# The Kingdom of This World Study Guide

## The Kingdom of This World by Alejo Carpentier

BOOKRAGS

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# Plot Summary

The Kingdom of This World tells the story of Ti Noël and the political turmoil in Haiti following the French colonial days. Ti Noël is a slave on a plantation in northern Haiti, then known as Santo Domingo. He participates in a rebellion against the French colonists. When his master flees to Cuba, Ti Noël is taken along and lost in a card game to a Cuban plantation owner. Ti Noël saves up his money and buys passage back to the now-free Haiti only to find that dictatorial King Henri Christophe has made slave labor of his fellow blacks. Henri Christophe is overthrown only for a mulatto upper class to rise and enforce labor on the darker-skinned blacks. At the end of his life, Ti Noël still stands up to call out a cry of rebellion to the world.

As the novel begins, Ti Noël is living on the plantation of a French colonist near the Cap, a city on the north coast of Santo Domingo. Another slave on the plantation, Macandal, gets his arm caught in a machine and it is crushed and later amputated. The one-armed slave is tasked with taking the cows to pasture, and in the foothills he discovers a wealth of plants of various kinds, including poisonous-looking mushrooms. Macandal disappears into the wild and begins planning a campaign of poisoning the whites and their livestock until someone learns that Macandal is responsible. He disappears again, but is finally captured and burned alive. There is a commotion at the execution, however, and the black slaves believe he has escaped as a supernatural hidden enemy of the slave owners.

Time passes. The French government orders slaves in the colonies to be released, and the plantation owners rebel. The slaves rise up in an open rebellion, which is initially crushed. Ti Noël's owner flees to Cuba with his remaining slaves, where he lives a life of hedonism tempered with prayer as he fears death coming nearer. He gambles away Ti Noël in a card game, losing him to a Cuban plantation owner. Ti Noël saves up his money to buy his way back to Santo Domingo, which has since been conquered by the rebelling slaves and where he believes he can be a free man.

When Ti Noël arrives at the now-deserted and ruined plantation where he once was a slave, he discovers that a rich aristocracy of blacks has risen under the rule of King Henri Christophe. However, Ti Noël is taken into slave labor, along with all the other residents of the northern region, to build a towering fortress atop a mountain, where the king and a large contingent can flee in case of attack. Under black rule, Ti Noël again finds himself enslaved. Ti Noël escapes as the work winds down, but the people of the land are unhappy with the king. Another revolt occurs, and the king shoots himself. For a while, Ti Noël is free, living in the deserted plantation and wearing one of the former king's robes. However, a new upper class arises from the lighter-skinned mulattoes on the island. As they parcel out the land and dictate forced labor for the people, Ti Noël calls to the sky with another cry of rebellion.

# Part One: I, The Wax Heads and II, The Amputation

## Part One: I, The Wax Heads and II, The Amputation Summary

The Kingdom of This World tells the story of Ti Noël and the political turmoil in Haiti following the French colonial days. Ti Noël is a slave on a plantation in northern Haiti, then known as Santo Domingo. He participates in rebellion against the French colonists, and when his master flees to Cuba, Ti Noël is taken along and lost in a card game to a Cuban plantation owner. Ti Noël saves up his money and buys passage back to the now-free Haiti only to find that dictatorial King Henri Christophe has made slave labor of his fellow blacks. Henri Christophe is overthrown only for a mulatto upper class to rise and enforce labor on the darker-skinned blacks. At the end of his life, Ti Noël still calls out a cry of rebellion to the world.

As the novel begins, Ti Noël, an African slave of French plantation owner M. Lenormand de Mézy in the Caribbean, is an expert horseman and immediately picks out a stallion for his owner from among twenty horses. Slave and master ride to the barber shop, and de Mézy is greeted by the governor on the way. Ti Noël stands outside the barber shop looking at four wax heads in the window, displaying wigs. Next door is a butcher shop, displaying calves' heads, and Ti Noël compares the two in his mind, imagining white men's heads served as food.

Ti Noël also observes the bright posters in a nearby bookseller's. He asks about a black man portrayed on a throne and learns that it's a portrayal of a king of Ti Noël's country. Ti Noël relates it to stories sung by Macandal, another slave, and compare white rulers unfavorably to African kings. The plantation owner comes out of the barber's shop, powdered white and looking like the mannequin heads, and buys a calves' head. As they head back to the plantation, the master hums a naval tune while the slave hums a shanty critical of the English king.

In The Amputation, Macandal, the great storyteller and carrier of African culture, is milling sugar cane when his arm gets caught in the machine. Ti Noël quickly cuts away the straps holding the horse who is powering the machine, but the arm is crushed. Slaves and master rush in and apply a tourniquet to stop the bleeding, and the master calls for a machete to cut off the useless arm.

# Part One: I, The Wax Heads and II, The Amputation Analysis

In the opening of the novel, the colonial slave owners' society is portrayed as aristocratic and extravagant, as well as foreign and incomprehensible to Ti Noël, the main character of the novel. The four wax heads in the barber shop window are as about real and significant to Ti Noël as the culture of his owner. At the same time, the colonists do not understand or care about the African culture of their slaves from which they are kept separate. Ti Noël's comparison of the wax heads and the calves' heads in the butcher shop shows his hatred toward the white oppressors, while his master trusts him implicitly to be a good worker, to choose horses, and to fulfill his duties. Ti Noël's master has no idea what goes on in the slave's mind.

The African king that Ti Noël sees in the poster draws him, and Ti Noël idolizes his African past, even though he only knows it through the stories of Macandal. The scene where Macandal's arm is crushed and then cut off can be taken as symbolic of the separation of the colonial black slaves from their native Africa. They are cut off from something essential, their culture, which has been crushed by the machinery of the plantations, amputated by the white enslavers.

# Part One: III, What the Hand Found and IV, The Reckoning

## Part One: III, What the Hand Found and IV, The Reckoning Summary

In What the Hand Found, Macandal is given the job of taking the cattle out to pasture. While he is out in the foothills during the day, he discovers various plants growing wild. He begins to collect the herbs, leaves, seeds, and mushrooms that he finds. He's especially interested in the seemingly poisonous mushrooms. Ti Noël makes excuses to go out and spend time with Macandal. They visit an old woman, a voodoo practitioner, who talks with Macandal about voodoo and assesses the plants he's found. Macandal and Ti Noël test some of the poison by poisoning a dog. Then, Macandal says it's time, and he disappears from the plantation. The master does not put much effort into finding the one-armed slave.

In The Reckoning, Ti Noël is disappointed that Macandal ran away without him and feels lost without Macandal's tales and wisdom. He spends his time caring for the horses. One day, the old voodoo woman brings Ti Noël a message from Macandal. Following the instructions, he goes to a cave at dawn the next morning and finds it filled with plants and equipment for making medicines. Macandal, thin from his life as a fugitive, has made contact with trustworthy Africans on all the plantations. Macandal gives Ti Noël his instructions. The next day, the two best cows on the plantation drop dead, and Ti Noël tells the master that the imported cows don't know what poisonous vegetation to avoid.

## Part One: III, What the Hand Found and IV, The Reckoning Analysis

The third chapter introduces voodoo as an element in the novel. Voodoo is a strong thread in the black culture of the island and in Ti Noël's thinking. Macandal is basically a rebel, using terrorist tactics on the white colonists. He goes into hiding and leads an underground group of trusted slaves in a campaign of poisoning. There is nothing mystical in the actual events. However, the events take on a mystical aspect in the minds of Ti Noël and the other black slaves on the island. The culture of voodoo is one reason why the slaves create magical stories around natural events. The retelling of the events makes them mythical and powerful. Macandal becomes a holy man, and his power becomes the power of the gods.

Macandal's missing arm gives him power. It makes him seem worthless to the slave owners, who underestimate Macandal. It also serves as a mark of slavery on him, giving him a physical aspect that makes him a knowable figure to the slaves. It becomes part

of his persona and sets him apart from the others. The lost arm is also a constant reminder of the enslavement and separation from Africa that Macandal knows. His task is one of retribution, and his disfigurement is a motivation for his revenge.

