If He Hollers Let Him Go: A Novel Study Guide

If He Hollers Let Him Go: A Novel by Chester Himes

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Plot Summary

Written in the 1940s, this novel fictionalizes the experience of being black in America at a specific time in the country's history - the early days of its involvement in World War II. The experience of being at war nationally is mirrored on a smaller scale in the struggle of the book's central character, Robert Jones, as he attempts to wage a personal war against racism. Other themes explored by the narrative include the nature of freedom and, on both a literal and metaphorical level, the tension between darkness and lightness.

As the novel begins, Robert Jones recalls a series of dreams that caused him to wake in fear and foreboding, feelings that, as he reveals in narration, he wakes with more often than not these days. His fears, he writes, include fear of the war and of being forced into the army, fear of the racism around him, fear of being unable to realize his ambition of simply being a man. As he gets ready for work, commenting on how powerful he feels in his uniform, he flirts with his house mate Ella Mae, asking her if she ever feels scared. She doesn't answer and sends him off to his job at a shipyard, where he has been newly promoted to a position of responsibility and leadership.

That day at work, the dark skinned Jones has an encounter that changes his life - a white woman, Madge, refuses to work for him because he's a "nigger". Realizing that her attitude originates in a combination of racist fear and racially defined lust, Jones loses his temper with her. This, in turn, leads him to confrontations with his supervisor, who expresses disappointment that Jones has betrayed the company's hopes in him (that he would be an example of how to conduct positive race relations) and then demotes him. Frustrated and angry, not to mention nearly murderous after an encounter with a hostile white man, Jones leaves work early and struggles to sort out both his feelings and his intentions.

Meanwhile, Jones also struggles to define and secure his relationship with the paler skinned but still black Alice Harrison, whose parents have achieved a measure of social and economic success in the white world and who have convinced themselves that they are, in fact, leaders in the transition into a unified society. Jones struggles to accept both their perspective and the conditional nature of Alice's love; she says she will only stay with him if he apologizes to Madge and to his bosses. At first he refuses, but when she convinces him that happiness is indeed possible living and working within the boundaries of the racist system of segregation, he agrees to do as she says.

Back at work, Jones begins to make amends with Madge and his co-workers, but is manipulated into planning revenge on Madge by a white co-worker, who gives him Madge's address. That night when Jones visits her, he is put off by her eagerness to use him sexually and leaves her frustrated when he refuses to have sex with her. The next day, as he is continuing his efforts to behave the way his supervisors want him to, Jones has a random encounter with Madge, which results in her shouting out that she is being raped. He realizes that there's no way that anyone will believe his version of the story and tries to escape, deciding that if he's going to be put in jail he might as well be

guilty of something. He takes his gun to go and kill the hostile white man. A chance encounter with some patrol police officers results in their discovery of the gun. Jones is recognized as wanted on the rape charge and jailed.

In the book's final chapter, Jones is visited in jail by the owner of the shipyard where he works, who tells him that Madge has decided to not press charges. Jones, in narration, reveals his belief that she told the truth of what happened but the company has decided to spin the circumstances in their favor and against his. A judge then tells Jones that to avoid prosecution on a charge of gun possession, he can join the army. Jones feels he has no choice but to agree.

Introduction

Introduction Summary

Written in the 1940s, this novel fictionalizes the experience of being black in America at a specific time in the country's history - specifically, in the early days of its involvement in World War II. The experience of being at war nationally is mirrored on a smaller scale in the struggle of the book's central character, Robert Jones, as he attempts to wage a personal war against racism. Other themes explored by the narrative include the nature of freedom and, on both a literal and metaphorical level, the tension between darkness and lightness.

This introduction, written by noted African-American academic Hinton Als, discusses the author's work within the context of two other noted black writers of the period - the more sentimental, idealistic, and professionally successful Richard Wright and James Baldwin. Als writes of the literary and personal tensions between the three men, and of how their differences in life experience (Himes, for example, was middle class) triggered both those tensions and the significant differences in their styles of work.

The rest of the introduction is a biographical sketch, starting with Himes's birth to the light skinned Estelle, an ambitious, racially sensitive descendant of white, aristocratic, British landowners, and the dark skinned Joseph Himes, an easygoing craftsman and college instructor. Als describes the family's history of moving from place to place and better job to better job, Himes's struggle to find his own racial and social identity, his brushes with the law, his conviction on a robbery charge, and his imprisonment. It was in prison, Als writes, that Himes started writing and formulating his signature style, a style which idealizes nothing, including motherhood or love, blames nothing, including systemic racism, and respects very little, except for the individual's ambition to define his own life. Als analyzes the author's obsession with and fetishistic attitude toward white women, his ambition which led him to leave his first wife to move to Paris where, Als suggests, Himes felt he would be freer to write the way he wanted to, and his eventual success with a popular series of crime novels set in Harlem.

The introduction concludes with a summary of why Als thinks Himes' work is important: "His engaging, infuriating work succeeds because it forces the reader to pay attention; because it is brutal without apology; because it directly confronts race and passion, the guilt that can accompany them, and the pain of repudiation".

Introduction Analysis

The introduction gives valuable, and relevant, insight into the life and experience of the author that shaped the novel. While there is little or no evidence to suggest that the book's central character, Robert Jones, is in any extended way autobiographical, consideration of the book in the context of this introduction suggests that some

elements of the author's life did bleed through. These include the complex, love/hate relationship with white women and a sense of personal and almost self-righteous ambition.

The most significant shared component of the lives of author and character is their experience of having lived through systemic racism. But while the introduction suggests that the author's work takes no position of blame towards such racism, the novel tends to take the opposite tack. There is the very strong sense that in his actions and reactions, protagonist Robert Jones puts a great deal of blame for his situation on the shoulders of the white-dominated system within which he strives for success. The question is whether this is an entirely character-related perspective or another bleed-through of the author's, a question to which there seems to be no clear answer.

The title, If He Hollers, Let Him Go was a phrase from a common children's game/rhyme used, for example, to choose who was "it" in a game of tag. The original version of the rhyme went like this: "Eeny meeny miney moe / Catch a nigger by the toe / If he hollers let him go / Eeny meeny miney moe". Since the emergence and insistent progress of the Civil Rights movement, the rhyme has changed, with the word "nigger" being replaced by, for example, "tiger". The use of part of the rhyme as the title for this book suggests a couple of things - that on some level, the experience of Robert Jones is part of a game, a taunting, a superficiality. On another level it evokes the inner shouting (hollering) that Jones, and by metaphorical extension black people in general, do when "caught" by the racist system in which they live. On a third level, the title is ironic, since Jones and again, by extension, black people in general, aren't "let go" when they holler, but are kept in their place by imprisonment, ignorance, or by other direct action and/or neglect. On a fourth level, of course, the title is literal, crying out to the oppressors to do just what the line says - if a black man hollers, let him go.

Chapters 1, 2, 3 and 4

Chapters 1, 2, 3 and 4 Summary

In chapter one, dark-skinned Robert Jones wakes up with three dreams in his mind - of being offered a chained dog, of being present at a criminal investigation in which the white detectives are trying to find a crippled black man, and of seeking a job from two other white men, who mock him for not having tools. As he wakes up, he feels a now-habitual surge of anxiety and fear which he attributes to the war, to the responsibilities of his job as a leaderman, or foreman, at the shipyards, and to the intense, ever-present racism he senses all around him. His anxiety is dispelled, somewhat, as he listens as lighter-skinned Ella Mae, who is sleeping in the bedroom next door, wakes up to feed her baby, and as he thinks with pride of his strong-willed girlfriend Alice. As Jones gets up and gets ready to go to work, he flirts with Ella Mae in the kitchen, but she playfully refuses his advances, becoming only slightly more serious when he asks whether she ever wakes up scared. As he gets dressed, he comments on how important and powerful he feels when he puts on his working clothes, and then rushes out to get to work.

