

Meridian Study Guide

Meridian by Alice Walker

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Contents

Meridian Study Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Plot Summary.....	3
Meridian: The Last Return and The Wild Child.....	4
Meridian: Sojourner, Have You Stolen Anything?, and Gold.....	6
Meridian: Indians and Ecstasy, English Walnuts, and The Happy Mother.....	8
Meridian: Clouds, The Attainment of Good, Awakening, and Battle Fatigue.....	10
Meridian: The Driven Snow, The Conquering Prince, and The Recurring Dream.....	12
Truman Held: Truman and Lynne: Time in the South, Of Bitches and Wives, and The New York Times.....	14
Truman Held: Visits, Lynne, and Tommy Odds.....	16
Truman Held: Lynne and On Giving Him Back to His Own.....	18
Truman Held: Two Women and Lynne.....	20
Ending: Free at Last, Questions, and Camara.....	22
Ending: Travels, Treasure, and Pilgrimage.....	24
Ending: Atonement: Later in the Same Life, Settling Accounts, and Release.....	26
Characters.....	28
Objects/Places.....	32
Themes.....	34
Style.....	36
Quotes.....	39
Topics for Discussion.....	40



Plot Summary

Meridian is the story of a young black woman, Meridian Hill, in the 1960s. Meridian gets pregnant in high school and has a short-lived marriage with her child's father, and then joins the Civil Rights Movement and gives up her son to go to college. Meridian finds herself unable to commit to the violence of the Civil Rights Movement and begins becoming ill, a manifestation of her conflicts about the injustice she sees in the world. Meridian travels to small, poor, black areas of the South, registering voters and fighting injustices, until she finally heals herself.

Meridian is born to a former schoolteacher who feels resentful of her children for stealing her freedom. Meridian's mother doesn't tell her anything about sex, and Meridian begins having sex at an early age. She gets pregnant without realizing what it will mean and marries the father, Eddie. Almost immediately, their marriage begins falling apart. Eddie leaves, and Meridian hates her baby. Then, a house of civil rights workers is bombed, and Meridian becomes interested in the movement. She joins the movement and meets Truman Held, a pretentious, French-speaking activist. Meridian begins to love Truman.

When Meridian is offered a scholarship to attend college, she defies her mother and gives up her son to go to college in Atlanta. There, her life is balanced between a school that teaches social niceties and the horror and violence of the Atlanta Civil Rights Movement. Her relationship with Truman is also stressful, since he begins dating white exchange students. Truman and Meridian finally have sex, but then Truman leaves her. Meridian is pregnant and undergoes a painful and shaming abortion. Meridian starts having physical symptoms like blindness and paralysis that are manifestations of her stress and conflict.

Meridian's roommate is Anne-Marion, and they are involved in a revolutionary group. However, when Meridian is asked if she can kill for the revolution, she cannot commit to killing. Meridian leaves for small towns where she lives in poor black communities, fighting injustice and registering people to vote. Meanwhile, Truman marries Lynne, a Jewish exchange student. When the movement turns more angry against whites, Truman begins to regret his marriage. A friend of Truman's, after being shot and losing his arm for being seen with a white woman, rapes Lynne. Lynne is traumatized, and her marriage is falling apart. She gets pregnant by Truman and has a child, Camara. She moves to New York. Five years later, Camara is beaten to death in a hate crime. Meridian, who Truman has continued coming to periodically during his marriage, comes to New York to comfort Truman and Lynne in their grief.

Later, Truman joins Meridian in the South to work with poor black families. She heals herself, working through her conflicts with violence and justice, and leaves, but Truman takes her place. He needs to work through his own healing.



Meridian: The Last Return and The Wild Child

Meridian: The Last Return and The Wild Child Summary

Meridian is the story of a young black woman, Meridian Hill, in the 1960s. Meridian gets pregnant in high school and has a short-lived marriage with her child's father, and then joins the Civil Rights Movement and gives up her son to go to college. Meridian finds herself unable to commit to the violence of the Civil Rights Movement and begins becoming ill, a manifestation of her conflicts about the injustice she sees in the world. Meridian travels to small, poor, black areas of the South, registering voters and fighting injustices, until she finally heals herself.

In *The Last Return*, Truman Held arrives at the small town of Chicokema and pulls into a gas station. Word arrives that something's going on, and he follows the gas station attendants out to see. A woman is staring down the town's tank, bought to defend against "outside agitators" working for civil rights. The problem is that a traveling circus has brought a mummy to the town, and the black and poor children are only allowed to see it on certain days. The woman rounds up the children and marches them over to the exhibit, defying the tank with some of the townsmen in it. After she leads the children through the cheesy show, she collapses. Truman knows her; her name is Meridian.

Truman goes to Meridian's house. It's empty except for her sleeping bag, and for Meridian's poems and letters from her mother and her college roommate Anne-Marion stuck on the wall. Meridian is asleep in the sleeping bag. When she wakes, she tells Truman that he looks like Che Guevara. She tells Truman that she's sick and trying to get well. She didn't see the mummy, but the children said it's fake. They talk about Meridian's collapse, and Truman says he grieves in a different way. Meridian knows that he grieves by running away.

Ten years ago in New York, Meridian is in a group of revolutionaries at college with Anne-Marion. They all vow to kill for the revolution, but even though she knows that nothing will probably come of the group's violent words, she can't find it within herself to vow to kill. Meridian thinks of herself in childhood, and her inability to believe in God and her church. Her mother believed, but her father was more ambiguous. Yet, he was the one who mourned for the plight of the Indians and their lost culture. Meridian decides, to the derision of Anne-Marion and the rest of the group, to go back to the South and live among the people, as civil rights workers had. Truman goes to visit her as she moves from town to town, and her material possessions lessen as time goes on. Meridian asks him about his wife, Lynne, and he says he's only seen her a few times since their daughter Camara died.



The novel lists assassinated civil rights advocates of the sixties. When Kennedy's funeral is televised, Anne-Marion notes Meridian Hill, who is normally quiet and isolated. Anne-Marion watches Meridian crying. Earlier, when Medgar Evers was killed, Meridian planted a shrub in his honor, but the gardener killed it. Anne-Marion gives Meridian her sweater.

In *The Wild Child*, a thirteen-year-old girl with no parents or family, and who likely has never had any, is pregnant and living on the streets. When Meridian hears about her, she lures the girl with treats, until she can finally catch her and bring the girl to her college dorm. The college says that the pregnant girl can't stay, and Meridian phones to try to find a place for her at a halfway house or charity. The girl escapes, though, runs across the street, and is killed by a speeding car.

Meridian: The Last Return and The Wild Child Analysis

The novel is non-chronological, beginning when Truman comes to see Meridian in the town of Chicokema, years after they meet. This is a point near the end of the story, and the last chapters will come back to Truman and Meridian in this small town. The initial chapter introduces the theme of race, which is a primary focus of the novel. The town has bought a tank and decorated it with trappings of patriotism, setting it in the center of town. Racism is one of the central parts of life in Chicokema, a microcosm of the South. Although segregation is no longer legal, it survives. The town designates the poor as having to be separate, claiming that they smell. The vast majority of the poor are black, and since the town lumps together families with the workers at the guano plant, the result is racial segregation.

The story of the mummy also brings in a central theme of the novel: gender. The mummy, according to the story, was killed by her husband for having a lover. No one blamed the husband, even the victim's mother, because a woman having an affair just wasn't right. She is, essentially, a possession of her husband, before her death and afterwards. Meridian wants to make the world better. She sees injustice and experiences injustice, as a woman and as a black person. The novel draws parallels between different kinds of injustice: racism towards blacks, racism towards Native Americans, and sexism. Later, the novel will also broach anti-Semitism.

Meridian is conflicted about what must be sacrificed to achieve justice. She balks at the idea of violence, of killing, for a cause. Her conflicts are Meridian's sickness. She must find ways that justice can be achieved to heal herself. The story of the Wild Child is a story of Meridian's failure and guilt, though. Meridian wants to help the girl who has grown up with nothing, is outside of society, and is pregnant. Society, represented by Saxon college, turns its back on the girl, and even though Meridian is trying to help, her efforts end in tragedy. Meridian takes on the guilt of the end results of her activism, and this guilt is an aspect of her illness. In a way, Meridian has already killed in her fight for justice, but her victim is the person she's tried to save.