# Part One: V, De Profundis and VI, The Metamorphoses

## Part One: V, De Profundis and VI, The Metamorphoses Summary

In De Profundis, the Plaine du Nord, where the plantation is, is struck with an epidemic of poisoning. First, animals on the plantations begin dying. It's inexplicable to the white men. Then, the poisoning spreads to the houses. Men and their families begin to die. The funeral services need to be shortened to make enough time to honor all of the dead, and the people are terrified. The colonists take out their fear on the slaves, whipping them mercilessly. Nothing seems to be able to stop the death. M. Lenormand de Mézy's wife dies after eating an orange. A curfew and martial law rule the land. Finally, one of the slaves talks and the plantation owners learn that Macandal is behind the poisonings. To the slaves, Macandal is a voodoo holy man, with the power of the gods. The informant is shot in anger, and the plantation owners organize to track down Macandal.

In The Metamorpheses, the search parties cannot find Macandal anywhere in the area. The poisonings stop, and eventually the plantation owners give up their search for the perpetrator. They go back to card playing, drinking, and fondling the black women. There are several theories about what happened to Macandal, but the slaves know that Macandal turns himself into whatever animal he pleases and tell stories of when they saw him as a lizard or a bird. The slaves believe that a black woman gave birth to a baby with a boar's face because of Macandal. They wait for four years for Macandal's return.

## Part One: V, De Profundis and VI, The Metamorphoses Analysis

Macandal's campaign of poisoning is not merely an attack on the colonists to defeat them. The poisonings begin with animals and begin to spread and worsen to the point that no food or drink seems safe. The campaign is designed to inspire fear and terror. This creates a backlash. It wouldn't matter if the mysterious poisonings were a result of a natural occurrence, foreign terrorists, or any other source. The white slave owners would still take their fear out on their slaves. The brutality meted out on slaves is an expression of any negative emotions the slave owners have. They abuse their power unthinkingly to make themselves feel better, with no empathy for the slaves.

Macandal is closely allied to nature, as are the voodoo gods. He initially finds his weapon in nature, from observing the plants of the area. When Macandal disappears into the wilderness, he transcends and becomes a god from the slaves' perceptions,

and at the same time, he becomes one with nature, because the gods are part of the world of nature. Macandal becomes transformed, not into one animal, but into many animals, so that he is found everywhere in the nature that surrounds the people.

Throughout the novel, there is mysticism. It is important to recognize that the novel gives the points of view of the characters it portrays, often without pointing out any outside perspective of objective reality. The slaves know that Macandal has transformed himself into lizards and birds, and any wild creature he desires, impregnating a woman with an animalistic baby. However, the naturalistic explanation is that Macandal is hiding in the mountains, biding his time for another attack. The slaves create the context of a mystical explanation, creating their own mythology. Macandal's powers are true for the slaves because they believe in his transformations.

# Part One: VII, Human Guise and VIII, The Great Flight

## Part One: VII, Human Guise and VIII, The Great Flight Summary

In Human Guise, M. Lenormand de Mézy takes Marinette, a slave in charge of laundry, to his bed after his wife's death, while he arranges marriage to another woman. A devout Catholic, the new wife directs the building of a nativity scene that winter. The slaves look forward to the celebrations of Christmas when they might be able to sneak some food and wine. Ti Noël, however, will be away at a neighboring plantation where they will celebrate the birth of the master's first son with one glass of brandy for every slave.

At the celebration, the drums beat. More than two hours into the celebration, Macandal rises up behind the main drummer. No one speaks, but they all see the one-armed holy man. The gathering of slaves soon breaks out in a chanted song of sorrow at their plight. The plantation owners in the house hear the noise, and they begin to load their muskets and gather their weapons.

In The Great Flight, slaves and masters gather at the Cap on a day in January, at daybreak, to attend the burning alive of Macandal, as a special warning to all the black slaves. As Macandal is brought in, the whites watch the slaves, but they do not know the slaves believe in Macandal's voodoo powers. Macandal will transform into an insect or a bird at the last second, and escape the bonds of the white slave-owners.

Macandal is brought to the front of the crowd and set afire. However, the stump of his missing arm can't be bound. He moves his arm and slips out of his bonds, throwing himself into the crowd. Chaos erupts, and while the guards are subduing the crowds, the black slaves are too distracted to see the soldiers who recapture Macandal and throw him into the fire. By the time the slaves are quieted there is only a burning fire to see. The African slaves leave knowing that Macandal has escaped.

## Part One: VII, Human Guise and VIII, The Great Flight Analysis

The novel contrasts the Catholic religion of the French colonists with the voodoo beliefs of the slaves. The black slaves absorb the outward images of Catholicism, like the nativity scene that is built for M. Lenormand de Mézy's wife. The outward trappings are transformed and absorbed into the slaves' worldviews, which do not include a true understanding of the French culture of the owners. At the same time, religion is largely a facade for the French. M. Lenormand de Mézy has no problem taking slave girls into his

bed when he has no wife, and will continue to be lascivious and cruel throughout the novel.

The death of Macandal contrasts the magical perceptions of the slaves with the naturalistic reality of the world. The reader learns that the soldiers recapture Macandal almost immediately and throw him into the fire. However, the chaos of the moment hides the events from the slaves. The myth of Macandal survives his life. What is real to the people is a holy, mythical creature, hiding in the guise of animals as a rebellious spirit. Because of this, the expensive spectacle of execution becomes not a warning but an encouragement to the slaves.

# Part Two: I, The Daugther of Minos and Pasiphaë and II, The Solemn Pact

## Part Two: I, The Daugther of Minos and Pasiphaë and II, The Solemn Pact Summary

In The Daughter of Minos and Pasiphaë, Ti Noël goes to the Cap to pick up harnesses. The city has grown, and there is a new theater. Henri Christophe is a free black man, a chef who has just bought the hotel where he is head chef, Auberge de la Couronne. He is famed for his cooking. M. Lenormand de Mézy's second wife has died, and the plantation owner frequents the theater and takes up with one of the bit players. He leaves with her for Paris, but then he finds himself missing his plantation. He returns with the actress, who has failed in Paris.

Twenty years have passed since Mecandal's capture. The plantation master in his old age desires young slave girls and harshly punishes the black men, especially those who are guilty of sleeping with the women. The former actress takes out her failures on her personal slaves, and in fits of drunkenness, she gathers the slaves together and performs for them passages that they barely understand, gathering only that the woman is wracked with guilt for crimes of her past. Meanwhile, the slaves still honor Macandal and wait for him to come again.

In The Solemn Pact, slaves from various plantations gather after their curfew has been called. Bouckman, a Jamaican slave, begins to speak. The French authorities in Europe have declared that the slaves should be freed, but the wealthy plantation owners will not give up their slaves. The Africans have made pacts with the Loas, the African gods, so that they may war successfully against the plantation owners for their freedom. The gathered slaves call out to the voodoo gods for their help, and they sacrifice a pig with a machete, adorning themselves with blood. The rebellion is planned for eight days hence and the Africans hope for help from the Spanish colonies. They will contact a sympathetic priest to get him to write a proclamation, since none of them can write.

## Part Two: I, The Daugther of Minos and Pasiphaë and II, The Solemn Pact Analysis

M. Lenormand de Mézy is a lustful and hedonistic man. He takes his lust out on the slave girls and then when the theater opens, he goes there to satisfy his desires, finding yet another wife. When M. Lenormand de Mézy grows old, he takes out his waning sexual prowess on the young black men for their sexual exploits, which seem to pale in comparison to M. Lenormand de Mézy's sexual crimes. However, to both the black slaves and the white French colonists, women seem little more than convenient tools for

sexual outlet. M. Lenormand de Mézy's third wife desires to be admired for her creative ability, but she becomes nothing more than a spectacle to the slaves.