In chapter two, as he proudly drives his expensive, recently purchased new car to work ("the rich white folks ... couldn't even buy a new car now"), Jones picks up a load of co-workers who bicker all the way to the shipyards. Along the way, Jones encounters what he sees as hate-filled, racism-defined encounters with white commuters, pedestrians, and security guards, with the hate only manifesting on the part of the whites. When he finally arrives, five minutes late, he and his co-workers worry about what repercussions they're going to face, with Jones commenting that "the white folks had sure brought their white to work with them that morning".

In chapter three, as he gathers equipment and blueprints to prepare for the day's work, Jones has tense, in-passing encounters with his supervisor, a white Irishman named Kelly, and an over-made-up, exaggeratedly fearful white woman whom he intimidates with a frankly sexual stare. Just as he's getting down to work, he's called to a site where his "gang" of workers is posted ... a couple of his boys are about to get into a fight. As he breaks it up another white supervisor, Donald, arrives with Kelly to deal with a complaint about a mistake made by one of the black members of the gang. Jones feels anger and resentment surging within him, but he controls himself and defuses the potentially tense situation.

In chapter four, Jones goes in search of a tacker (pipe fitter), and after getting the runaround from a white supervisor, gets directed by another supervisor to a woman named Madge, who Jones is shocked to discover she is the white woman he encountered at the beginning of chapter three. When she refuses to work for a "nigger", he calls her a "cracker bitch" and goes, saying he felt better having "cursed somebody out". Later that morning, however, the white boss, MacDougal, calls him to the main office, saying he MacDougal is disappointed in Jones's behavior, adding that Jones, had

been promoted to leaderman because he MacDougal had thought Jones could be trusted to not aggravate the black/white tensions on the site. He tells Jones that come the beginning of the following week he is to be demoted to mechanic, and for the rest of the week he is to train his replacement. After leaving MacDougal's office, Jones feels surging rage and a return of the fearful anxiety he felt upon waking that morning. He seeks out a dice game to relieve some of his tension, and for a while he does well. Late in the game, however, a confrontation with a young blond white boy leaves him unconscious and, when he wakes, murderously furious. He is given a weapon by a fellow black worker and goes searching for the white boy but realizes that killing him at the job site is not how he wants the boy to die, and so walks away.

Chapters 1, 2, 3 and 4 Analysis

There are several noteworthy points in this section. First is the book's opening consideration of Robert's dreams, which foreshadows the several other occasions throughout the book in which his dreams also figure. On a metaphorical level, the dreams foreshadow Robert's negative encounters with both whites and himself. Other foreshadowings include his experiences of fear, which again foreshadow the troubles he is about to encounter, his drive to work, which foreshadows a second drive to work in which the racism-defined hate is all from Robert's side, and the reference to his reconsideration of how to kill the white boy. This last foreshadows further revisions of his plans in chapters five and twenty-one.

A second noteworthy point is the reference to the various shades of darkness in the skin tone of the black characters, also specifically noted on several occasions and in relation to several characters in the rest of the book. In the narrative, as in reality, the lighter a black person's skin, the closer to white, the more "value" he or she is perceived to have by both whites and blacks. Thus Jones's reference to the darkness of his skin is an important component of his self image, and more specifically of his self-identifying as a victim. The irony of this distinction is that almost without exception, the truly white characters in the book are portrayed as being corrupt, animalistic, and at times downright evil; in other words, the perceived and practiced value of whiteness is undercut by the way white people, in the book, actually behave. This sense of corrupt "whiteness", also holds true of the characters Jones portrays (particularly Alice and her parents) as wanting to be white: they have the surface ambition to be perceived as admirable and valuable, but underneath that surface they are ultimately, at least in Jones's mind, immoral.

Other ironies present in this section include Robert's comment about how powerful he feels in his uniform, which is ironic because, as the narration eventually reveals, he really has no power at all, the "fear" in Madge's eyes when she first encounters him, which barely conceals the lust she actually feels for him, and the fact that Robert is demoted. The irony there is that his losing his temper with the "cracker" Madge seems to be the only time in which he doesn't do exactly as MacDougal evidently wanted him to, which is to strive to defuse racial tension on the job. In the context of black/white

racial conflict, "cracker" is a derogatory term for "poor white", similar in connotation to the term "white trash".

Finally, there is the character of Don who, in spite of his lingering discomfort with Jones, is nevertheless supportive enough and sympathetic enough or perhaps voyeuristic enough to reveal where Madge lives. He is, in many ways, the only white character in the book portrayed as having any genuine, respectful feelings towards Jones and his situation.

Chapters 5, 6, 7 and 8

Chapters 5, 6, 7 and 8 Summary

In chapter five, as Jones gets a sick pass and walks away from the plant, he feels free and happy, knowing that he is going to kill the white boy. He heads for home, picking up a couple of young white hitchhikers along the way and dropping them off at a movie theater. At home, he has a shower, gets dressed, and pulls out his gun. After putting the gun in the glove compartment of his car and after killing time in "a slick, niggerish" part of town, he heads for the worksite, where he waits for the white boy to finish his shift and then follows him home. As he is dropped off at his front door, the boy looks around, sees Jones, and reacts in fear. Jones gets out of the car, taking the gun with him. The boy runs to his front door, where he is met by a woman and two children. Jones puts his gun away, realizes he doesn't have to act on his murderous intentions right away, and comments that he can even go back to work at his demoted job, knowing he has the white boy's life "in the palm of [his]hand".

In chapter six, back at home, Jones makes reservations for a fancy dinner. He then has another shower and dresses in his finest clothes. As he's leaving, Edda Mae kisses him invitingly, reacting angrily when he pushes her away. He then drives to a well-kept suburb where Alice lives with her parents, Dr. Harrison and his wife. He greets Mrs. Harrison politely and listens to her chatter about how important it is to keep the integration with whites moving forward, keeping his real opinions of her to himself. A beautifully dressed Alice arrives and engages in brief conversation about a spendthrift friend, which leads into a frightened discussion of whether Jones is going to be drafted. After Mrs. Harrison urges them both to think about having more social dealings with white people, Alice and Jones leave. Alice gives Jones a kiss, touching his lips "lightly with hers so as not to muss her make-up".

In chapter seven, as they arrive at the upscale restaurant for which Jones made reservations, Alice tells him she doesn't feel like being refused. Jones says she won't be, he made a reservation. When they get inside, Jones notes that they are the only black couple in the place, that several white patrons get seated before they do, and when they finally do get a table, it's right by the kitchen. As they go through drinks and dinner, Alice goes back and forth between being tense and relaxed, while Jones stays comfortable the whole time. He has his idea of killing the white boy to keep him happy. When the time comes to pay the bill, Jones discovers that a note has been left on it that tells him he will not be welcome in the future. Outside, Alice gets behind the wheel of the car, commenting on how good the food was and on how badly he behaved and saying she's not going to see him again. She then drives rapidly and recklessly through Los Angeles, "as if something was after her".

In chapter eight, Alice continues to drive recklessly, and she and Jones are pulled over by a pair of white patrol officers who call them "coons". Alice explains who she is and demands more respect from them, but she and Jones are nevertheless arrested and

taken to the police station, where Jones posts bail. Back in the car, Alice cries heavily, but soon repairs her makeup and says that instead of going home, she wants to go have some fun. She directs Jones to a house that, he says, looks like it would be more of a home to his friends than to hers. Inside, Jones quickly gets drunk, gets into an argument with Alice when he sees her get what he thinks is too close to her friend Stella, and slaps her. He attempts to apologize, but Alice is having none of it. He takes out his frustrations by hitting another of the guests, and then is asked to leave.

