

The House Girl Study Guide

The House Girl by Tara Conklin

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Plot Summary

The following version of this book was used to create this study guide: Conklin, Tara. *The House Girl*. HarperCollins Publishers Inc., 2003. Kindle AZW file.

Carolina Sparrow, known to her friends as Lina, is an intelligent young attorney who may very well be on the fast track for a partnership at one of New York's top law firms. She is working hard with little time for herself, intent only on the next case, when one of the partners, Dan Oliphant, announces that he wants to put her on a top priority case for one of the firm's important clients, Ron Dresser. Accustomed to corporate law, Lina is surprised to learn that she is going to be working on a reparations case. The client, Mr. Ron Dresser, wants to bring a class action law suit against the United States government and several industries – including the tobacco industry – for harm done to the slaves held by Americans prior to the 1860s. Lina's role is to find a descendant of a slave who will represent the class action suit.

Lina's father, Oscar, is an artist. When she tells him about the new case, he puts her onto the story of a recent controversy in the art community. A young slave named Josephine might have been the artist behind some of the paintings attributed to a slave owner, Lu Anne Bell. The Bell paintings are worth a great deal of money but an art critic named Porter Scales has recently questioned whether Lu Anne painted all of them. He believes Lu Anne's slave girl, Josephine, might have painted some of them.

Lina believes that Josephine's descendants would make a good “face” for a class action lawsuit. She sells Ron and Dan on the idea and travels to Virginia to do more research into Josephine Bell, hoping to find at lead to her descendants. Lina finds her way to the Bell Center for Women and Art, and meets a woman named Nora Lewis. Nora oversees the research center and seems very helpful. The Stanmore Foundation owns the Bell paintings and, with the recent controversy around the collection, sets out to hide or destroy any information about Josephine and the possibility that she could be the artist. Lina finds evidence that Josephine had a son, but fails to find any information about his fate. She is leaving in despair when Nora gives her a letter, written by a man named Caleb T. Harper. Nora says she will lose her job over the revelation, but believes it is time for the truth.

The letter is very old and Lina has to wait until she gets home to read it. Caleb T. Harper was the white doctor who helped Josephine escape. They made it to Philadelphia but Josephine committed suicide, fearing she was about to be recaptured. She left instructions for Caleb to find her son, Joseph, and to buy his freedom. Caleb did that and Joseph grew up to have children of his own. Lina had, completely by chance, met one of those descendants, Jasper Battle. With all this research in hand, Lina returned to her law firm where she discovered Ron Dresser had decided to drop the case after all.

During her research, Lina had struggled with her personal life. Her father had a successful art show featuring paintings of Lina's mother Grace. Lina grew up believing that Grace died in a car wreck but Oscar revealed that Grace had simply decided to



leave. Grace asked Oscar to tell Lina she was dead, believing that preferable to having her daughter feel abandoned. Oscar reveals that to Lina, along with a phone number from Grace, who had decided she wanted to talk to Lina.

With the lawsuit a dead issue, Lina realizes that she has to make some decisions about her life. She quits her job and hands her research over to Jasper in the event that he and his family want to assert their claim to Josephine's paintings. She gives Porter Scales a copy to verify his claims about Josephine's work. She also begins a relationship with Jasper, free from the lawsuit and with plans to get in touch with her mother.



Part One: Josephine, Lina; Chapters 1 and 2

Summary

The first chapter of “Part One: Josephine, Lina,” is titled “Josephine” and is told in past tense. This chapter opens in Lynnhurst, Virginia, 1852. Josephine was sweeping the porch of the Bell Creek plantation where she was a slave in the home of Miss Lu Anne Bell and Mister Robert Bell. Mister said something to Josephine as he was walking onto the porch, but she did not hear what he said. He did not seem “urgent” or upset. He suddenly struck her without saying anything about the reason why. He reminded her that the doctor was to arrive that day to check on Miss Lu. and then walks away.

Josephine looked out over the nearby fields, noting that there were some rows ready for planting but Mister did not have enough seeds to plant them. Things had gone badly under Mister's management. His father, known as Papa Bo, died the previous winter. A cow had gone dry, the barn used for curing out tobacco leaves had burned, and a field slave, Hap, died of a bee sting. Now, Miss Lu was suffering from “fits” (5). Josephine felt that Mister had endured hardships, but she did not feel sorry for him. She just nodded that she understood about the doctor's visit, but her mind was suddenly made up that this would be the day she would run away.

Josephine went around the house and found another slave, an older woman named Lottie, busy picking flowers for Miss Lu. Lottie noticed the red mark on Josephine's cheek, but Josephine insisted that it was nothing. Josephine asked about a new slave in the field, Nathan, who had run away twice. His owner had cut his heels so that he could not run away again. He was so slow that Mister had been able to hire Nathan at a reduced rate. Lottie was suspicious about Josephine's interest. They agreed to continue their talk that evening at Lottie's cabin.

Josephine remembered trying to run away another time. She was about 12 or 13, and had been forced to return to Bell Creek. She was determined that would not happen again. She knew she had to go about her daily chores without alerting anyone to her plan.

The second chapter of “Part One, Josephine and Lina,” is titled “Lina” and is told in present tense. The subtitle of this chapter is “New York City, 2004, Wednesday.” Carolina Sparrow, known as Lina, is a first-year associate at Clifton and Harp LLP. The company provides legal services for Fortune 100 companies and rich people. She works on a brief and finishes it just after midnight. She walks into the office of Dan Oliphant, the man assigned to be Lina's “mentor partner.” Dan is also still working and he announces that the case has settled, meaning Lina wasted the hours she worked on the brief. Lina argues that they could have gotten a larger settlement but Dan's look silences her.



Dan then says he has a new case for her to work on. He promises to clear all her other work so she can work on this one project. He throws out the word “slavery” and asks Lina for her first thoughts. She flounders and is embarrassed. Dan seems to ignore it and tells Lina that this case could put her on the track to becoming a partner.

Lina goes home in a company car. The driver drops her at the brownstone she shares with her father, Oscar Sparrow. He is an artist. Lina and Oscar have always lived here, though the house is too big for the two of them and Oscar sometimes struggles to pay the expenses.

While Lina eats the pasta Oscar prepared, he announces that he has completed the paintings for his upcoming show. He then says that the show will focus on Lina's mother, Grace, who died when Lina was young. They talk briefly about the impact of Oscar's decision. He agrees that he never wanted to talk about Grace, but says painting her was the best idea he has had in years. He invites Lina to look over the pieces. Lina is taken aback by the images. One is a portrait with the word “enough” across it. Another is a close up of Grace's knee. Some include paint and other mediums. Oscar is disappointed with Lina's reaction, which she puts down to the unexpected portraits of her mother and her own tiredness. They agree to talk later, when Lina has time.

Analysis

The reader's first look at Josephine gives an impression of a self-assured young woman, but that picture will be fleshed out in coming chapters. Josephine is actually afraid, which is prudent for a person in her circumstances. She is a complex character and her intelligence shows through by the next section of the novel.

Dan Oliphant is a partner at Clifton and Harp LLP. He is ruthless and always wins his cases, though he counts settlements as wins. Lina is furious with him over settling on the claim she was helping with, mainly because she felt their client was right. She insisted that they could have earned a larger award by taking the matter on to court, but Dan argued that the clients were ready to settle. It seems obvious that Lina believes he settled just to ensure that his perfect winning record was not damaged.

Dan dangles the idea that Lina might be on the fast track to becoming a partner when he is telling her about the new case to which she will be assigned. Much later, Lina will discover that he hinted at that same promotion to another young associate, and then neither of them makes partner in the current round of selection. This is one look at Dan that confirms that he is not an ethical character and that he will do whatever he can to manipulate people and situations.

It is evident even from this first chapter that there is some sort of mystery surrounding the death of Grace Sparrow. The foreshadowing continues in various forms through the coming chapters. Oscar says that he never talked to Lina about her mother's death, but that he is now ready to have that conversation. However, Oscar has had months to prepare himself as he worked on the pieces while Lina has no idea what to expect until



she walks into his studio. It seems rather selfish of Oscar to throw that on Lina when she has worked a very long day and cannot possibly be ready to face the situation.

The dialogue between the various characters seems reasonably realistic. Oscar and Lin are educated, informed, intelligent people and their conversations reflect that. Josephine and Lottie have some southern speech patterns, such as double negatives, but those are not as pronounced as they likely would have been during that period.

Lina is a complex character, which makes her more believable. She is a successful young attorney who seems to be on the fact track to partnership. She hates instability, probably because of childhood events including the loss of her mother and her father's rocky financial status. She is also lacking in self-confidence, which seems out of character but actually explains why she has worked so hard to accomplish so much.

Discussion Question 1

What is the event that makes Josephine decide she will run away? Based on historical facts, does her situation seem realistic?

Discussion Question 2

Describe Lina's life as an associate at Clifton and Harp LLP. What does this tell readers about her character?

Discussion Question 3

What does Oscar Sparrow do for a living? What is the subject of his current project?

Vocabulary

resonated, mustered, unremitting, encroaching, fallow, resplendent, disparate, itinerant, mentor, beleaguered, nemesis, articulately, adolescence, nestled, penultimate, frazzled, indistinct, morph



Part One: Josephine, Lina; Chapters 3 and 4

Summary

The third chapter of “Part One: Josephine, Lina,” is titled “Josephine,” is told in past tense, and picks up where the previous chapter about this character left off. Josephine was going about her work but she was excited over her decision. She helped Missus Lu get dressed for Dr. Vickers's visit. Josephine had watched over the winter as Miss Lu suffered a series of seizures. Mister first declined to call the doctor. Miss Lu began mistaking words for which Josephine could find no pattern. Mister eventually agreed to call Dr. Vickers, the only person Miss Lu would agree to see. The plantation, meanwhile, was facing problems. Mister worked in the fields most days because there were too few slaves to do the work.

On the day of Dr. Vickers' visit, Josephine found Miss Lu in the room designated as a studio. The room had been set up as a nursery but none of their children survived birth. Mister burned all the nursery furniture and Miss Lu used the studio for painting, needlepoint, and sewing. Josephine's paintings were piled in one corner of the room. They were all scenes from the farm, including Winton and Lottie standing by their cabin and Mister and Miss Lu in rockers on the porch. Some of Josephine's paintings were on paper and others were on lily leaves Josephine picked and dried. Sometimes, Miss Lu began a drawing but got bogged down. In those cases, Josephine helped with the sketching until Miss Lu was ready to take over.

When Miss Lu acknowledged Josephine, she talked in rambling sentences about her past. Josephine listened, accustomed to the wandering. Miss Lu says she was aware of Mister's transgressions, but that she forgave him because a man could not be held responsible when he was drinking. Josephine remembered when Mister had come often to her room. She knew there was no one who could help her so she never told anyone. Josephine had seen a painting of Abraham Lincoln. There was a tall chest in the background of the painting and Josephine mentally placed all her negative feelings into that chest. Without that coping mechanism, she knew the rage and disappointment would be too much to bear.

The studio was special to Josephine. Miss Lu taught her to read there, always reminding her to never tell Mister. Miss Lu also allowed her to paint sometimes. She stood in the room after Miss Lu left, knowing she would never again paint in that room. She looked at her finished paintings, including one of Lottie, and wondered if she might be able to take some with her.

Miss Lu called for her. Josephine helped her dress and discovered a large lump at the base of her neck. She wondered how long it has been there, what Dr. Vickers might be



able to do about it, and knew that it would not go away on its own. Miss Lu said Mister was too busy in the fields to talk to the doctor and Josephine agreed to be available.

The fourth chapter of “Part One: Josephine, Lina” is titled “Lina” and moves back to present tense. This chapter takes place on Thursday. Lina arrives at Dan's office to find another young associate, Garrison Hall, already present. Dan explains that they have been hired by an important client, Ron Dresser, to sue about 20 companies that benefited from slave labor. The government would also be a plaintiff in the case but the plan was for the government to issue a formal apology for slavery. The lawsuit would then be amended to exclude the government. Dan says they have two weeks to finish the first draft. The firm is not billing in the usual way, but will only get paid if they manage to win an award from the lawsuit. He then dismisses them.

