Homegoing Study Guide

Homegoing by Yaa Gyasi

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Plot Summary

The following version of this book was used to create this guide: Yaa Gyasi, Yaa. Homegoing. Penguin / Random House / Bond Street Books, 2016.

Each chapter in the narrative focuses on the experience of a single character, making the book almost as much a series of short stories as it is a novel. The book's underlying plot is simple: across decades, half-the world, and several generations, the two separated sides of an African family are reunited in the land in which the originating mother of both sides was born.

That mother is a woman named Maame, the one character essential to the story who does not receive a chapter focusing solely on her. Instead, the first two chapters focus on her two daughters by different fathers. Effia remains in Africa, while Esi is taken prisoner by slavers. Before they are taken from her, Maame gives each girl a black stone flecked with gold. Effia keeps hers, and it is passed down to her many descendants. Esi hides hers in the dungeon where she is kept prisoner, but she is unable to retrieve it before she is sent to America.

The narrative then alternates between chapters focusing on Effia's descendants and chapters focusing on Esi's.

The Effia line follows her son Quey (fathered by a white man), his son James (who marries for love, not tribal loyalty), and James' daughter Abena (betrayed by a lover and a traveler into self-imposed exile). Then there is Abena's daughter Akua (traumatized by both her upbringing in a conservative missionary community and by bad dreams), Akua's son Yaw (scarred for life as a result of his mother's dream-defined delusions), and Yaw's daughter Marjorie. Marjorie is born, and makes her home, in America following her father's immigration there.

Meanwhile, the Esi line follows her daughter Ness (a slave on an American plantation), Ness' son Kojo (sent into freedom in the aftermath of Ness's sacrifice for him), and Kojo's son H (who, after being separated from his father as a child, grows into a powerful, respected miner). Then there is H's daughter Willie (who has dreams of being a singer, but is betrayed by her husband), Willie's son Carson (who is given a new nickname by one of Willie's boyfriends and who becomes a heroin addict), and Carson's son Marcus. Marcus is born in New York City, but studies in California, where he meets Marjorie.

In the novel's final chapter, the two lines of descendants are united in the relationship between Marjorie and Marcus. They travel together to Africa, where the fears and memories that haunt them both are released.

Part 1, Chapter 1

Summary

Effia – Effia is born on the night of a powerful fire that destroys much of her family's livelihood (see "Quote 1") and leads her father to believe that his family had just been cursed for generations. As Effia matures and becomes increasingly beautiful, her mother, Baaba, continually beats and abuses her, and when she is mature enough to start menstruating, tells her to keep the fact between the two of them. Effia agrees, even though she knows that her chances of becoming a bride to the handsome new tribal chief, Abeeku (who has been interested in her ever since she was a child), would increase if he knew she had matured. Her chances of becoming his wife are ended when she finds herself accidentally present at a meeting between Abeeku and the white governor of the region, James Collins. Effia finds herself the object of Collins' attention, and she later finds herself on the receiving end of a proposal of marriage from him. Baaba convinces Abeeku (who has also entered into an agreement with another village to help them traffic slaves) that Effia, born on the night of the fire, was cursed and would never make him a good wife. Abeeku agrees, and gives permission for Effia to marry Collins. Effia's mother gives her a gift for when she goes: "a black stone pendant that shimmered as though it had been coated in gold dust" (16). Effia sees the relief in her mother's eyes.

On the first night of her marriage to Collins, Effia becomes aware of the human beings in the basement below their home in The Castle (full name: The Cape Coast Castle, the community in which the white governors live). Collins instructs her to neither think nor talk about them, and soon Effia is too busy with her daily routine (which includes sexually pleasing her husband) to worry about them. She soon becomes concerned that she has not become pregnant. She worries that she has, in fact, been cursed as a result of being born on the night of the fire. Another African "wife" helps her with a tribal ritual, but after intense lovemaking, Collins discovers the ritual and becomes angry. Shortly afterwards, he receives a letter from his wife in England, and stops having sex with Effia. Meanwhile, Effia is spending time with some of the other African "wives" learning – through conversation – that the men with whom they are all involved are often confused by the fact that the women they are with are much like the women they keep in the dungeons below The Castle.

Eventually, two years after she left her village, Effia learns that she is pregnant - and that her father is dying. Effia travels home and is present at her father's death. There, Effia learns from her brother, Fiifi, that she was the child of a servant girl who died in the fire, which explains the reason for her mother's resentment. Flifi also informs Effia that the black stone given to her was, in fact, left for her by her real mother, Maame. After her father's death, Effia considers making amends with the woman she thought was her mother, but is treated with contempt. Baaba calls her "nothing" and rhetorically asks what can grow from nothing.

Analysis

This chapter introduces several of the novel's key elements, both thematic and narrative. First of all, it directly introduces Effia, one of the two characters originating the two family lines that are the focus of the book's two narrative lines. The second character originating the two family lines, who has an important relationship with Effia, is introduced in the following chapter. Secondly, the chapter introduces, in a more indirect way, a character who sets in motion the deployment of one of the book's central symbols; Maame who, through the intervening influence of Baaba, introduces the black stone flecked with gold into the ongoing life of her family and into the story. This particular stone, unlike its sister stone which appears in the following section, makes its way through time and narrative until, in the book's final chapter, it becomes a symbol of a kind of family reconciliation that is exactly the opposite of the kind of family tension within which it first appears here. A related point: the fact that the passing of the stone from parent to child (both biological parent – Maame – and adoptive parent – Baaba) foreshadows the way this first stone is similarly passed from parent to child at several other points in the narrative. All this can also be seen as introducing one of the book's central themes: the power of family.

Another theme introduced in this section has to do with the examination of different kinds of slavery. Perhaps the most obvious example of this is in the reference to the slaves being kept in the dungeons underneath the Castle, a reference here that also foreshadows events in the following section. Meanwhile, a different sort of slavery is explored in the relationship between Effia and Collins, which is in many ways similar to the first sort (i.e. a black African bound to service to a white person) but which is, in some ways, disguised. The chains of status and power that bind Effia to her situation are no less real for not being physical.

Meanwhile, there are a couple of key pieces of foreshadowing in this chapter. First is the reference to the character Fiifi, who plays a significant role in a couple of subsequent chapters. Then there is Baaba's comment about Effia being nothing, which is a literal foreshadowing of words and sentiments expressed by other characters in a similar situation in Part 1, Chapter 5. It is important to note that the references to nothingness here are negative: the later references have a more positive aspect to them.

Also noteworthy is how the narrative portrays tension between the white, colonizing culture (represented by James Collins and his attitudes towards virtually anything African, including rituals and people) and the black, colonized culture (represented by the situations of Effia and the female slaves in the dungeon).

The reference to menstruation is an important symbol here and throughout the book not only of the process of becoming a woman but, on another level, is an important symbolic representation of one of the book's key themes: the power of family.

One last key point is this chapter's introduction of the motif of fire. Here and throughout the book, this particular symbol manifests one, or more, of three concurrent meanings: a

representation of strong feeling, a representation of suffering, and a representation of connection with the past.

Discussion Question 1

How is the theme of journeying home explored or developed in Part 1, Chapter 1?

Discussion Question 2

What is at the core of Baaba's resentment of Effia? What do you think Baaba means when she says Effia is "nothing"?

Discussion Question 3

How do the representations of fire in Part 1, Chapter 1 represent its overall symbolic value relating to strong feeling, suffering, and/ or connection with the past?

Vocabulary

paunch, millet, appreciative, facilitate, boisterous, machete, premonition, dissolution, lineage, silhouette, decipher, imperceptible, disfigure, embodiment, posterity, ascribe, prosperous, apothecary

Part 1, Chapter 2

Summary

Esi – Esi is kept in the dungeons below the Castle with so many other women that they can all barely move, covered in their own waste and starving. She manages a bit of mental escape as a friend tells her a story, but her mind soon moves back into memory of how she came to be there.

Esi was the beautiful daughter of an important man in her village, a wise and powerful warrior. She was treated with love and tenderness of her mother Maame and with pride by her father, and eventually learned that her mother was chosen by her father to be his wife in spite of her having had a troubled history, about which no-one will tell her. Eventually, and upon her father's insistence, Esi's mother took a young female prisoner into the family home to be a housemaid. Esi became upset at how the girl was beaten by her father, and moved by her mother's angry response. "Weakness is treating someone as though they belong to you. Strength is knowing that everyone belongs to themselves" (38). In an effort to ease the young girl's suffering, Esi managed to send a message to the girl's father in another village. The girl became happy and excited, speaking repeatedly of how her father was coming for her.

One night, while Esi's parents were making love, the village was attacked. Esi's father ran off to fight, telling Esi and her mother to run into the forest to hide. Esi's mother refused to go, speaking frantically to her daughter of how she ran in similar circumstances before. She gave Esi a small black stone to take with her when she ran. "'I left one like this for your sister. I left it with Baaba after I set the fire.' … Esi wanted to ask more questions, but her mother's eyes were growing blank, emptying somehow of something" (42).

Esi ran into the forest with the stone and hid, but she was eventually captured and marched for days to another village. There, she was inspected first by a man called Chief Abeeku, then by a man named Governor James, and finally by a young man who seemed to be familiar with Abeeku. She spit in the young man's face, which led Abeeku to suggest to the young man (whom he refers to as Fiifi) that she should be punished. The young man slapped her, pulling off her clothes. She grabbed the stone (from where it was hidden in those clothes) and swallowed it.

Back in the present, narration describes how Esi buried the stone for safety once it had emerged from her. She and several other women are taken from the dungeon by soldiers, Esi is then taken into a private room and raped by a soldier. Afterwards, she is taken back into the dungeon, where she is kept for several more days. Governor James returns, chooses Esi and several other women from the group in the dungeon, and leads them out. Esi tries to reclaim her stone but is unsuccessful. Esi is carried out onto the beach.

Analysis

The first point to note about this section has to do with information that is revealed through implication, rather than through out-right statement. While the narrative's suggestion that Effia (Part 1, Chapter 1) and Esi are half-sisters by the same mother is quite clear. What is less clear, however, is a situation that the reader may or may not realize: that while Esi is imprisoned in the dungeon, she is in the same building as her half-sister, maybe even only a few feet away. There is much irony in the situation of one sister living a life of relative comfort, while the other sister lives in squalor immediately below her.

It is important to note that while Effia is able to hold on to her black-and-gold stone, her sister is forced to leave hers behind. Later in the narrative, as time and generations pass, the metaphoric reasons for this set of stone-related circumstances become clear. For now, the reader is left to realize and ponder the ironies of all this on his or her own, because the narrative does not really address all the implications of this very dark situation.

Meanwhile, themes evoked by this situation include the book's thematic exploration of different kinds of slavery, manifest in one by the experiences of Effia and in another way by the experiences of Esi. There are also echoes of this theme in Maame's comment about weakness and strength on p. 42, a comment which can be seen as making a statement of how the slavers are operating from a place of weakness. This is one of the places in which the novel's historical contemplations and comments have contemporary resonances. At the same time, the book's thematic interest in the power of family (as manifest in the implied contrast between Esi's and Effia's lives) takes, as mentioned above, a very dark turn, again through implication rather than outright narrative or explanation.

Motifs to note include the depictions of sexuality (there are several occasions throughout the book where sex, consensual or otherwise, plays a defining role in relationship and narrative) and the excitement of the young servant girl at the thought of her father coming to rescue her. This is significant because several times throughout the narrative, parent-child relationships go through a similar pattern as this one does: an expression of hope, joy, and possibility followed by an outbreak of violence. In this case, that violence is emotional. In other cases, it becomes physical as well as emotional or psychological.

One last point to note about this chapter is its structure – specifically, its movement from present into the past (to explain how the present came into being) and its return to the present. This narrative pattern repeats throughout the book, coming in particularly useful because each chapter is anchored by narrative focus on a different character, each chapter needing to provide contextual information for readers so they can know what is going on.

Discussion Question 1

How does the narrative of Part 1, Chapter 2 develop the book's thematic exploration of different kinds of slavery?

Discussion Question 2

How do the roles played by Abeeku, James, and Fiifi in Part 1, Chapter 2 echo the roles they played in Part 1, Chapter 1? What are the ironies associated with the fact that, in each chapter, they are affecting the lives of a pair of sisters?

Discussion Question 3

What do you think the author means when Maame's eyes are described as "emptying of something" (42)?

Vocabulary

detritus, duration, toddle, enrapture, impenetrable, plantain, contrite, paternal, inconsolable, malice, lattice, supplication

Part 1, Chapter 3

Summary

Quey – Initial narration reveals that Quey is the son of Effia and Collins. Quey was raised and educated in England and now has a job with his father's company. That job has seen him, because of his familiarity with the local language and his family connection, given a position ensuring that Abeeku continues his village's arrangement for supplying slaves and trade with the company. Focus then shifts to a conversation between Quey and Fiifi, now the de facto chief of the village. Quey urges Fiifi (his uncle) to honor the arrangement for slaves with the company: Fiifi uses a fable to explain that he is waiting for the best deal. Conversation concludes with Fiifi wondering why Effia and Collins sent Quey to England.

Narration then shifts into flashback. First, Quey's childhood is described; he was cared for and taught by the loving Effia, who always wore a black stone necklace. In his teen years, Quey became friends with Cudjo, a chief's son of a similar age. Over time, the friendship between Quey and Cudjo started to take on a homoerotic connection. Immediately after seeing this connection, narration suggests, Collins sent Quey to England.

Back in the present, Quey receives a message from Cudjo asking to meet. Narration reveals that it has been six years since Quey went to England, and shortly after he left, Collins died. On the journey to England, Quey began to identify with the misery of the slaves shipped in the holds of boats similar to the one he was on. Quey also began to hate his father at that time. Meanwhile, Quey becomes aware that Fiifi, his warriors, and other allies from other villages are preparing for a dangerous mission. Despite his best efforts to find out the nature of that mission, he finds out nothing. On the day the mission is to begin, he encounters Cudjo, now the chief of his village; now married; and now accompanying Fiifi. He asks Quey to come visit, and Quey cannot help but imagine a possible life in Cudjo's village.

After weeks of waiting, Fiifi returns, having been seriously injured on the mission. There is no sign of Cudjo. After Quey discovers that the mission was successful in its purpose – the kidnapping of the daughter of a powerful tribal leader – he also discovers that Fiifi is dying, and has plans to turn over the leadership of the village to him, whom he counts as his sole surviving male relative. Fiifi also tells Quey that he (Quey) is to marry the captured girl in order to secure a kind of peace between the two tribes. Narration describes Quey's realization that "he would never go to Cudjo's village … he was in the business of slavery, and sacrifices had to be made" (69).

Analysis

With this chapter, the narrative begins its movement through time and generations. Whereas the first two chapters take place at approximately the same time, this chapter takes place some years following the action of those chapters. Here it is important to note that the next chapter takes place at roughly the same time as this chapter, each pair of chapters chronicling key events in the approximately concurrent lives of what amounts to a pair of cousins, separated one from the other by circumstance and by the consequences of what happened to the previous generation. On a similarly technical level, this chapter repeats a structural motif established in the chapter immediately previous to it: the identification of a new central character and situation, followed by a narrative flashback to the events that brought that character (in this case: Quey) to this particular turning point in his life.

Meanwhile, there are several key points to note about this chapter. First is the relationship between Quey and his uncle Fiifi, a significant character in the previous section whose actions as what might best be described as a black slaver have clear echoes in the actions that Quey, in the first part of the chapter, is being asked to perpetuate, or sustain. Second is the reference to Effia's necklace, which initiates the motif of the necklace's appearance in the lives and situations of the characters along the African narrative line. Third is the reference to the early stages of the relationship between Cudjo and Quey which, in the way it is portrayed, offers a very clear answer to the question of why Quey was sent back to England.

A final point to note in this section relates to Quey's imagining of a life in Cudjo's village, and his subsequent realization that such a life will never be possible. The primary value of this part of the story lies in its significance as a piece of foreshadowing – specifically, of the experiences of several characters (including Ness, the central character in the following chapter) making sacrifices of personal happiness and, ironically, of the experiences of several other characters (including the child of Quey's forced marriage) who have exactly the opposite experience, determined to live their own lives and being successful in doing so.

Discussion Question 1

How does the book's thematic interest in the power of family develop in Part 1, Chapter 3 ?

Discussion Question 2

What narrative structure is repeated in Part 1, Chapter 3 ? What question posed by the opening paragraphs of Part 1, Chapter 3 is answered by the flashback? What is the answer to that question?

Discussion Question 3

Why do you think Quey made the choice he did (that is: to accept the destiny that Fiifi had planned for him, rather than pursue his own dreams)?