Chapters 5, 6, 7 and 8 Analysis

The most important element of this section of the book is the introduction of Alice who is, on just about every level, a very telling contrast to Jones. Upper middle class where he is blue collar, pale where he is dark, sophisticated where he is crude, Alice is simultaneously everything Jones wants and everything he resents, particularly since he sees her and her family as having sold out their true identities in the name of ingratiating themselves with white people. Alice argues later in the book that living on her terms, and by extension those lived by her parents, is the only way to gain the success Jones wants. It is a mark of his self-perceived integrity that he, in spite of his physical and emotional attraction to her, refuses to accept her argument.

There are repeated references in this section to Alice's care of her makeup. It's possible to see, in these references, the metaphoric suggestion of a mask - specifically, the racial mask that enables her to pass for white, her mask of will and ambition. By contrast, there is the surprising turn of events taken by the narrative in chapter eight, in which Alice takes Jones to visit a house in a part of town that, for both Jones and the reader, seems significantly out of character for her to be aware of, let alone comfortable in. When juxtaposed with the idea of makeup as mask, or of racial identity as mask, there is the sense about this visit that for Alice, on some level , the mask represents the black part of herself that she wants to keep quiet and/or secret. Later in the novel, in fact, Jones recalls Alice's closeness to Stella in this chapter and suggests that she is a lesbian. Alice's fury at the suggestion makes him immediately recant, but whether she is or isn't the implication of this chapter is clear. Alice, on many levels and for many reasons, is not all she pretends to be.

It's important to note, meanwhile, the contrast between both the mood and the intent of chapter five as opposed to chapters six, seven and eight. In the former, Jones' mood and attitude are violent and confrontational, while in the latter he is conciliatory and malleable, at least to a point. The sense here is that the feelings portrayed in chapter five are barely restrained beneath the veneer of relative ease Jones presents to Alice, a sense reinforced by events later in the narrative in which those feelings continue to surge to the forefront and are repeatedly fought down. This, it should be noted, is the essential struggle experienced by Jones and, the novel seems to imply, by black people in general at the time - waves of rage and frustration and fear that he/they must subdue in order to not only advance, but also simply to survive.

Chapters 9, 10 and 11

Chapters 9, 10 and 11 Summary

In chapter nine, the morning after the evening with Alice, Jones wakes up after a bad dream in which he was beaten in the course of being arrested. His slowly emerging recollections of the night and the day before are interrupted by Alice, calling to make amends. When his anger again threatens to surge she hangs up, leaving him at loose ends. He finds his car and drives through town, eventually ending up at a restaurant called the Rest Room. There he encounters a white girl, in the company of two white sailors, who seems to be attracted to a pair of black boys at the back of the bar. After the girl has a few drinks and refuses to leave, tension begins to mount, defused by the bartender convincing the girl to leave with the sailors. Confused and frustrated, feeling lonely without his friends, who are all in the Army, Jones realizes he needs help to put his situation and his life back into perspective. He drives out to see Alice, to ask for help and for her forgiveness.

In chapter ten, when Jones arrives at Alice's, he is met by her father, Dr. Harrison, who offers him a drink and speaks proudly of how intimidated Nazi pilots are by Negro air fighters. Jones, who reveals in narration that he finds the doctor pretentious and creepy, asks if Alice is home, and is shown into her sitting room. There, he finds Alice engaged in conversation with three friends, light-skinned Polly, dark-skinned Cleo, and brown skinned Arline, about racial ghettos and about white women who marry black men, who are blanketly described as "sluts". The conversation is interrupted by the arrival of Leighton, a white man whom Alice introduces as a co-worker. As conversation continues, Jones reveals his intuition or fear that Alice and Leighton are having an affair. Leighton and the women turn their attention to "Native Son", a violent book about the so-called "Negro Problem" by Richard Wright, of which they speak negatively. Their comments, in turn, lead Leighton into a patronizing commentary on how the "Negro Problem" can be solved by extensive social revolution. This, in turn, makes Jones angry, and he jumps to his feet "with a sudden violent gesture". At that point, the gathering breaks up.

In chapter eleven, after Leighton and the three women leave, Jones and Alice have a lengthy, volatile conversation about what happened the night of the dinner, what's happening between the two of them, and how they feel they can move forward. Alice is by turn sensual, loving, and what Jones describes as her "social worker" self, analytical and preachy. For Jones's part, he moves back between anger, frustration, despair and longing, telling Alice that he is desperate for her to understand his fear, his frustration, and his anger, eventually telling her what happened with Madge and with his job. Shocked, she tells him that if he wants to be with her, he has to think about how his actions can and will affect her. After telling him to apologize and plead for his job, she refuses to listen as he explains what will happen if he does so. Jones leaves, feeling "crushed inside, as if a car had run over [him] and left [him] lying there".

Chapters 9, 10 and 11 Analysis

While chapter nine takes place in a very different location from chapters ten and eleven, there is nevertheless the sense that the same issues play out in both locations - ongoing tensions between blacks, whites, and people of one race who seem to be attracted to the other. In chapter ten, there's the white girl who seems to want to be with the black boys. The reader may query if it is a coincidence that Jones describes the girl as resembling Madge. In chapters eleven and twelve, however, there is Dr. Harrison who, while expressing pride in his fellow blacks, seems to himself want to be white, and Leighton who, while not exactly wanting to be black seems, albeit patronizingly, to want to be considered as aware of black suffering as the blacks. Jones, meanwhile, reacts negatively to both, a situation suggesting that for him, the core issue is really one of integrity - of people simply being, and of being allowed to be, who they are.

Meanwhile, the so-called "real world" intersects with this fictional world with the characters' commentary on "Native Son", a seminal work of black fiction written by Richard Wright, one of the two authors noted in the Introduction as being connected, socially and politically and artistically, to the author of If He Hollers, Let Him Go. In the context of the introduction, it's difficult to not see the black-held negative opinions of the book as being, at least on some level, an echo of the actual opinions of the author of this novel. In other words, it feels here as though he is speaking through his characters.

Finally, the confrontation between Jones and Alice in chapter eleven is, in many ways, one of the most intriguing sections of the book. Both characters go through a range of emotions and actions, coming across as simultaneously unlikely (the scene's sexual, sensual content, Alice's obstinate inability to see Jones's side), searingly heartfelt (Jones's frustration at getting Alice to understand his situation), and ultimately all too human (Alice's self-absorption). It is, in other words, an uneasy mix of the idealized and the all-too-true, a sensibility that could reasonably be used to describe that of the entire book.

Chapters 12, 13 and 14

Chapters 12, 13 and 14 Summary

Chapter twelve begins with Jones's narration of another bad dream. In this one, he and Alice are shopping at a drugstore. When they leave, Jones discovers that one of his purchases has turned into a gun. Meanwhile, Alice runs away. As Jones chases her, she is caught by a pack of animals and killed. As he discovers her body, Jones realizes he's being watched by "millions of white women ... giving [him] the most sympathetic smiles [he] ever saw". As he recovers from the dream, he prepares to go to work. He picks up his co-workers as usual, and as usual, they banter and bicker amongst themselves, with only a few of them aware that something is wrong with Jones. At work, Jones's gang kills an hour of work time by first debating how they're going to defend him and then telling dirty jokes. Jones listens the whole time, aware that both he and they are blowing off steam so they can function for the rest of the day. As the gang gets down to work, Jones prepares to go up to talk to the union steward.

In chapter thirteen, Jones tracks down white union boss Herbie, who tries to tell him the union supports him and how to go about making a complaint through the proper channels. The two men argue over whether the union has actually ever supported its black workers and whether the whites in the union have the responsibility to make the same kind of accommodations for the blacks that the blacks have for the whites. Jones then goes off by himself, remembers Alice's urgings that he has to think about both of them now, realizes he's still angry with Madge, and goes down to confront her. When he finds her, she goes into what Jones calls her "act", but this time her white supervisor Don sees her, realizes the game she's playing and, as he gives Jones Madge's address, hints that Jones should "cure her". Jones isn't quite sure what he means, but suspects that Don is telling him that Madge wants to have sex with him and that Jones should do it to keep her quiet. When he rejoins his gang, Jones joins in a conversation about whether black people should fight in the army and if there's any fight the black man should fight, it's with the white man.

