederate soldiers see them together and believe that they are an interracial couple. For this reason they hunt Jackson down with the intention of killing him. Jackson is shot in the leg but he is not killed because General Bobby Lee Smith stops the Confederate soldiers from shooting him.

## **Annie Graham**

Annie Graham is the lady who takes Josey in when Bobby Lee discovers that the baby is alive. She is the wife of Richard and the sister of George.

Like many of the women in this novel, Annie is an example of a strong female character. She holds herself together after her husband is changed by a stroke and does not love her like he once did. She also survives after the baby she raised is taken away from her by her husband because he learned the baby had some black lineage.

Annie's husband, Richard, disappears for fourteen years, leaving her in charge of plantation. When he returns, he brings his pregnant mistress with him. He hopes to be able to take Annie's home away from her. Annie follows the old adage that it is better to be kind to one's enemies than cruel to them. In her kindness, Annie tells Kathy, the pregnant mistress that she is a whore and that she needs to be concerned that her baby is not born without a father. After her encounter with Annie, Kathy pushes Richard to divorce Annie but tells him that she does not want to live in Annie's house. She wants her own place.

Even after Richard divorces her and then sells off all the furniture in her house, Annie still manages to overcome her difficulties. She opens a successful neighborhood market to which the people in her area can buy, sell or give away their wares.

## **Sissy**

Sissy is Jackson's mother. When Josey is a child, the children believe that she is a witch. When Josey wanders onto her property, Sissy tells Josey how she caught her pretending like she was a white person. Josey did not understand what she was saying at that time.





Later, when Josey married Jackson, the two went to live with Sissy. Sissy was jealous and possessive of Jackson. She was hateful to Josey, even when she was struggling to give birth to her grandchildren.

Sissy remained hateful and uncooperative until she happened to see a dead body in a creek that looked just like her. Sissy was very disturbed by what she had seen. It was after she was so scared by this body that she became more helpful with the children and around the house.

After Jackson returned home from the war, Sissy was terrified that he had deserted the fighting and that soldiers would come after him to arrest him. When the confederate soldiers try to kill Jackson and Josey because they are an interracial couple, Sissy questions Jackson again and again if they are coming after him for that reason. Jackson and the rest of the family escapes through the indoor outhouse. Sissy refuses to go out that way and instead meets the soldiers at the door. She is shot by the men but it gives Jackson, Josey and the children time to get some distance between them and the soldiers.

## Slavedriver Nelson

Slavedriver Nelson is a white man who is the overseer at the Graham plantation. Nelson is proud of his ability to keep the slaves in line and claims he treats them all the same regardless of age.

It is when Nelson comments to Annie that he heard the discussions between Annie and George that Annie fires him. Nelson insinuates that he knew Annie suspected George had raped a girl. He describes to her how he heard them arguing about the cuts and bruises George suffered just before George went away again.

Because he is not longer employed by Annie, Nelson gets a job with Dr. Mitchell. Instead of running the errands that Dr. Mitchell assigned to him, Nelson went to the slave quarters on Graham property because he knew the slaves would be meeting there with the intentions of leaving.

After Richard returns, he rehires Nelson as the slavedriver. It is later learned that Nelson told Richard that Annie had allowed Josey to be brought into the house for medical treatment when she was suffering with the vapors.

## Jeremy

Jeremy is the slick white man who charms Naomi into giving up her virginity. Even though he denies it, Jeremy is Josey's father. He promises her that when he leaves Conyers he will take her with him. Even though she is black, he says that they will live together as a married couple.



Jeremy calls Naomi his lucky charm on the night that she wins money for him in his gambling game. Later, when Jeremy loses money in his game and owes the house money Jeremy asks Naomi to offer oral sex to Mr. Shepard in exchange for money to pay his debts.

When Jeremy does leave Conyers, he does not take Naomi with him like he had promised her. He returns about nine months later and discovers that Naomi is pregnant. Because she is not very big, even as far along as she is, Jeremy doubts the due date that Naomi gives him. He calls her a whore and accuses her of sleeping around on him.

## **Dr. Mitchell**

Dr. Mitchell is the doctor who serves the Graham plantation. He is highly racist.

It is Dr. Mitchell who examines Josey when she suffers with the vapors. All through the time that he is examining Josey, Dr. Mitchell is criticizing Annie for allowing the girl inside her house. He worries what Richard might think if he were to learn that Josey had been allowed inside.

Later, when Dr. Mitchell examines Kathy, Richard's pregnant mistress, it is clear that he is attracted to her. She encourages him to feel her pregnant belly and he does so, hesitantly at first but then with more pleasure. By the time she is finished playing with his emotions, Kathy has the doctor under her spell, believing that she would consider marrying him.

## **Letti**

Letti is Naomi and Hazel's mother. She has been used by Massa Hilden for years as a sex slave. He makes her mate with Boss, a black man on the plantation, so he can sell the babies produced. Because she was so emotionally worn out by having her babies taken from her Letti eventually stops talking and spends her days just sitting.

When the master comes with the intention of having sex with Hazel, Letti speaks up and begs the master to let her try again to have a boy. All of the ten children she'd had in the past had been girls. Female infants did not garner as much money in the slave trade.

Letti kills Boss with the fire poker when the two walk in on her family and the master shoots James, Hazel's fiancé. She is shot by Massa Hilden before he dies.