Meridian: Sojourner, Have You Stolen Anything?, and Gold

Meridian: Sojourner, Have You Stolen Anything?, and Gold Summary

The chapter Sojourner contrasts quiet Meridian with confident, atheistic Anne-Marion, who cut off her hair and was immediately rebuked by the Dean of Women. Both live in the honors house at the university. The girls are part of a funeral procession, carrying the Wild Child's coffin. They go past the guard at the gate, who warns them that there will be trouble.

In the center of the campus is a huge magnolia tree called The Sojourner, planted by a West African slave named Louvinie when Saxon College was the Saxon plantation. Louvinie's family in Africa used stories to detect murderers. At the plantation, Louvinie was in charge of the kitchen garden. The Saxon children loved her because she told grisly horror stories, but unknown to her, the youngest child had a heart condition and died in the middle of a story about a man who buried children up to their necks and tortured them with eels. Her tongue was cut out and she buried it under the magnolia tree, which became reputed to be magic.

In her second year at school, Meridian fought to stop the tree from being cut down. Stories about the tree abound, and Fast Mary of the Tower is remembered there. In the 1920s, Mary was a girl who got pregnant, kept it secret, killed the baby, and was caught trying to flush it in secret down the toilet. When the funeral procession for the Wild Child is prevented from entering the chapel to have the funeral at the school, the girls riot, and they tear down The Sojourner.

In "Have You Stolen Anything?", Meridian's mother asks her the title question because young Meridian has a feeling of guilt she can't shake. Mrs. Hill had been a schoolteacher and enjoyed being young and free, with money and respect. However, she felt she was missing something, seeing the other women, and married another schoolteacher. She didn't realize until she was saddled with children what a burden they would be, sapping her freedom and happiness. That is the origin of Meridian's guilt.

In Gold, Meridian is seven. She finds a bar of gold, rusted over. Her parents and brothers pay no attention to her claim, and Meridian buries it under a magnolia tree in the yard. She digs it up to look at every week, then less and less, until she's forgotten about it.



Meridian: Sojourner, Have You Stolen Anything?, and Gold Analysis

The Sojourner magnolia tree embodies the history of African Americans, with roots that go back to Africa. The story of the slave whose tongue is buried under the tree symbolizes the voice of the African American, which has been buried and hidden. Since in the story, the tongue is equated with the soul, the voice and soul of black America are united. The Civil Rights Movement is fighting for a voice, and also for a soul. When the girls take out their rage on the magnolia tree, they are acting self-destructively. The oppression of the school brings on self-destruction. The incident is a microcosm of the self-destructive behavior of black communities in America.

Meridian starts out her life carrying guilt. She carries the guilt of the oppression of women, though oppressing her mother who doesn't understand the consequences of motherhood for a woman. Meridian takes away her mother's freedom and the respect she had as a schoolteacher. This is only the beginning of Meridian's guilt.

The story relayed in the chapter Gold reflects the story of The Sojourner. In both, something valuable is buried beneath a magnolia tree. Just as the tongue reflects the voice and soul of black America, the gold does too. More than this, the gold reflects the light inside of Meridian herself. She has inner value, but her parents and family do not value it. She hides it away, and over time, it is lost.



Meridian: Indians and Ecstasy, English Walnuts, and The Happy Mother

Meridian: Indians and Ecstasy, English Walnuts, and The Happy Mother Summary

In *Indians and Ecstasy*, young Meridian goes into her father's shed and sees him examining a map of Indian settlements in North America. The whole room is full of photos and artifacts of Native Americans. Later, her father turns over the deed for their small farm, which contains the Sacred Serpent, an Indian burial mound in the shape of a serpent, to a Native American man, Walter Longknife, who camps there and gives back the deed at the end of the summer when he moves on. Later, the government takes away the land and makes it a public park, where blacks are not allowed. Mr. Hill's grandmother, Feather Mae, had stopped her husband from flattening the burial mound. She had a spiritual experience in the serpent's tail, and eventually walked around naked, worshipping the sun. Meridian and her father both experience the ecstasy in the serpent's tail, but after it becomes a park, Meridian goes back and is unable to recapture the experience.

In *English Walnuts*, Meridian is an adolescent girl. No one has told her anything about sex. She lets boys have sex with her but doesn't enjoy it. She is shocked to discover she is pregnant. The boy, Eddie, marries her. He is athletic and does well in school, and he stays in school after they get married. Meridian becomes friends with her in-laws, but her pregnancy seems unreal to her, as does her life with Eddie. She's uninterested in housework or sex. Eddie complains of how she locks her legs closed. Soon, Eddie has another lover, but he is still considered a good husband, since he doesn't beat her.

When Meridian was younger, she would go to Daxter's Funeral Home, owned by overweight, half-black George Daxter, who was cast in the garbage as a baby by his white mother's parents. He would give her candy and money for sexual favors. His assistant, with a sexy voice, tried to seduce Meridian, and arranged for her to watch him seduce another schoolgirl. She stopped seeing the men at the funeral home after she met Eddie.

In *The Happy Mother*, Meridian has her baby, and her life is thrown into disarray. She hates the baby and thinks about killing him or herself. She becomes exhausted and critical, upset at being out of school while her husband is only interested in graduating, not learning. Soon, Eddie is spending more and more time away. Finally, he moves out, leaving her with the baby. She notices a house in her neighborhood, full of young people. On the news, she sees that there's a voter registration drive there. During the night, it is firebombed, and most of the people escape only because they've posted guards. Meridian is surprised that the people knew they needed guards, and slowly, she begins to become aware of the world around her.



Meridian: Indians and Ecstasy, English Walnuts, and The Happy Mother Analysis

The story of Native Americans expands the concept of racism beyond black America. Meridian's father recognizes a larger picture of justice than merely the injustices toward African Americans. Meanwhile, Meridian's mother doesn't even truly understand her own experience of injustice. She is so accustomed to bearing troubles that her solution is for people to stop complaining and bear their troubles, such as being banned from bathrooms and having to sit in the back of the bus.

A central part of Meridian's experience is spirituality. She cannot accept her mother's religion, because her mother's religion is blind. Her mother believes that God will make her good without understanding what it truly means to be good. Meridian, however, sees something beyond the natural world when she experiences ecstasy in the Sacred Serpent's tail.

Meridian's first experiences with sex highlight the problems of women in poor, black communities. Meridian has no education about sex. She doesn't understand the consequences of sex, only that all the men in her community want it from her. She is quickly trapped into a life with a husband and child, much as her mother was trapped before her. Meridian's hatred of her baby echoes her mother's hatred of Meridian. At this stage in her life, Meridian is blind to the world around her, much like her mother. Her eyes only begin to be opened when she hears about the Civil Rights Movement house being bombed. This is Meridian's entryway into a different world than what's normal for poor black families in America.



Meridian: Clouds, The Attainment of Good, Awakening, and Battle Fatigue

Meridian: Clouds, The Attainment of Good, Awakening, and Battle Fatigue Summary

In *Clouds*, Meridian leaves her son Eddie Jr. with her in-laws to play with his three-year-old uncle each day, and she goes home to stare out the window and think. She watches the young people walk by, going to the movies. Her fleeting thoughts are compared to clouds. She is only seventeen. At the end of each day, she retrieves her son, who wants to stay at his grandmother's.

The *Attainment of Good* describes Meridian's mother. She believes in the church and the holiness of its physical building, although the preacher's voice is unintelligible. She believes that the artistry of the ceremony will bring her to Good. She knows little about the world and is not political. She's never voted. She believes completely in the schoolteachers who teach her children, though she dislikes them as individuals. She only complains about her husband. Her children are correctly cared for, with perfectly washed and starched clothes, but her good housekeeping is tinted with anger.