Vocabulary

pedigree, discordant, exasperation, prosperous, vigor, consummate, coddle, prominent, rowdy, exuberant, falter, composure, inexplicable, inventory, mutinous, treacherous, successor

Part 1, Chapter 4

Summary

Ness – On the Stockham plantation in Alabama, field slave Ness picks cotton. Narration reveals that she is the light-skinned daughter of Esi, and that Esi was loving but unsmiling and not warm. Narration also describes Ness's barely-friendly relationship with another slave, TimTam, and how the beautiful Ness was rejected for house service because of the scars along her torso and shoulders. Finally, narration reveals that Ness got her name in the aftermath of Esi being whipped for not speaking properly: at one point Esi cried out "My goodness," which she took as a sign of her daughter's name, a sign that was eventually shortened to Ness.

One night, TimTam brings his beloved daughter Pinky to the women's slave quarters. He needs the women's help: Pinky has not spoken since the death of her mother, only hiccuped. Ness takes Pinky under her wing. For days afterwards, Pinky does not leave Ness' side. Shortly afterwards, a confrontation between Stockham's children and Pinky results in Ness grabbing the stick with which Stockham's son was about to beat Pinky. Stockham catches them, the son blames Ness, and Stockham tells her she will be dealt with later. That night, in the women's slave cabin and wrapped in bed with Pinky, Ness distracts herself with memories of her husband. Past tense narration describes the development of Ness's relationship with the strong, handsome, and silent Sam: how she took the blame, and the whipping, for something he did; and how they married and conceived a child. Narration then shifts back into present tense as Pinky speaks words of comfort to Ness, who had been mumbling while she half-slept, half-dreamt, half-remembered.

The next day, Ness goes back to work, the whole while aware that Stockham is watching her in the field. Ness recalls the birth of her son Kojo during a time when she was on the plantation where she met Sam. She recalls how she, Sam, and Kojo made an attempt to escape after Ness met someone (Aku) who spoke her mother's language, and who had experience helping slaves escape. In the midst of the escape attempt, however, she and Sam surrendered to those pursuing them allowing Aku and Kojo to escape. Narration then describes how Ness was whipped (receiving the scars that made her unsuitable to be in the house) and how Sam was hanged.

The chapter concludes with a return to the present, and Ness continuing to pick cotton while wondering what Stockham is going to do to her. As she picks, she prays for forgiveness, and for the protection and safety of her son, "wherever he may be" (87).

Analysis

This is the chapter in which the narrative begins to follow its second narrative and generational line. At the same time as one line of the family and the story follows a path

through time and place in Africa, a second line of family and story follows a path through America. What is particularly noteworthy here is that this structural and stylistic choice ties the narrative thoroughly into the historical experience of what is arguably the country (the United States) with the most significant, and longest, history of racial tension in the Western Hemisphere (although it must be said that tensions between whites and Indigenous citizens have gone on a whole lot longer, but with much less publicity). As it does so, the narrative follows the pattern of sketching in the present, filling that sketch with information about the past, and then completing the sketch with further information about the present that, in turn, leaves the chapter on a note of suspense – in this case, the question of what happened to Kojo.

Meanwhile, aside from the important elements of narrative in this section (i.e. the story of Ness's relationship, the story of her attempted escape), there is the stylistic choice to slip, albeit briefly, into present tense narration. This is the only point in the book at which such a shift happens, with the shift emphasizing (as present tense tends to do) the significance of the moment being described.

The references to Ness's scars are a vivid example of how symbol and theme entwine, since scars here and throughout the narrative functioning to serve as a reminder to readers and characters of both the physical punishments associated with being a slave but also the psychological, inner scars associated with that experience. The question of whether scars can be inherited, and what it means to inherit a scar, is explored later in the narrative.

Other themes evoked in this section include an exploration of the power of family (which manifests in the sacrifices Ness and Sam seem prepared to make in order to ensure that their son has a freer, better life), and the idea of journeying home. Here, as is the case elsewhere in the book, the journey in question is one that takes characters to a new home, as opposed to going back to their old home. This is perhaps the origin of the book's title, Homegoing and not Homecoming, with its connotations of returning to a place of origin. In any case, while Ness and Sam do not complete the journey that begins here, there is a sense that Kojo and Ma Aku do, a sense that propels the reader forward into the narrative to find out what happened to them.

Finally, and on another thematic note, this chapter introduces the theme relating to the search for forgiveness. That theme is referenced, almost in passing, in Ness's chapter-closing prayer, which in turn foreshadows events (primarily in Part 2) that explore the experience of other characters searching for forgiveness as well.

Discussion Question 1

The references to Ness's scars is the first of several points throughout the narrative in which physical scars can be seen as existing in tandem with emotional scars. What are the possible emotional scars evoked in Part 1, Chapter 4 ?

Discussion Question 2

What is important or significant, either ironically or literally, in Ness's name being drawn from the phrase "my goodness"?

Discussion Question 3

In what main way does the shift into present tense emphasize the experience being described?

Vocabulary

pallet, cicada, deference, retribution, fester, metronome, berate

Part 1, Chapter 5

Summary

James – In the celebratory aftermath of the death of a rival tribal leader, James learns from a white friend of Quey, his father, that his grandfather has been killed, possibly as part of ongoing conflict between the tribe from which his mother (Nana Yaa) came, the Asantes; and the tribe from which his father came, the Fantes. Quey reveals that Nana Yaa wants to go to the funeral, and “The next day,” narration comments, “James, his mother, and his father headed north … his grandmother Effia would stay at home with the younger children” (89).

Narration describing the trip places the action in the early 1800’s. As James and his family travel to the funeral of his grandfather, they stop at the home of a friend of Quey’s from England. Conversation reveals that James has been promised in marriage to the daughter of a prominent man in their tribal community, one of several things that Fiifi had done to ensure the continued status of the family. Meanwhile, narration reveals that the marriage between Quey and Nana Yaa had always been unhappy, and that James was determined to not have a marriage like theirs.

Eventually, James and his family arrive at the village where the funeral is to take place. As part of the ceremonies, the family stands in a line to receive the condolences of mourners. One mourner, a beautiful young woman, tells James she will not shake his hand – or, more specifically, the hand of a slaver. He immediately feels a deep attraction to her, and after the ceremonies are finished, seeks her out with the help of his cousin. He discovers her name is Akosua, that she is intelligent and strong, and that she is determined to be “[her] own nation” (99). James asks her to marry him, even though he knows how much trouble it will cause. He thinks to himself of how “she had nothing, and she came from nowhere” (99). This reminds him of his grandmother Effia: see “Quote 6.” James makes Akosua promise to keep it a secret when she starts to menstruate (which, to her family, would be a sign that she could marry), and in his turn, promises to come for her. She says she will only trust him when he actually does.

Several months later, James has been married, and his wife is anxious to become pregnant, as she knows the village will start spreading rumors about her, or her husband, or both. James stalls for time, because of his desire to remain faithful to Akosua, but eventually realizes that he at least has to be seen to take action. He visits an aged apothecary, who senses what is really going on with him, and tells him that he already knows what to do. James goes back home, but does not make any changes in his life. Only a conversation with Effia (during which she fingers the black stone around her neck) convinces him to have the courage to do what he wants. He tells his family he is going to stay with her for a while, but leaves her halfway through their journey and finds a job in another town. His time there is cut short by the attack of an angry Asante raid. James runs, but gets lost and is attacked in the jungle. He is rescued by an Asante warrior who recognizes him and vows to take him home, but James refuses, telling the

man to spread word that he has died. Initially the warrior refuses, but James convinces him: “it would be the last time James would ever use his power to make another do his bidding” (110). He travels to Akosua’s village, and finds her there waiting.

Analysis

Here again, the narrative shifts focus along generational lines, a pattern that continues along both the American and African narrative lines for the rest of the book. There is a sense, here as elsewhere in the book, that while information about the past is important, only enough is included for the reader to have a clearer understanding of the present. The reader does not know, for example, much about James’ childhood: only that he is aware of the tensions in the marriage of his parents, and that he shares a close bond with his grandmother. Here it is interesting to note that James shares a first name with his grandfather, with whom he shares something else: a drive to establish, and maintain, a relationship with someone outside the boundaries of what, or who, is the expected choice.

The primary themes developed in Part 1, Chapter 5 has to do with its explorations of the nature and power of family, which manifests in what might be described as both positive and negative ways. In terms of the latter, the narrative clearly portrays the more controlling side (the tribal side?) of James’ family in a negative light, suggesting that such control is a negative thing against which rebellion, and James’ rebellion in particular, is practically inevitable. In terms of the former, a positive development in the theme of family, there is the sense that James get good, decision-triggering advice from the one family member in his life who, it seems, understands what the positive value of family actually is. This is James’ grandmother Effia, who arguably manifests the ultimate in family-love by recognizing, and acting on, the fact that James needs to be himself more than he needs to be family. The irony here is quite significant.

Meanwhile, developments in another theme in this chapter tie-in closely with developments in the family theme; this is the exploration of the theme / motif of journeys home, which in fact manifests in a couple of ways. The first is in the literal, physical journey that James and his family takes to the funeral of James’ grandfather, a journey to his mother’s home that does not really feel like a journey to a home that James really knows, or feels for. The second, and more significant, type of journey home has to do with the journey James makes to be with Akosua, a journey to a new physical home – a homegoing – that is triggered by a deep sense in James that he is, in fact, making a journey to a new emotional, psychological, and spiritual home.

Motifs and images referred to in Part 1, Chapter 5 include the reference to menstruation which, here and throughout the novel, is partly a reference to the book’s thematic interesting in family, and which, in this case, also has a clear echo of a situation earlier in which another character was told to delay announcement of the arrival of menstruation, but for an opposite reason. A similar sort of echo, involving the same character (Effia), appears in the comment about being nothing and coming from nowhere. In both cases, characters and situations referred to by the comment

eventually turn out to be the opposite of what was predicted: Effia clearly manages, and has managed, to make something of her life, while the “something” that James and Akosua manage to make of theirs is revealed in Part 1, Chapter 7.

One final point to note: Akosua’s comment about choosing to be her own nation. There is a sense here that on some level, James’ choices to be with her are defined by this comment, a powerful and evocative suggestion of individual independence and integrity which, in some ways, can be seen as reflecting the individual journeys of all the principal characters in both narrative lines throughout the book.

Discussion Question 1

What different sorts of slavery are evoked, or explored / described, in Part 1, Chapter 5?

Discussion Question 2

How does James’ choice of a partner reflect the choices made by his namesake grandfather, whose choices are discussed in Chapter 1?

Discussion Question 3

What is the metaphoric, or thematic, significance of the narrative’s reference to Effia’s stone in the middle of her conversation with James about his future? Why does the author choose this particular point to make a reference to the stone?

Vocabulary

swath (n.), calabash, rectification, raffia, condolence, insolence, attribute, menses, perpetual, atrocity, attainable

Part 1, Chapter 6

Summary

Kojo – The narrative shifts back to America, the first few paragraphs revealing that Kojo and the woman he calls Ma Aku now live in Baltimore, Maryland. Narration also reveals that Kojo (called Jo) is old enough to be working on the docks in a job that Ma Aku says has something evil about it: "… freed Negroes … building up the things that had brought them to America in the first place, the very things that had tried to drag them under" (111). Finally, narration describes Jo's home and family life: his wife Anna (a freed slave) and their seven children, their names starting with the first seven letters of the alphabet, with an eighth on the way and nicknamed "H."

One day, after working a full shift on the docks (narration referring to Jo's experience using powerful fire to heat the pitch used to seal the boats), Jo is called to the home of the white family for whom Anna and Ma Aku work. He learns that a law has been proposed that would allow for runaway slaves (like Jo and Ma Aku) to be captured and returned to the South. That night, Jo assures Anna that everything will be fine, and considers his options, reflecting on how "sometimes staying free required unimaginable sacrifice" (120). Jo then lies awake listening as his daughter Beulah has bad dreams.

Jo decides to stay in Baltimore, mostly because Anna's pregnancy is too far advanced for him to move her and everyone else. Time passes: Jo's oldest daughter Agnes gets married to the son of a preacher on the same day that the new law has passed. Jo teaches his children how to behave when stopped by police searching for runaway slaves.

One day, Anna does not return home from work. Jo searches with increasing desperation for her. Days and weeks pass, and there is no sign of Anna. Agnes' husband draws a sketch of Anna and Jo passes it around, hoping that it will spur someone's memory, but there is no sign of her.

Some time later, Jo learns that a heavily pregnant black woman had been seen getting into the carriage of a white man, leading Jo to believe that Anna and her baby had been taken and sold. Back home, before he can tell his children (including the now-pregnant Agnes), Ma Aku calls out for him, and he goes to her. She tries to comfort him, and he crawls into her bed the way he did when he was a child, finding comfort in being with her and in his memories of stories about the strength of his parents, Ness and Sam.

Brief narration closes the chapter with a summary of how ten years passed with no sign of Anna; how Ma Aku died, and how Jo's children left because they could no longer stand to be with him in his grief and loss; and how Jo eventually moved to New York to escape his memories. The chapter concludes with a reference to how Jo spent most of his nights alone in a bar and how one night, conversation between the bartender and other customers referred to the beginnings of war over slavery.

Analysis

The first point to note about this section is the geographical and historical context in which its action takes place. In terms of the former, the chapter's being set in Maryland places its action within the geographical context of the Northern United States which, at the time, was anti-slavery (at least to a point) and in which ex-slaves might be considered free. Here, though, it is important to note that as the chapter relates, even ex-slaves in the North were still viewed, by those in the South, as little more than property. This is one of the key points of this chapter's historical context, the second being the placement of its end moments, several years (perhaps decades) after its opening moments. Specifically, the references to "the war" are to the American Civil War, fought between North and South over the continuance of slavery (among other things). These elements, in turn, can also be seen as developments in the book's thematic interest in different kinds of slavery.

Another way in which the slavery theme is developed has to do with Jo's intense experiences of loss and confusion after the disappearance of Anna and H. These experiences can be seen as an evocation of being a slave to grief, and can also be seen as an evocation of yet another theme. This is the idea, developed throughout the book, that there are different kinds of scars – specifically, scars of a non-physical, inner, psychological nature. As the chapter draws to its close, and in its references to Jo being lonely and abandoned because of his grief and loss, there is a clear sense that his slavery to grief and loss has resulted in emotional scars in a metaphorically similar way that his mother Ness's experience of physical slavery resulted in scars on her body.

Key narrative points to note about this section have to do with the way in which it answers the question of what happened to Jo and Ma Aku, raised at the end of Chapter 4; the passage of time over the course of the chapter, which is perhaps longer than any other chapter-defined passage of time in the book; and the naming of Jo and Anna's children. On the one hand, there is an almost unavoidable sense of contrivance and cuteness about the names. On the other hand, though, there is particular value in H's lost child being referred to only by an initial. That value becomes clear in the chapter in which that child is a central character: Chapter 1 of Part 2.

Discussion Question 1

How does Part 1, Chapter 6 explore the theme of the power of family – or, more specifically, of different kinds of family?

Discussion Question 2

How do you respond to Ma Aku's comment about the irony of Jo working on the docks?

Discussion Question 3

Consider when Jo tells Anna that “sometimes staying free required unimaginable sacrifice” (120). What action directly affecting Jo’s life does the idea of this quote echo? What other “unimaginable sacrifice” was made to ensure his survival?

Vocabulary

tangible, mesmerize, secession, emancipate, oakum, detest, interval, huckster, ferocious, congregant, impeccable, leery

Part 1, Chapter 7

Summary

Abena – Abena returns to her village with a handful of seeds in the hope that they would change the fortunes of her father, nicknamed “Unlucky” (in the early stages of this chapter, neither her father nor her mother is identified by name). After her father takes the seeds, Abena tells him she wants to visit the Asante lands she believes she came from. Her father crushes the seeds in his hand as he reacts with increasing anger, Abena’s requests becoming so taunting that he eventually slaps her. Abena is comforted by her mother, whose explanation of her father’s behavior is that he was descended from great leaders but wanted to live his own life, free and independent. After her mother goes in search of her father, Abena realizes that her father’s decisions had led to the shame of her being unmarried. She resolves to leave.

One night soon afterwards, Abena visits an old friend, Ohene, with whom she lost her virginity. She convinces him to help her, and he takes her into the city, Kumasi. While there, she has a strange encounter with an old man (whose race is not identified) who confuses her with someone named “James.” Abena also encounters a white missionary, but the meeting ends when she realizes it is time for her to rendezvous with Ohene. When Aben and Ohene reconnect, he refers angrily to the power of white people, leading Abena to remember things her father said about The Cape Coast Castle, where slaves were kept before they were shipped to England or America. As Ohene takes her home, Abena asks why he has not married her. He tells her that he will as soon as he has another good harvest, and their conversation leading to lovemaking.