## **Katherine "Kathy"**

Richard tries to pass his mistress, Katherine, off as his cousin. He brings this pregnant woman with him when he returns home to Annie.



Katherine is crass and uneducated. She torments Annie and eventually convinces Richard to divorce Annie. When they leave, they let Annie stay in the house but take all of the furnishings from her.

When Dr. Mitchell examines Katherine, she surprises both Richard and the doctor by pulling up her dress and exposing herself. Kathy traps the doctor in her pretended affection and need for a husband, a play she puts on for Richard's sake to push him into making a move toward divorcing Annie.

## **General Bobby Lee Smith**

General Bobby Lee Smith is the man who is a cousin of Henry and Ray, the two men whose dogs kill Naomi. Bobby Lee is with his cousins the night of Naomi's death. He is the one who cares for the baby and takes it to Annie Graham.

Bobby Lee believes that caring for the baby is his way of redeeming himself for his past mistakes. His wife and infant were killed by bandits and he had not been around to protect them.

Bobby Lee shows up later in Josey's story as the General who keeps Jackson from getting shot to death by the runaway soldiers. Annie recognizes Bobby Lee as the man who brought Josey to her many years before.

## **Hazel**

Hazel is Naomi's older sister. She helped keep Naomi hidden as a child and also taught her younger sister how to read. Hazel was a mother to Naomi when their mother lost that ability.

Hazel had a dream of fleeing to the safety of the north and taking her sister and mother with her. After her fiancé and her mother are killed, Hazel makes Naomi run away. She hopes that her sister will make it to freedom. The reader never learns what happens to Hazel after Naomi runs away the night of the deaths of Massa Hilden, Boss, James and Letti.

## **Charlie Shepard**

Charlie Shepard is Soledad's husband. He is also the new house dealer whom Cynthia hires for her gambling parlor.

After Jeremy loses all his money gambling and Shepard will not let him borrow any more, Jeremy asks Naomi to offer him oral sex in exchange for money to pay off his loans. Shepard refuses Naomi's offer.



It is Shepard whom Naomi is later accused of murdering. Naomi is innocent of the murder, however, it was Soledad, Shepard's wife, who killed him.

## Massa Hilden

Massa Hilden is the man whom Naomi kills with Hazel's fire poker. For years he had been forcing her mother to have sex with a black man named Boss so she would have babies. He sold these babies as slaves.

Naomi attacks Massa Hilden when she sees Hazel's grief after the master killed James, Hazel's fiancé. She runs the master through with the fire poker. Before he dies, the master is able to shoot his pistol and kill Letti, Naomi and Hazel's mother.

## George

George is Annie's brother. He has a problem with alcohol and likes to have sex with little girls. He is the one who attacks Josey. He rapes and demeans her for six hours.

When George returns from war after Josey had her babies, George takes a liking to Rachel, Josey's daughter. He catches Rachel and is trying to rape her when he is discovered by Josey. Josey, strengthened by her mother, attacks George with a rock and kills him.

## James

James is Hazel's fiancé. He is the one who gets her interested in running to freedom in the north. The night that Massa Hilden and Boss visits Letti's house unexpectedly James is shot when he knocks on the door. Massa Hilden realizes that James and Hazel are dating even though it is forbidden for them to do so without permission. Massa Hilden shoots James and pretends it was an accident.

## Richard

Richard is Annie's husband. He had loved Annie and Josey completely before he had a stroke. After his stroke, Richard was a changed man. He brought his pregnant mistress to Annie's house intending to kick Annie out and live there with the mistress. Instead of kicking her out, Richard sold all of the furnishings in the house so that he and Kathy, his mistress, could buy their own house.

## Colonel Barling

It is Colonel Barling who orders his men to kill Jackson and Josey because it is believed they are a biracial couple. Barling is standing over Jackson with his pistol aimed at him



when General Bobby Lee Smith rides up on his horse. He tells Barling and the other two soldiers with him that they should give themselves up because an army is coming behind him to arrest them for all the mischief and deaths they have been causing.

## Ray and Henry

Ray and Henry are cousins who work as bounty hunters. They are the ones who use dogs to run Naomi down on the night that she dies. They wanted to let the dogs kill Naomi's baby but Bobby Lee would not allow them to do so. The two agreed to let the baby live only when Bobby Lee told them he thought he could sell the girl.

## Bessie

Bessie is the house servant who works for Annie Graham. She is the only character in the story who admits that she can actually see Naomi. She gives Naomi the advice that she should forgive George instead of trying to get revenge on him. She also tells Naomi that if she continues to try to invade living people, her spirit will die.

## Rachel

Rachel is the daughter of Josey and Jackson. She is Squiggy's twin. Rachel develops normally even though she was not as big as Squiggy when she was born.

When George meets Rachel he comments how she looks like her mother. It is clear he is attracted to the girl and would take advantage of her if given the opportunity.

## Everett

Everett is a boy who is a slave on the Graham Plantation with Ada Mae and Josey. He is the one who tells Josey and Ada Mae that the Emancipation Proclamation has set them free. As young teens, Everett and Ada Mae are a couple. After he leaves the plantation as a free slave, Everett plans to join the northern troops.

## Squiggy

Squiggy is the son of Josey and Jackson. He is Rachel's twin. Squiggy is stunted in his growth and does not develop as fast as his sister. He does not talk and his parents accept the reality that he is mentally handicapped.