In *Awakening*, Meridian volunteers with the voting drive a month after the bombing. The workers immediately put her to work typing a petition, and she has to remind them to ask her name. One of the workers is Truman Held, and she's embarrassed when he introduces himself in French and she doesn't understand. She struggles through the petition, since she doesn't yet know how to type, and in the end it is still ruined by an extra "e" that must be marked out.

In *Battle Fatigue*, the civil rights workers go on a protest march against segregated hospitals, which will end in a candlelight vigil at the jail by people who haven't been arrested earlier. The police let go the beaten-up people they arrested, including Truman, to make room in jail to arrest the others, including Meridian. As she is beaten and dragged to jail, Meridian realizes that she has a feeling of love for Truman. After months of protesting and being beaten, they are both exhausted, and Meridian is almost constantly in tears.

Meridian's mother disapproves of the Civil Rights Movement. Now Meridian, who has a high IQ, has the opportunity to go to Saxon College. She will have to give up the baby to take the scholarship from a wealthy white family. She goes with two friends to break the news to her mother. Meridian's friend Nelda also got pregnant at fourteen, and she backs up Meridian's decision to give up her child for an opportunity in life. Meridian's mother insists only a monster wouldn't want her baby. One day, Meridian discovers she loves her son, if distantly, and wonders who he is and where he came from. She changes his name to Rundi before giving him away, but afterward she feels a guilt, knowing that women in slavery had their children forcibly taken from them.



Meridian: Clouds, The Attainment of Good, Awakening, and Battle Fatigue Analysis

The chapter Clouds is a transition period for Meridian. She has lived only in a very narrow world. Before she goes out to change her life, she needs to understand herself better. By thinking and watching the young people walking by her house, she begins to see her own life more clearly.

The next chapter, The Attainment of Good, shows the world that Meridian is escaping. To Meridian's mother, the church is holy, but it is also meaningless and incomprehensible, like the preacher's words. Meridian's mother doesn't understand what it is she believes in. She only believes blindly. Her lack of interest in politics shows the narrowness of her view of her own life. She goes about the daily activities of a "good" person and mother, without understanding goodness or thinking about the meaning of what she's doing. This is a complete contrast to Meridian, whose whole experience is wrapped up in gaining an understanding of her own life and what is right and good.

The chapter Awakening is the beginning of Meridian's journey into the broader world. She does not know what she is doing. The world of the civil rights workers is completely foreign to her, as foreign as Truman's French. Meridian immediately feels her own failure and incompetency, symbolized by the marked-out "e" that mars the petition.

The chapter Battle Fatigue continues Meridian's development. She is thrown into a world of violence where she begins to fully understand the hatred of the white community for the black community and the injustice that exists. The chance to go to Saxon College is a chance to fully develop herself and join the new world. To do this, she must sacrifice her son and become a monster, turning her back on what has trapped her. Meridian carries this guilt with her into her new life.



Meridian: The Driven Snow, The Conquering Prince, and The Recurring Dream

Meridian: The Driven Snow, The Conquering Prince, and The Recurring Dream Summary

In *The Driven Snow*, Meridian is at Saxon. She loves The Sojourner and enjoys Anne-Marion, who switches out being pure as the driven snow in the school song with a line about being prime as the daily steak. Meridian's past marriage and child are kept secret. When she is asked to talk about resisting temptation, she admits that she can't think of a time when she has and doesn't know if she believes in God. She begins to have bad headaches and nightmares. Her and other students' involvement in the Civil Rights Movement is ignored by the school, which focuses on social niceties, a stark contrast with the suffering among the black community. Meridian's guilt feelings are only abated by police beatings. After the Wild Child's death, she moves off campus to the ghetto and starts working as a typist for a professor. Her hair begins to thin and her vision begins to blur.

In *The Conquering Prince*, Truman and Meridian are dating. He speaks to her in French, telling her how glad he is she's come to Saxon. They head out to a party, and Meridian tells him about three white exchange students who've come to a civil rights march. One of them is Lynne Rabinowitz, who Meridian went canvassing with, asking people to register to vote. One woman invited them in to eat, and afterward Lynne argued with her about voting. When they get to where the party is, Truman makes out with Meridian in the car and begs to go back home with her. They haven't had sex yet. They go to the party. Meridian finds herself dancing with annoying men, while Truman is getting friendly with one of the exchange students. Afterwards, Meridian doesn't see Truman for several months.

Truman stops marching and starts dating white women, which Meridian doesn't understand. One day, after running into each other, they're in Meridian's apartment, and she is putting away some groceries her boss gives her. Truman jokes about him chasing her around the office. She doesn't tell Truman that he does fondle her and try to kiss her. She needs the groceries. Meridian puts aside thoughts of the exchange students, and finally gives in to Truman's sexuality. Afterwards, Truman goes back to Lynne, the exchange student he's currently with. Meridian discovers she's pregnant and has a painful abortion, with the doctor offering to tie her tubes in exchange for future sexual favors. The next time Meridian runs into Truman and he tells her she should have his babies, she starts hitting him in anger.

In *The Recurring Dream*, Meridian dreams repeatedly that she's a character in a novel who must die to fulfill the story. She starts seeing a bluish light. Meridian graduates, and



Anne-Marion is living with her. They hate capitalism, but Anne-Marion wants to be rich. Meridian has a spell of blindness, and the doctor only abuses her. Then, she has a spell of paralysis. She gets sicker and sicker, and eventually achieves ecstasy through her sickness. One day, Anne-Marion sees Meridian seeming to glow, but she won't admit it.

After a month of sickness, Anne-Marion goes to one of the teachers at Saxon, who is from Meridian's hometown and once saw Meridian fall apart while giving a high school speech about patriotism that she suddenly realized she didn't believe in. Mrs. Hill wasn't sympathetic, but Meridian can't blame her for anything because of the history of struggle of her family, through years of slavery and poverty. In her delirium, Meridian calls for her mother to let her go, and the teacher, Miss Winter, says, "I forgive you." The next day, Meridian is a little better. After Meridian is well, Anne-Marion leaves her, telling her she's obsolete.

Meridian: The Driven Snow, The Conquering Prince, and The Recurring Dream Analysis

Saxon College tries to uphold what is considered nice and good in polite society. It is focused on a myth of what people should be, a myth of the white world which is imposed on the black students. The girls are supposed to be pure and virginal. The reality of black life in America, though, is dirty, gritty, and desperate. Meridian sees the reality of rape, beatings, and injustice through her work with the Civil Rights Movement. In comparison, the finishing-school social niceties of Saxon College seem obscene. Meridian cannot subscribe to the conventional ideas of God and goodness. Torn between these two worlds and burdened with her own guilt, Meridian begins getting sick.

Meanwhile, Meridian is bound to Truman. They are thrown together by the Civil Rights Movement, and Meridian experiences her first true physical reaction to a man. However, Truman is not truly a man. He is a product of black society. He devalues women, including Meridian, seeing only his own needs. He doesn't see Meridian's struggles or her guilt. While Truman fights against injustice toward blacks, he does not see the injustices towards women in the world, and especially in poor, black communities. Truman makes her pregnant without thinking or knowing, leaving her deal with the consequences, much as Eddie left her to deal with her son.

Meridian's dream is a dream of dying. Meridian is collapsing under the weight of oppression from every side and injustice against others that she can't seem to stop. She wants to save someone, but she can't save anyone. She wants to free her mother so that she's no longer burdened by guilt, but she cannot do that. Meridian's illness is an expression of guilt, shame, and hopelessness.



Truman Held: Truman and Lynne: Time in the South, Of Bitches and Wives, and The New York Times

Truman Held: Truman and Lynne: Time in the South, Of Bitches and Wives, and The New York Times Summary

In Truman and Lynne: Time in the South, Lynne sits on a back porch, with black children playing with her hair. Truman wants to take a photo, but a feeling of dread about opposites stops him. In the evenings, Truman and Lynne go riding on a motorcycle. Lynne admires the black people of the south as Art, but believes it's a sin she'll be punished for. When three civil rights workers disappear from Mississippi, Lynne is drawn there, and she and Truman arrive in 1964.