In the hallway, Lina and Garrison talk briefly. He suggests they have lunch sometime and Lina initially refuses, but then agrees, though they do not set a time. Lina shares a secretary, Sherri, with other attorneys. Sherri says Dan called with news that Lina was to meet with Ron Dresser the next morning, but she has forgotten the conference room number. Lina has to call the facilities department to find out which room. She hates that Sherri is so indifferent about her job but feels there is nothing she can do about it.

The next part of the chapter is subtitled “Friday.” Ron Dresser is a large man with “coffee colored” skin. He says the plan is to seek “redress for the hundreds of years” of slavery, but also to memorialize those who were held as slaves (55). He outlines the plan, citing 22 private corporations in industries that include tobacco, banking, mining and textiles, all having benefited from slave labor. He has come up with the figure \$6.2 trillion dollars in damages, including interest. Dan says the proceeds from the lawsuit will go toward a slavery museum and a monument, with the remainder being used for programs such as scholarships, community centers, and to boost minority businesspeople. Dan asks why Ron is bringing the lawsuit now, and Ron says it is “past time” to recognize the men and women who “lived in bondage and helped build this country” (57).

Dan assigns Garrison to do research on similar cases, including problems they might face. Lina is supposed to create an outline of who will qualify to participate in the class action lawsuit, and to find someone who can be held up as the lead plaintiff. As Lina returns to her office, she thinks about Dresser's words. She knows there were blacks involved in many areas of America's history and she wonders why she never thought about those people, or wondered who they were. The chapter ends with Lina wondering what those forgotten people had “wished for and worked for and loved” (59).

Analysis

The author depends heavily on literary devices throughout the novel. Metaphors and similes are common and the author seems intent on ensuring the reader has a full picture of the events and scenes. For example, this chapter from Josephine's perspective opens with Josephine in the kitchen. She feels that the room is larger



because the word “tonight” is “alive in the air.” The word reminds her that she is going to run away. The description goes on to say that the floor is pressing down while the ceiling is lifting up, giving the reader a deeper look into Josephine’s feelings.

There are also instances of imagery designed to elicit specific emotions from the reader. Josephine talks about the previous winter, which was colder than any other winter she could remember. She brought in frozen clothes from the clothesline, holding them “close as a dancing partner” (34). Hyperbole is another literary device seen in several scenes. In Josephine’s chapter in this section, she views Miss Lu’s deteriorating health and notes that Miss Lu makes mistakes with words. Those mistakes soon become “thick as fleas.”

The writing seems to change subtly as the chapters change between Josephine’s perspective and Lina’s perspective. The prose becomes more flowery with the author turning more to literary devices. While there is a great deal of description in Lina’s chapters, these descriptions often seem matter-of-fact. This could be an effort to make the reader realize what an austere life Lina is living at this point. She is working a lot of hours and focused only on her career. She mentions a boyfriend and that the connection ended mainly because they were both working such long hours.

It is obvious that Josephine describes being raped by Mister, apparently repeatedly over a period of time. Various details of the novel indicate that she was only 12 or 13 years old when those rapes occurred, and that she had a child that Mister fathered. Miss Lu seemed to be fully aware of the situation but says she forgave Mister because he was drunk at the time. Historically, this could have been an honest portrayal of these three characters. More details about Josephine’s pregnancy and the child are revealed in coming chapters.

Garrison is introduced only briefly in this section. On the surface, he seems to be intelligent and hardworking, just like Lina. He is a light-skinned black man, which will become slightly relevant later in the novel. The reader’s first impression of Garrison may be changed by the conversation he has with Lina after their meeting. He suggests they go to lunch sometime. Lina says she usually just has something at her desk, indicating that she works through her lunch. Garrison says she is allowed to leave the building, and makes a joke of it. Lina takes his remark at face value. It seems that he just wants to be friends, which is unusual at Clifton and Harp. There is a heavy level of competition that drives most of the young lawyers away from their peers. Lina will soon learn that she does not have any friends at the firm.

Discussion Question 1

Describe the lawsuit Ron Dresser has proposed. Does it seem realistic in modern society? Why or why not?



Discussion Question 2

Predict the outcome of Lina's research, considering that Josephine's story is being told simultaneously with Lina's.

Discussion Question 3

Miss Lu calls on Josephine to be available when the doctor completes his examination to relay the information to Mister. What does that say about the relationships between Mister, Miss Lu, and Josephine?

Vocabulary

prone, wreaked, endeavors, provoked, licentious, burnished, cultivated, diversity, reparations, kitsch, unsolicited, quashed, collegial



Part One: Josephine, Lina; Chapters 5 and 6

Summary

The fifth chapter of “Part One: Josephine, Lina” is titled “Josephine” and is told in past tense. The doctor arrived. Josephine had met him before but she tried not to think about it. Miss Lu said she felt “right as rain” (63). Dr. Vickers said he needed to examine her anyway and was annoyed that Mister Robert did not make time to talk with him afterward. Memories rushed over Josephine. She had ignored signs of her pregnancy until she no longer could. She ran away but was too near her date and returned to the plantation where she gave birth in a bed, possibly in Miss Lu's bed, with Dr. Vickers in attendance. She did not hear the cry of the newborn and thought it was appropriate the her child was born dead. She again pushed the memories away.

Josephine remained at the window while Dr. Vickers performed his examination. She then helped Miss Lu dress before joining the doctor in the hall. He said he needed more equipment than he brought with him, including mercury, and that he had not expected to find the tumor to be this large. He instructed Josephine to keep Miss Lu happy and focused on “frivolous things” (67).

Dr. Vickers stepped close to Josephine and asked if she knew him. She denied it and stepped back. He said Josephine was a “disgrace” and that any other mistress would have sent her to work in the fields or sold her. He went on to say that Miss Lu had always been “headstrong” and that she had made choices that made her life difficult (68). Dr. Vickers said he would return in two days unless he was needed sooner. Just before he left, he said that Miss Lu was dying, but could not give a time frame.

Josephine remembered her life before events began to go wrong on the plantation. She remembered a slave named Louis who had left a bouquet of goldenrod near the back door. He had talked of running away and asked Josephine to go with him. Louis was sold a few days after they talked. Later, Josephine became pregnant. A young slave named Hap – Lottie's son – died of a bee sting. Miss Lu began having seizures. Lottie turned to faith. She never talked about her other children, all born before she arrived at Bell Creek. She felt that God was the only one who would never leave her. Josephine refused to follow Lottie's example. She held to the idea that her body belonged to no one – including God, Mister, or Miss Lu – as a means of coping with her life. Josephine briefly thought about who would take care of Miss Lu if Josephine were to run away, but dismissed the thought.

The sixth chapter of “Part One: Josephine, Lina,” is titled “Lina” and reverts to New York and is told in present tense. The chapter is subtitled “Friday.” Dan has cleared Lina from all other cases. She is doing research from home. She plans to make some contacts the following days in order to have a list of candidates for the lead plaintiff by the following



week. Lina has transcripts from interviews with slaves. Those interviews were conducted in the 1930s. Lina pores over the list of names and begins to organize her findings. After a while, she writes on the notebook that, “The harm is immeasurable,” with the word “immeasurable” underlined (77).

Lina's mind strays to the paintings of her mother upstairs. Oscar stops in to say good-night. He asks about a former boyfriend and Lina says it did not “make sense” for them to try to continue a long-distance relationship. Oscar responds that “love doesn't always make sense,” which prompts Lina to say he sounds as if he is reading from a greeting card (78). The comment hurts Oscar's feelings. Lina tries to reassure him, saying she wants a love like Oscar and Grace had. Oscar seems to be hurt even more by that statement. He leaves the room with a sarcastic comment that indicates his hurt. Lina feels she should apologize, but does not really know why.

Lina has a picture of Grace and Oscar in a diner just after Oscar's first art show. They are smiling and happy. Lina has always wondered about her mother and sometimes followed women who reminded her of Grace.

Analysis

Cliches appear throughout the novel, including Miss Lu telling Dr. Vickers that she is “right as rain.” The modern-day reader may understand that means that everything is fine, but may not realize that the phrase held a deeper meaning during the lifetime of Miss Lu and Josephine. The plantation depended on agriculture to survive, from the tobacco growing in the field to the garden that provided vegetables for the family. Without rain, those enterprises were destined to fail. While Miss Lu was not thinking about the agriculture reference at that point, the term held more significance for people of this time period.

There seems to be little doubt that Mister Robert raped Josephine, and that he was the father of Josephine's baby. However, Dr. Vickers talked to Josephine as if she was wrong for allowing the rape to happen. This attitude was common at the time and persisted for generations after slavery was abolished. In modern times, rape victims are seen as victims but the attitude has only recently changed. As recently as two decades ago, rape victims were often silent about their attackers, simply because the perception was that they must have done something to instigate it.

There is more insight into Miss Lu's character during this chapter. Dr. Vickers talked about the choices that led her to this difficult life, indicating that Miss Lu had left behind a wealthy family with financial stability. He also talked about her fragile nature. Miss Lu had told Josephine about her childhood in idyllic terms but Dr. Vickers' statements gives credence to those stories.

Josephine stood at the window while Dr. Vickers performed his examination. She watched a sparrow flying around outside. Sparrow is Lina's last name, and that



connection is an apparent effort to continue to tie the two story lines together. Lina Sparrow will right an injustice done to Josephine's descendants.

In some ways, Josephine and Miss Lu are in very similar circumstances. Women of this time period have virtually no rights on their own and are completely dependent on the men of their families for everything. Miss Lu is trapped in a marriage that seems to be without affection of any kind, and her upbringing means that she could not run away, even if she had the means and health to do so. Josephine recognizes that similarity and she undoubtedly feels something akin to affection for Miss Lu.

The author includes about 175 names among the transcripts Lina is using for her research. Most readers will not read each of those names, and it is interesting that the author creates such a lengthy list. The list ends with the words, "The names went on and on," (76), which means the author could have used a list of 20 names to achieve the same effect. It could be that the author wants to ensure that the reader understands the magnitude of the list. It could also be that the author wants the reader to think about Lina's statement that people do not even know the names of all those slaves. That lengthy list is just a small sampling of the many lives that were affected by slavery and most readers will skim over them. This is an analogy for the attitude that most people do not want to think about the human side of slavery. It is left to the reader to decide what is gained by including the lengthy list in the novel.

The reader is beginning to get a clearer picture of Lina's loss with regard to her mother. Lina was very young when her mother disappeared from her life. Oscar told her that Grace was involved in a car wreck but never offered any details. Lina also knows nothing of Grace's family and has made up stories over the years to fill in those gaps in her knowledge. The fact that she sometimes followed random women in the city is a sign of her desperation to connect with a mother figure.

Discussion Question 1

What is Miss Lu's prognosis? Why does this make Josephine think about her decision to run away?

Discussion Question 2

Describe the brief argument Lina and Oscar have near the end of this section (Part One: Josephine, Lina; Chapters 5 and 6). Define the emotions each character is feeling.

Discussion Question 3

Why might the author include the lengthy list of slave names in Lina's research?

Vocabulary

vague, approximation, bastion, disheveled, amicably, monumental, garments, imperative, composition, startled



Part One: Josephine, Lina; Chapters 7-10

Summary

The seventh chapter of “Part One: Josephine, Lina” is titled “Josephine” and told in past tense. Josephine heard Miss Lu calling. When she arrived in the bedroom, she found Miss Lu had cut a huge gash in her own face. Josephine took care of Miss Lu, holding the edges of the wound together and staunching the flow of blood to the best of her ability. Josephine asked if Dr. Vickers cut her but Miss Lu said she did it to herself because she had “no need of this face” (83). Miss Lu said she heard Dr. Vickers say she was dying. Josephine knew that she should contradict her and she might have if the scene took place some other time, but she found she could not lie. Miss Lu talked about how pretty she once was and that she had wasted her life. Josephine had found the knife and placed it on the window sill, then threw it outside.

Josephine was torn with her conflicting emotions. Miss Lu had never been her friend, but she had taught Josephine to read and she had tended to Josephine when she collapsed with a fever. She remembered that Miss Lu had often watched the children play around the cabins where the field hands lived, and that Josephine was her favorite. Lottie told Josephine to use that to her advantage. When Miss Lu announced that Josephine would move to the main house, Lottie agreed. Josephine was frightened and angry but realized there was no way to change the facts, Josephine did not cry when she left the slave quarters for good the following day.

