

The Marriage of Opposites Study Guide

The Marriage of Opposites by Alice Hoffman

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Contents

<u>The Marriage of Opposites Study Guide.....</u>	<u>1</u>
<u>Contents.....</u>	<u>2</u>
<u>Plot Summary.....</u>	<u>3</u>
<u>Chapters 1 – 3.....</u>	<u>5</u>
<u>Chapters 4 – 6.....</u>	<u>9</u>
<u>Chapters 7 – 8.....</u>	<u>12</u>
<u>Chapters 9 – 10.....</u>	<u>15</u>
<u>Chapter 11.....</u>	<u>17</u>
<u>Characters.....</u>	<u>19</u>
<u>Symbols and Symbolism.....</u>	<u>22</u>
<u>Settings.....</u>	<u>24</u>
<u>Themes and Motifs.....</u>	<u>26</u>
<u>Styles.....</u>	<u>31</u>
<u>Quotes.....</u>	<u>32</u>



Plot Summary

“The Marriage of Opposites” is a historical romance novel by Alice Hoffman which recounts the life of Rachel Pissarro, and the early years of her son, future Impressionist painter Camille Pissarro. When the novel begins in 1807 on Saint Thomas, Rachel is a girl of 12. She is rebellious, enjoys breaking rules, and wants to live her life the way she chooses. Her mother is strict and dutiful, knowing that both reality and social convention will not allow for this. Nevertheless, Rachel and her best friend, Jestine, a part-black daughter of the cook, are taught to read and educated by Rachel’s father. Rachel’s father is a little more relaxed about duty and convention than his wife. However, when Rachel reaches her early twenties, her father arranges a marriage with a businessman, father, and widower twice her age. The two companies will merge through the marriage. Isaac, the husband-to-be, does not want to force Rachel into the marriage. He allows her to meet his children and get to know him before she decides to marry him. She is enamored with his kindness, loves his children, and recognizes she has a duty to her father.

Although the marriage is loveless, the marriage is safe, secure, and comforting to Rachel who bears Isaac several children. Though she becomes very close to him, the marriage never translates into love. A few years later, Rachel’s father dies. At the same time, Jestine falls in love with Aaron, a distant cousin of Rachel’s who was taken on years before as the ward of her father. The two wish to marry, but because Jestine is partially black, this is forbidden. Aaron is sent to Paris to manage the company’s affairs there in order to get him away from Jestine. Jestine, however, is pregnant by Aaron and gives birth to a baby girl named Lydia who can pass for being white. On a visit from France, Aaron and his new wife, Elise, unable to have children, forcibly take Lydia with them. Jestine is devastated.

Seven years after marrying Rachel, Isaac dies of a heart attack. Rachel becomes the de facto head of the family company. For the first time in her life, she is truly free, but suddenly has numerous children to care for and little money to do it. The freedom she now enjoys also means she inherits great responsibility. Isaac’s nephew, Frederic, arrives from Paris to handle the company. Rachel is annoyed and believes Frederic intends to steal the company away, but Frederic convinces her this is not the case. The two quickly develop feelings for one another, though Frederic is 22 and Rachel is 30. They seek marriage, but are denied by the Jewish community on the island because they are legal relatives. They appeal the decision to the Grand Rabbi of Denmark, who upholds the marriage request. However, Rachel and Frederic are shunned by the Jewish community on Saint Thomas for years. During this time, they have several children, including Camille.

As Camille grows, he is less inclined to handle the family business than to draw and paint. Rachel encourages him to do his duty to the family, and to keep his mind focused on reality. Camille refuses, focusing on painting. He is finally allowed to go away to study in Paris, during which time he tracks down Lydia for Jestine, which begins a correspondence between them. Camille returns home to Saint Thomas, restless, and



aspires to continue traveling and painting. Rachel opposes this but again relents. Ultimately, Rachel and Jistine decide to travel to Paris. There, one of Rachel's daughters is dying of illness, while Jistine is reunited with Lydia. Camille and Frederic also come to visit in Paris. Frederic dies soon after of illness and exhaustion from work.

Camille quickly falls in love with Julie, a young Catholic farm girl his mother has taken on as a maid. Julie is eight years younger than Camille. Rachel opposes Camille's desire to marry Julie since Julie is not of the faith. Camille thinks his mother is being hypocritical by denying him marriage after she had to fight for her own, and after she supported the right of Aaron and Jistine to marry years before. Rachel refuses to allow the marriage for years, during which time Camille and Julie begin having children. Only when falling in love with her grandchildren does Rachel finally consent to the marriage.



Chapters 1 – 3

Summary

Chapter 1 – It is 1807 in Charlotte Amalie, on the Island of Saint Thomas. 12 year-old Rachel Pomie and her family are Jewish. Her grandparents fled religious persecution in France years before, ultimately coming to settle on Danish-held Saint Thomas because Denmark tolerated the free practice of religion. Rachel's favorite place in the house is her father's library, where she loves to read and look at maps of the world. Rachel's father educates both Rachel and her best friend, the half-black Jestine, daughter of the family's cook, Adelle. Rachel also loves French fashion and longs to leave the island. Rachel knows she and her fellow Jews are meant to behave and go unnoticed so that the Jews will not incur the wrath of the Danish king, but Rachel refuses to conform. Rachel enjoys breaking any rule she can, such as leaving her window open at night for the cool air. Rachel also enjoys collecting local history, legends, folk tales and horror stories in a blue notebook from her father's store rather than practicing to be a lady. Rachel's mother dislikes Rachel's rebelliousness, and the education her father gives her and Jestine.

Rachel, though she believes in God, has little interest in helping out in a Jewish household. Rachel's mother believes Rachel should focus on womanly duties. Rachel knows her mother believes this because she and her mother are so similar. Rachel also knows her mother laments the death of her infant son years before, and so wants Rachel to turn out properly. However, Rachel cannot stand her mother. Her mother tends to favor Rachel's live-in cousin, Aaron Rodrigues, since Aaron is a boy. Years pass. In 1817, as Rachel's father's business begins to fade, he arranges a marriage based on business for her with Isaac Petit, a man twice her age with three children, David, Samuel, and Hannah. Isaac is a kind man, and does not want to go through with the marriage if Rachel does not agree. She asks to meet his children. He agrees. Rachel gets along well with the children, and realizes they and their father still love and miss Madame Petit. She also quickly befriends the Petit maid, Rosalie. Rachel consents to the marriage. Jestine tells Rachel that Rachel will only know tragedy with the Petit family.

Chapter 2 – Rachel and Isaac are wed at the synagogue. Isaac is gentle and understanding the first time they have sex, which comforts Rachel. Rachel quickly falls in love with the children and gets along well with Rosalie. Rachel is also invited to join the social circle of the elite women at the synagogue. Rachel's mother, already a member, is extremely proud of Rachel. Rachel continues to spend time with Jestine when possible, treasuring Jestine's friendship. Rachel's father and husband become business partners in the rum trade, and their business does well. During dinner, it is revealed that Aaron, a manager, is to go to France on business, and that Isaac will inherit the business. Aaron is outraged by this and storms out. Rachel argues with her father over the decision, causing Isaac to apologize for Rachel's outbursts. This angers Rachel who storms out after Aaron. Aaron explains the reason he is being sent away is



because his romance with Jestine is considered inappropriate. Adelle and Jestine have both been fired.

