

The Kitchen House Study Guide

The Kitchen House by Kathleen Grissom

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



Contents

The Kitchen House Study Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Plot Summary.....	3
Prologue and Chapters 1-8.....	5
Chapters 9-20.....	10
Chapters 21-28.....	15
Chapters 29-36.....	18
Chapters 37-48.....	21
Chapters 49-55.....	25
Characters.....	29
Symbols and Symbolism.....	34
Settings.....	36
Themes and Motifs.....	37
Styles.....	39
Quotes.....	40



Plot Summary

The Kitchen House was written by Kathleen Grissom. The novel is an interesting look at the history of slavery, the role of the indentured servant, and the helplessness of the ladies of the time period.

Lavinia McCarten is only six when her parents die on board a ship bound for America from Ireland. To pay their passage, Lavinia and her brother are placed separately as indentured servants. After arriving in America, Lavinia is taken to the home of the ship's captain and raised by the kitchen slave named Belle. At first, Lavinia is too sick to take much notice of the world around her. However, Belle and her surrogate mother, Mama Mae, nurse her back to health.

As time passes, Lavinia becomes an important part of the daily workings of the household staff on Tall Oaks. Lavinia learns to cook and clean alongside Belle, Mama Mae, and Dory. Lavinia even learns the secrets of the farm, including the fact that Belle is the captain's daughter. In time, Lavinia even finds herself rescuing the captain's son from his abusive tutor. On the day the captain's young daughter falls from a swing and breaks her neck, Lavinia is there to help deliver the captain's wife, Mrs. Pyke, of a second son.

Lavinia becomes the primary caretaker for the newborn baby when Mrs. Pyke, lost in her grief, is unable to care for the child herself. Lavinia names the child Campbell after an infant brother she vaguely remembers from her past. Lavinia becomes mother, sister, and playmate to the child as he grows. At the same time, she becomes a constant companion to Mrs. Pyke who takes her under her wing and begins to teach her how to be a lady. Therefore, when the Pykes decide to go to Pennsylvania for the summer to visit Mrs. Pyke's father, Lavinia is devastated to lose her teacher and her tiny charge. The boy is quickly replaced, however, when Dory is forced to leave her own infant Sukie behind in order to devote her energies to caring for young Campbell.

In Pennsylvania, the Pykes are devastated when yellow fever strikes, killing both Mrs. Pyke's father and Dory, as well as inadvertently causing the death of little Campbell. The captain also contracts the illness. Even though he survives, he is weakened by the illness and dies less than two years later. Mrs. Pyke, who has gone insane from grief, is taken to Williamsburg where her sister lives to be hospitalized. Lavinia is to go to Williamsburg as well, so that she might be a companion to Mrs. Pyke when she heals.

Despite her unhappiness at leaving Belle and the rest of her family, Lavinia soon realizes what a gift it is to be allowed to go to Williamsburg and receive lessons in being a lady. Lavinia becomes engaged to a widower, but this relationship quickly ends when the man tries to take advantage of Lavinia's innocence. A short time later, Lavinia finds herself engaged to Marshall Pyke. Lavinia is happy about her new circumstances because it means a return to Tall Oaks and the family she left behind. However, it is not the same when she returns. As lady of the house, there are certain expectations for Lavinia that her husband violently imposes.



Lavinia soon falls into a depression when she realizes the mistake she has made by marrying a violent alcoholic who does not try to hide an affair and children he has had with Beattie, his slave. Lavinia begins to rely on laudanum, the same drug that Mrs. Pyke once used to excess. In the end, however, Lavinia's love for her family pulls her out of her depression as she learns that her husband is breaking up whole families by selling his slaves to pay his gambling debts. Lavinia arranges for several of the slaves to run away, going along herself to escape her violent marriage. However, things go wrong when Mama Mae is hung by Marshall. Lavinia returns to Tall Oaks just in time to witness Marshall's murder by Belle's beloved son Jamie. Lavinia takes the gun and stands trial in Jamie's place. In the end, Lavinia walks away with her freedom and what is left of Tall Oaks, as well as the surviving members of her beloved family, now freed of slavery and earning a proper salary.



Prologue and Chapters 1-8

Summary

Prologue

Lavinia runs as quickly as she can, ignoring her child attempting to keep up with her. When Lavinia falls in the river and the child catches up, she instructs her to stay put. Lavinia climbs the bank and instantly sees the woman hanging from a massive oak tree.

Chapter 1

In the spring of 1791, a small girl is pulled from the arms of a large man she has no memory of and handed to a black man. The orders are to take the child to the kitchen house. The woman in the kitchen house, Belle, is not pleased with being given the care of such a small child on top of her other duties. The girl vomits when given milk, causing Belle anger when she has to clean her up. The girl wakes the next day, washed and redressed in a coarse brown shirt, to hear two children playing on swings outside. The girl goes out to meet them, but Belle drags her back into the kitchen house. There the girl meets Dory and her infant Henry.

The young girl is confused and overwhelmed. She refuses to eat and spends most of her time sleeping. A woman, Mama Mae, makes the girl a broth from a chicken that helps her feel a little better. A short time later, the girl and Belle are called to the main house. There, the captain tells the girl she is an indentured servant, that her parents died on his ship and she must work to pay for her passage. The captain says that the girl had a brother, but he has been placed with another family as an indentured servant. The captain then tells the girl her name is Lavinia McCarten.

That night, Lavinia stays with Mama Mae and her family while Belle waits for a visit from the captain. Lavinia is overwhelmed by all the people and noise at Mama Mae's, but finds she likes most of the people. Belle rushes into the house and tells Mama Mae's husband, Papa George, that Mrs. Pyke and Marshall followed the captain to Belle's house and that Mrs. Pyke became very upset when she saw the gifts the captain had brought Belle. Dory is sent to the house to care for Mrs. Pyke while Papa George goes to see to the captain. Later, Papa George instructs Belle to get some papers from the captain before things get worse.

Chapter 2

Belle is the captain's daughter, the result of a union between the captain and a young slave he purchased before his marriage. Belle's mother died, but she lived for nearly seven years in the big house with her grandmother, the captain's mother. However, after the captain's mother died, he got married and sent Belle to live with Mama Mae to protect his new wife from the truth of his relationship with Belle. Belle resents having to



be a servant to Mrs. Pyke, but she does not want to get her free papers and leave the only family she has ever known.

Chapter 3

Lavinia is caught with a doll she stole from Beattie. Belle is angry, but Mama Mae immediately understands and makes a similar doll for Lavinia. As time passes, and Lavinia's health improves, she begins spending time with Fanny and Beattie. They like to play by the river and one day see Jimmy steal a piece of board from the floor of the smoke house. Fanny, Beattie, and Lavinia run to tell Papa George. Later, Lavinia sees Jimmy's mother, Ida, take a piece of the same board out of a pot of corn mush.

When winter comes, Mama Mae takes the twins to the big house to teach them how to do the chores there. When the girls act up, Mama Mae tells them the story of seeing her father killed when he tries to get help for his dying wife. Mama Mae was then sent to the fields to work and remained there until Belle's mother died and she was sent to the main house to feed her. If not for Belle, Mama Mae might have died in the fields long ago.

That winter, Henry dies from an unnamed congenital illness. Dory takes the death of her infant hard. When Lavinia witnesses the baby's funeral, she suddenly remembers her own parents and watching them put in the water after their deaths. It is a difficult time for Lavinia until Mama Mae finds her and helps her with her grief.

Chapter 4

Belle begins to warm up to Lavinia when she learns that Lavinia is taking parts of her dinner to Ben, Mae and George's son and the man Belle loves.

Chapter 5

The captain returns home at Christmas. Lavinia is allowed to help with the preparation of Christmas dinner. During the preparation, Sally, the captain's daughter, and her cousin Meg come to watch. Sally is a bright child who makes everyone smile. However, Mrs. Pyke is not pleased when she finds the children speaking with the slaves.

There is a party in the slave quarters that night. The captain comes down to wish everyone Merry Christmas. While he is there, Mama Mae convinces him to perform the ceremony for Dory and Jimmy to marry.

Chapter 6

Belle is annoyed with the way Mrs. Pyke treats her and is tempted to tell her that Belle is the captain's daughter. Belle finds some time to be with Ben alone at the Christmas party, but when he starts talking about getting married, she leaves because she knows that someday the captain plans to take her away to Philadelphia.

Chapter 7



After the holidays Mrs. Pyke's sister and her family leave, followed soon by the captain. Everyone expects Mrs. Pyke to fall into a depression as she often does when the captain leaves, but she does not. Soon everyone learns that Mrs. Pyke is to have a baby. As Mrs. Pyke's confinement begins, she allows Sally to spend more and more time in the care of Fanny. One day, Fanny brings Sally to the kitchen house to see the baby chicks. Sally comes back often to the kitchen house even though Belle does not, at first, like it. After a while, however, everyone looks forward to Sally's visits.

As the summer progresses, the Lavinia and her family begin to notice odd things about Marshall's relationship with the new tutor, Mr. Waters. Papa George and Ben try to intervene on several occasions, even going to the captain to try to talk to him about it, but the captain refuses to listen. One afternoon, Sally begs Marshall to push her on the swings. Marshall refuses, but when Sally calls to Mr. Waters and asks him to make Marshall, Marshall becomes angry and pushes Sally too hard. Sally falls from the swing and breaks her neck, dying immediately.