Abena and Ohene continue their affair when they arrive back at the village, and soon everyone knows. Meanwhile, the entire community (and not just Unlucky) becomes affected by drought: everyone’s crops suffer, to the point that the elders decide that the drought is being caused by Abena and Ohene’s relationship. They decree that Abena must conceive a child or there must be a good crop within seven years, or else Abena will be banished.

Time passes, and in the sixth year of the drought, Ohene risks planting some new seeds (cocoa) in hopes of growing a new and prosperous crop. The town waits anxiously. The plants grow and are harvested. Ohene takes the harvested beans to be sold, and the village (including Abena) prepares to celebrate. When he returns, he has bought supplies and enough seeds for everyone. Meanwhile, narration reveals that Abena has become pregnant. When she tries to speak with Ohene at the celebration, he rebuffs her, and she returns to her hut, convinced that she and Ohene will not marry. She tells the elders when they come to visit her; and the elders have confirmation from Ohene, who confesses that he had to promise to marry the daughter of a merchant in order to get a good price for the cocoa beans. Abena resolves to leave, and she tells her father. Her father then goes out into the yard and digs up a black stone. He gives it to Abena, saying that it was given to him by his grandmother, Effia. Abena's father says

Effia considered herself lucky, not unlucky, to have lived a life free of involvement with slavery, and that he wants Abena to take the necklace with her if she goes. Abena, now with first-time knowledge of her ancestors that she never had, embraces her father and mother, and leaves. "…[W]hen she arrived at the missionary church … she touched the stone at her neck and said thank you to her ancestors" (153).

Analysis

The first point to note about this chapter is how, in its early stages, it avoids referring to the actual identity of Abena's father. Given that the structure of the book to this point might suggest to the reader that "Unlucky" is likely James, there is a sense that the choice to leave the character unnamed has less to do with creating a sense of mystery and suspense in the reader and more to do with defining the situation in which Abena is coming into maturity – specifically, a situation in which her family background (like that of female relatives before and after her) leads her, as a woman, into a situation in which she has no choice but to live her life in a certain way - or at least try to. In following her father's example, she is taking her own life, and the lives of her descendants, into her own hands.

What is interesting to note here is how Abena becomes the first woman on her side of the narrative's two family lines to take her life fully into her own hands and make her own choices. The other female characters in her line (i.e. the African one), both central characters like Effia and secondary ones like Nana Yaa, have their choices made for them. It is also interesting to note that Abena is following in the steps of a relative she does not know she has: earlier in the book, in the chapter that bears her name, Ness makes choices defined by a desire for independence, at first for herself (i.e. running from slavery) and then for her son (i.e. surrendering and sacrificing herself so he can be free). This is one of the most intriguing aspects of the book – how the author creates parallels and similarities in the lives of characters who are related by blood and, arguably, by circumstance, but are kept apart by geography.

Meanwhile, this chapter introduces an important new symbol: seeds. In both situations in which seeds appear, they represent hope – hope crushed, and hope realized. Here it is interesting to note a possible connection between the positive image of seeds having brought new life to Abena's village and the fact that Abena ends up living at a Christian mission: one of the metaphoric aspects of Christian teaching, and specifically the teachings of Jesus, is that spreading the Word of God is similar, in some ways, to the sowing of seed. The idea of hope and possibility represented by the seeds is echoed in the reappearance of an important symbol from earlier in the book: the black stone, which represents, for both the characters and the novel, the hope and possibility inherent in being, having, and staying connected with, family. This, in turn, develops and reiterates the novel's interest in that particular thematic element.

Other themes developed in this section include the book's exploration of different types of slavery. Here, Ohene's reference to the behavior of white people towards Africans can be seen as referring to how slaves in both narrative lines and on both sides of the

Atlantic are treated by whites. It also foreshadows comments later in the narrative by characters in a more contemporary time period, comments that suggest that in spite of efforts to the contrary, white attitudes towards Africans and African-Americans are transcendent of time and geography. One last thematic consideration in this chapter is its exploration of journeying home, which manifests both in the short journeys Abena takes to and from Ohene and the longer journey at the end of the section, which Abena takes to her new home and her new freedom.

The final moment of the chapter, which is also the final moment of Part 1, involves Abena's recognition of, and communion with, her ancestors foreshadowing a parallel event at a parallel moment in Part 2 (i.e. the end of that part), in which characters honor the journeys of their ancestors, albeit in a less direct, more implied way.

Discussion Question 1

Throughout the narrative, characters are portrayed as having both physical and psychological scars as a result of what has happened in the past, to them as individuals and to the community or culture to which they belong. What sorts of scars are portrayed in Part 1, Chapter 7?

Discussion Question 2

What do you think is the significance of the cameo appearance of the old man? How does the fact that he calls Abena "James" reflect the similarities in situation between Abena and her father?

Discussion Question 3

Why do you think James withheld the stone for as long as he did? What is it about Abena and her choices at this point in her life that makes him decide that now is the time for him to give it to her?

Vocabulary

chrysalis, mortified, banishment, penance, brazen, solace, reap, reminiscent, ferment, crevice

Part 2, Chapter 1

Summary

H – H reacts angrily to being put in jail, but his cell-mate calms him down. Conversation reveals that it is several years since the American Civil War. H considers himself free, but his cellmate thinks he is being foolish: “War may be over but it ain’t ended,” he says (158).

H has been imprisoned for looking at a white woman the wrong way. As his cell-mate falls asleep, H recalls how he got there – specifically how he was arrested while traveling north in the aftermath of the breakup of his relationship with a woman named Ethe, who ended the relationship because he called her by the name of another woman.

Four days after being arrested, in the summer of 1880, H is sentenced to mine coal and marked with a scar. He quickly becomes a strong and sturdy miner. Some time into his sentence, he is assigned to work with another convict, a weak white man in danger of not meeting his quota, which would result in both him and H being punished. H shovels double the amount of coal he is required to in order to save the life of his partner. Through the whole ordeal, H continues to dream of being free, and also continues to remember his mother, who killed herself just as H was being born and so never gave him any other name.

Nine years later, H is set free. He eventually gets a job as a free laborer in the same mine as other ex-convicts work. He stays in the home of one of them, Joecy, whose wife tells him that he has been a fool about Ethe (she has heard the story from her husband) and that H should let her son write to Ethe for him. H refuses. Meanwhile, he reluctantly becomes involved with the union at work, and also realizes that he now has an opportunity for a free life and home that he never had. He then gets Joecy’s son to write a letter to Ethe.

Some time later, after a strike at the mine that resulted in the death of a young miner, H comes home to find Ethe in his kitchen cooking. They look at each other in silence a long time before Ethe explains why she has not been in touch for so long. She could not forgive H for a long time for getting her name wrong, but finally found herself able to, and became eager to find him. He goes to her, Ethe eventually letting herself relax into him.

Analysis

This chapter opens with what is often referred to, in technical terms, as a moment “in media res” – that is, in the middle of things. The first point to note about this technique is that it immediately engages the reader in story, character, and situation. Another point to note is that the chapter as a whole follows a similar pattern to chapters that precede it, and also chapters that follow it: open with a scene or sequence that establishes the

identity and situation of a central character; flashback into the past to explain how that character got to this point in life; and then return to the present, to move the character and the narrative forward. In some cases, the flashback / present day balance is tilted in favor of history. However, in the case of this chapter and others, the balance is tipped in favor of the present.

That present, for H, includes an anonymity reinforced by his name. The fact that he has no identity beyond the initial “H” reinforces, and is reinforced by, his lack of identity as a former slave (who had no real identity apart from that defined by his servitude); as a coal miner (who has no real identity apart from that defined by his ability to mine and move coal); and as a man (who has, at least at the beginning, no real identity apart from that defined by his physical gender). All that said, however, it is important to note that the narrative movement of the chapter – H’s journey of transformation – is primarily defined by his movement INTO an identity – as a free man, as a person with value and integrity, and as a forgiven beloved.

Several of the book’s themes developed along this particular journey of transformation. For example, the variations on slavery theme is evoked in several ways – by what amounts to H’s slavery to the coal mine owners; by what amounts to his slavery to remorse (that is: his remorse over what happened with Ethe); and by what amounts to his slavery as a black man. This moves with him into jail, into the coal mine, and even into the union hall, where it becomes the catalyst for him to move into union activism. He sees clear echoes of his experiences on the plantation in his experiences in the mine, and as a result finds himself determined to engage in a fight for the greater good so that more people are forced to endure less of what he has had to endure. All this can be seen as evoking the book’s concurrent thematic interest in scarring, and in different types of scars. It is at least partly because of the physical and emotional scars left behind by his history that H does what he does in order to change both his present and his future. The scar carved into him at the beginning of his career and life as a miner represents this aspect of his experience.

Meanwhile, a theme developed in a relatively lower key in this chapter has to do with the power of family – specifically, the kind of family formed when two people open themselves to connection and relationship. The final moments of this chapter are one of several examples throughout the book of coupled relationships that transcend circumstance and connect with something deeper, forms of connection with self and the other that might, ultimately, be seen or defined as spiritual.

One final point worth considering. H is one of several examples in the book of central male characters whose father figures are absent, either literally (as in physically not around, which is H’s situation) or emotionally, psychologically, or morally distant). It is possible, given this recurring, book-wide motif of fatherless sons, that on some level the author is exploring a pair of thematically related, present-day significant ideas. The first is that family relations between African-Americans are in many ways, both in history and in the present, defined more by relations between mothers and children than by fathers and children. The second, and related point, is that in recent years, commentary and socio-cultural analysis have suggested that as a group, African-American males have

been, again in both past and present, frequently neglected, abandoned, or betrayed by fathers who are unable, unwilling, or unprepared to role model healthy and appropriate male behavior. In putting several of her male characters in this situation, the author seems to be exploring the historical and cultural roots of a problem that many commentators have identified as at least part of the reason why tensions between white authority and black men have, in recent years, been so high, so present, and so violent.

Discussion Question 1

How does Part 2, Chapter 1 develop the book’s thematic interest in forgiveness?

Discussion Question 2

Given that the American Civil War, referred to in the opening moments of Part 2, Chapter 1, was primarily about slavery and race, what does the quote from H's cellmate ("War may be over but it ain’t ended” (158)) mean? How is the central idea of this quote reflected or echoed in the events of the rest of Part 2, Chapter 1?

Discussion Question 3

What do you think is the connection between H’s experiences with the strike and his decision to re-establish communication with Ethe?

Vocabulary

spiteful

Part 2, Chapter 2

Summary

Akua – The opening narration of this chapter reveals that Akua is the daughter of Abena, and that Akua has a recurring dream of an all-consuming fire shaped like a woman. The dream, narration reveals, first came in 1895, shortly after Abena's death, but now, in the aftermath of the burning death of a white man, has intensified and been coming more frequently. She wakes from the most recent time of having the dream, and is comforted by her husband, Asamoah, a proud warrior of the Asante.

An errand into the village leads Akua past the place where the white man was burned, leading her to remember the event and how she was one of the few people who spoke enough English to understand when he cried out to be released, because he was only a traveler. After returning from her errand, Akua learns that the current white governor is escalating tensions with the Asante. Shortly afterwards, Asamoah and the other warriors go into battle.

Narration then flashes back and forth between the present and the past – specifically, Akua's experiences with the Missionary who raised her after the death of Abena, being beaten for being a heathen like her mother and all the other "people on the black continent" (184). She is also told that Abena had accidentally drowned while being baptized. Meanwhile, as Asamoah and the other warriors continue to stay away and to fight, Akua (who has realized she is pregnant) becomes more and more easily distracted, letting herself slip into deep reveries and contemplations. Eventually, her mother-in-law comes to believe that she (Akua) is ill, and locks her into a hut until she gets better. Akua becomes increasingly upset, eventually descending into a frantic kind of prayer that is also connected to her dreams of the fire-woman.

Eventually, when Asamoah comes home (having lost a leg in battle), Akua is freed and reunited not only with Asamoah, but also their two children who had been taken from her while she was, as her mother-in-law says, "sick." Eventually Akua gives birth to her child, a boy named Yaw, and the family tries to rebuild their life together. For Akua it is particularly difficult: partly because the people of the village view her as crazy, and partly because the dreams of the fire-woman are returning.

One night, Akua has a particularly intense version of the dream, one in which she embraces the fire-woman's two children. The next morning, she wakes up to find herself being carried through the village while the people around her shout that she is crazy. She is taken to where the white man was burned, all the while asking what is being done to her. Eventually, she and the reader both learn that the villagers believe she killed her daughters, but that Asamoah managed to save Yaw. Asamoah pleads for Akua to be freed, saying that Yaw will need her. Akua is then released, and she and Asamoah return home. She is not told what happened to the bodies of her daughters.

Analysis

The primary point to note about this chapter has to do with the complex meanings and implications of the many manifestations of fire it contains. Fire, throughout the narrative as a whole has been representative of one or more meanings, separately or in combination: a representation of strong feeling; a representation of suffering; and a representation of connection with the past. Here, in the case of the manifestations of the image in the life and experience of Akua, there is the sense that Akua is being haunted by subconscious, memories of her family's suffering throughout history. This sense emerges primarily as a result of the final manifestation of the dream (the mother with two children), which seems to have very clear echoes of the situation that gave the book's parallel narrative/geographical lines its origin: that of Maame and her two daughters.

Meanwhile, a second reference to fire (the death of the white traveler) can be seen as evocative not only of suffering (that of the white man) but also of strong feeling – that is, the rage and resentment of white power and domination that has been simmering for decades in the Africans portrayed in the novel. As such, the image of the burning white man foreshadows situations later in the narrative in which African, and African-American, characters feel similar rage and resentment of what whites, and white attitudes, have done to blacks as individuals, and as a community or culture.

It is also important to note the juxtaposition between so much fire imagery and an in-passing reference to water which, throughout the narrative to this point, has been a less overtly developed image but will play an increasingly significant role in chapters to come, particular in the book's climax. Water, in all its appearances, has an ambivalent meaning: on the one hand, as an image of cleansing and redemption (this shows up primarily in the book's final moments) and, on the other hand, as an image of separation and death. The reference to water in this chapter is not overt, but is implied in the reference to baptism, a Christian ritual in which the sins of an individual are metaphorically "washed away" by being bathed, either symbolically with a small amount of water poured over the head or literally, by being immersed. The baptism in this chapter, that of Abena, is an example of the latter: she was, at the time of her death, being baptized by immersion, a situation which, given what the narrative reveals about the attitude of the missionary, suggests that it is meant to be interpreted as a simultaneous representation of both redemption and death.

The final point to note about Part 2, Chapter 2 is the careful ambivalence with which narration portrays Akua. While her community perceives her as insane, the narrative seems intent upon portraying her as some kind of visionary, one with spiritual and subconscious connections to her personal history as a descendent of a troubled family and to her tribal history as a member of a troubled community. In other words, her situation seems to be the result of her being both a black woman in Africa and a descendant of a family line whose suffering and circumstances were born in fire in the same way as her own suffering, circumstances, and identity. Here it is important to note that narrative and community perspective on Akua and her circumstances shifts with the

passage of time, and is explored in subsequent chapters. In those circumstances, she becomes as much of a revered elder as Effia, her great-great grandmother.

Discussion Question 1

In what non-literal ways do the events of Part 2, Chapter 2 explore the experience and power of family?

Discussion Question 2

What do you think is the psychological, or emotional / spiritual, connection between Asua's witnessing of the death of the white man and the emergence of her dreams? How does the one trigger the other?

Discussion Question 3

What do you think is happening with Akua – is she a visionary? Is she mad? Is she some combination of the two?

Vocabulary

repetitive, scrutinize, cassava, heathen, valiant, argumentative, girth, fissure, situate

Part 2, Chapter 3

Summary

Willie – This chapter begins with narrative of house-cleaner Willie walking home from church with her son Carson. As they enjoy their time together, narration then moves into flashback, revealing that Willie is the daughter of H; that she hates how dark her skin is; and that she is a singer, most notably of the national anthem at her father's union meetings.

Flashback narration then describes the relationship between Willie and Robert, the man who became her husband and the father of her child. They fell for each other almost immediately after they met, got married a couple of years later, and had a child named Carson. Willie's parents never get to see Carson, as they died before he was born. Shortly afterwards, desperate to make new lives for themselves, Willie (who wanted to sing) and Robert (who could pass for white, and wanted to work) moved to New York. There, they soon discovered that they were perceived as a mixed marriage; that Robert could find work if he posed as white; and that Willie was too dark to get any work other than housecleaning. They drifted apart, and Willie became increasingly distant from Carson as she took more and more work. One night, at the jazz club where Willie had taken a job cleaning in the hopes that she might one day be allowed to sing, she and Robert encounter each other and are forced to have sex by Robert's boss, who does not know that Willie is Robert's wife. After the sex is finished, Robert is told to not come in to work. Robert then tells Willie that he will move out that night.