The eighth chapter of “Part One: Josephine, Lina,” is titled “Lina” and subtitled “Saturday.” It is told in present tense. Lina goes downstairs where her father is making waffles, as he does every Saturday. Oscar asks if she wants to talk about her mother. Lina realizes that she is afraid of what Oscar might tell her, including that none of her memories of her mother are true. She has made a successful career for herself and decides she does not want to know. Instead, she tells him that she wants three waffles.

Over breakfast, she talks about her new case, including that a wealthy client is funding the case. Oscar makes a teasing remark about the “money-hungry, corporate bozos” who inhabit Lina's chosen profession (91). She counters with a remark about his “unemployed artist-friend bozos” (91). Oscar hands Lina a copy of the New York Times' art section that features an article questioning the paintings of Lu Anne Bell. The Bell collection is famous but the article suggests that Lu Anne Bell did not paint all the pieces. Lina skims the article while her father retrieves an invitation to a showing for the Bell works at the Calhoun Gallery. That invitation includes information about the show, including the idea that Josephine might have been the actual artist. The show will include a talk by art critic Porter Scales.



Lina knows about the Bell works from a college art class. Lu Anne Bell had run away to marry without her family's approval. Her art was known because she “portrayed the humanity of the slaves” at Bell Creek, an attitude that was not taught to young women of upper society of those days. Oscar suggests that Josephine's descendant could be a good lead plaintiff. Lina agrees to go with him to the Calhoun Gallery.

Back upstairs, Lina researches Lu Anne Bell and finds that the plantation is now the Bell Center for Women and Arts. Lina finds a single picture of Josephine, dated 1852. In the picture, Josephine and Miss Lu are seated on the plantation house porch.

The ninth chapter of “Part One: Josephine, Lina,” is titled Josephine and told in past tense. Josephine remembered that her feet had been sore after her last attempt to run away and decided to take a pair of Miss Lu's boots. Miss Lu was sleeping and Josephine planned to take the boots directly to her room. She was interrupted by a knock at the door and had to leave the boots in the studio.

The visitor was Miss Melly Clayton, a spinster from the community. She claimed that she wanted to check on Miss Lu, but she looked over the house carefully, including at the dirt accumulated under a rug. She criticized Josephine's work and said that Miss Lu was too lax, all while pretending interest in Miss Lu's health. She complimented a picture Josephine painted but Miss Lu took credit for it.

Miss Melly found a package of food Josephine wrapped in a towel for her trip but Josephine said she'd made the package on Mister Robert's order. Miss Lu noticed her boots were gone but Josephine said Mister Robert had taken them to be resoled. They continued the tour of the house but Miss Lu was tired and the two women went to the porch. By the time the visitor left, Miss Lu knew that Melly was looking over the property with plans to marry Mister Robert as soon as Miss Lu died. She instructed Josephine to keep all other callers away.

Josephine's emotions changed during Miss Melly's visit. When her food and boots were almost discovered, she realized that she could never really run away. But Miss Melly said that a slave named Louis had run away but was captured. Josephine knew Louis would run away again. The thought gave her hope and she renewed her vow to leave that night.

The tenth chapter of “Part One: Josephine, Lina,” is titled “Lina” and subtitled “Sunday.” it is told in present tense. Lina and Oscar visit Marie at the Calhoun Gallery. Lina explains that she hopes to find one of Josephine's descendants to serve as lead plaintiff in her lawsuit. Marie says she hopes Lina is not successful because it would complicate her situation.

Marie says that Porter Scales was the first to question whether Lu Anne Bell painted the 52 pieces in the collection currently on display, which is owned by a man who bought them at the estate sale of a white woman. Marie says the paintings are not signed but names are written on the backs of each. The handwriting of those names could prove authorship but samples of Lu Anne's handwriting are held by the Stanmore Foundation



which owns all the other pieces of the Bell collection. The Stanmores are refusing to share the information that might prove that “Lu Anne was nothing more than a fabricator” (115).

Lina sees a look pass between Marie and Oscar and wonders if there was something between them. Oscar once said to Lina that he was not a “perfect” husband to Grace, and those things combine now. She asks Oscar about it, but he insists they are just friends.

Analysis

Lu Anne Bell is undoubtedly a reasonably talented artist, as evidenced by the fact that she is the artist of some of the pieces in the Bell collection. However, her collection would probably have remained unremarkable without Josephine's paintings. Josephine is the artist of the pieces depicting the “humanity” of slave life, which is what the collectors and critics proclaim to be the important part of the collect.

The relationship between Lina and Oscar is important to the novel, and their apparent struggle to communicate is threatening their relationship. Lina was dependent on her father for most of her childhood and they are also struggling through her period of growing into an independent woman. All the things going on in their personal lives are also making their communication more difficult.

Oscar has a negative reaction to Lina's comment that she is waiting for a love like the relationship between Oscar and Grace. That seems out of character if everything the reader knows about Oscar and Grace is true. Lina has grown up believing that her mother and father were happy and in love, and that her mother died in a car wreck. Oscar's reaction at this point is the first real evidence that what he needs to tell Lina is more serious than she might have imagined. That's probably why she avoids listening to him as he tries to tell her the truth.

Lina's chapter of this section (Part One: Josephine, Lina; Chapters 7-10) ends with her impression of the photo of Josephine. Josephine's story in this novel takes place in 1852, the same year the photograph was made. Lina notes that the photographer seemed to want to get the entire house in the photo, and that the house was more of the focus than the two women on the porch. She notices that Josephine's eyes are blurry in the photo, as if she had not looked at the photographer, but had “contemplated the road ahead” (96). That wording lends an element of foreshadowing, especially since the reader knows that Josephine makes up her mind to run away, just months after the photo was taken.

There is no explanation for how the pieces of the Bell collection were separated. The reader is led to believe that some of them are in the possession of the Stanmore Foundation at the Bell Center for Women and Art but that a private collector bought the 52 pieces on display at the Calhoun Gallery from an estate sale. The author later details information about Josephine's departure and she took only a few pieces with her. Those



pieces show up later but the reader is left to figure out how the rest of the collection became divided.

There are two important pieces of information that come out of Lina's visit to the Calhoun Gallery. The first is that she suspects there might have been a relationship between Oscar and Marie. The second is that Marie says they did not search very hard for any of Josephine's descendants and that the question of ownership would make it difficult to sell any of the pieces if Lina finds a descendant. Marie is looking at the situation from a business viewpoint. Oscar has a different view of the situation and he urges Lina to look for a descendant. It is easy to follow his line of reasoning as an artist who takes pride in his work. He would not want anyone else to take credit for his paintings and he can identify with Josephine because of that.

Discussion Question 1

Predict what Oscar will tell Lina about Grace. Keep the predictions to compare with the truth when it is revealed.

Discussion Question 2

Describe how Lina comes to know about the Bell collection of paintings and the controversy around the collection. Why do you think Oscar urges Lina to find Josephine's descendants?

Discussion Question 3

What is Oscar's attitude about the people Lina associates with through her work? How serious do you believe he is?

Vocabulary

poultices, mayhem, critique, fundamentalist, debilitating, seclusion, reconciling, tacit, tentative, inscrutable, flurried, reluctance, lurking, captivated, fabricator



Part Two: Lina, Josephine, Dorothea; Chapters 1-3

Summary

The first chapter of “Part Two: Lina, Josephine, Dorothea,” is titled “Lina,” is told in past tense, and opens with an article titled “Lottie, by Porter Scales.” Porter writes about the painting by that title and points out that Lu Anne Bell portrayed Lottie with “tenderness and hope,” though there is no explanation as to why Lu Anne felt that way about the slave woman (124). The second article of the chapter is titled “Lu Anne Bell's Children No. 2.” Porter talks about the homemade paper and that there is no way to be certain whether the children are white or black. He suggests it could be about the children she lost or a statement on the children born to slave women and their black masters. He goes on to say that Lu Anne may have realized that being a slave owner is like a prison with social, moral, and spiritual consequences.

The next section is subtitled “Monday” and is told in present tense. Lina contacts a genealogist about researching Josephine's descendants. The woman says the research will take weeks but tells Lina about the Rounds family who were conductors on the Underground Railroad. The Rounds' farm was just 12 miles from Bell Creek. Lina began her own research online and found letters from Dorothea Rounds to her sister Kate dated 1848. The letters are newsy in nature and include information about local runaway slaves. The website includes a note that additional letters are on file at the Virginia Historical Society in Richmond, Virginia. She goes to Dan's office with the idea she should go to Virginia but he refuses, saying she can find some other plaintiff.

Lina is later furious that she did not argue her case and compares her reaction to how she acted when Oscar offered to talk about Grace. She goes home and finds that all the paintings have been transferred to the gallery already for Oscar's upcoming show. She finds some books and writing that belonged to Grace. Lina had never seen them before. She reads and finds that her mother seemed to be in torment. In one line, she writes that she “cannot bear to leave her” but “cannot bear to stay” (140).

The second chapter of “Part Two: Lina, Josephine, Dorothea,” is titled “Josephine” and is told in past tense. Josephine went about her duties waiting for the evening when she could go to the slave quarters to get information from Nathan.

She remembered running away before. She had encountered a slave boy who was in yokes that prevented him from moving very much. He begged her to scratch his back and she did. He knew he would die there in the field. He warned Josephine that patrollers might soon pass by again. He directed her to the home of the undertaker where she would find help. She found the correct farm and a man and his daughter took her in. The daughter, later identified as Dorothea Rounds, gave her a place to rest. Josephine went to sleep hoping that she would be alright.



Back in Josephine's present, Mister arrived and asked for a report from the doctor. He ate his meal then left. The slamming door summoned Miss Lu and Josephine made up a story about Mister wanting to talk with Dr. Vickers. Miss Lu, remembering stories of a local widow who had trouble with her slaves, sent Josephine to the fields to ensure the overseer kept the slaves working through the day.

In the field, Josephine had a brief moment with Nathan. She asked him for directions to the undertaker's house but he refused to talk to her, saying it was too dangerous. She delivered her message, then walked away from the house a long distance and thought about the other time she ran away. The undertaker had said it was too risky to take in a pregnant woman. He and his daughter argued about it but Josephine slipped away when they were not looking. She rushed through the night, arriving at the plantation at dawn and in labor. Later, she wondered if she might have escaped if she had run away earlier in her pregnancy. She stopped thinking about the past and returned to the house.

The third chapter of "Part Two: Lina, Josephine, Dorothea," is titled "Lina" and subtitled "Friday." It is told in present tense. Garrison, Lina, and Dan are in a meeting. Lina dreads telling Dan that she has not followed up with any local candidates for the lead position. Garrison takes control of the meeting, questioning the basis for the lawsuit. He points out that the descendants of slaves now have a greater opportunity for economic success than if their ancestors had remained in Africa. He adds that it is impossible to punish companies that used slave labor because slaves were legal at that time and that those companies have changed ownership since that time. Lina adds that defining the class is difficult because of verification and that it is impossible to limit the boundaries without saying anyone with a hint of black ancestry should be compensated. Dan cuts them off, saying he knows there are problems but he wants them to give him solutions. He says he chose them because he thought they, among all the young associates, would understand the historic significance of the lawsuit.

Ron Dresser joins them but Dan leaves, citing a demanding judge. Lina updates him on what she has discovered, including the possible link to Josephine. Dresser said someone should go to Virginia to search further. Garrison asked to be let off the case. He fears the impact on his career. Ron asked Garrison to think about the number of black men he saw working menial jobs. He predicts the case will make people realize the full impact of slavery, not because of the human significance, but because of the money. Garrison is not convinced and points out that Dan does not seem to be dedicated. Ron says Dan is a businessman and that he expects nothing more from him, even a commitment to this cause. Garrison says he no longer wants to be off the case. As he leaves, he says Lina has a tougher job.