Chapter 8

Even Belle, who has always resented Sally because of her position in the family, is heartbroken when Sally dies. Belle is responsible for cleaning the body, leaving her wracked with grief.

Analysis

The prologue of the novel showcases a grown woman named Lavinia who has a child of her own. This woman runs through the woods into a stream to find the hanging body of an unnamed person. The prologue is dark, opening the novel with the promise that someone close to Lavinia will die violently, a fact that will profoundly impact Lavinia. Immediately the reader is drawn to Lavinia as they wonder who this person is and why her death affects Lavinia so profoundly.

The early chapters of this novel introduce Lavinia, a six year old child who has been torn from everything that is familiar to her and given to people she does not know. Lavinia is sick and frightened, lacking memory of her past. This suggests to the reader that Lavinia's past is filled with tragedy. The reader learns that Lavinia, at six years old, has been made an indentured servant in order to pay for her passage to the United States from Ireland. It is a sad reality of the time period, as is the tradition of slavery to which Lavinia is introduced when she is given to the kitchen servants as a ward.

As Lavinia gets to know her new family, the reader too gets to know these colorful characters. They are all slaves, owned by the family, some for generations. Another twist that is accurate to the history of the time period is the fact that Belle, the eighteen year old kitchen servant, is the biological daughter of the captain, the owner of the farm. The captain's wife, however, does not know that this is their relationship and instead believes that Belle is the captain's lover. This causes a dangerous situation in which Belle becomes the constant target of Mrs. Pyke's wrath.



Time passes and Lavinia becomes a member of the extended family of Mama Mae, the head of the kitchen servants, and her husband, Papa George. Despite the differences between them, Mama Mae and her family have big enough hearts to accept into their lives this little girl who so desperately needs a family. This lays the ground for a long relationship that will not only mold who Lavinia will someday become, but also present some obstacles for Lavinia when she becomes an adult and has to face the inevitable separation between her and her new family.

Lavinia's life not only includes the kitchen house staff and other slaves on the property, but it also includes the people who live in the big house. The farm is owned by a ship's captain who is often traveling and not around. The captain has a wife, Mrs. Pyke, and two children, Marshall and Sally. Marshall is a preteen who spends much of his time with his new tutor, Mr. Waters. Mr. Waters is a cruel man whom many of the servants, including Lavinia, have seen abusing Marshall verbally. At the same time, there are some hints that Mr. Waters is abusing Marshall in other ways. Sally, on the other hand, is the much loved only daughter of Mrs. Pyke and for this reason is often coddled. This begins to change when Mrs. Pyke, who has suffered multiple miscarriages, becomes pregnant again. Sally is allowed to play with Fanny, one of Mama Mae's youngest children. In the end, this proves to be fatal for Sally when Marshall pushes her too hard on the swings and she is killed.

The reader is left at the end of these chapters wondering what will happen to the family and the servants in the aftermath of Sally's death. The reader is aware that Mrs. Pyke is prone to depression and she was very devoted to Sally. This foreshadows a time when Mrs. Pyke will suffer greatly from her grief.

Discussion Question 1

What is an indentured slave? Why is Lavinia made an indentured slave? What does this mean for Lavinia's future?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Belle resent Sally and Marshall? How does this affect the way she acts around the children? Why does Mrs. Pyke dislike Belle? What papers does Papa George keep reminding Belle to ask the captain for?

Discussion Question 3

Who is Mr. Waters? Why do many of the servants dislike him? How does Mr. Waters treat Marshall? Why is this a concern?



Vocabulary

living, likeness, nursing, sisters, stretched, descent, fueled, tactic, tutor, continued, ribbon, miniature, directed, embarrassed, genuine, wail, exclusive, frustration, unlike, reported, bedridden, luxury, changed, clamped, recognize, delivered, hammered, warrior, protected



Chapters 9-20

Summary

Chapter 9

Mrs. Pyke goes into labor immediately after learning of Sally's death. Mama Mae makes Lavinia help her with the delivery. After the child, a boy, is born, Mrs. Pyke refuses to even look at him. Mama Mae leaves Lavinia in charge of the baby. Dory comes to nurse the baby because she has recently had an infant girl. Dory is not happy about it, but Mrs. Pyke continues to have anything to do with the baby, giving her no choice. Over the next few days Mrs. Pyke falls deeper into her depression, even confusing Lavinia with a sister she had who died, Isabelle.

Shortly after the captain comes home, the overseer, Mr. Rankin, and a group of local men take Ben out to punish him for Sally's death. Mr. Winters has told everyone that he saw Ben cause the child to fall even though most of the kitchen servants saw Marshall push Sally. Belle comes to the big house for help. After Marshall admits to his father what he did, the captain rushes out to save Ben from Rankin and his friends. Before he can help Ben, however, Rankin has already burned the side of his face and cut off his ear.

Chapter 10

Belle is devastated by the attack on Ben because she is in love with Ben. However, when the captain demands that she not take up with any of the men on the farm, Belle agrees out of fear that the captain will allow Rankin to hurt Ben again. The captain also promises again to take Belle to Philadelphia.

Chapter 11

Lavinia goes up to the big house to care for the baby she has named Campbell and overhears Mr. Waters attempting to leave the farm. However, the captain needs Mr. Waters to stay while his wife continues to struggle with her depression. The captain refuses to listen to Mama Mae's attempts to tell him that Mr. Waters is abusing Marshall. The captain also instructs Mama Mae to wean his wife off of the laudanum that the doctor has ordered. After he leaves, Mrs. Pyke continues to be confused and depressed, but begins to show improvement as Mama Mae waters down her doses of laudanum.

One day, Lavinia is doing some chores when she sees Mr. Waters leave the outhouse that serves the inhabitants of the big house. As he leaves, Mr. Waters' kicks something. Lavinia goes to the outhouse and finds Marshall partially undressed on the floor of the outhouse in a daze. Lavinia gives him an apple before rushing off to get Ben and Papa George. A short time later, Mr. Waters attacks Dory. Ben is forced to kill Mr. Waters. Mama Mae, Papa George, and some of the others help dispose of the body. They get



rid of Mr. Waters' belongings to make it look as if he just left. Things become complicated when Mr. Rankin tries to find Mr. Waters, but Belle flirts with him until a dose of laudanum in his booze knocks him out.

Chapter 12

Belle helps Mama Mae get rid of all evidence of Mr. Waters.

Chapter 13

As Mrs. Pyke begins to recover, she begins to take an interest in Lavinia. Mrs. Pyle continues Lavinia's education into reading and writing, something Lavinia then shares with Belle. Mrs. Pyke also tells Lavinia stories about the history of Tall Oaks and of her own family.

Chapter 14

Ben tries to woo Belle, but Belle continues to push him away out of fear of Ranking hurting him. Uncle Jacob reminds Belle of the danger, reinforcing her need to discourage Ben.

Chapter 15

The captain is expected home for Christmas, the hope drawing Mrs. Pyke even further out of her depression. One day Mama Mae tells Mrs. Pyke that the patrolers have taken Jimmy, Dory's husband, because they believe he and Ben did something to Mr. Waters. Mrs. Pyke rides out to stop the beating with Papa George. They find the men in the kitchen house with Ben tied up on the floor and the men tossing Belle between them. Mrs. Pyke forces them to stop by shooting off her gun. A young boy from a neighboring farm, Will Stephens, helps Mrs. Pyke calm things down and later apologizes for allowing it to go so far.

Chapter 16

Belle is rattled by what Rankin and his men tried to do to her and angry at Ben's helplessness.

Chapter 17

Mrs. Pyke is disappointed to learn the captain cannot make it home for Christmas. A pile of presents arrive, but it takes Mrs. Pyke a few days to get up the desire to open her gifts. Mrs. Pyke's gifts are all new clothes that the captain has bought in anticipation of a trip to Philadelphia. At the bottom of one of the boxes there is a letter that Lavinia believes is meant for Belle, but Mrs. Pyke hides it in her desk and denies it was for Belle.

Chapter 18



The servants are frightened of Rankin's attempts to find out what really happened to Mr. Waters. Mama Mae is also worried about Rankin's sudden interest in Belle, warning the girl that if the captain gives her the chance to leave, she should go.

Chapter 19

Lavinia turns nine and begins to recognize the differences between herself and her friends, Fanny and Beattie. At the same time, Lavinia continues to care for Campbell, coming to think of him as her own. Therefore, when the captain finally comes home and announces that he is taking Mrs. Pyke, Campbell, and Dory to Philadelphia to visit Mrs. Pyke's father, Lavinia is devastated. Dory, too, is heartbroken because it means she will have to leave her daughter, Sukey. Sukey will only behave for Lavinia, so Lavinia becomes her caretaker. At the same time, the captain hires Will Stephens to watch over the farm and to keep Rankin in line. Marshall has been sent to Williamsburg to school.

