

# **The Invention of Wings Study Guide**

## **The Invention of Wings by Sue Monk Kidd**

(c)2015 BookRags, Inc. All rights reserved.



# Contents

<a href="#">The Invention of Wings Study Guide.....</a>	<a href="#">1</a>
<a href="#">Contents.....</a>	<a href="#">2</a>
<a href="#">Plot Summary.....</a>	<a href="#">3</a>
<a href="#">Part 1, November 1803 – February 1805.....</a>	<a href="#">4</a>
<a href="#">Part 2, February 1811 – December 1812.....</a>	<a href="#">9</a>
<a href="#">Part 3, October 1818 – November 1820.....</a>	<a href="#">13</a>
<a href="#">Part 4, September 1821 – July 1822.....</a>	<a href="#">17</a>
<a href="#">Part 5, November 1826 – November 1829 - Part 6, July 1835 – June 1838.....</a>	<a href="#">20</a>
<a href="#">Characters.....</a>	<a href="#">25</a>
<a href="#">Symbols and Symbolism.....</a>	<a href="#">28</a>
<a href="#">Settings.....</a>	<a href="#">30</a>
<a href="#">Themes and Motifs.....</a>	<a href="#">32</a>
<a href="#">Styles.....</a>	<a href="#">35</a>
<a href="#">Quotes.....</a>	<a href="#">37</a>



## Plot Summary

The Invention of Wings is a historical novel by Sue Monk Kidd. The story is a fictionalized account of the life of abolitionist Sarah Grimke, her sister Nina, and their family slave named Handful. Sarah lives in Charleston, South Carolina. As a four year-old, she witnesses the brutality of slave punishment. The event scars her emotionally and physically, as she develops a stutter while speaking. At eleven years old, Sarah is given a slave named Handful, who is ten. Sarah doesn't want Handful, but there is nothing she can do. Over time, the two girls bond and share a friendship in secret between them. As Sarah gets older, she becomes more and more outspoken in her opposition to slavery, and Handful seeks ways to either buy her freedom or escape. She becomes part of a planned slave uprising, but some of the slaves tip off the city of Charleston, which crushes the revolt before it even begins. Handful settles back into slavery, looking for her chance for freedom. Sarah and her younger sister Nina become vocal leaders of the abolitionist and women's rights movements, writing pamphlets for both causes. As a result, they are banned from Charleston. Nevertheless, Sarah journeys to Charleston to help Handful and her sister Sky escape to freedom.



# Part 1, November 1803 – February 1805

## Summary

Part 1, November 1803 – February 1805

Hetty Handful Grimke – Ten year-old Hetty “Handful” Grimke, a slave girl, remembers a story that Mauma, her mother, tells her about when black people could fly with magic in Africa. Handful knows this is just a story, especially because they are slaves, but doesn’t realize until later that black people can fly, but without magic. Handful is a slave to the Grimke family of Charleston, South Carolina. The fourteen slaves are given daily Bible lessons from Mrs. Grimke, advising them on obedience. Aunt-Sister, having been with Mrs. Grimke since childhood, is the most senior slave along with Tomke, the butler. Aunt-Sister is the only slave who can speak as an equal to Mrs. Grimke without getting hit. Handful is a handful, and gets hit by Aunt-Sister on a daily basis. Handful gets her name because that is what she looks like when she is a baby, and is a name given to slaves by other slaves. Mauma’s real name is Charlotte. Mauma is a wonderful seamstress, and is making a Watteau gown, for Race Week is coming up, culminating in the St. Cecilia Ball. As slaves, Handful and the others are expected not to be seen or heard, but are always expected to be on call when needed. As the sun goes down, Mrs. Grimke calls for Handful.

Sarah Grimke – Sarah Grimke, daughter of Mrs. Mary Grimke, turns eleven and is allowed to venture out of the nursery. Sarah has nine siblings: John, Thomas, Mary, Frederick, (herself in the middle), and Anna, Eliza, Ben, Henry, and baby Charles. They are tended to in the nursery by Binah, the nursery mauma. Sarah is red-headed, has freckles, is called remarkable by her father, and different by her mother. Everyone says she is father’s favorite. Mary is descended from the original settler, Lords of Charleston. Sarah’s father is a veteran of the American Revolution, a judge on South Carolina’s highest court, as well as a member of the elite planter class. Binah is forever calling her “poor Miss Sarah”. Sarah’s earliest memory is of her mother beating the slave, Rosetta, for not working fast enough. The blood and suffering of Rosetta terrified and shocks Sarah and causes her to develop a stutter while speaking. The stutter will come and go throughout her life, but will be worst in difficult situations and speaking in public.

Handful – Binah, Cindie, and the other slaves are preparing for Sarah’s eleventh birthday party. Handful is put into a purple dress and ribbons, and given to Sarah as a present –as a waiting maid. But Sarah shocks everyone by saying she does not want or need a waiting maid. Handful, who has to go to the bathroom incredibly bad, can no longer hold it, and goes in front of everyone. She is chased out by Aunt-Sister. Handful is given a quilt and will sleep in the hall outside of Sarah’s bedroom, so that anytime Sarah needs her, all she has to do is ring the bell.

Sarah – Sarah begs her mother not to punish Handful. She also wants to give her back, but Sarah’s mother tells her that her guardianship is legal and binding and nothing can



be done about it. Sarah is then instructed to write eighteen letters of apology to the guests at the party. That night, Sarah goes down into the library, find her father's law books, and frees Handful by written declaration. She imagines her father will be proud, Handful and Charlotte will be happy, and her mother will be annoyed. Sarah intends to one day be a jurist. When she wakes up in the morning, her manumission document is torn in two and on the floor.

Handful – Handful's first day as a handmaid goes horribly from the start. She forgets to open the flue while lighting a fire, causing smoke to come pouring into the house. Mrs. Grimke hits Handful on the head with her cane, but then stops before doing it a second time.

Sarah – Sarah is unhappy that she owns a slave, and is unhappy she cannot free her slave. Sarah's mother tells her not to attempt such folly again. Sarah's sister, Mary, asks their mother what she means, but their mother tells her it is nothing to be concerned with.

Handful – Her first week as Sarah's slave, Handful does everything from spilling oil to breaking a vase. Handful gets glimpses of the ocean, and she falls in love with it. She can see all the way out to Sullivan's Island and is thrilled.

Sarah – Slowly, Sarah and Handful get used to one another as companions. When Sarah finds Handful missing one morning, she feels his absence, as well as fear if her mother finds out. Outside, she finds Charlotte tending to a baby barn owl. Sarah apologizes to Charlotte for owning Handful, but Charlotte says it is alright, because she knows Sarah will make up for it. Sarah promises to do so by setting Handful free. Charlotte tells her that Handful will be back, soon. As the month of March passes, Sarah wonders if she'll be able to keep her promise.

Handful – With Mrs. Grimke, Sarah, Mary, and Anna off to a promenade at White Point, Handful tends to chores and steals a spool of scarlet thread from Sarah. Before Easter, a bolt of emerald green silk cloth goes missing. At night, Handful sneaks out once more, against the warnings of Cindie. Mauma comes into the house, but wakes up the Master and Mrs. Grimke. Mrs. Grimke believes Charlotte is the thief. They search her room and find the green cloth with a quilt Mauma is stitching together with red thread. Her punishment will be delayed until after Easter. Mauma tells Handful she is not sorry for stealing the cloth, but just for getting caught.

Sarah – Easter Service for the Grimkes occurs at Saint Philip's Episcopal Church on Meeting Street. Sarah will be giving her first Sunday School lesson to slave children. There are many slaves out, and newspapers call for regulations on their movements on Sundays; but, Mr. Grimke believes that their passes and work badges give the slaves the legitimate right to be out and about and to say hello to friends. Slaves often go to church with their masters, but are required to sit in the balconies. They socialize there, and get in trouble for it. Monitors are appointed to keep them quiet. At Sunday school, Sarah, watched over by her sister, Mary, teaches the slaves the ABC song. Reverend



Hall tells Sarah that it is against the law to teach a slave to read, and singing does not happen in Sunday School.

Handful – Mauma is given an hour of one-legged punishment, where a rope is tied from the ankle to the throat. If the leg is lowered, the slave chokes. Mauma falls over several times, bashes her head open, but is stood back up. Handful prays to God, asking Him not to let her mother fall anymore. Miraculously, she does not. This is a turning point for Mauma.

Sarah – Sarah is forced to write a letter of apology to Reverend Hall. Twice a week, Sarah and the older children read from their father's books, everything from philosophy to history to Latin. Thomas tells Sarah one day that he does not want to be a lawyer. He wants to be a minister, instead. Their father will not allow it. Sarah goes to find Handful, seeking her out in the kitchen house, the sanctum for the slaves. She listens to the slaves talk about Charlotte being strapped up, and angrily confronts her mother. Her mother forbids her from leaving, but Sarah declares she is going to go and see Charlotte, and leaves for the carriage house.