After the meeting, Garrison and Lina talk for a minute. He tries to explain his comment about being taken off the lawsuit but Lina waves it aside. They talk about Josephine and Lina invites him to the opening of her show. Garrison says he has other plans. Lina attends the opening and spots Garrison at a distance, but he disappears before she can be certain it is him. Porter Scales talks about the Bell collection and his reasons for believing there are two artists, including the brushstrokes and materials. Lina learns from Marie that the Stanmore Foundation is suing her for libel. Without planning it, Lina



asks if Marie and her father were romantically involved. Marie says they had a brief affair when Lina was a baby, and that she does not believe Grace knew. Lina is not angry at Marie but is disappointed that her father lied.

Marie introduces Lina to Jasper Battle, a young musician who believes he has art by Josephine Bell but cannot afford to get them authenticated. He says the pieces are “family heirlooms” through his father, but knows little more (168). Lina asks if she can look into Jasper's family ancestry as well. Jasper agrees but then refuses when Lina explains about the lawsuit. They talk for a long time over drinks at a bar and it is obvious Jasper is passionate about life.

The next section is subtitled “Monday.” Lina plans to ask Dan to reconsider a trip to Virginia. She arrives at his office with her arguments ready only to find that Garrison is already there, pitching the idea. Garrison says he attended the Bell exhibit and that the publicity would be good for their lawsuit. Lina interrupts and tells Dan that “Garrison is excited about my idea to locate a Josephine Bell descendant” for the case (176). Dan agrees and Lina volunteers to make the trip. Outside, Garrison tries to apologize, saying he was just trying to pitch the idea for Lina since Dan had already dismissed her. Lina is furious. She reminds herself that everyone is trying to make partner and that few succeed. Every step she takes is important to her career and she cannot let her guard down.

Analysis

Ron Dresser makes a comment about Lina just as he is about to leave the meeting with Lina and Garrison. He is talking to Garrison as if Lina is not standing there listening. He says that she is “a fish out of water.” The use of this simile is apparently an observation of her race. Lina is white while Garrison and Ron are both black. The statement hints that Lina cannot possibly understand what the black men have endured to get where they are and that she does not have a real understanding of the issues they are facing. The statement prompts the question of whether Garrison was chosen because of his race.

Garrison tries to tell Lina that he was pitching her idea to Dan again with the hope that Dan would listen to him. He wants Lina to believe that he was actually doing Lina a favor but she heard him talking to Dan before either of them knew she was there. Garrison presented the idea to Dan with a high level of emotion, saying that he “felt a kinship” with the artist, Josephine (176). Considering what Lina knows about Garrison, his pitch sounds ridiculous, including that he is a huge art fan and that he refused her invitation to attend together. It takes that moment for Lina to accept that the other associates at the firm are truly ruthless in their attempts to succeed. It is her nature to question that again before she leaves the firm.

The reader should not be surprised when Jasper Battle is introduced. Several aspects of the book are so contrived that the reader will fully expect those moments and Jasper's introduction is one of those. Not only is he going to be one of Josephine's



direct descendants, he is a musician who exemplifies everything Lina has tried to leave behind by choosing a career in law. It is also completely expected that Lina and Jasper will feel a connection that Lina fights.

Discussion Question 1

What are some of Lina's weaknesses?

Discussion Question 2

Describe Josephine's first attempt to run away. What went wrong?

Discussion Question 3

What are some of the problems with the lawsuit? What is Dan's reaction when Lina and Garrison outline some of those problems?

Vocabulary

bristling, prostrate, skittering, scabbled, salvation, tolerant, ponder, rustling, dangled, redeem, amiable, potential, kinship



Part Two: Lina, Josephine, Dorothea; Chapters 4-6

Summary

The fourth chapter of “Part Two: Lina, Josephine, Dorothea,” is titled “Josephine” and told in past tense. Josephine went to the slave quarters that evening and briefly saw Lottie and her husband, Winton. Lottie said they were too old to run away with Josephine. At Josephine's request, Nathan drew a map in the dirt, detailing the way to the undertaker's farm. He urged her not to run, saying the patrollers were watching. She knew she would go anyway. She spent some time with Miss Lu who seemed frantic to finish some of her art. Miss Lu said that would be her last evening in the studio, hinting that she expected to die that night. Josephine soothed her and helped her to the bedroom. There, Miss Lu said she knew Josephine was preparing to run away. She promised she would not tell. Miss Lu asked Josephine for forgiveness, but never said why.

The fifth chapter of “Part Two: Lina, Josephine, Dorothea,” is titled “Lina” and subtitled “Monday.” This section is told in present tense. Lina leaves the office feeling better after clearing the air with Garrison. She attends the opening of Oscar's show, called Pictures of Grace. She intends to examine them with detachment but finds she cannot. Without waiting to talk to her father, she rushes away. Porter Scales catches up with her. They have a drink and Porter reveals that he knew Grace. Lina remembers that Porter was one of the names in Grace's writing she found in the studio. She begins to realize that her idea of her parents' perfect marriage is dissolving with everything new she learns. They talked for “1.6 hours” and Porter reveals things like the food and music Grace liked. He knew little about her background. Lina mentions the car wreck but Porter says he thought she died of an aneurysm. Lina briefly outlines the case she is working on. Porter predicts that the Stanmore Foundation will have to open its archives to the art world soon, and that they will prove Josephine was the artist of some of the paintings.

As they leave, Lina catches a moment of something intense between them and leans in for a kiss. Porter puts her off, saying he would not give her a reason to hate him. He asks that they remain friends and encourages her to let him know how her case goes. Lina goes home and packs for her trip. She then goes to the office to work in order to avoid seeing Oscar.

Lina begins reading a biography about the rights activist Kate Rounds Sterrett, Dorothea's sister. The book holds nothing of value to Lina's search but she finds more letters from Dorothea to Kate at the back of the book.

Lina learns that the Rounds family took in a young boy named Samuel after his father killed his mother. Dorothea cited a recent sermon against slavery. In another letter, the



pastor disappeared and later Dorothea wrote that his body had been found. His replacement was fully against anything related to the abolitionist movement.

One night, Dorothea woke to the sound of a shout. She went to the barn and found her father helping a slave into a coffin where he would hide and be transported north. Slaves remained in the coffins for three days with only a bit of food for the journey, all for a chance at freedom. The man had shouted in fear. Dorothea's father tried to send her away but she tried to convince him that she could help. He later told her that he was active with the Underground Railroad but warned that she could never tell anyone else. Weeks passed before Mr. Rounds allowed Dorothea to become actively involved. As the weeks pass, so many sought freedom that Mr. Rounds transported some in a wagon with a false bottom.

Dorothea related to Kate that she planned to tell Samuel about their work and to get the youngster involved, but had not told her father of her plan. One of the slaves they helped was captured and tortured. Dorothea felt certain he would give information about the Rounds, but he died without talking at all. In another letter, she said she had told Samuel.

Dorothea talked about a pregnant slave named Josephine who had arrived at their barn. She had nothing with her but a wonderful drawing, and left while Dorothea and her father were arguing about what to do. Dorothea noted that there was a rift in her relationship with her father that did not heal for several days because she wanted to find a way to help Josephine.

In a letter dated September 10, 1848, Dorothea wrote that the family's activities had been discovered. Someone burned the barn with some of the horses inside and all her father's tools. The family began to pack, fearing for their lives. The new preacher arrived and revealed that Samuel was the one who told on them. Dorothea's mother had bonded with Samuel as a son by that time, as had the entire family, and her mother made sure Samuel knew he was forgiven. Despite the preacher's urgings, Samuel chose to remain with the Rounds and they continued to pack. Jack Harper arrived and asked Dorothea to marry him. Her father approved and performed the ceremony. Dorothea remained with Jack while the rest of the family left.

Lina realizes that her search for Josephine would be more difficult because the Rounds' station for the Underground Railroad was not in existence by the time Josephine ran away again, and there were no other recorded stations near Bell Creek in the years around Josephine's disappearance. She has learned that some plantation owners kept records and she hopes to find something in Virginia that would help.

The sixth chapter of "Part Two: Lina, Josephine, Dorothea," is titled "Josephine" and continues the past tense. Mister arrived home, smelling of smoke, and saying that he was "aggrieved" by his wife's pending death. He grabbed Josephine. He was drunk and clumsy but Miss Lu cried out for Josephine and he released her, collapsing on the floor with sobs wracking his body.



Miss Lu said she had to tell Josephine something before she died. She revealed that Josephine's son, a boy, did not die. Miss Lu took the baby to the Stanmore's knowing they had so many young slave children that they would not notice one more. She begged for Josephine's forgiveness but Josephine walked away without saying anything. Josephine picked up her package and put on Miss Lu's boots. She walked outside where the road in one direction led to the Stanmore's and the road to the other direction led to the undertaker's. She turned away from the Stanmore's and began to walk.

Analysis

Josephine is furious when Miss Lu says she knows Josephine is running away and that she will not tell anyone. In her own way, Miss Lu is giving Josephine as much permission as she is capable of giving. Miss Lu really has no authority or power, so she cannot set Josephine free. Her promise not to tell is as much as she can do. However, Josephine is furious by the promise because it is just one more indication of the authority Miss Lu has over her. Josephine is struggling against the lack of power she has. While the physical cruelty is often touted with regard to slavery, people sometimes overlook the emotional toll. Josephine does not have the ability to make choices for herself and that situation takes a serious toll on her. Some have tried to rationalize the situation, saying those people born into slavery never knew any other life and did not miss their freedom, but Josephine's story is a direct contradiction to that idea.

Lina is in the habit of accounting for her time to the tenth of an hour because that is how the law firm bills clients. The author uses that time management reference at other points in the novel, such as the time Lina spends with Porter. The point is that Lina has become so accustomed to thinking of her work time as inherently valuable that she values some other aspects of her life in the same way. The information Porter gives her is worth a lot to Lina because she has grown up with virtually no information about her mother, and certainly without the stories and details Porter offers.

The letters Lina reads from Dorothea Rounds are lengthy and filled with all kinds of information that is virtually irrelevant to the main storyline. There are details about the community, the arrival of the boy named Samuel, and the family's sense of loss after Dorothea's brother drowned. The author likely includes those lengthy passages so the letters will feel real. This is another place in the novel that some readers may be tempted to scan or skip altogether, but the relevant details appear often enough to keep most readers engaged.

Dorothea Rounds is a typical young woman of her time and place. She dreams of being loved and hopes that she will have a happy future. Her younger brother, Percy, had drowned some time before these letters. Dorothea was apparently with him at the time, based on information from the letters, and she feels guilty for allowing it to happen. Everyone said it was an accident. In Samuel, Dorothea and her parents find another youngster that helps fill that void in their lives. All these things combine to give a better



picture of Dorothea as a character. She becomes more important later in the story, though those details are not revealed until the final section of the novel.

Dorothea and Josephine are, in some ways, contrasting characters. Josephine needs someone to help her escape and Dorothea risks her life to help slaves escape. In other ways, they are very similar characters. Josephine is ruled by the people who own her and by the law that permits slavery. Dorothea is ruled by those who support slavery and by the laws that permit slavery.

Discussion Question 1

Describe Dorothea Rounds' life. Compare her character to Josephine. How are they similar? How are they different?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Miss Lu ask Josephine's forgiveness? Why does she take that step now? Why does Josephine deny Miss Lu forgiveness?

Discussion Question 3

What are some of the things Lina learns from Porter? Why is his information so important to her?

Vocabulary

fierce, breached, muffled, elation, selfish, insistent, emerge, illusions, striving, gossamer, aggrieved, descended, apprehended, swoon, conducted, beloved



“Part Three: Lina, Caleb, Josephine; Chapters 1 and 2

Summary

The first chapter of “Part Three: Lina, Caleb, Josephine,” is titled “Lina” and opens with the subtitle “Wednesday.” This chapter is written in present tense. Lina is in Richmond, Virginia, and sets out early from her hotel. She wants to go to the Bell Center for Women and Art in the hope that she will find records there of Josephine's son.