During the summer, Ben announces that he has married a field girl, Lucy. Belle is heartbroken by this news. AT the same time, Belle receives several letters from the captain. Unfortunately, the letters are filled with bad news. A yellow fever epidemic hits Philadelphia almost immediately after their arrival. Mrs. Pyke's father dies first, followed by Dory.

Chapter 20

Mama Mae lives in denial for a while after learning of Dory's death. Belle uses Will Stephens to make Ben jealous out of revenge for Ben marrying Lucy.

Analysis

Mrs. Pyke gives birth to a baby boy, but she is so deeply hurt by Sally's death that she refuses to have anything with the child. No one seems to want to care for the poor child, leaving nine year old Lavinia to take full charge of the child other than Dory feeding him. Lavinia names the child after a brother she remembers dying shortly before her family began the journey to America, Campbell. It is an unusual name for a child of a family like the Pykes, but no one ever questions the choice. Lavinia becomes so attached to the child that she is devastated when the captain decides to take the whole family, with the exception of Marshall who has gone off to school, to Philadelphia.

Marshall is a difficult child. The captain believes what Marshall needs is discipline because he has been coddled by his emotional mother. However, when the captain chooses to allow the tutor full access to his son, it never occurs to him that he is entrusting his young son to a man who is cruel. Mr. Waters abuses Marshall in many ways, leaving the child broken. The servants try to come to Marshall's aid, but they are restricted by their position in the house and the general restrictions of the time period. They do their best, but Marshall is so poisoned by the words of this tutor that he cannot see what they are trying to do for him. This, coupled with a friendship that develops between Marshall and the cruel overseer, Mr. Rankin, causes the child to develop a



hatred of the same people who tried so hard to help him. This foreshadows a time when the servants will be at Marshall's mercy.

Belle is in love with Ben, Mama Mae's eldest child. However, the captain has made it clear to Belle that he does not want her marrying one of the other slaves because he plans one day to free her and send her to live as a white woman in Philadelphia. This causes Belle to push Ben away out of fear that the overseer will kill him for breaking the captain's orders. For this reason, Ben becomes convinced that Belle does not love him, so he marries another woman. This sets up a triangle that will leave Belle either happily married to a white man in Philadelphia, or forever on the outside of the only love she has ever wanted.

The author inserts a little real history in her novel when she sends the Pyke family to Philadelphia the spring of 1793. It is well known that George Washington was in Philadelphia during this time period until a yellow fever epidemic struck the city. The Pykes find themselves in the middle of this epidemic, an illness that kills Mrs. Pyke's father and takes the life of Mama Mae's daughter, Dory. This leaves young Sukey motherless. Lavinia has already taken the child under her wing, but this only seems to add to her responsibility.

Note the actions of Mr. Rankin. Rankin is the overseer on the property. However, Rankin is a cruel man who seems to enjoy punishing and killing the slaves. For this reason, Rankin is forced to back down on several occasions when he tries to take matters into his own hands. The captain has hired a neighbor, Will Stephens, to oversee the farm in his absence, giving the reader hope that the captain understands the danger Rankin represents to the servants and his attempt to make things better. The reader, however, worries that Rankin's rule over the servants will continue.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Mrs. Pyke not want to care for her new infant son? Who takes care of the child? Why?

Discussion Question 2

What happened to Mr. Waters? Why? Who thinks that Mr. Waters did not leave of his own free will as suggested? Why? Why is this a danger for the servants?

Discussion Question 3

Belle hopes that the captain will give her some papers. What do these papers mean to her future? Who hides the papers from Belle? Why?



Vocabulary

arrangements, permeated, trouble, limits, carriage, orders, happened, supervisor, advanced, exclaimed, perfect, accessories, embroidery, ivory, trimmed, elegant, delightful, desire, approve, selection, sequence, excitement, prospect, agreed, dressmaker, excellent, comfort, celebration, deciding, brocade



Chapters 21-28

Summary

Chapter 21

The captain and Mrs. Pyke return. However, Campbell is not with them and Lavinia later learns that Campbell died of starvation after Dory died. Lavinia is devastated by the loss of the baby. The captain, who is still recovering from yellow fever, remains bedridden for a long time. Fanny becomes his favorite nurse. Lavinia begins visiting Mrs. Pyke with Sukey. Mrs. Pyke, who has once again become mentally unstable, finds comfort in having the baby around. Rankin begins to take advantage of the illness of both the captain and Mrs. Pyke by stealing food meant for the servants to sell on the black market. When Jimmy steals some meat from the smokehouse, Rankin beats him to death before the captain can stop him. However, this does lead to the captain firing Rankin. In his place, the captain makes a deal with Will Stephens. After the exchange of some land and a few servants, Will is in line to be the new overseer after the exchange of some land and a few servants.

Chapter 22

Belle is happy she will not be going to Philadelphia. She is also happy she is getting too old for the captain to find her a suitable husband.

Chapter 23

For two years, happiness reigns at Tall Oaks. However, the captain continues to struggle with his health. Will begins to organize trips to the local church for the servants. Belle allows Lavinia to go, but she does not understand why she has to sit in the pews with Will while her friends and family stand in the back. However, she does enjoy the time alone with Will. Lavinia even gets Will to promise to wait for her to grow up, so they might marry. Marshall returns from school one summer. Marshall begins spending time with Rankin, who is still in the area, drinking and causing trouble.

Chapter 24

One Sunday while everyone is at church, Rankin and Marshall break into the kitchen house. Marshall rapes Belle. Mama Mae comes to care for Belle, but Belle refuses to allow anyone to talk about what has happened.

Chapter 25

Lavinia is confused by Belle's sudden change in behavior, but no one will tell her what has happened. In a short time, it becomes clear that Belle is pregnant. When Belle refuses to tell the captain who the father is, he refuses to see her any more. When Belle goes into labor, Lavinia helps Mama Mae deliver the child, a boy. At first Belle does not



want to see the child, but when she holds him for the first time, she falls deeply in love with him.

Chapter 26

When the captain hears about Belle's baby, he changes his mind and asks to see them. When he does, the captain promises to write out freedom papers for the baby. However, the captain dies before he can. Belle thinks of running away, but Ben talks her out of it by professing his love.

Chapter 27

Mrs. Pyke's sister and brother-in-law come. Mrs. Madden takes Lavinia under her wing, asking her about Mrs. Pyke and how she treated Lavinia. When the estate is settled, the Maddens announce that they will be taking Mrs. Pyke to Williamsburg to place her in a hospital there. Lavinia is to accompany them so that she might care for Mrs. Pyke when she comes out of the hospital. Lavinia is shocked and does not want to go, but Mama Mae and Belle both convince her that it is important that she go. Mama Mae and the others throw a party for Lavinia before she leaves.

Chapter 28

Belle worries about Lavinia, but she knows she is better off. At the same time, Belle continues to see Ben despite being overwhelmed with jealousy for his wife.

Analysis

The captain and Mrs. Pyke return to Tall Oaks. The captain is suffering ill health after his bout with yellow fever that leaves him bedridden most of the time. This is a frightening time for the servants because they know that the captain's death will mean big changes at Tall Oaks. The first change comes almost immediately when the captain fires the heavy handed overseer, Rankin. This ushers in a time of peace for the servants as they stop worrying about Rankin's cruelty. Will Stephens proves to be a blessing for Tall Oaks, especially for Lavinia who harbors a crush on the young man.

During this time of peace, Marshall comes home from school and begins hanging out with Rankin. This is a bad combination and it culminates in the rape of Belle. Marshall is Belle's biological half-brother, making this attack that much more outrageous. Belle is ashamed and embarrassed by what has happened to her, so she refuses to tell anyone who attacked her. This leads to a break in her relationship with her father for a time, but it also allows young Lavinia to come to her own conclusions about who fathered the child Belle gives birth to as a result of this attack.

Belle has hoped for many years to get her freedom papers and leave slavery. The captain has promised her this since she was a small child. The captain has actually already sent Belle her freedom papers, but Mrs. Pyke has hidden them. Only Lavinia knows about this, but she does not realize the significance of it. After Belle has her



child, the captain again promises to give her papers for her freedom, but he dies before he can have them drawn up. Once again Belle is faced with the reality of her situation. However, this time it appears that it is more permanent than she ever expected it to be.

Discussion Question 1

What is yellow fever? Why did it kill so quickly? Why does the captain never really recover from his bout with the illness?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Belle visit her father often during his illness? Why do these visits come to an end? How does this impact Belle?

Discussion Question 3

Who attacks Belle? Why does Belle refuse to let anyone know who attacked her? Who does Lavinia think is the father of Belle's child? Why?

Vocabulary

enclosure, privacy, bluntly, embellish, reputation, engagement, dismissive, miserable, subdued, upcoming, fatally, hummed, gossip, compliments, increased, escorted, socialize, display, treatment, position, freedom, isolate, consequence, subject, improve



Chapters 29-36

Summary

Chapter 29

Lavinia is given a room of her own, new clothes, and is included in some of the lessons the Maddens' daughter, Meg, takes. After a few weeks, Meg convinces her parents to allow Lavinia to take all her lessons with her. In a short time, Lavinia becomes accustomed to being a part of the family, though she is often homesick at night.

