

Mama Day Study Guide

Mama Day by Gloria Naylor

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Plot Summary

Mama Day is a novel by Gloria Naylor, the American Book Award-winning author of *The Women of Brewster Place*. This novel follows the lives of Miranda (Mama) Day and her family. *Mama Day* is told in both third person (Mama Day's story) and in the first person, in a dialogue between Mama Day's grandniece Ophelia (Cocoa) Day, and her husband, George Andrews.

The Days are descendants of slaves, freed in 1823 by their master Bascombe Wade when he died and deeded to them his entire holdings: a private island off the coast of South Carolina and Georgia called Willow Springs. Though its beginnings are shrouded in mystery, Mama Day, the matriarch of the island, helps keep the island's unique heritage alive. Her sister Abigail is her only living relative on the island, as Abigail's granddaughter Cocoa has gone "mainside" and is living in New York City.

Although they seem to have nothing in common, Cocoa finds love with a straitlaced engineer named George Andrews who, himself, has a past hidden in shadows. Upon visiting the island, Cocoa and George find themselves confronted with mysterious happenings, difficult situations, and devastating loss. However, the citizens of Willow Springs persevere in a place that seems set outside of time: a place of struggle and survival over forces both natural and supernatural.

Preface

The preface of the book begins with a family tree depicting the Day Family, and a bill of sale detailing the purchase of a female slave, Sapphira, who is suspected of using witchcraft.

Readers are introduced to Willow Springs, an island that belongs to no country, but only to its inhabitants. In 1823, Bascombe Wade died, freed his slaves, and left everything he owned to Sapphira and her descendants, who live there to this day.

After the preface, the book is broken into two parts: I and II.

Part I

After noticing one another in a coffee shop, Cocoa applies for a job at George's company. The interview is awkward, and she does not get the job. However, after writing him a letter, he anonymously suggests her to a business associate for a job. Eventually, he asks her for a date and they develop a friendship, which later evolves into a more romantic one. They have many differences, and for several years they vacation separately, Cocoa spending her vacations on the island of Willow Springs with her family.



Cocoa's grandmother Abigail and great-aunt Miranda (Mama Day) live on Willow Springs. Mama Day is a wise-woman and healer who is respected above all others on the island.

The novel has two major subplots, which are introduced in part I. The first concerns a young woman, Bernice Duvall, who is desperate to have a child and elicits Mama Day's help. Dissatisfied with the initial results, she takes matters into her own hands with disastrous consequences. Mama Day steps in and offers to help if only Bernice will follow her guidance. Eventually, with Mama Day's help, Bernice becomes pregnant.

The second subplot concerns another neighbor, Ruby, who is suspected of using supernatural means to steal another woman's lover. She is extremely possessive and prone to jealousy, suspicion, and revenge. Some even say she is prone to murder. Everyone she sees as a threat is in danger of coming to harm. Eventually, most of the town begins to avoid both her and her new husband.

Part II

After four years, George and Cocoa visit Willow Springs together. He is welcomed into the family and community. The Day women inform George and Cocoa they plan to throw a party for the couple to celebrate their visit. In the meantime, George gets to know the tales and traditions of the island, even though he doesn't completely understand them.

Bernice and her husband have had a son. Bernice is very protective of him, but cannot prevent tragedy from striking when he is killed during a tropical storm.

Ruby's possessiveness has become twisted and vicious. Any woman who comes too close is in danger. When she suspects Junior Lee has his eyes on Cocoa, she turns her ire on the younger woman with vicious consequences. However, Ruby underestimates the consequences of messing with someone Mama Day loves.

George and Cocoa fight before the storm hits. At the party thrown for them, they are not speaking to each other and Junior Lee takes this opportunity to hit on Cocoa. Ruby sees this, and, feigning sympathy, invites Cocoa over to have her hair done.

The storm hits, bringing George and Cocoa together again. However, when Cocoa awakes, she finds she has come down with a mysterious illness. Mama Day realizes quickly that Ruby has done something to her Baby Girl, and goes to confront her. When Ruby refuses to come out to meet her, Mama Day delivers retribution.

The storm has caused massive damage, including the death of Little Caesar Duvall and the destruction of the bridge to the mainland. George is obsessed with repairing the bridge, and threatens to swim across if needed (impossible as he cannot swim) in order to get help for his wife.

Mama Day instructs Dr. Buzzard to tell George about the hoodoo that has been performed on Cocoa. George refuses to believe, even when Mama Day tells him the



same thing and plus adding the fact Cocoa is dying. When he finds a maggot from Cocoa's body, he decides to return to Mama Day, who sends him to perform an unusual task. In his attempt to do what she asks, he falls victim to a heart attack, during which he goes to Cocoa and holds her as he dies.

Cocoa is cured, although she despairs over the loss of her husband. Mama Day returns with her to New York to clean out their apartment, and Cocoa moves to Charleston. She eventually remarries and has children.

At 104 years old, Mama Day knows she is dying, and savors the moments left in her life. She knows Cocoa is merely at the beginning of her journey, and is comforted now they have both found their peace.



Preface (pages 1-10)

Summary

NOTE: "Mama Day" does not have regular chapters. It is written in rotations of points of view: Cocoa and George in dialogue, and the Narrator (who tells Mama Day's story). For convenience here, each section is broken into one group, approximately 30-50 pages each. Due to differences in editions, page numbers, when given, are approximate and based on the 1988 hardbound edition: Ticknor & Fields, Publishers.

The facing of the book: a family tree depicting the Day Family. At the top, Sapphira Wade b. 1799. Beneath her are listed seven sons, the last of which is Jonah Day. A note states, "God rested on the seventh day and so would she." This is the first usage and origin of the surname. Under Jonah Day are also listed seven sons, the last of which is John-Paul. Beneath John Paul's name are listed three daughters: Miranda (Mama Day) b. 1895, Abigail b.1897, and Peace. Beneath Abigail's name is listed three more daughters: Peace, Grace, and Hope. Beneath Grace's name is listed her daughter, Ophelia (Cocoa) b. 1953.

The next page shows a bill of sale dated "Tuesday, 3rd day August, 1819." This paper details the sale of one female, aged 20 and answering to the name "Sapphira," to Bascombe Wade of Willow Springs. She is of pure African stock and healthy, but rebellious, refusing to do field or domestic work. She is a willing midwife and nurse, but is suspected of delving into witchcraft. The conditions of her sale, it is listed, are "one-half gold tender, one-half goods in kind. Final."

Everyone on Willow Springs knows the legend of Sapphira Wade, although no one speaks of it. Each person has a different idea of her. In 1823, Bascombe Wade dies, leaving his slaves free and the deed to Willow Springs in Sapphira's name. The cause of his death is lost to the mystery of time, and Sapphira disappears, leaving seven sons who inherit the land down through the generations.

In the generations that follow, "18&23" takes on a variety of meanings, mostly relating to magic, trickery, mischief, danger or treachery. The inhabitants of Willow Springs manage to survive all kinds of hardships, including several powerful storms.

Willow Springs is not part of any state. A single wooden bridge connects the island to the mainland, and it is occasionally damaged by storms, forcing a rebuild. The island belongs only to its residents, although they do business with the mainland and pay the appropriate federal taxes.

The inhabitants learn to look at anything that comes to them from over the bridge with a critical eye, even if it's one of their own. The son of the local beauty shop owner, Reema, attends college mainside, and returns to write a book that will "put Willow



Springs on the map.” Instead, he writes a book in which he comes to his own conclusions, which the inhabitants find patronizing.

The narrator informs readers if “Reema’s boy” had listened, had offered to help with daily tasks, and had asked the right questions, he could have heard everything he needed to know.

The narrator points out the reader can magically “hear” through the medium of this book; the reader can hear the stories, whether or not they are even spoken aloud. It is yet another form of “18&23.”

Analysis

The preface sets the tone and plot of the novel and introduces the many intertwined themes of the story. These complex themes include family/identity, the occult/belief, power/consequences and heartbreak/loss and include layers of intricate symbolism.

Family and identity are strongly related themes. The genealogy of the Day family is provided, but the names of the spouses are omitted, and the chart begins with Sapphira Wade. The father (or possibly fathers) of her sons are not listed, and are lost to time. Because of this, and because of the diverse shades of brown skin among the island’s inhabitants, the theme of identity also comes into play.

The island’s past is shrouded in mystery. Therefore, it is also laced with myth and legend, superstition, and tales of magic: all of which could be seen as “occult.” This theme appears several times and in several guises throughout the novel: in the powers attributed to Sapphira and her descendants, the traditions of the island, the actions of some of the islanders, and in the setting of Willow Springs as a place separate from any other. It is also expressed in the ability of the living to converse with the dead (and vice-versa) and the establishment of the “other place” as a place of mystery, even beyond the isolated strangeness of the island.

Mystical themes, such as the seventh son of a seventh son, and the manipulation of time also help create this sense of magical realism. The narrator points out through the magic of the written word, readers can be present in a time and place not our actual time and place, and can also be privy to thoughts and conversations we would not otherwise hear. All things, no matter how well hidden, are accessible to those who know how to listen.