In Of Bitches and Wives, Truman's feelings for Lynne, now his wife, start to change. Tommy Odds, a fellow civil rights worker, is shot in the arm coming out of a church. He loses his arm, and he begins berating Truman for being with a white woman, drawing a line of hatred between the races, especially since Lynne being seen with the black men is one reason for the shooting. Lynne is guilty of being white.

Tommy Odds had spent a lot of time with a group of local black men, making friends with them and then finally forming the Niggers-on-the-Corner-Voter-Machine, or NOTC. One Saturday, they all went to the Moonflower cafe, with Truman and Lynne, a dive with a "Whites Only" sign on the door. A car followed them afterwards, because Lynne was with them. Even though Tommy invited Lynne, he now blames her for her whiteness. Truman knows the movement is changing and black men are dropping their white women. He knows a black man who keeps his white woman hidden away because the movement is a war between white and black. Lynne, however, has made her way into the black group, making friends slowly with the NOTC.

In The New York Times, Truman goes to Meridian, three years after his marriage to Lynne, but Meridian won't be with him, if nothing else, for Lynne and their daughter Camara. Meridian tells him he didn't love her. Truman is annoyed with Lynne's activism and verve, and he's surprised to find that Meridian has let go of him. She tells him that he wanted a virgin, but one with worldly experiences, which Lynne, from a rich, white family, had. It was true. He'd found Meridian had been married and had a child, and the white exchange students read The New York Times.



Truman Held: Truman and Lynne: Time in the South, Of Bitches and Wives, and The New York Times Analysis

The novel is divided into three sections. The first section, Meridian, shows Meridian's story. The second section is Truman Held, but this section focuses in many ways on Lynne far more than Truman. Lynne is a white woman living in a black world. She comes in to this life with an idea that poor, black people are sublime, that they are Art. She doesn't look at them as people, but as something aesthetic, embodying endurance and suffering.

However, Lynne is vulnerable as a woman and as a white person in a black world. Truman begins to feel the pressure of marrying a white woman. The white community expresses its hatred, and the black community also expresses its hatred. Tommy Odds blames Lynne, though she has done nothing but help the black community and become friends with the people in the movement, despite their differences. Oppression and hatred from whites has drawn lines between the two races. All white people become hated. Lynne, though despising oppression, becomes a representative of the oppressors. She cannot escape her color, just as Truman can't.

Truman runs to Meridian, as a symbol of the race he feels that in some ways he's betrayed by marrying Lynne. Meridian knows Truman better than he knew himself. She shows him his motivations in marrying Lynne, and also that he's closed the door to a relationship with her.



Truman Held: Visits, Lynne, and Tommy Odds

Truman Held: Visits, Lynne, and Tommy Odds Summary

In Visits, Lynne comes to see Meridian the summer before Meridian goes to Chicokema, the first time they've seen each other since the death of Lynne and Truman's daughter Camara a year before. Meridian has lost most of her hair, and shaved her head and donned the railroad cap. Lynne has gained weight and become pale. Meridian brings tea, bologna, and peanut butter and jelly. Truman is there, but Meridian says there's nothing between them. Lynne laughs, saying there will always be something between them. She is bitter, saying that only the poorest black people ever loved her.

When Truman returns, he and Lynne have a fight. Lynne accuses him of marrying her as a white oddity. Meridian says that she's leaving but will leave the door open. Before she can go, Lynne and Truman continue their fight, viciously, until finally Meridian decides to lock up the house. That doesn't stop Lynne from later coming in through a window, and weeping with Meridian for comfort. She tells Meridian about being pursued by black men in New York and giving in to them, and that her father told her she was dead to him, when she called to tell her parents about Camara's death. She also says that Truman let one of his friends rape her, but Meridian refuses to listen.

In Lynne, she remembers leaving her parents' house and her childhood room, with the posters of white, non-Jewish celebrities on the walls. She goes to Truman, who she's been seeing in his mother's house. Her mother follows her, in a screaming fit because he is black. Her mother's howling will always be with her, in the back of her mind.

In Tommy Odds, Tommy jokes with Lynne, telling her she's scaring the black men. He disapproves of the way whites in the movement dress, with short skirts or shorts. Lynne has tanned in the South and seems happy, despite the problems and poverty of being married to a black man in the South. She writes love poems to Truman and poems about gentleness in the Revolution. He wants to have sex with her, and to hurt her, but she has grown on him, with her good and willing nature.

Truman Held: Visits, Lynne, and Tommy Odds Analysis

When Lynne comes to see Meridian, she is bitter and hostile. She has lost her love of life and become critical and overweight. She lashes out at everyone around her, with the violence of the oppressed. Lynne has no one that she can count on. She is separated



from Truman by race and gender, and she is separated from Meridian by race. She is separated from her own people by her love of Truman and the child she's now lost.

The irony of Lynne's character and her parents' treatment of her is that Lynne is Jewish. The holocaust is only twenty years in the past. Still, it is completely removed from the world of Truman and Meridian. Truman says at one point that Lynne is a white woman and therefore has everything. He treats her as an oppressor, seemingly completely unaware of the anti-Semitism active throughout the world.

Tommy hates Lynne unreasonably. Oppression has filled him with anger, and he looks for an outlet for his hatred. In the black community, that outlet is often women. For Tommy, Lynne, as a white woman, makes a perfect target.



Truman Held: Lynne and On Giving Him Back to His Own

Truman Held: Lynne and On Giving Him Back to His Own Summary

In *Lynne*, Tommy Odds rapes Lynne. In a way, it's not really rape, because she doesn't scream or struggle too much. Tommy comes to her and tells her that the other women won't have him, because of his destroyed arm. He tells her that she should be sympathetic and sleep with him. She tells him that he can't do this, and he pulls on her hair so that it hurts. She begs him not to do it, but he persists, saying that he can't help himself. He asks if she can't stand cripples or blacks.

At one moment, Lynne thinks she could push him off her, but she doesn't. She is overcome by guilt. She tries to think of all the good things about him as he rapes her. She tries to remember him as her friend. At the end, she kisses his amputated arm and says that she forgives him. The next day, Tommy returns with three of the NOTC boys. He tries to get them to rape Lynne, but she is their friend. They refuse and leave. Tommy tries to rape her again but can't perform. Lynne cries every night after that, and Truman confronts Tommy at the community center Truman has helped build. Tommy says that Lynne only married Truman out of the same guilt that let him rape her. Lynne starts sleeping around with everyone afterwards. When her birth control pills ran out, Truman got her pregnant with Camara, and she left for New York.

In *On Giving Him Back to His Own*, Lynne is riding on the subway. She gets off, heading toward Truman's studio. She goes over in her mind how to tell Truman that Camara has been attacked. As she approaches the door, she's aware that she's started to gain weight. He would admire her figure, comparing it to black women who let themselves go as he sculpted large, full black figures. She can't help comparing herself to them. When Truman answers the door, Lynne hears a woman inside. Lynne pushes her way in, to find that it's not Meridian. It's a blond white woman, with a Southern accent. Lynne calls her Miss Scarlet. They've been living together for two months.

Truman Held: Lynne and On Giving Him Back to His Own Analysis

Lynne, like Meridian, carries guilt within herself. She feels guilty for being white, in the same way that Truman thinks of her in his mind. She accepts the guilt that Tommy Odds puts on her. She is giving and forgiving, and in exchange, she meets the rage of the oppressed. Tommy Odds takes out his hatred on her, and Lynne recognizes that she is actually a good target for Tommy's rage, rage that is forgivable because it is in response to generations of cruelty and oppression. Tommy cannot fight back against the white



oppressors. Most black men would take out their rage on their black wives, who have done nothing to deserve cruelty. Lynne sees herself as a more appropriate victim. Lynne, like Meridian, brings suffering onto herself because of her guilt.