Marshall, who has been going to school near the Maddens' home, offers Latin lessons to the girls on Saturdays, staying for dinner afterward. Lavinia finds Marshall charming and intelligent now that they are both older. However, Lavinia overhears that Marshall went to visit his mother and she mistook him for her husband. It is a difficult situation that only adds to Marshall's past hurts. A week later, Marshall comes to the house drunk and beaten. Lavinia helps nurse him and wins his gratitude. At about the same time, Lavinia begins sneaking to the hospital to visit Mrs. Pyke.

Chapter 30

Belle continues to have an affair with Ben even though she learns that his wife is expecting a second child.

Chapter 31

As Lavinia and Meg get older, Mrs. Madden begins to teach them how to be proper ladies. Meg dislikes the lessons and often makes mistakes, but Lavinia is an apt student. One Saturday Mrs. Madden makes Meg throw a tea party for Marshall and a friend, but she ends up spilling tea in the boy's lap. Marshall finds it amusing.

At fifteen, Lavinia begins to worry about her future. For this reason, she decides to attempt to locate her brother. Mr. Boran, an associate of Mr. Madden's, offers to help. Meg warns Lavinia that Mr. Boran is helping her only because he wants her to be his wife, but Lavinia brushes off this warning. In the end, however, Mr. Boran tells Lavinia that her brother died just three years into his servitude. Then Mr. Boran asks Lavinia to marry him.

Chapter 32

Belle gets excited when she receives a letter from Lavinia saying that she plans to find her brother and then buy Belle and her son, Jamie. Ben tries to talk Belle out of leaving, but Mama Mae stresses that Belle needs to leave Tall Oaks before Marshall returns. Will Stephens tells Belle that he is going to Williamsburg to speak to Mr. Madden. Will tells Belle that he plans to begin courting Lavinia when he gets there.



Chapter 33

Lavinia is thrilled to see Will, but they have little time to talk. Lavinia's engagement to Mr. Boran is announced at dinner. Will is confused and asks to speak to Lavinia alone, but before they can Marshall tells Lavinia that Will has asked to buy Belle and Jamie, implying that his offer stems from the fact that he and Belle are lovers and he is Jamie's father. Lavinia is heartbroken and refuses to see Will again before he leaves. At the same time, the Maddens allow Lavinia to begin visiting Mrs. Pyke properly.

Chapter 34

Will returns to Tall Oaks with news of Lavinia. Mama Mae and Belle soak of word of Lavinia, but are frightened when they hear that Marshall, who is close to finishing school, is just as cruel and angry as ever.

Chapter 35

Although their wedding is still a year off, Mr. Boran becomes more and more improper with Lavinia. Lavinia has no one to talk to about this situation. It all explodes one night when Lavinia attends a party with Mr. Boran. Mr. Boran insists that they go to his house to show his daughter Molly how nice they look. Lavinia can find no way out of the trip, so she goes along. However, Molly is not home. Mr. Boran attacks Lavinia. Lavinia manages to get away. Marshall comes to Lavinia's aid and explains everything to the Maddens. The engagement is ended, but Mr. Boran spreads terrible rumors about Lavinia's morals.

On Lavinia's seventeenth birthday, Marshall proposes to her. Lavinia immediately agrees and begins dreaming of going home to her family. While choosing dresses for her new wardrobe, Lavinia learns from the dressmaker that Mr. Boran has been killed while walking home from a house of ill-repute. A short time later, Lavinia convinces Marshall to take his mother out of the hospital and home again. He reluctantly agrees.

Lavinia and Marshall are married. They immediately make the long journey back to Tall Oaks.

Chapter 36

Belle is shocked to learn that Lavinia will be marrying Marshall. Will Stephens is heartbroken. The others worry about Lavinia's future.

Analysis

After the captain dies, Mrs. Pyke's sister and husband come to take over the estate because Marshall is too young to take control of the farm. Lavinia is surprised when they take her under their wing and decide to take her back to Williamsburg. Lavinia has never really thought about her future except when Fanny and Beattie made comments about it. Now, however, Lavinia realizes that she will soon be on her own and she needs



to make some choices. The Maddens educate Lavinia and teach her how to be a lady. At the same time, Lavinia becomes friends with Marshall who is a frequent visitor to the Madden home.

Lavinia becomes engaged to an older man because she feels desperate to find a new situation before she turns seventeen. Lavinia does not love the man and is frightened by his constant physical overtures. Marshall proves to be a surprising knight-in-shining armor for Lavinia when her relationship with her fiancé becomes violent.

Lavinia eventually decides to marry Marshall, in part because she feels a desperation to find a future, partly because she misunderstands the relationship between Will and Belle, and partly because she sees her role as Marshall's wife as a way to make life better for the family she left behind at Tall Oaks. Lavinia believes Marshall to be a kind, gentle man. However, Belle knows differently and fears for Lavinia's future when she hears the news. The reader, too, realizes that Marshall is not all he appears and could be trouble for Lavinia.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Lavinia move to Williamsburg? Why does she initially attempt to befriend the servants? Why is Lavinia told to leave the servants alone?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Lavinia want to find her brother? What does she hope she will do when she finds her brother? Why does this not happen?

Discussion Question 3

How does Lavinia end up befriend Marshall? What is Marshall, as an adult, like? Does Lavinia love Marshall?

Vocabulary

wondering, change, wagon, quarters, chuckled, overtook, feast, retired, resist, joyfully, individual, musicians, ward, amount, wardrobe, sufficient, stimulate, appetite, optimistic, informed, account, sleeves, prettiest, unfortunate, response, initial



Chapters 37-48

Summary

Chapter 37

The journey is long and difficult, especially for Mrs. Pyke. Lavinia spends most of the trip with Mrs. Pyke. When they arrive at Tall Oaks, Lavinia is thrilled to see her family, but disappointed when they brush off her attempts at hugs. Later, Mama Mae makes it clear to Lavinia that she is not supposed to call her Mama anymore. Lavinia refuses to listen and continues to treat the servants like family.

Chapter 38

Belle is afraid of Marshall and goes out of her way to hide from him. Will has promised to take Belle with him to his new farm, but he has another year to finish out on his contract.

Chapter 39

Marshall begins to drink heavily and constantly runs Will down for his management of the farm. In a short amount of time, Lavinia begins to notice a change in her husband. He is almost cruel toward her. When Marshall sees a bracelet Lavinia gave to Beattie, he takes it back and yells at Lavinia for spending money on the servants. Mama Mae tries to help Lavinia by telling her how to fill her days and what to say to Marshall, but somehow Marshall just continues to grow cruel. At the same time, Marshall's hatred of Will only grows. They nearly come to blows several times. Eventually Marshall pushes Will so far that he breaks his contract and leaves early, taking Belle, Jamie, Ben, Lucy, and their children with him. Angry that Will broke the contract, Marshall takes Jamie back. Will fights for the child, but loses.

Chapter 40

Belle is heartbroken over the loss of her child, but knows she cannot go back to Tall Oaks in any form. Lucy surprisingly becomes Belle's friend as she becomes the only one who can truly comfort her.

Chapter 41

Lavinia arranges for Jamie to spend time with Mrs. Pyke when she realizes that Mrs. Pyke thinks Jamie is her child. Over time, Jamie moves into the blue room that once belonged to Campbell. Jamie and Mrs. Pyke seem to be good for one another, helping one another out of their separate grief.

When Lavinia announces her pregnancy, Marshall becomes kinder, gentler. However, it is also during this time that Marshall begins visiting Beattie in the kitchen house, cruelly



taking advantage of her situation. Lavinia does not understand what is happening at first. Lavinia does, however, finally learn the truth about Jamie's paternity.

Chapter 42

Belle becomes very upset when she learns that Jamie is staying in the big house, concerned about his proximity to Marshall. She is also saddened by the news of Marshall's relationship with Beattie. At the same time, Belle goes out of her way to tell Will that Lavinia thought Jamie was his child, but it is too late for this news to do any good.

Chapter 43

Lavinia becomes depressed when she learns the truth about Marshall and Belle, as well as Marshall and Beattie. Lavinia blames Beattie for the relationship and refuses to have anything more to do with her. After having her baby, and noticing that Marshall's relationship did not end as a result, Lavinia began to act out against Beattie, especially after Beattie became noticeably pregnant. Beattie loses the baby, but Marshall continues to see her, even giving her gifts.

Chapter 44

Belle becomes ill because of her grief over losing Jamie. However, when Lucy gives birth to another son, Belle takes him as though her own.

Chapter 45

Meg writes that she and her parents are coming for a visit. Lavinia is excited and buries herself in the preparations. Lavinia also decides that she should be allowed to visit Belle. Lavinia devises a plan to get there: she wants to learn how to ride a horse so that she might sneak off to Will's farm. Marshall agrees to allow Lavinia to ride, leaving her to successfully sneak a visit to Belle. Belle is as loving as ever, but she is unsuccessful in convincing Lavinia that Beattie is not with Marshall by choice. Lavinia also sees Will, with whom she shares a kiss, but he makes it clear her marriage has changed everything.

Chapter 46

While Belle continues to miss her son, Jamie, George has brought light into Belle's world. Lucy leaves George with Belle most of the time, coming to see him only long enough to feed him. Ben finds this amusing, as the women are now friends even though they continue to share him.