Lina meets Nora Lewis, director of the archives building at the Bell Center. Nora is slightly uncooperative at first, but then is excited that Lina is related to Oscar, the famous artist. Nora explains that they have been very strict about releasing information because of the controversy over the paintings. The Stanmore Foundation took possession of everything related to Lu Anne Bell but Nora gives Lina some documents that she says might help, including Robert Bell's “farm book” that includes details about the plantation. Nora instructs Lina to wear cotton gloves so the oils of her hands do not damage the fragile old papers. Lina sets to work. She finds an entry for a baby boy born on the same day as Dorothea's letter about Josephine's brief appearance at the Rounds farm, but can find no other evidence of the boy. The final entry in the ledger is the sale of the plantation and goods, including slaves, to Mr. Stanmore in 1852. Lina then finds a copy of a wanted poster advertising a 100-dollar reward for the return of Josephine. The poster indicates she went missing on September 24, 1852. Lina asks if there is a similar book on the Stanmore property. Nora says it exists but that few people are allowed to see it now. She promises to ask to borrow it and Lina plans to return the next day. She talks briefly with Jasper and agrees to attend his performance the following evening.

The next section is subtitled “Thursday” and continues the present tense narration. Lina returns. Nora is upset, saying she was not allowed to take the book but she copied some random pages, hoping it will help Lina. Mr. Stanmore's records are sloppy but Lina begins to sort through the information. After hours of reading, she finds an entry for the sale of a slave. Joseph, age 4, was sold for \$2,250 on February 10, 1853, to Mr. Caleb Harper. The price is well above what even the able-bodied men were sold for at that time and Lina wonders if there is a significance. She asks Nora if she knows anything about Caleb Harper. Nora seems suddenly cooler and Lina leaves without answers. Before she can leave town, Nora calls her cell and asks Lina to come back by. When she arrives, Nora gives Lina a thick envelop. She says it contains a story that should help Lina find Josephine's descendants. She believes it is time for the truth to be told though it might mean she gets fired.

Lina does not have time to read it before she gets on her flight and she does not want to damage the pages during the flight, so the envelop remains closed. She reads Porter Scales' positive review of Oscar's show. She arrives home and finds that Oscar is there with his art dealer, Natalie, and that it is obvious there is some connection between



them. Lina finds herself filled with questions about Grace and she pours them out. Oscar tries to put her off but then explains that they had a rocky marriage. He had an affair with Marie and Grace fell in love with someone else, possibly Porter. Lina asks how Grace died. Oscar says it was a car crash but Natalie says it is time he tells Lina the rest. Lina asks what he needs to say but Oscar refuses to say. On an impulse, but knowing it is right, Lina says she plans to move out. Oscar says she should do what she feels is right and tries to smile.

Lina attends Jasper's performance and is amazed that he seems so different on stage, as if he is unaware of the crowd listening. Afterward, they go to a bar where they play gin rummy with some friends. Later, they go to the apartment Jasper shares with a roommate. Jasper shows Lina the picture he believes was created by Josephine Bell. She carefully removes it from the frame and finds the name "Louis" written on the back. All Josephine's pieces had the names of the subjects written on the back and no signature on the front. They talk briefly about the case and Lina says it could be worth a lot of money once the Josephine-Lu Anne question is settled, but only if he has it authenticated.

The next section is subtitled "Friday" and continues in present tense. Lina wakes on Jasper's floor and realizes she has to rush directly to work. She tells Jasper that they cannot become involved because of the client-attorney relationship.

When Lina arrives at the office, Dan and Ron Dresser are on the phone. Ron is angry that there will be another delay. Lina feels pressured to say she has completed her research. She says Jasper Battle, a young musician who lives in New York, is Josephine's descendant. Dan promises they will have their first draft of the lawsuit drafted by the following Tuesday. After the meeting, Lina asks to see Jasper and he agrees.

Lina meets Jasper at the New York University library where she learns he had been working on a doctorate degree but is not sure whether he will finish it. She obviously disapproves and Jasper accuses her of being a snob who thinks he is a "loser" (297). She says that is not true and they walk to the park to continue their talk. Lina explains that she told her boss she already had a lead plaintiff and asks Jasper to reconsider. Jasper asks why Lina is a lawyer. She has a stock answer, a story of her childhood, but she tells him the truth. During college, she helped a young woman with her immigration status and felt she had done something worthwhile. Jasper listens, then agrees to be her lead plaintiff, if she can prove his relationship to Josephine.

Lina goes home to read the document from Caleb Harper. She has no cotton gloves and uses socks instead. The letter is dated March 15, 1853, and was written in Stanton, Virginia. Caleb opened by saying he wanted to explain how the recipient's life came to this point.

Caleb Harper was Jack Harper's brother. Caleb left the farm long before Jack married Dorothea. Caleb's memories of the farm were of hard work and brutality, but Jack remembered things differently. Caleb went to the city and became a doctor, and never



planned to return though he did reconnect with Jack and spent some time with them during a break from school. Dr. John Coggins was one of Caleb's professors at a medical school in Philadelphia. Dr. Coggins opened a clinic in Charlotte County, Virginia, and Caleb agreed to work there.

Just before the clinic was to open, Jack sent a neighbor to get Caleb. Caleb had been drinking and the landlady had trouble waking him. When he was finally awake, he struggled to get himself together but became fully alert when he learned there was trouble at Jack's house. He sobered up during the ride. There, he found Dorothea was in distress. Jack said the midwife had left, declaring there was nothing that could save either Dorothea or the baby.

Lina's reading is interrupted by Oscar's arrival. He gives her some of Grace's things and says that Grace did not die but chose to leave. She did not want Lina to believe she had abandoned her and asked Oscar to tell the lie that she had died. Grace had contacted Oscar recently and wanted to talk to Lina, if Lina wanted to talk. Lina cries but is also angry. Oscar assures Lina that he was happy being a father. Lina struggles through emotions for a few moments. She eventually feels calmer and assures Oscar that their relationship is sound. She considers calling her mother now but decides to return her attention to Caleb's letter.

Caleb wrote that he discovered the child was positioned sideways and he thought about a radical procedure to remove the baby through a cut across the mother's stomach. He tried that but both Dorothea and the baby died. Dr. Coggins arrived to find the Dorothea dead in a pool of blood and he accused Caleb of practicing while drunk. Caleb was heartbroken because he had come to care a great deal for Dorothea and Jack, and he did not defend himself. He began traveling the countryside, making a few dollars wherever he could.

Eventually, Caleb became the doctor for a slave trader. The man captured anyone he felt was a runaway slave. Rather than turning them in for their reward, he sold them to private buyers for a larger fee. The captives were often beaten or ill and Caleb's job was to decide which would likely survive and which were too sick or injured to recover. He arrived one day to examine Josephine and two men, one named Bo and another Caleb felt was near death. Bo and Josephine were held in a barn. Caleb returned the next day to check on Josephine and he was captivated. She repeatedly asked him to help her.

Mr. Rust, Caleb's employer, said there had been a conductor for the Underground Railroad at the Rounds farm. The Rounds had been chased out of the county but Rust and other patrollers kept the rumor alive that the farm was a safe destination. Once the runaways reached the farm, the patrollers caught them.

After Caleb heard the story, he returned to town on the pretense of needing medical supplies. He got all the money he had saved and returned to the barn. The man named Bo begged Caleb to set him free but Caleb ignored him, releasing Josephine but leaving Bo chained up. He said he never even gave Bo another thought, but he should have. Caleb knew Josephine was ill. She coughed a lot and sometimes coughed up blood.



Caleb and Josephine traveled to Philadelphia where he hoped to find help. They almost immediately found a wanted poster for Josephine's capture and checked into a small hotel on the other side of town. Caleb went out, seeking the help he hoped would ensure Josephine's safety, but he encountered Mr. Rust and Bo instead. He ran, planning to lead them away from the hotel, but was confused by the streets and passed the hotel repeatedly before he finally escaped. When he entered the hotel room later, he found Josephine in the bathtub. She had seen the chase and had slit her wrists rather than risking being captured. He held her hand "until it went slack" (348).

Caleb found a note from Josephine on the bed. The note gave Joseph's name, age, and location, with the words "my son" and a plea to buy his freedom (348). Caleb said some men spend their lives searching for some direction but never find it, while others are given a purpose. Caleb returned to Virginia and saw the abandoned Bell Creek property. He said Mr. Stanmore was wealthy and demonstrated his greed as soon as he knew Caleb was interested in Joseph.

Caleb concluded the letter by writing that he had enclosed three of Josephine's paintings that she had with her when they traveled to Philadelphia, including one of a boy named Louis. He went on in the final paragraph to say he had chosen to leave Joseph with Jack, who would be a good father, but early in the letter wrote that he was leaving because he did not want to be a constant reminder of Dorothea's death.

Lina puts the letter down. She knows she has proof that Josephine painted the picture of Louis in Jasper's possession. She finishes the research that leads to Joseph Harper and right down to Jasper Battle.

The next section of the book is titled "Tuesday" and continues in present tense. Lina and Garrison are in Dan's office with the completed brief, 112 pages, on Dan's desk. Ron and Dan agree the work is excellent. Jasper arrives, appropriately dressed in a suit though the sleeves are a little short. Dan is furious. He says Jasper is "too white" and points out his tattoos (353). Garrison agrees. Ron calls for a pause in the conversation. He says he has learned that the lawsuit will negatively affect his business and has decided not to pursue it, but says he will return to it when the time is right. Jasper rushes out of the office. As Ron is leaving the office, he gives Lina his card and says he can find a place for her in his organization. Garrison is obviously jealous.

After Ron is gone, Dan says the partners were not on board with the lawsuit anyway. He then tells them that another associate is going to get the next partnership spot. He tells Garrison that one of the major partners in the firm would soon contact him about a new case. He dismisses Lina but she does not leave for a moment. She sees with amazing clarity that she does not want this life.

Back in her office, she reads a section of the brief that outlines the lineage that leads from Josephine to Jasper. Caleb died in the Civil War. The family was large and scattered around the world. Lina closes the brief and goes to Dan's office where she announces, "I quit" (359). Dan asks why and Lina says she does not belong here. Dan says he once thought that about himself, and tells her good-bye. By the time Lina



reaches her office, Sherri has heard the news. She tells Lina that security will be there soon to escort her out to ensure she does not take anything that is not hers or “sabotage” anything. To Lina's surprise, Sherri offers to help and makes three copies of the brief Lina worked on. Lina leaves the building with her few possessions and three copies of the brief, without a security guard escort.

A half hour later, she is at Porter's office. She feels none of the sexual tension she felt at their previous meeting as she gives him a copy of the documents. He plans to write a book and they briefly discuss a title.

Lina next calls Jasper. Her first words are a plea to him not to hang up. He listens as she says she quit her job. She asks to meet, saying she does not want their relationship to end. He agrees that he does not want that either but still hesitates. He gives in and they agree to meet at Grand Central Station. There, Lina hands over the brief. Jasper is not certain what his family will do with the information. He asks what Lina plans to do next. She does not have a firm plan but it does not bother her. She removes her mother's phone number from her pocket and tells Jasper that she has not talked to Grace in 20 years. She asks if he will dial and he does. He hands over the phone as it begins to ring and they hold hands as Lina waits for her mother to answer.

The final chapter of the book is titled “Josephine” and is the only Josephine chapter told in present tense. Josephine walks down the road, marveling at the fact that her son is alive. She wonders if Miss Lu has decided to “show mercy” to the child all along, or if she made that decision only after she held the infant. Josephine thinks about her mother, buried with the other dead blacks from the plantation. She notes the fields are silver in the moonlight and she accepts that as fact. After all, she is an artist.

Analysis

One attitude about slavery is exemplified by the wording of signs at the Bell Center for Women and Art. The center is a tourist spot with information signs throughout the grounds. Instead of saying that slaves did laundry at a specific location, the sign says, “Clothing was laundered.” The point seems to be that no one mentions slavery in the hope that everyone will forget. The effort to right that injustice is seen throughout the book and drives much of the action.

Lina feels certain about her career as she begins work on the reparations case, though there are many things in her life that are uncertain. Her relationship with her father has been rocky recently and she knows there are secrets about her mother that she will eventually have to face. She is also unsure about her feelings for Jasper because she is attracted to him but he is not the kind of person she has hoped for. It seems that everything in her personal life is in a bit of disarray, but Lina still feels she is in control because her professional life is on track. When Jasper says Lina thinks he is a loser, she disagrees, but it seems that she is judging him, at least to some degree. She believes that she wants stability but discovers that her principles are more important than her job.