Handful – Mauma tells Handful about her grandmother's mother, the best quilter in all of Africa. Mauma's mother is black, and her father is white. But the gift of quilting passes down through the generations. Handful's father is a field slave named Shanney, who never knew Mauma was pregnant. He dies of a cut on his leg before Handful is a year old. Sarah leaves them a basket of liniment and medicine tea, which Handful thanks Sarah for the next day. They hug each other.

Sarah – Sarah and Handful become nearly inseparable through the summer, doing everything together. Sarah reads aloud to her, while Handful sings for Sarah. But they carry on their friendship in secret, so as to avoid Mrs. Grimke's anger. Sarah decides to teach Handful to read. She also tells Handful she will one day be a lawyer, like her father. Handful confesses to stealing the thread, and apologizes for it. She also tells Sarah to call her "Handful".

Handful – Mauma's eyes are full of anger as the time passes. Mauma is moved into the cellar of the plantation house to do her sleeping and sewing. Because of this, Handful is able to visit more often. Mauma begins to half-repair clothing and to put dirt and spit into the tea for Mrs. Grimke. Handful tells Sarah to stay clear of the tea. A hurricane causes a flood and mud to come into the cellar. Handful writes some words with her toe, but doesn't cover them up well enough.

Sarah – Sarah's father is unhappy that Sarah's slave girl has learned to write and read. He tells her that slaves who can read are a threat. He says it is wrong to deprive them, but there is a greater good to be protected. Sarah disagrees. Her father reveals that he will do what he needs to in order to protect the family and their way of life, even if they disagree with it –including to destroy Sarah's manumission declaration. Sarah's father tells her she has broken the law, and she needs to learn. She is forbidden from entering the library or reading any books other than those assigned by Madame Ruffin for her



studies. When Sarah learns that Handful is to be punished, she races outside to stop Tomfry, but he is ordered by Mrs. Grimke to administer one lash.

Handful – Sarah helps Handful recover from her lash, and Handful learns that it was Lucy who told on her for writing. Handful forgives Lucy. Mauma is working on a new baby dress, for Mrs. Grimke is pregnant again. She also instructs Handful to write out a slave pass for her. Mauma uses it to get to the Russell plantation, where Tom, the blacksmith slave, makes her a counterfeit slave badge for work. Mauma goes around getting work from elderly people. She begins saving up money from her work. But one day, in January, Charlotte is discovered gone. Mauma gives Tomfry a half-dollar to tell Mrs. Grimke she was asleep on the roof. Mrs. Grimke calls Mauma dumb, and tells her that her skills at sewing have gotten worse.

Sarah – Nearly twelve, Sarah begins to think about marriage. She remains in her room except for meals and schooling, and Dr. Geddings, the family physician, announces she is depressed. It is now Christmas. Thomas is preparing to go off to Yale, and converses with Frederick and John, along with their father, about abolition. Sarah tells them she wants to be a jurist, and earns laughter. Their father says that if such a thing were to ever happen, it would not be his daughter. Mrs. Grimke tells Sarah to go to her room. She then goes up to Sarah's room to apologize for the response of her brothers and father, saying that all young girls have ambitions, but they have to be knocked out of them. She tells Sarah to give herself to duty and to fate, but to be happy wherever she can. Sarah decides she wants to be the new baby's godmother, and Mrs. Grimke agrees provided Sarah does her duty well.

Handful – Handful and her mother kneel before a tree, putting their spirits in it so they will be safe and learn how to fly, just like Handful's grandmother did years before. It gives Handful a little comfort because they have no idea what the future will be.

## Analysis

Sue Monk Kidd's historical novel *The Invention of Wings* takes place between 1803 and 1838, decades before the Civil War and abolition. At that time, slavery was a fixture across America, but especially in the South. It is into the elite planter class of Charleston, South Carolina, that Sarah Grimke is born. Sarah, from an early age, is exposed to the evil horror of slavery, as she sees Rosetta, one of her family's slaves, savagely beaten. This terrifies Sarah, sending her into shock and producing in her a stutter that she will have on and off for the rest of her life. It is a fateful encounter that will set Sarah against slavery for her entire life, leading her to become vocally opposed to it, even at the age of eleven, when she refuses to accept Handful as her slave.

Interestingly enough, despite the absolute evil that slavery is, the feelings of slave owners are mixed. Some are fierce proponents of slavery, and utterly hate blacks. Some, like Sarah's father, dislike slavery immensely, and despise being unable to give blacks a better life, but they fall prey to the existing system which they cannot seek to change or reject without risking their own lives and livelihoods, and that of their families.



Others favor gradual emancipation; some favor slaves working to gain their freedom; others favor sending slaves back to Africa, and others favor freeing the slaves and letting them settle in America. The wide range of thoughts and opinions on slavery illustrate the relative discomfort most Americans have with slavery, but also their saddening and disappointing refusal to try to change anything.

Yet, it is Sarah who decides that she will attempt to change something in the system. Her first rebellious act is to attempt to free Handful by declaration. When this fails, she promises Mauma that she will free Handful whenever she is able to do so. Sarah sees Handful not as a slave, but as a friend who happens to be a slave. The two quickly bond and develop a secret friendship, which is not uncommon for the children of slave owners, and slave children. But, time and age will alter things from the glow of childhood.

## **Discussion Question 1**

Why is Sarah, at age eleven, so totally opposed to slavery?

## **Discussion Question 2**

What sorts of conflicting opinions does Sarah's father have about slavery? How does Sarah respond to this?

## **Discussion Question 3**

Like Handful, Sarah is bound to a fate of her own as a woman. What is this fate? How does Sarah handle this idea?

## **Vocabulary**

devised, audacity, incantation, mellifluous, mercurial, paroxysm, pariah, archaic, ostentatious, abysmal, implacable, tintured, literate, sedition, predilections, prodigal





## Part 2, February 1811 – December 1812

### Summary

Part 2, February 1811 – December 1812

Sarah – Handful and Angelina, or “Nina,” Sarah’s six-year old sister and god-daughter, help prepare Sarah for a waltzing party. Since she turned sixteen two years before, Sarah has been thrust into society. Her sole focus is to find a husband, it is explained. Sarah loves Nina like no other, and warns her about the evils of slavery. As time passes, Handful and Sarah grow apart some, but Sarah believes they are still friends. Handful has more chores and duties, while Sarah helps to raise Nina. Nina considers Sarah her mother. Their real mother, now forty-six, appears much older than she is. She warns Sarah about not finding a husband. At Mrs. Alston’s party, Sarah sees a young man named Burke Williams she hasn’t seen in a year. His family is wealthy, and owns a silver shop. He is rich enough to be a member of society, but is not part of the established class. He asks to call on her.

Handful – Now seventeen, Handful feels like Nina is replacing her to some extent in Sarah’s heart. She worries for Sarah, in her struggle to find a husband. She also helps Mauma to make a story quilt. Each square tells a story. Mauma has been seeing a free black, who owns his own house, though he is married. He came into money by buying a lottery ticket from East Bay Street, and winning. Mauma is now legally granted permission by Mrs. Grimke to hire herself out, though Mrs. Grimke gets eighty cents for every dollar Mauma makes. This is following a gift to Mrs. Grimke of a quilt made by Mauma with clothing from each of the children stitched in. Mauma intends to buy freedom for herself and Handful, but she cautions Handful not to get a husband, or he’ll be on his own. She has noticed the new slave, Goodis, watching Handful.

Sarah – Sarah begins keeping a diary to try to control her feelings for Burke Williams, but they only intensify. She is head-over-heels in love with him, though he does not call on her for a month. He finally calls upon her, but is ten minutes late. Mr. and Mrs. Grimke ask Burke about his family’s silver shop. They talk for two hours, and the curfew drums ring out. Burke rises to leave, and Sarah sees him to the door. She agrees to throw down a lock of her hair to him in a handkerchief. As she races upstairs, she hears her father unhappy with the fact that Burke is from a mercantile family, and her mother saying Burke may be Sarah’s only chance for marriage. Sarah has Handful cut off some of her hair, and throws it to Burke in the street. The next day, Mr. Grimke brings his family to their plantation in the upcountry. Sarah knows it is because of Burke. She writes him a hasty letter before they leave for the next seven weeks. There, Sarah begins a slave infirmary. Sarah is allowed to write to Burke only once.

Handful – Mauma look through records while the Girmkes are gone, and discovers she and her daughter are valued at \$450 for Charlotte, and \$500 for Handful. It is a lot of



money, but Mauma believes she can raise it. She also tells a saddened Handful that nobody can write down in a book what she is worth.