Chapter 47

Mama Mae begins to push Lavinia to move Jamie out of the big house, but she hesitates because of the happiness the child brings Mrs. Pyke. Lavinia also attempts to visit Belle again, but Rankin catches her, forcing her to turn back. That night, Lavinia



argues with Marshall about his relationship with Beattie. As a result, Marshall drags her into the library and beats her.

A few weeks later, Meg and her parents come for a visit. Mr. Madden is shocked by the level of disrepair the farm has fallen into. He and Marshall argue over this, but Marshall insists that his methods are better than any other person's. In the end, the Maddens clearly recognize what Marshall has become, but they refuse to allow Lavinia to go home with them. Mr. Madden tells Lavinia that even if Marshall were to allow her to go, he would never allow his daughter to leave. Lavinia is forced to remain behind.

Chapter 48

Belle knows that Rankin is stopping Lavinia from visiting her because she gets a visit from Fanny and her husband, Eddy. They tell Belle and the others of all that is going on at Tall Oaks. Belle convinces Fanny to be a little more sympathetic toward Lavinia.

Analysis

Lavinia returns to Tall Oaks as the new mistress with dreams of how she will change the lives of her family. However, Lavinia soon learns that being the wife of the owner of such a place has certain requirements, not the least of which is a certain etiquette she is supposed to maintain with the servants. Lavinia tries to maintain the same relationship she had with her family as a child, but Marshall soon makes it impossible for her to speak to, let alone visit, the people she loves.

Marshall is not a good man. Marshall was terribly abused as a child and was influenced by people who taught him darkly, unhealthy things about what it means to be a man. It's apparent that Marshall has a tendency toward violence as illustrated by his attack on Belle. However, Lavinia hopes he has changed. Unfortunately, Marshall begins to show his true colors when he returns to Tall Oaks, forcing Lavinia to treat the people she considers her family as servants and beating her for becoming annoyed at his choice of mistresses.

Marshall has always been obsessed with Belle. The reader suspects that Marshall had a crush on Belle as a child that was spoiled by his mother's belief that Belle was his father's lover. Marshall continuously referred to Belle as his father's woman, growing exceedingly angry whenever her name is mentioned. The reader suspects this is why Marshall begins to treat Will Stephens the way he does upon his return, because, like Lavinia, he believes Will is Belle's lover. The reader also suspects this is why Marshall stole Jamie back after Will left with his slaves instead of taking Belle, Lucy, or Ben.

Lavinia struggles to adjust to her new role as wife and mistress of a farm. It is difficult, especially with Marshall's behavior. When the Maddens sympathize with Lavinia, but do not give her the help she seeks, Lavinia feels that all hope is lost. It is at this point Lavinia becomes addicted to laudanum, not unlike Mrs. Pyke, giving in to the difficulties of her life instead of fighting them.



Discussion Question 1

What is unusual about the first few days of Lavinia's marriage? How does Marshall's behavior change? Why does Lavinia not see this change?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Mama Mae refuse to allow Lavinia to refer to her as mama? Why does Lavinia continue to do so anyway? How does this cause trouble between Lavinia and Marshall?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Marshall steal Jamie from Belle? Is this legal? How does this impact Belle? How does it impact Jamie?

Vocabulary

prospered, established, hurried, embrace, disturbed, property, indulge, approval, construction, hesitated, scarcely, trailing, plunged, permission, gathered, rejoiced, encouraged, rejoice, achievements, partners, embarrassment, beauty, explain, stimulated, elixir, hope



Chapters 49-55

Summary

Chapter 49

After the Maddens visit, Lavinia begins taking laudanum to drown her sorrows. Lavinia thinks she can handle it, but quickly becomes addicted. About the same time, Lavinia finds Belle's freedom papers, hidden long ago by Mrs. Pyke. That Christmas, Lavinia assists in the delivery of Beattie's baby. During the process, Lavinia sees marks on Beattie's body that seem to prove her relationship with Marshall is not voluntary. This ends the angst Lavinia feels toward Beattie.

Lavinia tells Sukey about the papers for Belle she found and how she plans to take them to Belle. However, Lavinia is once again turned back around by Rankin. That night, Marshall confronts Lavinia in front of Sukey. Sukey tries to defend Lavinia and is taken away. Soon after, Lavinia learns that Marshall has sold Sukey. After this, and the news that Will has married, Lavinia falls into a deep depression that she treats with laudanum.

Chapter 50

Five years pass. Belle continues to worry over Jamie, who continues to live in the big house. Belle sneaks to Tall Oaks to try to see Jamie, but Papa George warns her to stay away. Belle is still little George's main caretaker and she is preparing him for work in the big house.

Chapter 51

Marshall has begun selling acres of the farm as well as some of the slaves to pay off his gambling debts. Again the debate over moving Jamie out of the big house comes up. Lavinia finally agrees that the thirteen year old boy should be moved out of the house and begin to learn the work in the barns. However, Lavinia continuously puts off the moment because of the way it had affected Mrs. Pyke when Mrs. Madden took Jamie away during her visit. Finally, however, Lavinia realizes that Jamie thinks he is Mrs. Pyke's son and he must be moved. Lavinia steels herself for the confrontation. However, before she goes, she climbs up to get more laudanum from her hiding place and finds Belle's freedom papers. Lavinia holds them as the chair she is standing on tips and she falls, hitting her head. As Lavinia recovers, she overhears her daughter talking about her dislike of her mother using the laudanum. For this reason, Lavinia promises to not use them again.

Chapter 52

Belle is working in the garden one day when she sees a boy watching her from the woods. The following day, Belle insists on working in the garden alone. The boy comes



again. The boy approaches Belle, gives her the freedom papers, and leaves. Belle is happy to have seen her son again. A short time later, Belle goes to Tall Oaks to ask Marshall if she can buy Jamie from him. Belle wants to send the boy to Philadelphia where she believes he can live as a white man. In this conversation, Belle tells Marshall that she is his sister, a fact that shocks and angers Marshall. Marshall sends Belle away.

Chapter 53

Lavinia is still recovering when one day Fanny bursts into Mrs. Pyke's room to tell them Marshall is selling Eddy. They quickly learn that Marshall has decided to sell all the slaves except for Uncle Jacob, Beattie, and Mama Mae. Lavinia quickly decides to send them all away. However, before they can do anything, Marshall comes into the room and takes Jamie away. When Lavinia tries to stand up to Marshall, he tells her that he is sending her and Mrs. Pyke to the hospital in Williamsburg.

That night, Lavinia leaves the house with her daughter, Mama Mae, and Fanny. Uncle Jacob insists on remaining behind to care for Mrs. Pyke. Eddy and Jamie have been freed by Beattie, but Jamie disappears. The group walks through the woods to Will's farm. Ben then leads the slaves away while Lavinia waits with her daughter in Belle's cabin. When Lavinia learns that Will has left the farm with his wife, she wants to go back to Tall Oaks to protect Belle and Ben, but Belle will not let her. Ben hides Lavinia and her daughter in a hideaway in the ceiling of his cabin. Lavinia suspects he has hid others here. After nearly a full day, Lavinia hears Marshall come to the cabin, but Lucy convinces him that she does not know anything.

Chapter 54

Belle becomes anxious when Jamie never shows up on Will's farm. Belle decides to go to Tall Oaks to look for him. When Belle goes into the big house, she discovers that Uncle Jacob has accidentally killed Mrs. Pyke by giving her too much laudanum. Belle then goes to ask Beattie if she has seen Jamie, but Beattie is unsure. As they talk, they spot Rankin coming back with the slaves who ran away the day before. They know they need to save them. Ben comes up with a plan to set the main house on fire, something that will distract Rankin long enough for them to help the slaves escape again.

Mama Mae refuses to run away with the slaves, insisting that she is the reason they were caught the first time. Papa George reluctantly agrees to lead everyone out of the area. After they are gone, Belle tries to take Mama Mae home with her, but Mama Mae is clearly ill and cannot walk far. Mama Mae insists Belle leave. However, Belle runs into Marshall. As Marshall ties Belle up, threatening to hang her, Mama Mae appears. Mama Mae confronts Marshall. Marshall becomes angry and hangs Mama Mae.

Chapter 55

Ben returns and tells Lucy how Marshall and Rankin got Belle. Upset, Lavinia insists they free her. Lavinia immediately begins to run through the woods to save Belle, unaware her daughter is following. When Lavinia arrives at Tall Oaks, the first thing she



sees is Mama Mae hung in the tree. Lavinia then sees the burning house. Then, behind her, she hears Jamie yelling at Marshall. As Lavinia turns, she sees Jamie shoot Marshall. Lavinia immediately takes the gun and insists Jamie run. The runaway slaves returns. Papa George is devastated by Mae's death.

Lavinia is taken to jail. At first she refuses to defend herself, but Mr. Madden convinces her it is for the best. Lavinia is acquitted when her lawyer suggests that Uncle Jacob killed Marshall and ran away, even though they all know Uncle Jacob died in the house fire. Lavinia decides to return to Tall Oaks, rebuild the house in a new spot, and begin again. Lavinia also gives freedom papers to Papa George, Beattie and her kids, Fanny, Eddy, and Jamie. Belle, too, returns to Tall Oaks. When she dies, Lavinia has her buried in the family cemetery with an epitaph that states she was the daughter of James Pyke.