Shortly after Robert left, Willie met Eli, an attractive but undisciplined poet who excited her, but also made her deeply angry with his restless wandering. She got pregnant, and the wandering got worse. Years passed. Willie struggled to keep herself and her children fed and sheltered, and Eli only occasionally appeared, at one point giving Carson the nickname Sonny, a nickname that Willie deeply, and angrily, resents. Meanwhile, Willie's ability to sing seemed to have disappeared: every time she auditioned, she froze with stage fright.

In the present, Willie and Carson continue to walk home. At one point, Willie catches a glimpse of Robert with a blond white woman, who seems to be his wife, and a girl who seems to be his daughter. Their eyes meet; they smile at each other; and Willie finally realizes that she has forgiven him. As narration reveals that Eli is about to have a book of poetry published and that he has stayed with Willie and the children longer than ever, Willie suddenly feels able to sing again.

Analysis

Aside from parallels between the structure of this chapter and the structure of several others (i.e. a sketch of the present, a flashback to the past explaining the present, and a

return to the present), this chapter is notable for the development of parallels defined by content, rather than shape. Among them are the parallels between Willie and several of her ancestors; not only the independence and sacrifice of Ness and the movement to new home-places of Esi, but the employment situation of grandmother Anna (as a house-cleaner) and the relationship situation of mother Ethe, whose determination that she be treated with respect by H has clear parallels in Willie's determination to be treated with respect by both Robert and Eli.

There are also parallels between the father-absent situation of Carson/Sonny and those of his male ancestors, Kojo and H, parallels that continue to develop in future chapters focusing on the lives of Sonny and his descendants. One other significant parallel is the fact that Willie and Robert engage in a mixed marriage, which parallels an experience on the other side of the narrative-geographic story, the mixed-relationship between Effia and James. Here it is important to note that the latter relationship is somewhat more successful and tolerated, arguably the result of centuries of racism-defined resistance to, and resentment of, mixed marriage in America. This resentment is vividly, almost horrifyingly, depicted in the scene in the jazz club in which Robert and Willie are forced to have sex without their being able to acknowledge that they are, in fact, married. It could be argued, then, that the conflicted situation of being both part of the problem and part of the solution is what drove Robert to leave the relationship.

Meanwhile, several themes are developed in Part 2, Chapter 3. The power of family is developed, here as is the case on several other occasions throughout the narrative, through the portrayal of sacrifices and commitments made by mothers in order to provide their children with stable, fulfilling, promising lives (here again the idea of parallel experiences comes into play). There are also echoes of slavery here, again through the use of parallels. There is a clear sense that, like her ancestors, Willie finds herself in a position where menial, servant-like / slave-like work is the only option open to her. Finally, there is a significant development in the book's exploration of the theme of forgiveness, which manifests in a similar way to this theme's development in the H chapter – parallels again, as Willie's compassionate insight into, and forgiveness of, Robert's actions parallels and echoes the forgiveness of her mother Ethe for her (Willie's) father H.

A last point to note relates to Willie's individual story, an experience that has its own individualized elements at the same time as it evokes so many parallels with those who have gone before and who will come after. Specifically, Willie's journey from singing through silence into singing again can be seen as evoking the idea of moving from childhood freedom and possibility, through a period of young adult insecurity, fear and a kind of economic and psychological imprisonment, and into a new period or phase of freedom. Here it is interesting to note the tie between this idea and the previously discussed idea of forgiveness: only when she has forgiven the man that she believes did her so wrong is Willie again able to sing. While there is a sense that the narrative portrays Willie's renewed inclination to sing as being connected to Eli's settling down and becoming more stable, in the bigger picture of the book's thematic perspective, though, this aspect of the Willie/Eli relationship seems also tied to forgiveness – Willie's forgiveness of Eli. In both cases of Willie's resentment toward Robert and Eli, though,

the sense here is that anger and pain are themselves a kind of prison, or slavery, a variation on the book's thematic contention that slavery can be, as much about chains that exist in the mind, heart, and spirit as it is about chains on the ankles, wrist, or neck.

Discussion Question 1

How does Part 2, Chapter 3 explore the thematic idea of journeying home?

Discussion Question 2

In what ways does Willie's crusade for respect from the men in her life differ from that of her mother's? How do the results of Willie's efforts differ from Ethe's?

Discussion Question 3

What is your opinion of Robert's decision to leave? Does he go because he is afraid? Does he go because he feels he, Willie, and Carson will be better off without the tension of being associated with a mixed marriage? Is it some combination of both?

Vocabulary

inconsolable, mewling, drawl

Part 2, Chapter 4

Summary

Yaw – Introductory narration reveals that Yaw has become a teacher and writer, committed to African independence and freedom; that his face is scarred as a result of what happened to him as a child; and that he spends most of his off-duty time with a school friend. It was that friend, narration comments, who told a girl who had reacted badly to Yaw's scar (who had, in fact, said that no-one would marry him because their children would be ugly) that "… you could not inherit a scar … Yaw no longer knew if he believed this was true" (228).

Narration reveals that Yaw has not been home to his village (Edweso) since he was six. When he was young, the villagers put together a collection to pay for him to be sent away to go to school.

Time passes, and Yaw realizes that his friend, who is raising a large family, has less and less time for him. He then employs a housekeeper, Esther, who is physically plain but a good worker and generally happy. Over the next five years, Yaw finds himself falling in love with the happy worker, named Esther, but he unable to express it well. Finally, he asks whether she will come with him to visit his mother, "in case," he says, "I need someone to cook for me as I travel" (232). Narration reveals that Esther had been encouraging him to make such a visit for several years. Esther agrees to go.

After a journey of several days, Yaw and Esther arrive at Edweso, where they are met by a man who recognizes Yaw, who knows Akua, and who welcomes the travelers into his home. Esther assures Yaw that everything will be all right, and that his journey – as she has always said – has something to do with forgiveness. Yaw is not sure he agrees with her: forgiveness, he thinks, is "a word the white men brought with them when they first came to Africa" (237). Later, however, when Yaw and Esther visit Akua, who recognizes her son immediately, he realizes he has the capacity to forgive his troubled, apologetic, grieving mother who is also scarred by burns.

Yaw asks his mother to tell him what happened on the night he was burned, and she tells him she cannot do so without also telling him the history of their family. She tells him of where and how she was raised (under the influence of the missionary); of the dreams she had (and continues to have); and how she has learned that the firewoman in her dreams represents a female ancestor. She also shows him a black stone pendant that had been left behind by her mother, and how a "fetish man" (African spiritual man) had told her that the stone had belonged to a firewoman. She also tells him that the stone was, and is, a remnant of the evil in her past; and that if she continued to listen to her dreams, the firewoman would tell her where she came from. Akua then tells Yaw that it is time for him to be free of his inherited evil and pain.

Analysis

The first point to note about Part 2, Chapter 4 is how an early comment describing Yaw's experience with his scars in many ways sums up the approach taken by the book in exploring this thematically central idea. Specifically, the comment that it is impossible to inherit scars is entirely true, in that it is impossible to inherit physical scars; however, as several circumstances in the novel reveal, it is not only entirely possible but entirely likely that emotional or psychological scars can be inherited. Inner scars left behind by experiences of slavery, of abandonment, of failure, of rejection, of betrayal – all these are defining and identifying characteristics of many characters throughout the book. It could be argued, in fact, that Yaw is one of them: here and in future chapters, the narrative makes clear that his mother's actions have left him damaged not only in terms of what has happened to his face, but also what has happened to his mind, heart, and spirit.

The book develops another of its primary themes in parallel, or in tandem, with the theme relating to scarring. This second theme is the one that relates to the question of forgiveness, introduced in earlier chapters such as the one portraying Ethe's forgiveness of H and developed with even greater intensity, depth, and compassion here. There is the very clear sense, as Part 2, Chapter 4 draws to its close, that while Akua and Yaw both carry with them the physical scars of what passed between them, the healing of the emotional and psychological scars left behind by that night has at least begun. One other point to note in relation to Part 2, Chapter 4's exploration of forgiveness is Yaw's reference to forgiveness being a white man's concept, a comment that might seem somewhat obscure at first, but becomes clearer when the idea of white missionaries bringing Christianity (with its New Testament emphasis on forgiveness) to Africa is taken into account.

One other theme developed in Part 2, Chapter 4 has to do with the idea of home-going. Yaw is the first character in the book to return to the home where he grew up rather than a journey from the place of origin to a new home. Yaw's decision and actions here are the first of several instances of going home (as opposed to home-going) in the latter chapters of the book, and foreshadow a climactically significant going home in the final chapter.

The final section of Part 2, Chapter 4, with its extended exploration of the reunion between Yaw and his mother, contains several important elements. The first is the portrayal of the character of Akua, who was portrayed in her earlier appearances as crazy but who is now, as a result of time and, perhaps, the forgiveness of her community, revered as a wise and spiritual elder. This aspect of her character and identity carries forward into chapters later in the narrative in which she plays a significant role. Another important element in Part 2, Chapter 4 includes the reference to the firewoman which here, as in the Akua chapter, can be seen as referring back to Maame. What is interesting about this reference is that for the first time, the ancestral actions of the firewoman (Maame) are regarded as evil, and as having curse-like influence over the generations of family that have followed her. While the narrative here

is not explicit as to which actions, exactly, have been defined as evil, when the reader recalls that Maame was responsible for setting a destructive fire, the idea that her family line is perceived as having been cursed starts to make sense.

The last key element of the final section of Part 2, Chapter 4 is the return of the black stone, absent from the last few chapters but returning here in a couple of capacities: as a more positive side of the "enduring power of family" coin (the dark side being the aforementioned curse), and as a trigger / catalyst not only for the forgiveness and redemption that ends Part 2, Chapter 4, but which pervades the book's concluding chapters as well.

Discussion Question 1

How do the events in Part 2, Chapter 4 relate to the book's overall thematic interest in the power of family?

Discussion Question 2

Why do you think it takes so long for Yaw to admit his feelings for Esther?

Discussion Question 3

What is your reaction to Yaw's comments about the relationship between white men and forgiveness? Keeping in mind the racial, cultural, and economic context of those comments, do you agree or disagree?

Vocabulary

caption, athleticism, allegiance, ravenous, resistant, competent, obstinate, nebulous, mortar, pestle, embolden

Part 2, Chapter 5

Summary

Sonny – Sonny is once again bailed out of jail by his angry mother, Willie. Narration describes his years of anger at her and at his long-missing father; his years of directing that anger into work for the NAACP (National Association for the Advancement of Colored People); and how he had become the deadbeat father of three children by three different women. An encounter with a frustrated boy whose home he is inspecting for the NAACP leads him to quit his job and, after living with his mother for a while, finding a small apartment and a job of his own, as a bartender in a jazz club.

One night, Sonny's attention is caught and held by the presence and performance of a singer whose name, he eventually learns, is Amani. Sonny becomes obsessed with her, eventually tracking her down to another club. As he goes home with her, he becomes increasingly troubled by her strange behavior, but "…he had felt something in himself open up when she started singing that night, and he wanted to capture just a little bit more of that feeling, keep it for himself" (254). Sonny also learns that she only calls herself by an African name because she likes the sound of it; she does not believe that it is possible to connect with ancestry and history, saying it is impossible to go back to someplace that has never been known. Amani's home turns out to be a drug house. Sonny watches as Amani injects herself with drugs, and then asks him whether he still wants her.

Narration then jumps ahead, to a point at which Sonny has become a heroin addict, sharing a house and drugs with Amani and a number of other addicts, denied money and contact by almost everyone. Meanwhile, Amani's singing career has almost entirely fallen apart. On Amani's urging, Sonny goes to visit his mother to try to get some money.

Sonny arrives at his mother's home long after everyone else in the house has had their dinner. Willie sends Sonny's sister and her kids out for ice cream; gives Sonny some food; and then tells Sonny about his father (essentially, the story of Part 2, Chapter 3), describing how it breaks her heart to see Sonny doing what he was doing after all she had done for him. Sonny, who had taken a hit of a drug before sitting down to dinner, listens as Willie continues, talking about how free white men had been putting black people in different kinds of prisons for years, and how Sonny was already in a different kind of white prison. "He ain't got to sell you or put you in a coal mine to own you. He'll own you just as is, and he'll say you the one who did it. He'll say it's your fault" (263). With that, and with tears in her eyes, she pulls out a wad of money, puts it in front of him, and tells him that he can take it and go if he wants to.

Instead, Sonny stays.

Analysis

Once again, the action of this chapter begins “in media res” – that is, in the middle of the action. This way of beginning the chapter clearly echoes another chapter with a similar beginning: the chapter that focused on the life and experiences of Sonny’s grandfather, H, which also starts with the central character in jail. This parallel can perhaps be seen as another way in which the novel explores its central theme, relating to the power and connections within family, power that results in parallel personalities as well as in parallel experiences across generations.

The theme of family, in fact, is the dominant one in this section as the narrative, in both its past and present aspects, focuses on family relationships: mother-son (in Willie and Sonny) and father-child (in the clear absence of a strong father figure, and Sonny’s inability to be a consistent and effective father figure for his own children). There is the clear sense that Sonny’s choice at the very end of the chapter is defined as much by his love and respect for his mother as it is by his own need to recover from addiction. Meanwhile, the motif of absent father / angry son can be seen as evoking a dark side of the family relationship theme; as evoking a similarly dark side of the thematically central idea of emotional scars; and, as previous manifestations of this idea have done elsewhere in the book, can be seen as an apparent attempt by the author to look at a present-day cultural issue through the lens of history.

There is another element of contemporary-issue-explored-in-past-context in Part 2, Chapter 5 in the portrayal of Sammy’s descent into drug use. The point must be made here that on the contemporary side of the coin, the image relates less to a specific comment about the African-American community in particular than it has to do with contemporary society in general, a society in which drug use of varying sorts is more prevalent than ever. This is partly as a result of accessibility and partly because more and more people are finding it increasingly difficult to find ways to deal with personal pain, psychological or physical. This, in turn, can be seen as contributing in a metaphoric way to the book’s exploration of different types of scars – specifically, psychological scars like Sonny’s, left behind as a result of his childhood and related to pain that he, for various reasons (including desire for Amani), feels he can only ease through the use of drugs.

Meanwhile, another aspect of Part 2, Chapter 5’s exploration of relationships with the past has to do with the comments made by Amani about the futility of going home, or trying to. This comment is clearly at odds with both the thematic intention of the book and several of its plot elements, one of which took place in the previous chapter, while other goings-home take place in following chapters. Here, though, it is important to remember that the comment comes from someone addicted to drugs, a sort of person who, almost by definition, is only interested in the present (being high) and the immediate future (getting high) because the past, for most addicts, is the source of the pain that makes getting high necessary.

Discussion Question 1

The experience of what kind of thematically-relevant slavery is explored in Part 2, Chapter 5? Consider, in particular, Willie's comments to Sonny in the latter half of Part 2, Chapter 5.

Discussion Question 2

Consider and discuss the differences between the life that Sonny finds in his mother's home, and the life he finds in Amani's home. How are the two lives contrasted? Specifically, how might a reader define the differences between the sorts of love found in each?

Discussion Question 3

What do you think fuels Willie's actions in offering Sonny the money? It is a high stakes move: what has she got to gain? What does she have to lose? In the moment of the offer, what does she think he is going to do? What does she HOPE he is going to do?

Vocabulary

conjure, immune, pristine, secular, mortician, glassine, commode

Part 2, Chapter 6

Summary

Marjorie – Narration describes how Marjorie, a young woman in her mid-teens, arrives in Cape Coast to visit her grandmother, once referred to as Crazy Woman and now referred to as Old Lady. Narration also describes how, because of the scars on her father and grandmother and because she had none, Marjorie refused to admit to having pain of any sort; how Marjorie's father and mother once lived in Alabama, but moved back to Ghana; and how much Marjorie loves chocolate, her grandmother joking how she "must have been birthed from a cocoa nut" (266). On a visit to the beach, part of their regular ritual when Marjorie visits, Old Lady first confirms that Marjorie is wearing the necklace (the black stone passed down in her family from generation to generation, which had only just been given to Marjorie by her father), and then reminds her of a ritual that she (Old Lady) performed when Marjorie was younger, another "summer ritual, her grandmother reminding her how to come home" (268).

Narration then reveals that Marjorie begins to menstruate while she is visiting her grandmother, a rite of passage that her grandmother celebrates happily. As years pass, Marjorie develops a deep friendship with a white boy named Graham. Then, in high school, Marjorie is asked to read a poem for a special celebration of African-American culture, but tells the African-American teacher organizing the assembly that she does not feel African-American inside. The teacher tells her it does not matter how she feels: to the white people running things, black is black.