Sarah – Burke Williams request Sarah's company on a chaperoned horseback outing at Sullivan's Island. Sarah, excited, bounds upstairs to discover Handful, naked, getting out of Sarah's washing tub. Sarah is partly angry, partly terrified at her mother discovered what Handful has done. They empty out the tub quickly.

Handful- Handful and Mauma are sent to buy cotton for a new dress for Nina. They visit Denmark Vesey, the free black man, who has three wives, not just one. Denmark and Mauma go into his workshop on each visit, while Handful is forced to wait outside. Handful learns that Mr. Robert Smyth, down the road, is a free black man who owns three black slaves. It makes her wonder if Smyth wants to behave like white people, or some people are just vile, period. Denmark dislikes seeing Handful step out of the way on the street for a passing white lady, and he tells her to never do it again.

Sarah – Sarah turns nineteen and is reminded by her mother she is at the prime age for marriage. Burke proposes to Sarah. She accepts, they kiss, and Burke puts his hands all over Sarah, who enjoys it. But politics shift, and Mr. Grimke is seen as too righteous for his work as a judge. He is impeached, and so the trial preoccupies the Grimke family, making Sarah's accepting of the proposal for marriage without permission a non-issue. Mr. Grimke is defended by the brilliant lawyer, Daniel Huger. Now fifty-nine, Mr. Grimke's age begins to show with the stress from the trial. His right hand begins shaking, and he becomes reclusive. Meanwhile, Burke is allowed unchaperoned visits with Sarah, which makes her call herself a Jezebel.

Handful – Mauma has saved up four hundred dollars by then. Handful worries about Sarah. She doesn't like Burke Williams, and wonders if, when the time comes, she will leave Mauma to go live with Sarah. Handful discovers Mauma is pregnant.

Sarah – Thomas asks Sarah when she plans to marry Burke. She explains Burke is waiting to be assigned the family business. Mr. Grimke tells her there is no divorce law in the state. Thomas reveals that he has discovered that Burke Williams has other fiancées. He is the kind of man to lure women into engagements only for sex. Thomas explains he has confronted Burke, who admitted to having two fiancées. The engagement has been broken off on her behalf. She must withdraw from society for three weeks for the talk to die down. Sarah feels humiliated and crushed.

Handful – Handful is beside herself with worry for Sarah, who barely eats or talks. She has saved an old silver button Sarah threw out long before, and returns it to her, brightening Sarah's spirits.

Sarah – Goodis drives Sarah over to pick up her sister from visiting the Smith household after a bad storm. The carriage becomes stuck in the mud. Sarah sees Charlotte and a white woman walking toward each other down the street. Charlotte refuses to move, even when ordered by a City Guard. Charlotte then pushes the white lady over, and is arrested.



Handful – Handful is unhappy about her mother’s disappearance. It is Sarah who explains what happened. When Thomas goes to free Mauma, he is told she escaped from prison. Sarah assures Handful that her mother will come back. Handful is beside herself.

Sarah – An ad is placed in the Charleston Mercury paper for Charlotte, but no response comes. A little heartbroken, but mostly ashamed at everything that has happened, Sarah cries and cries. She receives numerous letters of concern and care from friends and neighbors. After four weeks have passed altogether, Sarah is ordered back by her mother to find a husband. Sarah attends a service at a Presbyterian Church, and she resolves to never marry, and give herself over to God. Sarah then turns twenty, and joins a discussion with her father and brothers about abolition. Sarah tells her family that she agrees with them that freeing the slaves and sending them back to Africa for colonization is a bad idea. She thinks the slaves should be freed and live in America. She assures her father she did not learn this idea from the Presbyterians, but from herself.

Handful – Handful misses her mother terribly. She finds the key to her mother’s trunk and opens it, where her mother has kept the squares for their story quilt. They are all beautiful. She discovers one patch with Denmark and the number 1884. She then commits to sewing the quilt together.

## Analysis

As Sarah and Handful get older, they maintain their friendship as best they can, but time and age changes many things between them. Sarah’s primary goals are to find a suitable husband and to become a member of society. Handful’s duties around the house increase. Handful becomes resentful of the things that Sarah gets to do, while her own freedoms are being curtailed. Nevertheless, Handful cares deeply for Sarah, worrying to no end about how Sarah’s search for a husband and the pressures that entering into proper society are having on Sarah. This is especially true during the Burke Williams engagement. Sarah, accepting to some great extent her proper place and role in society, maintains her opposition to slavery, and is continually frustrated by Handful’s rebelliousness, mainly because it could get Handful into serious trouble.

At the same time, Handful is given a glimpse of freedom through the eyes of Denmark Vesey, a free black man whom Handful’s mother has become lovers with. Denmark instills it in Handful’s mind –and that of her Mauma –that they shouldn’t get out of the way for white people as they walk down the street, not just out of principle, but for reasons of equality. Denmark is a fiery man who plans on violence to achieve his ends, and Handful falls under his sway. This ultimately has tragic consequences for Mauma Charlotte, who pushes over a white woman one day, only to be arrested and to disappear from jail. Handful is lost and desolate without her mother.

Meanwhile, the strangeness of the persistence of slavery is readily apparent among the members of the Grimke family. The older brothers, in addition to their father, discuss



abolition and what may come of the freed slaves. While they laugh at Sarah's ideas for freeing the slaves and letting them settle in America, it should not be lost on the reader that they are discussing abolition at all. Though they are not fierce proponents of slavery, they are not true abolitionists, either. Like most Americans, they are bothered by slavery, but again, unwilling to do anything about it, mainly out of self-preservation.

## **Discussion Question 1**

What influence does Denmark Vesey have on Mauma Charlotte and Handful? What happens as a result?

## **Discussion Question 2**

As Sarah and Handful enter their late teens and early adulthood, what happens to their friendship? In what ways does it improve? In what ways does it deteriorate?

## **Discussion Question 3**

Why does Sarah decide to become a Presbyterian? Does this help to influence her opinions? Why or why not?

## **Vocabulary**

proselytized, contemptuous, berated, adroitness, splendiferous, behemoth, mutinous, dawdling, intermezzo



## Part 3, October 1818 – November 1820

### Summary

Part Three, October 1818 – November 1820

Handful – Mauma has been gone for six years, and Handful is now twenty-five. The other slaves believe Mauma is either dead or a runaway, but Sarah doesn't believe her mother has run off. At the market, Sarah overhears Jesse, a kind slave, talk about an African church. The African Methodist Episcopal Church, convened in a hearse house near slave burial grounds, is packed every night with free men and slaves alike. There, Denmark Vesey preaches about Charleston being Egypt all over again. Mrs. Grimke allows Handful to go, so long as it does not interfere with her work.

Sarah – Sarah and fourteen year-old Nina are called to the meeting room to see their mother and Reverend Gadsden. Nina has publicly refused to be confirmed into St. Philip's. Even the bishop, during the service, cannot get Nina to be confirmed. Their father is slowly dying, and wants her to be confirmed, but Nina refuses still. Gadsden and Mrs. Grimke are shocked. Nina later worries she will be sent off to boarding school or their uncle's North Carolina plantation.

Handful – Handful is thrilled going to church, becoming a regular. She doesn't learn anything about her mother, but she does learn about the Bible and God. Morris Brown, a free black man, serves as the reverend pastor for the church. Vesey declares that only cowards seek the afterlife without wanting to do anything in the present life. Suddenly, the City Guard bursts in and arrests everyone for disorderly conduct. The slaves and freemen who either can't pay fines, or whose masters don't bail them out, are forced into the Work House. But Denmark Vesey refuses to pay the fine, wanting to suffer as the others suffer. He says they have to deliver themselves, and not wait on God.

Sarah – Sarah is horrified to see that Handful has not only been arrested, but her foot has been mangled in the Work House. She will become a cripple. Sarah and only three Grimkes are now left that haven't married or gone to school, including Charles, Henry, and Nina. When they see that Handful is up and about, she is angry and doesn't want to talk much. Meanwhile, Mr. Grimke's condition worsens, and he is told to travel to Philadelphia to see Dr. Philip Physick. Sarah will go with him since she has no family to care for and no occupation to attend to. She will leave in three days.

Handful – Handful now has a limp. Goodis carves her a rabbit-head cane. With the cane, she can get around very easily. Handful grows at once to care for and hate Sarah, for Sarah is part of what takes away her freedom, but also gives her kindness. Sarah agrees to write Handful a pass to get around while she is in Philadelphia. She visits Denmark, who explains the numbers 1, 8, 8, and 4 were his winning lottery number tickets. She reveals to Denmark that her mother was pregnant with their child when she left.