In chapter fourteen, after being put in the uncomfortable position of overhearing Kelly tell a racist dirty joke, Jones realizes that the only way he can calm himself is to confront Madge. But when he finds her, and even though he can tell she wants him, a white co-worker stands up with her, and Jones loses his nerve. After reminiscing about some of the white girls he has gone out with, and realizing that what he "ought to do is rape her", Jones grabs a piece of pipe to use as a weapon and goes in search of the white boy, whose name he discovers is Johnny Stoddart. When the two encounter each other, Jones sees the total fear in Stoddart's eyes and starts laughing. Stoddart's fear becomes anger, and he threatens to shoot Jones if Jones ever comes around Stoddart's home again. After he goes, Jones feels better and goes onto his lunch break feeling more confident, knowing that he is, on some level, in control of the relationship with Stoddart.

Chapters 12, 13 and 14 Analysis

Jones's anger surges even more closely to the surface in this section, as his frustrations and resentments bring him closer to the brink of violence. It's interesting to note, though, that the influence of others is what both triggers him to act and keeps him from following through on those triggers. In the case of the former it's the urgings of the white supervisor and the commentary of the other black members of the work gang, and in the case of the latter it's Alice's admonitions to think of her. In other words, for a character who seems to have such a strong desire to live an independent, autonomous life, Jones seems, in this chapter at least, to be more reactive to the will of others than to his own.

This is possibly also true in the circumstances of chapter fourteen, when the confrontation with Stoddart comes to nothing after he tells Jones to leave him alone. The question is this - when Jones doesn't kill Stoddart, is it truly because Jones wants to kill him in his own way, or because on some sub-conscious level Jones is obeying the white-dominated status quo? In considering this question, it might be useful to keep in mind the fact that Jones never actually kills Stoddart, and that in fact, Jones never actually does anything he says he's going to in terms of taking revenge on the whites who have tortured him, and/or on whites in general. Right until the very end of the book, he is victimized and, it could be argued, emasculated. He doesn't win. He never wins. Is this, then, an important component of the author's racial perspective and/or his reasons for writing the book, the sense that black people can never win?

Chapters 15, 16 and 17

Chapters 15, 16 and 17 Summary

In chapter fifteen, at the canteen, Jones encounters Madge who, to his surprise, is friendly with him. In spite of realizing that in this situation she has the power, Jones sits down and talks with her, turning the situation to his advantage and taking his own power by flirting with her. He's just about to push the point when they're interrupted by Madge's chatty sister-in-law Elsie, a Texan, who gabs about how "coloured" people and white people back home all get along, how "coloured" people prefer their own company, and how God made "coloured" people different from white people so that the "coloureds" could serve the whites. Further conversation is stopped by the ringing of the bell signaling the end of the lunch break. As Jones prepares to go back to work, he tells Madge he will come by and see her about eight. Back at work, Jones listens to some of his black co-workers joke about wanting white women, and then encounters Madge again, who goes into her fear act.

In chapter sixteen, as he's carefully choosing his clothes for his encounter with Madge (accompanied by the taunts of Ella Mae), Jones is interrupted by a call from Alice, who first asks whether he can go to a lecture with her. When he says he's got plans, she then asks whether he's done what she asked him to do, which is to apologize to Madge. When he tells her he hasn't, she asks whether he loves her and whether it's the end of their relationship, hanging up when he says he's not in the mood to talk with her. On his way to meet Madge, Jones picks up a bottle of brandy and drinks it in the car. As he's waiting for her to come back to her hotel, he realizes he as a black man is suspicious if he stays in one place too long, and also realizes that his idea of using Madge to get even with all the white people who are against him is foolish. He then goes to meet Alice, and is surprised and resentful to discover that she, who seems to have powdered her face an even lighter color than she already is, is going to the lecture with the white Leighton. After exchanging small talk, Leighton and Alice leave, and Jones angrily goes out to get some food, realizing as he eats that he's again preparing to go and meet Madge.

In chapter seventeen, Jones arrives at Madge's hotel room and realizes it's after eleven. Drunk on rage and brandy, he bullies his way in, wrestles the half-furious, half-turned on Madge to the ground, sees her fleshy nudity, and realizes that he still wants her. But then, when she says "rape me then, nigger", in an "excited, thick" voice, Jones backs off, runs outside, and gets in his car. She runs after him, asking to go with him. He tells her she looks like "mud" to him, "like so much dirt", and takes off. She threatens to call a policeman, but Jones is gone.

Chapters 15, 16 and 17 Analysis

The major noteworthy point about this section is how Jones finally takes action based on his own feelings and instincts rather than on the "orders" of others. Although he tracks Madge down on Don's suggestion, he realizes both the danger of his waiting and his raping her on his own, and backs out of the situations at hand. The question, of course, is why: is he emotionally and/or physically weak or is he morally strong? He and Alice would probably say the latter, his black and probably some of his white co-workers would probably say the former. The author appears ambivalent on the subject. The question is what the reader thinks, and there is the sense that by this point in the narrative, the reader, being either black or white, would be more than a little impatient for Jones to do something to stand up for himself. Up to now, it's been start to stand up, start to confront, and then withdraw, over and over again. It may be that this is part of the author's intent, to suggest that black people in general, and Jones in particular, are so oppressed by the racism within which he functions and that he has absorbed that he is in fact no longer able to function as a human being. This perspective develops further in the novel's final sections, in which Jones seems caught in an ever-constricting net of racism, hapless fear, and cruel manipulation.

Chapters 18, 19 and 20

Chapters 18, 19 and 20 Summary

In chapter eighteen, the next morning, Jones has another bad dream, this one of a white boy and a black boy taking knives to each other and the white boy slowly, jab by jab, killing the black boy. As he wakes, struggling with a hangover, Jones muses on his place in America, on his being black, and on what he believes to be his simple, universal desire to just be a man. When he arrives at the office, he prepares to quit, only to find that the manager is talking to every white boy that comes in, rather than to him. On a break, he tries to get hold of Alice and is told she is out, and then goes in search of Madge. He finds her with Don, to whom she is complaining about being given bad gear by a "nigger" in the tool crib, but when Don (who, it must be remembered, told Jones the day before where to find her) needles her about her date with a new boyfriend. After she storms off, Jones again tries Alice, this time reaching her but arguing about whether they have anything to say to each other. After musing on how much he enjoys his job, he again goes looking for Madge, desperate "to bring her down, to hurt her in some kind of way, humiliate her" but can't find her. He accidentally bumps into union boss Herbie, who has come looking for the grievance Jones said he was planning to file. Jones tells him there will be no grievance, that all he wants is peace.

In chapter nineteen, Jones eventually connects with Alice, who says she wants to meet him. He takes a two-hour sick pass from work and joins her at a drive-in restaurant, where Jones explains his fear and frustration, his feeling that no matter what he does or says he's always going to be controlled by white people. Alice explains that within the current system of segregation, as long as black people accept it, there's room for all kinds of happiness - home, family, love, peace. He tells her he's never thought of it that way, and asks her to marry him. She says yes, and they make plans for their future, including a July wedding, Jones going back to school to earn a degree, children. As they part, Jones realizes that life with Alice is all he wanted, and exults in his feeling that he can now handle whatever the world throws at him.