## **Boss**

Boss is the black man whom Massa Hilden brings to have sex with Letti. After Naomi stabbed the master with the fire poker, Netti followed her daughter's lead and stabbed Boss.

## **Johnny**

Johnny is Cynthia's son. He is a mute. Because Johnny has no older brother or sister to take care of him, Naomi feels sorry for Johnny. She often plays with him and treats him like a sibling.

## **Sam**

Sam is the bartender at Cynthia's saloon and brothel. Sam is friendly to Naomi even though the two do not know each other well. He gives her two days worth of tips for the baby when it is nearing time for her to give birth.

## **Ada Mae**

Ada Mae is Josey's childhood friend from the Graham plantation.



# Symbols and Symbolism

## Hazel's Fire Poker

Hazel's fire poker is a symbol of Naomi's act of defending her family. Hazel had sharpened and prepared the fire poker in the chance that they would need to protect themselves. When Naomi saw the master shoot James and Hazel's grief, she grabbed the poker and rammed the master without even considering what she was doing. When Hazel told Naomi to run from their house, she sent the poker with her because she knew Naomi would need a way to protect herself.

## Bible

This Bible is a symbol of Naomi's family. It is the Bible from which Hazel taught Naomi how to read. Hazel rescued the Bible from the fire where their master had thrown it and makes Naomi take it with her when she runs from their home.

## Marks on the Wall

These marks on the wall represent everything that Hazel loves. She puts a mark for each of the babies that their mother has had to give up. After Naomi has to run away from home, she wonders if Hazel puts a mark on the wall for her.

## A Rolling Hoop

This rolling hoop that it appears George intended to give Josey is a sign that he is attracted to her. Because Josey angers George, he instead gives the hoop to Ada Mae. Josey warns Ada Mae that no good will come of the gift.

## Albert's Hair

Albert tells Naomi that his hair is a symbol of his freedom. Even though he is still in a job where he has to obey orders, he can express his freedom through his hairstyle.

## Orange Stripe on a Satchel

An orange stripe on a satchel symbolizes that the person carrying it is a member of the Freedom Fighters. Albert tells Naomi that the orange stripe represents sunsets and sweet fruit, signs of freedom.



## **Red String Bracelet**

This red string bracelet represents the love between Josey and Jackson. When Jackson returns from war, Josey is still wearing the bracelet even though the string has faded to white. Jackson gave the bracelet to Josey on her fourteenth birthday.

## **The Emancipation Proclamation**

The Emancipation Proclamation is a symbol of the slaves' freedom. Even though the proclamation, signed by the president, gave the slaves their freedom, many of the slave owners refused to let their slaves go, or punished them as runaways if they tried to leave.

## **Yellow Dress**

This yellow dress is a sign of Naomi's love for Jeremy. She wears it because Jeremy gave it to her as a gift.

## **Yellow Ribbon**

This yellow ribbon displayed on the back of Josey and Jackson's wagon after their wedding is a symbol that they were married in freedom.

## **New Lotion**

This new lotion is a symbol of Charles accident. It is believed that he was burned so badly because the new lotion he had been given had caused his skin to ignite.





## Settings

### Faunsdale, Alabama

Faunsdale, Alabama is the city where Naomi was born and lived with Hazel and her mother until she killed the master of the plantation.

### Tallahassee, Alabama

Tallahassee, Alabama is the place where the Graham Plantation is located. It is where Josey lives during the entire course of the novel.

### Conyers, Georgia

Conyers, Georgia in which Naomi arrives after she is ordered by Hazel to run away from home following the murder of the plantation owner. Naomi lives there for nearly two years until she is killed by Ray and Henry because they think she killed Mr. Shepard.

### Naomi's Garden

The garden in which Cynthia allows Naomi to work outside the brothel is the place where Naomi feels most at home.

### The Cellar

Naomi is arranging liquor bottles on the new shelves in the cellar under the saloon when she learns she has been accused of killing Mr. Shepard.

### The Graham House

The Graham House is the place to which Bobby Lee takes Josey when she has just been born. Annie agrees to take Josey into the house and adopt her as her own child. When it was discovered that Josey had black blood in her veins, about the time she was two, Josey was sent to live with the slaves. Later, when Josey suffered with a severe case of asthma, Annie allowed Josey to be put in her guest room so she could get medical attention.

### The Witch's House

When she is still a child, Josey wanders to Sissy's house, which she refers to as the witch's house, where Sissy threatens her. Sissy does not like Josey because she



believes it was because of Josey that she lost her job as a house servant at the Graham plantation as well as her friendship with Annie. Later, after Josey and Jackson are married, they live in this house.

## **Soledad's Home**

Because she thought she had a confidant in Soledad, Naomi went to Soledad's house after Cynthia kicked her out. When Soledad learned that Cynthia had treated Naomi better than she had treated Soledad, Soledad gets angry with Naomi. Later, Soledad kills her husband in this house and blames it on Naomi.

## **Cynthia's Saloon and Brothel**

From the time that Naomi ran away from her home with her mother and Hazel, she lived with Cynthia in her saloon and brothel. It is at this saloon that Naomi met Jeremy.



# Themes and Motifs

## Finding One's Identity

Several characters in this novel struggle to determine their identity based on their pasts and the labels that have been placed upon them. Cynthia, Naomi and Josey are all characters who struggle to determine exactly who they are. These characters struggle to reconcile who others say they are compared to who they believe they are.