Analysis

Despite her desperation after the Maddens refuse to help her, Lavinia continues to try to hold on. She attempts to take Belle her freedom papers, but fails. After this, Sukey tries to help her when Marshall faces her with his anger. Sukey is immediately taken away and sold. This paralyzes Lavinia because she is afraid that anything she does will adversely affect another beloved member of her family. For this reason, Lavinia falls into a depression and relies more and more on laudanum.

As Lavinia becomes a laudanum addict, Marshall continues his downward spiral into alcoholism and gambling. This causes him to begin selling off the farm and its property, including the slaves. Both Lavinia and Marshall have become shells of themselves, both hiding in addiction rather than facing the difficulties of their lives. Lavinia manages to overcome her problems, however, by kicking her addiction. Marshall simply continues to fall apart.

To protect her family, Lavinia eventually comes to the conclusion that the slaves need to run away. Although she could be punished by death for doing this, Lavinia helps the slaves runaway, running away herself with her daughter. Unfortunately, Marshall is able to recover the slaves. Mama Mae is hung in an attempt to protect Belle from Marshall's irrational anger. This is a final straw for some. However, it is the death of Mrs. Pyke that pushes Jamie over the edge. Jamie blames Marshall, killing him without warning.

Lavinia sees the disaster that her life has become and blames herself. Lavinia feels that if she had not allowed Jamie to become so reliant on Mrs. Pyke, and vice versa, that he would not have killed Marshall. For this reason, Lavinia claims responsibility for the murder. At first Lavinia is content to take the punishment herself, but Will and Mr. Madden convince her that her daughter needs her to be free. For this reason, Lavinia allows Mr. Madden to defend her by pointing a finger at Uncle Jacob who died in the house fire and can no longer be harmed.

Lavinia takes over Tall Oaks in an ironic twist of fate. Lavinia came to Tall Oaks as a servant and has become the mistress who saves it from the mistakes the true heir



made. At the same time, Lavinia makes it possible for her family, the slaves who once ran the place, to become a free part of the farm. In the end, Lavinia buries Belle there the way Belle had always dreamed of being buried, as a member of the Pyke family and not a slave.

Discussion Question 1

What is laudanum? Why does Lavinia use it? How does this create a parallel between Lavinia and Mrs. Pyke? Will Lavinia go crazy like Mrs. Pyke?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Belle remain first on Will's farm and then Tall Oaks after she gets her freedom papers? Why does Belle never run away to Philadelphia? How does this parallel what has happened to Lavinia?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Jamie kill Marshall? Why does Lavinia take the blame?

Vocabulary

acquittal, prosecution, murder, ingenuity, situation, gratitude, resolve, requested, emancipation, assured, wonderful, privacy, negatively, elicited, promise, sincerity, offer, introduction, recommended, upholstered, reunion, detailed, quality, plastered, surprisingly



Characters

Beattie

Beattie is a twin, one of Mama Mae's youngest children. Beattie and Lavinia grow up together at Tall Oaks. Beattie is a kind, gentle young girl who is always good to Lavinia. However, after Lavinia is married to Marshall, Beattie finds herself in a difficult position when Marshall begins forcing her to have an affair with him. At first, Lavinia is angry with Beattie and treats her badly; but, after awhile she realizes the truth and Beattie again becomes her friend.

Fanny

Fanny is Mama Mae's daughter and the twin sister of Beattie. Fanny is not as pretty as Beattie and tends to be rougher. Fanny does not like her position on Tall Oaks as a house servant at first. However, when Mama Mae tells her the story of her own family, Fanny learns to work hard and stay quiet. Fanny becomes a devoted servant who is the captain's favorite nurse late in his life and later becomes a devoted nanny to Lavinia's daughter, Elly. Fanny was once Lavinia's good friend, but becomes annoyed with her when she faces her dark marriage with laudanum. However, in the end, Lavinia frees Fanny after Marshall's death.

Dory

Dory is Mama Mae's eldest daughter. When Lavinia first comes to Tall Oaks, Dory has a baby boy named Henry. Unfortunately, Henry dies of an unnamed disease. The burial of the baby helps Lavinia regain her memories of her own family and their deaths. Later, Dory had another baby, Sukey, who becomes a source of great comfort to Lavinia after baby Campbell leaves and dies. Dory dies of yellow fever while in Philadelphia with the Pyke family.

Jamie Pyke

Jamie Pyke is Belle's only child. Jamie was born as a result of Marshall's attack on Belle. Jamie grows into a beautiful young boy who looks more like Marshall than Belle except for his one blind eye. Jamie is taken from Belle when Belle goes to work on Will's farm. Will fights for Jamie, but his claims fail because he broke his contract with the Pykes by leaving early. Jamie ends up becoming a companion to Mrs. Pyke because his companionship calms the elderly, mentally struggling woman. This causes Jamie to come to the conclusion that Mrs. Pyke is his mother. In the end, Jamie kills Marshall because he blames Marshall for the death of Mrs. Pyke who died of a laudanum overdose and burned in a fire. Lavinia, however, takes responsibility for the murder and Jamie moves to Philadelphia to make a new life for himself.



The Maddens

The Maddens are related to Mrs. Pyke as Mrs. Madden is her sister. After the death of the captain, the Maddens come to Tall Oaks to settle his estate. Mr. Madden becomes the executor of the estate because Marshall is too young to take responsibility. It is decided that Mrs. Pyke will be placed in a hospital in Williamsburg to treat her mental collapse in the aftermath of the death of Sally, Campbell, and her husband. Lavinia is to go along to be a companion to Mrs. Pyke when she is released from the hospital. However, Mrs. Pyke is not released for many years. For this reason, the Maddens educate Lavinia in hopes of helping her make a good marriage. Due to this, Lavinia marries Marshall. When Marshall turns into a violent, cheating husband, the Maddens inform Lavinia there is nothing they can do to help her. However, after Marshall is killed and Lavinia is charged with his murder, Mr. Madden arranges her defense and helps her receive an acquittal.

Baby Campbell

Baby Campbell is a baby Mrs. Pyke gives birth to in the aftermath of Sally's death. The Pykes take little interest in this baby because of their focus on their own grief. For this reason, Lavinia takes this baby under her wing and treats him as her own. This baby dies of starvation before the age of one because his wet nurse dies of yellow fever and his mother is too frightened to find another way to feed him.

Sukey

Sukey is Dory's daughter. Sukey is still a toddler when Dory leaves for Philadelphia to be a wet nurse for baby Campbell. Lavinia is devastated by the loss of her baby, Campbell, so she and Sukey seek one another out and become inseparable. When Lavinia goes to Williamsburg with the Maddens, she and Sukey are devastated to lose one another. Lavinia and Sukey are reunited when Lavinia marries Marshall and returns to Tall Oaks. However, the reunion is short lived when some time later Sukey is taken away and sold by Marshall out of revenge for Sukey attempting to stop Marshall from beating Lavinia.

Lucy

Lucy is Ben's wife. Lucy is a big, tough woman who is surprisingly shy. At first, no one likes Lucy because she has taken Ben from Belle. However, when Belle loses her son, Jamie, Lucy comes to comfort her. Despite the fact that Belle and Lucy are sharing Ben and each knows about the other, they become close friends. Lucy even gives one of her sons to Belle to raise.



Ben

Ben is Mae and George's eldest child. Ben is a big, tough man with a heart of gold. Ben takes to Lavinia quickly and becomes something of a protector toward her. Ben even tries to protect young Marshall when it becomes clear that the tutor is abusing the young boy. Ben is good-looking. At a young age, he falls in love with Belle. Belle, however, pushes Ben away because she is afraid the captain will sell him or have him killed if he learns that Belle has fallen in love with a servant at Tall Oaks. For this reason, Ben marries Lucy, but after a short time he and Belle become lovers. Belle and Lucy share Ben for many years and eventually become friends, a fact that bothers Ben, but makes his life simpler.

Papa George

Papa George is Mama Mae's husband and the father of Ben, Dory, Fanny, and Beattie. Papa George, like his son, is a large man who works hard and has a heart of gold. Papa George is in charge of the barn and taking care of the animals there. Papa George proves to be a good friend to Lavinia, adopting her as one of his own. In the end, when Lavinia frees him, Papa George elects to remain on Tall Oaks and help Lavinia rebuild it.

Mama Mae

Mama Mae is the head of the kitchen on Tall Oaks. Formerly a field servant, Mama Mae was moved into the big house when Belle was born and her mother died. Mama Mae had recently had a child of her own and provided Belle nourishment. This led to a job in the house and later to the head job in the kitchen.

Mama Mae is a kind woman who becomes surrogate mother to all the children on Tall Oaks. Lavinia is no different. Mama Mae helps Lavinia overcome her illness and become a part of the family on Tall Oaks when she first arrives. Mama Mae also tries to help Lavinia when she becomes mistress of Tall Oaks. In the end, Mama Mae dies because she wants to protect Belle from Marshall. It is Mama Mae's death that bookends the novel and shocks Lavinia into taking the blame for Marshall's murder.