In chapter twenty, back at work, Jones goes to MacDougal to ask to keep his job, explaining that he wants to get married. MacDougal tells him to prove that he can behave himself, then apply to be reinstated. Jones realizes he has no choice and rejoins his gang, where he is surprised to learn that since being given a white leaderman, the gang has also been given a better, open-air job. Swallowing his resentment, he goes to check out the companionway where the gang is to work next, and discovers a closed room that should be open. When he goes in, he discovers Madge, taking a nap. Torn between taking advantage of her and getting out of there, Jones is unable to make up his mind. For her part, Madge approaches him sexually. They are interrupted by a tour of inspection led by someone Jones knows is white. Fearful of being caught with Madge, he tries to get out, but Madge attacks him, shouting that she's being raped. As they struggle, the door is opened and Jones makes a desperate attempt to escape, but is knocked into unconsciousness.

Chapters 18, 19 and 20 Analysis

In all three of these chapters, there is a sense that Jones is on the edge, that his volatile emotional state and his physical restlessness are both manifestations of a feeling of building pressure about to explode. It might not be going too far to suggest that he gives the impression of an animal in a cage, pacing round and round, frustrated and trapped, looking for a way out in places he has already looked and again being frustrated because there is no opening there. In other words, the tension that has been building throughout the novel, advancing and retreating, seems to be reaching a point of no return. On one level, this state of his being is most apparent in chapters eighteen and twenty, but is no less present in chapter nineteen, where the circling and pacing are more moral and/or verbal than physical, but the sense of being trapped is perhaps even more intense. This is the result of Alice's rationalization, or perhaps delusion that living life on white terms is a life worth living.

The sense of being trapped morally, physically and spiritually comes to a head in the final moments of chapter twenty, in which both of Jones's alternatives, taking his revenge on Madge sexually and refusing her advances, seems to have the prospect of ending in his destruction. This is the novel's narrative and thematic and metaphorical climax, the point at which action, intention (to portray the bleakness of a racism-defined life) and imagery (Jones being literally trapped with the embodiment of white hate and fear) all come together to create and/or define the situation of black people in general and Jones in particular. There is literally no way out for him; he is, to utilize and/or paraphrase the image implied by the book's title hollering, but no one is letting him go.

Chapters 21 and 22

Chapters 21 and 22 Summary

In chapter twenty-one, Jones wakes up, beaten and bruised, in the shipyard infirmary. As he gets dressed, the details of what happened come back to him, and he tells himself he's going to explain what happened and have Madge fired. When he's taken to the yard's security office, however, he is shocked to learn that there is a warrant out for his arrest on a charge of rape. After being taunted by a pair of southern white security guards about how much time in jail he'll be getting, Jones fights his way out and races for his car, suddenly convinced there is no way he'll receive justice. He manages to get away, planning to get out of California and head for Las Vegas until he realizes his wallet has been stolen. He calls home, only to be warned by Edda Mae that the police are already there. He then heads for the home of a friendly woman named Hazel, who lets him use her phone to call Alice. He tries to convince her to help him flee, she tries to convince him to stay and face what she believes to be inevitable justice when the truth comes out. Their conversation ends in a stalemate, and he hangs up on her. Running back out to his car, Jones remembers both the gun in the glove compartment and his intention to kill Stoddart, leading him to think to himself that if he's going to go to jail, he might as well be guilty of something. As he's driving to Stoddart's, however, he's pulled over by a pair of white police officers who discover the gun and take him into the precinct office. There, the duty officers discover he is the black man with the rape warrant out on him, and send him to the San Pedro precinct where the rape charge has been sworn out.

In chapter twenty-two, Jones dreams of killing Stoddart, of being captured by a drunken white Marine who brags about the number of people he's killed and the women he's raped and prepares to kill him, but then Jones wakes up on the floor and is hauled to his feet by a guard who takes him to see a judge. When the judge arrives, he is accompanied by a man introduced as Mr. Houghton, the head of Atlas Shipbuilding. Houghton tells Jones that Madge has dropped all charges, saying that she realized to press the charges might damage the well-being of the company and, by extension, the country. In narration, Jones indicates his belief that Madge confessed the truth, but that Houghton is probably dressing it up to still blame Jones and his race. Houghton talks about how he and the managers at Atlas had hoped that Jones would be a good example to his fellow blacks, and how disappointed he is. After Houghton goes, the judge suggests that in order to avoid the gun possession charge, Jones must agree to join the army. "I wanted," Jones says, to "laugh and keep on laughing. 'Cause all I ever wanted was just a little thing - just to be a man". In the end, though, he agrees. On his way to the recruiting office, a pair of Mexicans with whom he's riding joke that he looks as though he's already been in a war. In two hours, Jones has been recruited into the army.

Chapters 21 and 22 Analysis

The literal and metaphorical net of racism closes around Jones in these final two chapters, as he discovers there is no way to escape the forces opposing his struggle for personal and racial integrity. There is no way out, either physically by running away or morally by acting on what he knows is the truth about what happened, embracing Alice's idealistic, naïve ideas about justice. His fear of being forced into the army, which for him is both a metaphorical and a very real surrender to the destructive will of the white man, also closes in around him, trapping him in what he clearly believes is now going to be a short life ended violently. His reality has turned out to be something entirely different to his dreams, to what he seems once to have believed was his American-born right.

In this context, it's interesting to note the metaphoric value of Jones's gun. His possession of it and his intentions to use it have all indicated at least the desire to respond to violence with violence. His repeated inability to use it, however, suggests several things. On a personal level, the implication is of cowardice and/or spiritual impotence, while on a deeper level the implication is of hopelessness and futility. Physical violence, no matter how morally just, is also of no use against the apparent social, political, moral and legal authority of authority of the white race.

And thus, with Jones's forced induction into the army, the novel concludes with the implication that while black people live within an illusion of freedom, albeit with limits, they are in fact still subject to the principles and practices of the life and system they so desperately wish to believe they left behind: slavery.

Characters

Robert Jones

Jones is the book's central character, a dark-skinned black man living in Los Angeles, California during World War II. His age is never specifically defined, but based on his descriptions of himself, his behavior (particularly his sexuality), his position at his job, and the fact that he isn't yet married, it would be reasonable to conclude that he is somewhere in his early to mid thirties. He is ambitious, proud of his recent appointment to the position of leaderman (supervisor) on his work crew. He is sexual and sensual, and emotionally volatile, with his moment-by-moment reactions to the situations in which he finds himself shifting rapidly from, for example, anger to frustration to fear to resignation to flirtatiousness.

The central point to note about Jones's character is that he feels trapped - by his feelings and desires for Alice and the life she represents, by the racist influences both in his immediate circle and in society at large, and perhaps most importantly, by the fear associated with both. In other words, he's afraid of the racism-defined life he sees Alice living and wants him to also live, while at the same time afraid of trying to live the racially freer, self-empowered life he dreams of. This is because while he sees himself as living within the context of an idealized free and equal America, having the potential for greatness, or living in at least a degree of peace, at his core he sees himself as a victim. He believes that no matter what action he takes to realize his potential, he is going to be kept down by the pervasively racist American system. The question, of course, is whether in the America of the time, this view is cynical or realistic.

Alice

Alice is Jones's girlfriend, a highly educated social worker who has more financial and social advantages than he does. She believes, and urges Jones to believe as well, in the potential for success working within the existing social-political system of segregation, proving to whites that blacks can be successful by doing so on white terms. A key point to note about Alice is that her skin is much paler than Robert's and her features much more Caucasian, so that she can sometimes pass for white. In the socio-racial system of the time, this was considered a great advantage for blacks, in that there was potential for them to avoid the systemic racism that repressed the lives and careers of so many black people.

Dr. and Mrs. Harrison

These characters are Alice's parents, well-off, socially prominent, integrated (at least to some degree) in white society. As seen through the eyes and perceptions of narrator Jones, Alice's mother is highly image conscious, while her father is a pretentious exploiter and manipulator. But while he occasionally responds with barely veiled

sarcasm to what he believes to be their true natures, because he loves and wants Alice so much, he goes along with their pretensions.