Lina announces to Oscar that she plans to move out. There is some symbolism here related to Josephine. Josephine was considered the "house girl," or the person who worked exclusively in the house, as opposed to those who worked in the fields. Lina has always lived in the house with Oscar despite the fact that most young women would have moved out during college or during the early days of a good-paying career.

The scene in which Lina learns that her mother is alive seems unbelievable, at least to a degree. She spent her childhood following women who resembled her mother and has always felt the void in her life, so her reaction seems incredibly subdued compared to what a typical person would have felt. It could be explained by the fact that Lina is so detail oriented and she is working on the case, but that seems rather flimsy. Some readers may feel that the author simply had this loose end to tie up and inserted it into a convenient spot.

Caleb's letter is written out of order, just as if a person sat down to relate such a complicated tale and could not quite decide where to begin. Though the opening pages are somewhat difficult to completely understand, readers will begin making connections, including that Caleb was Jack's older brother who left the farm long before Jack and Dorothea married. Dorothea mentioned the older brother, but not by name, in one of her letters. That is one of many details that seem unimportant until the author begins this process of tying all the pieces together for the end of the book. Readers who have paid careful attention will find no major holes in the story at the end.

Lina has another moment to think that she might have misjudged the people at the law firm. She has come to believe they are all ruthless and greedy in their effort to succeed. Then, just as she is about to leave, another associate named Meredith arrives at her office. She hugs Lina which prompts Lina to question whether the two might have been friends if Lina had ever made the first overture. Meredith then calls her Lisa and walks away, making it clear that she did not even know Lina's name. While Lina obviously wants to live a life far removed from the instability of her father's artistic existence, she also obviously wants something less corporate than the law firm. All this provides a deeper look into Lina's true character.

The first chapter of this final section is extremely long compared to the other chapters, mainly because the author keeps with her habit of ending a chapter only when she changes perspectives. That puts Lina's reading of Caleb's letter in a single chapter with all the other events of Lina's final days with Clifton and Harp LLP.

The final chapter is less than a page in length and offers nothing new in the way of direct information other than Josephine's brief thought about her son. She wonders if Miss Lu decided not to kill the child after she held it, or if she had made that decision before the baby was born. That indicates that Josephine felt Miss Lu was capable of murdering the infant. There is no doubt that Miss Lu was angry because she knew her husband had fathered the child, but this puts a new definition to that anger. The reader only knows Miss Lu as the incapable person she is as she nears death, but this brief look into her character shows that she was not always so ineffective. It is noteworthy



that the final chapter is in present tense, a change from the past tense of the previous chapters.

Lina had enjoyed working on an immigration case during college and she felt she really made a difference with her work on that case. It is not until she quits her job at Clifton and Harp that she thinks she can actually go into a different field where she makes a difference. This hope that she can build a better life while realizing some of her own goals is foreign to her but she finds she is not upset about this new track.

There are some interesting details revealed through Lina's research that really do not have relevance to the overall storyline but that some readers may feel they need to know. For example, Mister Robert Bell married Miss Melly after Miss Lu died, and he sells the plantation to a neighbor, Mr. Stanmore. That is how the Stanmores came to be in possession of the Bell property.

Discussion Question 1

Describe Josephine's death. Caleb writes that her face exhibited relief and exhaustion. Why did she feel those emotions?

Discussion Question 2

What prompts Lina to quit her job? Do you think she overreacted?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Ron Dresser decide to drop the lawsuit? What does this say about his commitment to the reparations claim as a societal question?

Vocabulary

verdant, implements, bucolic, concocting, lush, bustled, affixed, enunciated, prickle, exuberant, buoyed, reverberation, obsessed, larceny, avarice, humanity, posture, platonic, shoo, nee, whoosh, affirmative, flax



Characters

Lina Sparrow

Lina Sparrow is a young lawyer who craves security and success. She is goal-oriented and focused solely on her career as the story opens. Lina is driven to make partner at the law firm of Clifton and Harp LLP, and she cannot imagine what life would be like if she did not have those goals. She is a bit of a snob in that regard, and seems to judge the young musician, Jasper Battle, for his lack of direction. She comes to realize that some things are more important than a career, and that prompts her to take the plunge into an unknown future.

Lina is the daughter of Oscar Sparrow, an artist who was Lina's only parent for most of her life. Lina has always felt the loss of her mother, Grace, and believed her mother died in a car accident. Despite her mother's absence, Lina has grown up happy and healthy in Oscar's care. When Oscar first begins trying to tell her about Grace, Lina refuses to listen. She had asked questions when she was a teenager, but now felt that too much time had passed, and that she no longer really wanted to know.

Lina finds herself caught up in the assignment of finding Josephine's descendants, and she is bereft when she learns the facts of Josephine's death. She has known all along that Josephine was dead by now, but discovering the tragedy of her death is a blow. Lina is in possession of the research proving that Jasper Battle is Josephine's direct descendant when she quits her job. She hands that research off to Jasper so that he can prove ownership of the Bell paintings, if he chooses, and to the art critic, Porter Scales, to prove his theory about the Bell paintings.

Josephine Bell

Josephine is a slave girl on the Bell Creek plantation. Her mother died when she was very young and she never knows who her father is. She lived for a short time in the slave quarters of the plantation but moved to the main house when she was still very young. There, Lu Anne Bell, the mistress of the plantation, taught Josephine to read and write, and still allows her to paint sometimes. Josephine is dependent on "Miss Lu's" kindness for time to do any of those activities. Josephine is intelligent and a talented artist, despite having no formal training or instruction.

When she was in her early-teens, Josephine ran away from the plantation and found a family that helped slaves escape. She was heavily pregnant and wound up returning to the plantation where she delivered a baby boy. Miss Lu told Josephine that the boy died and years passed before Josephine learns that was a lie.

Josephine discovers that her son is alive just as she makes plans to run away again. She considers the child, but follows through with her plans to run. She is desperate to remain free, but is immediately captured. A white doctor, Caleb T. Harper, helps her



escape again and they arrived in Philadelphia. There, Josephine sees men who are searching for her and fears being returned. Her desperation to remain free is seen in her final act, taking her own life rather than face capture.

Josephine is sympathetic toward her mistress, despite the fact that she is treated cruelly. Despite her youth and lack of education, she recognizes that they are – to a degree – victims of circumstance. Josephine captures Caleb's heart though nothing comes of his feelings for her. Her final act is to leave Caleb a written request to find her son, Joseph, and free him from slavery.

Oscar Sparrow

Oscar is a contemporary artist and Lina's father. He belongs to a trendy art community and is somewhat temperamental, in keeping with his artistic nature. He worries about his relationship with Lina, especially when he needs to tell her that her mother did not die, as Lina believed.

Lu Anne Bell

Lu Anne, also known as Miss Lu, is the mistress of Bell Plantation and the wife of Robert Bell, the man who owns Josephine. Miss Lu is a weak character, unable to stand up for herself in most situations. She is possibly mentally ill. She gave birth to 17 children and all were either stillborn or died within moments of birth. She is a talented artist but she takes credit for Josephine's work as well as her own. She has a terminal tumor and dies shortly after Josephine runs away from Bell Creek plantation.

Dan Oliphant

Dan is a senior partner with the law firm of Clifton and Harp LLP where Lina is employed. He is hard working and seems to have no personal time at all. He is demanding and ruthless, but is usually kind to Lina. Dan is the lawyer who assigns Lina to the team working on the slave reparations lawsuit. He is virtually indifferent when Lina announces that she is quitting.

Jasper Battle

Jasper is a young musician and direct descendant of Josephine Bell. He meets Lina at an art gallery where he is seeking an expert who will authenticate art he believes was created by Lu Anne Bell. It turns out that his paintings, and several others, were created by Josephine Bell.

Jasper is a kind character who feels good about himself and his life. He is very intelligent, as seen in the fact that he is near a doctorate degree, but has a strong grasp of what he feels is important.



As the novel comes to a close, he has possession of the documentation that proves his family owns a share of the Bell paintings, but he does not immediately grab onto the idea that he could make money from the information, saying only that he will talk it over with his mother.

Porter Scales

Porter is an art critic who was good friends and perhaps lovers with Grace Sparrow, Lina's mother. Porter wrote a scathing review of Oscar's art years before the novel picks up, but he writes a very complimentary review of Oscar's latest work. He is a kind person who refuses Lina's sexual overture, saying he would not jeopardize their friendship. As the novel comes to a close, Porter is considering a book about Josephine and her art.

Dorothea Rounds Harper

Dorothea is the younger daughter of an undertaker who operates a station on the Underground Railroad in the years leading up to the Civil War. She is active in her father's operation and writes lengthy letters to her sister, Kate, about their activities. She marries Jack Harper, who later adopts Josephine Bell's son. Dorothea dies in childbirth.

Jack Harper

Jack is a young man who lives near Dorothea's home in Virginia. He marries Dorothea, just as the family is about to run away in fear of their lives. Jack is a stable man who works hard and wants to make a good life for Dorothea. He is devastated when she dies in childbirth. He adopts Jack Harper, the son of Josephine Bell, and research shows that Jack is a direct ancestor of Jasper Battle.

Caleb Harper

Caleb Harper is a doctor in the years prior to the Civil War. He is Jack Harper's brother but left the family farm at a young age, attending medical school and earning the right to practice medicine. He never planned to return to Virginia but agrees when his mentor asks him to work in a clinic, providing care for people in a rural area. Jack lives nearby with his wife, Dorothea.

Caleb is prone to drink but never drinks while he is supposed to be working. He is very drunk one night when a man summons him to Jack's house. Caleb arrives to find that Dorothea in labor, but near death. The baby is turned sideways and Caleb tries to perform a Cesarean Section operation, but both Dorothea and the baby die. When Caleb's mentor arrives, he accuses Caleb of performing the surgery while drunk and Caleb leaves in shame.



Caleb wanders around and eventually begins working for a man who buys runaway slaves. Caleb meets Josephine and is attracted in a way that he cannot understand. He helps her escape and falls in love with her during their trip north.

Caleb is with Josephine when she commits suicide and follows her instructions to buy her son, Joseph. Jack adopts Joseph and raises him as his own. Caleb writes Joseph a lengthy letter, describing his life and how Joseph came to be Jack's son. Lina uses that letter to prove her case for Jasper Battle's relationship to Josephine, and to prove that Josephine is the artist behind some of the Bell paintings.

Ron Dresser

Ron Dresser is a wealthy businessman who approaches the law firm of Clifton and Harp LLP with the idea of the lawsuit demanding reparations for the families of slaves. He is a strong person, demanding respect and attention whenever he is in the room. He has three attorneys working on the case and then abruptly decides to drop it, saying the timing is not right and that it might negatively affect his business.

Robert Bell

Robert is the owner of Bell Creek Plantation and is Lu Anne's husband. He is a cruel man, at least partly because of the trouble he is facing. His plantation is failing under his leadership and he has seen his wife go through multiple pregnancies without delivering a single child who lived more than a few moments. He slaps Josephine one morning for no apparent reason, which prompts her decision to leave at that moment.

Nora Lewis

Nora Lewis is a curator at the research building at the Bell Center for Women and Art. She is well-versed in the information about the Bell family and hates that the current owners, the Stanmores, are hiding and destroying documents that might be of use to researchers. Nora is the person who hands Caleb's letter over to Lina, putting an end to speculation. She does so knowing that she will be fired, but believes it is time for everyone to know the truth.



Symbols and Symbolism

Clifton and Harp LLP

This is the law firm where Lina works, and it symbolizes the ruthlessness of corporate climates. Lina is an associate attorney here when Ron Dresser launches the slavery reparations lawsuit. It is a huge company and the lawyers all work brutal hours under a great deal of pressure.

Billable Hours

Billable hours are symbolic of precious time. As an attorney at Clifton and Harp LLP, Lina measures all the time she spends working on cases, always keeping track of the time so that she can bill for her services. That habit becomes so ingrained that she counts the time spent in many aspects of her life, often noting how many billable hours are spent on a specific task even though those hours are only important to Lina. The concept of billable hours represents the fast pace and high pressure Lina and the other lawyers face on a daily basis.