At home, Rachel and Isaac make up. Rachel reveals the boys have taken on a wild donkey as a pet, naming him Jean-Francois. Isaac agrees to let them keep the donkey. Rachel insists the family move to Paris, but Isaac explains the business cannot be run from there. Rachel knows that part of the reason Isaac won't leave is because his wife is buried in Saint Thomas. A bad storm hits the island. There is widespread damage. Rachel visits Jestine. Both Rachel and Jestine are pregnant. Jestine thinks she and Rachel should have run away to live in France. Jestine is angry that Rachel has gotten married. Rachel convinces her mother to take back Adelle, but her mother won't hire back Jestine until after Aaron leaves. Rachel names her first child Joseph, after the son her husband's deceased wife lost.

Chapter 3 – Over the next six years, Rachel has two more children in addition to Joseph. She names them Rebecca Emma and Abigail Delphine. Out of respect, Rachel visits her husband's dead wife's grave and leaves flowers with each birth. In France, Aaron becomes a playboy with a bad reputation, so Rachel's father and husband cut him out of the business. Jestine has a daughter whom she names Lydia, but calls Lyddie. After the birth, Rachel's mother once again fires Adelle. Meanwhile, Rachel's father and Rachel both send money to support Adelle. Adelle falls ill. She tells Rachel that she will have another chance at happiness, and that it must be taken when it comes. Adelle dies soon after. Although Rachel cannot mourn with the blacks of the island due to boundaries, she waits outside their churchyard to pay her respects to Jestine as the service ends.

Rachel's father later dies. Rachel's husband becomes head of the family. Aaron returns for the funeral with his wife, Elise. Elise is young, pretty, delicate, and very wealthy. Despite this, she becomes fascinated by the island. She exchanges news and fashion with Rachel for knowledge of the island. Elise comes to enjoy the relative freedom of the island. Aaron, meanwhile, is enraged to have no say or part in the family's company based on Rachel's father's will. Jestine is devastated by the news that Aaron is married. However, she wants Aaron to meet Lyddie. With Elise's intervention, Aaron agrees to bring Lyddie back to France with them. Lyddie looks enough like Elise to be taken for Elise's biological daughter. Aaron has legal rights to Lyddie, and Elise is unable to have her own children. Jestine is heartbroken by this. She sarcastically says she is good enough to be visited by Aaron each night, but not good enough to raise a child. Jestine tries to hide Lyddie, but sailors forcibly take Lyddie away. A letter arrives months later for Jestine from Elise. Jestine burns the letter.

Analysis

"The Marriage of Opposites" is a historical romance novel by Alice Hoffman which recounts the life of Rachel Pissarro, and the early years of her son, future Impressionist painter Camille Pissarro. When the novel begins, the themes of Feminism and Duty appear instantly. Young Rachel is a rebellious girl who enjoys breaking even the



slightest rules. She is vastly independent for a girl, wants to do everything herself, has an expansive education through her father, and wants to leave Saint Thomas, all at a time when such things are uncommon for women. Rachel does not want to be told what to do, especially by her mother. Rachel's mother is very traditional, and very strict. She dislikes everything from her daughter's education and desire to travel to her daughter's rebelliousness.

Much of the freedom that Rachel enjoys has come through her father, which is ironically why she is willing to listen to her father and carry out the duties expected of her when he requests them. As Rachel learns later through Adelle, Rachel's mother was once very much like her, but reality and social conventions of the time made such freedom impossible. Rachel's mother's desire to impress duty upon her daughter can be seen as hypocrisy (which becomes a theme in and of itself as the novel progresses) because Rachel's mother was just as rebellious as Rachel. However, the feminist tendencies Rachel's mother may have had have been stamped out by simple reality. Women in that day and age did not have the same kind of freedoms women today enjoy. In some situations, it was a matter of survival, such as is the case with Rachel's arranged marriage or caring for children. In other situations, it was a question of social order, of proper gender roles in society.

Social convention and religious order through Judaism, which itself becomes a theme in the novel, determine how marriages and relationships play out. Aaron, who has been raised by Rachel's family, is forbidden to marry Jestine, not only because of the difference in religious faith, but because Jestine is part black. In order to keep them apart, Aaron is sent packing to France. Because of his duty to his family and his need for employment with the family company Aaron has no choice in the matter but to go. When Aaron later returns with his wife, Lydia is forcibly taken with them back to France. Neither Jestine nor Lydia have any rights or say in the matter since Aaron is the father. Likewise, as Rachel's family's business begins to fail, an arranged marriage with business benefits is seen as key to surviving. Rachel dutifully and willingly enters into such a marriage for three reasons. First, she knows it is her duty to her father who has allowed her other precious freedoms in her life. Second, Isaac is not a cruel or unkind man, and doesn't want to force her into the marriage. Third, should push come to shove, Rachel knows she will have no other option.

The marriage of opposites becomes an important theme in this section of the novel as well. Generally, marriages occur between people close in age, of the same race, and of the same faith. In the novel, the primary marriages dealt with are all unconventional. Rachel marries a man twice her age. Whereas he has a mind for business and work, she has a mind for the home and family. Aaron wishes to marry Jestine. Although Aaron's true parentage is not found out until much later, at the time, he is considered white and Jestine is considered black. He is Jewish; she is Christian. He is a free man; she is the child of the slave race. When Aaron later marries Elise, opposites again occur. He is from a working, upper trade-class family, while Elise is from a wealthy, aristocratic family. He is born in the New World; Elise is born in the Old World. He is considered rough around the edges; she is considered refined.



Marriages with differences outside the normal of Judaism are forbidden by the Jewish community on Saint Thomas not merely as a matter of religious observance, but as a matter of survival. Rachel's family has ended up on Saint Thomas after centuries of persecution against Jews in Europe. Apart from America, only in religiously-tolerant Danish colonies and territories is Judaism given any real assurance of safety. Even then, the Jews of Saint Thomas seek to behave like mice, going unnoticed and not standing out. This means adhering to all prevailing social customs of the time, which cut across religions, such as not marrying blacks. Likewise, the duty of Jews to their family is essential not only for the survival of the family, but to the community which is made up of numerous families. It is simple reality, but it is a reality that Rachel's mother has not been able to overcome, and one which Rachel seems to be recognizing.

Discussion Question 1

Although Rachel is not thrilled about the idea of an arranged marriage to Isaac, she ultimately agrees to it. Why?

Discussion Question 2

It is noted that Rachel's mother was very much like Rachel as a younger woman. Why is Rachel's mother no longer the same? Do you believe her treatment of Rachel is hypocrisy, genuine concern, simple reality, or a mix of all three? Explain.

Discussion Question 3

In what ways can Rachel be seen as a feminist in this section of the novel? Why?

Vocabulary

embellishing, congregation, infighting, flamboyant, vulnerability, impulsively, immune, impeccable, intricate, complexion, exquisite, prestigious



Chapters 4 – 6

Summary

Chapter 4 – It is now 1824. Isaac dies suddenly of a heart attack. While she isn't in love with Isaac, Rachel is still distraught by his death and misses him very much. She is also pregnant and financially worried, knowing she will no longer be able to afford living in their current home. Rachel is now unmarried and free, but trapped by reality. She has many children to support, and little money to do it with. She explains to her children that God relieves men's pain by taking them away, but that Isaac will always be with them. Rachel and her children move in with her mother. It is a humbling but necessary step. Rachel does her best to handle the family business with help from Mr. Enrique, a clerk and friend of the family. But word comes that Isaac's nephew will be coming from France to take over the business. In the meantime, Rachel spends her free time with Jestine, who deeply mourns the absence of Lyddie. Rachel and Jestine are both now thirty. Rachel's mother dies later on.