Sarah – The trip up the Atlantic coast and to Philadelphia is harrowing. Mr. Grimke gets worse and worse. They stay at a Quaker boardinghouse near Fourth Street. It is prescribed that Sarah bring her father to Long Branch, New Jersey, for the summer, in order to take in the sea air, which is known to cure patients. It is called “thalassotherapy”. There, at Long Branch, they stay at Fish Tavern. It is now July 17, 1819. From the tavern room window, Sarah watches with delight as girls go swimming in the ocean in bathing dresses. Time passes, but Mr. Grimke does not improve. He says he does not expect to recover, and he does not want to. He tells her he hate slavery, and the subjugation of women, but he had no choice but to go along with custom and law to preserve his family’s welfare. He apologizes for being harsh with her in the past, and that she could not have more out of life. Sarah forgives him, and asks for his forgiveness in turn, but he says she owes him no apologies. He encourages her to go outside and enjoy herself, which she reluctantly does. On August 9, Mr. John Grimke dies.

Handful – Mrs. Grimke is shocked at the loss of her husband, and orders Handful to prepare her a fashionable mourning dress. Handful later learns that Susan, Denmark’s wife, helped her mother to escape. When she goes to ask Denmark about the incident, she overhears him planning with other blacks to go to all the slaves they can find for enlisting. Denmark confesses to Handful that her mother was taken by a slave catcher.

Sarah – Sarah returns to Philadelphia, to Society Hill, where she stays at the Quaker boarding house. Sarah knows she needs to grieve alone. Her mother is furious about this. Sarah attends Quaker meetings, then heads home as November sets in. On board the ship bound for home, she meets a man named Israel Morris, a devout Quaker, who questions her about slavery and associating with those who support it. He says that remaining silent in the face of evil, is evil. Sarah is drawn to him like Burke, but she stops herself because Morris is married. He explains to her that there are male and female Quaker ministers. Morris’s wife Rebecca is on board with their children, and she is happy to meet and talk to Sarah. Morris later gives Sarah a copy of John Woolman’s journal to read, and he asks her to write to him.

Handful – Handful explains that when slaves are to be sold, the first thing they are told to do is to wash their teeth. Mr. Grimke’s last will and testament are read. Five of the remaining eleven slaves are to be sold or dispersed. Sarah is incensed by this. Tomfy will go to serve John’s household. Binah will go to Thomas, and Eli, to Mary. Prince and Mariah will have to be sold. Sabe becomes the new butler; Goodis hands the work yard, stable, and carriage, while Phoebe gets the laundry, and Minta and Handful get cleaning duties. Sarah tells Handful she is now twenty-seven, and her life is what it is.

Sarah – Sarah writes letters to Israel Morris over and over, but can never finish them. Sarah is shocked to learn that most of her father’s library will be packed up and divided between Thomas and John. Nina is angry at Sarah for not writing more often. Mrs. Grimke finds the letters for Israel Morris, and orders them burned, but the letters are saved by Handful. Sarah later learns that Thomas opposes slavery. He has founded an American colonization chapter. Sarah writes to Israel Morris saying doubts she can become a Quaker. Morris writes back that his wife has died of the flu and that he will



guide Sarah to Quakerism if she desires it. Sarah decides she needs to head north, believing God has spoken to her. She also wonders if it isn't also her inner voice telling her to head to freedom.

## Analysis

As Sarah grows older, her responsibilities increase. She is sent along to care for her father as he seeks medical treatments up North, first in Philadelphia and then in New Jersey. The complexity of the American situation with slavery –and the role of women – becomes readily apparent when Sarah and her father have a deeply moving conversation shortly before his death. He apologizes for being harsh to her in the past, but explains that he was only trying to prepare her for the way that things in the world are. He does not blame her for following her conscience, or her own beliefs. He is as much opposed to slavery as Sarah, it turns out, but he did not believe in taking on the system because he had a family to provide for. Both father and daughter forgive one another for anything horrible in the past, and John Grimke's declaration of pride in his daughter gives Sarah a much-needed boost of confidence, as well as much peace.

Yet, this resolution to follow her own conscience only creates in Sarah a much stronger desire to do good for blacks and women. Staying in Philadelphia and traveling home to Charleston, Sarah becomes acquainted with Quakerism and with Israel Morris. Israel is a devout Quaker. He explains to Sarah that any toleration of slavery is just as evil as slavery itself. The blunt, straightforwardness of Quakers at first shocks Sarah a little bit –she can't turn her back on her family despite their beliefs, or the fact that they own slaves –but she is also drawn to Quakerism because of its straightforwardness.

Things for Handful, meanwhile, go dramatically south. Following the disappearance of her mother, Handful turns to God and there comes into contact with Denmark Vesey once again. But, the church Handful attends is reported by neighbors as a public nuisance, so the City Guard breaks up the church and arrests all those within, including Handful. As a result, Handful is sent to the Work House where her foot becomes mangled. She will now have a limp for the rest of her life. In addition to her scars from lashing, she will now have a physically obvious reminder of her scar which will hinder her ability to get around at all. The experience seals a fire inside her, a fire which will grow over time.

## Discussion Question 1

What is the truth about Sarah's father's views on both slavery, and his daughter's beliefs? Why? How does this affect Sarah?

## Discussion Question 2

Why does Handful begin to go to church? What does the experience expose her to?



## Discussion Question 3

What both intrigues and repels Sarah about Israel Morris and his brand of Quakerism?

## Vocabulary

obstinacy, harrowing, futile, desiccated, aghast, solicitous, propitious, invariably, nostalgically





## Part 4, September 1821 – July 1822

### Summary

Part Four, September 1821 – July 1822

Sarah – Sarah travels to Green Hill, a castle-like house lived in by Israel Morris, his sister Catherine, and his children. The idea horrifies Mrs. Grimke and gives her chest pains. Sarah does her best to make her life simple, as well as helping to care for Israel's eight children. Becky, the six year-old, asks Sarah to wear a locket. It makes Sarah uncomfortable, but she does so to make Becky happy. Sarah is also given the ability to educate the children, which she does. Catherine later sees Sarah wearing the necklace, which turns out to be Rebecca's. Catherine demands the locket back, and tells Sarah she knows what her intentions are. Sarah later apologizes to Israel, but Israel believes she has been brought to him by God, and holds her against him.

Handful – With Sarah gone and everyone else married or in college, only Mrs. Grimke and Nina are home. Mrs. Grimke frequently worries about money. She sells off things to make ends meet. She writes to her lawyer, Huger, to implore her sons to send her money. Handful, meanwhile, visits Denmark regularly. They have recruited more than two thousand slaves to take up arms. But one man, Monday, loses his list of names. It infuriates Denmark. Denmark agrees to have Handful sew his list into a quilt. Nina is now seventeen. She begins a female prayer group. Nina has Handful take off her shoe to show the other girls her mangled foot. The prayer group dissolves after this, and Mrs. Grimke hits Handful on the arm with a cane. Handful knows that when the time comes for retribution, she will have to keep Nina safe.

Sarah – Sarah finds living with Catherine nightmarish, and does her best to defer to Catherine. Sarah and Catherine have a picnic for the children for Becky's birthday, and Catherine disapprove greatly of Israel and Sarah having feelings for one another, living under the same roof, and not being married. Sarah is instructed she must move out by Catherine, for the sake of propriety. Israel refuses to make Sarah leave. Catherine takes matters into her own hand by seeking lodging for Sarah at church at the Arch Street Meeting House. A female minister named Lucretia Mott defends Sarah's right to stay with Israel Morris, but the other Quakers do not. Lucretia offers Sarah a place to stay.

Handful - Denmark sets the date as two months off and explains he has over six thousand names in his book. Handful, listening in on the meeting, misses her Mauma. Handful volunteers to steal a bullet mold from City Arsenal on Meeting Street.

Sarah – In a letter from Nina, Sarah learns that their mother is becoming increasingly violent and reclusive. She tells Sarah she believes Nina is up to something dangerous. She also begs Sarah to come home. Sarah tells Israel she is leaving, but not because he didn't speak up for her at the meeting. He begs her to stay, but Sarah's mind is made up.



Handful – Now twenty-nine, Handful sleeps with Goodis the night before the intended bullet mold theft. Handful heads to the Arsenal. She pretends to be a hired worker to get in. She steals two bullet molds. Denmark is thrilled.