Pictures of Grace

This is the title of Oscar's new art show, with both the show and the title symbolizing the fact that Oscar and Lina have a missing piece of their lives. The pieces include portraits of Lina's mother, Grace Sparrow, along with a series of studies in various mediums.

The Chest in the Picture of Abraham Lincoln

This chest exists only in the picture and in Josephine's imagination, but it is a symbolic means of keeping her emotions in check. When she has feelings that she cannot afford to harbor – such as rage – she figuratively places those in the chest in order to maintain control.

The Bell Collection

This art collection symbolizes controversy, talent, and a sympathetic view of slavery. Most people believe that Lu Anne Bell was the talented artist and the collection became famous because the artist obviously felt affection and empathy for the slaves in the paintings. Porter Scales raised the question of whether Lu Anne Bell was the sole artist, which created controversy. Some people felt that Josephine should be given credit for her work while others felt they were losing something if the collection proved to be the work of two different artists.



Art Studios

There are art studios in the Sparrow home and in the Bell Creek plantation house, and both symbolize a place of creativity and happiness. Josephine feels sentimental about the room as she prepares to run away. Miss Lu often goes into the room during Josephine's final day on the plantation, obviously seeking solace from the room. The room in the Sparrow home is large and messy with Oscar's work, and this is where Lina sees Oscar's latest projects for the first time.

Caleb's Letter

Caleb's letter to Joseph Harper represents truth and closure, both to Joseph and to the reader. The letter includes information about Josephine's death and provides Lina with a clear path to prove that Jasper Battle is a direct descendant of Josephine Bell.

Ron Dresser's Lawsuit

The lawsuit is symbolic of the reparations Dresser said should be made to the descendants of slaves. The idea is fairly straightforward – companies that benefited from slavery and should pay the descendants monetary reparations plus apologies. The mechanics became unwieldy with Lina and Garrison Hall struggling to define who should pay, why, and to whom.

The Lead Plaintiff

The lead plaintiff in Ron Dresser's lawsuit is symbolic of the descendants of every slave who worked in America without pay or thanks. Lina identifies Jasper Battle as that plaintiff but Dan dismissed him as unsuitable just before Ron announced that he would not pursue the case.

Grace's Mother's Phone Number

When Oscar tells Lina that her mother is not dead, he gives her a piece of paper with Grace's phone number, which is symbolic of Grace's desire to reconnect with her daughter.



Settings

The Bell Center for Women and Art (During Lina's life)

This facility is on the property of the former Bell Creek plantation, where Josephine was a slave and where she and Lu Anne Bell created their famous works of art. By the time Lina visits there on her research trip, the center offers a few talented women a place to study and paint. The plantation at this point is fairly well restored and also serves as a busy tourist stop.

The Bell Plantation (During Josephine's life)

The house is large and was once a grand home, evidenced by the extensive details. There are descriptive passages about the nursery and a room at the front of the house that was filled with elegant furniture. However, the house had fallen into disrepair by the time Josephine's story picks up, evidence that the Bells have fallen on hard times. It is noteworthy that Robert Bell's uncle built and furnished the house, and it passed to Robert through his father. The uncle was apparently able to keep the plantation operating on a profitable basis, but Robert and his father were not.

The Sparrow's Brownstone

Oscar and Lina Sparrow live in a brownstone in Brooklyn, New York City. The house is really too big for the two of them but Oscar has managed to hold onto it over the years since Grace "died." It is not until Lina really examines Oscar's show and thinks about his life that she realizes he kept the house in the hope that she might someday return.

Philadelphia

This is the city where Caleb takes Josephine with the hope of finding help to get her farther north to a safe location. The city seems large to Josephine who had never been off the plantation. They take a hotel room, and while Caleb is looking for abolitionists who can help them, Josephine commits suicide in the bathroom of that hotel.

New York City

Several of the characters live and work in New York City, and this is where many of the modern-day scenes take place. The city is described only with regard to the events taking place, such as Lina's visit to the Calhoun Gallery or Oscar's art show, or the places she visits with Jasper and Porter. Clifton and Harp LLC has law offices in the city as well. These are located in a huge building that is also described only in incidental terms.



Themes and Motifs

The Effects of Slavery

There is no doubt about the negative effects of slavery, both at that time in history and on future generations, but the characters of this novel bring up some new outlooks and examples of this theme; from Garrison Hall's idea that the descendants of slaves are better off because their ancestors came to America to the tragic story of Josephine Bell, the novel demonstrates an array of characters and events that fit this theme.

Josephine's story is an important part of the novel. Born a slave and never knowing any other life, she still instinctively knows that there is a better life waiting for her if she can escape her bondage. As a slave, her every action and thought are property of her owners. This includes her art, which Lu Anne Bell claims as her own. Josephine's attitude on the day she runs away demonstrates the impact that slavery has had directly on her. When Miss Lu becomes emotional and begs forgiveness, Josephine determines not to give Miss Lu the satisfaction of having her say what is expected. Josephine takes that tiny bit of control at that moment, which strengthens her resolve to run toward freedom.

The lack of control is an important hurdle for slaves. Josephine is raped and gives birth to a son while she is still a child. She has no right to the baby from the beginning and never gets to hold her son. She is raised by a slave woman named Lottie but is expected to move to the plantation house without argument when Miss Lu decides she wants Josephine there. Lottie gives Josephine up without question, telling her that she should exploit Miss Lu's interest to get extra food or anything else that is offered. Lottie also had children before she was bought by Robert Bell and she has no right to any of them any more than she has rights for herself.

While Josephine's tragic story is exemplary of millions of others, Dorothea Rounds' father has a different take on the subject. He hates slavery because of the human suffering but he also feels the practice has a negative impact on the slave owners. They are degraded and lose their drive when they depend on their slaves. The Rounds are abolitionists of the day and their white neighbors hate them so much that they burn the Rounds family's barn. The Rounds have to leave their home, community, and livelihood because people hate the abolitionists.

In the modern day storyline of the novel, Lina begins to examine those impacted by slavery in an effort to outline the people who should become plaintiffs in the case. She soon accepts that the harm is "immeasurable."

Garrison, a young black attorney, feels differently. While he admits the harm to the slaves themselves, he feels that the blacks who descended from those slaves have a better life in America than they would have in Africa. Ron Dresser counters that argument, challenging Garrison to compare the number of blacks he sees performing



menial jobs outside the building to the number of blacks he sees inside the building in high-level careers. Garrison says that is an indication that the blacks have always been behind their white counterparts in terms of success.

Hopes and Dreams

Everyone has hopes and dreams, even when there seems to be little chance of those dreams coming true. The characters of this novel are no exceptions, though some of their hopes are far from typical because of their specific circumstances.

Josephine is very young when she begins to dream of freedom. She had not been taught that blacks could be free and had no real examples of free blacks, but she holds onto the hope that freedom can happen for her. She tries to run for freedom when she is a pregnant child but finds that the Rounds are reluctant to aid her because of her advanced stage of pregnancy. Her hope that she will be safe once she reaches the Rounds' farm is squashed, and she returns to Bell Creek where she has her baby. She might have given up on dreams and happiness after that disastrous set of events, but she does not. She continues to paint and to dream of the opportunity to be free so that she can make her own decisions, such as what and when to paint. Those hopes and dreams prompt Josephine to run again. She never returns to Bell Creek though she dies in Philadelphia.

Lina's life is another example of this theme. She grew up with a hole in her life because of her mother's absence. Lina's father, Oscar, told Lina that Grace died. As a young child, Lina sought ways to fill that void and she sometimes followed random women in the city who reminded her of Grace. Though she did not give voice to a specific dream, she was obviously hoping that she might someday encounter Grace or someone who could fill Grace's place in Lina's life. The novel ends before Grace and Lina reconnect, but it seems possible that Lina's dream of having a mother figure might come true.

Lina's career is another example of this theme. She believes she wants to be successful and that climbing the ladder at a prestigious law firm will achieve that dream. It is only after working on the reparations case that Lina remembers how much she loves helping people and decides that she can define a successful career in some term other than the long hours in the ruthless corporate firm.

Other characters also have hopes and dreams, some that are fulfilled and others that are lost. Jack Harper sets out with the hope of a happy life with Dorothea. They were expecting their first child and Caleb's letter indicates that the couple was happy with the situation. Caleb writes about Jack's grief immediately after Dorothea and the baby die, but he does not write about the long-term grief. He does, however, say that his presence is a grim reminder to Jack. Caleb also does not write about Jack's life after he adopts Joseph, but Joseph fathered children and it seems that Jack might have found some peace and happiness later in his life.



The Lawsuit

The lawsuit becomes a driving part of the novel and is a theme in the sense that characters and events are controlled by the case. Lina, Garrison, Jasper, Ron Dresser, and the Bell paintings are among the main examples of this theme.

Ron Dresser brings the idea for the case to the law firm, saying that it is time for the slaves to be remembered, named, and repaid for their work in building America and about two dozen industries. Ron says those industries owed trillions of dollars in wages for the slave labor, and he hopes the lawsuit will net money to be paid out to a series of projects and people, including a museum, education programs, and descendants of those slaves.

Lina and Garrison spend lots of hours and effort on drafting the document for the lawsuit but when they meet with Ron to go over it, he announces that he will not be pursuing it after all. He cites negative consequences to his business as the reason for the change of plan but says he will reopen the case when the timing is better. That prompts the question of Ron's motives. If he is truly interested in righting the wrongs against slaves, would he pull out because of his business interests? The limited perspective means the reader does not know what he is thinking, which means there is no way to be certain of his motives. The money may be a driving factor or he may be giving into pressure from the government to drop the case. Regardless of his motivations, his initial interest in the lawsuit drives much of the action in the story.

While Lina begins work on the lawsuit because of Ron Dresser's interest in filing a reparations claim, she becomes driven to find Josephine's descendants and to prove that Josephine is the artist behind some paintings in the Bell collection. Her interest at first is purely professional, but she exhibits a passion for the truth because she becomes connected to Josephine through the letters and historical documents. When she leaves the law firm, she takes copies of her research with her so that Porter Scales and Jasper Battle can decide what steps they will take.

The paintings are controversial because of Porter's theory that Josephine painted some of them, but Lina's research makes it clear that Porter is correct. When his theory becomes fact, the ownership of some of the paintings becomes a legal question. It also changes the perspective of the person looking at the paintings. They have been famous partly because everyone has always thought a slave owner created paintings that depicted the humanity of the slaves on her plantation. That is no longer the case after Lina proves that Josephine painted some of them, and the paintings will likely become famous for an entirely different reason. There is also the question of whether any of Lu Anne's paintings will be valuable once she is not credited with the portraits of the slaves.



Coming of Age

Several characters in this novel go through those situations that mature them and allow them to find the best path for their lives. The coming-of-age theme is typically seen when characters experience epiphanies that teach them vital things about themselves.

Lina is the main example of this theme. She is an adult as the story opens but is still struggling over the loss of her mother. She believes that information about her mother will help fill that void, but when her father offers to tell her about it, she realizes that she does not want to know, and that she is alright without any information her father might impart. She has to go through several emotional stages before she reaches a point where she is ready to talk about her mother.

On a related note, Lina grew up believing that her parents had a idyllic, perfect marriage. She bases that mainly on a single photo of her parents in a diner. The expressions on their faces make her believe that Grace and Oscar are happy. Then Lina notices a look that passes between Oscar and Marie, and Marie confirms that they had an affair when Lina was a baby. She later meets Porter and realizes that her mother was probably in love with him. These instances force Lina to accept the realities of her parents' marriage rather than the imaginary relationship she had created in her mind.

Lina's attitude about her career is another situation in which she matures and comes to a deeper understanding of what she wants. She believes that climbing the corporate ladder will make her happy, mainly because the sense of security and of accomplishment. When she sees the firm and a client drop the slave reparations case because it is not politically popular, she decides that she needs a career change. She quits without knowing for sure what she will do next, but she understands that she has to find a career that makes her happy rather than one that other people consider successful. For Lina, that means she has to find a way to help people.