Cynthia is the character who has the most dramatic change once she determines her identity. Before she makes the discovery that the man who raised her and sold her for sex was not her biological father, Cynthia was sexually promiscuous, angry and abusive. She determined her worth based on how the man she believed was her father treated her. Once she realized "It's not who my daddy was. It's who he wasn't" (328) that Cynthia forgives her mother for the way she was treated. This forgiveness seems to free Cynthia from the hate and anger she carried with her. As a result, Cynthia closed down her brothel and completed her religious training. In this case, it was Cynthia's act of learning who she was not that changed her life.

Life is confusing for Josey, a light-skinned girl with blonde hair. Born from the union of a white man and black woman, Josey looks white but is scorned by white people in the South because they know she had black blood in her lineage. As a child, Josey gets mixed messages. Sissy accuses her of being "A nigga tryin to be a white" (101) but Josey's friend Ada Mae tells her "You ain't a negro" (57) because of Josey's light skin. This lack of a racial identity follows Josey through her entire life. Charles, for instance, tells her that she will be an asset to him because if they do travel out of the South, she will be able to pass as white and buy things in stores where he will not be allowed inside. It is also because of Josey's light skin that her husband, Jackson, is almost killed by Confederate soldiers. The soldiers are offended by what they believe is a bi-racial marriage and try to kill Jackson on the accusation that he is raping a white woman.

Naomi additionally struggles with her identity. She believes that her sister told her to run from their home because she wanted her to have the opportunity for freedom. As a woman, a slave and a black, Naomi does not see that she has many opportunities. She believes her luck has changed when a white man shows interest in her but he only leaves her feeling more confused about who she is. She has to prove to herself that she is not like the prostitutes who work for Cynthia and sell their bodies for sex. Naomi tries to convince herself she gave up her virginity outside the bounds of marriage for love, a more worthy cause than pretty things.

Even after her death, Naomi still struggles to determine who she is and what her purpose is in continuing to watch over Josey. At first, Naomi just wants to see that Josey is okay. Later, after she watches as George rapes Josey, Naomi decides her purpose is to get revenge on George. Even though Bessie tells Naomi she needs to forgive, Naomi remains determined to kill George. It is when Naomi invades Josey's body when she



sees that Josey does not have the strength to overcome her vapors and take care of her children that she for once sees herself as being a person who is loved and wanted. She first is able to touch her grandson's hand through his mother's body. It is a bittersweet moment for Naomi. A few minutes later, Naomi inhabits Josey's body again to help her lift a rock to attack George, who is trying to rape Rachel, Josey's daughter, just like he did Josey. The act gives both Josey and Naomi closure. When Naomi sees her mother waving for her and calling her, she realizes even though she is a woman, a black, and a slave, she is loved and has had a positive impact on her family's life.

## Timeline of the Civil War in the South

Providing the backbone of this story of slavery and injustice is the American Civil War. Naomi makes comments about how this war, intended to bring freedom to the slaves, left some whites in the South with more hate toward the blacks than they'd had before the war. Additionally, Naomi describes the different options open to blacks who wanted to escape out of the South and the dangers they faced as they sought safety.

Blacks were already trying to escape the South years before the Civil War began. Naomi remembers that when she was a child, her sister would talk to others about running to the North. She could not understand why the other slaves, particularly those who worked in the plantation house wanted to run away. She writes of them "Now they trying to trade an easy life and a kind master to starve. Worse, get kilt" (17). Naomi, who did not yet understand the horrors of slavery, was not aware how bad their life even was.

It is after Naomi meets Albert and learns about his plans to go further South to freedom rather than going North, that she begins to share with her reader what she learns about the ways blacks can escape the South. Based on the information that Albert gives her, blacks are more readily accepted in Texas because the Mexicans there feel like slaves themselves. He says men who refer to themselves as Freedom Fighters take blacks to Texas by pretending like they need to hire help for a day. After their slaves are never returned to them, the owners realize they have been duped. For this reason, many plantation owners will no longer hire out their slaves on a daily basis.

Naomi meets and has a chance to talk to a Freedom Fighter who is taking a group south. She recognizes him because his satchel has an orange stripe on it, just like Albert said it would. Naomi chooses not to go with this Freedom Fighter and later both she and Albert are relieved that they stayed put. Someone, possibly Soledad, turned in the Freedom Fighter. He was hung and burned while one of the female slaves he had tried to sneak out of the South was maimed before being returned to her owner. This fear of being recaptured was only one of the dangers for slaves trying to escape.

Albert tells Naomi that most blacks who go to the North, meaning Canada, usually do so with the help of the Underground Railroad. While this railroad is well organized beginning in Virginia, there are few organized conductors or stops south of that state.



He says that they would mostly be on their own in their attempt to get to Virginia. They would run the chance of being caught, starving or dying of exposure to the elements.

When the Civil War starts in 1861, Naomi comments that she believes it is ironic that the war was started by a Frenchman. That man lived in a French colony and did not even speak English until he was 12. Unlike blacks, Naomi realizes that Pierre Beauregard was accepted as an American, “ ‘cause he white and rich and born here . . . mostly” (115). There are no changes right away for the blacks working as slaves.