Sarah - Sarah returns to Charleston as a Quaker. Her mother is not impressed in the least. Nina wants a dress just like Sarah's new simple dress. Nina also speaks about rumors of a slave rebellion, which Mrs. Grimke dismisses. Nina also thinks people are worrying for no reason, because the rumors of a rebellion in Edgefield turned out untrue. A house slave belonging to Colonel John Prioleau reported talk of insurrection at the wharves, and the slave William Paul is arrested for it. Sarah asks Handful about the revolt, but Handful denies knowledge. Sarah knows she is lying. Sarah knows a great distance has emerged between her and her childhood friend. Nina and Sarah head to the Quaker House on Sunday. The City Guard and militia are out in force. An officer condemns Sarah and Nina for stopping to help a slave woman with her spilled foodstuffs. The gathering crowd shouts at the Grimke sisters to go home. The officer tells the sisters that plans for a slave revolt have been outwitted. Arrest and executions are had. New, strict laws against slaves are enacted, and Thomas tells Sarah she is endangering his firm's livelihood. Angry people throw rocks through the windows of Sarah's house.

Handful – Handful goes to see Denmark, who is packing to leave town. Denmark believes that house slaves have betrayed them, because house slaves can become very close with their masters. Denmark is caught four days later, and sentenced to death. Handful burns his list of names, which has only two hundred eighty-three, not six thousand like Handful said. An edict has been issued by the city which will mean punishment for anyone who mourns Denmark. Denmark is ultimately executed, and Handful watches him hanged.

## Analysis

The lives of Sarah and Handful diverge. They are separated not only by physical distance, but by a distance in how they intend to go about the problem of handling slavery. Handful has decided to throw her lot in with Denmark Vesey, believing a violent revolt and a temporary takeover of the city of Charleston will be the only effective way and means of securing her freedom. She even goes so far as to steal bullet molds from the armory for the rebellion. Handful is, however, worried that Nina or Sarah may come to harm during the revolt. For this, she is grateful that Sarah is not in Charleston, and realizes she will have to do everything she can to keep Nina safe.

Meanwhile, Sarah is living in Philadelphia at the home of Israel Morris, along with his sister and his children. Sarah's mother is beside herself with horror at the living arrangement. Sarah has decided to become a Quaker because of the tenets of comparative equality of women and staunch opposition to slavery. But, Sarah's living arrangement with Israel is questioned and condemned by the church. Israel refuses to defend Sarah; so, Sarah decides it is time to head home. Ironically, as equal as the Quakers may be, they themselves still have social conventions and customs to which



they adhere, and Sarah's living arrangement with Israel falls squarely to the side of the boundaries.

Ultimately, Denmark's rebellion is crushed before it even gets off the ground, and he flees the city of Charleston, though he is later captured and executed. Sarah and Nina have their own run-in with the people of Charleston, who condemn them for helping slaves and for opposing slavery. Sarah decides she can no longer stay in Charleston. Even her brother tells her she needs to cool her rhetoric. Stones thrown through the windows of the Grimke house only confirm the fact that Sarah is not safe.

## Discussion Question 1

What are the positive aspects about being a Quaker to Sarah? What are the negative attributes? How do these affect Sarah's perceptions of Quakerism?

## Discussion Question 2

Why does Handful decide that her only shot at freedom is with Denmark Vesey's revolt? Why does Handful decide she needs to protect Nina?

## Discussion Question 3

How does the relationship between Sarah and Handful evolve between Sarah's journey to and from Philadelphia?

## Vocabulary

megalithic, morose, disarray, humility, devising, elaborate, fathom, truncheons, congregated, pandemonium, compunction, inflammatory, edict



## Part 5, November 1826 – November 1829 - Part 6, July 1835 – June 1838

### Summary

Part 5, November 1826 – November 1829

Handful – Mauma returns with her daughter by Denmark. Gone for thirteen years, she looks as if she has aged forty. Even Mrs. Grimke is stunned to see Mauma return. Handful is now thirty-three years old. The daughter, about thirteen, is named Sky. They have been slaves on the Wilcox plantation near Beaufort. They were caught four times trying to get away before finally managing to do so on a fifth try. Sky reveals all of their mother's teeth were knocked out with a hammer, courtesy of Master Wilcox.

Sarah – Sarah returns to Philadelphia to stay with Lucretia Mott and her husband, and Israel comes to call on her. It appears as if they will never be more than friends, because of pressure from Israel's sons and Quaker society. Sarah receives word by mail that Mauma is back. Sarah feels as if her life has come to nothing, and she wants to become a Quaker minister. Lucretia believes she could. Sarah then writes back to Handful, telling Handful about the promise she made Charlotte as a child, to free Handful. She goes on to tell Handful she will become a minister.

Handful – Mauma recovers over the course of the winter. Sky is put to work, but doesn't seem to be good at anything. The cotton market crashes, and money troubles spring up once more. Mrs. Grimke wants to sell Sky, but Handful wants to find a way for Sky to earn her keep. Sky is put to work in the yard, and brings back the ornament garden to its former glory. She plants vegetables and the gardens thrive. Mrs. Grimke decides not to sell Sky. Mauma begins work on new story quilt patches.

Sarah – At meetings, Sarah speaks openly and frequently against slavery, which earns the condemnation of some, though they all oppose slavery. Mrs. Bettelman thinks Sarah talks too much about slavery. Sarah disagrees. She learns in a letter from Nina that Nina is in love with Reverend William McDowell of the Third Presbyterian Church. He is from New Jersey, is kind, handsome, and well-liked. He is decidedly anti-slavery. Nina wants to marry him. Sarah feels old, headed toward middle-age. Israel proposes to Sarah, but Sarah turns him down, because Israel wants her to choose him over the ministry.

Handful – Handful and Mauma sew new curtains for the drawing room. Handful brings Sky out to the market, and explains to her that her father was Denmark Vesey. Later, Mauma reveals that she doesn't expect to pay for her own freedom, but for Handful's.

Sarah – Sarah reveals her refusal of Israel in a letter to Nina, and explains it has caused considerable confusion among the members of the Meeting House. She also feels she



may have made the biggest mistake of her life by rejecting Israel. Nina responds that she will never marry McDowell for not being vocal against slavery like she is. Nina later reveals she is to be publicly expelled from the Presbyterian church for attending so many Quaker meetings. Nina decides to come north to Philadelphia. She has had it with Charleston.

Part Six, July 1835 – June 1838

Handful – Mary Grimke, the oldest Grimke girl, moves back home following the death of her husband. She leaves the tea plantation to her sons to run, and brings her money and everything she owns, including nine slaves, back to Charleston to live with her mother. Mary is just as bad as her mother was. Mauma later dies, covered in her story quilt.

Sarah – Sarah and Nina plan to defy the Quaker Meetinghouse members by sitting in the black pew. The idea comes to them after reading William Lloyd Garrison's radical antislavery newspaper, *The Liberator*. It is a dangerous thing, since anti-abolition groups, in the South and in the North as well, have formed mobs and have attacked antislavery papers and offices. Nina is now thirty, and Sarah worries that Nina will one day be like her: forty-three and alone. Nevertheless, Nina is quite popular among the eligible men. Sarah and Nina sit with Sarah Mapps and Grace, free blacks. They refuse to move when told to do so. Mr. Bettleman is later incensed by a letter written by Nina to the *Liberator* that is published. Bettleman and Israel tell Nina she must recant the letter or be expelled from the church. Sarah tells them she wishes she had signed the letter, too.

Handful – Handful writes to Sarah to let her know that Mauma has gone on to Heaven. Sky is now twenty-two and as tall as a man. Sky sprinkles rice on Mauma's grave, to send her spirit to Africa.

Sarah – Sarah and Nina, who have been staying with Catherine Morris in her home, are ordered to leave. Sarah feels hollow and sad. Sarah, and her mother Grace, offer the Grimkes a place to stay. It is a poor, mostly white neighborhood, but Sarah and Nina are grateful for the help. Sarah is happy to have the sisters. She longs to begin a school for blacks. Sarah and Nina are pelted with pebbles by boys one day for living with blacks. One day, Nina decides they should write a pamphlet, to appeal to the South rather than lecture or condemn them. They each write one. Sarah's is called, "An Epistle to the Clergy of the Southern States", and Nina's is called "An Appeal to the Christian Women of the South". Sarah and Grace are thrilled with the pamphlets. Garrison writes to the sisters, telling them he looks forward to the pamphlets; Elizur Wright of the American Anti-Slavery Society wants the sisters to be speakers for his organization in parlor meetings with women in New York. They will be trained by Theodore Weld, the man who abolitionized Ohio. They are both excited, but Sarah worries that her stutter will get in the way of public speaking.

Handful – Handful becomes the main errand slave for Mary. On an errand for scotch, she smells smoke and hears shouts. A mob has a bonfire going in front of the Old



Exchange. They are burning copies of the Grimke sister pamphlets. She exchanges the scotch to a half-drunk white man for Sarah's pamphlet. Mary has Handful whipped for it. She receives ten lashes. Mr. Robert Hayne, Mayor of Charleston, calls on Mary and Mrs. Grimke. He tells them that Sarah and Nina are banned from Charleston. Mrs. Grimke says her daughters may hold unholy opinions, but they are not to be treated with such indignity. The Mayor then leaves.