Related to the previous theme are those of “real vs. unreal” and the role of belief. The narrator tells readers if they listen, they can hear things others might not. Legend is a mysterious blend of truth and untruth, and the dividing lines between are blurry.

Sapphira is said to have magical powers, including control of lightning, and is suspected of using witchcraft. She is also a midwife and nurse, which historically implies a knowledge of natural medicines, such as roots and herbs, which are historically linked to witchcraft. The use of this power can be good or evil; however, every action, right or



wrong, has consequences. Sapphira's actions, although lost to time, gained her freedom and the deed to the island. Life has also been a struggle for her descendants, imbued with hard work, loss, and pain.

Heartbreak/loss is the final theme discernible in the preface. The dead tell stories. Many die young. Cocoa Day comes to the island to talk with her first husband George about the summer they came to visit. We are told there was a storm, after which she left, and he stayed. All one needs to know, readers are told, can be found in the graveyard. Thus, readers are given the foreshadowing of the fate of George and Cocoa.

Vocabulary

bilious, conjure, salve, persuaded, crowddaddies, treacherous, gabardine, descendant, addle-brained, ethnography, inverting



Section 1 Summary (pages 11-52)

Summary

While she is waiting to head to a job interview as an office manager at Andrews and Stein Engineering Company, Ophelia “Cocoa” Day notices a man in a coffee shop. Cocoa has been looking for a job for six months, and has become a self-defined expert on reading people. After watching the man eating, she is intrigued, and considers going over to offer him a toothpick, but decides against it. Cocoa contemplates the dating scene in New York, and how difficult it is to find a good man.

Cocoa believes racism is rampant in New York, only underground, hidden behind “equal opportunity.” She speculates segregation would have been easier because then at least you’d know for sure whether or not it was worth applying for a given job. The office is on the fifth floor of a six-floor lower-rent office building. The building’s furnishings are worn and the lighting is dim. Cocoa assumes the job will not be a lucrative one, but she is mostly attracted by the fact the job begins September first, as she is going home for a week in August to Willow Springs.

Cocoa refers to people in terms of food or flavors, often indicating their race. She sizes herself up in comparison to the others, and figures as long as they are hiring on qualifications and not sex appeal, she has a good chance. When she is finally called in to meet with George Andrews, she discovers he is the same man she was watching in the coffee shop.

George is taken aback as he had a strange feeling of déjà vu when he had seen her in the café that he had seen her before. Being a pragmatist, he does not often rely on “feelings,” and is unnerved by it. George attempts to put Cocoa at ease, but fails miserably. He comments on the discrepancy between the nickname “Cocoa” and her pale brown skin, inadvertently pushing her buttons. She becomes instantly defensive, and the remainder of the interview does not go well. He informs her the job must be filled immediately, not on September 1 as noted in the ad, and she leaves, disappointed.

On Willow Springs, Cocoa’s grandmother, Abigail, and great aunt Miranda, are preparing for her arrival. Miranda is referred to by many of the locals as Mama Day. Mama Day thinks about her family, and about how the boys of the first two island generations had thrived, but the female offspring of the Day line had not been so fortunate.

A neighbor, Bernice Duvall, visits and is upset the herbal teas Mama Day has been giving her have not helped her conceive. She suggests perhaps Mama can help her using less orthodox means, but Mama Day deflects her request and counsels patience. Cocoa surprises her family with her arrival, and they welcome her into their arms. She complains about not getting the job. They suggest she write Mr. Andrews a letter.



Analysis

Cocoa, despite her intelligence and tough exterior, is deeply insecure. She believes men are out to use women, and are only interested in them for sex. While racism is real, she uses her African heritage as a shield, even as she feels insecure about her light brown hair and skin as well as her slender form: not, in her mind, the Black ideal of beauty. Even though she finds herself intrigued by George in the café, she does not approach him, rationalizing he is probably a “creep” and not worth her time. When she sees him again at the interview, and he asks her to address him casually, she assumes the worst of him. Cocoa lives by assumption, usually the worst, to protect herself from heartbreak and disappointment.

Cocoa dehumanizes people by referring to them as food or flavors. This is another form of self-protection, allowing her to write people off and avoid intimacy with them. Although she can develop relationships with people (i.e. family), she is terrified of being rejected the way she was as a child, both by her mother who died young and by her peers who teased her for being too “white.”

The introduction to Mama Day and Miss Abigail contrasts the harsh edges of the city with the warmth of home and family. The arrival of Bernice Duvall introduces the first subplot and establishes Mama Day as a wise woman who does not rush to extraordinary means, but instead counsels patience in the rhythms of nature.

Vocabulary

desperate, encourage, ulcers, editorial, discreetly, ethnic, hypocritical, legwork, clincher, underwriter, inner sanctum, predestination, adamant, requisition, notorious, congenital, delinquents, derelict, segregation



Section 2 Summary (pages 52-97)

Summary

George receives the letter from Cocoa, which brings her back to the forefront of his mind. Since he has already hired someone, he uses his connections to secure her an interview surreptitiously with a company for whom his company is a contractor. Upon her return from Willow Springs, Cocoa gets the job as an accounts manager. Although she has been told to expect gifts from clients, she is surprised when she gets roses and an offer of dinner from George. She calls to thank him for the flowers and decline the date, but finds herself accepting instead.

Their date is very boring, as they don't seem to have much in common. They have vastly different tastes and she can't understand, much less share, his obsession with football. When he tries to explain his work through his tie-tack logo, she makes a sarcastic comment, which bruises his ego. He asks her if she likes walking, which leads to her into a long monologue leading George to the realization that not only does she know nothing about New York, but she is also a bigot, albeit an "equal opportunity" one.

George confronts Cocoa about her attitude and she becomes very defensive. He tells her he just wants to understand. Eventually he wears her down, and she divulges some of her vulnerability. At the end of the disaster date, she is surprised when he asks her out again: this time not on a date, but simply to see more of the city. She accepts.

Mama Day and Abigail are answering a letter from Cocoa, filling her in on gossip about local dramas, including their neighbor Ruby's attempt to steal another woman's man. Bernice Duvall is sick with fever and sends her husband Ambush to fetch Mama Day, afraid she is going to lose her baby. Mama Day suspects that Bernice is not pregnant, but goes to help her. Bernice has an ovarian cyst caused by taking fertility pills she stole from the pharmacy where she works. Mama Day calls a physician from the mainland to help the girl. After seeing the nursery Bernice has lovingly created, Mama Day feels compassion for her. Mama Day tells Bernice come spring she will help her if she is willing to work hard. However, if it comes to the point that they have to go to the other place, Bernice will have to promise never to tell a soul.

When Mama Day returns home, she finds Miss Frances who begs Mama Day to give her some hoodoo charms to counteract the "roots" Ruby has used to steal her lover. Mama Day refuses, saying Miss Frances needs to act rationally and use her own mind and skills to deal with her romantic relationship.

Analysis

Cocoa and George seem to be drawn to one another, despite their best efforts to resist. Cocoa's letter from Willow Springs brings her back into George's thoughts. There is a strange, odorless powder on the envelope, and when he goes to wash it off, memories



of her come flooding back, and his hands smell of lavender. The reader must wonder: is this some sort of magic?

In a Chinese restaurant with his client Hopewell, George's fortune reads, "All chickens come home to roost," which foreshadows his future sacrifice. He feels compelled, for no particular reason, to offer Cocoa's name to Hopewell for a job.

Cocoa is smug when she finds out George's company is contracted with Hopewell's, and she manages the boss's accounts. When he asks her out for a date, she fully intends to say no, but while waiting on the phone for him to answer, she feels nervous and defensive. She starts to reject him, but she senses the kindness behind the gesture, so she accepts.

The date is a disaster: the first of many storms between them. It is obvious they have little in common, and he pushes her buttons by confronting her behavior; yet, when he invites her to see New York with him, she still accepts. He has a feeling something has yet to be finished, she finds it weird he has asked her out after the disaster date, and even weirder that she accepts. Is it coincidence the word weird originally meant fate?

George and Cocoa's relationship is turbulent from the beginning. The issue of race is brought up between them through Cocoa's insecurities, which she seeks to deflect by referring to people as food. She does this based more on skin color than actual ethnicity: all Hispanics are "tacos," for example. George calls her out, and she becomes defensive, saying he is insinuating she is a shallow bigot. He does not deny it; however, he is calm and not sarcastic. He presses her for more information, and she admits to being overwhelmed by the diversity and constantly changing face of the city, especially in comparison to her home of Willow Springs. When he asks her to see New York with him, her defenses kick in again with a game of "what is wrong with this guy?"

Cocoa is not the only one dealing with the issue of race. George's five-year relationship with a white woman, Shawn, has been fraught with these issues, both spoken and unspoken, and it has put a wall between them.