Sally Pyke

Sally Pyke is the captain and Mrs. Pyke's only daughter. Sally is a bright, kind child who makes everyone on the farm smile. Mrs. Pyke is very protective of her daughter and rarely allows her to go off with any of the servants. This behavior changes when Mrs. Pyke becomes pregnant with Campbell. Sally begins visiting the servants with Fanny. It is just after one of these visits that Sally falls and breaks her neck after Marshall pushed her too hard on the swings. The death of Sally causes a great deal of grief on Tall Oaks and begins the downfall for Mrs. Pyke that will eventually lead to her death.



Marshall Pyke

Marshall Pyke is the eldest son of the captain and Mrs. Pyke. Marshall is a normal, happy kid when the novel begins. However, Marshall is abused by a tutor, Mr. Waters. This abuse, coupled with a friendship with Mr. Rankin, the overseer, causes Marshall to begin looking at the world through dark, biased eyes. When Marshall causes the death of his baby sister and later has a difficult visit with his mother, he begins to drink heavily. Marshall becomes very violent, often abusing his wife as well as his servants. Marshall has an obsession with Belle, unaware she is his sister and assuming her to be his father's lover. This leads Marshall to, first, attack Belle and later steal her child. Later, Marshall hangs Mama Mae when she tries to stop him from hurting Belle. In the end, Marshall is killed by his own child, Belle's son Jamie.

Mrs. Martha Pyke

Mrs. Pyke is the captain's wife. Mrs. Pyke was a very young woman when she first married the captain and came to live on Tall Oaks. The captain promised his wife he would stop traveling so much and would spend more time on the farm with her, but he never kept his promise. Mrs. Pyke did not handle her husband's absences well, especially when she suffered multiple miscarriages. Added to this the mistaken assumption that Belle is the captain's mistress causes Mrs. Pyke to become very depressed and to self-medicate with laudanum.

Grief is only compounded for Mrs. Pyke when she loses her father, her daughter Sally, and her son Campbell in the stretch of just a year. The captain also dies a few years later, leaving Mrs. Pyke so consumed with her grief that she becomes mentally unstable. Mrs. Pyke is placed in a hospital in Williamsburg by her sister, but this only seems to make matters worse. In the end, Lavinia brings Mrs. Pyke back to Tall Oaks where she becomes stable only when Jamie becomes her constant companion. In the end, Mrs. Pyke dies of a laudanum overdose on the night most of the remaining slaves on Tall Oaks run away.

Captain Pyke

Captain Pyke is a ship's captain who owns a farm called Tall Oaks. The captain once fell in love with a beautiful black woman he purchased as a slave. This woman became pregnant with his child, but died in childbirth. For many years the infant, Belle, lived in the big house and was cared for by the captain's mother. However, when the old woman died, the captain moved Belle out to the kitchen house with Mama Mae and married his new wife.

The captain cares deeply for Belle, but he never tells his wife his true relationship with her out of fear of upsetting the fragile woman. This causes Marshall, his son, to believe, as his wife does, that Belle is his lover. The captain always intends to give Belle her freedom and take her to Philadelphia where he could find her a proper husband.



However, he puts it off for so long that he dies before he can do anything. With his death, the captain leaves chaos on Tall Oaks and only his cruel son to take control.

Belle Pyke

Belle Pyke is the eldest daughter of the captain. Due to the fact that her mother was a slave, Belle is a slave as well. However, the captain has always promised to give Belle her freedom papers and find a suitable husband for her. Belle does not want this. Belle wants to remain on Tall Oaks and marry Ben. However, she would also like to get some of the things that she feels are her right as the daughter of the captain, such as an education and a burial spot in the family cemetery.

No one in the family other than the captain knows that Belle is the captain's daughter. Mrs. Pyke believes Belle is her husband's lover, so she treats her poorly. Belle puts up with this treatment because she believes her father loves her and will one day give her all she wants. This lie, however, leads Marshall to also believe Belle is his father's lover, making Belle someone to be used and abused. Marshall rapes Belle even though she is his sister and she gives birth to his son. At first Belle believes she cannot love this child, but when he is born he becomes the only thing that matters to Belle. Perhaps this is part of the reason Marshall takes the child from her when her ownership is transferred to neighbor Will Stephens.

Lavinia McCarten Pyke

Lavinia is six years old when she is brought to live on Tall Oaks as an indentured servant. Lavinia cannot remember her family or her past when she is first delivered there, but soon remembers and falls into grief. However, her new family, Mama Mae, Papa George, Ben and Belle help her through her grief. Lavinia grows among the members of her new family and becomes a bright young girl. However, her future is never really certain, even when she goes to live with the Maddens and receives a proper education.

Lavinia becomes engaged to a man she does not love after she learns that her brother died shortly after coming to the New World. This engagement ends among some dark rumors, leaving Lavinia again worried about her future. However, Marshall Pyke quickly comes to her rescue and asks to marry her. Lavinia believes herself to be in love with Marshall, but she does not know about his difficult past and his past violence. Soon after the wedding and their return to Tall Oaks, Lavinia finds that her new husband can be very cruel and violent.

Lavinia follows the same path of her mother-in-law for a time, becoming addicted to laudanum to deal with the dark reality of her life. However, when her family is in danger, Lavinia jumps to their protection, first helping the majority of the slaves on Tall Oaks to escape and later she takes the blame for Marshall's murder even though she saw Jamie kill him.



Symbols and Symbolism

Freedom Papers

The captain promises Belle he will give her freedom papers. He finally keeps his word one Christmas, sending them his wife's Christmas gifts. However, Mrs. Pyke takes the papers and hides them. Lavinia finds them years later, but she has an accident and cannot get them to Belle. Belle's son Jamie finds them and gives them to Belle.

Laudanum Bottles

Mrs. Pyke is addicted to laudanum throughout most of the novel, a medication the servants called black drops. Later, Lavinia finds a stash of six bottles of laudanum and uses them herself to deal with Marshall's violence and cruelty.

Floor Plank

Jimmy steals floor planks out of the smoke house in order to provide his family with much needed salt. Lavinia later sees his mother, Ida, cooking with a piece of this wood.

Whips

Jimmy is beaten to death with whips after Rankin comes to the conclusion that Jimmy killed Mr. Waters. For this act, the captain fires Rankin and sends him away.

Letters to/from Williamsburg

While Lavinia is in Williamsburg, she and Belle share many letters. However, one of these letters leaves Lavinia with the impression that Belle and Will Stephens are lovers. This leads Lavinia to make the decision to marry Marshall.

Letter about Jamie

Lavinia sends a letter to Belle letting her know that Jamie is okay. This letter is intercepted and causes Lavinia to get in trouble with Marshall.

Swing

Sally dies after Marshall, who is angry and frightened of his tutor, pushes her too hard on a swing and she falls, breaking her neck.



Peach Whiskey

Every Christmas the captain gives the servants several jugs of peach whiskey.

Food

Rankin sells food that was meant to be given to the slaves, causing many of the slaves to begin to starve.

Large Oak Tree

There is a large oak tree in the front yard of Tall Oaks that Lavinia spends many happy afternoon hours under throughout her childhood and early marriage. This tree is the same one from which Marshall hangs Mama Mae.



Settings

Tall Oaks

Tall Oaks is the name of the farm where this novel is set during the late 1790s to 1810. Tall Oaks is a tobacco farm that is worked by slaves owned by the Pyke family. It is here that Lavinia is taken as an ill six year old girl to work as an indentured servant. It is also here that the Pykes' only surviving child, Marshall, is abused and later becomes a tyrant, abusing his wife and servants and selling off much of the farm and his slaves to pay gambling debts. It is also here that Mama Mae is hung and Marshall shot to death by his own child. In the end, it is also here that Lavinia makes a new farm, working it with her daughter and her freed slaves, people she has always considered family.

Philadelphia

Philadelphia is where the captain always promises to take Belle after he gives her her free papers. The captain never takes Belle to Philadelphia, but he does visit the city with his wife and son during the yellow fever epidemic in 1793 that kills his father-in-law, Dory, and Campbell. The epidemic also takes a toll on the captain's health, eventually killing him, too.

Williamsburg

Williamsburg is a town in Virginia where the Madden family lives. Lavinia is taken to the Madden family in Williamsburg after the captain's death and is given a good education. It is also here that Lavinia becomes engaged twice, first to a widower who treats her badly and later to Marshall, who has lived in Williamsburg for many years to attend school. Lavinia is also married here.

Kitchen House

The kitchen house is a small house a short distance from the big house where all the meals for the family are cooked. When Lavinia arrives at Tall Oaks, Belle is living in the kitchen house where she works with Mama Mae to make the family's meals. Lavinia moves in here as well, becoming something like a surrogate child to Belle. It is also here that Belle is attacked by Marshall and later gives birth to his child. After Belle leaves Tall Oaks, Beattie begins living in the kitchen house. It is here that Marshall begins using Beattie as his mistress and has several children with her.



Themes and Motifs

Indentured Servitude

Indentured servitude is a system by which someone becomes a servant for a set amount of time in order to pay off a debt. Lavinia becomes an indentured servant after her parents die while on ship between Ireland and America. Lavinia cannot pay the ship's ticket, so the captain of the ship brings her home with him and places her in the kitchen house as a servant until she comes of age.