After Emancipation Proclamation is signed there is not immediate relief for the slaves. Because they do not consider themselves part of the United States, many plantation owners do not think the proclamation applies to them. Slaves who try to leave the plantations on which they live are often caught and treated as escaped slaves.

Even after the Civil War is ended and the South surrenders, blacks are still treated badly. Disgruntled Confederate soldiers roam the land killing blacks. Because these soldiers have been given pardons for war crimes to all participants in the Civil War, they thought nothing about killing blacks and even deserters from their own side of the war.

While Naomi shares with the reader that many of the blacks do leave the plantations on which they lived in slavery, she does not mention how many actually made it to freedom. Jackson and Josey never left their home on the Graham plantation. Even after most other blacks had gone away, those two, along with Sissy, remained.

## Sex and Its Relationship with Love

Sexual tension between men and women is important in the novel both as Cynthia realizes she is worth more than being a prostitute and Naomi tries to rationalize her decision to have sex with Jeremy, a white man. A Naomi comes to terms with her sexuality, she begins to see the way men and women have different rules to follow based on their relationships with sex. Also important in the novel is the idea that men and women cannot be friends because the sexual tension would get the best of them.

Cynthia comes to the realization that she can do something better for herself than just sell herself for sex. “I’m more than what feels good and makes me happy” (336) Cynthia says of her decision to stop living as a prostitute. For Cynthia, sex has never been about love. It has always been about making money.

After Naomi agrees to have sex with Jeremy, she tries to convince herself that she was motivated by reasons different from those of the prostitutes who work with Cynthia. While those women sell themselves for pretty things, Naomi believes that her giving of herself was done in the name of love. Naomi later realizes that even though she loved Jeremy, Jeremy did not love her in return. He was using her to get what he wanted.

Meanwhile, Naomi is scornful of the world she lives in because there are different rules for men and women to help keep men from being sexually aroused by women. Naomi notes that when it is hot, men are allowed to go about town with no shirts on or clothes



that are so thin “their nipples and nuts showing through their clothes” (139). In the same weather, women are expected to remain fully clothed. Naomi reasons that this is because men are too lazy to control their sexual urges and see every woman they pass as a possible lover instead of as a woman. In these cases, the sexual arousal of these men has nothing to do with love.

When she is forced to move in with Albert, Naomi remembers Cynthia’s words that a man and a woman cannot just be friends with one another. She thinks that a man living with a woman will eventually want to have sex with her just because she is convenient. When Naomi asks Albert what he will expect from her in payment for her room and board, she is expecting that he will want sexual favors. Instead, Albert tells Naomi that he is not a typical male. He shows his love for Naomi by not pressuring her into having sex before she is ready.

## Strength of Women Characters

Through multiple female characters, the author demonstrates how women can demonstrate incredible strength in different, and unexpected, ways, whether that means using their sexuality, brute strength, manipulation, or desperation. They range from those willing to sacrifice themselves for their families to those willing to stand up for what they believe. The strength and courage of these women comes from the deep love they hold for their family members, particularly their children. While these women are beaten down and often abused, they still come to the rescue of their children when they are needed.

Naomi is one example of the strong female characters who is included in the novel. Not only does Naomi kill a plantation master in an attempt to protect her family, she also learns how to live on her own at the young age of fifteen. Two years later, she is killed after she is wrongly accused of a crime. Even as she dies, her thoughts are on protecting her baby. After her death, Naomi could have gone to rest with her mother but instead she chooses to stay on Earth as a spirit and watch over her daughter. Naomi suffers a good deal of frustration because she is unable to help Josey with any of her challenges, she can only watch. At the end, Naomi gives up her chance to stay with Josey so she can help Josey get revenge on a man who raped her and also save her daughter, Rachel, from being raped the same way she had been.

Cynthia is also a strong female character though she uses her strength in the wrong way at first. When Cynthia takes Naomi in, she is running and working in a brothel. She allows herself to be motivated by hate and anger. It is only after Cynthia reads her mother’s diary that she realizes the truth about herself and her mother. It is at this point that Cynthia gets the strength she needs to forgive her mother and move on with her life. Cynthia makes drastic changes in her life like shutting down her brothel and finishing her Jewish religious education. Cynthia also sacrifices herself the game of Russian Roulette that she plays to distract Henry and Ray from searching her house for Naomi. Cynthia’s death gives Naomi a chance to escape from the house with no one noticing.



Naomi's mother Letti, is another example of a strong female character. When the plantation owner and Boss visit her house, Letti lies about Hazel's age and Naomi's existence in order to keep the men from having sex with the girls. Letti is used as a brood mare for the master's business in which he sells the children Letti produces as slaves. In her lifetime she has had eight children, six of whom are taken from her and sold. Because of her trauma, Letti becomes silent and withdrawn from her family. When the time comes for her to protect her family, however, Letti has the strength to step forward and offer herself as a sacrifice. The plantation boss sees that Hazel is of child bearing age and sets his sights on using her as his new brood mare. Letti steps up and offers herself even though the plantation boss will not allow her to take Hazel's place.

Annie Graham is also an example of a strong female character. Annie's strength is shown in the number of things she has had to give up in her life. Despite what has been taken from her, Annie has not given up on life. Annie's first heart break came because she was barren. Unable to have children, she thought her prayers had been answered when Bobby Lee brought Josey to her. For a couple of years, she, Josey and her husband, Richard, were a happy family. After Richard's accident and stroke, he changed toward his family. He learned Josey had black lineage and made Annie give the child up. He had once adored Annie but no longer loved her after he regained the memory he had lost from his stroke. Hoping to persuade Richard to stay with her, Annie gave him ownership of her parents' house but this sacrifice did not keep Richard with her.