A first real peek into Willow Springs introduces us to the Day sisters, as well as to the story's two sub-plots. In their letter to Cocoa, the sisters gossip about the widow Ruby, who Mama Day suspects of killing her first husband out of jealousy. This exposes Ruby's ethics and motivations. She desires another woman's man, so she will take him, whether through mundane means (a home cooked meal) or magical (use of roots); however, no one had better mess with her man, or else! This foreshadows trouble in the future, as gaining control means one has to maintain it: a downside for any love spell.

In going to the aid of Bernice, we see Mama Day in her true role as a healer. We see her compassion and observe she thinks long and hard, working every natural and practical angle, before suggesting going to the "other place." In an earlier incident, however, when someone misbehaves towards Cocoa, she threatens him with a curse. She tells her sister, "I had it all ready at the other place." We can see Mama Day may be cautious, but she's no one to be trifled with, either. We know now the other place is



somewhere that mysteries occur, and where secrets must be kept. Once again, the other place is a place out of time, a place of power, a place “between,” where magical things can happen, for good or ill.

We know, too, Mama Day does not take her gifts lightly, expecting the recipient of her extraordinary talents will do their part. Bernice promises to work hard and do what Mama Day asks in order to be worthy of her help. In contrast, we see Mama Day turn away the desperate Frances, who is begging for a magical resolution to her problem, unwilling to listen to the matriarch’s wisdom: the mind is the most powerful tool to utilize for change.

Vocabulary

overzealous, contentious, plaintive, sachet, disposition, rationale, cholera, sufficient, potash, bumbles, breech, antipasto, gauge, pullet, cloistered, sanctimonious, tribulation, sparse, efficiency, gargoyle, legitimate, commission, cantor, masochist



Section 3 Summary (pages 97-140)

Summary

As George and Cocoa visit the neighborhoods of New York, they become friends. Cocoa is vaguely disappointed he doesn't seem to be interested in her romantically, yet impressed by the fact he is a gentleman. Her old life and friends are beginning to seem less attractive. George is ambivalent about his growing affection for her, as he is still involved with Shawn. When he tells Cocoa about her, she acts sympathetic, but declines to see him again. She admits to herself she is manipulating him. He goes for it, and they make a date under the premise of discussing King Lear. Instead, they admit their attraction and go to bed together.

Mama Day and Abigail prepare for the traditional winter Candle Walk, and speculate about Cocoa's letters. Bernice is healing, and she and her husband bring Mama Day a handmade rocking chair evoking memories of her mother. Mama Day walks to the family graveyard and thinks of the other place. She feels a sensation of fear, and her candle blows out as she senses the spirits wandering the woods.

Cocoa admits to George the intensity of their relationship frightens her, as she is afraid of losing control over her carefully managed life. Her moods don't seem to rile him, so she pushes the boundaries. They begin to argue about small things, and she assumes the worst of him. George has decided already he wants to marry Cocoa; however, he decides not to compromise on the thing most important to him: football. Cocoa becomes angry over his refusal to compromise on this issue and tells him not to call her anymore. He complies, but she eventually gives in and calls him. Cocoa is discouraged because George is not forthcoming with details about his life.

The evening before George goes out of town for football playoffs, Cocoa brings him a gift at his work and meets Shawn, who works in the same building. Cocoa becomes very angry and jealous and has an argument with George, who leaves on his trip in a temper. Cocoa defiantly agrees to meet an old boyfriend. George returns home planning to ask Cocoa to marry him, but sees her leaving her apartment. He follows her, and sees her go into the man's apartment, and not come out until morning. Livid, he reveals a meaningful insight into his past. She asks him to marry her and he agrees.

On Willow Springs, gossip is flying about the weddings of not only Cocoa and George, but also Ruby and Junior Lee. Much of the town believes Ruby has bewitched Junior. Mama Day and Miss Abigail sew a quilt for Cocoa and George, a gift that will span generations. As spring comes, Mama Day decides it's time to help Bernice in the next step in helping her conceive a child. She takes her out to the old house, the other place, and performs a secret fertility ritual.



Analysis

George and Cocoa bond over King Lear, in which one of the characters is a bastard, a man who never knew his father. Neither George nor Cocoa ever knew their fathers, which negatively affects each one's sense of identity. The storms Lear faces are brought on by his insecurity, just as Cocoa's insecurity brings on the storms in her relationship. Just as in the Bard's play, these storms lead to both madness and heartbreak.

Cocoa's insecurity, especially regarding Shawn, leads her to attempt to sabotage the relationship through fights, while George stubbornly clings to order; it is the only constant in his life. Still, despite the anxiety, both cling to the fact they love one another and don't want to live without the other.

Mama Day seems to have a connection with the otherworld. Whether it is in her mind or not (or both), the spirits of her ancestors seem to speak to her, and she often seeks her counsel. On Candle Walk she goes to see them and gets a feeling of foreboding. She has an intuition telling her Bascombe Wade died of a broken heart.

The rocking chair she receives from the Duvalls is also a symbol of loss, and is reminiscent of the chair her mother, Ophelia, rocked in as she went mad with grief over her lost child, before drowning herself in the Sound.

Bernice is a girl with a nervous temperament. Nonetheless, she has worked hard and fostered patience, just as Mama Day asked her to do. Mama Day performs a fertility ritual wherein Bernice takes an egg, a universal symbol of fertility, into her body. Whether or not the rite works magic in helping her conceive or whether it was Bernice's hard work preparing her body for pregnancy is a matter of belief.

Vocabulary

pinafore, agile, melancholy, knish, fluke, profusely, shrewd, hygiene, pragmatism, engrossing, obligatory, poignancy, rheumatic, pomanders, traipse, junction, chemise, sarcastic, catastrophe, endure, havoc, carte blanche, suffice, intrigued, potential, relevant, pompous, snide, elusive



Section 4 Summary (pages 140-165)

Summary

George and Cocoa learn how to live together as man and wife. George turns to books on women's cycles to explain her occasionally irrational behavior, and Cocoa learns to live with his exacting and practical nature and the rituals he has learned to live by. Cocoa says she wants to go back to college and does not want children right away, though George would like to have kids soon. Despite their differences, they are happy together.

When Cocoa returns to Willow Springs, she does not bring her husband. She takes her vacation in August, and George takes his week of vacation each year to attend the Super Bowl. Bernice is pregnant, which has helped heal her previously poor relationship with her critical mother-in-law, Pearl. Cocoa and Mama Day go out to the other place to tend to the gardens, and stop by the graveyard to tidy the graves. Returning home that evening, Cocoa goes upstairs to get ready to go out with some friends. When the car pulls up and Mama Day sees Junior Lee is in the car, she makes an excuse for Cocoa, and tells the driver of the car to go ahead. Cocoa is mad, but Mama Day is simply trying to protect her from Ruby.

Over the next four years, George and Cocoa begin to compromise more and take care of each other in little ways. Cocoa finishes school, and agrees to try for a baby.

Bernice has a son, and is very protective of him. His name is Charles, but everyone calls him Little Caesar. Ruby is fiercely jealous of nearly any woman, accusing them of trying to steal Junior Lee.

Cocoa stops trying to get George to go to Willow Springs with her because her persistence finally wears him down. George gives up the league playoffs to go home with Cocoa and finally meet her family. In hindsight, Cocoa wonders if anything she could have done could change the outcome of their fateful trip.

Analysis

Family is very important to both Cocoa and George. As an orphan who never knew his parents, he wants to start right away and have several children. Cocoa is still finding her personal identity and is learning how to live with another person. Secure in the love of her own family, she does not feel the need to have children right away. Learning to compromise strengthens their marriage. One of these compromises includes separate vacations. When George suddenly shifts and decides to go to Willow Springs with his wife after four years of marriage, it foreshadows a change in destiny; in the same way animal behaviors often predict the coming of a storm.



Ruby has a dilemma. She has her man, but is now gripped in the desperate struggle to keep him. She dictates what he wears, where he goes, and who with. When he does step outside, she is not far behind. Still, it is not he who suffers when he misbehaves, and he does. A woman who is seen with him dies a mysterious, painful death, and the fact he was in a car that stopped in front of Abigail's house while Cocoa was there is enough to fuel a jealousy in Ruby due to manifest four years later. Ruby's insecurity leads her to grasp power and control by any means, even destructive ones. This power is tenuous, and the methods unethical, which can only lead to greater struggles and tragic outcomes.

While Bernice dotes on her son, Charles, she is overprotective. The secret she is keeping seems to have an effect on her. Although she is not outwardly rude, she avoids Mama Day and becomes closer with her sanctimonious mother-in-law, Pearl. She is overly upset when people call her son "Chick" saying he looks like a baby chicken; she is so upset they eventually switch to calling him "Little Caesar" instead. It's as if she is struggling with her own belief, and how to deal with what she's experienced, not sure how to deal with her own occult knowledge.