Lynne and Truman's daughter becomes a sacrifice to prejudice and injustice. She is a complete innocent, destroyed through hatred, completing the tragedy of Truman and Lynne's marriage. White and black cannot make a union. They are from two sides of a horrible, vicious war. Both sides turn on them, destroying their marriage and their innocent daughter. There is no salvation and no solution, in the world as it exists. Even more, Lynne's sense of self is destroyed. She cannot even tell Truman about their daughter because she flies into a jealous rage at Truman's involvement with a white Southern belle, the embodiment of everything that has oppressed him.



Truman Held: Two Women and Lynne

Truman Held: Two Women and Lynne Summary

In *Two Women*, after Camara's death, Truman sends for Meridian. She goes back and forth between Truman and Lynne for a month, helping them through their daughter's death, a trial that she can't even think about afterward. On Meridian and Lynne's last evening together, they watch a TV program about white men and black men in the South. Both women miss the South. Meridian tells Lynne that she's tried not to hate her. Meridian packs the few things she has, but she never really unpacked. Lynne says that the last thing that bound her and Truman is now gone. Truman told her that she could go home, but she can't go back to her parents and doesn't want to. Her daughter died because of the prejudice against black people that her parents stand for.

In *Lynne*, she goes back to the South, to her old house that seems to have stood empty. The door is not locked. The lights are not working, and she lights a candle. She falls asleep on a cot. For a whole day, she sleeps. When she wakes, she remembers eating watermelon in the backyard in the summers. Truman took a photo of her with watermelon juice flowing down her arms.

Lynne uses the toilet, and sees the posters on the walls destroyed by time. She eats an orange, bought from a deli where the Jewish owners viewed her with disdain for being with a black man, especially after she got pregnant. Lynne remembers the deli owners' naive shock when a local synagogue was bombed. Lynne eats the cheese she bought and then comes back to herself. Meridian is there with her. Lynne is depressed. Sadly, she wants Truman back. Lynne says that at least, through Truman, she knows what life is like. She knows things her parents are completely ignorant of.

Truman Held: Two Women and Lynne Analysis

Meridian's main goal is to heal. She wants to heal herself, and she wants to heal others. She must go to Truman and Lynne in their grief, because they require healing. Like her work with poor Southern families, the help she gives to Truman and Lynne takes a severe toll on her. The TV program that Lynne and Meridian watch highlights the invisible plight of women. The struggle against injustice for blacks is visible to everyone, and is shouted in marches and protests. The struggle of women, black and white, against gender injustice is not broached in the TV program and is a silent struggle happening in the background.

When Lynne goes back to the old house in the South, she is returning to the place where she was once happy. However, it is completely decayed. The past cannot be recaptured, any more than her daughter can be brought back to life. The bombing of the synagogue brings up the presence of anti-Semitism, which has been largely a subtext

throughout Lynne's story. However, anti-Semitism is real and is close to the surface, ready to be another layer of violence in the American culture of intolerance and hatred.



Ending: Free at Last, Questions, and Camara

Ending: Free at Last, Questions, and Camara Summary

Free at Last takes place on a day in April, 1968, in Atlanta. Meridian waits outside the church with the poor people, eating fried chicken out of tin foil. People tell stories about the past. As morning nears, the crowd increases. They are there for a funeral. Limousines arrive, carrying the family, senators, clergy, and movie stars. After the service, the crowd follows the casket, singing. A man carries a sign that says, "I have a dream." As they walk the four mile journey, the people relax and begin to talk. Meridian feels ashamed at the people seeming to put behind them the death they're honoring.

In Questions, Meridian and Truman talk about the willingness to kill. Truman thought about what it would be like to kill if he was drafted. Meridian thinks that setting out to kill a group of oppressors is different than killing in the army. Truman says the oppressors are a disease. Meridian is unsure whether she could or could not kill, and doesn't trust revolutionaries to make the decision who to kill. Truman says she's not cut out for killing. Meridian says that a revolution should begin with teaching. It's the 1970s, and Truman says that revolution is in the past. Meridian still struggles with questions of what's right, but Truman thinks it's useless.

Meridian lives in a house provided by a black community. Behind the row of houses there is a ditch known as "the pool." The children love to play there. When the town was ordered to open the public pool to blacks, they closed it down instead. During the rains, the town would open the reservoir without warning and send water flooding down the ditch, drowning children playing in it. Meridian takes the decayed body of a dead five-year-old, found washed into the sewer, and walks it to a town meeting, laying it before the mayor. After her performance, she collapses. Meridian begs them to vote, but they laugh and say it's not radical enough. When Truman comes to see her, Meridian refuses to ride in his new green car.

In Camara, Meridian begins going to church after the spring of 1968. At first, she just stands outside different churches, watching the people arrive. Finally, she goes in to a Baptist church. A photo of a murdered civil rights activist is at the front of the church. The congregation begins to sing, a song Meridian does not know the words to. This song is followed by a prayer and then a martial song. The pastor gives his sermon, and his voice sounds just like Martin Luther King. Meridian begins to think of it as a play, a reenactment of King.

The preacher introduces a man Meridian noticed before, going up to the front of the church. He is the father of the slain man whose photo is in front of the church. Meridian recalls him having a breakdown after losing his son. His wife and other children had



died previously in a fire. The man gives a short, simple speech: "My son died." After the service is over, Meridian notices a stained glass window depicting a black man in a suit and tie holding a bloody sword, which one of the people tells her is called "B.B., With Sword." Meridian sees the changes in the church as the black community coming to realize the necessity of uniting for change for themselves, integrating civil rights into the church that is the core of their community. Meridian comes to believe that she would kill to stop the man's son from dying again, a belief that she carries with her from then on, although sometimes she wavers in her conviction that she could kill for the movement.

Ending: Free at Last, Questions, and Camara Analysis

The funeral in *Free at Last* is the funeral of Martin Luther King, who was assassinated in April, 1968. The funeral is shown from the perspective of the poor black people who gather. The funeral is a celebrity event of national importance, but the people truly affected by King and the Civil Rights Movement are the impoverished blacks. Meridian sees their laughing and talking during the procession as a betrayal.

Meridian shows herself to be the opposite of her unthinking mother. She thinks and feels too much. Every question is of vital importance. She needs to affect change, but she does not want to kill or hurt anyone. Meridian needs to reconcile the desire for change with the abhorrence of violence. This is the conflict that she struggles with throughout the book. Meridian finds a way of reconciling these two things in her activism, such as when she carries the dead child to the mayor. This performance is a way to affect change and right injustice, to free others so that she can free herself, without violence. Meridian begs the people to use their vote, to reclaim the voice symbolized by the tongue buried beneath *The Sojourner*. However, violence is easy to understand, but the slow regaining of a voice through voting is not.

When Meridian goes to church, she sees that the betrayal she felt against King at the funeral is false. The people have absorbed the truths of the Civil Rights Movement. They keep King's voice alive in their cultural center, the church. King's voice becomes the basis of the voice of the race. The church service also brings up for Meridian all of the losses and violence of the Civil Rights Movement. Camara is dead. King is dead. The man's son is dead. Meridian feels that she could kill to right the injustice that has stolen so many lives. Though she feels this capability, she does not take it lightly, and her resolve waxes and wanes.



Ending: Travels, Treasure, and Pilgrimage

Ending: Travels, Treasure, and Pilgrimage Summary

In *Travels*, Meridian and Truman come up to a house where a man is rolling up pieces of discarded newspaper into cylindrical logs. He's already made a large pile of them. From where he sits in the front room, he can see his wife lying in bed. Meridian and Truman ask how the woman is, and she says she feels better. Her husband Johnny brought home venison, hunted near a deer-crossing sign, and made a stew for her. The woman's name is Agnes, and she tells the visitors that Johnny used to work at a copper plant, until they tried to cover up all the windows. Johnny wouldn't work without a window. Now he gathers newspapers and rolls them up to sell as kindling in the winter, for a nickel to whites or three cents to poor blacks.

Meridian and Truman offer to help roll newspaper, and explain they want the family to register to vote. Agnes is in a lot of pain and dying. She hopes that she'll die right before Mother's Day and be buried on the holiday. As Meridian and Truman are leaving, the father tells them that without enough money or food, and with a dying wife, he doesn't have time to worry about voting. Meridian and Truman leave, but they come back in a few minutes with two bags of food before they go on their way. The Monday after Mother's Day, Johnny comes to see Truman and Meridian, bringing them rabbits and kindling and signing up to vote.