Richard left and was gone several years before he returned with his pregnant mistress. Annie made up her mind to be kind to the woman instead of stooping to her level. Even though Kathy played dumb, Annie impressed upon her that she needed to be more worried about her baby having a father than asking why Annie's relationship with Richard did not work out. Kathy persuaded Richard to divorce Annie but told him she did not want to take Annie's house. Instead, they took all of furniture so they could sell it to buy a place of their own. Even with no husband and no child, Annie still managed to keep her house and her property. At the closing of the novel she has begun a successful market on her property where people of any color can buy, trade or give away goods.

## Religion

The author demonstrates through an array of characters and religions that spirituality and religion are viewed, interpreted, and used by everyone differently and, therefore, can play as much of a role in misinterpretation, pain, violence, and prejudice as it does in tranquility, peace, fairness, and love.

For Naomi and her family, religion is a way of life. As a whole, the blacks relate their own situation to the story of the slaves in Egypt. They believe God will rescue them, just like he rescued the Israelites from their slavery. In a different take, Cynthia believes that her religious redemption depends on keeping Naomi a virgin. Even though Naomi tries to discuss religion with Cynthia several times, it is not until Cynthia learns to forgive that she begins to understand the nature of religion.



Religion is important in the family in which Naomi grows up. It is part of their everyday life, illustrated by the fact that when Hazel teaches Naomi how to read, she teaches her using the Bible as their text. Naomi prays enough that she is concerned that God will not understand her prayers because she does not talk the same way that He does.

As a whole, the black slave population compares their situation to that faced by the Israelites when they were held captive by Pharaoh in Egypt. This Biblical story tells how God intervened in the slavery and made Pharaoh let the slaves go. An analogy is drawn between Pharaoh and President Lincoln such that: "God has touched President Lincoln and softened his heart so that he be like Pharaoh and set us free" (160).

In some cases, religion is used in entirely inappropriate ways. Cynthia, for instance, struggles to return to her Jewish beliefs. Knowing that Naomi is a Christian, Cynthia tries to talk to her about redemption and salvation. Because the two are talking about religions that have little in common, there are often misunderstandings as Naomi tries to minister to Cynthia. In one of these instances, Cynthia gets the idea that God will redeem her if she is able to keep Naomi a virgin. Naomi's sexual status has no bearing on Cynthia's salvation and it only causes more dissension between the women instead of healing.



# Styles

## Point of View

This novel is told from the first person point of view of Naomi after Naomi's death. Naomi recounts not only the details of her life after she had to run away from her first home, but also the life of her daughter whom she watches over as a spirit.

This first person point of view makes the reader feel very close to Naomi and understand the pain she feels when she is unable to interfere when George rapes Josey. Had the author chosen any other point of view it would not have had the emotional impact on the reader as this first person telling of the story.

## Language and Meaning

A good deal of language is used in this novel that some might consider offensive. Black people are referred to as both "negros" and "niggers" terms that were used frequently and freely during the time when blacks were held as slaves. The use of these words, as well as the white people's reference to the slaves as their property shows how little respect the white people in the South had for black people.

Also significant in the language used in the novel is the way the author copies the dialect and language used by the slaves around the time of the Civil War. Differences in slaves are demonstrated by the way they speak. Naomi is particularly uneducated so she speaks with bad grammar, incorrect verb usage and mispronunciation. Naomi indicates that some slaves, like Mamma Dean, who was a house servant, speaks with better grammar than Naomi. Albert's speech is also more proper than Naomi's.

## Structure

Naomi, the narrator, opens the story by giving the reader the details of the end of her life. From that point, Naomi tells the story of her life as well as the story of Josey's life in a linear fashion. Naomi switches between memory flashes about her life and parts of the story of her daughter's life. Through the majority of the novel, entire chapters are dedicated to either Naomi's flashes or Josey's experiences. In the fourth part of the novel in Section 47 / Judgement, the climax of both Naomi's story and Josey's story, the action switches back and forth quickly between the stories of the two women.

Through the course of the novel, the stories of Naomi and Josey parallel each other through the stages in their lives. The story reaches a short climax at the beginning of the first part where Naomi describes her death, and then when she has to leave her home after she kills the plantation master. With Part II, the author begins the exposition and rising action, describing the situations of Naomi's life that led up to her death and detailing the life of Josey, the baby to whom Naomi gave birth to just before she died.



The climax comes as Naomi runs from the men who believe she killed Mr. Shepard, and Josey and her family run from the men who want to kill them because they believe they are a multiracial couple. As was described in the beginning of the novel, Naomi is killed but Josey and her family are saved by Bobby Lee, the same man who saved Josey when she was first born. Denouement comes when Naomi, through Josey, is able to touch her grandson. She also gives up being a spirit and joins her mother who is calling her and holding her hand out to her.



## Quotes

It was the first time a man lied for me. It was the familiar ring of lifesaving untruth. A death rattle that has followed me all my life. And it was the sound that plunged me into the flashes.”