A short time later, after she and Graham go on a date, Marjorie tells him to stop playing with his cigarette lighter. Narration reveals that she dislikes fire because she is concerned about having the same sort of visions that her grandmother had. She also wonders whether Graham is going to ask her to the prom. He does not. A short time later, Marjorie and her family receive word that Old Lady's health is failing. In a long-distance phone call, Marjorie begs her to not die, but Old Lady reassures her that she will never leave.

Over the next several weeks, as Marjorie becomes increasingly worried about both her grandmother and the poem, Graham becomes initially more attentive (kissing her for the first time) and then more distant, actually letting himself be pulled away from her by a white girl. Later, Marjorie spends the night of prom at home with her parents. After Graham calls to apologize for not taking her, she tells her mother that the phone call was nothing important.

Eventually, the date for the assembly arrives. Marjorie fights down nerves as she prepares to read her poem, and eventually recites it. "Split the Castle open / find me, find you. / We, two, felt sand, wind, air. / One felt whip. Whipped, / once shipped. / We, two, black. / Me, you. / One grew from / cocoa's soil, birthed from nut, / skin uncut, still bleeding. / We, two, wade. / The waters seem different / but are same. / Our same.

Sister skin. / Who knew? Not me. Not you" (282). As she finishes, she sees her father arrive, but does not see him crying.

Back in Ghana, Marjorie follows the procession to the top of the mountain where her grandmother is to be buried. Only after the soil has been placed on top of her grandmother's coffin does she realize that she forgot to bury her poem with her. She reads it aloud and bursts into tears, falling on her grandmother's grave and crying out "Maame."

Analysis

As the novel draws closer to its narrative and thematic climax, it introduces one of the two characters who play a key role in that climax: Marjorie, descended from Effia (who stayed in Africa); daughter of Yaw (who evidently left Africa, for reasons that are never directly addressed); and granddaughter of Akua. This last familial relationship is particularly important, given that it is Akua from whom Marjorie seems more directly descended, given that the two women have similar dreams. Here it is important to note the completeness of Akua's transformation; Akua has transitioned from someone regarded as insane into someone regarded as a wise, if eccentric, elder. Here again, the novel develops the idea of forgiveness; time has passed, and Akua's killing of her children is perhaps not forgotten, but forgiven, and possibly understood with modern perspectives on mental health.

Other thematic elements are also developed in this chapter.

Part 2, Chapter 6 includes an interesting take on the novel's general thematic interest in scars and scarring. Several characters throughout the book are portrayed as having experienced traumas that cause physical scars, which in some cases are representations of courage (Ness, Esi) and in other cases representations of vulnerability (Akua, Yaw). It is interesting that Marjorie sees her lack of physical scars (in other words, the clarity and purity of her skin) as a kind of armor, an element of her determination to reveal no pain. The irony is that her attitude is perhaps a reflection of having experienced a great deal of emotional pain. There is a sense, as her relationship with Graham becomes what it does, that that pain is probably connected to experiences of racism. This is never discussed outright, only implied; for example, in Marjorie's comment to her mother about Graham's phone call, which can be perceived as either a manifestation of Marjorie's personal armor or as a statement of how she is not going to be affected by racism … or, perhaps, a combination of both.

Another example of thematic development has to do with the reference to the black stone, which again resurfaces as a family heirloom and can be seen as one of the novel's primary metaphoric evocations of its thematic interest in the power of family. That theme is, arguably, more vividly developed in this chapter than anywhere else in the book by Marjorie's poem, which contains all kinds of echoes of family history – the Castle, whipping, cocoa, and sisterhood among them. Most importantly, though, the poem foreshadows events in the following, and climactic chapter, in which the idea of

two people with an unknown connection, developed vividly in the poem, comes into reality. Another point about that poem is that there is the clear sense, both in the present and as the result of what happens in the next chapter, that the poem functions in the same way as the dreams of the firewoman to suggest that Marjorie has inherited her grandmother's seemingly psychic ability to see beyond the physical present and intuitively connect with both the past and the future. A final point about the poem and the burial of Akua is that up to this final moment, the narrative gives no indication that Marjorie knows anything about Maame. The moment is therefore another reinforcement of the sense that Marjorie has, again, some kind of psychic connection with the past.

Further to the point of family inheritances: it is important to note how the narrative pays particular, if glancing, attention to Marjorie's beginning to menstruate. The first point to note about that is how many women on either side of the family tree are, to some degree, defined as both family and able to give birth to family as soon as they begin to menstruate. The second point to note is that here as throughout the narrative, the commencement of menstruation suggests a metaphoric connection to family as well as a literal one. In her case, Marjorie does not actually give birth, but in the chapter that follows, she does bring a long-lost family member back into, for lack of a better phrase, the tribe, or the family.

One final point to note about this complex, narratively and thematically rich chapter, has to do with the comment made by Old Lady (Akua) that she is never going to leave. The sense here, like so much else about both Old Lady and Marjorie, is that psychically and/or spiritually, there is a connection between the two that transcends the physical. The other level of meaning here has to do with the idea that the comment has echoes of the experiences of the very first bearer of the necklace; as Marjorie's outburst at the grave reveals, over time and over the world, Maame has never really left either.

Discussion Question 1

How do the events of Part 2, Chapter 6 explore the idea of journeying home?

Discussion Question 2

Given Marjorie's ancestry in the African line of the narrative / family, what is the irony associated with her being described as being born of a cocoa nut?

Discussion Question 3

What are all the various elements of Marjorie's poem that make either direct or metaphoric resonance with other events in the narrative?

Vocabulary

disembark, mimic, gingerly, livid, engrossed, equatorial, proximity, enamored, commotion, infuriate, obnoxious, cursive, anonymity, cumbersome, insistent, attribute

Part 2, Chapter 7

Summary

Marcus – Narration describes how Marcus, the son of Sonny (Part 2, Chapter 5) hates water, partly because of what his father has always said about how “black people didn’t like water because they were brought over on slave ships. What did a black man want to swim for? The ocean floor was already littered with black men.” (284) Narration goes on to describe Sonny’s deep hatred for how whites both made and wrote the history of blacks. Narration also describes Sonny’s regular routine (which keeps him off heroin) and sets this final chapter at the beginning of the new millennium, early in the 2000’s, when Marcus is in graduate school.

As it describes Marcus’ experiences, narration comments on his anger and frustration with his studies (specifically, how much he learns, and wants to say, about how black people have been treated in America), and how much his desire to learn was fueled by his desire to learn more about his family on his father’s side, his mother being gone from his life because of her ongoing addiction. Narration also describes how Marcus’ desire to know more was also fueled by imaginings prompted by Ma Willie’s beautiful singing. Meanwhile, Marcus accompanies his friend on his search for a woman he met once at a museum, Marcus and his friend referring to each other as “nigga.” Eventually, the friend finds the woman, who happens to be in the company of another woman, one whom Marcus finds attractive and who is wearing a beautiful necklace – a woman named Marjorie.

As the relationship between Marjorie and Marcus deepens, they find themselves revealing each other’s fears (Marjorie’s of fire, Marcus’ of water). They travel to where Marcus’ grandfather H had been in the coal mines, Marcus revealing his desperation to know, and connect with, the histories of the men and women whose journeys and sufferings had led to him. He also reflects on his feelings for Marjorie, feeling “like she had, somehow, found him” (293). Eventually, Marjorie talks him into traveling with her back to Ghana, to the Cape Coast.

On their first day there, and after a brief stop at the resort where they are staying (where Marcus gets his first glimpse of the beautiful beach), they take a tour of the Castle which, on the outside, is a clean and gleaming white but which, on the inside, shows the darker side of its history. A guide shows them first through the church, describing how black women married white men there, and how the people above ground never knew what was happening below them in the dungeon. The guide then takes them down into the women’s dungeon, and Marcus becomes extremely upset, shouting to be let out. He eventually runs out of the Castle and out to the beach, where he joins a couple of men at a fire. Marjorie caches up to him, and together they stand by the fire (working through Marjorie’s fear) and then look out at the ocean (working through Marcus’ fear). Marjorie runs into the ocean, and after a while Marcus follows her in, at first frightened but increasingly comfortable. After a few moments, Marjorie takes the black stone pendant

from around her neck, and puts it around his. “Welcome home,” she says (300), and then splashes through the water back to shore.

Analysis

As the book and its multi-generational, across-the-world narrative draws to a close, there is a richness of texture and meaning similar to that of the previous chapter. For example: in much the same way as Marjorie’s story in that chapter carries with it a number of resonances of the stories of her ancestors, Marcus’ story in this chapter does the same thing. Here again, note the similarities in the first letters of their names, which are also similar to the first letters in the name of the female ancestor who set everything in motion: Maame).

In Marcus’ case, resonances with his past (some of which are more direct than others) begin with the reference to his hatred of water, the comments made by his father about the hazards of black people sailing going all the way back to Esi, an ancestral matriarch on Marjorie’s side of the long-separated family. This comment also resonances with comments made in Chapter 6 of Part 1 by Ma Aku, in reference to the dockside job held by Sonny’s great-grandfather Kojo. Resonances continue with commentary on the complicated father-son relationship between Marcus and his father, who seems to at least be making an effort towards being the kind of father that not only he did not have, but that his grandfather H and great-grandfather Kojo did not have. Here again, the narrative explores the contemporary-related motif of father-son relationships between African-American men.

Another important element of this chapter that can be seen as having a past-present resonance and connection relates to the use of the term “nigga” between Marcus and his buddy. The term is a modernization of the term “nigger,” which had been used throughout the story as a negative term, judgmental and derogatory, a representation of racist and colonial white attitudes. In its original form, in fact, the word is very much part of the history that Marcus seems so intent upon railing against and attacking. So then why would he, and so many other African-Americans in contemporary culture, use the term to refer to themselves and each other, given that it has such a negative connotation? Because the adoption of a negative term by those against whom it is often used takes away that term’s negative power. It becomes a weapon of defiance. It is a claiming of identity, and the transforming of the negative sides of that identity into a pride-worthy positive.

Other past-present relationships in Marcus’ story include the reference to his life being changed by hearing Ma Willie sing, and also the reference to Marcus’ search for a woman who attracts him. Both of these are clear echoes of the experiences of his father Sonny, whose attraction to singing and to an elusive woman both relate to his relationship with Amani (who, in this chapter, is revealed to have been addicted to drugs through much of Marcus’ childhood). Then there are a pair of more overt connections between past and present – Marcus making the visit to the mines where H once worked and, more importantly, his being attracted to, and eventually being given, the black

necklace. This is one way in which the narrative manifests its emotional and thematic climax - not just through the connection of sixth-cousins Marcus and Marjorie, but also through their bonding over the stone that has been passed down Marjorie's line for generations.

Here it is essential to note that as the book comes to its end, and in the same way as the American family / narrative line is symbolically reconciled with the African family / narrative line by the handing over of the black stone, the final representative of the American family is essentially reborn in the waters off the coast of Africa, waters that had symbolically and literally represented death to his ancestors. In fact, it might not be going too far to suggest that Marcus, the "last American" in question, is in some ways baptized into his new Africa-connected life, washed clean of that which separated him from his family and his home.

Also with regards to the stone, there is a very important point to note and remember. Back in Part 1, Chapter 2, the sister to the stone given to Marcus here was given to Esi, Marcus' four-greats grandmother, BUT WAS NEVER RETRIEVED FROM HER JAIL CELL. This means that it is very likely that her stone is still in the dungeon that Marcus and Marjorie visit in this chapter (Part 2, Chapter 7), which also means that, given that psychic abilities seems to run through Marjorie's side of the family, it is possible that Marcus' intense reaction to being in the dungeon has something to do with some kind of psychic connection to the abandoned stone. It may sound far-fetched, but the possibility exists, and may even be likely, given the way that the narrative includes and develops so many different sorts of parallels.

Finally, in the novel's concluding images, there is a very clear sense that as Marjorie and Marcus find their sense of connection, that their ancestors are somehow in this moment with them and that all the way back to Maame, they have all found their way to redemption and freedom. Fire and water have, in the establishment of relationship between Marcus and Marjorie, been somehow reconciled, as have the scars (both inner and outer) left behind by fear and anger and doubt, all healed (at least to some degree) by the thematically central powers of forgiveness, family, and traveling home.

Discussion Question 1

How might the book's final moments be seen as an evocation of the book's thematic interest in journeying home?

Discussion Question 2

In Part 2, Chapter 7, as Marcus starts putting together the pieces of his past, it is possible to see connections that up to this point in the narrative had been less than clear. For example, there is now an apparent connection between the experience of H and the experience of his great-grandmother Esi. What might that connection be?

Discussion Question 3

The experience of which centuries-and-chapters ago characters is reflected in the comments of the tour guide about what happened in the church? And about what happened below the church?

Vocabulary

nauseate, uvula, methadone, custodian, intricate, vibrant, tangible, dint, accumulation

Characters

Maame

Maame is the mother of the two female characters whose situations and actions set the two family-narrative lines in motion. Maame is referred to in passing in the book's first two chapters - specifically, the ones named after her two daughters, Effia and Esi. Maame is the ancestress of all the other chapter characters, her bloodline descending down the two separate family lines over decades and contents until, in the novel's final chapter, the two lines are reunited in the friendship of Marjorie (from the African line) and Marcus (from the American line).

In terms of character and personality, Maame is never vividly defined much beyond her love for her daughters, her determination that they live free lives, and her giving them the black stones to remember her by. While one black stone is lost to time, the other is handed down from generation to generation. Both Marjorie and Marcus are affected by the presence of the black stone that Maame gave Effia, an affect that might perhaps be described, in thematic terms, as embodying the power of family - more specifically, the power of family to survive.

Effia

Effia is the central, and title, character of Chapter 1. She is the biological daughter of a tribal chief (Cobbe) and of Maame. She is also the adopted daughter of Abeeku's senior wife, the resentful and bitter Baaba. Effia is described as a beauty, in spite of having several scars as the result of frequent beatings by Baaba. Effia is considered a prime candidate for marriage to the powerful tribal leader Abeeku in spite of the fact that she was born on the night of a fire that, according to community legend and belief, cursed both Cobbe and the village as a whole. Ultimately, because of Baaba's manipulations and lies, Effia is given to a white man (James Collins) and becomes his African "wife."

In the trading center where Effia and James make their home, the money comes from the slave trade. Effia herself has something of a better life than those whom her husband and his comrades trade to England and America, but she is fully aware that she is a second - or third - class citizen, and is in danger of being sent away or imprisoned. This is why she resorts to seemingly desperate measures to ensure that she becomes pregnant - in other words, to ensure that she is not cast aside by her white husband.

Later, when Effia learns more about her origins (and the origins of her most cherished possession, a black stone pendant), she tries to make amends with Baaba, but is again rejected. This action can be seen as foreshadowing the role she plays in much of the rest of the narrative - as a much-loved, and much-respected, matriarchal influence on the generations of family that follow her.

Baaba

Baaba is Effia's adoptive mother, the first (and primary) wife of tribal warrior Cobbe. At first, the narrative seems to suggest that Baaba is Effia's biological mother, and that Baaba's resentments have to do with Effia's being born on the night of the fire that, according to community belief, cursed both Cobbe's family and the village where he lives. At the chapter's conclusion, however, narration reveals that Baaba's resentment comes from another source: Effia's mother was a servant girl not connected with the family. This makes Effia illegitimate, and an easy target for Baaba's curse-like judgment and condemnation.

Cobbe

Cobbe is Effia's biological father, and the husband of Baaba. He is a relatively minor character, noteworthy for his defense of his daughter from Baaba's attacks.

Abeeku

Abeeku is an important, influential tribal leader. He is first portrayed as being a potential husband for Effia, but he is manipulated out of his interest in her by Baaba. Later, he is revealed to be an African participant in the slave trade, selling those whom he captures in tribal warfare to the British. Abeeku also appears in the "Esi" chapter, in which the depths of his participation in the trade, and his acquiescence to the abuse suffered by those who he turns over to the white traders, is even more vividly portrayed.

James Collins

Collins is the white slave trader to whom Effia is married. He treats her relatively well - better, at least, than the dozens of black women who live in the dungeons below the castle where Collins and Effia make their home. He is a combination of tenderness and affection (when it suits him) and racism-defined intolerance (when reminded of his wife and family back home, and of his superstitions about African culture).

Esi

Esi is the title character and protagonist of the book's second chapter. She is Maame's second daughter by her husband, known as Big Man. As her chapter begins, Esi is a prisoner in the woman's section of the slave dungeon of The Cave Coast Castle, kept there with dozens of other women in quarters so cramped they can barely move. Esi tries to keep hold of her sanity by remembering her past - the happy times with her family in their Asante village, and her struggle to survive after being captured by slavers and being marched to the Castle.