In *Treasure*, Meridian and Truman meet Miss Margaret Treasure. She is burning her cornfield and wants to burn her bed. Margaret Treasure is an obese, old woman who lives with her sister Lucille on a family farm. They hardly ever go into town or see anyone. The last time they got their house painted, though, Margaret fell for one of the painters, Rims Mott, and they had an affair. Now she thinks she's pregnant. Margaret Treasure is afraid of marrying him, because after she dies, he'll get the house and child. Meridian and Truman both say she doesn't have to get married. They help her burn her bed, but Margaret's leg gets caught under the bed while they're moving it, and it's crushed. They bring her to the doctor, and have the doctor check whether she's pregnant while they're there. In her joy at finding she's not pregnant after all, Margaret signs up with Meridian to vote.

In *Pilgrimage*, Meridian and Truman go to a prison to see a young girl who killed her baby. They bring photos, including one of an apple. The girl likes the picture of the round, red apple. She bit her baby before strangling it. She says it's as if she took out her own heart and bit it, and killed it. Yet, now she's alive without her heart. Meridian and Truman tell the girl that her mother and sister told them about her. The girl says that if they can't give her back her heart, to go away. Out of the prison, Meridian and Truman huddle in Meridian's sleeping bag. She tries to feel something for the son she's given up but can't. Meridian watches as workers start to fill in the dangerous ditch, which the



voters finally got the town to do. Meridian writes a poem about ending shame and guilt. She puts her poems on the wall and doesn't look at them again.

Ending: Travels, Treasure, and Pilgrimage Analysis

Meridian and Truman work together to slowly, painstakingly try to bring back a voice to the African-American people. They see suffering and poverty. Johnny struggles to feed and clothe his family, while his wife is dying. However, Meridian approaches the people with acceptance, help, and love. She does not try to cajole, argue, or threaten. She understands. She brings groceries, and accepts the people's decision. She helps roll wretched, slimy newspapers to bring the family another nickel. She and Truman don't judge Margaret Treasure for having sex or for wanting to burn her bed. They help with whatever she wants to do. They bring her to a doctor, and they are able to ease her trouble, without criticizing. Through gentleness, Meridian and Truman are able to move forward in the struggle to bring back a voice to the African-American people. This is the process through which Meridian heals.

The young girl that Truman and Meridian see in prison is the other side of the coin. She is lost and cannot be helped. She is like Meridian, a woman who has been destroyed by her position in the world. She has killed her own child, and so she has killed herself. Still, she continues to live, in a state of pain. Meridian cannot help her, but she recognizes that guilt must be forgiven. She realizes that shame must be let go of. These emotions are self-destructive, and they are what has been destroying Meridian. She sees herself in the girl in prison, and seeing herself revealed helps her heal.



Ending: Atonement: Later in the Same Life, Settling Accounts, and Release

Ending: Atonement: Later in the Same Life, Settling Accounts, and Release Summary

In *Atonement: Later in the Same Life*, Truman tells Lynne he still loves her but that he doesn't desire her anymore. He says he wants to be a friend and a brother. Lynne says that maybe they should go South again, and Truman asks what for.

In *Settling Accounts*, Truman is in the sleeping bag with Meridian. He tells her that he wants her to love him. Meridian protests that she does love him, and he accuses her of taking her love away. Meridian, though, says that her love for him just changed and that she set him free to be himself. Truman sees a letter from Anne-Marion on the wall, along with a photograph. It is a picture of the stump of *The Sojourner*, and a new limb sprouting from it.

Meridian reminds Truman of a woman who attacked Meridian and slammed the door in her face when the two were out canvassing. The woman acted that way because Meridian knew something about her that she's ashamed of. The woman's husband was in love with a dog and he treated it better than his family. When she confronted him, the husband told her that the dog was better than she was. The woman left her husband, taking her children with her, but her mother didn't want to have the woman and children in her house. The woman couldn't care for her children on her own, so she had to go back to her husband. She made her husband promise to kill the dog, though. Truman asks if the husband did kill the dog, and Meridian says that's not the point.

In *Release*, Meridian is strong enough to leave. She has nothing, so there's no need to pack. Her hair is growing in, and she leaves behind the railroad cap. She is well, having healed herself. Truman feels that the Meridian he knew is gone forever, but the new Meridian has grown out of the old. Part of the former Meridian still survives in her. Truman reads Meridian's poem on the wall. He has taken her place, and he collapses once she's gone. He lies in the sleeping bag, wearing the railroad cap, and he envisions that one day Anne-Marion will appear at the door, to go through her own healing. They all must resolve the conflict from Meridian's soul.

Ending: Atonement: Later in the Same Life, Settling Accounts, and Release Analysis

The last three chapters are short, wrapping up the novel. Lynne and Truman are bound together through their lives, but they cannot fulfill each other. Truman loves her, but he is not a husband to her. Lynne cannot regain the South that she loves. Although Truman



asks Lynne why they would go to the South, he must heal himself in the South, as Meridian has done.

The Sojourner's new branch is a symbol of Meridian's healing, and her new self growing out of her old. The branch is also a symbol of healing among the black community and of the slow reclamation of the African-American voice. Meridian's story of the woman whose husband loved a dog is a story of the experience of African-American women, which Meridian seems to be beginning to understand. Truman, though, still has to learn and grow.

Meridian is able to leave, but she passes on the railroad cap of self-exploration and healing to Truman. He must confront all of the uncertainties and questions that Meridian has confronted, and he must come to reconcile violence and justice, suffering and guilt, in order to move forward in life.



Characters

Meridian Hill

Meridian Hill grows up in a poor black family in a Southern community. In her early life, she doesn't have any idea of the greater issues of the world around her, but she does, from an early age, carry with her an overwhelming guilt. Meridian is trapped into an early marriage when she gets pregnant while in high school. She doesn't have any knowledge of men or sex, and she gets into this situation without thinking. She is unsatisfied and apathetic, and she takes to complaining (like her mother) as a way of coping with unhappiness. Only after her mother leaves her and Meridian becomes aware of the Civil Rights Movement does Meridian begin to realize that the world is larger than she had realized. After she gets involved in the movement, Meridian begins to see a way out of her current life, in the guise of a scholarship to Saxon College, a college for black women.

Meridian, however, has issues that she needs to deal with. She begins having psychosomatic symptoms that represent her conflict and guilt. Meridian needs to reconcile the need for change and righting injustice with her abhorrence of violence. She needs to assuage her guilt over leaving her child and defying her mother after being a burden that stole her mother's freedom. Meridian wants redemption. She can only find redemption through a slow journey to try to give voices back to the poor and black people of the South. When Meridian sees that she can help others and that shame and guilt are destructive forces that must be let go of, she begins to recover and moves on.

Truman Held

Truman Held is a black man in the Civil Rights Movement. He is pretentious and superficial, though he is also superficially handsome. Truman loves France and the French language, and he speaks French whenever possible. He does not have any understanding of women as people, but takes them for granted as sexual partners who should be devoted to him. Meridian comes to understand that Truman wants a woman who does not think for herself and is not truly independent.

Truman is interested in white women as something novel and something he can conquer. He sleeps with Meridian, but he rejects her as a possible wife because she has been sullied. She has been married and had a child. Instead, he marries Lynne Rabinowitz, a white Jewish exchange student. Though Truman loves her, he sees her more as a white woman than as a person. Truman begins to feel that he's turned his back on his race by marrying a white woman and that he shouldn't love Lynne. He begins sleeping with other women and always returns to Meridian, though she rejects him as a lover.



Truman doesn't have a lot of self-awareness. He loses interest in the Civil Rights Movement. Truman is an artist, and he follows his art. The thing that seems to finally get through to Truman is the death of his five-year-old daughter, who is beaten to death in a hate crime. Truman takes Meridian's place when Meridian leaves, because he needs to understand and heal.