Chapter 5 – 22 year-old Abraham Gabriel Frederic Pissarro arrives to manage the family business. He goes by Frederic. He is a good and decent man with a mathematical mind. Mr. Enrique is skeptical of Frederic, but Abraham insists he is there to help run the business, not steal it. Upon meeting Rachel, Frederic is surprised by how young she is for a widow. Although he is legally there to claim his part of the business, he explains he truly wants to help it continue to prosper. Rachel does not believe him, and is angered by his presence. Still, she brings him around the company business. She introduces him to Mr. Farvelle, who runs the store. She insists Enrique is not to be fired. Frederic readily agrees. He signs papers to make Rosalie a free woman. Frederic goes on to promise he will steal nothing from Rachel.

Frederic promotes Enrique to manager, while Enrique in turn helps Frederic to master the business. This causes Rachel to calm down. She and Frederic quickly fall for one another romantically. Frederic fights the attraction, believing it is inappropriate. He is reminded by other local women of the same. He tries to keep his distance, but quickly comes to like Rachel's children. Frederic contracts yellow fever and nearly dies. Rachel and Jestine see a local healer for tea and poultice, which helps Frederic recover. Rachel and Frederic become lovers. They get engaged but the relationship is denounced by family back in France. The marriage ceremony is refused by the rabbi on Saint Thomas. Rachel bears Frederic a child, and she and Frederic carry on as if they were married.

Chapter 6 - Rachel names her new son Joseph Felix. Frederic pleads with the rabbi and the community elders to let him and Rachel marry, but they refuse. While entering Joseph's name into the family records, Rachel learns that Aaron's parents are both unknown. His mother's name has been blotted out and his father's name noted as unknown. A family friend, Madame Halevy, explains this has been done throughout Jewish history on Saint Thomas to protect the community. She tells Rachel the scandal of her and Frederic will come back to haunt her. Rachel presses the case for marriage,



but is refused. The reverend says the love between Frederic and Rachel is the destroying kind, that as relatives, they cannot wed. Rachel decides she and Frederic will petition the Grand Rabbi in Denmark for the legal right to wed. They know the letter has the potential to cause a firestorm.

The Grand Rabbi consents to the marriage, but the local Jewish community condemns Rachel and Frederic to such a point that even other religious communities on the island learn of what has happened. Rachel and Frederic become the source of gossip. The congregation begins a legal correspondence with the Rabbi and the King. The marriage is overturned and they are considered outcasts. When they must go out in public, they avoid Jewish-centric places. Jistine and Rosalie do their best to comfort Rachel. Rachel gives birth to two more children, Moses Alfred and Abraham Jacobo. Rachel worries for Jacobo, but the herb healer tells her that Jacobo is strong but sensitive. Rachel realizes that out of all her children, Jacobo is most like her. At New Year's, a fire breaks out that destroys much of town. Frederic's attempts to help put out the blaze are unmentioned, and when the fire is out, everyone turns their backs on him. Rachel gives birth to a stillborn son named Aaron Gustave. In 1833, the congregation finally accepts the marriage as legal. A letter later arrives, saying that Lyddie is engaged to be married.

Analysis

Although Rachel is not in love with Isaac, it is clear she loves him by how deeply she misses him when he is gone. His death provides Rachel with the first true freedom she has experienced in her life. Without a father or a husband to guide her, Rachel can do what she wants. But the reality of society is that women do not enjoy the same legal or social standing of men. Rachel bucks the trend by taking on running the family business, but even she realizes she cannot do it without Enrique's help. At the same time that Rachel is free to do as she chooses, responsibility comes with her newfound freedom. She has children to care for, and a business to oversee. As a woman, she does not have the same options, earning power, or respect garnered by men. Nevertheless, she has a duty to her family and the family's business, as well as to the business's employees.

Rachel takes it as an insult when Frederic arrives to take over the company. Rachel considers it an act of theft, but Frederic assures her this is not so. In part because of his kindness and his attraction to Rachel, he allows her tremendous say in how the company is run. Rachel's feminist independence can be seen through her decision-making and influence, such as when she insists that Enrique be kept on and the family slaves be freed. It is only a matter of time before Rachel and Frederic become lovers. In an era when women were meant to marry older men, an older woman pursuing a much younger man is enough to send reverberations through the community. Rachel's feminism shines through here again in her pursuit of what she wants, not what social convention considers acceptable. Rachel, like any man, has a right to marry younger. Here, the theme of Marriage of Opposites can also be seen.



However, even with the age difference, the primary issue that Rachel and Frederic encounter in their marriage is not one of social convention, but religious convention. The Jewish community of the island objects to the marriage. The local rabbi refuses it because Rachel and Frederic are technically relatives, and such a marriage is forbidden. The theme of Judaism takes prominence in the novel as Rachel and Frederic defy religious custom, go over the heads of their community, and appeal to the Grand Rabbi. The Grand Rabbi consents to the marriage, but the community fights back, getting the King to declare the marriage invalid. The community then goes on to treat Rachel, Frederic, and their family as outcasts. As Rachel realizes, there is a price to pay for every action, especially when that action is in defiance of convention.

For the Jewish community, a proper marriage is not merely a question of religious faith, but of religious and social duty. Long persecuted, the Jews of the community are doing their best to fit in and get along. Relatives marrying relatives is not common across the religious spectrum on the island. Between faith and citizenship, the Jews of Saint Thomas believe they have the sacred duty to oppose the marriage, though they later consent to it when it becomes apparent the ensuing scandal makes the entire community look bad.

Discussion Question 1

How does Rachel exert feminist tendencies over Frederic when he arrives on the island to run the company? How does Frederic respond? Why?

Discussion Question 2

Though Rachel decides to live her life the way she wants—from running the company to marrying Frederic—there are consequences she must deal with. What are these consequences? Why? Do you believe, given the time and place in which she lives, those consequences were appropriate? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 3

Why do Frederic and Rachel decide to marry each other no matter what the community or the King have to say? What does this say about Rachel in terms of feminism? Explain.

Vocabulary

arduous, imminent, integrity, mystifying, forthrightness, incantation, poultice, ferocity, frugally



Chapters 7 – 8

Summary

Chapter 7 – It is now 1841. Rosalie and Enrique get married. Jacobo Camille Pizarro, called Camille, enjoys his family's status as outcasts because it affords him greater freedoms from social conventions and boundaries. Between his parents he sees genuine love and affection, whereas between other kids' parents he sees only duty and arrangement. Camille attends school with children of color because his own family is outcast. Though he believes in God, Camille is a disinterested Jew who admires Jesus for being an outcast. Camille is friends with Marianna King, and she becomes the subject of numerous drawings that Camille does in class. Everyone compliments his artwork. Camille goes on to draw other people and scenery. He steals paper and art supplies from his father's store. He begins painting. He loves his homeland but desires to travel. Jistine makes note of how Rachel, now so dutiful, was once a dreamer like Camille is now. In sketching Jistine, Camille is able to see grief. He learns about Lydia being taken away.

As Camille gets older, Frederic has him begin working in the store and to deliver packages of goods. While delivering goods for Madam Halevy, Camille learns more about what happened to Lydia, and about his family's scandalous life. It the scandalous history of the family that has the man interested in marrying Hannah worried about telling his family. Together, Frederic and Hannah help broker a peace between their parents and the Jewish community elders. The family commits to Synagogue while Hannah becomes engaged. Mrs. Halevy explains to Camille that her sons both died of yellow fever at the ages of 12 and 14, and only a daughter who now lives in Charleston, South Carolina, has survived. She teaches Camille about how women and blacks have few rights, but that sometimes things are for the better, such as Lydia being taken away to live in France. Mrs. Halevy dies a week later. When Camille decides to make a living as an artist, living as he intends, his mother calls him a fool. He wonders aloud if she was a fool to live the way she wanted. She is angered by this. She and Frederic decide to send him to live with relatives in Paris and to study under Monsieur Savary. They want him to study hard so he can take over the family business. He promises to find Lydia for Jistine.