Esi is portrayed as being compassionate (i.e. sensitive to the situations of those captured in battle and placed into slavery). She is also portrayed as strong-willed and independent, resisting when she is being treated badly by those (white and black) who manipulate and control the lives of all the slaves. Like the rest of the women in her situation, she is treated as little more than an object - in some cases, as a sexual object, a tool by which the men in control of the situation are able to release their sexual tensions and desires. Esi is also portrayed as having a similar sense of family and history as her half-sister Effia, but her effort to hold on to both aspects of her life by holding onto her black stone (a mate to the one given to her sister by their shared mother) ends in failure as Esi is shipped out to America.

Fiifi

Fiifi is first referred to in Part 1, Chapter 1, where he is revealed to be Effia's half-brother. He plays a more significant role in Part 1, Chapter 3 (where he is an abuser of a woman, Esi, he does not know is related to his half-sister) and in Part 1, Chapter 5, where he is a political and cultural mentor to his nephew Quey. In Part 1, Chapter 5, Fiifi is portrayed as weak and easily manipulated by those around him; in subsequent chapters, those aspects of his personality remain consistent, defining most if not all of the choices he makes for his family and his community.

Quey

Quey is the title character and protagonist in Part 1, Chapter 3. He is the son of Effia and James Collins, which means he is of mixed race, an important factor to consider when the events of the chapter (i.e. his tribal chief-uncle naming him his heir).

Quey is portrayed as being thoughtful and sensitive, and as perhaps having inclinations towards homosexuality: there is a very clear sense that his attraction to his friend Cudjo, as children and as adults, goes beyond camaraderie and into something more. There is also the clear sense that Quey's discovery of that side of his son is the key reason he is sent away from Africa to be educated, one of several representations in the chapter of how Quey was, in so many ways, more his father's son than his mother's - at least initially. Examples of this include the moment late in the chapter when Quey is described as agreeing to the choices made for him by Fiifi - specifically, how Quey is described as making the choices he does because he, like his father, is in the business of slavery.

Later in the narrative, when its focus shifts to the life and experiences of Quey's son James (Chapter 5, Part 1), there is also the sense that Quey has at least some sense of regret about his choices, and at least some sense of hope that his son will live his life in a way that he Quey could not.

Cudjo

Cudjo is a friend of Quey's in both their childhood and their youth. Cudjo is portrayed as being more adventurous and outgoing than the more cautious Quey, perhaps a reason why they find each other attractive as friends and possibly as something more. Later in Quey's story, after he returns from spending a good portion of his young adult life in England, Cudjo attempts to rekindle their friendship, but he is rebuffed. Cudjo disappears in the battle led by Quey's uncle Fiifi, and the narrative never reveals what happens to him.

Ness

Ness is the central character and protagonist of Part 1, Chapter 4. She is the slavery-born daughter of Esi, and on a parallel generational line with Quey.

As Ness's chapter begins, she has been living a life of slavery every since she was born. Her one attempt to escape that life resulted in her making a difficult sacrifice: specifically, allowing her son and an ally to escape while she and her son's father surrendered to those hunting them.

Those incidents were in the past of the character. In her present as well as in her past, Ness is feisty and outspoken, acting on the injustices she sees perpetrated on some of the slaves around her. She suffers as a consequence of these choices. She is one of the more significant characters in the book whose experience with punishment evokes the novel's overall thematic interest in scars, physical and emotional.

A particularly intriguing aspect to Ness is the origin of her name. Her mother (Esi) was in the middle of being whipped by her master when she cried out "My goodness," the final syllable of her exclamation being decided upon as the name of her as-yet unnamed child. This aspect to Ness's story, while quite literary and somewhat unrealistic, can be seen as potentially evoking a key aspect of her character - goodness - which can also be seen as tying in with the sacrifices she makes that ensure that those whom she loves (her husband and her son) are released from suffering, or potential suffering.

Sam

Sam is Ness's slavery-born husband, and the father of her son Kojo. Sam is portrayed as being strong and quiet, vulnerable and deeply attached to Ness. He is executed by hanging in the aftermath of his and Ness's escape attempt, one in which he shares in her sacrifice of herself and her freedom so that her son can escape into a new life.

Ma Aku

Ma Aku is a friend and confidante to Ness and Sam. She joins them (and their son Kojo) in their escape attempt, and when they face potential capture by slave hunters, Ness gives Ma Aku responsibility for making sure Kojo escapes. While Ness and Sam surrender themselves to those hunting them, Ma Aku and Kojo remain hidden, eventually escaping to new lives in the North.

Ma Aku becomes a secondary character in Part 1, Chapter 6, in which Kojo is the main character and in which she becomes a sharp-tongued but wise and affectionate elder. Her eventual death in that chapter is one of a series of challenges to the peace of his life that trigger Kojo's descent into what today would be described as depression.

James

James is the central character and protagonist of Part 1, Chapter 5. He is the son of Quey and the captured tribal princess, grandson of Effia and his namesake (white) grandfather James Collins, and the great-grandson of Maame. This lineage makes James one-quarter white; an inheritor of a family tradition of making profit from the slave trade; and also an inheritor of the black stone originally given by Maame to Effia. All these aspects to his history can be seen as affecting, in one way or another, his choices in the chapter that bears his name.

James is a noteworthy character because he is the first character in either narrative line (the African or the American) to truly break free of the family history of having lives defined by the slave trade, either as a participant (in the African line) or as a slave (in the American line). As such, his actions and attitudes foreshadow those of other characters later in the narrative, again on both narrative lines, who act out of a spirit of independence and self-determination.

James' determination to live life on his own terms has consequences for future generations. When he appears in Part 1, Chapter 7, his life is defined as unlucky, a designation that also affects his daughter Akua. As that chapter draws to a close, however, James confesses that although he may seem to have had an unlucky life, he considers himself to have been more fortunate than most, in that he has been able to live and define his life on his own terms. At the same time, he passes the black stone on to Akua, also metaphorically passing on the power, strength, courage, and independence of his family to the next generation.

Akosua

Akosua is the woman whom James marries. Like many of the other women in the book, Akosua is strong-minded and independent: like her husband, determined to live her life on her own terms. She clearly feels a strong connection to James, particularly in terms of their shared desire to live independent lives; this connection is so strong that she is

prepared to wait for him, and able to refuse any and all requests for her hand in marriage.

Akosua appears briefly in Part 1, Chapter 7, which is focused on the life and experiences of Akua, her daughter with James. In that chapter, Akosua is sensitive, honest, and firm with her daughter as she Akosua explains how and why James became who he did.

(Kojo) Jo

Kojo (referred to in the narrative as Jo) is the central character and protagonist of Part 1, Chapter 6. He is the blood son of Ness and Sam, given into the care of his surrogate mother, Ma Aku. At the same time, he is the grandson of Esi and the great-grandson of Maame, all of which places him on a parallel generational line with James. Kojo is the first individual in the American line of the family to live his life ostensibly free of slavery, although as the action of the chapter reveals, he and his family still live their ostensibly free lives within the grasp of those who would have them return to the plantation.

Jo is a significant character because of his determination to be a good father. Up to this point in the narrative, the father figures on both sides of the story (the African and American) have been either absent (i.e. unidentified, as in the case of Ness's father, or separated from their children, as in the case Jo's father) or engaged in a life that tends to see children as something to be traded or used, or at the very least manipulated. Jo, by contrast, is determined to provide a good life for his children, both in terms of material things (a home and food) but also emotional things - security, affection and trust. His efforts in this aspect of his life fall apart when his beloved wife Anna (and his unborn child H) are taken from him by slavers. The narrative portrays him as losing his will to be a good parent over time, eventually being reduced to moving to New York City where he is, on the one hand, more likely to be free, but where he is also, on the other hand, more distant than ever from the children he had, at one point, been determined to parent well for the entirety of his life.

Anna

Anna is Jo's wife, hardworking and, in many ways, as passionate about being a good mother as he is about being a good father. She and Jo are portrayed as having a solid, loving, friendly relationship, that is open and trusting. That relationship, and the individual strengths of the two characters, are portrayed as being a solid foundation for the busy family life - with seven children - that they have created for themselves.

That foundation is shattered when the pregnant Anna is kidnapped by slavers and returned to the South. There, she gives birth to her child (here nicknamed H), who becomes the central character and protagonist in Part 2, Chapter 1. She appears in that chapter only briefly, in the memory of her son and of their shared time in slavery.

Abena

Abena is the central character and protagonist of Part 1, Chapter 7. She is the daughter of Akosua and James, granddaughter of Quey and the kidnapped tribal princess, great-granddaughter of Effia, and the great-great granddaughter of Maame. This lineage makes her one-eighth white, an aspect of her identity that seems to be of less significance than the fact that she is the daughter of a man perceived as being unlucky and whose actions, like those of Abena herself, are seen as bringing curse-like shame upon the lives of the community where they live.

At the same time, Abena has inherited the spirit of independence that triggered the independence-defined choices of both her father and her mother. Her acting on that independence leads her into a situation (i.e. her relationship with Ohene) that ultimately leads to significant unhappiness, and to once again being considered cursed. There is a sense here that Abena has also inherited the sense of patience, of playing the long game, that also shaped the decisions and choices of her parents. On the other hand, Abena also seems to have a streak of blind hope in her makeup, in that she holds on to her belief that Ohene will marry her as promised in spite of his delays and other evidence that he is merely stringing her along.

Eventually, Abena has enough of waiting and believing, and strikes out on her own to make a new life for herself. Two events at the end of her chapter are particularly important. The first is her being given the black stone, passed down through her family from Maame to Effia, to Quey, to James, and now to her. The stone, here as always throughout the novel, evokes the book's thematic interest in the enduring power of family, and because it is passed down through generations that embrace increasing independence, it also represents freedom and individuality.

The second key event at the end of Abena's chapter sees her taking refuge with a Christian mission, a choice that, like the choices of her own father and mother, has significant repercussions for her daughter. Those repercussions form the basis of the narrative in Part 3, Chapter 2, in which Abena appears only briefly.

Ohene

Ohene is a determined and self-reliant farmer, a childhood friend of Abena's who continues their relationship into their shared adulthood. Ohene is primarily focused on achieving success as a farmer. Success as a husband - and more particularly success as Abena's husband - is of secondary consideration to him. This is not to say that he does not care for her; there is the clear sense, in fact, that he does so as best he can. He simply has other priorities, and lacks the sensitivity and compassion to let Abena know what those priorities are, and that she does not really fit into them.

H

H is the central character and protagonist of Part 2, Chapter 1. He is the son of Kojo and Anna, grandson of Ness and Sam, great-grandson of Esi, and the great-great grandson of Maame. This puts him, and the story of his life and circumstances, on a generational parallel with Abena, the title character and protagonist of the final chapter of Part 1. This also makes H and Abena third cousins.

H's chapter is set in the early aftermath of the American Civil War, which means that technically he is a free man, but because the cultural, political, and economic racism of the time remains, he is viewed and treated as though he is property. His union-oriented actions in response to the slavery-like conditions of the coal mine can, in that context, be seen as a personal effort to transcend that particular experience, and to make it possible for others to do so as well. At the same time, his actions both in relation to the union and to Ethe can also be seen, on some level, as an effort at atonement for what amounts to an internally-defined slavery to guilt and remorse.

Ethe

Ethe is referred to several times in the early parts of this chapter, but even in her physical absence from the story, she is an important presence. Specifically, H's guilt over his treatment of her and his consequent desire to change his life are primary motivators of his actions throughout the chapter, as he strives to become a better man for both himself and for her. When she finally appears, returning to H's life, she functions as a clear and vivid manifestation of the book's thematic interest in the power and nature of forgiveness.

Later in Part 2, Ethe appears briefly in the chapter focusing on her daughter Willie. There, she serves as a strong-willed and compassionate confidante to her daughter, which fits in with the sense of her character and personality revealed in the chapter focusing on H.

Akua

Akua is the central character and protagonist of the second chapter of Part 2. She is the daughter of Abena, granddaughter of James, the great-granddaughter of Quey, and the great-great granddaughter of Effia. This makes her one-sixteenth white; three generations removed from her family history of profiting from the slave trade; and, similarly, three generations removed from the power and status that defined the lives of the early generations of her family line. In contrast, she is only two generations removed from the relative poverty and troubled reputation that challenged and defined the lives of her grandfather and mother.

Of all the primary female characters in the book, Akua is the one whose connection with the family's history seems to be the most immediate – not in any sense of conscious

memory, but more as manifest in her dreams and the imagery that form their foundation. There is a clear sense that her experience of fire is triggering, in almost a psychic way, of a connection with who her family was and everything its members have suffered, a connection defined by the origins of both in the Maame-triggered fire that set the book's parallel narrative lines in motion. In many ways, it could be argued that Akua is more of a link between her family's past and its future than any other character. Her dream-revealed connections with the past clearly and vividly define the history-shaped role she plays in molding the lives of her son and grandson, characters whose choices, in turn, define decades-later events at the book's climax.

Asamoah

Asamoah is Akua's husband, a strong and compassionate warrior whose understanding of, and respect for, his wife's situation give him the courage to stand up for her in the aftermath of her troubling, and troubled, interaction with ancestral memory. His presence and actions are an important contrast to the actions of other father figures in the book, who tend to be either absent or lacking in compassion.

Willie

Willie is the central character and protagonist of Part 2, Chapter 3. She is the daughter of ex-slave and coal miner H, granddaughter of ex-slave and dock worker Kojo, great-granddaughter of rebellious slave Ness, and the great-great granddaughter of Esi, taken from her home in Africa and brought to America. This puts Willie, and the story of her life and circumstances, on a generational parallel with Akua, the title character and protagonist of the preceding, and also makes Willie and Akua fourth cousins.

Willie has much in common with her female ancestors Ness (in that both make significant sacrifices in order to ensure the well-being of their sons) and Esi, in that both are placed in situations where they make new lives for themselves in new environments. In Esi's case that situation did not come about by choice, whereas in Willie's situation it did: in both cases, though, the two women experienced one of the types of "homegoing" evoked by the book's title. She also shares common experiences with her mother Ethe, in that both women take stands against the poor treatment they receive from the men in their lives and eventually find the freedom and capacity to forgive.

Later in the narrative, in chapters exploring the lives and situations of her son and grandson, Willie is portrayed as loving, compassionate, perhaps to a point. As her son falls deeper and deeper into addiction and other experiences of suffering, she continues to love him and make room for him in her life, perhaps longer than she should. Ultimately, though, she has enough, and it is her choices and responses to her son's situation that seem to be the final turning point in his journey towards an independent, relatively healthy sense of self.

Robert

Robert is a black man who can pass as white, as well as the husband of Willie and the father of Carson, who is eventually referred to as Sonny. Robert is portrayed in the narrative as being attractive, but troubled and conflicted. He is fully aware of what his apparent whiteness means and gives him; of what his being married to a dark-skinned black woman likewise means and gives him; and of what staying with the woman that he tries to keep loving means for both them and their child. His eventual decision to leave the relationship is an ambivalent one: he could be frightened of the future; he could be selfishly leaving a situation that he knows will prevent him from having a full, successful life; or he could be compassionately realizing that being married to him will continue to bring Willie and Carson more trouble.

Eli

Eli is the second man with whom Willie becomes involved. Unlike Robert, he is dark-skinned. However, like Robert, he proves to be unstable and unpredictable, although not for the same reasons. Eli is perceived by Willie, and probably by the reader, as being selfish and irresponsible. He is arguably, in many ways, the kind of father that commentators and analysts in the African-American community are suggesting is all too commonly, and troublingly, common in contemporary African-American culture. In any case, Eli's decision to turn his life around and become a more responsible male figure in the lives of both Willie and Carson/Sunny is an important trigger for the changes in Willie that enable her to find her voice and sing again.

Yaw

Yaw is the central character and protagonist of Part 2, Chapter 4. He is the son of Akua, grandson of Abena, great-grandson of James, great-great-grandson of Quey, and the great-great-great grandson of Effia. This makes him 1/32 white, an aspect of his history that is of ultimately less importance to his identity than the scars left on him as a result of his mother's deluded attempt to kill him in Part 2, Chapter 2.

Yaw is the most educated of all the principal characters in the book up to this point. He is also the first to have something of the attitude and priorities of an activist, being referred to as determined to look at the history of Africa for what it is, and call out the crimes against the continent and its people that have suppressed and damaged the African races, both there and elsewhere (particularly America). The scars on his body that have resulted from his encounter with his mother parallel, in physical presence, the scars of many of the book's other characters, and simultaneously parallel the psychological scars left in him and other characters as a result of their encounters with racism-defined anger, resentment, and cruelty.