Bouckman takes over Mecandal's role as a leader among the slaves. Years have past, but the desire to be free has not died. It persists because slavery persists. The French government's dictate to free the slaves is only an instigator. Rebellion has been brewing beneath the surface. The rebellion itself is supported by the Loas, the gods of voodoo. Sacrifices are made to the gods, and pacts are formalized. Though the gods are created in the minds of the men, the power of the pacts becomes real in the motivation to fight and the belief that victory is possible.

# Part Two: III, The Call of the Conch Shells and IV, Dagon inside the Ark

## Part Two: III, The Call of the Conch Shells and IV, Dagon inside the Ark Summary

In The Call of the Conch Shells, M. Lenormand de Mézy and the governor are furious with the idealists in France who want freedom for the slaves and don't understand the reality of the colonies. With the looming threat of civil war, the French are willing to give up the colonies for their principles. At 10:00 one night, M. Lenormand de Mézy goes out to rape one of the slave girls. He hears a conch shell being blown, answered by more throughout the land. Hearing the horns blowing on his own plantation, the owner hides behind a flowering bush. The slaves' quarters' doors break open, and the slaves poor out. The overseers are killed, and the slaves run to the master's house. They go to the cellar, open all the casks, drink wine and liquor, and destroy the saved food and drink. After drinking his fill, Ti Noël goes upstairs, bent on raping the former actress Mlle Floridor.

In Dagon inside the Ark, M. Lenormand de Mézy hides in a well for two days before crawling out. The plantation is ruined, littered with corpses. The dogs have been burned in their kennels. In the house, he finds his wife on the floor, legs spread, killed with a sickle. Dropping to the floor, the plantation owner drops to the floor and, grasping a rosary, says all the prayers that he knows. He hides in the house for several days until news comes that the uprising has been quelled. Bouckman's rotting head is displayed in the Cap. The whites are killing off all the blacks they've captured.

M. Lenormand de Mézy heads into the Cap, arriving just in time to stop Ti Noël and a dozen more of his slaves from being killed. He needs the money they would bring for sale in Cuba. The plantation owner goes to see the governor, who is livid. The black men have raped all the women of good family and killed off too many overseers. He wants to kill anyone who is of African descent, even a small amount, free or slave. He fears their voodoo worship. M. Lenormand de Mézy is despondent. On top of everything, Henri Christophe has joined the colonial artillery and closed down the inn, and there is no more good food in the Cap. The plantation owner makes arrangements to sail for Cuba.

## Part Two: III, The Call of the Conch Shells and IV, Dagon inside the Ark Analysis

The slaves on Haiti before the rebellion made up almost ninety percent of the population. The rebellion is a bloody outpouring of the masses, a dam breaking over the minority of whites who have all the power and wealth, and moreover, who abuse that

power relentlessly. However, simply running over the plantation, destroying the overseers and every white person and dog they can find, leads ultimately to nothing. Like the masters who take out every disappointment and grievance in rape and beatings for their slaves, the slaves take out their long suffering on the whites mercilessly, reveling in food and wine and destruction. The rebellion is almost a knee-jerk reaction, an eye for many eyes, without a plan for a future.

Even though the slaves vastly outnumber the whites, they are ultimately subdued by those with power and weapons. The governor wants to commit genocide to destroy every black, slave or free, on the island. This would be self-destruction, as it would mean the extermination of the people who make the plantation-driven economy run. At the same time, the governor identifies an important element that many whites, like M. Lenormand de Mézy, pay no attention to: voodoo. Voodoo signifies the independent thought of the black slaves. By holding on to their culture through voodoo, the blacks hold on to a belief in a black-dominated world.

# Part Two: V, Santiago de Cuba and VI, The Ship of Dogs

## Part Two: V, Santiago de Cuba and VI, The Ship of Dogs Summary

In Santiago de Cuba, M. Lenormand de Mézy and other white colonists sail for Cuba, while Ti Noël and the other slaves suffer in the ship's hold, filled with coal. In Cuba, M. Lenormand de Mézy attends the theater and spends time merrymaking with other former plantation owners and colonists. Those who weren't enlightened enough to get their wealth out of Santo Domingo in advance seem to glory in their bad fortune. They give themselves over to hedonism, with fancy clothes, drinking, music, sex, and idleness. The fashions of the displaced plantation owners begin to be copied by the Cubans. M. Lenormand de Mézy spends his time card playing and going to church, living off of the money he can get selling off his slaves one by one. He attends church because, growing old, he is beginning to fear death. Ti Noël goes with him and is perplexed by the choir director conducting his singers in rounds. Still, the decoration and symbolism of the church seems meaningful to Ti Noël, resonating with his voodoo religion.

As The Ship of Dogs begins, the harbor at Santiago, Cuba is filled with barking dogs. They are being loaded onto a ship. Ti Noël asks where the dogs are going, and he gets the reply: "To eat niggers!" Meanwhile, Pauline Bonaparte, a pampered, aristocratic woman is on a ship on her way to the Caribbean with her husband General Leclerc. She has all types of riches brought with her. On the ship, she revels in the lust of the sailors for her. One hot night, Pauline comes out of her cabin and sleeps under the stars, and after that, she sleeps on deck every night, where the men catch glimpses of her sleeping and washing herself.

When the ship approaches Santo Domingo, Pauline is charmed by the Cap and the mountains rising beyond the northern plains. She finds the island exotic. However, her husband is worried about the slave uprising and the plantation owners' disloyalty to France. He has bought a house on an island off the north coast of Venezuela, in case they need to leave Santo Domingo. Pauline, unconcerned, has a swimming pool dug and starts getting massages from Soliman, a black slave who she knows desires her. She beats him playfully and painlessly with a switch to watch him squirm. She occasionally allows him to kiss her feet. One day, Pauline's world is interrupted when her hairdresser coughs up blood and collapses. A plague has arrived.

# Part Two: V, Santiago de Cuba and VI, The Ship of Dogs Analysis

In Cuba, M. Lenormand de Mézy's hedonism comes to the forefront. On the plantation, M. Lenormand de Mézy's wealth rests in his slaves, since without them he could not raise and sell sugar. When he goes to Cuba, the slaves are literally his wealth, like bars of gold that he carries with him to spend. Ironically, in this time of hedonism, when M. Lenormand de Mézy falls into drinking and gambling, he at the same time turns to religion. His religion is not based in a belief in principles or in any real desire to understand or follow a good path in life. Instead, it is based in the fear of death. M. Lenormand de Mézy does not want retribution meted out to him for the way he's lived his life (though this was how his plantation was ultimately destroyed). He wants to pay for his sins with prayers, without any real remorse. His faith is hypocritical.

The story of Pauline Bonaparte is a separate thread within the novel. Unlike the story of Ti Noël, it tells the story of a woman, the only major woman character in the novel. Pauline is a sensualist. She enjoys the trappings of wealth and taking male lovers. She enjoys a position of honor, where she can appreciate the men around her without danger of being raped. She is protected by her husband. Like many Europeans, Pauline has an idealized view of the Caribbean. She sees her new home as exotic, an opportunity for wearing her carefully chosen fashions. She sees Soliman as a sexual toy that she can tease and enjoy. She views herself as powerful, a being to be worshiped by everyone around her. Pauline, like Macandal, is a kind of god.

# Part Two: VII, Saint Calamity

## Part Two: VII, Saint Calamity Summary

In Saint Calamity, as the plague spreads, Pauline's husband insists that she leave for the house on La Tortue that he bought in case of emergency. Soliman and her maids go with her. At first, Pauline is happy and at leisure in her new home. When her husband, Leclerc, joins her though, he is wracked with chills and his eyes are yellow. Pauline is terrified, and she turns to Soliman for voodoo rituals against the disease. The black religious beliefs resonate with Pauline's Corsican background. He performs rituals such as floating coconut shells decorated with ribbons on the sea so the Lord of the Sea will not allow the disease to cross the ocean.