Chapter 8 – It is 1847. Lydia has long been married to Henri Cohen, a partner in a small family banking company in Paris. He is the love of her life, and she worries for his safety with an unstable political environment challenging the power of the king. Henry's family loves Lydia greatly, especially Henri's Aunt Sophie. Elise has been dead for five years. Aaron, is ill. He has said that he wishes he hadn't betrayed her mother, and that he wishes Lydia did not have her eyes. She also is unnerved by a boy who has been following her around Paris. Speaking to Aunt Sophie, Lydia learns that she was the product of Aaron's first marriage before Elise. Sophie is unclear of the details. Lydia now feels a stranger to herself. Near death, her father explains he couldn't marry Lydia's real



mother for obvious reasons, that he never loved anyone else, and that Lydia should never do what she is told to do. He dies soon after.

Lydia learns about the boy who has been following her. It is Camille Pissarro, now 14. He reveals the truth, that Lydia was stolen away from her true mother, Jestine. He delivers a letter of motherly love and hope from Jestine. Lydia fears Henri may leave her because her mother was half-black. Henri brushes it aside. His love for her is unchanged. Lydia becomes pregnant in the spring. Camille gifts her with a painting of a park. She gives him a collection of sixty letters for Jestine, the letters bearing the details of her life so far.

Analysis

As the novel continues, Camille Pissarro comes into his own as a teenager. He is very similar to his mother. He is rebellious and a dreamer. Saint Thomas is a place that is far too small for him. The status of his parents and family as outcasts has afforded him great freedom to shirk social convention and social obligations, but familial duties remain. Camille's parents insist he keep his mind focused on the store, but Camille only wants to paint. Ironically, the person exerting the most influence over Camille is his mother. Rachel especially insists that Camille stay focused on his studies and on preparing to manage the family business one day. This is a far cry from her former self.

There is a certain level of hypocrisy that can be seen in Rachel's attitudes toward Camille. Rachel rebelled against her duty as a woman and her mother's strict ways; now, Rachel is imposing strict ways on Camille and insisting he do his duty as a young man. Rachel is slowly coming to realize that her own mother simply wanted a better life for Rachel, even if the road to get there was a struggle. With all of the struggles that Rachel has faced as a result of her own choices in life, Rachel does not wish her son to have so difficult a time. There is also great hypocrisy in a woman looking for equal standing and liberty in society to deny equal standing and liberty to her son while her own father granted her some degree of freedom.

It can be argued that there is a justification in Rachel's hypocrisy, telling her son to do differently than she herself has done. This only serves to create a rift between mother and son, rather than bringing them closer together. Camille directly attacks his mother's hypocrisy, asking her if she was a fool for living the way that she wanted. Nevertheless, Camille is allowed to go and study art in Paris for a few years, with the hope that it will take the restlessness out of his system.

At the same time, as Aaron dies, he tells Lydia to never do what she is told to do. Having been forced under social obligation and family duty to reject Jestine, Aaron has major regrets in his life. Because of Lydia's true nature as part black, she worries her own husband will choose to do away with her. However, Henri proves otherwise. His love for her is unchanged. In a sense, his marriage to Lydia now becomes a marriage of opposites. He is a French, white Jew, while Lydia is a part-black, part-Jewish Dane. As



Henri indicates, no one else has to know about it. He loves Lydia, and that is all there is to it.

Discussion Question 1

Why does Henri refuse to divorce or put aside Lydia after the truth of her identity becomes apparent? How does Lydia react? Why?

Discussion Question 2

In what ways are Camille and Rachel alike? In what ways do they differ? How do these similarities and differences affect their relationship as mother and son? Why?

Discussion Question 3

It can be argued that there is a justification in Rachel's hypocrisy, telling her son to do differently than she herself has done. Do you believe this is so? Why or why not?

Vocabulary

formally, marriageable, transgressions, luminous, flustered, rectified



Chapters 9 – 10

Summary

Chapter 9 – It is 1848. Camille returns home to Saint Thomas. Jestine is delighted to learn that Lydia is doing well, is married, and has three daughters named Amelia, Mirabelle, and Leah. Jestine is thrilled to receive Lydia's letters. Camille goes to work in the shop as a shipping clerk, but he is restless and unhappy. He learns Marianna is now married. He continues to admire Jesus for reaching out to the afflicted and mistreated, and begins attending a Lutheran church. He is glad to see slavery abolished in Saint Thomas by the King. Rebecca Halevy-Stein at long last comes to Saint Thomas to see about her mother's estate. She is enraged that so many of her mother's things have either been given away or taken by friends. It is revealed later that Rebecca had tried to have an abortion at the age of 17 after being with a black sailor, but the baby lived. The baby was Aaron. The parentage was hidden to protect Aaron and Rebecca.

Meanwhile, Camille fails miserably in the family's store, preferring to sketch and paint. Years pass. He meets a traveling artist named Fritz Melbye. Camille is stunned to learn that Melbye manages to make a living as a painter with support from his father. Camille's parents, especially Rachel, look down on Fritz. Melbye encourages Frederic and Rachel to let Camille go out into the world and paint. Rachel refuses. Camille secretly saves up money, then goes to meet Melbye in Venezuela. Rachel is upset by her son's departure, but wonders if she herself is responsible by transmitting the same feelings of restlessness through blood.

Chapter 10 – It is now 1855. Joseph Felix, only 28, has died. Camille scrambles to return home. He feels like a stranger on Saint Thomas. He learns that Jestine and Lydia now correspond by mail. Rachel is resentful that Camille has come home after two years and barely staying in touch. Still, she asks to see his work. He shows her his paintings, sketches of women he has loved, and numerous other drawings. Rachel, Hannah, and the rest of the family are impressed with his artwork. Camille meets a young man named Roland James, the grandson of Mrs. Halevy. He gives Camille one of his grandmother's rings as a measure of thanks for always taking care of his grandmother. Thoughts of Mrs. Halevy inspire Camille to paint all night. He takes ill, but is watched over by Rachel until he recovers. Rachel and Frederic agree to finance Camille's studies in Paris so that Camille might paint. Rachel reveals she and Jestine will also be visiting Paris.

Analysis

Camille's return to Saint Thomas is a good and bad thing for Camille. It is good because he is able to help reconnect mother and daughter through letters for Jestine from Lydia. It is bad because he is almost instantly restless once more. Rachel bears down hard with Frederic, forcing Camille to work in the family's store once more. Hypocrisy is once



more present in Rachel's relentless drive to force Camille to conform to conventions of the time. Rachel believes she is doing this in Camille's best interests, but Camille does not accept this. He is angered beyond description at his mother's hypocrisy, preventing him from living the life he wants to live while she has spent a lifetime trying to live her life the way she wants. What should be noted by the reader is that there also seems to be a bit of jealousy on the part of Rachel towards Camille. Camille has been to Paris, travels to Venezuela, and has been across the ocean while Rachel has never left the island.

Not everyone can live as they want, however. As Camille and Rachel later learn about Aaron, Aaron is half-black though he doesn't look it. He is the product of a sexual liaison between a black sailor, and a white girl named Rebecca. The hiding of Aaron's parentage was done out of a sense of duty to Rebecca, Aaron, and the Jewish community at large. The Jewish community looks to keep its head down to survive, so it does not want to buck social trends that blacks should not marry whites. In an age where white men having sex with black girls and women is frowned upon, a black man having sex with a white girl would be a scandal beyond belief. It would bring unwanted attention to the Jewish community as a time when they are doing what they can to fit in, not stand out.