-- Narrator (Part I )

**Importance:** Naomi believes that it was Bobby Lee’s lie that he had found no one to buy the baby so he had thrown it into a field to die that made her start having the memories of her life. She notes it was the first time a man had lied for her. While Bobby Lee’s lie might not have been for Naomi specifically, it did help to save Josey.

Maybe Hazel put a mark on the wall for me, too.”

-- Narrator (Part I, 3/Flash)

**Importance:** Each time their mother has to give away a baby, Hazel puts a mark on the wall to represent that baby. She tells Naomi it is the way she keeps up with all of the things she loves. After Naomi has to leave their home, she wonders if Hazel will put a mark on the wall to commemorate her.

It’s more than just seeing the moment, it’s taking part in the memory as if it were happening again.”

-- Narrator (Part I, 4/Flash)

**Importance:** Naomi describes the horror of the memory flashes that she has. She does not only see the past but experiences it again just like she is living through it. Naomi indicates that the terrible part of the flashes is that she is unable to correct any of the mistakes that she made.

It’s been said that justice is getting what you deserve. And mercy is not getting the bad you deserve. Grace is getting a good thing, even when you don’t deserve it. So if I would’ve named my good thing, I’d have called her Grace. But someone else named her Josephine.”

-- Narrator (Part 1, 4/Flash)

**Importance:** Naomi believes that her baby was a good thing that she did not deserve. Because the baby was a gift from God, Naomi indicates she would have named her Grace. Sissy, however, suggested to Annie that they call the baby Josephine.

Happy ’cause God gives all children laughter. A time for happiness. To be joyful. A time before they learn who they are and what it means to the world — a woman, a slave, black.”

-- Narrator (Part II, 7/1855)

**Importance:** Naomi enjoys watching Josey laugh and play before her daughter has



realized how little worth the world will assign to her because she has three strikes against her. She is female, she is black, and she is a slave.

So that night with Josey, Bobby Lee got it in his mind to be that man he never was. Be that hero and save my child.”

-- Narrator (Part II, 13/1860)

**Importance:** It was because Bobby Lee’s wife and infant were killed by bandits that he decided he needed to redeem himself by seeing to it that Naomi’s baby survived and was with someone who would take care of her.

He said we had two choices. The Railroad, north, or these Freedom Fighters, south.”

-- Narrator (Part II, 14/Flash)

**Importance:** When Albert tells Naomi about their choices for freedom, he says they can either take the Underground Railroad north or let the Freedom Fighters take them south to Mexico.

I killed him, you know. My daddy. One slice across the neck and he was dead, just like that. Ain’t nothing like taking a man’s life.”

-- Cynthia (Part II, 16/Flash)

**Importance:** It is while Cynthia is attempting to observe the Jewish Day of Atonement that Cynthia admits to Naomi that she killed her father because he sold her for sex when she was as young as ten years old.

I don’t know what you mean, free.”

-- Josey (Part II, 17/1862)

**Importance:** When Ada Mae and Everett tell Josey that the Emancipation Proclamation assures the slaves their freedom, Josey tells her friends that she does not understand what it means to be free.

So for six months, I been visiting the spot in the woods where the dead walk hoping to find a soul to help me, to teach me what I need to know to touch the living.”

-- Narrator (Part III, 19/April 1863)

**Importance:** After Naomi watched helplessly as George raped and belittled her daughter, Naomi walks the woods at night hoping that there will be someone who will be able to tell her how she can reach out of the spirit world and kill George for what he did.

Tired of his sacrifice. This one and the one he made for me the night I died. The night when Charles’s name was still Albert. The Scottish Banshee.”

-- Narrator (Part III, 19/April 1863)

**Importance:** It is at this point that Naomi shares that Albert and Charlie are the same man, that he gave up his freedom on the day that she died so he could follow her baby



to the plantation to which Bobby Lee had taken her. His intention was to take care of Josey. As he believes he is close to being free again but learns of Josey's struggle with her own emotions, Naomi can tell how tired he is from having to give up his freedom.

Forgive,' she say. 'There's the answer to your question. If you ever plan to go home, you got to forgive.'"

-- Bessie (Part III, 23/April 1863)

**Importance:** Bessie, who is the only living person who speaks directly to Naomi and says she can see her even though she is a spirit, advises Naomi not to try to get revenge on George. She adds that Naomi's attempts at invading the bodies of the living will cause even her spirit to be killed. Bessie advises Naomi that she needs to forgive George.

And when he discovered that his adopted daughter, a stranger to him now, was negro, he gave her to Charles, too. Told everybody else his precious child died."

-- Narrator (Part III, 24/April 1863)

**Importance:** Richard, Annie's husband, is so racist that when he learns that Josey was born to a black woman, he gives the young child to Charles to raise. Josey becomes a slave on his plantation. In order to cover the disappearance of the child, Richard tells everyone that Josey died.

Twenty years and I've seen hundreds of gals like you. Chasing a chance for some man they think loves 'em. A sad occasion. I'll do you the favor of some advice. Leave him while you still got a soul."

-- Mr. Shepard (Part III, 27/Flash)

**Importance:** Because he has lost all of his money gambling and has run up debts, Jackson asks Naomi to earn some money for them by offering sex to Mr. Shepard. Instead of taking Naomi up on her offer, Mr. Shepard warns her that she needs to get away from Jackson before he causes her to completely lose her soul.