Pauline begins to avoid stepping on the cracks between tiles on the floor, since the cracks form crosses which should not be stepped on. One of the maids discovers Pauline on the floor, as Soliman dances around her mostly naked with a machete, having sacrificed a rooster. Soliman begins sleeping on a rug in Pauline's room. Finally, Leclerc dies of yellow fever, and Pauline departs for Europe with her husband's body, shedding the trappings of voodoo as she departs. After Pauline's departure, Santo Domingo, kept sane under the rule of Leclerc, turns to debauchery and hedonism. Prostitution is rampant, and black men are thrown to the dogs for sport. The governor sends away to Cuba for more dogs, to feed on the black slaves. However, the black rebels succeed in overthrowing the colonists' government, and black priests begin to appear in the communities.

## Part Two: VII, Saint Calamity Analysis

Pauline's response to her husband's illness is a reaction of emotion and not thought. Pauline lives in her emotions and in her limited worldview, little affected by the books she reads or by intellectual thought. She is easily attracted to voodoo, the promise of powerful gods that can be dealt with through pacts, of the idea of reasoning and bargaining with the forces of nature, as one might try to reason and bargain with a powerful human ruler.

The personification of forces of nature into gods gives man power to bargain for help. Ultimately, this power is simply an illusion, since the gods are not real, and Pauline's husband dies. Her experience with voodoo is not an experience that takes place in reality, but an experience that takes place inside her own mind. Though Pauline falls deep into the spell of voodoo, she sheds it as easily as she takes it on, as she sails away from the island. This shows Pauline following her emotions thoughtlessly, instead of taking any real spiritual path.

# Part Three: I, The Portents and II, Sans Souci

## Part Three: I, The Portents and II, Sans Souci Summary

In The Portents, Ti Noël, an old man, comes back to his old home. M. Lenormand de Mézy lost him in a card game to a Cuban plantation owner and shortly afterward died in poverty. By saving up Christmas money given to him each year by his new owner, Ti Noël gained passage on a ship to Santo Domingo, where slavery no longer exists. He walks toward the plantation where he was formerly a slave, giving greetings as he walks along, although he doesn't understand the language very well. He stops when he sees a voodoo offering to Legba, Lord of the Roads, at a tree. Ti Noël falls to the ground in thanks for being in a land where pacts with the gods are honored.

In San Souci, Ti Noël walks for several days, finding himself near the cave where Macandal hid and made his poisons. He finally locates the plantation of M. Lenormand de Mézy. Nothing is left, though, of the old buildings except ruins. The chimney of the main house rises up, solitary. A weather vane is all that's left of the chapel. As Ti Noël sits in the ruins, talking to the ants, black soldiers in ornate uniforms ride by, and Ti Noël follows them. He finds himself in vast garden-like fields, where people are being forced to work under the threat of soldiers with whips. An elaborate palace rises up in the distance. All the trappings of aristocracy are here, exaggerated beyond anything the European colonists have, but the aristocrats are black. Even the statue of Mary is black. Ti Noël is at Sans Souci, the palace of Henri Christophe, former chef, now the monarch ruling the land. As he watches the scene, Ti Noël is attacked by soldiers and taken prisoner. Despite his protests, he is set to work carrying brick after brick up a mountain to build a fortress, along with other prisoners: the elderly, women, and children. He can see the luxurious, ornamented garden where the princesses Athenaïs and Améthyste, play.

## Part Three: I, The Portents and II, Sans Souci Analysis

Ti Noël believes that as an old man, he will find peace at the plantation where he suffered as a slave through the years of his youth. The sight of the voodoo offering, in the open along the side of the road, shows Ti Noël that his culture has come above ground in the land he left years ago. He is grateful of the idea that blacks can rule their own land in the Caribbean. This is a moment of exaltation for Ti Noël, but it is only momentary.

Ti Noël finds the same disparity in the new kingdom that there was in the old colonial slave society. Before, the disparity was between the rich, white colonists and the black slaves. Now, the disparity is between the rich, aristocratic blacks and the helpless

peasants, who are enslaved without recourse, and whose objections are answered with violence and death. Ti Noël is a slave again. The issue of slavery, power, inequality, and suffering is not an issue of black against white, Ti Noël learns. The issue is one of kings and peasants, of rich and poor, contrasting the haves and the have-nots.

# Part Three: III, The Sacrifice of the Bulls and IV, The Immured

## Part Three: III, The Sacrifice of the Bulls and IV, The Immured Summary

The Sacrifice of the Bulls describes the Citadel La Ferriére, a monstrous structure rising up on the top of a mountain. It is an immense brick fortress on the top of Le Bonnet de l'Évêque mountain. Each day, bulls are slaughtered so their blood can be mixed with mortar to protect the fortress. The workers building the structure are black prisoners, and no one worries if one falls over a towering wall. At the end of his day as one of the workers, Ti Noël lays down his last brick. It is midnight, and he finds a ditch to sleep in. He is wakened with a whip at dawn to work.

For twelve years, every person in the north has been enslaved to build this fortress, brick by brick. In some ways the slavery is worse than the old slavery. It is humiliating to be enslaved by another African and the colonists rarely killed their slaves, who were worth money. The soldiers have no compunction against killing the enslaved workers. King Henri Christophe goes up to the citadel accompanied by his officers to view the work, occasionally ordering a lazy worker's death. Then he rests atop his creation, where he can flee to with 15,000 men if necessary, in case of attack, so that a black king will remain towering over the island, the hope of the people.

In The Immured, the work on the fortress begins drawing to a close, and Ti Noël slips away among the women and other workers being released. He goes to the former plantation where he once lived and begins to clear away the growth that is covering the ruins. He hides on the plantation, away from possible enslavement; but after months of malnourishment, he heads for the Cap to find food. The city, though, is in an eerie state, a deathwatch, focused on the Archbishop's Palace, where howling cries can be heard. The prisoner is Corneille Breille, the priest and confessor of King Henri Christophe, who wanted to return to France. Since the priest knows the king's sins, the king had him imprisoned. Henri Christophe has replaced him with a Spanish father, Juan de Dios. After a week of prison, Corneille Breille's voice has disappeared, and he is assumed dead, and life renews in the Cap. Ti Noël manages to get some supplies and money for brandy, and after having some drinks, he takes off home, remembering a song of insults to a king and insulting Henri Christophe in every way he can imagine.

## Part Three: III, The Sacrifice of the Bulls and IV, The Immured Analysis

The citadel, the great fortress that King Henri Christophe builds at the top of the mountain, is an abuse of power and an extravagance of aristocracy, but it also arises

from the trauma of slavery. It comes about from the remembrance of domination by whites, of being overwhelmed by a more powerful contingent and left to suffer. King Henri Christophe in the novel truly believes that the citadel will be a blessing to the people, a way for the free black society to survive against dominating forces that come to attack it. The sacrifice of the bulls is a blood sacrifice, as is the sacrifice of the peasants who work for twelve years of unending labor in building the fortress. The bulls also symbolize the powers of nature and of voodoo, brought into the fortress. It becomes a living thing, with blood coursing through its mortar. Meanwhile, in his position of power, King Henri Christophe becomes blind to the suffering he is inflicting, a suffering as great or greater than that under slavery.

The imprisonment of Corneille Breille is another indication of King Henri Christophe's paranoia. The citadel is meant for protection in case of attack; King Henri Christophe lives in fear of the forces of Europe reasserting themselves. This fear extends to the European priest he confesses to. King Henri Christophe imprisons him as a way to protect himself from his own sins, which the priest carries in his memory. Like M. Lenormand de Mézy, Henri Christophe's relationship with religion is hypocritical. He wants salvation for his own soul, but cares not for the well being of his priests or his people.