Ella Mae

Ella Mae is the lighter-skinned black woman with whom Jones boards. Married to Henry and mother of an unnamed baby, Ella Mae has in the past let Jones have sex with her a couple of times, but stopped after he angrily found out she was only doing it because she felt sorry for him. Uneducated but wise, she is a voice of honest appraisal in Jones's life.

Kelly, MacDougal, Herbie

At Jones's job at Atlas Shipyards, Kelly is Jones's Irish superintendent while MacDougal is the manager of the site. Both are racist, both reluctantly tolerate Jones as the first black leaderman on the site, and both take every opportunity they can to take him down. Herbie is the union steward on the job site, and while on one level expressing support for Jones and his situation, nevertheless refuses to take actual action. He is, in short, yet another manifestation of white reluctance/resistance to ease black suffering and/or discomfort.

Madge

Madge is a lower class white woman who works at the shipyards. In the 1940s, because so many of the men had been drafted into the war, women were drafted into the jobs men had left behind. Madge, portrayed from Jones's point of view, is a manipulative liar, putting on an act of almost terrified fear whenever she sees him but in fact wanting him sexually. She has a couple of opportunities to have him, opportunities he almost takes, but refuses. Frustrated and angry, when an opportunity to take revenge for what she sees as his humiliation of her presents itself, Madge accuses him of rape, knowing that he has little or no hope of defending himself because he is black.

Don

Don is Madge's white supervisor and, while not entirely comfortable with Jones, is nonetheless sympathetic enough to him, or perhaps resentful enough of Madge, to give Jones information about where to find Madge. Don seems on some level to be aware of what Madge and her reactions to Jones are all about. He is one of the few if not the only white character who behaves in any way genuinely and supportive towards Jones.

The White Boy

During a dice game that Jones seems to be winning, he is confronted by an angry young white boy, who at first has no name, but is later identified as Johnny Stoddart). The boy takes the racist lead in beating Jones up and teaching him a lesson. After the fight, Jones resolves to track the boy down and kill him, but while never actually doing so, he does instill fear into the boy, whose racism becomes even more intense and is even further intensified with fury and frustration.

Homer, Conway, Smitty, Johnson, Pigmeat, Ben

These characters are Jones's co-workers at the shipyard, all black and almost all complainers rather than doers. The one exception is Ben, who has more education than the others and who seems to have ambitions towards being an activist. All are sympathetic when Jones is demoted, but only Ben offers perspective on and/or awareness of the social context of his difficulties.

Elsie

Elsie is Madge's sister-in-law, a lower class white woman from Texas who speaks of being friendly to the blacks and sympathetic to their situation while at the same time speaking bluntly as what she sees as their proper place in the whites only scheme of things.

Leighton

Leighton is a white co-worker of Alice's in the Los Angeles department of social work. He is highly educated, determinedly liberal, and patronizing to both Alice and to Jones. His presence in Alice's life is a trigger for Jones's angry frustration and jealousy.

Mr. Houghton

Houghton is the owner of Atlas Shipyards where Jones works. He appears in the novel's final chapter to tell Jones two things: that Madge is not going to follow through with her accusations of rape (in the interest, Houghton says, of preserving the company's movement towards racial integrity); and, that he and the other authorities in the company are deeply and personally disappointed in Jones. They had, Houghton says, placed a lot of trust and confidence in him, and he has betrayed them.

Objects/Places

America

America appears as both a place and a concept throughout the book, with the concept being defined by both what it seems to be intended to be - a land of freedom and equality - and what, in Jones's eyes, it actually is - a land of hypocritical racism. Both place and concept are aspects of what Jones believes is keeping him trapped, preventing him from achieving what he believes he both can, and should have the right to, achieve.

Los Angeles

Los Angeles is the California city where Jones lives and works. The name of the city carries with it the aura and energy of dreams and possibility, but for Jones and, he claims, for most of the other blacks there, it is a place where dreams die and possibility doesn't really exist; at least, not for them.

Ella Mae's House

This small house in what appears to be a slummy part of Los Angeles is where Jones lives. Thin walls and a lack of privacy are among the factors that contribute to Jones's overall sense of being trapped.

The Harrison Home

The home of Alice and her parents, by contrast, is large, and in an upper class part of the city. Another example of the contrast with Ella Mae's house is the fact that Alice has a sitting room, while the people who live in Ella Mae's barely have bedrooms. The house is, for both the Harrisons and for Jones, a symbol of their status and of the success of their evident belief that the way to that success is to accept the racism-defined circumstances of the society in which they live and work within those circumstances.

The Shipyard

This is where Jones works and has most of his encounters with the constrictions and challenges of racism. The shipyard, and the company that runs it, is called Atlas. There is a potential thematic resonance in this name since, according to mythology, Atlas was a god who carried the world on his shoulders. There is the sense throughout the book that Jones is, on some level, carrying "the world" of racist oppression on his own shoulders.

The Rest Room

Jones goes into this bar following his troubling evening with Alice. He intends to treat it as a kind of refuge, but when he witnesses racially and sexually charged encounters just like those he experiences at work, he realizes there's really no place to take refuge from what the world is oppressing him with.

The Hotel Mohave

Madge lives at the Hotel Mohave, the seedy setting for her sex-and-violence charged encounter with Jones that begins with her attempting to seduce him and ends with her almost being raped.

Dreams

Throughout the narrative, Jones describes vivid dreams that, on some level, can be seen as manifesting and/or illuminating various aspects of his existence and/or experience.

Jones's Gun

Throughout the narrative, Jones's gun becomes a symbol of the vengeful violence he dreams of dishing out to the white people who have oppressed him, and perhaps to white people in general. It's significant, however, that his fear always gets the better of him before he actually has a chance to put his dreams into action. In other words, the gun is never actually used but in fact, in the book's final chapters, becomes the catalyst for his imprisonment, both literal (in jail and in the army) and metaphorical (within the racist system).

The Army, World War II

Also throughout the narrative, both the army and the war that army is in the middle of fighting function as external manifestations of the fear eating its way through Jones's psyche and experience. He dreads being drafted, hating the thought of going out and fighting to preserve the social and political integrity of the country that has, in his mind, socially and politically both oppressed and destroyed him.

Themes

Racism

Racism is the novel's central theme, dramatized through the experience of a particular black man living at a particular time in a particular place. Every encounter Jones has, every experience, every thought, every feeling, is underpinned and/or underlined first by his perception of tension that exists between him and whites, and second by pervasive fear, both his of the whites and the whites of him. That said, as Jones narrates his experiences, there is a clear subtext, or implication, that while the specifics may be different, the undercurrents are felt and lived by almost every black person in America in 1942. In other words, the author seems to be suggesting that all black people are victims of the tension and fear on both sides of the "Black Problem", as it is referred to in the book, and are all looked at and/or treated in a similar fashion by whites.

It's important to note, however, the contrast provided by the book's few successful black characters, in particular Alice and her socially and financially successful parents. While they have achieved a degree of integration into white society and make no bones pointing it out, urging Jones to follow their example, they are portrayed as sellouts, traitors to the true experience of being black in America, succeeding on white rather than on black terms, alienated from their true selves. They are, in effect, self-racists, having internalized white hatred and fear of blacks to the point where they hate and fear themselves so much that they feel they have to be a white as possible in order to succeed. Alice describes this as a positive, achieving success within the boundaries of segregation. Jones, and by implication the author, sees this as denial of identity and truth which, it could be argued, is a perpetuation of racism's ultimate purpose.

Freedom

While it seems as though there are two different kinds of freedom at work in this narrative, perceived and actual, there is in fact only one. None of the main characters is actually free. All are trapped, in one way or another, by one or another facet of racism as defined above. In other words, the only freedom evident in this book is perceived.