Sarah – Rather than small parlors, Nina and Sarah speak before halls full of hundreds. Weld comes to have feelings for Nina. He is thirty-three; she is now thirty-one. Not only does Sarah talk about the evils of slavery, but about the need for women's rights. The audience loves the sisters. For weeks, they speak in New York City, and then in New Jersey, and the up and down the Hudson. The sister become both famous and infamous. Former President John Quincy Adams agrees to meet with the women, and to deliver their petitions to Congress, while in the South, the sisters are hung in effigy in some cities. They travel to New England, and to Massachusetts, where men and women by the thousands flock to hear them speak. However, some are concerned that the sisters are speaking for women's rights as well. While they do not have a problem with this, they are worried that the sisters will lose sight of the greater focus, which is slavery. The danger, as Elizur Wright explains, is that the sisters' speaking o women's rights threatens to split the abolitionist cause in two. Sarah only redoubles her efforts.

Handful – Mary finds Charlotte's quilt with all the punishments she received, and Mary is taken aback by it. It shames Mary, in a way. Handful announces to Sky that they will leave the Grimkes, or die trying. She writes Sarah to tell her that she and Sky are leaving to come to the Mapps' house.

Sarah – Theodore Weld marries Nina. Mrs. Grimke writes that she is beside herself with happiness. Sarah reflects sadly on Israel Morris, thinking of what might have been. The wedding is known as the abolition wedding. Sarah will go to live with Theodore and Nina at the small farm he has purchased for them in Fort Lee, New Jersey. Lucretia Motts congratulates Sarah Grimke for all she has accomplished. It is during the wedding that Sarah gets the letter from Handful, and fears for her life and for Sky's life. The letter is three weeks old. Sarah resolves to go to Charleston.

Handful – Handful studies the harbor, the water, and the schedules of steamships. Tickets to New York and then Philadelphia will cost fifty-five dollars. Handful sets to altering old mourning dresses. They will leave or die trying –and Sky has made some white oleander tea for the latter problem.

Sarah – Sarah arrives in Charleston in stormy weather. Sarah keeps to herself, knowing that Charleston people forgive nearly anything of its citizens, except betrayal. She speaks to Handful and tells her it is dangerous to try to escape. Sarah wants her mother to see Handful and Sky to her. She waits four days so it looks like her visit isn't solely about Handful and Sky. Mary tells her that rumors are swirling about Sarah's return, and the sheriff may show up. Mrs. Grimke says they will not hand over their family to the sheriff, but urges Sarah to keep her visit short. While she will not sell Handful and Sky to



Sarah, she will free them on her death. But this does not impress Handful or Sky. They will be leaving the day after the next. Sarah asks how she can help.

Handful – Handful and Sky put their personal possessions into Sarah's steamer trunk. Sarah knows she could get twenty years in prison for helping a slave escape. Handful takes her spirit from the tree. The next morning, Sarah and her mother say goodbye. They know they will never see one another again. Handful and Sky dress in mourning clothes and powder their faces white. Goodis drops the three women off at the docks. They steam out of Charleston.

## Analysis

As Sarah and Handful head toward middle-age, their lives once again intertwine, having been drawn back together. Sarah decides that she will become a Minister in the Quaker faith and will continue to pursue the abolition of slavery, as well as rights for women. She is later joined by her sister, Nina, and the two women end up writing pamphlets to convince the women and people of the South to give up slavery. They are instead denounced as traitors, and banned from ever visiting Charleston again. Nevertheless, they are held up as heroes by many in the North, and they travel between New Jersey, New York, and all up and down the Hudson, speaking to sold-out crowds and audiences. Their audiences are full of men and women, which is unheard for that day and age.

Handful, meanwhile, resolves that both she and her sister, Sky, will escape from Charleston somehow. She plans to travel up North to stay with Sarah and Nina, as well as the Mapps. She writes to tell Sarah about this plan, and it terrifies Sarah that Handful and Sky will have to traverse hundreds and hundreds of miles to reach them, much of it through unfriendly territory. Sarah decides instead that she will journey to the South in order to try to buy Handful and Sky from her mother in order to free them. Sarah's mother refuses to sell them, but she will free them upon her death. This is not enough for Handful or Sky. Sarah helps them escape to freedom by ship from Charleston Harbor. Sarah has now kept her promise to Charlotte and has managed to free her childhood friend.

## Discussion Question 1

Why does Sarah travel to Charleston after she has been banned from the city? How does her mother react to both Sarah's request, and her presence?

## Discussion Question 2

What dangers does the topic of women's rights present to the abolitionist movement? How do Sarah and Nina respond to these charges?



## Discussion Question 3

Why does Sarah refuse to marry Israel, and pursue the ministry instead? Does she regret her choice? Why or why not?

## Vocabulary

magnified, vacant, vestibule, edification, exigency, exultation, vicariously, trenchant, castigated, rhetoric, imprudent





# Characters

## Theodore Weld

Theodore Weld is a young abolitionist in his thirties who helps to cleanse Ohio of slavery. He later assists in training Sarah and Nina to speak in front of audiences on behalf of the antislavery movement. He ultimately marries Nina.

## Israel Morris

Israel Morris is a member of the Quaker faith in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. He meets Sarah on a voyage to Charleston. Following the death of Israel's wife, Israel and Sarah become nearly romantically involved when she comes to live with him. Ultimately, he asks Sarah to give up the ministry and be his wife, but she turns him down.

## Mauma

Mauma Charlotte Grimke is the mother of Handful, and a slave to the Grimke family. Mauma has been a slave all her life, just as her grandmother was. Mauma steals material and threads to build a story quilt, and hires herself out to other white people for money. She hopes to one day buy her freedom, and that of Handful's. She meets and becomes lovers with Denmark Vesey, and is later arrested for pushing a white woman on the street. Mauma later has a child by Denmark, and escapes the Wilcox Plantation where she has been sold to get back to Handful. Mauma has received incredibly evil and cruel punishment as a slave, including having her teeth knocked out by a hammer, but she remains resolved to be one day be free. Unfortunately, she dies of old age while still a slave to the Grimke family.

## Burke Williams

Burke Williams is the son of a Charleston silversmith who lures young girls into engagements, only to sexually use and abandon them. Burke sets his sights on Sarah, but before the two can get too far, Burke is outed and confronted by Sarah's sister, Thomas, and the engagement is broken off.

## Mrs. Mary Grimke

Mrs. Mary Grimke is the matriarch of the Grimke family. She is very duty-driven, conforming to societal customs and traditions, and expects much from her children. She is very strict with the slaves, meting out punishments left and right as needed. Nevertheless, she does have a tender side, such as when she soothes Sarah's broken spirit at not being able to be a jurist one day, or when she allows Mauma and Sky to



come and live at the Grimke household when they return. She also passionately defends Sarah and Nina against Charleston's mayor and society, despite her disagreement with their beliefs and their lives.

## Mr. John Grimke

Mr. John Grimke is the patriarch of the Grimke family. He is a very wealthy planter, is a veteran of the American Revolution, and is a very strong but patient man. Though he disagrees with slavery, he worries for the livelihood of his family against the laws, traditions, and customs of the South, and so he does not speak out against slavery. He butts heads with Sarah repeatedly throughout the novel based on her vocal activism against slavery. Shortly before his death, he makes peace with Sarah, telling her that he is proud she has always followed her conscience.

## Handful

Hetty "Handful" Grimke is one of the two main characters in the novel "The Invention of Wings" by Sue Monk Kidd. Handful is a slave who begins the novel as a ten year-old girl, and ends the novel as a woman headed towards middle-age. The daughter of a slave, Mauma, Handful is unhappy about being a slave, but she is happy about being able to be secret friends with Sarah. Handful helps her mother make a story quilt throughout the novel, featuring scenes from Mauma's life. Mauma is later arrested in Charleston for pushing a white woman, and escapes from prison. Handful is desolate without her, and continues working on her quilt.

Over time, Handful begins attending church where she sees her mother's boyfriend, Denmark Vesey. Handful learns that her mother has been captured by slave poachers, and believes she will never again see her mother. Handful becomes part of Denmark's attempted slave revolt, which fails, and Handful escapes connection to the plot. Later, Mauma returns home, with a thirteen year-old daughter who is the product of her relationship with Denmark. Handful becomes close to her new sister, Sky, quickly, and the two decide to escape to freedom following Mauma's passing. They are helped in this endeavor by Sarah, who smuggles them onto a Steamboat posed as widows, and out of Charleston.