# Part Three: V, Chronicle of August 15, VI, Ultima Ratio Regum, and VII, Strait Is the Gate

## Part Three: V, Chronicle of August 15, VI, Ultima Ratio Regum, and VII, Strait Is the Gate Summary

In Chronicle of August 15, Juan de Dios González is saying mass in Latin, which Queen Marie-Louise finds pleasant, though she doesn't understand it. Henri Christophe is distracted with feelings of unease. He is aware of the people's growing dislike for him. Suddenly, a second priest appears, the grotesque figure of the imprisoned priest, though all know of his death. The people shrink from the apparition. The king is struck to the floor, paralyzed, and the apparition leaps to the roof-beams above him. Henri Christophe is carried out of the church, cursing, and brought back to his chambers to be nursed.

In Ultima Ratio Regum, a week has passed. Henri Christophe begins feeling that he can move, and he pulls himself up out of bed. Soliman, the king's valet, helps him stand up. The king goes to the window and begins to feel better. He sees several court musicians walking below. He then hears drums and watches for the changing of the guards. The drums, though, are playing the wrong rhythm. It is a call to rebellion. Chaos breaks loose as some soldiers try to stop the mutiny and others run off in rebellion. Then, the courtyard is deserted. The queen and princesses are crying.

The king walks through the empty palace, noting the previously unnoticed sounds of insects buzzing in the rooms. At the bottom of a stairway, the king sees five African men he bought and gave their freedom, training them as palace pages. They have not deserted him, and the king greets them gratefully with a gesture. Henri Christophe goes to the throne room. The king thinks of the citadel, but hears the voodoo drums in the distance as his lands begin to be set aflame. The citadel is useless for one man against the people of the island. It is meant to defend against whites, not against his own people. The king dresses himself in his most regal robes and shoots himself.

In Strait Is the Gate, the queen, Soliman, the princesses, and the king's remaining loyal African pages carry the king's body to the citadel, as the people ransack the palace. The queen is barefoot, having lost the heel off of her shoe. When the procession arrives at dawn, they find no help. The soldiers flee from their posts when they hear the news. Prisoners are released and talk threateningly of beheading the queen, as Marie Antoinette was beheaded during the French Revolution. At a rumor that the guards have deserted, the prisoners follow suit. The governor of the citadel cuts off Henri Christophe's finger and gives it to the queen, who puts it in her shirt. Then, they sink the body of the king in wet mortar, and he becomes part of the great and terrible citadel that he has built.

# Part Three: V, Chronicle of August 15, VI, Ultima Ratio Regum, and VII, Strait Is the Gate Analysis

The Chronicle of August 15 retells the most mystical event of the novel. The specter of the abused priest appears during mass, and all those attending, including the Spanish priest, seem to see him. The king is struck paralyzed, and the mass erupts in chaos. This ghost story is true in the context of the novel, because the king and those around him believe in it. Its reality is difficult to discern. The imprisoned priest may never have died, or the event may be a conscience-stricken hallucination of the king's, but the novel gives no real indication that either of these things is true. The king's misdeeds have come back to destroy him, and this is an indicator of things to come.

When King Henri Christophe recovers from his encounter with his sins against the priest, he is faced with his sins against his people. The rebellion stems from King Henri Christophe's imposition of suffering on the people of the land. All suffering comes back to its instigator, in a natural reaction. The only people who remain loyal to the king are those whom he delivered from slavery. The five pages are Africans who are grateful to the king for their lives of freedom. However, though the king gave freedom to these Africans, he did not allow freedom for his own people, and he pays the price. With all his paranoia, King Henri Christophe only sees danger from the Europeans who may at any time attack him. He sees no way to counter a rebellion of the peasants in his own land, who he never expected to harm him. The only possible way out he can see is suicide.

# Part Four: I, The Night of the Statues and II, The Royal Palace

## Part Four: I, The Night of the Statues and II, The Royal Palace Summary

In The Night of the Statues, the former queen and her daughters are in Rome. Athenaïs is playing the piano to her sister Améthyste's singing. Queen Marie-Louise is embroidering an alter cloth. The family is enjoying a summer in Rome, as is Soliman, who makes a stir among the poor sections of Rome and becomes a local celebrity for his uniqueness as a black man in Rome. He is asked over and over to tell his story, which he adds to with magical details, painting himself as a nephew of Henri Christophe. One night, the people push him onto a stage at a theater, and his story is so successful that the theater manager invites him back to perform any time. He begins an affair with a maid at the Borghese Palace, where the servants have free reign because the owners are away.

One night, Soliman is drunk and decides to explore the palace with his lover. They go out into a garden filled with white statues of naked women and animals, and Soliman thinks he sees one of the statues move. They run inside and go upstairs, where Soliman sees a statue of a naked woman holding out an apple, the Venus of Canova, modeled by Pauline Bonaparte. In his drunkenness, he sees his Pauline and begins caressing the statue with massage. Becoming overwhelmed with the idea that it is Pauline's corpse, he lets out a cry, as his girlfriend runs off. His screaming brings the police, and Soliman runs off. Soliman goes back to Queen Marie-Louise, and he falls ill with malaria and calls to his voodoo gods to help him.

The Royal Palace returns to the story of Ti Noël. One of the looters who ransacked the palace, Ti Noël now has a boule table in his roofless manor house at the plantation, as well as a decorated screen, a stuffed moonfish, a music box, a decanter, a shepherdess doll, an armchair, and three volumes of encyclopedia that he uses as a stool. His most prized possession is a green silk dress coat with salmon-colored lace cuffs that once was King Henri Christophe's. Ti Noël wears it constantly. He feels himself ascending, and he gives a long speech at a festival of drums, feeling himself possessed by the spirit of a king. People leave animals for him on his land and greet him with reverence. Ti Noël gives royal appointments to passersby, and gives flowers to little girls for services. The Order of the Sunflower is the most desired, since the flower is the most decorative. Ti Noël presides over dances on his plantation.

# Part Four: I, The Night of the Statues and II, The Royal Palace Analysis

The statues in the garden are idealized images. Interestingly, the ideal of humanity is portrayed as women, naked and in conjunction with nature. These statues contrast with the reality of the Caribbean society where man is enslaved and abused, leading to a cycle of bloodshed and suffering, and where women are raped and used as sexual tools. The ideal is far removed from the reality. In his drunken stupor, Soliman confuses the idealized statue of Venus for his idealized Pauline. She is not a person, but an image, an idol.

In The Royal Palace, Ti Noël ascends to a kind of godhood. As he ages, he begins moving away from reality, becoming an eccentric "king" ruling harmlessly from his ruined plantation, surrounded by plunder from the former ruler. He is respected by the people because he has no will to oppress and no real power over them. The idealized ruler is ironically the ruler without power.

# Part Four: III, The Surveyors and IV, Agnus Dei

## Part Four: III, The Surveyors and IV, Agnus Dei Summary

In The Surveyors, French-speaking surveyors come and begin measuring out the land, despite the protests of Ti Noël and the other people living in the area. All Ti Noël gets for his protests is a beating with a measuring stick. The author compares the surveyors to insects, spreading over the land and completing their systematic measurements. The lighter-skinned mulattoes on the island are directing the operation, having formed an upper class. Farm work is mandatory, at the punishment of a whip and under the control of the ruling mulattoes.

Ti Noël thinks of Henri Christophe, who could not have imagine this turn of fate, but all that's left of him is his finger, preserved in a bottle of brandy. Queen Marie-Louise has ordered her right foot, similarly, to be preserved in alcohol and kept in a chapel to be built for her. Ti Noël is depressed at the endless cycle of forced labor and slavery, no matter who rules. He decides to turn into animal form, like Macandal, and wills himself to become a bird, then a horse, a wasp, and finally an ant, where he finds himself again in a chain of forced laborers. He runs and hides himself under the plundered table at his plantation.