Discussion Question 1

Despite her own past, and despite Camille's obvious talent for painting, Rachel still insists on his working in the family company. Why?

Discussion Question 2

What is the truth about Aaron's parentage? What lessons does this teach Camille about society and convention?

Discussion Question 3

Do you believe that preserving the Jewish community on Saint Thomas is justification or an excuse for social standards, conventions, and duty? Why or why not?

Vocabulary

countenance, refute, berated, plaintive, enamored, aliases, commandeered



Chapter 11

Summary

Chapter 11 – Rachel and Jestine prepare to travel to France in part to help care for Rachel's daughter Delphine, who is ill. Camille remains behind to help his two brothers and father settle the store and business enough to leave for Paris. A third of the business will be given to Enrique. As Rachel and Jestine set sail, they both know they are never going back. Rachel now recognizes there is a price to pay for everything. Rachel and Jestine are amazed by the beauty of France. Jestine is thrilled to be reunited with Lyddie, who is herself thrilled to see her true mother. Camille and Frederic arrive in November, just before Delphine dies. Camille is quickly attracted to Julie, Rachel's 20 year-old maid, but Rachel opposes this romance for seven years because Julie is an uneducated Catholic. Julie becomes pregnant and loses the child. Rachel and Frederic go on to denounce the relationship. Camille becomes an atheist and an anarchist, rebelling against every form of authority, including in the art world. Camille and Julie have a son that Rachel refuses to visit due to the birth being outside of marriage. Frederic's health declines, and a mass forms in his abdomen. He dies soon after. Camille gives Mrs. Halevy's ring to give to Jestine, saying that Aaron wanted her to have it. Julie and Camille have a daughter that they name Jeanne-Rachel, which Rachel takes as a sign to make things right. She begins visiting her grandchildren regularly, and ultimately consents to the marriage between Camille and Julie.

Analysis

As the novel comes to a close, Rachel still remains hypocritical toward her son. His desire to marry is one of opposites. Camille's desire to marry his mother's maid speaks to the opposites of wealthy and poor, servant and master. It also speaks to differences in religion with Camille being Jewish (and later atheist) and Julie being Catholic. Additionally, it speaks to Camille being Danish and Julie being French. Interestingly enough, just as Rachel is eight years older than Frederic, Julie is eight years younger than Camille.

Despite no longer living in the Jewish community on Saint Thomas, despite the fact that they are now living on another continent, and despite the fact that Camille is a fully-grown man, Rachel still refuses his wish to marry Julie. She claims it is because he and Julie are of different faiths. In fact, Rachel and Frederic go so far as to actually denounce the idea of marriage between Camille and Julie, a level of hypocrisy that reaches a level of disgust not previously seen. After everything Rachel and Frederic have been through, for them to denounce Camille's desire to marry who he wishes is beyond hypocritical.

It is likewise shamelessly hypocritical for someone as feminist as Rachel, who demanded the freedom to marry who she wanted, to deny Julie the right to marry who



she wants. Whereas social convention, a community, and a king prevented Rachel and Frederic from marrying and having true happiness, now only Rachel and Frederic stand in the way of Camille and Julie's happiness. This goes on for seven long years until Rachel finally relents as she falls in love with her grandchildren.

Discussion Question 1

For what reasons do Rachel and Frederic oppose Camille's desire to marry Julie? Do you believe these reasons are sufficient? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 2

Is there any real justification for Rachel and Frederic to oppose the marriage, or do you believe the opposition is merely personal? Explain.

Discussion Question 3

Why does it take seven years for Rachel to finally accept Camille's marriage to Julie? What finally brings Rachel around? Why?

Vocabulary

Portends, unquenchable, remembrance, vestibule, entreaty, excruciating, traipsed



Characters

Rachel

Rachel Pomie is one of the main characters and part-time narrator of the novel “The Marriage of Opposites” by Alice Hoffman. Born in 1795 on the Danish-held island of Saint Thomas, the Jewish Rachel grows up rebellious. She is best friends with Jestine, a half-black daughter of a slave. She is given a sound education by her father, but has her dreams of freedom challenged by her very strict mother. To help the family business, Rachel must enter into an arranged marriage based on business with a widower twice her age, Isaac Petit. Isaac is kind and gentle, the marriage is good, and Rachel bears Isaac children. When Isaac dies, Rachel realizes she is free to do as she wishes, but is grounded by the reality of responsibility for the company and her children.

She falls in love with Frederic Pissarro, eight years younger than Rachel and a relative of Isaac’s recently arrived from France to handle the business. However, because she and Frederic are legally related, the Jewish community opposes the marriage and later shuns them. Rachel and Frederic persevere, and have several children, including Camille. Interestingly and hypocritically, Rachel comes to oppose Camille’s desire to live life the way he wants, and to marry a Catholic girl eight years younger than he is. She insists she is looking out for his best interests, but relents after seven long years.

Camille

Camille Pissarro is the son of Frederic and Rachel, and is one of the main characters in the novel “The Marriage of Opposites” by Alice Hoffman. Camille, like his mother, is a rebellious child and young man who would rather paint than handle the family business, and who wants to live life the way he wants. He runs into fierce opposition from his mother who insists he is living like a fool and needs to focus on reality. Nevertheless, she finances art studies in Paris for him in the hopes it will help ground him. While in Paris, Camille manages to help Jestine and Lydia reestablish connection. Returning to Saint Thomas, Camille is restless and unhappy. Only when he moves permanently to France by the end of the novel does he find some sort of stability. However, he falls in love with Julie, a Catholic farm girl eight years younger who is serving as a maid to his mother. Rachel opposes the marriage for seven years, during which time Camille and Julie have several children. Only when Rachel gets to know her grandchildren does she give in and bless the marriage.

Julie

Julie is a beautiful farm girl of 20 who works as a maid to Rachel in Paris. Though eight years younger, Catholic, and uneducated, Julie catches the eye of Camille. She and Camille fall in love quickly and seek to marry, but they are opposed by Rachel for seven



years. Only after Rachel meets her grandchildren does she relent and bless the marriage.

Isaac

Isaac Petit is a gentle widower with several children from his first marriage, and is the owner of a prominent company on Saint Thomas. He is solicited by Rachel's father for an arranged marriage with business benefits with Rachel. Though twice her age, Isaac agrees to the marriage provided that Rachel consents. Rachel does, and is very happy with Isaac. Isaac proves to be a good husband and father, though he dies of a heart attack seven years later.

Jestine

Jestine is the half-black daughter of Adelle, the Pomie family cook. She is best friends with Rachel through life despite the difference in their skin color. She falls in love with Aaron as a teenager, and the two become lovers who wish to marry. This is forbidden by the Pomies and Petits, who send Aaron away to France. Jestine, however, is pregnant and gives birth to a baby girl named Lydia. Aaron, on a visit to Saint Thomas with his wife, Elise, abduct Lydia and bring her to live and grow in France. Jestine is devastated. Only through the efforts of Camille decades later does Jestine reestablish contact with Lydia, ultimately going to France to see her.

Lydia

Lydia is the part-black daughter of Jestine and Aaron, born in Saint Thomas but taken to live and grow up in Paris by Aaron and his wife, Elise. Lydia marries a gentle and kind man named Henri Cohen. She has several children with him, but is stunned to learn through Camille that Elise is not her true mother. When Lydia learns she is part black, she confesses the truth to Henri though she fears he will do away with her. Henri refuses, saying his love for her is unchanged. Lydia goes on to reconnect with her real mother, ultimately visiting with her some years later when Jestine comes to France.