Freedom is Jones's goal, the idealized freedom promised by the concept of "America". In other words, his goal is a perceived freedom, his obstacle the reality of the lack of freedom afforded him by the racist system upon which the country and its society are built. Then there are the members of the Harrison family, Alice and her parents. Having achieved at least some degree of social and financial success, they see themselves as having realized a concurrent degree of freedom from the racism that they patronizingly see as oppressing so many other black people. The author is careful to point out, however, that their freedom exists within the confines of segregation. Alice says it herself when she's trying to convince Jones to move on from his anger and resentment. In other words, Alice and her parents live in an illusory freedom, having convinced

themselves that the racism-defined cage in which they're living isn't a cage at all, but success on their own terms.

Even the white characters, who are all portrayed as actually having both freedom and the power to go along with it, are in fact imprisoned by fear, by anger, and by the desire for power which, it could be argued, is actually just a manifestation of the fear and anger. Madge, the White Boy, Kelly, MacDougal, and Leighton all are imprisoned by their preconceptions and their ignorance. That doesn't mean that actual freedom is entirely absent. It exists for all of the characters, but only, as discussed above in relation to Jones, as a goal or ideal. The novel seems to be suggesting, however, that it is a goal none of them will never realize, because the social-political system in which both blacks and whites are living is too inherently divided, too inherently flawed, to ever be safe enough to allow freedom for any.

Light versus Dark

Over the centuries, the concept of "dark" in Western thought and imagery has for the most part come to represent evil, corruption, decay, mystery, or baseness, while the concept of "light" has come to represent good, integrity, life, truth, and idealism. Throughout the book, these entwined preconceptions manifest thematically and dramatically in several ways. The first is perhaps the most obvious, in the tension between the so-called black ("dark") and white ("light") races. Fear and anger and resentment are all triggered, the narrative suggests, because of the very presence of blackness (in the form of black people) in society.

The second manifestation of the dark/light dichotomy is somewhat less obvious, but no less vividly defined. This is the perception that lighter blackness (that is, paler skin tone in the blacks) is a positive, while darker skin tone is a negative; in other words, the closer to white, the better. Third, there is the blackness of ignorance, unbroken by the light of wisdom and/or insight, that exists in all the characters, black and white alike. Finally, there is implied darkness, the surging, shadowy, subconscious truths at the core of Robert Jones's dreams, which come at night, the time when there is no light.

In short, while other philosophies and perspectives portray and/or understand blackness in spiritually positive terms as, for example, sources of fertility, the novel defines blackness, from the perspective of both blacks and whites, in traditional Western terms as a negative, a source of unsettled distortion of honest human relationships, with both the self and others.

Style

Point of View

The novel is narrated from the first person subjective point of view; that is, from the perspective of its central character, the protagonist, Robert Jones. On a purely technical level, the apparent intention of this point of view is to place the reader firmly within the experience of this particular black man, in his frustrating, pervasive encounters with the racist attitudes and behaviors that he fervently believes define his life both internally and externally.

This, in turn, leads to another level of meaning inherent in this particular point of view. Robert Jones sees himself as a victim, trapped on several levels and in several ways within a system of racism founded on and fueled by hatred and fear. In other words, by using the first person subjective point of view, the author seems to clearly intend that the reader awaken to a sense of identification with that trapped-ness and with that fear, bringing the reader to a deeper awareness of both the individual and societal experiences of systemic racism. This, however, raises the question of just who is the novel's intended audience, blacks or whites, or whether the author did, in fact, make a distinction. Is he writing to shake blacks out of what he clearly sees as their fear and their concurrent willingness to settle, as Alice and her family do, for whatever falsely-grounded acceptance they can get? Is he writing to shake whites out of the racism that he clearly believes oppresses him and his people? Or is he ultimately writing to an audience of both, opening them to the possibility, necessity or value of considering perspectives outside the boundaries of fear?

Setting

There are two key elements to the novel's setting. These are place and time. In terms of the former, the broad strokes setting is America, while the tighter strokes setting is Los Angeles. Over the decades, both have come to function as metaphors as much as geographical locations, with the former serving in general as a metaphor for or an image of freedom and opportunity, while the latter serving as a metaphor for or an image of success and the possibility of achieving that success through self-determination, on one's own terms. Events of the novel, however, and the reactions of the characters to those events, establish the metaphorical meanings of both America and Los Angeles as ironic. In nowhere else but America, the novel seems to suggest, could freedom be simultaneously so close and so entirely unachievable, while only in Los Angeles could success be simultaneously so immediate and so fleeting.

In terms of time, the setting of the novel during the mid-1940s, and specifically within the context of World War II, adds a layer of looming, ever-present foreboding to both the action in general and the experience of the central character in particular. Death, it seems, is all around, the physical death threatened by any war and the associated

spiritual death with which Jones associates his ongoing "war" with the whites in his world. In this context, it's interesting to note that at the end of the novel when Jones has lost the spiritual war, he is sent to fight in the physical war, a moment which communicates the sense that following his spiritual "death", physical "death" is the only option left. Both deaths have, throughout the novel, been the source and/or the trigger for much of Jones's intensely experienced and communicated fear.

Language and Meaning

There are two noteworthy ways in which language is used in the novel. The first is the casual use of the word "nigger" by both white and black characters, indicative of the common use of the term before political correctness and/or sensitivity emerged in the 1960s and '70s. The second is the way in which narration and dialogue, which both ostensibly emerge from the mind and experience of the same character (the semi-educated Robert Jones) differ substantially from one another. Dialogue comes across as having been carefully shaped to reflect the educational and social backgrounds of the characters. The upwardly mobile Harrisons speak very differently (i.e., far more articulately) than do Jones's black co-workers at the shipyard. The dialogue for Jones himself is reflective of the latter, but contrasts quite notably with the way in which he narrates his story.

The character presents himself as having taken only two years of college, but writes with the expansive vocabulary and sophisticated sentence structure of a much more educated individual. This, combined with what often comes across as a self-conscious determination to use clever words (in particular, euphemisms for "said"), evokes the sense of a novelist writing to impress, rather than to simply tell a story. Is it possible, one wonders, that the author, himself a black man, has ironically fallen under the same spell as Alice and her family, the spell of trying to fit in with a group of people from whom one feels alien? In Alice's case, she and her family try to fit with whites by being whites. It may be that in the author's case, he's trying to fit in with other writers by being a "writer".

Structure

The book's structure is essentially linear, moving from event to event, from action to reaction, from cause to effect to cause to effect in a clear progression that takes the narrator on a clearly defined journey of transformation. There are occasionally detours into scenes and/or incidents that seem either underdeveloped or less than fully connected to the main plot (i.e., Alice's visit to her friend Stella in chapter eight). Ultimately, though, the chapter-by-chapter and moment-by-moment structuring of events builds effectively through key turning points and confrontations towards an effective climax and a fitting, although somewhat unhappy, resolution.

It's interesting to note, however, that in the midst of this fairly straightforward narrative movement, there are several chapters which open with descriptions of the central

character's dreams, descriptions that take the reader out of the linear narrative and into the arena of interpretation. In other words, events are occasionally interrupted by metaphoric contemplations of those events. Said contemplations do slow the book's narrative momentum somewhat, but because they are generally written with a heightened, self-contained sense of energy that carries with it its own momentum, their effect on the narrative's overall momentum is illuminating, and in fact both refreshing and intriguing, rather than interrupting. They serve to define the story's structurally sound narrative in more emotional, raw terms.