Vocabulary

exhilarating, arduous, rudiments, squeamish, complexity, deteriorate, nonsensical, tepid, disoriented, spectrum, goulash, exacting, sabotage, negligee, ridiculous, gratitude, foxglove, muggy, gallivanting, chaperon, hoodoo, glycerine, domineering, heifer, consensus, inane, buckeyes, fanatic, tinge, propaganda



Section 5 Summary (pages 169-197)

Summary

The day of George and Cocoa's arrival, Mama Day is not feeling well. She finds a mysterious flannel bag of herbs and salt mixed with dirt beneath her steps. She walks to Ruby's house, and under the pretense of asking for some peaches, she leaves the bag where Ruby can see it and will know she's been found out. Ruby is very polite and says nothing, knowing Mama Day is not a person to trifle with.

George is not sure what to expect from Willow Springs. He finds the island to be a paradise, and is surprised by Abigail and Mama Day, as they are nothing like he imagined them to be. They accept him immediately. Cocoa is nervous having him at her childhood home at first, but realizes she is fortunate to have both parts of her life together in one place.

Mama Day and Abigail tell Cocoa and George about the party they plan to throw for them the following Friday. Ruby appears at the door with her husband and a basket of peaches. After some polite conversation, Mama Day invites Ruby and Junior Lee to the party. Ruby seems ambivalent, but Junior Lee seems very eager to attend. They leave and the family comments on Ruby's irrational jealousy surrounding her husband.

The sounds of nature keep George awake at night. When he finally sleeps he has a dream in which he is swimming, something he does not know how to do. In the dream, he begins to tire and cannot reach shore. Mama Day is there and tells him to get up and walk. He becomes angry with her. He reaches up to scream at her, and is able to stand in the water. When he awakens he seeks comfort from his wife, who is sleeping and disinterested. He decides to take a walk. On his walk, he runs into Dr. Buzzard and has a cryptic conversation with him regarding Dr. Buzzard's occupation.

Cocoa becomes concerned when she awakens to a missing husband, and he does not return until late morning. She tries to make him jealous by mentioning Junior Lee had admired her as she was tanning her legs.

Mama Day has returned from nursing a neighbor's sick baby when she sees George. He comes over, nervous around all of the chickens. He repeats some of Dr. Buzzard's comments to Mama Day. She is angry, but not at George, and she invites him to go fishing with her some morning.

Analysis

George is nervous going into a new and unfamiliar situation. The fact he can't find Willow Springs in an atlas disrupts his usual routine of researching a destination; it is his structured pattern of preparing for change, and the inability to do it unnerves him. Yet, when he arrives, he is immediately accepted into the family and community, which gives



him a feeling of belonging he hasn't known before. Cocoa, who acts as the bridge between the two worlds, feels uncomfortable at first, but realizes she truly belongs both places and can bring the two together.

George meets Dr. Buzzard, and although Dr. Buzzard hints at his role as a conjure-man, George simply does not understand, as the realm of hoodoo is simply beyond his scope of belief. The islanders are used to this, and while they don't hide their ways, they don't take time to explain them, either.

The first clash between Ruby and Mama Day occurs when Miranda's hen scratches up a mojo bag with an herb in it Mama Day recognizes as being directed towards Cocoa, who is arriving on the island soon. When Mama Day confronts Ruby she does so indirectly but deliberately, not to escalate the conflict but to let Ruby know she's been found out. Ruby visits and delivers her response: she is backing off. However, Junior Lee's behavior doesn't change, and he continues to flirt with Cocoa, who passes it off as nothing but foolish behavior.

George and Cocoa have a similar dream on the same night. George is swimming in the Sound. Cocoa is calling to him, but he can't get to her. In George's dream, Mama Day tells him just to get up and walk. He becomes angry, as he does not believe it's possible, but when he gets angry enough, he does stand, and his feet reach the bottom. This dream foreshadows the coming crisis, wherein George has to decide if he can believe in Mama Day enough to help her save his wife.

George's fearfulness of Mama Day's chickens also foreshadows their role in his final challenge, wherein his Chinese fortune cookie comes true and "all chickens come home to roost."

Vocabulary

haywire, soufflé, ointment, sprig, concoction, clapboard, remedies, bode, katydid, agenda, balmy, infirmity, equilibrium, illicit, moonshine, droning, receding, eaves, primal, parasitic, magnitude, encompass, spigot, burnished, vaudeville, falter, eke, croup, brazier



Section 6 Summary (pages 197-241)

Summary

George and Cocoa spend time with Ambush and Bernice Duvall. The next day, George and Mama Day wake up early to go fishing. When he insists she take her walking stick on their easy trek, she changes course and they head across the island, through the east woods to the ocean. She stays several paces ahead of him. They stop to look at the grave of Bascombe Wade, and Mama Day tells George the story of the island. By the time they catch and clean all their fish and trek home, George is exhausted.

George plays cards with Dr. Buzzard and his friends. He is frustrated by the fact not only does Dr. Buzzard cheat, but everyone expects him to, and the real goal of the evening is to lose the least amount of money to him. Dr. Buzzard offers to sell anyone who wants one a hoodoo good luck charm. George watches patiently to see how Buzzard is cheating and adjusts his strategy to win. Over the course of the evening, he becomes drunk, much to the amusement of the Day women upon his return home. Believing George's idleness was at the root of this situation, Mama Day and Abigail put him to work at a variety of tasks.

Cocoa takes George to the family graveyard, where she shows him the tradition of putting moss in one's shoes before entering. George asks a lot of questions regarding the origins of the island's traditions, which irritate Cocoa because she doesn't know the answers. It's just the way things have always been done. Cocoa feels ambivalent about their presence on the island. Thoughts and memories about her childhood and subtle voices she hears in the graveyard are making her anxious and eager to leave the island, even as George is thinking he'd like to stay in paradise. George wonders at the isolation of the other place, and the feeling he senses that the house resonates loss. Still, he decides it would be wonderful for himself and Cocoa to stay there for the remainder of their vacation.

Mama Day is having a bad feeling and can't shake it. She soon realizes she is feeling the signs of a storm possibly heading toward the island. She talks with Abigail, and while they hope for the best, that the storm will pass them by, they know they should prepare. The storm is not coming yet, and they throw the party for Cocoa and George.

As they prepare for the party that evening, Cocoa and George have the worst fight they have ever had. Cocoa is nervous, and pushes George's buttons. His honesty and pragmatism push hers. The fight escalates until Cocoa picks up a vase and throws it at George's head, cutting his scalp.

Everyone on the island, it seems, arrives at the party. Conversation revolves around weather reports of a storm front and speculation about the bandage on George's head. Bernice takes a moment to thank Mama Day quietly for her son, and Mama Day takes a



moment to encourage Cocoa to make peace with her husband, as it seems strange to everyone they have been avoiding one another all night.

Cocoa attempts to make peace, but he ignores her. Angry, she goes outside to cool off. Junior Lee follows her and comes on to her. She rebuffs him, but he persists, reaching up and untying her top. She tries to hit him, but smacks her hand against the railing. Crying, she runs into the house. Junior Lee is about to head the other way when he sees Ruby. He immediately lies, saying Cocoa tricked him into coming onto the porch with her.

Analysis

The visit with the Duvalls affects George deeply, as it brings up thoughts of all the qualities his childhood lacked. He is stung by Bernice's innocent reference to his mother, yet he is impressed by Ambush as a father. After seeing George's hurt, she assumes he will take it out on her, but he reacts with sorrow instead of defensiveness. He is beginning to feel "at home" on Willow Springs, another bit of foreshadowing.

George's underestimation of Mama Day allows the author to show us her stubbornness and tenacity, and also allows for George to discover more about the origins of Cocoa's family. George seems drawn to the grave of Bascombe Wade, and the heart-shaped leaves of the wild ginger growing there (and several places in the novel symbolic of great heartbreak.) Mama Day feels a strong urge to pull him away, as if to keep him from hearing something he doesn't need to know.

George asks Cocoa about the traditions of the island, but she doesn't know the answers. She is especially defensive about Bascombe Wade, and George knows it's because of her complexion, which indicates she could be related to the original Master of the plantation. He ruminates it shouldn't really matter; unlike him, she at least has a family, a heritage. Cocoa's intuition is ringing with the voices of the past, voices telling her she will break George's heart. She's starting to feel ambivalent about even being on the island. George, however, is feeling more and more attached, as if he belongs there with his newfound friends and family. He and Cocoa even argue about it, but he coaxes her out of her bad mood with humor. He thinks about moving to the other place for the rest of their vacation. Even though he knows it is a place of great sadness, he has a feeling they can defy history.

Miranda's intuition foreshadows the coming storm. Death. As if to back this up, George and Cocoa blow up in a huge fight the night of their party. Cocoa's lack of self-confidence drives her to want to look "perfect," which in her mind means darker. When George points out her insecurity by asking why she uses make-up too dark for her, she accuses him of wanting white women. He confesses his fantasy women were actually dark, and she gets even angrier: she is neither light enough nor dark enough. Cocoa is the bridge between black and white, between the woman of George's fantasy world and his previous reality. Instead of seeing she is both, she assumes she is neither. Their frustration rises, and they both lash out destructively.