In Agnus Dei, the geese from Sans Souci come to Ti Noël's plantation. He tries to join the group of geese, who have a cooperative tribal life, and all celebrate the mating of couples in their number. Ti Noël tries to turn into a goose and join them, but they will not accept him. Goose or not, he is a stranger and not one of their clan. He can never be one of them. Ti Noël experiences a moment of clarity. He realizes that all men suffer, work, and hope for people that they will never know, always seeking happiness that is never attained. Man's greatness is in seeking to rise above what he is, a greatness that can't be fulfilled in Heaven, where there is nothing to be won. Man can only be great in "the Kingdom of This World" where there is misery and suffering. The old man gets up on his table and shouts a declaration of war against yet another new master. A wind comes down and blows over the last ruins of the plantation. Ti Noël and his silk coat were not seen again, except perhaps by a vulture who suns itself before flying off to Bois Caïman.

## Part Four: III, The Surveyors and IV, Agnus Dei Analysis

The last two chapters of the novel show the cycle of abuse of power starting again, and indicate that it will lead inevitably to bloodshed and rebellion. First, the white colonists

were the abusers. Then King Henri Christophe showed that abuse of power was not limited to one race. Now, a new racial division is arising, but the important element is not race. Instead, it is power. The mulattoes are taking on power and are repeating the sins of the past—sins that have no color but are inherently human. In the face of this cycle, Ti Noël hides in the comfort of nature, believing himself to be a bird or a horse, a wasp or an ant. When he finds himself in a line of ants endlessly toiling, likely in reality he has been captured and forced into labor again; however, the reader only sees Ti Noël's distorted point of view, that of a man turned ant. He runs off and hides under his table, likely an escape from forced labor.

In the end of the novel, Ti Noël, like Macandal before him, disappears. He takes his last breath to rail against oppression, even though the cycle of slavery seems to never end. Ti Noël is taken away by a force of nature, a wind that rises up and tears down the last walls of the plantation. He is joined, that way, with his gods of nature. The vulture at the end of the story may be an animal form of Macandal, the last creature to possibly see Ti Noël; or perhaps it is meant to be Ti Noël himself, changing into another animal form. In any case, the vulture is a creature of death, and his flight off the island represents a flight into another realm of existence beyond the Kingdom of This World.

# Characters

## Ti Noël

Ti Noël is a slave on M. Lenormand de Mézy's plantation in Santo Domingo. He is in charge of the horses and is an expert on judging horses. Through the course of his life, he sees many political changes, but they continually result in enslavement and suffering. Ti Noël is a follower of Macandal in his poisoning campaign against the white slave owners, and he is a follower of Bouckman in his rebellion. At the beginning of the novel, Ti Noël compares mannequin heads in a barber shop to calves' heads on display in a butcher's. He doesn't view the white slave owners as people like himself, but as something completely separate from him, and he has no compunction against harming them. During the slave rebellion under Bouckman, Ti Noël goes to rape the master's wife. He may be the one who killed her with a sickle.

Ti Noël doesn't understand white culture, which seems foreign to him. He listens to the stories of Macandal and admires what he knows of tribal African culture. Ti Noël travels to Cuba when his master feels Santo Domingo, and in Cuba, he manages to save money to escape back to his old home, which is now the first free black land in the New World. Ti Noël is at first overjoyed to find a land where voodoo is practiced openly, but he is soon disappointed. Ti Noël learns that a land where blacks are in power does not mean there is no slavery, and he turns against the black king who commits his people to forced labor to build a giant fortress. He gains a hatred toward king, any king.

After the overthrow of King Henri Christophe, in which Ti Noël participates as a looter, he imagines himself a benign king and becomes a local character. However, he lives to see yet another ruling class, the island's mulatto population, gain power and begin enslaving the people. As an old man, Ti Noël still rails against slavery and suffering, but he has a revelation that man is at his best when he is suffering on Earth and always striving to better himself.

## Macandal

Macandal is a slave on M. Lenormand de Mézy's plantation in northern Santo Domingo. Macandal is a Mandigue, and the slaves from that part of Africa are reputed to be troublemakers. Macandal brings with him stories of Africa, and in his role as a storyteller, he unites the black slaves and builds up their culture. Macandal is a practitioner of voodoo, and the voodoo gods play a large role in the stories he tells of Africa and its kings.

Macandal's arm is caught in a machine on the plantation and crushed. When the master comes to the scene, he takes out a machete to lop Macandal's crushed arm off. Afterward, Macandal becomes a cowherd, taking the cows out to graze each day. During Macandal's time alone in the wild, he begins exploring the plants that are

indigenous to the area. Macandal gathers plants and seeds, and he is especially interested in fungi that he finds, suspecting that they are poisonous. He confers with a voodoo woman who lives in a shack to find out the uses of the plants he's found. Finally, he and Ti Noël test a poison on one of the master's dogs.

Then, Macandal disappears. From a hiding place in a cave, he organizes a campaign of poisoning. When the white slave owners find out that he's responsible, Macandal disappears again. The black slaves believe that Macandal has voodoo powers and can turn into any animal at will. Four years later, Macandal is caught and burned alive, but the slaves still believe in him, convinced that he escaped his death at the last moment.

## M. Lenormand de Mézy

M. Lenormand de Mézy is a plantation owner on Santo Domingo and a confirmed monarchist who disapproves of the bleeding-heart parliament in France. M. Lenormand de Mézy does not consider the idea that his slaves may revolt and does not understand what they are thinking. He doesn't consider voodoo worthy of his notice and only becomes aware that it is a force to consider when the governor mentions it in relation to the slave rebellion. M. Lenormand de Mézy considers his slaves as property, not as people. Obsessed with sex, he has three wives over the course of the novel and is continually raping his female slaves.

After the slave rebellion on Santo Domingo, M. Lenormand de Mézy flees to Cuba with his few remaining slaves. There, he lives a life of gambling and pleasure, but since he is getting old, he is starting to fear death. M. Lenormand de Mézy makes a hypocritical show of religion out of his fear of punishment in the afterlife. He continues to gamble, though, gambling away all of his slaves and ultimately dying in poverty.

## Marinette

Marinette is the laundress on the plantation, and M. Lenormand de Mézy has this black slave in his bed whenever he is without a wife.

## King Henri Christophe

King Henri Christophe begins as a chef in Cap, a free black man. He joins the military. After the successful revolt that made Haiti the first free black country in the New World, Henri Christophe becomes king. He rules from an ornate and European-style palace called Sans Souci. Henri Christophe uses enslaves the peasants of northern Haiti for twelve years to build an immense fortress rising up atop a mountain peak, for his army to retreat to in case of invasion from Europe. When the people who have come to hate his tyranny revolt, King Henri Christophe shoots himself. His body is entombed in mortar in his fortress.

## M. Lenormand de Mézy's First Wife

M. Lenormand de Mézy's first wife is killed during the outbreak of poisonings headed by Macandal. She dies from eating a poisoned orange.

## M. Lenormand de Mézy's Second Wife

M. Lenormand de Mézy's second wife is a deeply religious woman who gets the slaves' help in creating a nativity scene on the plantation for Christmas.

## Mlle Floridor

Mlle Floridor is an actress at the theater that is built in the Cap. When M. Lenormand de Mézy's second wife dies, he begins attending the theater and seeing Mlle Floridor. She convinces him to go to Paris with her, leaving a relative in charge of the plantation. In Paris, M. Lenormand de Mézy is home sick and Mlle Floridor's acting is a failure. Disappointed, she accompanies M. Lenormand de Mézy back to his plantation, where she grows ill and older. Mlle Floridor beats her maids to take out her frustrations, and she conducts theatrical performances for the slaves, who don't understand what she's saying and believe she must be confessing to a life of sin and prostitution that she fled from to wind up in Santo Domingo. When the slaves revolt, Ti Noël goes upstairs to rape Mlle Floridor, since he lusted after her well-formed breasts during her performances. Later, M. Lenormand de Mézy finds her splayed on the floor of her room, killed with a sickle.

## Bouckman

Bouckman is the leader of the slave rebellion that occurs after the French government orders the slaves released and the plantation owners refuse to comply.