Quotes

"The archetypal Himes character is still one of the few literary images we have of the distinctly urban black make who has little, if any, relationship to the Deep South and its legacy of violence, injustice, and forced segregation."
Introduction, p. viii

"What defines an 'authentic' black voice? How can one create a literature about blackness without identifying with the underclass? Should one feel compelled to portray an experience that is not one's own? Should the black novelist promulgate a personal or a general politic?"
Ibid, p. x

"In the history of black literature, where motherhood has become as much of a device as blackness itself, this portrait is anarchic to the point of chaos: Himes betrays family secrets in a way that betrays the black world as whole."
Ibid, p. xvi

"I thought if they really wanted to give [the baby] a break they'd cut his throat and bury him in the back yard before he got old enough to know he was a nigger."
p. 4

"We're a wonderful, goddamned race, I thought. Simple-minded, generous, sympathetic sons of bitches. We're sorry for everybody but ourselves; the worse the white folks treat us the more we love 'em."
p. 14

"If I'd been a white boy I might have enjoyed the scramble in the early morning sun, the tight competition for a twenty-foot lead on a thirty-mile highway. But to me it was racial ... all I wanted in the world was to push my Buick Roadmaster over some peckerwood's face."
p. 14

"Lust shook me like an electric shock ... it poured out of my eyes in a sticky rush and spurted over her from head to foot."
p. 19

"I could see the blond boy's bloody body lying half across his machine, blood all over the floor, all over the shapes ... his face all cut to pieces, one eye hanging out and wrinkled like an empty grape skin."
p. 35

"I wanted to kill him so he'd know I was killing him and in such a way that he'd know he didn't have a chance. I wanted him to feel as scared and powerless and unprotected as I felt every goddamned morning I woke up. I wanted him to know how it felt to ... look death in the face and know it was coming and know there wasn't anything he could do

but ... take it like I had to take it ... because nobody was going to help him or stop it or do anything about it at all."
pp. 35-36

"... you could take two white guys from the same place - one would carry his whiteness like a loaded stick, ready to bop everybody else in the head with it; and the other would just simply be white as if he didn't have anything to do with it and let it go at that."
p. 41

"I didn't have to kill him now, I thought. I could kill him any time; I could save him up for killing like the white folks had been saving me up for all these years."
p. 44

"She looked so goddammed smug and complacent, sitting there in her two hundred dollar chair, her feet planted in her three thousand dollar rug, waving two or three thousand dollars' worth of diamonds on her hands, bought with dough her husband had made overcharging poor hard-working coloured people for his incompetent services."
p. 51

"'I always like to go out with you, Bob ... you make me feel like a woman. But this is the first time you've ever made me feel like an exhibit.'"
p. 59

"'You can't make me cry. You never could make me cry. Every time I cry, I cry for many reasons.'"
p. 67

"I couldn't move. I couldn't even stand up any more. I'd forgotten about ... the white boy I was going to kill. It was just Madge and me in an empty world, with Alice pulling at me not quite hard enough to get me out."
p. 71

"Just a simple nigger bastard, that was me. Never would be a hero. Had a thousand chances every day; a thousand coming up tomorrow. If I could just hang on to one and say 'This is it!'"
p. 74

"I had to know that Negroes weren't the lowest people on the face of God's green earth. I had to talk it over with somebody, had to build myself back up. The sons of bitches were grinding me to the nub, to the white meatless bone."
p. 79

"I got a crazy feeling of being penned in by my own emotions; of getting out of my own grasp; of not being able to control my actions any longer. I didn't know whether to be mad, indifferent, or sympathetic; whether to turn and walk out, or sit down beside her and try to work it out."
p. 93

"I gave a long deep sigh ... wondering if it was too much to ask of her to face it for a minute. Maybe she really couldn't, I thought - maybe none of her class could face it. Maybe that was why it was so insane when it broke out - because she had to keep it buried as much as possible ... maybe that was her way of keeping on living."
p. 97

"I started drawing in my emotions, tying them, whittling them off, nailing them down. I was so tight inside, I was like wood ... I had to get ready to die before I could get out of the house."
p. 101

"Whenever I saw some white people crossing the street in front of me I stepped on the gas ... if they jumped they could make it; if they didn't I'd run 'em down. All of 'em jumped. I felt a dead absolute quiet inside; I didn't give a damn whether they jumped or not."
p. 103

"'Ain't no need of none of us running round here fighting these white folks. All you gotta do is get 'em fighting 'mongst themselves. Look what they doing in Europe right this minute, killing each other off like flies."
p. 107

"'You'll never get anything from these goddamn white people unless you fight them. They don't know anything else. Don't listen to anything else. If you don't believe it, take any white man you know ... the only way you'll ever get along with that son of a bitch is to whip his ass.'"
p. 121

"I knew where I was going. I didn't want to go. My body just carried me and my mind just pushed me along. I didn't feel rash nor reckless, nothing like that, I felt low, dispirited, black as I've ever felt. Really a black boy now."
p. 123

"... after all the crazy, wild-eyed, frightened acts she had put on, the white armour plate she'd wrapped herself up in, the insurmountable barriers she'd raised between us, here she was breaking it down, wiping it all out, with a smile; treating me as casually as an old acquaintance."
p. 130

"I wouldn't have minded so much if he had been the sharpest, richest, most important coloured guy in the world' I'd have still felt I could compete. But a white guy had his colour - I couldn't compete with that. It was all up to the chick - if she liked white, I didn't have a chance; if she didn't, I didn't have anything to worry about."
p. 142

"I knew that unless I found my niche and crawled into it, unless I stopped hating white folks and learned to take them as they came, I couldn't live in America, much less

expect to accomplish anything in it."
p. 150

"You simply had to accept being black as a condition over which you had no control, then go on from there."
p. 151

"I'd settle for a leaderman job at Atlas Shipyard - if I could be a man ... that's all I'd ever wanted - just to be accepted as a man - without ambition, without distinction, either of race, creed, or colour; just a simple Joe walking down an American street, going my simple way, without any other identifying characteristics but weight, height, and gender."
p. 153

"'Every person, no matter of what race, creed or colour, is the captain of his soul. This is much more important, really, than being permitted to eat in exclusive restaurants, dwell in exclusive neighborhoods, or even to compete economically with people of other races.'"
p. 169

"But now I was scared in a different way ... of America, of American justice. The jury and the judge. The people themselves. Of the inexorability of one conclusion - that I was guilty. In that one brief flash I could see myself trying to prove my innocence and nobody believing it ... American tradition had convicted me a hundred years before."
p. 187

"I felt pressed, cornered, black, as small and weak and helpless as any Negro share-cropper facing a white mob in Georgia. I felt without soul, without mind, at the very end."
p. 194

"I felt like a different person, I didn't have any fight left, didn't even hate the peckerwoods any more, didn't have anything left in me at all any more. What I hated most about the whole thing was I had to keep on living in the goddamned world."
p. 200

Topics for Discussion

Discuss the questions posed in the quote from p. x of the introductions. Expand your discussions from focus solely on "blackness" to a wider focus on being any sort of so-called "minority" - non-Caucasian, non-Christian, non-heterosexual, non-male.

In your opinion, are Robert Jones's beliefs about the innate and inhibiting racism at the core of American society cynical or realistic? Explain your answer.

Discuss the parallels and differences between the oppression experienced by Robert Jones and other forms of minority oppression (inflicted upon, for example, women, Aboriginals, the poor, homosexuals, etc).

Do you agree with Alice's contention that the way to prosperity is to achieve it within the boundaries of segregation? Do you believe in creating change from within the system rather than from without? Why or why not?

Discuss the metaphorical implications of Alice's continued attention to her makeup. What, for example, is the implication when she kisses Jones lightly so as not to smudge her makeup in chapter six, or her repairing her makeup after crying in chapter eight?

In what ways do the principal white characters in the book, MacDougal, Kelly, Madge, Elsie, Leighton, Houghton, embody and/or personify various aspects of white attitudes towards black people? Why do you think the author included no portrayals of genuinely compassionate, open-minded, respectful white characters?

Consider the dreams described by Jones. In what ways does each dream reflect and/or manifest an aspect of Jones's experience with racism?

America, as both a concept and an actual place, is portrayed as having two equally important sides to its nature - corrupt racism and the potential for boundless freedom. Discuss ways in which the two sided coin of American racial culture and racial culture in general has changed and/or continues today.

In what ways have the racist conditions portrayed in the novel changed? In what ways have they stayed the same?