Encouraged by her great-aunt, Cocoa tries to make peace, but is rebuffed. She leaves the scene, which gives Junior Lee the opening to make a pass. While the gesture is repelled, it is seen out of context by Ruby. Junior Lee deflects the blame, and seals Cocoa's (and hence George's) fate.

Vocabulary

infinite, adamant, nonchalant, quiver, wince, virtuoso, vindictive, liniment, badgering, doddering, sparse, inscription, tonic, eerie, chamois, lodestone, elusive, jubilation, matrix, juncture, legitimate, modicum, begrudging, decrepit, sporadic, succotash, ultimatum, nickelodeon, blasphemy, taut, akimbo, snide, sublime, reckoning (n.)



Section 7 Summary (pages 241-287)

Summary

George, still very angry with his wife, refuses to converse with her. He goes to help Mama Day prepare for the coming storm. Ruby has sent a note to Cocoa apologizing for Junior Lee's behavior, and asking Cocoa to come see her. Cocoa heads to Ruby's, where the older woman apologizes again as she braids Cocoa's hair. After she leaves, Ruby takes a few strands of Cocoa's hair and puts them in her pocket.

George thinks Cocoa's hair looks beautiful, but they are still not talking to one another, so he ignores her. George takes a long walk up to Chevy's pass, and the tomb of Bascombe Wade. As night falls, everyone huddles down and prepares for the storm.

As the storm hits, George can't sleep and is afraid. George decides he and Cocoa need to be together, so he carries her back from her grandmother's bed into their room. She doesn't wake up. She dreams George is drowning, and wakes up surprised to find herself with him. She questions him and he teases her. She gets angry at first, but succumbs to his warmth, falling back to sleep in his arms.

The storm takes a dramatic toll. Trees are down, gardens uprooted, and the bridge to the mainland is gone. Bernice Duvall's child, Little Caesar, is dead.

Cocoa comes down with a mysterious illness. At first it just seems like a virus, but she is fevered, in pain, and her skin is splotchy. With the bridge destroyed, the island has no access to the mainland, and there are no physicians on the island, only Mama Day. Mama Day is at the other place when Abigail shows up at the door, requesting her help for Cocoa. As Abigail refuses to come to the other place, Mama Day recognizes the seriousness of the situation. Meanwhile, George is becoming increasingly frustrated with his inability to get help for his wife. Mama Day realizes Ruby has poisoned Cocoa with the ointments she put in her braids. She cuts off all of the braids and tries to neutralize the poison. Welts appear down Cocoa's body.

After Little Caesar's funeral, all of the men, including George, return to work repairing the damaged bridge. Mama Day goes to call Ruby out, but Ruby does not answer the call. Mama Day walks around Ruby's house, striking the house on each side. On the way home, she meets Dr. Buzzard in the woods and instructs him to tell George what is really going on, whether or not he believes it. That evening lightning strikes Ruby's house twice and it explodes, burning Ruby and destroying all of her possessions.

Cocoa wakes up with her fever gone, but with vivid and horrifying hallucinations. George is obsessed with finishing the bridge, which was further damaged by the lightning storm. He is in a foul mood, and his determination is hardened when he sees the illness's effect on his wife.



At the other place, Mama Day goes up to inspect her damaged attic and finds a sodden ledger with a water-damaged bill of sale inside. The name is obscured, save the first two letters, Sa---

Cocoa continues to hallucinate at night, crying in bed while she thinks her husband is asleep. Feeling helpless, George decides he is going to fix an old boat and try to row to the mainland to get help for her. Mama Day realizes she needs George's help if she is to cure Cocoa. George goes to the bridge the next day to discover they have burned his boat. Dr. Buzzard tries to explain to him even if he did have the boat, he could not have helped Cocoa because the root of her malady was not natural, but the result of Ruby's actions. George refuses to believe it.

Analysis

Ruby manipulates Cocoa's affections in order to get her close so that she can exact her revenge. She braids her hair using an ointment containing nightshade, which is a deadly poison, and ties the hair with white threads. Later, when Mama Day cuts off the braids to try to neutralize the poison ore quickly she notes the braids look like worms, and the threads look like maggots. Mama Day notes that the braids were just one step in Ruby's plot, a device to gain her time, as she assumes Mama Day will take her time with the hair, and ignore whatever else might be happening. Again, Ruby has forgotten with whom she is dealing.

As always, George can't stay angry with his wife; she dreams of him drowning and is comforted when they wake up together. This dream is recurring, foreshadowing things to come: George must risk everything to save her.

The storm has caused severe damage on the island, including the death of Little Caesar. Bernice comes to Mama Day for reassurance that his death is not God's retribution for their secret. Mama Day comforts her, but wonders herself about the consequences of taking fate into one's own hands.

When Cocoa becomes sick, Abigail goes to the other place, where she has not set foot in 65 years since the heartbreaking death of her child (the loss of her peace, both figurative and literal) in the last big storm. Mama Day recognizes the signs of conjuring immediately. When she arrives at Ruby's, the woman refuses to face her. Mama Day calls out three times, a mystical number, and then uses her stick to bring down lightning upon the woman who threatened her grandniece.

The dreams George and Cocoa have been having are coming true. She is moving farther away from him, and he is desperate to get to her. He tries to find a boat, and threatens to swim if he has to (although he doesn't know how.) He seems willing to do anything, but when Mama Day tells him what she needs him to do, he gets angry, resists: he does not want to believe.

In this section of the story, the author gives readers another clear reference to William Shakespeare. In his play *The Tempest*, the magician Prospero has a staff and a book,



both of which he uses to conjure a storm in order to better the life of his daughter, Miranda. Mama Day, whose given name is Miranda, has inherited her father's carved walking stick, with which she calls out Ruby and conjures the lightning that burns down her house. She also finds the ledger of Bascombe Wade (her probable great-grandfather), which contains the name of Sapphira Wade (although it is illegible.) Like hair and nails, in folk tale and legend, names are powerful magic, thus, the ledger can be seen as a "book of magic." She sends both of these with George on his final task. Other themes from the play reflected indirectly in the novel include: constructive (rational) vs. destructive (fueled by negative emotions/desires) magic, manipulation (of nature and of people), communication with spirits, and the use of a triple, interwoven plot.

Vocabulary

commencement, monosyllables, chintz, verandah, morbid, junction, evidence, cockleburs, hypnotic, nape, bleak, distinct, listless, gnarled, grandeur, pervasive, prophetic, notions, tempest, morass, debris, devastation, splotches, reconcile, abscessed, hearth, plait, indignant, providence, incident



Section 8 and Epilogue Summary (pages 287-312)

Summary

Cocoa realizes she cannot trust her hallucinations, but she can feel something wrong within her body, and she begins to smell of decay. George comes home late and sees how thin she has become. He smells the putrid smell and struggles against what Dr. Buzzard has told him. Eventually, he asks Abigail what he can do to help Cocoa, and she sends him to Mama Day at the other place.

George spends all night stirring tar at the bridge. After Dr. Buzzard speaks to him again, George finally heads to the other place. Mama Day sits on the verandah oiling her father's walking stick and Bascombe Wade's ledger. George comes to her, and she tries to explain she cannot save Cocoa without his help. She asks him to do a task for her, and as it is unusual, he becomes upset and threatens to find his own way. They argue, and Mama Day tells him Cocoa is dying.

George returns to Abigail's house angry and exhausted. Abigail is burning sheets and pillowcases in a trash fire. George rushes upstairs to find Cocoa in the shower. He goes to join her, but she is hallucinating, and begins screaming. He holds her and comforts her. In the aftermath of their lovemaking, he finds a maggot on his body.

George returns to Mama Day to gather what he needs, then returns to perform the task she has asked of him. He tries, but everything seems to go awry, and he is not sure what to do. Feeling pain, he stumbles to Cocoa's room where he lays down beside her and dies.

After George's death, Cocoa gets better, although she despairs over the loss of her husband. Mama Day returns with her to New York to clean out their apartment. They come back to the island in time for Candle Walk. On Candle Walk night, Mama Day goes to the cemetery, where she contemplates George's spirit, and assures him eventually Cocoa will be able to speak with him again.

Cocoa begins to heal and moves to Charleston. She eventually remarries and has two sons, one of whom she names George. In trying to tell her son what her first husband looked like, she realizes she has no photos, and begins the final mourning of her loss.

At 104 years old, Mama Day knows she is dying, and savors the moments left in her life. She knows Cocoa is merely at the beginning of her journey, and she is comforted knowing also they have both found their peace.



Analysis

Mama Day suspects Ruby used the poison to buy her time to work a more disastrous magic on Cocoa. It was for this mojo Ruby would need Cocoa's hair. Most of Cocoa's symptoms including rash and delirium, can be attributed to the poison. However, there is more to it. The white worm of jealousy is moving through her.

Cocoa's hallucination of her skin melting and falling off (like worms) destroy her outward identity. She can also feel the whiteness crawling within her like worms. This whiteness represents her discomfort with her own ancestry, which is at the root of her jealousy over Shawn. It is also the symbol of the destructive nature of insecurity and jealousy, both hers and Ruby's. The putrid smell of death rises from that destruction.