## Nina Grimke

Angelina "Nina" Grimke is the sister of Sarah Grimke, and the youngest Grimke sibling. She is bright, pretty, and is the goddaughter of Sarah. Sarah raises Nina to be a staunch abolitionist and supporter of women's rights, much to the chagrin of their parents. Nina ultimately marries abolitionist Theodore Weld, and she and Sarah become famous advocates and writers for abolition.



## Denmark Vesey

Denmark Vesey is a free man who lives in Charleston, working to pay for his freedom, and winning the lottery to buy his house. He has a wife named Susan, and various lovers, including Mauma. Denmark becomes the unknowing father of Sky. Denmark later befriends Handful, and brings her into his slave revolt plot. The plot ultimately fails, and Denmark is captured and executed after fleeing from Charleston.

## Sarah Grimke

Sarah Grimke is one of the two main characters in the novel *The Invention of Wings* by Sue Monk Kidd. Sarah Grimke begins the novel as an eleven year old girl and ends as a middle-aged woman. The daughter of wealthy Charleston, South Carolina planter parents, Sarah grows up with slavery around her at every turn. Her earliest memory is that of when she was four years old, and seeing the family slave, Rosetta, ruthlessly beaten. It shocks Sarah and gives her a stutter when she speaks, which will come and go for the rest of her life. The experience also makes an abolitionist out of Sarah, who, throughout the rest of her life, will become a champion of abolition and a fierce opponent of slavery. Sarah is given the gift of a slave on her eleventh birthday –Handful –but Sarah refuses to accept the gift, though she is ultimately forced to do so. She becomes friends with Handful, and the two care and watch out for one another.

As a young adult, Sarah has her heart broken by her fiancée, who has two other women he is engaged to. She becomes an even more vocal proponent of abolition, as well as women's rights, along with her sister, Nina. The two ultimately write tracts against slavery, which get them banned from Charleston. Sarah decides to become a Minister in the Quaker church, and refuses to marry Israel Morris when he asks her to choose between him and the ministry. She is saddened by the choice, but resolves to continue with her life's work. She ultimately travels to Charleston despite the ban, and helps Handful and Handful's sister, Sky, to escape to freedom.

# Symbols and Symbolism

## Books

An entire library of books are purchased and kept by John Grimke for the education and enjoyment of himself, and his family. Books are voraciously read by the Grimke children, especially by Sarah. The books read by Sarah run from history and theology to philosophy, law, Latin, and botany. Following Sarah's teaching of Handful to read, she is banned from the books in her father's library, and it devastates her.

## Pamphlets

Pamphlets are small written tracts, often in the form of booklets or folded sheets, that discuss or advocate for a particular issue, and are handed out or sold to the public. Both Sarah and Nina Grimke take to writing pamphlets to advance the causes of anti-slavery and women's rights. As such, both sisters are banned from Charleston, and their works are burned in bonfires.

## Money

Money is earned through work in the novel by Mauma, who hires herself out as a seamstress to other white families. She saves up money with the hope that she will buy freedom for herself and her daughter, Handful. She manages to save up about four-hundred dollars, though, which she leaves to Handful when she dies.

## Cane

A cane is used and carried around by Mrs. Grimke. Until she is elderly, Mrs. Grimke uses the cane primarily as a statement of authority. She uses it to whack the slaves, and to dish out punishments to them. Following the foot accident she has, Handful is given a cane, made by Goodis, in order for her to get around more easily. She carries this cane with her through the rest of the novel.

## Bullet Molds

Bullet molds are used to press melted lead into bullets for use in rifles, muskets, and pistols. Denmark Vesey's revolt is in need of bullet molds. Handful volunteers to steal one from the Charleston city arsenal, but ends up stealing two.



## Mourning Clothes

Mourning clothes are worn by men and women of Charleston when a loved one dies. These mourning clothes are designed exclusively for each occasion, and are stored away after they are used. Sarah manages to help both Handful and Sky escape from Charleston by disguising them in mourning clothing. As such, they are bothered very little by others.

## Hammers

Hammers are used for construction primarily, but in the old South, they were used to exact punishment on slaves. Master Wilcox uses a hammer to knock out all of Mauma's teeth as a punishment.



# Settings

## Charleston

Charleston is located in South Carolina. It is a major east coast port. As a very Southern city, it is an example of the greater South for its aristocratic classes of wealthy people and its large population of slaves. The Grimkes have a "city home" in Charleston. (The Grimkes also have a plantation in the upcountry.) Charleston is also home to the Grimke slaves. It is where Handful spends her life before escaping to freedom with Sarah.

## Grimke House

The Grimke House is located in one of the finer sections of Charleston, and is the home of the Grimke family, and their slaves. The Grimke House consists of a main house, a summer kitchen, a carriage house, and some other smaller buildings. It is where Sarah, Nina, and their brothers and sisters are born and raised, as well as spend the first the first parts of their adulthood. It is a large, fine house, complete with a nursery and a library. It is often the scene of parties and hos to visitors, and is tended to and maintained by the slaves.

## Philadelphia

Philadelphia is a Northern city, located in Pennsylvania. Philadelphia is a melting pot of various faiths, including the Quaker religion. Sarah and her father travel to Philadelphia to see doctors to improve the father's health. Philadelphia is also home of the Morris family, whom Sarah meets after the death of her father. She moves to Philadelphia to stay with Israel Morris after his wife dies. She stays for a year with him at his home of Green Hill.

## Green Hill

Green Hill is the family home of the Morris family, and is located just outside of Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. The home looks like a stone castle on the outside, but is very plain and spartan on the inside, owing to the Quaker faith of Israel Morris. Following the death of his wife, Sarah travels to Green Hill to live with Israel and his family for a time, before ultimately returning to Charleston, and later living on her on in Philadelphia.

## New York

New York is a major port city in the state of New York, and is where Sarah and Nina Grimke travel to speak to packed halls and rooms full of men and women about the

evils of slavery. They travel up and down the Hudson and into New Jersey as well, where they continue to spread the abolitionist message of freedom for blacks and ll those enslaved.



# Themes and Motifs

## Friendship

Friendship is a major theme in the novel *The Invention of Wings* by Sue Monk Kidd. Friendship includes feelings of platonic love, compassion, concern, loyalty, and emotional, spiritual, and even physical support between two or more individuals. In the novel, friendship occurs primarily between Sarah and Handful. Despite the marked and serious difference between the two, the two are able to remain friends through their lives.

Handful is a slave of the Grimke family who is given to Sarah on Sarah's eleventh birthday as a gift. Sarah rejects receiving another human being as a gift, saying she doesn't want a slave, but she ends up with no choice in the matter. Sarah decides that she will become friends with Handful, and the two quickly do become friends. Sarah even goes so far as to teach Handful to read out of respect for her, and their friendship, despite the law forbidding anyone to teach slaves how to read or write. As the girls get older, Handful cares for Sarah through her failed engagement to Burke Williams, and Sarah in turn covers for, and cares for Handful as she steals and sneaks off the property.

As the girls get older, their friendship is more difficult to maintain given the fact that Sarah is a free white woman, and Handful is an enslaved black woman. Handful becomes part of slave plot to overthrow Charleston, while Sarah heads north to follow her heart and to become a minister for God in the Quaker church. Though the slave plot fails, Handful resolves that she will be free one way or the other, or die trying; Sarah, who succeeds at her ministry and her advocacy for abolition later on, vows she will do what she can to help Handful escape. She then heads to Charleston at great personal peril to herself to help not only Handful, but her sister, Sky, escape to freedom.

## Human Rights

Human rights are a major and overarching theme found consistently throughout the novel "The Invention of Wings" by Sue Monk Kidd. Human rights are the natural, God-given rights each and every human being has by virtue of existence. Such God-given rights are illustrated in the United States Declaration of Independence, and are protected by law in the United States Constitution. Human rights in the novel revolve primarily around the issues of slavery, and of women's rights.

Slavery exists all over the United States, though primarily in the South at the time the novel occurs. Slavery is a complex issue, fiercely defended by some and fiercely opposed by others. Most Americans are haunted by slavery, disliking it, but many refuse to do anything about it, saying that slavery is simply a part of life. Among these particular people is Mr. John Grimke, Sarah's father. Though he opposes slavery, he





practices the evil institution in order to provide for his family. Sarah, however, fiercely opposes slavery, ultimately becoming a Quaker minister and public speaker and writer against slavery. Freedom is a God-given right, and slavery is an unnatural evil that needs to be done away with. The reader sees the evil of slavery firsthand through the quashed dreams of Handful, and through the horrible punishments slavers receive from their masters. Of particular note is the hammering out of Mauma's teeth by Master Wilcox.