Yaw is one of several characters in the book whose experiences also explore the book's thematic interest in the power of forgiveness, and is also the first of several late-

appearing characters who turn the book's thematic interest in home-going (that is: going to a new home) into an interest in going home (that is: going to a place that USED to be home). Here it is interesting to note that while he shares these experiences with other characters, Yaw's is the only experience that entwines the two themes in this way: going home is part of his experience of forgiveness, and vice versa.

Esther

Esther is a servant and housekeeper whom Yaw employs to help him around the house, and with whom he eventually falls in love. She is portrayed as being wise, patient, and insightful, on occasion becoming quite direct when it comes to expressing her opinion. She helps Yaw discover himself, and later in the narrative, she does much the same thing (albeit to a lesser degree) for her daughter Marjorie.

Sonny

Sonny is the central character and protagonist of Part 2, Chapter 5. He is the son of singer Willie, grandson of coal miner and freed slave H, great-grandson of freed-slave and dock-worker Kojo, great-great grandson of defiant slave Ness, and the great-great-great grandson of Esi. He, like Yaw, is also the four-greats grandson of Maame, whose actions a good century and a half before put the separation of the two lines of her descendants in motion. Yaw and Sonny are, in fact, fifth cousins, and arguably share more commonalities in their lives and experiences than other parallel generations (i.e. Akua and Willie, Abena and H).

Sonny is a deeply troubled man, haunted by the instabilities of his childhood, by the ancestral sufferings of both his immediate family and the larger African-American community, and by his own personal longings – specifically, his desire for the beautiful Amani. As the chapter begins, and as suggested by his involvement with the NAACP, Sonny seems to be at least making an effort to deal with his pain in a healthy way, but finds the combination of pain and longing too overwhelming, eventually attacking both with a practice that initially seems healing which, in fact, ends up making his situation worse: the taking of drugs.

In a thematically significant way, Sonny becomes as much a slave to his drug of choice as his ancestors became slaves to white businessmen. They all become owned, controlled, and spiritually broken as a result of the insensitive, ruthless, acquisitive cruelty of both drugs and slavers. Here it is interesting to note another variation on this parallel: in the same way as the physically scarred slave Ness (Sonny's two-greats grandmother) made an attempt to break free of that which dominated her life, the chapter ends with Sonny trying to do the same thing. Later in the book, when Sonny reappears as a father himself, narration reveals how well he has succeeded. Ness, of course, never broke free herself, but made it possible for her son to do so, which in turn made it possible for Sonny to be born at all.

Amani

Amani is Sonny's drug-addicted girlfriend. She is a jazz singer like Sonny's mother Willie, which is perhaps part of what makes her attractive to him. Amani introduces Sonny to drugs, with both her sexual attention and the drug itself proving addictive, and destructive, to him. Amani also appears in Chapter 6, where she is still addicted and a disappointing, and perhaps even dangerous, mother to the son she and Sonny have together.

Marjorie

Marjorie is the central character and protagonist of Part 2, Chapter 6. She is the daughter of scarred intellectual Yaw, grand-daughter of Akua, the troubled woman who scarred both herself and her son, and the great grand-daughter of freedom-seeking Abena. She is also the great-great granddaughter of James, who was similarly a freedom seeker, the three-greats granddaughter of Quey, son of slavers, and the four-greats granddaughter of Effia, the centuries-ago ancestress of the African line of the family descended from troubled servant girl Maame.

Marjorie is something of a self-contradictory character. On the one hand, she seems to be psychically and emotionally sensitive. On the other hand, she tends to keep herself closed off from feeling, both from feeling it and revealing it. Feeling frightens her, it seems; there is the clear sense that she is afraid of ending up as much of an outcast as her intensely-feeling grandmother once was. This connects with her powerful desire to be taken to her prom to suggest that Marjorie desperately wants to not be an outsider, to be accepted and respected and cared for. This desire comes in conflict with her experience of being black in America, an experience which, the novel suggests here and in the book's final chapter, does not fit with an experience of being accepted.

As the book comes to its climax, and as Marjorie's actions bring the long-separated family lines back together, she seems to conquer some of her fear, and reveal herself and her spirit to the man whose actions emerge from the other, more American side of the family line. This situation, along with the fact that Marjorie's and Marcus' names both start with the same two letters as their common ancestress Maame (whose name resembles a variant on "mother" or "mama") are two of the most powerful examples in the book of how it book makes its thematically central point about the enduring power of family.

Graham

Graham is the young white man with whom Marjorie experiences the beginnings of a romantic relationship. At first, he is portrayed as being both accepting of, and blind to, their difference in race. Later on, however, he reveals himself to have a somewhat similar feeling about the situation to the character of Robert who, in the American

narrative and family line, clearly sees that whiteness is a more advantageous (and less dangerous) state of being, and makes life-defining choices accordingly.

Marcus

Marcus is the central character and protagonist of Part 2, Chapter 7. He is the son of recovering drug addict Sonny, grandson of soulful singer Willie, great-grand-son of coal-miner and freed slave H, great-great-grandson of freed-slave and dock-worker Kojo, the three-greats grandson of defiant slave Ness, and the four-greats grandson of Esi. He, like Marjorie, is also the five-greats grandson of Maame, whose actions a good century and a half before put the separation of the two lines of her descendants in motion. Marjorie and Marcus are, in fact, fifth cousins, a generational distance that might seem a little uncomfortable, given the hints of romance in their relationship, but given that they are that far apart generationally; that their lives have been lived halfway across the world from each other; and that, therefore, their respective gene pools have been expanded considerably, potential discomfort arising from their relationship can probably be eased.

Marcus is an angry young man. He is angry at the generations of suffering that his ancestors and other black people have been put through; angry that his father was so distant and so unavailable, and even more angry that his mother was worse; and angry that the world of the present seems determined to, and geared towards, a continuation of those past attitudes into the present. There is a very clear sense that as a result of his relationship with Marjorie, he begins the process of healing not only from the personal, internal scars that have troubled and haunted him for so long, but also the long-term, arguably sub-conscious scars he bears simply as a result of being a black man in America. Once he is taken back to the land from which his family came, however, and even more significantly, into the room where his ancient female ancestor became a slave, he is somehow able to own his anger in a way that it seems he was unable to before, and therefore becomes able to let it go, moving forward into a future that is not free of memory or the past’s influence, but is perhaps a bit more free from its pain.

Symbols and Symbolism

The Black Stones

The story's two black stones can be seen as representing, on one level, the power of family; and, on another level, how that power is defined by connection with the family's place of origin (Africa). In this context, it is important to note how, at the novel's conclusion, the most recent representative of the American family line is given the stone that has been passed down the African family line.

Early in the narrative, the mother of the two sisters who are the matriarchal ancestors of the two family lines that are the focus of the book's two narrative lines gives each sister a black stone, flecked with gold. The first of the two sisters, Effia, passes her stone to her daughter, and from there it is passed down through the succeeding generations, almost all of whom stay in Africa. The second of the two sisters, Esi, buries hers for safekeeping but is never able to retrieve it. She is sent to America, where all of the subsequent generations in her family / narrative line make their home. Her stone is never retrieved.

Fire

Throughout the narrative, fire appears as a powerful representation of several things: of strong feeling, of connection with the past, and of suffering. In fact, in its various appearances, fire can be seen as evoking all three of these things at the same time, in the same experience - specifically, the strong feelings associated with suffering in the past.

The Firewoman

A specific, and recurring, representation of fire as a symbol of strong feeling, the past, and suffering, is the figure of the firewoman, which appears in the dreams of several characters and which unites the symbolic power of fire with the thematic power of family. This connection is most vividly developed in Chapter 2, Part 2, in which Akua has a series of vivid dreams about the firewoman that leads to tragic results.

Water

Throughout the novel, water symbolizes separation and death. Specifically, slaves who have been taken from Africa to America (and their descendants) view water the same way as those who have remained, or been left behind, in Africa: as the route by which loved ones have been taken away, either by transportation or by death, or by both.

Menstruation

In the cultural context within which much of the book is set, the onset of menstruation is viewed as a sign that a girl has become a woman, able to bear children and therefore ready to be married. On another, and more thematically significant level, when characters become able to menstruate, the situation is representative of their becoming engaged in the perpetuation of family. This is true of both biological and historical / psychological family life. Several times throughout the book, particularly in the line that follows the African family / narrative, attention is paid to when young women begin to menstruate.

Premonitions and Dreams

Dreams can be seen as a metaphoric representation of the book's thematic interest in scars - more specifically, unconscious psychological scars that make their presence felt by emerging into dreams. In each case of dreams in the novel (particularly that of Akua - Part 2, Chapter 2), the dream or premonitions has connections to important elements of family history, elements that relate to traumatizing incidents or experiences in the past.

Scars

Several of the characters are described / portrayed as having physical scars as a result of traumatizing incidents in their pasts. These characters include Ness (whose scars come as the result of having been whipped for being not slave-like enough) and both Akua and Yaw (whose scars come as the result of Akua's psychologically disturbed attack on her children). Another kind of scar, however, plays a role in the story that is almost more significant. This is the psychological sort of scar, the mental or emotional damage that can result from an inner wound which may or may not be connected to an experience of an outer one. The question of whether scars can be inherited is introduced in Part 2, Chapter 4, and is a key element of this thematic aspect of the book.

Journeys

Both physical journeys from place to place (across oceans, across continents, from village to village) and psychological journeys (from violent emotion to peace and vice versa) are primary elements of both the narrative and its themes. More specifically, the different types of journeys home, from ancestral home to new home, and vice versa, not only provide the book with its title: they also provide the story with a universal set of experiences with which readers of any race or cultural background can, on some level, identify.

Seeds

At a couple of places in the narrative, seeds manifest as opportunities for new life and new beginnings. In some places, those new beginnings are portrayed as successful; in others, possibilities as represented by seeds are literally crushed in the hands of those who would deny others opportunities they desire.

Marjorie's Poem

In the second last chapter, a poem written by Marjorie, one of two characters whose actions and experiences finally re-unite the long story's long-separated family lines, reads a poem that defines both her and the story's connection to history. Marjorie's poem clearly ties together the experiences of all the main characters that have gone before, and foreshadows the tying together of the two family / narrative lines in the following, and final, chapter.

Settings

The Slave Era

Much of the book's early chapters, in each narrative line (the American, the African), are set in what might be summed up as the slave era - specifically, the early 1700's through the mid-1800's. This was the period in which black Africans by the thousands were taken from their homes traded as chattel or possessions by both blacks and whites, and sold into slavery into America and Europe. The end of the slave era came in the mid-late 1800's, at least in part as a result of the American Civil War which was fought in no small part because of differences of opinion between the North and South over the slave trade.

Africa

One of the book's main narrative lines is set almost entirely in the continent of Africa, and more specifically within several of its tribal communities, or villages. At the beginning of the novel, Africa is the originating continent for the slave trade, which was responsible for the separation of several of the characters from their homes and families. At the conclusion of the novel, Africa is the setting for the reunion of the two family lines that diverged in the book's early chapters.

The Cape Coast

The Cape Coast region of what is now known as Ghana, in Africa, is the setting for much of the book's action in its early stages, and is also the setting for its climactic final chapter. The region, and the Castle that was constructed there, was a center for the slave trade during the Slave Era.

The United States of America

Several chapters in the novel's middle section are set in America, the country to which thousands of captured slaves (such as the character Esi) were sent after being taken from Africa. The Southern United States were those who advocated, and benefited the most from, the slave trade: the Northern United States were those who opposed the slave trade on humanist grounds. The war between the North and the South, primarily over the slave trade, is referred to as the American Civil War.

Harlem

This area of New York City, in the Northern United States, is the setting for several of the novel's later chapters. For decades, Harlem was the area of the city to which

African-Americans traveled and in which they made their homes. For some time, including the period in which the relevant chapters in the novel are set, Harlem was something of a ghetto, many of its inhabitants living in various degrees of poverty.

The Contemporary Era

The book's second half is set in what might be described as the contemporary era in African-American history - specifically, the years following the Civil War (which is barely referred to in the book) - the late 1870's onward. Both the African and American narrative lines find themselves affected by events in the Industrial Revolution, which marked the division between the nineteenth and twentieth Centuries. The book concludes during the time of another transition between centuries - between the twentieth and twenty-first.

Themes and Motifs

The Power of Family

The novel's plot, the individual journeys of its many central characters, its various images and themes are all defined, one way or another, by the central idea of the enduring power of family.

Chapter by chapter, the story moves from generation to generation down a pair of diverging genetic and narrative lines, starting with the same person (Maame) and ending with the reunion of her descendants (Marjorie and Marcus, who do not know that is what they are). Each chapter focuses on the child of the protagonist of the chapter preceding it in its particular narrative line; each chapter and child explores a different aspect of the family's history; and each chapter and child is connected to those that have gone before, genetically, metaphorically, and narratively. As a result, there is a clear sense, in both theme and story, that family connection and relationship can, and will, transcend time, place, and hardship.

Here it is interesting to note a particularly significant aspect of the novel that, at first glance, does not seem to relate directly to this theme: its repeated references to menstruation. Throughout the African stages of the narrative, there are references to young girls being considered women when they have begun to menstruate. They become eligible to marry, they become parts of the community, as a result of what menstruation means: they are now eligible to bear children … in other words, to make a family.

What is particularly interesting to note is the novel's last reference to menstruation – in the "Marjorie" chapter, in which she is described as having her first period when she is in Africa visiting her grandmother. Interesting that it happens in the land of her earliest female ancestors; interesting that she is the first of the female characters in the American narrative line in several chapters to have this aspect of her maturation referred to; and most interesting that it happens just before the book reaches its thematic and narrative climax … the union of the two family lines (i.e. Marjorie and Marcus), in the final chapter and in the land from which their common female ancestor came: Africa. This, in turn, leads to consideration of the book's second major theme: its consideration of various types of journey home.

Journeying Home

In many ways and on several occasions, the book's plot and experiences of its characters are defined by various journeys home. Here it is essential to note that these journeys take place in terms of both moving forward (i.e. to a new home) and backward (i.e. to an ancestral home). It is also essential to note that each of these types of journey themselves manifest in different ways.

Moving to a new home can be a good thing, done for a good reason (i.e. Willie and Robert attempting to move north to make a better life for themselves). Moving to a new home can also be a bad thing, done for a bad reason (i.e. Effia being moved from her village into the castle; Esi being moved from her home in Africa into slavery in America). Likewise, moving backwards to an ancestral home can also be a positive move or a negative move: the climax-related example of the former is the return of Marjorie and Marcus to their ancestral home in Africa. Negative examples have to do with Ness choosing to return "home" to her life as a slave on a plantation in order to save her son's life; and with Akua's returning home to her village after life as the ward of a missionary in the city.

Other types of home also play important roles in the narrative. The dungeons in the Castle are an example, from early in the narrative, of the idea of a temporary home. The stories of Willie, Sonny, and Marcus later in the narrative are likewise defined by their movement from one temporary home to another. Then there is the idea of a spiritual home, a place where one's spirit and psyche feel most at peace, or at rest. Several of the characters in the African line of the story experience Africa, and their villages there, in that way; this is contrasted with the glimpsed references to white characters in Africa, particularly in the book's early stages, seeing England as their spiritual home. Finally, there is the idea that a person can become an emotional and spiritual home for another person. This is vividly apparent in the stories of James and Akosua; of H and Ethe; and of Kojo and Anna. This last is also noteworthy for its exploration of how this last kind of person-to-person home can become destroyed once one of the persons involved is no longer there.

Different Kinds of Slavery

Actual physical slavery, of the kind practiced in the Southern United States (and in other parts of the West) in the 17/1800's is only one kind of slavery in the narrative. It is a particularly significant kind, directly defining the action (one way and another) throughout the early chapters of the narrative and resonating throughout the later chapters in a way that relates to another of the book's main themes, developing scars. Meanwhile, similar sorts of slavery make their appearances in the earlier African sections of the narrative as well: the names are different (slaves are referred to, and treated, more as servants than slaves), but the principles are the same. But there are other sorts of slavery portrayed in the narrative, explorations of the experience that echo the experience of being physically enslaved with explorations of being emotionally, or psychologically, enslaved.

Perhaps the most vivid portrait of the latter kind of slavery emerges in the chapters relating to Sonny – specifically, in relation to his addiction, a kind of "slavery" to the influence and control of drugs. Both he and Amani, the mother of his child, have become completely drawn in to having their lives owned by heroin in the same way that, in earlier generations, Ness and others were completely drawn in to having their lives owned by white masters. This idea is developed in Part 2, Chapter 5, in which Willie talks to Sonny about how white people have been putting black people in different kinds

of prisons for years. This can be taken as referring to the “prison” of life on the plantation (as Ness was); the “prison," or enslavement, of the coal mine (as H was); the prison of white attitude (as Willie and Robert were); and the “prisons” of both the law and the drug trade (as Sonny was).