## Governor Blancheland

Governor Blancheland is the governor of Santo Domingo at the time of the slaves' revolt. He is terrified by the slaves' voodoo practices, and he wants to execute every black person, free or slave, on the island.

## Pauline Bonaparte

Pauline Bonaparte comes to the Caribbean with her military husband. A sensualist, she enjoys the exotic islands. When a plague hits Santo Domingo, Pauline's husband sends her to an island off the coast of Venezuela. When Pauline's husband comes down with yellow fever, Pauline becomes absorbed in voodoo, learning from her favorite attendant,

a black man named Soliman. However, as she leaves the Caribbean after her husband's death, Pauline's attachment to voodoo practices falls away as well.

## General Leclerc

General Leclerc is Pauline Bonaparte's husband, and an authority over the island of Santo Domingo. Leclerc comes down with yellow fever and dies in the Caribbean.

## Soliman

Soliman is an attendant on Pauline Bonaparte while she is in the Caribbean. He becomes her masseuse, and there is a constant sexual tension between them. When Pauline's husband falls ill, Soliman uses voodoo practices to ward off plague. After Pauline leaves, Soliman becomes a member of the court of King Henri Christophe, and after the king's death, he flees for Rome with the queen and princesses. There, Soliman becomes famous among the locals, who enjoy hearing him tell embellished stories of his adventures. While drunk, Soliman runs across a statue of Pauline Bonaparte, and he becomes overwhelmed by the memories of Pauline from her time in the Caribbean.

## Queen Marie-Louise

Queen Marie-Louise is the wife of King Henri Christophe. After his death, she flees to Rome with her daughters, taking with her the finger of her dead husband, which she preserves in brandy. The queen asks in her will that her foot be preserved in alcohol and kept in a chapel.

## Athenaïs and Améthyste

Athenaïs and Améthyste are the two daughters of King Henri Christophe and Queen Marie-Louise. They are princesses of Haiti. After King Henri Christophe's death, the princesses flee to Rome with the queen.

## Corneille Breille, Duke of Anse

Corneille Breille is Henri Christophe's priest. When he plans to go back to France, knowing the king's sins, the king has him imprisoned in the Archbishop's Palace, where he eerie cries can be heard throughout the Cap. After Corneille Breille dies, he appears in church to Henri Christophe, causing the monarch's temporary paralysis.

## The Surveyors

At the end of the novel, surveyors come to measure out the land for the new ruling class of mulattoes.

# Objects/Places

## The Cap

The Cap is the large city near the plantation where Ti Noël is a slave.

## The Plantation of M. Lenormand de Mézy

Ti Noël is a slave on the sugar plantation of the French M. Lenormand de Mézy.

## Plaine du Nord

Plaine du Nord is the Northern flatlands on the Caribbean island where Ti Noël is a slave, in an area that will later become Haiti, on the island known at the time as Santo Domingo.

## Sans Souci

Sans Souci is where the palace of Henri Christophe is. It is adorned with European elegance taken to a new level of intricacy.

## Citadel La Ferriére

The Citadel La Ferriére is a vast fortress on a mountain peak built by King Henri Christophe using enslaved labor, so that he and his army can have a retreat in case of invasion.

## The Slaughtered Bulls

During the building of the Citadel La Ferriére bulls are slaughtered and bled into the mortar to protect the fortress.

## King Henri Christophe's Finger

Soliman cuts off King Henri Christophe's finger after he is dead and gives it to Queen Marie-Louise. She puts it down her shirt and later preserves it in brandy.

## Venus of Canova

Venus of Canova is a sculpture of Venus modeled by Pauline Bonaparte. One night when he is drunk, Soliman sees this sculpture, and memories of Pauline explode in him. His cries attract the Roman police, and Soliman flees the scene.

## The Green Silk Dress Coat

Ti Noël loots a green silk dress coat with salmon-colored lace cuffs from the castle of King Henri Christophe, and after that he wears the coat every day, becoming a kind of mock king of the countryside.

## The Geese of San Souci

The geese of King Henri Christophe's palace find their way to Ti Noël's plantation after the death of the king. Ti Noël tries to turn into a goose and join the geese, but he realizes that he can never be accepted into their clan.

## The Vulture

At the end of the novel, Ti Noël disappears in a storm and is never seen again, except perhaps, the author notes, by a vulture who then flies across the sea.

# Themes

## Suffering and Enslavement

The Kingdom of This World is a novel of suffering and enslavement. The focus of the novel are the black slaves of Santo Domingo, now known as Haiti, during the French colonial period. Throughout his life, Ti Noël longs for nothing but freedom. When he is a slave, he wants to destroy his enslavers. When he can, he returns to his homeland looking for life as a free man. However, Ti Noël finds that the abolishment of slavery as it existed under colonial rule does not mean an end to suffering and enforced labor. Under the black King Henri Christophe, Ti Noël finds himself again enslaved. When King Henri is destroyed, a new regime comes to replace him. Again, labor is to be enforced.

At the beginning of the novel, when Ti Noël is walking back to the plantation with his owner, he sings a song of insults to the English king, in defiance of Europe. Later in the novel, after King Henri has imprisoned his priest to keep him from returning to Europe, Ti Noël remembers that song. He sings again, this time in defiance of all kings. It is not white tyranny that Ti Noël hates; it is tyranny.

At the end of the novel, Ti Noël has a revelation about suffering, and because this revelation concludes with the title phrase of the novel, it is clearly thematically central to the book. In a moment of lucidity, Ti Noël realizes that mankind can never get away from suffering during life, but that the best part of man is his desire to lift himself up above his present condition and to strive for something better in this life. Ti Noël concludes that while suffering is inevitable, it brings out greatness in mankind.

## Religion

Religion is an important part of the cultures in the novel. In the black culture developing on Santo Domingo, a central force is voodoo. The black slaves believe that they draw power from the gods, and Macandal, who organizes the poisoning of the white slave owners, is a voodoo priest, a holy man who channels the Loas. The governor identifies the potential danger of voodoo. He correctly attributes a power to voodoo. It has the power to join the slaves together and to give them a focus as they rise up to combat the white enslavers. The plantation owner, however, can't take voodoo seriously. How could someone take seriously a snake god, or any pantheon? He dismisses the voodoo beliefs as childish and beneath contempt, without recognizing their real power to join together the blacks of the island in a united culture.

Catholicism is the religion of the French colonists. It is a religion of pomp, performance, and decoration. The creation of a nativity is a performance. The slaves all witness it and participate it, but they see only the outer trappings of it. The tenants of the religion seem to play little role in the people's lives. Pauline Bonaparte attends mass, but she is quick

to embrace voodoo in an hour of need. M. Lenormand de Mézy goes to church when he is getting old and in fear of death, but he lives his life as a hedonist, embracing sex, violence, drinking, and gambling. While voodoo is very real to the slaves in the novel, Catholicism seems reduced to ritual to the colonists.

## Cultural Divisions

The novel begins by painting a deep cultural division between the white European colonists and the black slaves of the plantation. They live in entirely different spheres, often with little awareness of the other's world. However, cultural division is not only based on race. The novel makes it clear as new regimes continue to impose slavery on the peasants, that cultural divides happen between those of the same race and country, and that these divisions lead to suffering.

King Henri Christophe, though he was once an acquaintance of Ti Noël, an acclaimed chef in the Cap, builds a cultural division between himself and the people of northern Haiti. The division is one of wealth and of class. The king has little true understanding of the world of the peasants that he rules over, though he was once part of a small minority of free blacks in a country run by French colonists and populated in vast majority by black slaves. Still, King Henri embraces European culture and creates a wealthy court that is separate from the people he rules.

The geese at the end of the novel represent cultural divides between people. The geese have their own tribe, and no stranger can become part of it, even another goose like them. Ti Noël's observations of the geese apply to King Henri Christophe and his court. Though the peasants and the king are of one race, they are of different cultures, and so they are divided. This idea can be enlarged and applied to the African diaspora. Africans who are dispersed throughout the world by slave traders lose their tribes. They no longer belong to the group that they came from and only belong to the new group of people, slaves.