Cocoa decides to distrust the mirror, telling herself you can't always believe what you see. George, however, can't believe something unless he sees it. Even after he is told about the curse, he refuses to believe until he sees the evidence on his own body.

George's literal nature does not allow him, even with the power of the magic stick and book, to fully listen or know what Mama Day is asking him. Instead, facing his fear (represented by the chickens) and disbelief is so overwhelming he himself becomes the cure, sacrificing his life for the one he loves.

Throughout the novel, countless symbols point to a broken heart. Cocoa was called Ophelia so she would break a man's heart like her great-grandmother did. Only George calls her Ophelia. George is drawn to the heart-shaped leaves of the ginger, which cover the graves and the well where Peace drowned. Even the spirits whisper Cocoa will break his heart, just as she is terrified she will lose him and break hers. In the end, his heart does break, literally, to save the one he loves.

Cocoa is saved on many levels. George's sacrifice allows her to heal. Not only does she heal physically, but also becomes emotionally healthy enough to eventually marry again and have a family. She finds the peace lost so many generations before. Mama Day, too, can find satisfaction in her long and eventful life.

Vocabulary

palmettos, linger, abiding, bungalow, peculiar, flip (adj.), emphasis, irony, endurable, souvenirs, spinster, filthy, typographical, brochure, drafting, cremation, makeshift, akimbo, suspicious, verandah, stench, gouged, lunatic, jutting, erratic, abortive, putrid, texture, metaphors, gullies, Balm of Gilead, grizzled, gnawing, cadaver



Characters

Miss Miranda (Mama) Day

Miranda (Mama) Day is the oldest living descendant of Sapphira Wade, her Great-Grandmother. At 104 years old, she is the undisputed matriarch of Willow Springs. She is a Wise Woman, healer, and midwife, and many think she inherited Sapphira's gifts. They often ask her for help, although she only obliges when she finds it practical.

Mama Day has cared for others all her life, never having a husband or children of her own. She is a deeply practical person who cares for those who need it, but does not coddle. She takes responsibility for her actions, and calls people on the carpet for theirs.

Despite her outwardly stubborn and unsentimental nature, Mama Day has an appreciation for life and a wicked sense of humor. She is a deeply reflective woman who cares deeply for her own and both recognizes and mourns the sacrifices she and others have had to make to get on in life.

Ophelia (Cocoa) Day

Cocoa is the granddaughter of Abigail Day, and the grandniece of Mama Day. Her mother died young, bitter over her abandonment by Cocoa's father. She named her daughter Ophelia "for revenge," hoping she would "break a man's heart."

In Hamlet, the title character's rejection of the maiden Ophelia leads her to madness and her eventual suicide by drowning. Cocoa's grandmother, after whom she is named, was driven to madness by the death of her child, Peace, and eventually leapt off a cliff into the Sound. Her body was never found.

Cocoa lives in New York City. Living in the city has toughened her, giving her a hard exterior and a defensive attitude. Cocoa is insecure and emotional, especially around her identity as a black woman. She has reddish-gold hair and very light skin, and was teased as a child, as most of the people on Willow Springs, all descendants of slaves, are darker shades of brown. They called her a "leper" and told her she must have white blood.

Her husband George, seemingly her polar opposite, forces her to confront her defenses, assumptions and insecurities. Their relationship is passionate, fraught with both conflict and abiding love. She loves him, and that scares her, as a deeper connection brings the fear of possible future loss.



George Andrews

George Andrews is an orphan: the son of a 15-year-old prostitute from Harlem. He was abandoned at three months old and taken to the Wallace P. Andrews Shelter for Boys on Staten Island. His main influences there are the guardians: Chip and Mrs. Jackson; a firm, no nonsense woman who keeps ruthless order, yet treats George with care. As a young child, George had rheumatic fever, which leaves him with an incurable heart condition.

At the orphanage, the boys are taught to live only in the present. As a result, George is pragmatic, rational, straightforward, well disciplined, and unsentimental. This personality suits him in his profession as an engineer.

Upon meeting Ophelia (he does not call her Cocoa), George's foundation is shaken. He is drawn to her in a way he can't completely understand. As he tries to focus and plan his way through this relationship, he is frustrated by her unruly emotions. His stubbornness and hers are often at odds; still, in the end, he will sacrifice everything for her well-being.

Miss Abigail Day

Miss Abigail is Mama Day's younger sister. Her house is across the way from her sister's trailer. Her nurturing personality is the opposite of her sister's more gruff one. She married and had three daughters, but all of them died relatively young. She mourns most deeply for her daughter, Peace, who died just after her birth. Her granddaughter Cocoa, is her next living descendent, and Abigail dotes on her.

Bernice Duvall

Bernice Duvall lives on Willow Springs with her husband and works in the pharmacy. She is thin and nervous, and is always in motion. She has a good marriage, but a difficult relationship with her overly judgmental mother-in-law, Pearl.

Desperate to conceive a child, Bernice elicits Mama Day's help. Not satisfied with her initial advice, Bernice takes matters into her own hands, and becomes very ill as a result. Mama Day promises to help her if she is willing to work hard. Bernice agrees, and after a time, Mama Day prepares a secret ritual after which Bernice conceives a son.

Bernice's ambivalence about the ritual, and the secret she has to keep, causes her to feel uncomfortable around Mama Day. Bernice is over-protective of her son, but that does not prevent his tragic death.



Charles “Ambush” Duvall

Ambush Duvall is Bernice Duvall’s husband. A farmer, he is patient, steady, and kind. He is devoted to his wife and dotes on his son.

Pearl Duvall

Pearl Duvall is Ambush Duvall’s mother. She is a devout Christian woman, very judgmental, and a gossip. She has nothing kind or supportive to say about her daughter-in-law until Bernice becomes pregnant and then gives birth to a son.

Charles Kyle “Little Caesar” Duvall

Little Caesar is the son of Bernice and Ambush Duvall. He is conceived after Mama Day helps Bernice improve her health and then performs a secret fertility ritual with her. After he is born, people begin to call the baby “Chick,” but for her own reasons, Bernice strongly objects. Since she is overly protective of her son and treats him like a king, folks then start to call him “Little Caesar.”

Little Caesar is killed during a tropical storm. The islanders gather for a traditional funeral rite, called “Standing Forth.”

Ruby

Ruby is a very overweight, dark-skinned woman in her mid- to late 60s. She has a reputation for “working roots” or practicing plant-based witchcraft, and is rumored to have murdered her first husband in a fit of jealousy.

Ruby sets her sights on Junior Lee, a much younger man, She seduces him away from his common-law wife, and marries him. However, her possessiveness and viciousness only intensify, causing her to view everyone with malice and suspicion.

Ruby uses folk magic to control and manipulate others, with terrible consequences. When she turns her sights on Cocoa, she crosses Mama Day and pays a terrible price.

Junior Lee

Junior Lee is Ruby’s husband. He is lazy and attaches himself to older women so he doesn’t have to work. He could be attractive, but his attitude negates his attractiveness. Junior Lee knows his wife is possessive and even dangerous, yet he still behaves poorly around women, leering and making unwelcome advances. When the car Junior Lee is riding in makes a stop by Miss Abigail’s during one of Cocoa’s visits, Ruby becomes suspicious. After he is caught making an advance on Cocoa, he actually endangers her life.



Miss Frances

Miss Frances is Junior Lee's common-law wife who goes crazy after Ruby steals her man.

Dr. Buzzard

Dr. Buzzard is a former vaudevillian whose real name is Rainbow Simpson. He is a moonshiner and hoodoo man, selling lucky mojo and "gambling hands" to those he cheats at cards. Dr. Buzzard's talismans and elixirs work mostly on the power of his customer's superstitious belief, and not through any actual herbal medicine or spiritual power.

Bascombe Wade

Bascombe Wade is a Norwegian plantation owner who owns a private island off the eastern coast of the United States. When he dies in 1823, he frees his slaves and leaves the deed to his land to Sapphira Wade, a former slave who was also likely his lover.

Sapphira Wade

Sapphira is a slave sold to Bascombe Wade in 1819. She is described as difficult and is suspected of having magical powers and practicing Witchcraft (Hoodoo.) Although her story is shrouded in mystery, she is deeded the island of Willow Springs after the death of Bascombe Wade in 1823. She has seven sons, and her descendants are the Day family.

Jonah Day

Jonah Day is Sapphira's seventh son, and Mama Day's grandfather. He is the first child to have the surname Day. It is noted , "God rested on the seventh day, and so would she."

John-Paul Day

John-Paul, Mama Day's father, is the seventh son of Jonah Day, making him the seventh son of the seventh son. Legend says that the seventh son of a seventh son in a family in which there are no daughters, has the gift of healing, and perhaps other mystical powers.



Grace Day

Grace is Cocoa's mother. Abandoned by her baby's father, she names the child Ophelia after her grandmother, hoping, bitterly, she will grow up and break a man's heart. Grace dies when her daughter is a child, leaving her to be raised by Abigail and Mama Day.