In any case, the experience of being in prison or enslaved and emerging from that experience, in turn relates to the fourth of the book’s major themes: the experience of having scars.

Having Scars

Scars resulting from some form of suffering define the lives and experiences of several of the book’s characters. Perhaps the most overtly portrayed example of this appears in the “Ness” chapter, in which its central character is described as having a number and quality of scarring that makes people literally turn away from her. In this particular case, the scars are the result of Ness having been physically punished for one transgression or another. Another vivid example appears much later in the book, several generations later, in the characters of Akua and Yaw, both burned as a result of Akua’s delusional attempts to kill her children. Akua’s scars are on her hands; Yaw’s scars are on his face. In the same way as Ness’s scars are reminders of the physical suffering that she has endured, Akua’s and Sonny’s scars are symbols (to the characters themselves, to other characters who see them, and to the reader) that the pain suffered by the characters has had a lasting effect.

Late in the novel, however, in the middle of the chapter telling Yaw’s story, the narrative introduces a thematic concept that resonates with all the previous references to scars and, because it hints at a different way of perceiving scars, also resonates with everything that has gone before, and will resonate with everything that comes after. This is the idea “that you could not inherit a scar”(228). While this is arguably true about physical scars, the book repeatedly and consistently makes the thematic statement that emotional, psychological, or spiritual scars are inherited, passed on from one generation to the next.

In contemporary terms, this is referred to as “inter-generational trauma,” a relatively new concept that explores how the psychological effects of trauma leave physiological traces in the body, and that those traces can be passed from one generation to the next. Thus, the reader can clearly see James’ determination to not be what his father was as a result of having been emotionally “scarred” by seeing things his father was doing. The reader can also see Sonny’s having been emotionally “scarred” by the absences of the two men, Robert and Eli, who could have potentially been father figures for him; and, in the novel’s final chapter, how Sonny’s son Marcus has been psychologically scarred not only by what happened to his father but also the generations of anger and violence towards African-Americans that have left individual scars on that community as a whole, and individual scars on people, like Marcus, who live within it.

Forgiveness and Healing

As the novel moves into its final chapters, its explorations of scars and sufferings are tempered by contrasting explorations of the last of the book's major themes: explorations of the idea of forgiveness. The first point at which this theme emerges in fully fledged form is in the middle of Part 2, Chapters 3 and 4. In Chapter 3 Willie, who has struggled for years to be able to sing as she once could, literally finds her voice again in the aftermath of realizing she has forgiven her ex-husband for leaving her and their son. In Chapter 4, Yaw and Akua both find their way towards forgiving Akua for the suffering she caused as a result of her delusional attempt to kill Yaw and successful killing of his sisters. All three characters find a significant degree of peace, freedom, and release as a result of their coming to a connection with forgiveness. Here it is interesting to note that these experiences of forgiveness occur at roughly the same time in the two lines of family ancestry: Yaw and Akua have their encounter with forgiveness at approximately within a few years of Willie having hers.

That said, as the narrative draws to a close with the story of Marcus and Marjorie, there is a sense that the book is raising an important question in relation to this theme. To be more specific, the narrative clearly portrays Marcus as carrying with him a great deal of anger, arising from his awareness of how generations of African-American people have been treated by whites. Because of this, there is the sense that his reunion with the other side of his family (that is: with Marjorie, neither of them knowing that they are in fact sixth cousins) is intended, on some level, to represent an act of healing from that anger – or, at the very least, from the suffering that triggered the anger. In other words, in the novel's final moments there is the unavoidable suggestion that the power of family to endure is able to transcend anger, wounded-ness, and all the psychological scarring of history, bringing wholeness and peace into lives that have been torn apart, generationally and emotionally, by centuries of hatred and harm.

Styles

Point of View

As each new chapter introduces and focuses on a new protagonist, the point of view shifts to that of the protagonist in question. Thus, the Effia chapter is told from Effia's point of view; the Esi chapter is told from Esi's point of view; and so on all the way down the line to the final chapter, in which Marcus' experience with Marjorie is described from the former's point of view (note the similarity of the first syllables of their names). All that said, it is important to note that with each shift in point of view, one thing remains the same: the limited nature of that point of view, in that the narrative of each chapter unfolds with its writing focusing only on the inner lives, experiences, and memories of that chapter's protagonist. There is no moving into the more omniscient point of view – that is, getting into the inner lives of other characters within that particular chapter.

In terms of thematic point of view, the key point to note is that each of the book's themes moves through time and place in the same way as the novel's plot and symbols do. This makes the book's explorations of its various thematic interests unusually multi-faceted, in that with each shift in setting, and therefore in psychological and socio-cultural context, the book's themes take on different aspects. For example, the reference to physical slavery in the early chapters (i.e. Ness – Part 1, Chapter 3) has an echo in the references to the slavery of addiction (i.e. Sonny – Part 2, Chapter 5).

Finally, and in terms of authorial point of view, there is a clear sense that by the time the novel's action reaches its final chapters set in more contemporary America, the author's apparent reasons for writing the book become clear. This clarity seems to emerge from repeated references in these chapters (particularly those relating to Sonny, Marjorie, and Marcus) to the idea that the experience of contemporary African-Americans, and arguably that of contemporary Africans influenced by America, is powerfully defined by the experiences of centuries of history – centuries of scars, metaphoric and literal, that have been inflicted upon Africans, and African-Americans, by whites.

Language and Meaning

The novel's language is generally accessible and engaging. Vocabulary is not too large; the occasional deployments of poetic language are not too attention-grabbing, or too obscure; and it is appropriate to cultural context. This means that the chapters set in Africa include terminologies and details that create a clear sense of both situation and differentiation, placing them as clearly separate from the circumstances of the characters living in America. This is not to say that such separations are complete: there is a clear and vivid sense of parallels between the two experiences, in everything from the references to fire and to family to the references to the pendant necklace. Here, the book's use of language can be seen as being thematically relevant, in that one of the work's thematic and symbolic interests is in the creation of connections that cross time

and place. Those connections are revealed and explored through the book's use of particular language.

There is also a noteworthy sense of conciseness, combined with a deployment of carefully chosen detail, about the use of language. Because the novel shifts location in time and place with each chapter, there is a need to create a sense of setting and context in such a way as to give necessary information in a way that does not overwhelm or delay the action. In some cases, this economy of language pre-supposes certain understandings on the part of the reader: the "Ness" chapter, for example, pre-supposes that the reader comes into the book with at least a degree of how slavery functioned in America in the 1700s and 1800s. The "Effia" and "Esi" chapters also pre-suppose, to a degree, that the reader has at least some knowledge of the role of whites, and specifically of the British, in the slave trade. Enough details are offered to keep readers from being entirely mystified, yet at the same time, there is the sense that, again to some degree, assumptions made by the author about the reader's pre-existing knowledge run the risk of rendering parts of the narrative unclear, and perhaps even perplexing at times.

Structure

The book's overall structure is one of its most intriguing and most meaningful elements, given that its chapter-by-chapter development and individualization is tied into, and reflected by, its thematic interest in the power of family. As the narrative follows the individual descendants of the troubled, traumatized Maame through their own troubles and traumas, it portrays the family-related bonds that persist throughout their lives. These bonds are portrayed, again chapter-by-chapter and protagonist-by-protagonist, as being literal (i.e. the pendant-necklace), psycho-emotional (i.e. the dreams), and symbolic (i.e. the references to fire), all perhaps connected to the idea that bonds of blood are, in their way, as powerful and as life-defining as the bonds of different kinds of slavery that imprisoned so many of the various members of the family.

Another point to note about structure is that many of the individual chapters follow a similar structural format: the introduction of the new protagonist; a flashback to important incidents that got this particular protagonist to this particular point in his or her life; and then a return to the present, so that the narrative can focus on the particular turning point that defines this character's importance and relevance to the narrative as a whole. In terms of the book's structure and themes, this chapter-by-chapter structural pattern establishes the connection between past and present: interestingly, questions about the future are left open at the end of almost every single chapter. These questions raise from the general (what is going to happen to Effia after she has been told she is nothing?) to the more specific (what is going to happen to Ness's son?) to the political. This last is particularly interesting, in that Kojo's chapter ends with the barest hint of the Civil War (a turning point in American culture for the experiences of slaves and other non-whites) and the chapter along the American line that follows (H's) makes little or no reference to it. Ultimately, these chapter endings and their associated questions serve

primarily as hooks to draw readers further into the narrative, making them wonder what's going to happen next.

Quotes

It moved quickly, tearing a path for days. It lived off the air; it slept in caves and hid in trees; it burned, up and through, unconcerned with what wreckage it left behind, until it reached an Asante village. There, it disappeared, becoming one with the night."
-- Narration (Part 1, Chapter 1)

Importance: This quote, from the novel's opening paragraphs, is part of the introduction of one of its key recurring images - fire. The power and destructiveness evoked here are similarly recurring elements, generally associated with one of the three metaphoric values of fire in the book: as a representation of strong feeling; as a representation of suffering; and as a representation of connection with the past.

The need to call this thing 'good' and this thing 'bad,' this thing 'white' and this thing 'black,' was an impulse that Effia did not understand. In her village, everything was everything. Everything bore the weight of everything else."
-- Narration (Part 1, Chapter 1)

Importance: This quote functions on a pair of levels. On the most apparent level, it reveals Effia's essential moral ambivalence. On another level, it simultaneously foreshadows and illuminates one of the book's underlying tensions: between the so-called "black" and "white" races.

Hell was a place of remembering, each beautiful moment passed through the mind's eye until it fell to the ground like a rotten mango, perfectly useless, uselessly perfect.
-- Narration (Part 1, Chapter 2)

Importance: This character, made in reference to Esi's experience of forcing herself to remember happier times while suffering in the Castle's dungeon, can be seen as foreshadowing several other circumstances throughout the novel in which characters have memories that start sweet and positive, but then become rotten and intolerable.

… for the rest of her life Esi would see a smile on a white face and remember the one the soldier gave her before taking her to his quarters, how white men smiling just meant more evil was coming …
-- Narration (Part 1, Chapter 2)

Importance: In this quote, narration sums up the essential nature of betrayal - specifically, the betrayal of blacks by whites who made promises they never intended to keep.

The British were no longer selling slaves to America, but slavery had not ended, and [James'] father did not seem to think that it would end. They would just trade one type of shackles for another, trade physical ones that wrapped around wrists and angles for the invisible ones that wrapped around the mind …"
-- Narration (Part 1, Chapter 5)

Importance: Narration here sums up one of the core experiences of slavery: not only is the body enslaved, but also the mind. What is interesting about the book's narrative perspective on slavery is that even though slavers, of both races and in a variety of situations, endeavored to enslave the spirit as well, several of the characters propel them out of their slavery-defined situations by drawing on spiritual strength that cannot, and will not, be dominated.

Nothing from nowhere. It was something his grandmother Effia used to say on nights when she seemed most sad. James couldn't remember a day when he hadn't seen Effia in all black, nor a night when he hadn't heard her faint crying."
-- Narration (Part 1, Chapter 5)

Importance: The images of this quote hark back, both directly and indirectly, to the comments made to Effia by her bitter stepmother at the end of Part 1, Chapter 1. The references to Effia always wearing black and to crying suggest that she is always in mourning, although the narrative offers no suggestion as to why. There are several possibilities: she is perhaps in mourning for her mother (Maame); for her lost-half-sister (Esi); or for the hope and possibility that existed in her life before she was taken to the Castle.

Maybe Beulah was seeing something more clearly on the nights she had these dreams, a little black child fighting in her sleep against an opponent she couldn't name come morning because in the light that opponent just looked like the world around her. Intangible evil. Unspeakable unfairness.
-- Narration (Part 1, Chapter 6)

Importance: There are a couple of important levels of meaning to this quote. First, it represents what is arguably a bad dream of many / most black children of the period in which this chapter is set, and arguably of a number of black children today: the fear of the racism, judgement, and power that surrounds them. On another level, Beulah (the daughter of Jo) is one of several characters in the novel who experience, and are changed by, fearful dreams.

Ain't I been through enough? Ain't just about everything I ever had been taken away from me? My freedom. My family. My body. And now I can't even own my name? Ain't I deserve to be Ethe, to you at least, if nobody else? My mama gave me that name herself. I spent six good years with her before they sold me out to Louisiana to work them sugarcanes. All I had of her then was my name. That was all I had of myself too. And you wouldn't even give me that.
-- Ethe (Part 2, Chapter 1)

Importance: This quote, spoken by a woman who was referred to by a name not her own by a man who has no real name, essentially boils down to a crying out for being recognized, for being seen, for being valued as an individual. As such, it can be seen as representing all those experiences in most, if not all, the primary characters in the book.

In her dreams the fire was shaped like a woman holding two babies to her heart. The firewoman would carry these two little girls with her all the way to the woods of the Island and then the babies would vanish, and the firewoman's sadness would send orange and red and hints of blue swarming every tree and every bush in sight.
-- Narration (Part 2, Chapter 2)

Importance: On one level, this quote sums up the frightening content of Akua's dreams. On another level, it metaphorically ties Akua to her female ancestors, most specifically to Maame, whose life, and those of her two children, were profoundly changed by fire.

Prayer was not a sacred or holy thing. It was not spoken plainly … it need not be performed on the knees or with folded palms. For Akua, prayer was a frenzied chant, a language for those desires of the heart that even the mind did not recognize were there … it was the one-syllable word that escaped her lips over and over and over again. Fire. Fire. Fire."
-- Narration (Part 2, Chapter 2)

Importance: As it sketches in the behavior and experiences that made Akua seem insane to the people of her village, this quote once again evokes the important symbolic role of fire not only in her life, but in the lives of several other of the book's primary characters.

'…when you study history, you must always ask yourself, Whose story am I missing? Whose voice was suppressed so that this voice could come forth? Once you have figured that out, you must find that story too. From there, you begin to get a clearer, yet still imperfect, picture.
-- Yaw (Part 2, Chapter 4)

Importance: This quote, from African-born academic Yaw, suggests to the reader and to his hearer that there is always more than one side to the story told by history. It also suggests that the more sides of a story that can be heard and understood, the closer the listener can get to the truth.

He could see the differences between them as long ravines, impossible to cross. He was old; she was young. He was educated; she was not. He was scarred; she was whole. Each difference split the ravine wider and wider still. There was no way."
-- Narration (Part 1, Chapter 4)

Importance: This reference to Yaw's perception that there is too much distance between himself and Esther to be closed by mutual attraction and affection can also be seen as reflecting, on a much less romantic level, the distance between not only whites and blacks throughout the novel, but between people in other relationships as well - fathers and sons in particular.

We can't go back to something we ain't never been to in the first place. It ain't ours any more. This is.' She swept her hand in front of her, as though she were trying to catch all of Harlem in it, all of New York, all of America."

-- Amani (Part 2, Chapter 5)

Importance: This quote, spoken by a character whose perceptions are defined by addiction to drugs, offers a counter-idea to that posed by the narrative that it is, in fact, possible not only to go home, but to find new meaning in it and in the self. She is referring to the need to stay in the present and forget about the past: yet all along, and in the chapters that follow this one, the narrative celebrates the opposite - the value of, and need for, going home.

It had belonged to Old Lady and to Abena before her, and to James, and Quey, and Effia the Beauty before that. It had begun with Maame, the woman who had set a great fire. Her father had told her that the necklace was a part of their family history and she was to never take it off, never give it away. Now it reflected the ocean water before them, gold waves shimmering in the black stone."
-- Narration (Part 2, Chapter 6)

Importance: This description of the black stone necklace presented to Marjorie is the embodiment, here and throughout the narrative, of the book's thematic interest in the power of family. Tying it together with an image of the ocean, which throughout the book represents death, suggests that family power, strength, and courage lasts and becomes even more beautiful in the face of that which brings bodies to an end, but which allows spirits to be free. There is, perhaps, an arguement here of the idea (as opposed to the Christian practice) of baptism.

Marjorie was made aware, yet again, that here 'white' could be the way a person talked; 'black' the music a person listened to. In Ghana, you could only be what you were, what your skin announced to the world.
-- Narration (Part 2, Chapter 6)

Importance: This quote sums up Marjorie's attitude towards the experience of race in America - that divisions arising because of race are both pervasive and multifaceted, making their presence felt in even the most casual areas of life (i.e. music).

…what he wanted to capture with his project was the feeling of time, of having been a part of something that stretched so far back, was so impossibly large, that it was easy to forget that she, and he, and everyone else, existed in it – not apart from it, but inside of it."
-- Marcus (Part 2, Chapter 7)

Importance: This description of both the work and the calling of Marcus occurs at the end of the novel, sums up the spirit of connection and paralleling that has threaded through all the chapters before, and which comes to its climactic fruition in the relationship between sixth-cousins Marjorie and Marcus, and their sharing of the one remaining heirloom stone.