Frederic

Frederic Pissarro is the nephew of Isaac Petit, and is a resident of France when he is sent to Saint Thomas by his family to manage the Petit company. He is mathematical, very rational, and very romantic. He falls in love with Rachel quickly even though she is eight years older than he is. The two seek to marry but are denied by the community and the King of Denmark because they are legally related. Only after several years of living as outcasts and bringing negative attention to the Jewish community on Saint Thomas does the community consent to the marriage. Frederic hypocritically goes on to oppose Camille's marriage to Julie, dying at age 53 of illness and a mass in his abdomen.



Enrique

Enrique is the long-time clerk and later manager of the Pomie/Petit company. He is an incredibly kind, loyal, and brilliant man who is ultimately gifted with a one-third share of the company when Rachel and Frederic move to France. Enrique is the most valuable employee of the company, helping Rachel's father, Isaac, Rachel, and later Frederic and his children to handle the company.

Aaron

Aaron is introduced in the novel as a distant cousin of Rachel's family, but in reality is the illegitimate product of a sexual union between a local Jewish girl and a black sailor. Aaron's parentage has been hidden to protect all those involved. His very European appearance causes no one to question his parentage. Aaron falls in love with Jestine, but is sent to France because marrying a black woman is unacceptable in social conventions of the day. In France, a heartbroken Aaron becomes a womanizer and is cut off from the company. He marries Elise, a pretty and wealthy girl who settles him down. Aaron later abducts his daughter by Jestine, Lydia, to raise her in France. He ultimately dies, but not before telling Lydia to never do what other people tell her to do.

Henri

Henri Cohen is the husband of Lydia. A successful partner in a small family banking company, Henri is a good and kind man. He and Lydia are deeply in love with one another. When Henri learns the truth about Lydia's parentage, he isn't bothered in the least and never brings the subject up again.



Symbols and Symbolism

Blue notebook

A blue notebook is stolen from the company store by Rachel as a child. Rachel uses the notebook to scribble down stories, folk lore, legends, and history associated with Saint Thomas as she travels around the area. The notebook becomes a symbol of Rachel's love of travel and learning, and reveals a spirit of restlessness that will plague her for most of her life.

Paint

Paint is used by Camille to create paintings. Rachel finds it foolish at first that Camille should be more concerned with paints and art than numbers and account books at the family business. Camille, however, will live his life no other way than by painting. To Camille, it is a delight and a step closer to truth when he puts paint upon a canvas to create something of beauty.

Paintings

Paintings are created by Camille throughout the second half of the novel. As time passes, the paintings become increasingly Impressionistic. The paintings themselves are beautiful and noted for their colors, a fact not lost on Rachel. The paintings that Camille creates help Rachel to understand her son truly has a gift, and it is a gift that should not be wasted.

Halevy ring

Mrs. Halevy gifts Camille with a ring in exchange for all of the help he gives her, and the friendship he extends her, in the time leading up to her death. The ring is kept and worn by Camille throughout much of the later part of the novel. He ultimately removes the ring and gives it to his mother to give to Jestine under the idea that Aaron wanted her to have it.

Mourning clothes

Mourning clothes are worn by the family of a deceased individual for a sustained period of time following death. It may be for months or longer. A black arm band, a sign of mourning, is worn for up to a year following the death of a loved one. These symbols of mourning are a sign of respect toward the dead, and a sign of distress of the wearer. They let others know the wearer is suffering and in need of prayer and comfort. Rachel wears mourning clothing following the death of her father and later husband.



Rum

Rum is the principal export of the Pomie/Petit family trade business. While the business imports and exports various goods, rum serves as the main source of income for the family. Rum is a kind of alcohol which became popular in Europe through the 1700s and 1800s. The family's rum business sustains the family for decades until the business begins to falter in the 1850s.

60 letters

60 letters are written to Jestine from Lydia after Camille establishes contact with Lydia and tells her the truth about her life. In return, Lydia composes 60 letters with details about her life up through the present time. She entrusts these letters to Camille, who gladly carries them back to Saint Thomas and gives them to Jestine.

Letter to the Grand Rabbi

A letter to the Grand Rabbi of Denmark is written by Frederic and Rachel after the local Jewish community denies them marriage. The letter lays out the situation and their case for marriage. The letter is accepted and acted upon by the Grand Rabbi, which causes a firestorm in the Jewish community on Saint Thomas. The letter leads to Rachel and Frederic being shunned by the community for years after.

Abolition laws

Abolition laws are passed by King Christian of Denmark in 1848. These laws forbid and exterminate slavery across Danish-held territories, such as Saint Thomas. They give thousands upon thousands of slaves their freedom. Camille cheers these laws, and is thrilled to see so many people granted their freedom.

Life record books

Life record books are kept by the Jewish community and Jewish families on the island. These are essentially detailed family trees that list, among other things, birthdates and parents. While looking through the life books of her family, Rachel discovers that Aaron's parentage is unknown. His mother's name is blotted out, and his father's name is noted as being unknown.



Settings

Saint Thomas

Saint Thomas is a Danish-held tropical island sitting between the Atlantic Ocean and Caribbean Sea. It is home to a number of European immigrants, slaves, and natives. Primarily Danish, the island has a sizable population of Jews who have been granted religious tolerance by the Danish king. Rachel's ancestors first came to Saint Thomas to live freely without persecution. The island is noted as being very hot during the summers, but cool and even cold during winters. It is a beautiful place, but it is too small for Rachel. Rachel longs to leave Saint Thomas, but does not do so until she is in her sixties. Camille, too, longs to escape Saint Thomas. Though he finds the island beautiful, he finds the island too small. He makes several trips away from Saint Thomas through the novel, ultimately leaving for France for good by the time he is in his late twenties.

Synagogue Hill

Synagogue Hill is an area in the town of Charlotte Amalie on the Island of Saint Thomas where the Jewish population has centered itself. The center of Synagogue Hill is the synagogue, which acts not only as a place of worship and community focal point, but as a place of social activity as well. Synagogue Hill and its residents come to oppose the marriage between Rachel and Frederic, shunning them for years.

Paris

Paris is the capital of France, and is known for being a city of great art, fashion, and culture. Paris is the city to which Aaron is sent to handle the family company before he is cut off. There, he marries Elise and later brings Lydia back to be raised. It is to Paris that Camille visits to study art and to reconnect Lydia and Jestine. It is later to Paris that Jestine and Rachel move permanently, followed by Camille and Frederic. It is in Paris that Camille falls in love with Julie, and has his marriage to her denied for seven years by Rachel.

Venezuela

Venezuela is a country in South America which becomes the second country Camille visits. Having visited France, Camille returns to Saint Thomas where he quickly becomes restless. Following the example of the traveling artist Melbye, Camille journeys to Venezuela for two years. There, he paints until he returns to Saint Thomas for his brother's funeral.

The French countryside

The French countryside outside of Paris is where Camille and Julie come to make a home for themselves after Rachel refuses to allow them to marry. There, they live as though they were married and have children. Camille travels throughout the French countryside to paint. Ultimately, Rachel comes to visit the children of Camille and Julie in the French countryside. These visits encourage Rachel to finally drop her objections.



Themes and Motifs

Feminism

Feminism is an important theme in the novel “The Marriage of Opposites” by Alice Hoffman. In the novel, the author advances feminism as not only equality between the sexes, but as the ability for women to make their own choices and choose their own paths in life. In the novel, feminism primarily concerns itself with the character of Rachel, and to a lesser degree, Julie.