Lynne Rabinowitz

Lynne Rabinowitz is a Jewish white woman from a well-off family. She leaves her home and family to be with Truman and to live in the South. Lynne loves the poor black people of the South, and at first she thinks of them as Art instead of people. However, she makes friends in the black community and is happy among them. As a white woman, though, she is not immune from the hatred of oppressed blacks. One of Truman's friends, after losing his arm in a shooting, rapes Lynne. After that, she is not the same. Her marriage falls apart, and Lynne becomes more and more ruined. She becomes bitter and overweight. Losing her daughter is the last straw, and Lynne is left with nothing.

Anne-Marion Coles

Anne-Marion is Meridian's college roommate, who continues to write Meridian letters. Anne-Marion had no qualms in college about agreeing to kill for the revolution and grows up to write poetry about her two children and her lake.

The Wild Child

The Wild Child, or Wile Chile, is a thirteen-year-old girl living with no parents or friends, who has lived on the streets her whole life. She gets pregnant, and Meridian catches her and tries to find a place for her with a halfway house or charity organization. She can find none, and the Wild Child escapes, runs across the street, and is hit by a car.

Mrs. Hill

Meridian's mother was a schoolteacher, and she was not prepared for the loss of identity that would come with having a child. Silently, Mrs. Hill blames her children for the loss of her happiness. She doesn't think about politics or see the larger picture of the world around her. She is devote and believes in God and the church, but she doesn't have a well-formed morality. She simply believes in a simplistic, conventional idea of "good." She does not believe in black people voting or in ending segregation, and she is horrified when her daughter wants to give up her son and go to college.



Mr. Hill

Meridian's father is a schoolteacher, like his wife. He teaches history, and he is interested in Native Americans. He knows all about Native American civilizations that have been destroyed over time by Europeans. Mr. Hill has a farm that contains a serpent-shaped Native American burial mound. One summer, he gives away the deed to a Native American man, who gives the deed back after camping there during the summer.

Louvinie

Louvinie was the slave who planted The Sojourner magnolia tree and buried her severed tongue under it.

Walter Longknife

Walter Longknife is a Native American wanderer, who Mr. Hill gives the deed to his farm that contains an Indian burial mound. Walter camps there and then returns the deed before moving on at the end of the summer.

Eddie

Eddie is Meridian's husband, a boy who got her pregnant when she was a teenager.

Tommy Odds

Tommy Odds is Truman's friend, who is shot and loses his arm. He takes his anger out on Lynne as a white woman. He rapes her and tries to get his friends to rape her.

Camara

Camara is Truman and Lynne's child, who is beaten to death by a man because she is mulatto.

Johnny

Johnny is a poor, black man who quit his job at a copper factory because the factory owners wanted to shut off his only window. He collects dirty and slimy pieces of newspaper to roll into kindling, which he sells for three cents or a nickel. Johnny has a son, who he can't afford to buy shoes for, and he has a wife Agnes, who is dying. However, because of Meridian's kindness and acceptance, he registers with her to vote after his wife dies.



Agnes

Agnes is Johnny's wife. She is dying, and she wants to die right before Mother's Day so that she can be buried on the holiday.

Miss Margaret Treasure

Margaret Treasure is an elderly, obese black woman who lives on a family farm and rarely has contact with anyone but her sister. One day, when her house is being painted, she falls in love with one of the painters and begins a sexual affair with him, though he is over twenty years younger than she is. Margaret believes that she is pregnant and burns down her corn crops and her bed. When she injures her leg, Truman and Meridian bring Margaret to a doctor, who also is able to tell her that she's not pregnant. Margaret is so happy that she agrees to register to vote.

Miss Lucille Treasure

Lucille Treasure is Margaret Treasure's younger sister, who is critical of her elder sister's morals.

Rims Mott

Rims Mott is the painter who has a sexual affair with Margaret Treasure.



Objects/Places

Chicokema

Chicokema is the small town where Truman goes to see Meridian, and where she brings the local children to see the mummy that they've been turned away from because they are poor and black.

The Tank

Chicokema has an army tank in the town square, bought to protect the town from "outside agitators" working for civil rights.

Marilene O'Shay

The supposed mummified body of Marilene O'Shay is an exhibit in a traveling circus. The mummy is supposedly an unfaithful wife, killed by her husband who was forgiven by the law and the people because his wife was unfaithful. The flier says that her blackened skin reflects her sins. Black children are only allowed to see the mummy on certain days, and Meridian leads a protest against this. The children who see the mummy say that it's a fake made of plastic.

The Railroad Cap

Meridian wears a black-and-white railroad cap to cover her thinning hair.

Saxon College

Anne-Marion and Meridian attend Saxon College in Georgia.

The Sojourner

The Sojourner is a giant magnolia tree planted by a slave on the Saxon plantation before it became Saxon College. The students tear down the tree when they're denied entrance to the chapel for the Wild Child's funeral, but the tree is not dead. Anne-Marion sends Meridian a picture of a new branch growing out of the tree's stump.

The Sacred Serpent

The Sacred Serpent is an Indian burial mound in the shape of a serpent, which is on Meridian's father's small farm. He preserves the mound and he and his daughter have



spiritual experiences there. One summer, he gives the deed to an Indian man, who gives it back when he journeys on at the end of the summer. The farm is taken by the government to build a park, where blacks are not allowed.

The Niggers-on-the-Corner-Voter-Machine, or NOTC

Tommy Odds leads this group of local men in Mississippi into a political group who tries to register as many blacks as possible to vote.

The Sleeping Bag

A sleeping bag is Meridian's last possession, and she rests there while she heals from her illness. Meridian leaves the sleeping bag for Truman when she goes.

The Gold Bar

As a child, Meridian finds a gold bar and buries it under a magnolia tree. Slowly, she forgets that it's there.



Themes

Race

Meridian is a novel about the African-American experience, but it also looks beyond that into other issues of race and discrimination. Meridian's father is concerned with the disappearance of Native American cultures from the Americas. The experience of Native Americans is a parallel to the slavery and oppression of blacks. However, few people can look outside of their own experience and see the parallel. Meridian's father reflects the narrow view that refuses to see a larger picture of justice.

Meridian sees that racial hatred leads to terror and abuse. She experiences brutal treatment at civil rights rallies. The response to oppression and abuse is violence, but Meridian sees danger in embracing violence. It is one of the fundamental ambivalences of her nature.

Lynne represents the dangers of racial divisions. Lynne is a white woman, but she chooses to live in a black community and marries a black man. Lynne suffers for her choice. Although she loves the black community and is nothing but kind and hard-working in the Civil Rights Movement, her husband rejects her because he feels he shouldn't have married a white woman. She is raped by Tommy Odds because she is white and he wants to hurt her in revenge for all the wrongs against him. She loses her daughter because of racial hatred, as well. Racial divisions are tragic and destructive. Meridian sees a route through the vote to mending hatred by giving African Americans back a voice .

Gender

Meridian is not just black; she is a black woman. Gender plays an important role in the novel. Meridian begins her life following in the footsteps of her disappointed and trapped mother. The act of childbearing traps women into lives that they don't want, and once they are trapped, they turn bitter and angry, falling back on criticism. Meridian's mother despises her for stealing her freedom and respect. In turn, Meridian hates her young son, who trapped her in a life and a marriage that she hates. Only through giving up her son, which makes her a monster, can Meridian escape her life.

Women are expected to be virginal, but men are always trying to seduce them. Truman seduces Meridian, but then he discards her because she is not a virgin. He wants a woman who will be his property and who he can control. Even when he marries, Truman has no drive to be faithful to his wife. He takes his freedom, while leaving his wife with a young child who will be accepted nowhere because of her race.

Lynne suffers, as well, from being a woman. She is raped by Tommy Odds, but no one believes that it is rape. The black men say that rape always ends in murder, and since she was not murdered, she was not raped. Tommy tells her that he did not rape her.



Lynne herself is unsure whether she has been raped. She feels responsible for not having fought off Tommy. Still, the rape ruins her psychologically. She becomes deserted, angry, and bitter.