Peace and Peace (Again) Day

Peace is Miranda and Abigail Day's youngest sister, the daughter of Jonah Day and his wife, Ophelia. Peace accidentally drowns in the family's well, driving her mother to despair and eventual suicide.

Abigail decides to name her first child Peace, but that child dies when Abigail goes into labor during the tropical storm of 1920. Miranda refers to the child as "Peace Again."

Shawn

Shawn is a woman with whom George has a five-year relationship prior to meeting Cocoa. She is pale with red hair and freckles, a strong contrast to any African-American complexion. She also works in the same building as George.

Cocoa is threatened by Shawn and George's feelings for her. Cocoa uses her opinions of Shawn as a weapon in her fights with George. These fights are often gateways to intense milestones, including their marriage and later, Cocoa's illness.

Shawn symbolizes all white women, something Cocoa has been compared to in a negative sense (too white for some, not white enough for others.)

Mrs. Jackson

Mrs. Jackson is the female guardian at the Wallace P. Andrews shelter on Staten Island, where George is raised. George is considered to be her favorite, although she is not a soft or nurturing personality. Instead she encourages him to be forward thinking, physically healthy, and to do the best he can with what he's been given. Her care is the foundation on which George creates his self, and his life.



Objects/Places

Bridge

The bridge is the only way on or off the island. When the bridge is destroyed, the island is cut off from the rest of the world. Metaphorically, Cocoa is also a bridge: between New York and Willow Springs, between Black and White, between the lofty language of her educated husband and the homespun dialect of the folks at home. When the storm hits, both bridges are damaged, and can only be repaired with hard work and sacrifice.

Charleston

After the storm, Cocoa moves to Charleston to escape the memories of New York, and to be closer to Willow Springs. She meets and marries her second husband there, and raises two children, the oldest of whom she names George.

Chevy's Pass

Chevy's Pass is the location of Bascombe Wade's gravestone. He is buried in a separate location, which symbolizes his unclear relationship to the Day family. Perhaps it also represents his "otherness" as the white slave owner, and the desire of the inhabitants of Willow Springs to distance themselves from him.

Chickens/Eggs

Chickens are strong symbols, and even characters in the novel. Chickens are pushy, loud, smelly, aggressive and even violent. George is afraid of chickens, and they eventually take part in his demise, as predicted in his fortune cookie: "All chickens come home to roost."

Chicken eggs are a common and obvious symbol of fertility. Mama Day breaks eggs and gazes at the yolks to divine when Bernice might have a child. Later, she uses chicken eggs (and a chicken) in the secret fertility rite she performs for Bernice, which is likely why she is so upset when people start calling her son "Chick" after his birth.

Graveyard

Where the Days are buried. The graves are grouped by generation, with the size of tombstone indicating the length of each person's life. Mama Day often visit to clean the graves and to listen to the spirits of her ancestors.



Hair

In many myths and legends, as well in folk magic practices around the world, hair holds great significance. Hair holds a person's power, whether it is strength or the power of seduction. Braids are used to weave magic spells into hair, just as Ruby weaves her poisons (literal and symbolic) into Cocoa's, tying them with white threads. She also keeps some of the younger woman's hair; in Hoodoo, having someone's hair (or fingernails) allows one to gain control over that person.

New York

New York is where George and Cocoa work, live, and meet. It represents the big city, modern urban life, and "the real world" in contrast to the strangeness of Willow Springs. The city is fast-paced, and people live isolated and, for a large part, in relative anonymity. Chaos is carefully controlled through force of personality, self-reliance, and law.

The Other Place

The house that belonged to Bascombe and Sapphira Wade and was handed down to Miranda. Although she has a garden there, she lives mostly in her trailer across from Abigail. The other place is where she makes medicines and tinctures, and where she does any conjuring she does. It contains a lot of sad memories, and also a lot of powerful emotion. She goes there to be alone. Miss Abigail will not set foot there since she lost her baby, Peace (Again) there in the storm of 1920.

Shakespeare

William Shakespeare wrote some of the world's greatest plays, including King Lear, Hamlet, and The Tempest, all of which are referenced in this novel.

Stick

John-Paul's walking stick is made out of hickory wood, with polished brass nails in the handle and snakes carved down its length. It is polished to a high gloss. Mama Day uses the stick to get from place to place, but it is also a symbol of her strength and power. With the stick, she out-hikes George, a man less than half her age, and with the stick, she also brings lightning down on Ruby in retaliation for the curse on Cocoa. When Mama Day sends George for his final task, she puts the stick in his hands.

In this story, the walking stick is similar to a magician's staff or wand. Mama Day's given name, Miranda, is the same name Shakespeare used for the magician's daughter in his great play, The Tempest. The magician's magic staff is used to wield his power and



(most especially) to bring storms. Mama Day uses her daddy's walking stick to call down storms upon those who harm her own. The bringing of the storm cracks the stick, releasing power.

Storm

There are many storms in this novel, as they are used as harbingers of powerful change. The arguments between Cocoa and George in their tempestuous relationship bring damage, but also growth and healing in their aftermath. There is calm before, in the eye of, and after every storm.

Thread

Thread is used as a symbol for tying things together. Memories and family history are tied into the wedding quilt, poisonous magic is tied into Cocoa's hair with white thread, and when the original Ophelia is going mad with grief after the death of Peace, she sits in her rocker, twisting and pulling threads, unraveling her own sanity in the process.

White

White is a symbol of insecurity in this novel. Cocoa is insecure when comparing herself to white women, when feeling too pale, or when being accused of having "white blood." Insecurity is the sickness that leads to Ruby's cursing/poisoning Cocoa. When Ruby does this harm, she ties Cocoa's braids with white threads. Cocoa succumbs to hallucinations (distorted self-image) and eventually maggots: the white worms of insecurity (hers and Ruby's) crawling beneath the skin.

Willow Springs

Willow Springs is the island that Bascombe Wade left to his former slave, Sapphira, and her descendants on 1823. It is where Mama Day lives, where Cocoa Day hails from, and where the major events of the novel take place.



Themes

Family/Identity

The theme of family and identity is crucial in the novel. The Day family is at the center of Willow Springs with its strong lineage; however the origins are lost to history. The true identity of Sapphira Wade is lost, as is the nature of her relationship with Bascombe Wade. Still, it is likely his blood that runs through her descendants' veins, as some children, such as Cocoa, have light skin and eyes. It is this paleness causing Cocoa's crisis of identity, even though she has a strong and loving family.

George has no family, yet he has a strong identity, as he was taught to live in the present and rely only on himself. Still, he longs for connection, which is why he is tempted to stay on Willow Springs where he feels accepted, and why he longs for several children of his own.

Another sub-theme is that of insecurity, and how it leads to negative behavior: conflict, jealousy, anger, sickness, and revenge.

The Occult/Belief

The occult refers to any sort of supernatural mystery or secret knowledge, and is a major theme in the novel. This is the Hoodoo, the "roots," the mojo, and the medicine that pervades Willow Springs. Spirits of the Dead have a voice on this island, and everything has more than one use, more than one meaning.

Intuition, signs, dreams, symbols all take on importance, especially at the other place. Time seems malleable.

On Willow Springs, many people seem to have no problem taking these ideas and events in stride. Traditional rituals, such as Candle Walk, are not questioned, and everyone knows who to go to when they need help. For others, however, it is not so easy. George simply cannot believe. Being stubbornly pragmatic, he cannot trust his intuition; he doesn't even realize he has one. Mama Day reminds us the mind is the most powerful tool for magic: belief is what makes it work.

Related are the ideas of truth v. lies, legends, 18&23, crossroads, sacrifice, the land between, 1000 days (the bending/manipulation of time), and the seventh son of a seventh son.



Power/Consequences

Power, and the very nature of power, is a major theme in the novel. Power can be used for good or evil, but action brings consequences regardless of intention. Responsibility must be accepted for action, because what goes around, comes around.

Mama Day uses her power judiciously: to heal, to bless, and to defend her loved ones. She must still bear responsibility for what she does (or fails to do), and she does. It seems at times, that she has the weight of the world on her shoulders. If she does, it's because she has a conscience.

Ruby, on the other hand, takes what she wants, regardless of the harm it does. Her need to control leads to ever-escalating and irresponsible power plays. The consequences she pays are grave: the loss of everything she holds dear.

Broken Hearts/Loss

Broken hearts abound on Willow Springs. As Cocoa discovers, being in love opens the heart to the possibility of being broken. The women of her family have suffered more than their share of broken hearts: the deaths of mothers and children, the abandonment by husbands, madness, loss of peace, the sacrifices made to keep the family together.

The graves of the dead, as well as the well where the first Peace drowned are covered in wild Ginger, which has leaves in the shape of a heart. Additionally, George comes to Willow Springs with a "broken heart": one damaged by illness as a child. Out of love, he makes the ultimate sacrifices. He breaks his heart, and Cocoa's, so they can both find peace.