From the beginning of the novel, Rachel is a rebellious girl who enjoys breaking even simple rules, such as leaving the window open. She consistently draws the ire of her mother, who believes that Rachel must act like a proper girl prepared to handle the responsibilities accorded to women, which range from managing the household to participating socially in the community to bearing children. Rachel often shirks her chores in favor of reading in the library. Her father gives her a strong education at a time when women were given only a basic education. Restless, she decides that Saint Thomas is too small for her. She wants to live her life the way she wants to live it, but her mother tells her to remain focused on reality. Rachel has limited choices.

Whereas Rachel often clashes with her mother, she never clashes with her father. When her father arranges marriage for her, Rachel does not go kicking and screaming. Because her father has afforded her respect and as much freedom as he could, she willingly enters the marriage for him. The fact that she comes to admire and respect her future husband, and to fall in love with his children only help her decision. Nevertheless, Rachel is under no delusions. She would have been forced into the marriage whether she wanted it or not. She continues to dream of freedom and making it off Saint Thomas someday.

When her father and Isaac pass away, Rachel has a chance at freedom. But with freedom comes responsibility. She may now make many of her own decisions, but she has children and a company to look after. Likewise, even if she had no ties at all, she would still have the responsibility of supporting herself. Rachel goes on to manage the company with Enrique’s assistance, a practice highly uncommon in that day and age. Rachel’s refusal to remain in the sphere of the home and enter the world of business is a demonstration of her rising in equality to the level of men. When Frederic comes over from France, Rachel exerts tremendous influence through him to do everything from keeping on Enrique to freeing the family’s slaves. She becomes his equal in business and in marriage.

Rachel’s decision to marry Frederic is her own. The marriage is based on love and nothing else. However, the Jewish community and the King oppose the marriage. Even then, Rachel refuses to accede to their objections. She lives with Frederic and bears him several children until the community relents and allows the marriage. Yet even then, the community continues to shun Rachel and her family due to her actions.



Much later on, Rachel moves into the position her mother formerly occupied with her when it comes to Camille. Rachel becomes an overbearing weight on Camille's life, hypocritically refusing him to marry the woman he loves, a Catholic farm girl eight years younger than him named Julie. Julie does not care what Rachel has to say about her love for Camille. Julie defies not only convention of the time by marrying outside her faith, but by choosing to marry for love. Like Rachel, Julie determines to live her life the way she wants to, not the way society or anyone else would have her live it. There is great hypocrisy in Rachel denying her son and Julie the very same freedom to marry that was so long denied to her. Only after a seven year standoff does Rachel finally consent to the marriage.

Hypocrisy

Hypocrisy is an important theme in the novel "The Marriage of Opposites" by Alice Hoffman. Hypocrisy—doing something other than what one states, believes, or instructs, or not practicing what one preaches—is rife throughout the novel. Much of the novel's hypocrisy comes through Rachel, ironically. As someone who has long struggled for her rights as a person and a woman, that Rachel should deny that same respect to others is staggering.

When the novel begins, Rachel is a rebellious girl who wants to live life the way she chooses to live it. Her mother stops her, putting her foot down and telling Rachel she must deal with reality. Rachel learns later that her mother was like her as a child. While her mother argues that she wants the best for Rachel, there is also a level of hypocrisy in her mother's demands when her mother sought once to do what Rachel is seeking to do now.

Despite the naysaying of the Jewish community and the King of Denmark, Rachel goes on to live the life she wants to live by marrying Frederic. Nothing will stop her from choosing to live the way she wants to live. She also finds it unfair that Aaron cannot marry Jestine, and agrees that Aaron and Jestine should be allowed to marry. But Rachel's attitude toward life and marriage changes years later with respect to her own son.

Rachel hypocritically comes to oppose her son Camille's desire to live life the way he wants to. She tells him that to want to make a life from painting is the desire of a fool, and that he must stay focused on reality. She allows him to study art, hoping it will get the restlessness out of his system, but continues to oppose him doing anything other than helping the family business. Even then, Rachel wishes to live life the way she wants, but refuses to let Camille live life the way he wants. She claims it is for his own good, just as her mother claimed for her.

When Camille decides to marry Julie in France, Rachel and Frederic not only oppose the marriage, they denounce it. Rachel claims that it is because Julie is not of the same faith, but her hypocrisy is startling. She and Frederic struggled for the right to marry one another for years, only to turn around and hypocritically refuse their own child the right



to marry who he wants to. Only after Frederic dies and Rachel gets to know her grandchildren does she relent. Unfortunately for Camille and Julie, this takes seven years to happen.

Duty

Duty is an important theme in the novel “The Marriage of Opposites” by Alice Hoffman. Duty is fulfilling one’s obligations, whether they are expected, necessary, required, or a combination of all three. Duty heavily influences the plot in many ways, especially when it comes to the character of Rachel.

When the novel begins, Rachel is a rebellious girl who grows into a rebellious teenager. Rachel’s duties are clearly laid out for her as a woman, as expected by society and required for a family’s survival. She is to marry, have children, tend to the household and tend to her husband. Rachel resists talk of marriage until marriage becomes a duty of necessity. With her father’s business struggling, a marriage based on business is arranged between Rachel and Isaac. It becomes Rachel’s duty to marry Isaac. While Isaac only wishes to marry Rachel with her consent, Rachel knows that she really doesn’t have a say in the matter because she needs to help her family and its business.

For the next seven years, Rachel adheres to her duty as a loving wife and mother. The marriage is comfortable and happy, but uneventful until Isaac dies seven years later. While Rachel is now technically free to do as she pleases, she is bound by duty to her children and the family business to remain. She must provide for her children using the business that she now takes over running until Frederic’s arrival. Frederic’s appearance from France to handle the business is itself a necessary duty, imposed upon him by his family and social convention in which a woman running a business is not taken seriously.

After Rachel and Frederic fall in love, she continues to exert influence over the affairs of the business because she feels it is her duty to help watch out for her family. For example, she ensures Enrique—vital to the company’s operations—stays on. As her children grow, she feels it her duty as a mother to guide them down the right path in life, even if the stands she takes against her children are abjectly hypocritical. This include opposing Camille’s marriage to Julie, for example, on the grounds that Julie is not a Jew. This leads to seven years’ worth of dissent and disharmony between mother and son, until Rachel at last relents.

Judaism

Judaism is an important theme in the novel “The Marriage of Opposites” by Alice Hoffman. Judaism posits the belief and faith in God and His goodness, and is noted for a sense of community among its followers. Judaism serves to influence the plot of the novel in many important ways.



Jews have long been persecuted by racists and bigots throughout history. Few have welcomed Jews or tolerated their religious practice. When the novel begins, two such places that tolerate religious freedom are the fledgling United States, and Denmark. Religious tolerance extends to all Danish-held territories and islands, including Saint Thomas. Religious tolerance is why Rachel's ancestors came to settle on Saint Thomas, along with numerous other Jewish families.

The Jewish community on Saint Thomas does its best to remain unnoticed so that it will not incur the wrath of the King or any other Gentiles on the island. Though they are willing members of Danish society on Saint Thomas, they do everything they can to get along –but are also very defensive of their own. For example, the Jewish community hides the parentage of Aaron to protect both him and his mother, and the Jewish community at large by extension from racists. They will do what they must out of a sense of duty to ensure survival.

When Frederic and Rachel plan to marry, the community opposes this because marrying a relative is inconsistent with Jewish theology. When Frederic and Rachel bring in the Grand Rabbi of Denmark, the community appeals to the King who overturns the Rabbi's decision. Rachel and Frederic are shunned, but their outcast nature proves scandalous across the island. The entire marriage scandal draws unwanted attention to the Jewish community. As a result, Rachel and Frederic are finally allowed to marry to protect the greater Jewish community on the island.