Lavinia never really understands her servitude to the Pyke family. Lavinia only understands that Mama Mae, Papa George, and Belle are her family. As she grows older, Lavinia becomes aware of the differences between her and her new family. However, she believes that her life will continue as in the past. In the end, Lavinia is sent to live with the Maddens. She realizes that she cannot be a servant for the rest of her life and must make a good marriage. It is when she marries Marshall that she ceases to be a servant and becomes mistress of Tall Oaks.

Lavinia's brother also becomes an indentured servant after their parents die. The brother goes to work with a blacksmith, but he dies in an accident only three years into his contract. For Lavinia and her brother, indentured servitude was not the best option, but it was the only option. Without parents or relatives to care for them, they had nowhere else to go. For Lavinia, it becomes a generous situation in which she gets a good education and makes a good marriage. In the end, Lavinia becomes the sole owner of the farm where she grew up.

Slavery

Slavery was a fact of life in the time period in which this novel is set. The country had only recently won its independence and become a united, democratic government. George Washington was still President. Slavery was a hot topic in politics. It would remain legal for many years in most states.

Tall Oaks is a tobacco farm in Virginia. The captain owned many slaves, most of which worked in the fields, but some of whom also worked in the big house caring for him and his family. Belle, one of the kitchen servants, was the captain's daughter. It was not uncommon for this sort of thing to take place in that time period as well. It was also common for things like Marshall's relationship with Beattie to take place on these farms.

Slavery is a big part of the plot of this novel. If Mama Mae, and the others, were not a part of Lavinia's life, she might have had a very different childhood growing up as an indentured slave. It never occurred to Lavinia that her family was different from her, that they could not just pack up and leave the farm. Lavinia never thought of the differences between herself and her new family until she moved to Williamsburg and was



discouraged in making friends with the house servants. It also never occurs to Lavinia that in order to have Belle be with her, she would have to purchase her.

In the end, Lavinia begins to realize the differences between her and her adopted family. Mama Mae makes it clear that Lavinia's role has changed when she marries Marshall. Marshall himself also makes it clear when he punishes Lavinia for spending time with the servants. Later, when Marshall begins selling the slaves to pay for his gambling debts, Lavinia begins to fear losing her family. Lavinia helps them escape even though she could be punished severely for this action. In the end, Lavinia understands fully what it means to be a slave. It is then that Lavinia offers freedom to the people she still thinks of as family.

Family

Family is an important part of this novel because it highlights both the positives in family as well as the negatives. Mama Mae and Papa George create a tight, loving family just from the love they freely share with those around them and the generosity of their spirit. When Lavinia first comes to live on Tall Oaks, she could have become an outcast, treated poorly by the other servants. Instead, Mama Mae goes out of her way to help Lavinia and to make her feel a part of things. It is because of this love that Lavinia has a happy childhood despite her circumstances.

As a contrast to the happy family the servants create in the kitchen house, Marshall has a far different childhood. The captain is often gone for months, leaving his wife to care for the house and the children alone. Mrs. Pyke does not handle the long absences, and her frequent miscarriages, well. Mrs. Pyke becomes a laudanum addict who often neglects her son in favor of her young daughter. When Sally dies, Mrs. Pyke only becomes that much more neglectful of her son, especially since he caused the death. No one but the servants come to Marshall's defense when the tutor abuses him, leaving him broken and receptive of the poison the cruel overseer chooses to feed him. In the end, Marshall becomes a violent alcoholic who does not care about family or tradition.

The two different families in this novel represent opposite ends of the spectrum. The author gives the reader the suggestion that no matter who a person might be, it is, in part, their childhood and family that shapes who they will eventually become. Lavinia was well loved by her family even though they were not biologically related. Marshall, on the other hand, was neglected and abused even though his well-meaning parents were his biological relatives. To Marshall, blood no longer meant anything as he had little to do with his child with Lavinia, ignored his son with Belle, and took a mistress whom he threatened to sell with her children even though all those kids were his. Family only matters to those who can make that emotional connection, something Marshall clearly could not.

Styles

Point of View

The novel is written from the first person point of view. The novel divides the narration between Lavinia and Belle. The odd chapters are written from Lavinia's point of view, while the even number chapters are from Belle's.

The point of view of this novel works because it draws the reader in close to the main character as everything is seen through that character's eyes. Lavinia draws the reader in with her innocence and naivety. Belle, on the other hand, is often angry in her observations, but begins to mellow with age and with the realization that life there is beauty in life no matter how dark it might seem. The reader comes to care deeply for each of these characters, leaving readers on the edge of their seats at the moment when Lavinia learns who has been killed. The point of view works well with the plot.

Language and Meaning

The book is written in simple English. It is set in a time period when language was more formal than it is in the modern world. However, the author uses less formality. There is no use of bad grammar or foreign words to underscore the time period or unique characters. The language is simple enough to be easily read by the youngest readers.

Structure

The novel is divided into fifty-five chapters and a prologue. The Prologue begins at the end of the novel while the first chapter takes the reader back nineteen years in time. This allows the author to warn the reader of a dark moment in time that waits for the characters of the novel. The novel is told through narration and dialogue, with Lavinia's chapters containing more scenes and information than many of the chapters narrated by Belle.

The novel contains one main plot and several subplots. The main plot follows Lavinia as she becomes an indentured slave to the family of a ship's captain. A subplot follows the relationship of Belle and the captain and the complications that arise from this relationship. Another subplot follows the relationship Lavinia has with Marshall and the complications that develop from it. All the plots come to a satisfactory conclusion at the end of the novel.



Quotes

I forbade myself to think I was too late and focused all my strength on moving toward home.

-- Lavinia (Prologue paragraph 1)

Importance: This quote shows not only that something bad has happened that will profoundly impact Lavinia's life, but that she still thinks of Tall Oaks as home despite all that has happened to her.

In that spring of 1791, I did not understand that the trauma of loss had taken my memory.

-- Lavinia (chapter 1 paragraph 1)

Importance: This quote is the first of Chapter 1. It alerts the reader that Lavinia has no memory. Something terrible has recently happened to her, relating back to the terrible events in the Prologue. The reader knows now that even though the two events are nineteen years apart, Lavinia is destined to have a hard life.

Because of his great size, I might easily have been frightened by him, but I became enamored.

-- Lavinia (chapter 3 paragraph 11)

Importance: This quote is Lavinia's first reaction to Ben, showing that he was a large man, but very gentle. Ben would be the first man Lavinia would love.

After I remembered the death of my parents, other memories began to surface.

-- Lavinia (chapter 5 paragraph 1)

Importance: This quote shows that Lavinia's memories returned. They impacted her life as she remembered more and more.

Christmas is always the worst time for me. It's what I remember best, living up there in the big house. And now Marshall is sleeping in my old bedroom.

-- Belle (chapter 6 paragraph 2)

Importance: This shows some of the nature of Belle's dislike of the people in the big house even though she lived there until she was seven or eight. Belle's unhappiness stems from the fact that she was treated like one of the family until Miss Martha came along and began giving the captain children of their own.

After a time I come to like her and think, Maybe when she gets older, I'll tell her myself that we're sisters.

-- Belle (chapter 8 paragraph 1)



Importance: Belle admits that she was jealous of Sally, but after she got to know her she began to really like her. This is part of Belle's grief after Sally dies.

Here's what happened: Waters goes after Dory and now he's a dead man.
-- Belle (chapter 12 paragraph 1)

Importance: This quote explains why Ben had to kill Mr. Waters. This act places all of the servants in a difficult position, but they manage to deal with it.

Her hands shook as she loaded it, but it was evident that she was familiar with the workings of a gun.
-- Lavinia (chapter 15 paragraph 5)

Importance: This quote shows that before she became addicted to laudanum and mentally unbalanced, Mrs. Pyke knew and understood how to protect herself.

Papa's saying how Marshall's spending all his time with Rankin. He's letting that boy drink liquor, and young as he is, Papa says, Marshall's already got a taste for it.
-- Belle (chapter 18 paragraph 9)

Importance: This quote foreshadows Marshall's drinking problems and his violent behavior with his wife and his slaves. This also foreshadows the attack that will happen against Belle soon after this time.

When Campbell don't come back, Lavinia takes over with Sukey like she's her own.
-- Belle (chapter 22 paragraph 2)

Importance: This quote shows how attached Lavinia was to Campbell and how she grows just as close to Sukey. The relationship with Sukey is important because it will lead to trouble later.

I take full responsibility for the relationship that developed between Miss Martha and Belle's son, Jamie.
-- Lavinia (chapter 41 paragraph 1)

Importance: This quote is important because it notes just how damaging the relationship between Miss Martha and Jamie would one day become the one that will lead almost directly to Marshall's death.

Our massive old oak tree stood near the top of the hill, its lush green leaves shading the thick branch that bore the weight of a hanging body.
-- Lavinia (chapter 55 paragraph 10)

Importance: This quote marks the moment Lavinia finds Mama Mae hanging from a tree, the same moment that is described in the Prologue of the novel.