While Sarah and Nina Grimke achieve remarkable things in their lifetime, they are a very, very rare kind of woman. While Sarah is arguably freer than Handful, for example, she is not free by much more. Sarah is born into a society that expects her to be married and having children between her teens and early twenties, and that she will be a dutiful, loyal, and obedient servant to her husband, and will have a hand in raising children and managing slaves. Any dreams Sarah has of becoming a jurist, or doing anything other than social volunteer work, are not only seemingly impossible, but laughed at. Nevertheless, as Sarah and Nina grow in fame and stature for their stance against slavery, they also use their platform to advance the cause of women's rights, allowing them responsibilities and opportunities equal to men, based on the fact that God has given men and women the equal lot of life.

## Family

Family is a major and dominant theme in the novel *The Invention of Wings* by Sue Monk Kidd. Family involves mutual love, compassion, loyalty, and emotional, spiritual, and physical support between individuals who may or may not be blood-related, but who behave and operate under the auspices of the traditional family unit. The theme of family can be seen between the Grimkes, and between Mauma and her daughters.

The Grimkes are a wealthy family who behave very much according to custom and tradition, though Mr. Grimke takes certain liberties, such as allowing his daughters – particularly Sarah – to read to their hearts' content. Mr. Grimke is first and foremost concerned with the welfare and success of his family, and he endeavors to do his best to prepare his children for the ways of the world, as does his wife, Mrs. Grimke. Both parents butt heads continuously with Sarah and her sister, Nina, over their views and rebukes of tradition. Nevertheless, both parents unfailingly love their daughters, and are proud of them for following their consciences. When Charleston turns against Sarah and Nina and bans them from returning, Mrs. Grimke defends her daughters' honor, even though she utterly disagrees with their views and the way they live their lives. She deeply loves them and will not suffer insult or injury to her family.

Mauma, despite her life as a slave, is determined to give her daughters the best lives they can possibly have. Mauma fills their hearts and minds with stories of beauty and freedom and helps them to understand that they can indeed be free one day. Mauma sneaks out of the house to hire herself out to other white people to sew for them in order to raise money to buy her freedom and the freedom of Handful. When Mauma is arrested, escapes from jail, and is later kidnapped by slave traders, she has a baby she

names Sky. She brings Sky back to the Grimke house in Charleston, where the two work again as slaves. Mauma continues to guide and raise her daughters, ultimately wanting them to be free. She dedicates her entire life to this. Although she ultimately dies in slavery, she dies with the knowledge that her daughters will one day be free.

# Styles

## Point of View

Sue Monk Kidd tells her novel *The Invention of Wings* in the first-person, limited omniscient perspective, from the points of view of both Sarah Grimke and Handful. This is done for primarily three reasons. The first is that the stories involved in the novel are those of Sarah and Handful, and there is no one better to tell their stories than themselves. Secondly, the first-person narrative mode is an intimate frame of storytelling, allowing the reader to understand the experiences of both Sarah and Handful firsthand through their own words. This removes the middle-man, or third-person narrator, from between the reader and the personal thoughts and feelings of the characters. Finally, the first-person narrative mode allows two women to tell their stories, in a time when women did not have their own voice, or very many rights. This defies the nature of the times in which the story takes place, just as Sarah and Handful defy the nature of the times in which their lives occur.

## Language and Meaning

Sue Monk Kidd tells her novel *The Invention of Wings* in language that is very traditional, educated, and flowing for the sections of the novel told by Sarah; and in language that is simple, straightforward, but poetic for sections of the novel told by Handful. This is done alternatively for different reasons. The educated language of Sarah is due to her education and her social status as a free white woman; the simple, straightforward language of Handful is due to her status as an enslaved black woman. Yet, both women are absolutely beautiful human beings, and their kindness and love is clearly discernible in their language. As such, Sarah's language is flowing given her education and involvement in Charleston society, while Handful's is poetic, owing to the traditions of storytelling and agony experienced by her mother. Both forms of writing complement one another and allow both Handful and Sarah's stories to complement one another.

## Structure

Sue Monk Kidd divides her novel *The Invention of Wings* into six major parts, with each part subdivided into chapters. Each chapter alternates between being told by Sarah or Handful. Oftentimes, chapters revolve around one particular event, and the experiences of both Sarah and Handful in relation to that one event. This is done for at least two major reasons. The first is that the story Kidd tells occurs over a period of thirty-some years, so the division of the novel into parts allows her to jump through time, skipping a few years here or there. The second reason is that she allows both Sarah and Handful to tell their stories by use of alternating chapters, at different points in their lives. The

stories of both lives merge together to complete the plot and tell the novel in full –from the perspective of both Sarah, a free white woman, and Handful, a black slave woman.



## Quotes

I was a handful. That's not how I got my name, though.

-- Handful (Part 1, Handful paragraph 9)

**Importance:** Here, Handful explains to the reader that she is a handful, but that is not why she has the name. Slaves are given names by their owners, but they are also given names by their mothers and fellows. These names often come from their appearance, such as Handful's that she is a handful. These names are the one thing slaves can give one another that their owners cannot take away. It is a small act of freedom against the greater tyranny of slavery.

Why must you fight this? I don't know where you get these alien ideas. This is our way of life, dear one, make your peace with it.

-- Mrs. Mary Grimke (Part 1, Sarah paragraph 7)

**Importance:** When Sarah is given Handful as a slave, Sarah refuses to accept Handful, saying she does not want to own a slave. This comes from the experience of seeing Rosetta beaten while Sarah is four years old. Sarah's mother cannot understand why her young daughter continually bucks against the system, and will not allow things to be as they are. It sets the stage for decades of friction between Sarah and her mother.

At the age of eleven, I owned a slave I couldn't free.

-- Sarah (Part 1, Sarah paragraph 2)

**Importance:** Sarah is ultimately forced into ownership of Handful, which Sarah resents and is unhappy about. She meditates on the paradox that she has legal ownership over someone else without her consent, but has no consent to freeing that person.

The truth," she said, "is that every girl must have ambition knocked out of her for her own good. You are unusual only in your determination to fight what is inevitable. You resisted and so it came to this, to being broken like a horse.

-- Mrs. Mary Grimke (Part 2, Sarah paragraph 36)

**Importance:** Here is Sarah's first real taste, courtesy of her mother, of the precious few rights and freedoms afforded free women in the antebellum South. Sarah has dreams and ideas about her own life, but the reality is, she will not be able to follow them, and so Mrs. Grimke explains that this is the way of the world. Sarah now has two enemies: slavery and the subjugation of women. These twin causes will motivate her throughout her life.

She should deny her conscience or her father?

-- Sarah (Part 3, Sarah paragraph 22)

**Importance:** When Nina refuses to be confirmed into the Episcopalian faith, Sarah's mother and the pastor believe it is the work of Sarah. Nina says that the choice is her



own not to be saved in the church, and that it is a measure of her conscience. Mrs. Grimke says it is her father's wish on his deathbed that Nina should be saved, which prompts Sarah to ask her mother if Nina should obey her father, or follow her conscience. This sets the stage for a series of conflicts now between Mrs. Grimke and Nina, as well as between Mrs. Grimke and Sarah.

Forgive you for what, Sarah? For following your conscience?  
-- Mr. John Grimke (Part 3, Sarah paragraph 42)

**Importance:** Shortly before his death, Mr. Grimke and Sarah have a long discussion in which he admits to opposing slavery, but living by it in order to care for his family. He also admits to being proud of Sarah, and tells her she has nothing to be sorry for, for she has followed her conscience. This causes a beautiful peace between father and daughter before his death.

To remain silent in the face of evil is itself a form of evil.  
-- Israel Morris (Part 3, Sarah paragraph 34)

**Importance:** Meeting Israel Morris on a ship bound for Charleston, Sarah is both a little put off and intrigued by the bluntness of the Quaker faith. Israel Morris, in black-and-white terms, tells her that to be silent in the face of evil is itself a form of evil. In other words, Sarah's decision to associate with her family and not do anything about their slaves is a form of evil itself.

The retribution was coming and we'd bring it ourselves. Blood was the only way. It was the only way, wasn't it?  
-- Handful (Part 4, Handful paragraph 69)

**Importance:** Handful decides that violence and open rebellion is the only way for her and the other slaves of Charleston to achieve their freedom. They are throwing in their lots with Denmark Vesey, who plans to take over the city. Handful has been pushed to the brink, and is ready to commit to violence in order to secure her freedom. This demonstrates the utter desperation of Handful to be free, and the price she is willing to pay to do it.

Why would God plant such deep yearnings in us if they only come to nothing?  
-- Sarah (Part 5, Sarah paragraph 20)

**Importance:** Sarah, wondering what the rest of her life will be like, wonders about God planting yearnings in her to do big things if they were never meant to be. She feels called by God to do important things, and God would surely not give her these inclinations if He did not expect they could be achieved. Here, Sarah's faith in the goodness of God and His plan sustains her.