Josey's sickness ebbed because of Squiggy and Rachel. They needed her. Especially Squiggy. And Josey stopped cutting when she decided that his suffering was more important than hers."

-- Narrator (Part IV, 39/1870)

**Importance:** After Josey has her babies, she stops with her midnight ramblings and no longer cuts herself. She has realized the children depend on her and that their feelings are more important than her own.

I started the quake that changed our normal — my kissing him and the way I let myself feel when he rubbed my feet. Those innocent things damaging us."

-- Narrator (Part IV, 40/Flash)

**Importance:** Even though she did not intend to, Naomi realizes that she changes the



friendship between herself and Albert when she kisses him in an attempt to earn forgiveness when she hurt his feelings.

I'm a different woman now, Naomi. I want you to know that. I'm different because I understand her. I forgive her. Forgive myself. And I know what I got to do for Johnny. For you."

-- Cynthia (Part IV, 41/Flash)

**Importance:** After Cynthia finally reads her mother's diary, she understands her mother better than she did as a child. She realizes that she was the offspring of a one night stand and she was not the child of her mother's husband. Cynthia tells Naomi it is because she has learned the truth about that part of her life that she realizes what she has to do in order to protect Cynthia and Johnny.

It's why she listened when I tol' her what that night man had done to her. I was the one that saved her from kissing that black baby on the mouth. From the ridicule of this world. From them good people that despise nigger-lovers more than sin itself. But it wasn't them that Annie ended up loathing. It was me."

-- Sissy (Part IV, 42/1869)

**Importance:** Sissy tells Josey that it was she who told Annie that Josey had black blood in her and had caused her to have to give Josey up. Sissy says she thought she was saving Annie from embarrassment but the plan blew up in her face when Annie hated Sissy for having taken Josey away from her.

Well here's mine. You're a whore. Just like the rest of 'em. 'Cause no man would look after somebody else's baby unless he had a stake in it."

-- Jeremy (Part IV, 43/Flash)

**Importance:** Even though Naomi tells Jeremy that the baby she is carrying is his, he will not believe her. He accuses her of having an affair on him. It is as if Jeremy is looking for a reason to deny Naomi and the baby.

If a person never loved somebody pathetically and unrequited, they haven't met themselves yet, so consider yourself introduced."

-- Cynthia (Part IV, 44/Flash)

**Importance:** While Cynthia had once kicked Naomi out of her house when she realized that Naomi was pregnant, she later tells Naomi that her love for Jeremy was a normal reaction and a right of passage for every adult.

May never know about the choice somebody made for you that changed your life. Just like I didn't know about the choice made for me that day. By the time I was standing behind Albert, watching him bang those last nails in, my life had already changed."

-- Narrator (Part IV, 45/Flash)

**Importance:** Naomi foreshadows the ending of the novel by telling her reader that



choices were made that she had no control over that changed her life. The choice to which she refers is Soledad's choice to kill her husband and blame it on Naomi.

Momma, I ain't gon' kill Indians. Treat 'em the way white folks treat us."  
-- Johnny (Part V, 46)

**Importance:** When Jackson comes home from the war, Sissy is upset with him because she believes he is a deserter. He tries to explain that he did not desert the troops. He saw the way they were chasing the Indians out of their land and killing them because they were different. He realized that it was the same way the white people had treated the black people. He did not want to do to others what had been done to him.

Sending our great nation to hell, is what. Next thing you know they'll want to marry. First, the government takes our property and rights and give it to niggers and then they give 'em our women, too."  
-- Colonel Barling (Part V, 46/Homecoming:1869)

**Importance:** When Colonel Barling and the two men with him discover Josey and Jackson together they believe that they are witnessing an interracial marriage. They are so angry with the idea that a white woman has married a black man that they decide they should kill Jackson. They decide to kill him even though several different people tell him that Josey is black despite her light skin and blonde hair.

She told us she seen the girl running from her house just before she found him. Said Mr. Shepard figured out she was the one who killed those in Faunsdale. He was gonna turn her in."  
-- Bobby Lee (Part V, 47/Judgement )

**Importance:** It is Bobby Lee, the man who later saves Naomi's baby, who tells Cynthia how Naomi has been accused by Soledad of killing her husband. According to Bobby Lee, it is believed that Mr. Shepard learned that Naomi had killed the plantation owner and others in Faunsdale. Naomi had allegedly gone to the house to silence Mr. Shepard about the murders. No one suspects that it was Soledad who killed her husband.

The unnatural birdcalls start again. This time, flashes of light come through the door's gap, too. Quick-like. Flickers in the dark. One flicker. Stop. Then a second and third flicker. A whistle. The Railroad north to freedom."  
-- Narrator (Part V, 47/Judgement)

**Importance:** When Naomi is running from Ray and Henry she hears the sounds of a group being gathered to escape through the Underground Railroad. Even though she could have tried to escape with these people, Naomi instead decides to run away from the escaping slaves, not wanting to destroy their chance for freedom.

His hand on hers is mine. His skin on mine. My own tears, one's I ain't had since dead, sizzle against my burning coal face."  
-- Narrator (Part V, 48/The Rigor)

**Importance:** When Naomi inhabits Josey to help her fight for her children, Naomi is able to put her hand on her grandson's hand. Even though Naomi is in terrible pain because of the sacrifice she is making, she is able to reach from her world as a spirit and make contact with her grandson.