Style

Point of View

The novel is written in both the first person and third person omniscient points of view. It is told in first person in the form of a dialogue between Ophelia and George, and then switches to third person omniscient narration when looking over the shoulder of Mama Day. The dialogue portion of the novel is written to allow George and Ophelia to tell the story of their relationship. The third person point of view allows us to share Mama Day's thoughts and observations as well as her actions through the voice of the narrator. This allows a much larger scope for the story.

The novel offers a very intimate point of view, not only into the personal relationship of a married couple, but also into the mind of a woman whose age and experience has made her both powerful and wise. This allows the reader to understand and develop an emotional connection with the characters, regardless of differences in lifestyle, culture, or belief.

The triple point of view allows the reader to view the story in a more nuanced way, with greater dimension and perspective. It allows for a more interesting narrative, with a chance to better understand the inner workings of each character in a deeply personal way.

The author's non-linear writing style is enhanced by the use of this point of view, which correlates to the theme of relationship, which is never purely linear, nor is it one-dimensional.

Setting

Part I is partly set in New York; however, the main setting of the novel is Willow Springs, an island off the eastern coast of the United States, between Georgia and South Carolina. Although the story begins with references to events in 1823, the main time period covered is the eighteen years between 1981-1999, focusing on the period between 1981- 1985.

The setting is important, as the island of Willow Springs represents a "place between," where the line is blurred between reality and otherworldly influences. This allows the story to explore events and experiences which some people would think of as supernatural, magical, or beyond the scope of belief. It also allows the author to create and develop a community with a unique history and cultural identity, which helps support the plot.

The other setting, New York, is important as well, as it helps point out the differences between the rest of the world, especially urban America, and Willow Springs. The powerful contrast between the rushed, colorful, diverse and hard-edged reality of the



city and the laid back, more homogenous and mysterious island, with its blurred lines between reality and mystery, allows the reader to be drawn into Mama Day's world and lends credence to the possibility of events that occur in it.

Language and Meaning

As all of the main characters in *Mama Day* are of African descent, the language of the novel is distinctly African-American. The author does not exaggerate or mock such speech (being African-American herself), but does use slang and other intonations to indicate an ethnic slant to the language. Also, the author uses language to develop and express the unique culture of Willow Springs, which is separate from that of the mainland, and has developed its own sort of dialect. Words like "mainside," and the ideas of the crib name (a pet name given to each child after birth), become cultural identifiers for the Willow Springs residents.

The language of this novel is easy and understandable, both musical and casual, carrying a soft southern cadence, which makes it flow. The language reflects the intelligence and the level of education of the characters. George uses a more structured voice and sophisticated vocabulary to reflect his education and the influence of the city. Mama Day's language, in contrast, seems more simplistic and uneducated at first. However, just as some from the mainside do not understand the language of the island, the opposite is true of the islanders. It's not ignorance due to lack of intelligence; rather, the two parties simply don't speak the same language. Cocoa's language acts as a bridge between the two; with her educated language and suppressed accent, she is neither as lofty as her husband nor as homespun as her family.

The language serves to enhance the plot of the story in that it further highlights the uniqueness of Willow Springs, and the differences between it and the mainland. The language is accurate to each character: George as the practical, plainspoken engineer, Mama Day as the Wise Woman, and Cocoa as the emotional bridge between the two worlds. The language reflects each character's culture, upbringing, and purpose in the tale. In this way, the language adds to the richness of the story, and to the reader's enjoyment in and understanding of the characters' journey.

Structure

The novel is divided into two parts, along with a preface and a brief epilogue, although neither is titled as such. The first part is approximately 165 pages long, and the second part consists of approximately 143 pages. Each of these parts is divided into sections with symbols. The sections represent shifts in points of view between George and Cocoa (in dialogue) and the narrator, who follows Mama Day. The narrative (*Mama Day*) sections tell the story in exposition, and in both internal and external dialogue. The narrator injects her own voice in the preface and in the epilogue, which brings a sense of intimacy with the reader into play.



The novel contains a convoluted main plot and two smaller subplots. The main plot follows the inception and development of the complex and stormy relationship between Ophelia “Cocoa” Day and George Andrews. It also follows the historical origins and development of the unique culture of Willow Springs and specifically the Day family. Both are intertwined thematically as well as coming together via the character of Cocoa. The first subplot concerns Bernice Duvall and her desire to conceive a child. The other involves the unscrupulous Ruby, and her destructive need to control. Both explore the potency of desire, the use (and misuse) of power, and the consequences of one’s actions.

All of these plots converge within the novel and are powerfully resolved by the conclusion.



Quotes

It ain't about right or wrong, truth or lies; it's about a slave woman who brought a whole new meaning to both them words, soon as you cross over here from beyond the bridge. (Preface)

To believe in fate or predestination means you have to believe there's a future, and I grew up without one. (Part I, Section 1)

Unlike Grandma, she'd take a peach switch to me. Mama Day just didn't believe in cuddling. (Part I, Section 2)

They say every blessing hides a curse, and every curse is a blessing (Part I, Section 2)

The mind is a funny thing, Abigail – and a powerful thing at that. (Part I, Section 2)

And from a little girl I had been taught that you don't waste your time telling people things you know they won't believe. (Part I, Section 3)

If it was a warning, I didn't listen. Or maybe, I didn't want to listen. (Part I, Section 3)

You can keep it, you can hide it you can blow it – but even when your ass is in the tightest crack, you must never, ever, LOSE [your cool.] (Part I, Section 3)

They never found her mama's body, although John-Paul and three of his brothers dragged the bottom of the Sound for a week. Mother flew off that bluff screaming Peace. (Part I, Section 3)

I woke up one morning, sometime in early November, and realized I wanted to be with you for the rest of my life. Whether I could or not was seriously open to question, but the desire was certainly there. (Part I, Section 3)

The uncountable, the unthinkable, is one opening. (Part I, Section 4)

Marriage brings its own work— you ain't gotta add nothing on to it. (Part I, Section 4)

The seventh son of a seventh son is a special man. (Part I, Section 4)

I gave the first and only baby my grandmother's name. Ophelia. I did it out of vengeance. Let this be another one, I told God, who could break a man's heart. (Part I, Section 4)

Ain't no hoodoo anywhere as powerful as hate. (Part I, Section 4)

It's hard to know what to expect from a place when you can't find it on a map. (Part II, Section 1)



Ignorance is a mighty ugly thing to watch in action. It's worse than spite and envy. (Part II, Section 1)

When you can't sleep and you know there is no one to call down those long corridors, you close your eyes and tell yourself over and over again, I can't find it because it's waiting in my dreams. (Part II, Section 1)

There's something in [the woods] for everything, she tells him, if a body knows what they're doing. (Part II, Section 2)

[T]o be unable to live without someone is one thing, to be forced to prove it continually is something else again. (Part II, Section 2)

Just like that chicken coop, everything got four sides: his side, her side, and outside, and an inside. All of it is the truth. (Part II, Section 2)

The right woman is the one you can live with, not the one in your head. (Part II, Section 2)

Declaring myself an atheist would have taken more conviction than I had one way or the other. (Part II, Section 3)

Daddy always said that folks misread the Bible. Couldn't be no punishment worse than having to live here on earth, he said. (Part II, Section 3)

Whatever I saw, I saw. And if it was a monster reflected back at me, I was going to stand there and face it. (Part II, Section 3)

He believes in himself — deep within himself — 'cause he ain't never had a choice. (Part II, Section 3)

I can do more things with these hands than most folks dream of — no less believe — but this time they ain't no good alone. (Part II, Section 4)

[S]he tries to tell him with her eyes how hard she knew the journey was. Harder, 'cause he had been beaten down to believe. (Part II, Section 4)

I didn't feel anything after my heart burst. As my bleeding hand slid gently down your arm, there was total peace. (Part II, Section 4)

Tradition is fine, but you gotta know when to stop being a fool. (Part II, Section 4)



Topics for Discussion

Topic 1

Who is Mama Day? How do people on the island regard her, and why? What is her role and how did she gain it? What are her gifts? How does she view and use her influence and/or power? How does she use this power during the novel, and what are the consequences? How does she feel about this?

Topic 2

Discuss the relationship between George and Cocoa. What do they have in common, and what are their differences? Each of them struggles with their sense of identity. Why? What keeps them together? What lessons do they learn through their relationship? How do they communicate through the course of the novel? What sacrifices do they make for one another?

Topic 3

How does Ruby view the world around her? What does she do to get what she desires? Are her methods successful? What are the consequences of her actions? How is her use of power different from that of Mama Day?

Topic 4

Who is Bernice Duvall? What does she want from Mama Day? How does Mama Day help her? Are the methods Mama Day uses successful? Why or why not? How does Bernice feel about the secret she has to keep? How does she deal with it? What choices does she make, and what are the consequences of those choices?

Topic 5

What role does belief take in the novel? Are the events that occur real, or are they all in the mind? What is the power of belief? Are things simply true or not true, or is there something in between? Explain your thoughts.

Topic 6

How is time different on Willow Springs from time on mainside? Using examples from the book, discuss the role of time in the novel, and how it enhances the magical realism present in the story.