# Style

## Point of View

The novel is written by a third person, semi-omniscient narrator which follows different characters at different times of the book, and often retells events as a simple third-person narrator, without giving insight into what is in the characters' minds. The general course of the novel follows Ti Noël's life, but he is often not the central character in the action of the moment. Though Ti Noël begins the first part of the novel as the central character in the first chapter, and though the reader sees Ti Noël's thoughts about the wax heads and the calves' heads, the majority of the first part of the novel centers around Macandal, a character whose inner life is a mystery to the reader.

The novel often shows the point of view of the slaves in general. At the end of the first part, when Macadal is killed, the slaves know that he has escaped and is still living. The author tells the reader the actuality of what happened, that soldiers recaptured him and threw him into the fire. He also tells what the black slaves watching the event "know" to have happened. In doing this, the author contrasts the objective reality of the event with the subjective reality that the people experience. Later in the novel, as Ti Noël grows old, the reader is still inside his mind, and when Ti Noël believes that he is turning into different animals, the writer does not temper this subjective reality with an objective view. The reader sees only what Ti Noël "knows."

## Setting

The novel is set on the island where Haiti is now, beginning in the French colonial period approximately 1750, and ending in the early 1800s, after the death of King Henri Christophe. The setting is chosen to track, over the course of one man's lifetime, a continuing cycle of enslavement and forced labor. The time and location also gives the author scope to explore the deep cultural divides between people, particularly the European colonists and the displaced African slaves.

The novel begins on a French sugar plantation, owned by an aristocrat at run by African slave labor. The slaves and the plantation owner live in two separate worlds, and this creates a dichotomy of setting. The plantation owner is completely unaware of the slaves' cultural world, where voodoo reigns and the African Loas give power. Meanwhile, as the slaves see the nativity scenes, book posters, powdered wigs, and other trappings of the French colonists' culture, they understand little of it. The characters living next to each other are living in two separate worlds.

As time passes, the setting on Haiti changes. However, the reign of King Henri Christophe paints a similar cultural division. One setting is Sans Souci, where the European-style black court lives in extreme luxury. The contrasting setting is the bloody and painful building of the citadel, where the impoverished peasants are put to hard

labor by force to build an extravagant structure. Though Ti Noël can see Sans Souci from the place where he labors, his world is far removed from the wealth of the upper class.

## Language and Meaning

The characters in the novel speak different languages, not merely French and Creole, but language of culture that reveal their beliefs and heritage. When the plantation owner's third wife performs scenes from famous plays for the slaves, she is telling the stories of her own culture, in the manner of her culture. However, there is a deep cultural divide between the aging, failed French actress and the slaves of the plantation. The slaves understand a few of the words and apply their knowledge of colonists to these few inklings to decide that the actress must be a prostitute and a criminal, fleeing to the colonies to escape prosecution. Language is part of the cultural divide that makes the two groups so distant from each other.

The African slaves speak a storytelling language of their own cultures, tribes, and kings. One of Macandal's powers is as a storyteller, relating the greatness of African Loas and kings to the other slaves. The wealth of these stories gives the slaves something to believe in and a path to follow that is their own. It gives them culture, something that they can relate to and that is not foreign like the European culture that surrounds them.

The novel paints the cultural differences between the upper classes and the lower classes with language. The rich, intricate practices and settings of the elite are described in detail. Henri Christophe, at the beginning of all proclamations, is described with a litany of titles that goes on for half a page. This is a signifier of power. The simple Ti Noël, in contrast, is never heaped with titles or language beyond the simple three syllables of his name.

## Structure

The novel is divided into four parts, each covering a different time period in the novel. The novel's parts are divided into short, named chapters. The first three parts of the novel are of similar length, consisting of from seven to eight short chapters. The fourth part of the novel is shorter, with only four chapters. Part One covers Ti Noël's younger days as a slave on the plantation, and the main storyline is that of Macandal, who loses his arm, conducts a war of poisoning on the white colonists, and finally is caught and burned alive by the colonists, becoming an ascended holy man in the eyes of the slaves.

Part Two covers the tumultuous time between the death of Macandal and Ti Noël's return to the island as a free man. The plantation owner remarries. The French declare that slaves should be freed, and the colonists revolt. The slaves, in turn, war against the colony, and Ti Noël is driven off the island to Cuba, when his master flees. Meanwhile, General Leclerc is sent by Napoleon to the island to restore order and dies of yellow fever.

In Part Three, Ti Noël returns to the island after all this turmoil, only to be enslaved again under another regime, this time a regime of his fellow black men. Part Four shows the cycle starting again. There is another regime, a new ruler, and a new program of hard labor for the peasants. The book ends with Ti Noël's death. He has not, throughout his lifetime, attained true freedom, because the cycle of imprisonment continues endlessly in the Kingdom of This World, but he still strives for a better life, showing greatness in the attempt.

# Quotes

"Ti Noël heard the voice of his master, who emerged from the barber's with heavily powdered cheeks. His face now bore a startling resemblance to the four dull wax faces that stood in a row along the counter, smiling stupidly." —Part One: I, The Wax Heads, page 15

"The poison crawled across the Plaine du Nord, invading pastures and stables." —Part One: V, De Profundis, page 33

"With wings one day, spurs another, galloping or crawling, he had made himself master of the courses of the underground streams, the caverns of the seacoast, and the treetops, and now ruled the whole island." —Part One: VI, The Metamorphoses, page 42

"Meanwhile the actress, faded and gnawed by malaria, avenged her artistic failure on the Negresses who bathed her and combed her hair, ordering them whipped on the slightest pretext." —Part Two: I, The Daughter of Minos and Pasiphaë, page 60

"Governor Blanchland, a monarchist like himself, was completely out of patience with the vaporings of those Utopian imbeciles in Paris whose hearts bled for the black slaves." —Part Two: III, The Call of the Conch Shells, page 71

"But, at the same time, seeing in the mirror how the marks of age deepened with every passing week, he began to fear the approaching summons of God." —Part Two: V, Santiago de Cuba, page 85

"But before long, as the east wind brought Paris ever nearer the prow and the salt air tarnished the rings of the coffin, the young widow began to shed her cilices." —Part Two: VII, Saint Calamity, page 101

"But what surprised Ti Noël most was the discovery that this marvelous world, the like of which the French governors of the Cap had never known, was a world of Negroes." —Part Three: II, Sans Souci, pages 114-115

"A song that was all insults to a king. That was the important thing: to a king." —Part Three: IV, The Immured, page 132

"The bulls' blood that those thick walls had drunk was an infallible charm against the arms of the white men. But this blood had never been directed against Negroes, whose shouts, coming closer now, were invoking Powers to which they made blood sacrifice," —Part Three: VI, Ultima Ratio Regum, page 149

"One had to have seen the Surveyors at work to grasp the terror aroused by the presence of these beings who pursue the calling of insects." —Part Four: III, The Surveyors, page 175

"For this reason, bowed down by suffering and duties, beautiful in the midst of his misery, capable of loving in the face of afflictions and trials, man finds his greatness, his fullest measure, only in the Kingdom of This World." —Part Four: IV, Agnes Dei, page 185

# Topics for Discussion

What are the meanings of all the chapter titles? Why did the author choose them?

What does the title mean in the context of the novel?

In what ways does the novel differ from historical accounts of the history of Haiti?

What are the characters' attitudes toward women? What does the author's perception of women seem to be?

What does the vulture at the end of the novel signify?

Does the novel give any hope for overcoming oppression?

What is the significance of voodoo for the characters in the novel? How do the white characters' perceptions of voodoo differ from the black characters' perceptions of voodoo?

Why does King Henri Christophe impose a rule of oppression? Why is he surprised that his people rebel against him?