Oscar is another example of this theme. He apparently struggled greatly with Grace's decision to leave them. He maintained their brownstone though it was really too big for them and he had trouble meeting the financial burden, but he refused to leave in case Grace decided to return. His motivations are not detailed in the novel, but he came to a point of acceptance that allowed him to paint the Pictures of Grace for his next art show. He also decides to talk to Lina about Grace, though it is obviously a difficult decision.

To a lesser degree, Grace can also be considered an example of this theme. She left her family when Lina was young because she could not endure her life. There is no indication of what she found after she left, but she chose to reconnect with Lina after Oscar's show.



Family Relationships

While each of the characters has biological families, there are pseudo-familia relationships that are also important to the novel. The relationship between Josephine and her mistress, Miss Lu, is one of those.

Arguably the most important family relationship is between Josephine and her son, Joseph, which leads directly to Jasper Battle. Jasper does not give many details about his life, but it seems obvious that he is close to his mother. When Lina gives him the documents of her research, Jasper can use the information to file a lawsuit seeking ownership of Josephine's paintings, but he says he wants to talk it over with his mother. That indicates a close family bond, at least with some members of his family.

Josephine's mother died when she was very young, leaving her in the care of a slave named Lottie. Josephine seems to need the family connection with Lottie but it is not clear whether Lottie feels the same. When Miss Lu announces that Josephine is to move to the plantation house, Lottie makes no comment other than agreement. Josephine wants to fight the situation because Lottie is the closest person she has to a mother.

Josephine lives in the main house and Mister Robert rapes her when she is still just a child. She becomes pregnant with a son who is biologically related to Mister Robert, but Miss Lu takes the child away before Josephine knows the baby is even alive. That deprives Josephine of the opportunity to have a relationship with her son and she never sees him, though she does take a step in her final moments of life to ensure that he is freed. The fact that her final thought is of Joseph indicates that connection, even though they had never seen each other.

Josephine and Miss Lu have a tenuous sort of a bond. Both are wary but are dependent on each other to a degree. Their proximity makes them familiar with each other, even though Josephine does not view Miss Lu as either friend or confidante.

Lina's relationship with her father is another example of this theme. They live together with Oscar playing the role of single father. It is obvious that they are very close, at least partly from having spent so many years dependent on each other. Their relationship becomes slightly rocky for a time, but that could be attributed to the stress each has faced as their lives took dramatic turns.

Styles

Point of View

The story is written in third person from limited perspectives that vary, specifically depending on the time frame. The earlier story line focuses on Josephine Bell, a slave girl who lives in the mid-1800s in Virginia. In that story line, the reader sees everything from Josephine's perspective. The storyline that is set in modern times is presented from the perspective of Lina Sparrow, a young attorney doing research for a class action law suit. The changing perspectives are necessary for the reader to follow the story because of the years' difference in the settings.

The limited perspective means that the reader knows only what Josephine and Lina know, and only as they know those facts. For example, Josephine believes that her son died at birth and she goes on believing that until Mistress Lu Anne Bell finally tells her the truth. Lina believes that her mother died when Lina was a child, and she goes on believing that until her father tells her the truth. In both cases, the reader only learns the truth as the two women learn it. The chapters alternate between their respective perceptions, and that means that information about the two women is presented in alternating order. That changes how some details are revealed, meaning the reader gets some details out of order. For example, Lina reads Caleb Harper's letter and that is how she learns that Josephine killed herself in Philadelphia. In the next chapter, the reader learns about Josephine's decision to run away a second time.

Language and Meaning

The overall tone of the story is one of hope and dreams, though some of the characters face brutality and hardship along the way. Josephine is the prime example of this. She is a slave but has a real talent for art. She holds onto the dream that she will someday be free and the hope that she can live her life as a normal, free person. As a contrast to Josephine, Lina is living a life that is very much her dream come true. She has become a successful attorney in a prestigious law firm, and she feels that her career is on track. However, she discovers that there is more to life than making partner at a hug firm and that she can follow her true dreams to help people.

The novel has a dual storyline. One line focuses on Lina in modern times while the other focuses on Josephine in the mid-1800s. Both are written in similar modern-day English with little difference between them. The major shifts in tone are seen in letters written by Dorothea Rounds and Caleb Harper. Dorothea's letters are newsy and include a look into her character as an abolitionist but also as a young lady of the mid 1800s facing all the social aspects of that time. Caleb's letter is not in chronological order, which makes it somewhat difficult to follow at first. Once he settles into telling his story, the tone takes on a sad tone and the reader is probably not surprised to learn of Josephine's death.



The modern reader will find few unfamiliar words but there are some dated terms in Josephine's story, including references to the "patrollers," which refers to men looking for runaway slaves. Lina's storyline focuses on her life, including her work on the reparations lawsuit, but the author manages not to fall into the trap of depending on legal terms, meaning the layperson will understand the lawsuit details.

Structure

There are two main story lines in the novel. The earlier follows the life of Josephine, a young slave girl who filled with hopes and dreams, despite the fact that she is owned by a cruel master and a mistress who exhibit the signs of mental illness. The second story line is set in modern times and follows the life of Lina, a young lawyer who learns about herself through her research into Josephine's life. Their stories are told in alternating chapters. Each chapter is titled with the name of one of these two characters, meaning that the first chapter is titled "Josephine," the second is titled "Lina," the third is "Josephine," and so on. That repetition makes it difficult to refer to specific chapters. For the purpose of this study guide, the chapters have also been numbered to help the reader understand where specific chapters fall within the novel.

The novel is divided into three sections, titled by number and by two or three names. Part One includes the names Lina and Josephine. There are 10 chapters in this section, alternately titled Josephine and Lina. The title page for Part Two includes the names Lina, Josephine, and Dorothea. This section includes six chapters, alternately titled Lina and Josephine. The names on that title page of the third section are Lina, Caleb, and Josephine. This section consists of only two chapters, but the first of these is more than 100 pages and includes the letter from Caleb Harper to Jack Harper.

Each of the two story lines are presented roughly in chronological order with the back stories presented through memories, conversations, and historical documents. Those documents make up a large piece of the novel. There are letters from Dorothea Rounds to her sister, Kate, about their family's work for the Underground Railroad. There is also a lengthy letter from Caleb T. Harper to Jack Harper. That letter appears near the end of the book and the author uses it to tie up several loose ends.



Quotes

Something shifted in Josephine then, a gathering of disparate desires that before had been scattered. She could not name them all, there were so many, but most were simple things: to eat at mean when hunger struck her, to smile without thinking, to wear a dress that fit her well, to place upon the wall a picture she had made, to love a person of her choosing.”

-- Narrator (Chapter 1, “Josephine,” of “Part One: Josephine, Lina” paragraph 3)

Importance: Mister Robert had just struck Josephine and she decided that she was going to run away. She has always been a slave and has no role models, no black person who has told her she could be free, but she has learned enough to know that it should be possible.

In the far corner were piled Josephine's pictures. She painted scenes from the farm.”

-- Narrator (Chapter 3, “Josephine,” of “Part One: Josephine, Lina” paragraph 17)

Importance: This line gives the reader positive proof that Porter Scales' theory about the Bell collection of paintings is correct and that Josephine is the artist behind some of the paintings. It also gives an early look into the relationship between Josephine and Miss Lu. Few slaves would have been granted permission to paint, which means there is something out of the ordinary in their relationship. The details are related over the course of the novel.

We seek to right this nation's largest, most enduring sin. We seek redress for hundreds of years of man's inhumanity to man, trillions – let me say it again, trillions – of dollars in unpaid wages.

-- Ron Dresser (Chapter 5, “Lina,” of “Part One: Josephine, Lina” paragraph 52)

Importance: Ron is talking to Lina and Garrison about the importance of the lawsuit he has proposed. The two points are the moral wrongs perpetrated on the slaves and the financial impact of the lawsuit. Ron's true motivations can only be evaluated by the reader but it's noteworthy that he later drops the case because it would negatively impact his business.

She felt herself separate from the room, from Missus Ly, from the sun on the floorboards, from the bloody residue still sticky on her fingers, as though she lived according to a set of principles that applied only to her, the principles having to do purely with escape.”

-- Narrator (Chapter 6, “Josephine,” of “Part One: Josephine, Lina” paragraph 10)

Importance: Miss Lu had just cut her face and, under normal circumstances, Josephine would have tried to soothe away her anxiety. She could not perform that duty that day. She went on to realize that she wanted to rid herself of everything related to the plantation, including the need to say “yes, Missus.”



For one more moment, Josephine stood before the frame and in the dim light of the hall she found herself fading away, diminished as a shadow or a ghost, and it seemed an impossibility that once she had held a brush, chosen a color, put hand to canvas to make anything so material and fin as the painting that hung there on the wall. Perhaps she had been mistaken. Perhaps it had been Missus Lu all along.”

-- Narrator (Chapter 9, “Josephine,” of “Part One: Josephine, Lina” paragraph 49)

Importance: Miss Melly Clayton had just admired a painting by Josephine, but Miss Lu accepted the compliment and claimed that she painted it. The wording indicates Josephine's lack of confidence and her feeling that she lacks the power to actually own anything, including her own talent.

In painting her subject, a slave, in such a way, with tenderness and hope, Lu Anne Bell has given us a portrait of humanity itself.”

-- Porter Scales (Chapter 1, “Lina,” of “Part Two: Lina, Josephine, Dorothea” paragraph 3)

Importance: Porter writes this before he comes up with the theory that Josephine painted some of the pieces in the Bell collection. This humanity is an important part of what makes the collection famous.

You call the the legacy of slavery and nobody bats and eye. You call it six point two trillion dollars and its a different story.”

-- Ron Dresser (Chapter 3, “Lina,” of “Part Two: Lina, Josephine, Dorothea” paragraph 46)

Importance: Dresser is talking to Garrison and Lina about the possibility that this lawsuit will give people a clearer picture of the true impact of slavery. His point is that people hear the words “legacy of slavery” without really understanding, but that they can understand it when there is a dollar figure that quantifies it.

Slavery breeds nothing but sloth and degradation among the landowners, he told me and it is the greatest hypocrisy that extends it still within our national borders.”

-- Dorothea Rounds (Dorothea Rounds' Letter, May 2, 1848, In Chapter 5, “Lina” of “Part Two: Lina, Josephine, Dorothea” paragraph 1)

Importance: Dorothea is repeating her father's ideas about slavery and his point is that the landowners suffer because of slavery as well. They are tempted into degrading acts such as sex and brutality, and they become lazy in their own work because they feel slaves should do everything for them.

Your baby lived.”

-- Lu Anne Bell (Chapter 6, “Josephine,” of “Part Two: Lina, Josephine, Dorothea” paragraph 39)

Importance: Josephine is just about to run away but is interrupted by Mister Robert's return. Miss Lu then calls out to her and tells Josephine that the baby is alive. She begs



Josephine's forgiveness but Josephine refuses to give it. The existence of that child drives much of the remaining action of the story.

And a date beside it: Joseph, age 4. Lina shivered. \$2,250 was an astronomical sum to pay for an able-bodied male slave, let alone a child.”

-- Mr. Stanmore's Farm Book (Chapter 1, “Lina,” of “Part Three: Lina, Caleb, Josephine” paragraph 107)

Importance: This is the key that leads Lina to discover Caleb's existence. The age matches Lina's research for when Josephine gave birth and the high amount paid indicates that someone really wanted this little boy.

I cannot say that it was then, that morning, I began to love her. Such thoughts were the furthest from my mind.”

-- Caleb (Chapter 1, “Lina,” of “Part Three: Lina, Caleb, Josephine” paragraph Para 16 of Caleb Harper's letter)

Importance: Caleb wrote about his first encounter with Josephine when she is captured by the men he works for. She is hurt, but he finds himself drawn to her. A short time later, he helps her escape and his affection for her prompts him to free Joseph.

It is silver, a pure shining silver that glows heavenly in the moonlight and she does not question it, she knows it is silver she sees, for she is an artist with the untethered eye of an artist and everywhere beauty lies down at her feet.”

-- Narrator (Chapter 2, “Josephine,” of “Part Three: Lina, Caleb, Josephine” paragraph 5)

Importance: Josephine has just reached the road as she prepares to run away. This is one of several scenes that includes her artistic way of looking at things, which is a vital part of her character.