Guilt

Meridian carries guilt with her throughout the novel. She is guilty for being a burden to her mother. She is guilty for deserting her own son. She is guilty for letting her boss fondle her in exchange for much-needed food and supplies. She is guilty for letting The Wild Child die. She is guilty for a girl she calls to join a rally march, who later she believes she hears being raped or beaten in jail. She is guilty for all the people she cannot save. Meridian cannot bear her own existence and she falls ill, believing that she can only resolve her situation through dying.

Lynne, too, is guilty. She carries the guilt of the white oppressors, and she allows Tommy to rape her because of her feelings of guilt. The Native American man who Meridian's father gives his farm to also feels guilt for killing Italian soldiers during World War II. Guilt is everywhere, especially among the oppressed.

Meridian comes to realize that guilt and shame must be washed away, to move forward past the trauma. When Meridian is first ill, she recovers when, in her delirium, her teacher gives Meridian forgiveness. However, Meridian finally needs to forgive herself. Though she has been wronged by her mother, her society, and her lover, Meridian doesn't need to forgive others. If she cannot let go of her own guilt, then she cannot embrace her life. Giving in to guilt is embracing death.

Style

Point of View

The novel is told in the third person with an omniscient narrator. Just as the novel jumps around in time, giving the picture of Meridian's life from different angles, it also jumps from point of view to point of view, giving a picture from different angles of Meridian and of the Civil Rights Movement. The first part of the novel is told mainly from Meridian's point of view, but it also shows her mother's thoughts and feelings, as well as Anne-Marion's impressions of Meridian.

The second part of the novel, focusing on Truman and Lynne, shows events from both characters' points of view. The reader is able to see Truman's perspective and his doubts about Lynne as a white woman. The reader is able to see Lynne's horror and guilt. The writer even shows Tommy Odd's thoughts, and the reader can see his rage and his desire to hurt Lynne.

The third part of the novel, which focuses on Truman and Meridian together, tells the stories of black people that Truman and Meridian meet as they travel around. Each story is one more piece of the black experience in America. The novel, when viewed as a whole, forms a tapestry of experience, like a montage of images, all shot from different perspectives and angles. Each of the characters' experience and thoughts is revealed, forming a multi-layered perspective.

Setting

The setting of the novel is the Deep South during the Civil Rights Movement, where racism is at its height. Meridian's childhood puts her in the middle of the dysfunctional black culture of the South. She lives in a culture that devalues women and traps girls through pregnancy, since girls are not educated about their sexuality. She also lives in a culture that divides black and white, where there is oppressive violence, which breeds violence in the oppressed. The violence against blacks leads to violence against women. Within Meridian's childhood, the reader sees the narrow points of view of many of the black people, like Meridian's mother, who can't see to help themselves.

The setting of Saxon College reflects the desire of blacks to fit into society, but the magnolia tree and the college's history as a plantation manned by slaves also shows how the black community carries the roots of slavery with it into the future. The college itself is contrasted with the violence and cruelty met by the Civil Rights Movement.

Meridian is transient during the novel, moving from one small black community to another. This creates a continuity between the black communities in small towns, melding them into one whole culture and group, united. Part of the novel is set in New York, but even in New York, Lynne is obsessed with the South. She watches a show about the South and seeks out things that remind her of the South.



Language and Meaning

Language creates cultural distinctions between characters in the novel. Truman, who is pretentious and desirous of delving into the white community, speaks in French. He aspires to a language that he sees as above other languages. Through his desire to speak French, Truman undermines his own culture and identity, discarding his language for someone else's language. Lynne is able to use good finishing-school English when she wants to, but she can also easily slip into Southern black dialects. When she finds Truman living with a Southern belle in New York, she begins talking to the woman derisively in a black dialect, pointing out the woman's whiteness with her voice.

Storytelling is also important in the novel, as a tie to history. The woman who planted *The Sojourner* was a storyteller. It was a part of her cultural heritage that she brought back from Africa. Her tongue is a symbol of her voice. The history of the black culture is told in stories, like the stories at the end of the novel of the different black families that Truman and Meridian visit. The word "voice" becomes synonymous with "vote" through Truman and Meridian's quest to register black voters.

Several of the characters are poets. Meridian, Lynne, and Anne-Marion all write poetry. Poetry is an expression of voice and of storytelling. Meridian attaches her words to the wall, where they take on their own life. They are inherited by Truman, transferring her meanings and conflicts to him.

Structure

The novel is divided into three parts and is told non-chronologically. The first part is called Meridian and is focused on Meridian's life. It begins near the end of Meridian's journey, when she is living in the Deep South, stripped of almost all of her possessions, trying to heal her psyche. Truman tracks her down where she is trying to right injustices in a small Southern town and suffering collapses. Meridian's story is told in jumps through time, including her experience at Saxon college, her strained relationship with her mother, her spiritual experiences with her father, and her young pregnancy and failed marriage. Finally, the story tells of Meridian's joining the Civil Rights Movement and her experience at college and with Truman, ending in her psychological and physical distress.

The second part of the novel focuses on Truman and Lynne. It tells of their marriage and their life in the South and of Truman's growing rejection of Lynne. Meridian exists in this part of the story as someone that Truman runs to when he's running away from his wife, and someone who comforts him and Lynne when their daughter is killed. Though the second part is named after Truman, Lynne is more of a focus, and this part of the novel tells the story of her rape by Tommy Odds and her decline.

The third, and shortest, part of the novel begins with the death of Martin Luther King at the end of the Civil Rights Movement. During the last part of the novel, Truman and Meridian visit black men and women, sharing their stories and registering them to vote.



with quiet calm and understanding. The final part is one of exploring Meridian's resolution of her conflicts and her final healing. The novel is circular, ending near its beginning. Meridian exchanges places with Truman, who now must complete his own healing.



Quotes

"As she drew nearer the tank, it seemed to grow larger and whiter than ever and she seemed smaller and blacker than ever." *The Last Return*, p. 21

"They needed her to kill. To say she would kill. She thought perhaps she could do it. Perhaps." *The Last Return*, p. 30

"That night, after *The Wild Child* was buried in an overgrown corner of a local black cemetery, students, including Anne-Marion, rioted on Saxon campus for the first time in its long, placid, impeccable history, and the only thing they managed to destroy was *The Sojourner*." *Sojourner*, p. 48

"Rebelling, she began to dream each night, just before her baby sent out his cries, of ways to murder him." *The Happy Mother*, p. 69

"She felt deeply that what she'd done was the only thing, and was right, but that did not seem to matter. On some deeper level than she had anticipated or had even been aware of, she felt condemned, consigned to penitence, for life." *Battle Fatigue*, p. 91

"He did not want a woman who tried, however encumbered by guilts and fears and remorse, to claim her own life." *The Conquering Prince*, p. 110

"She dreamed she was a character in a novel and that her existence presented an insoluble problem, one that would be solved only by her death at the end." *The Recurring Dream*, p. 117

"By being white Lynne was guilty of whiteness." *Of Bitches and Wives*, p. 133

"But running away from Lynne, at every opportunity, and existing a few days in Meridian's presence, was the best that he could do." *The New York Times*, p. 143

"To her, it was worse than rape because she felt circumstances had not permitted her to scream." *Lynne*, p. 158

"She could not help struggling with these questions. Just as Truman could not help thinking such struggle useless." *Questions*, p. 189

"I am a failure then, as the kind of revolutionary Anne-Marion and her acquaintances were." *Camara*, p. 201

"His first thought was of Lazarus, but then he tried to recall someone less passive, who had raised himself without help." *Release*, p. 219



Topics for Discussion

What is Meridian's stance on violence, ultimately? When is violence necessary in the name of justice?

Why can't Truman and Meridian come together in a permanent relationship? What do they find with each other when they go canvassing for votes?

Why is Lynne attracted to black communities?

Why does Truman want to date white women? Why does he feel as if he shouldn't have a white wife?

How is gender discrimination in the book different from racial discrimination?

What is the source of Meridian's guilt, and how does it affect her?

How does the Civil Rights Movement change over the course of the book?