Marriage of Opposites

The Marriage of Opposites forms an important theme in the novel “The Marriage of Opposites” by Alice Hoffman. The marriage of opposites involves the falling in love, and/or marriage of individuals who are seen either as different or totally opposite from one another. These marriages are outliers to trends of the time in the novel, and help drive the plot.

The novel, which occurs primarily between 1807 and the 1860s, has a number of marriage norms for the times. Even when marriages occur between a man and woman close in age, the man is almost always older. Much of the time, the man is far older. Marriage usually always occurs between people of the same faith, and always between people of the same race. Likewise, marriages, especially those among the upper classes, are often arranged. In the novel, marriage does not always follow these standards.

The first marriage in the novel occurs between Rachel and Isaac. While keeping in line with many of the marriage norms of the day, Rachel and Isaac are opposites. Isaac is twice Rachel's age, being older while she is younger. Rachel has no previous experience as a parent; Isaac has long been a parent. Isaac is well-grounded; Rachel seeks greater freedom. Isaac is business-oriented; Rachel is family-oriented. The opposites in their marriage mean the marriage works well for them. Although Rachel is not in love with Isaac, she is happy with him, their marriage, and their children.



Aaron and Jestine enter into a relationship even though Aaron (until later discovered otherwise) is white, and Jestine is black. Aaron is a free white man, while Jestine is the daughter of a slave. Aaron has money; Jestine is poor. Aaron is Jewish; Jestine is Christian. Marriage between them is forbidden by Rachel's family due to all of these prevailing circumstances, especially the differences in race. As Aaron later tells Lydia, she should never do what others tell her to do.

Frederic and Rachel are also a marriage of opposites. Frederic is much younger than Rachel, an unusual age difference in the nineteenth-century. Frederic has a mind for math and reason, while Rachel is more sensitive and intuitive. The two fall deeply in love, forming a whole as two complementary halves.

Much later, Camille and Julie form a marriage of opposites as well. Camille is eight years older than Julie, is a Jew (and later an atheist) while Julie is a Catholic. Camille comes from a wealthy family while Julie comes from a peasant farm family. Julie is uneducated while Camille has studied in Paris. The two, like Camille's parents, form a complementary whole.

Styles

Point of View

Alice Hoffman tells the story of “The Marriage of Opposites” in the first and third-person reflective narrative modes, from the points of view of Rachel, Camille, and an unnamed narrator. The writing assumes a reflective tone as though the novel were being told by Rachel, Camille, and the narrator years after occurring since the novel spans a time of almost seven decades. Likewise, various chapters are told from the first-person point of view of Rachel and Camille. The author gives these characters voices to tell their own stories given the fact that they were real people. This allows the reader a firsthand glimpse into the minds and hearts of Rachel and Camille, learning personally what they think and feel. The third-person narrator fills in various other chapters where events do not primarily concern Rachel or Camille. For example, the third-person narrator handles Chapter 5, where Frederic arrives in Saint Thomas from France, and in Chapter 7, where Lydia’s reaction to Camille’s revelations are dealt with.

Language and Meaning

Alice Hoffman writes her novel “The Marriage of Opposites” in language that is formal and historical. This is done for at least two reasons. First, the novel occurs primarily between 1807 and the 1870s. Then, English was far more formal than contemporary English. The formal, historically-based language adds a sense of realism and believability to the story being told, for it reflects the time in which it is told. Secondly, because the characters are based on real people who lived between 1807 and the 1870s, it is only natural that the language employed be reflective of the time in which they lived. This, too, lends a sense of believability and realism to the novel. It also reinforces the realistic nature of the characters in the novel.

Structure

Alice Hoffman divides her novel “The Marriage of Opposites” into 11 chronological, numbered chapters from 1 through 11 that primarily cover events between 1807 and the 1870s. Each chapter is long, with most being in excess of 30 pages. Some chapters deal with events over the course of a few days, such as Chapter 1, or several years, such as Chapter 11. The simple and straightforward approach to the novel allows the author to focus on specific events in time, or to leapfrog through years, sometimes as much as a decade to get to the next setting and its situations. For example, the events of over seven years are dealt with in Chapter 11, which involves Rachel’s role in refusing to bless her son’s desire to marry Julie.



Quotes

I was a girl who knew what I wanted.

-- Rachel (Chapter 1 paragraph 1)

Importance: From childhood, Rachel reveals she is determined to live the way she wants to live. She knows what she wants out of life, and will do whatever she must to get it. However, Rachel's mother, social convention, and the Jewish community and their presence on Danish-held Saint Thomas, all conspire together to obstruct Rachel.

We were meant to be mice, to go unnoticed so that we would not bring hatred upon our people, who had been so ill-treated in every nation. But I was not a mouse. In the fields where I walked, I was much more interested in the actions of the hawks.

-- Rachel (Chapter 1 paragraph 11)

Importance: As a member of the Jewish community, Rachel knows she is in a difficult position. With the exception of few places like Saint Thomas, Jews are persecuted around the world. The Jewish community does its best to go unnoticed, and does its best to fit in with Danish society in general. Rachel, like all women, are meant to do the same. But Rachel is not interested in going along just to get along. She has other plans for her life.

And then it was done. I was a married woman.

-- Rachel (Chapter 2 paragraph 12)

Importance: Understanding that she has a duty to her family, Rachel consents to being married to Isaac. Though it is an arranged and loveless marriage, it is a happy marriage for Rachel. Her husband is a good man, and she has several loving children by him. Despite Rachel's insistence on living the way she wants to live, she has acceded to duty and the needs of her family over her own personal interests. This speaks volumes about Rachel's character as a person.

His was the third death, and the one that changed my life more than any other.

-- Rachel (Chapter 4 paragraph 2)

Importance: The death of Isaac affects Rachel deeply. Although she did not fall in love with him, she misses him deeply. Isaac's death now makes Rachel a free woman to do as she chooses, but with that freedom now come great responsibilities. She is now the primary source of security for her family and the family business. She can choose to let it all slide downhill, or take it on personally. Rachel decides to tackle providing for her family and handling the business instead of capitalizing on her sudden freedom and leaving Saint Thomas as she has always wanted to do.

I was free, unmarried, but I was also trapped. This was the moment I'd always imagined I could begin a new life; now, I wasn't so sure."

-- Rachel (Chapter 4 paragraph 4)



Importance: Rachel has longed to be a free woman, but the responsibility and uncertainty that come with freedom are stunning to her. She may be free to do as she pleases, but she must care for her family and the family's business. She has doubts about herself and whether or not she can do the job, but also as to whether or not the price of freedom was truly worth the cost (the price being the death of her husband and the mantle of responsibility being thrust upon her).

He burned for all he wanted, but ignored his yearnings, for he had a plan for his life, to prosper and be the man in his family that everyone could depend upon. He wished to do this to honor his God, his faith, and his family.

-- Narrator (Chapter 5 paragraph 4)

Importance: Frederic is a straightforward, moral young man who has great plans for his life. He longs to be good and do good things. His plans in life focus around God and family, all stemming from a sense of honor through his faith. He has the chance to make good on his plans through Rachel, whom he comes to fall in love with. He serves to stabilize her now uncertain life, and becomes someone she and their children can depend upon.

I wanted my freedom from the start... We were outcasts, and as far as I was concerned this was good luck. So much the better.

-- Camille (Chapter 7 paragraph 1)

Importance: Camille is very much like his mother when she was his age. All he wants is freedom, and to live his life the way he wants to live it. His family's outcast status grants him an unimaginable amount of freedom from social conventions of the time. Because he is already an outcast, there is nothing he can really do that would make him any more of an outcast. This is greater freedom than Rachel herself ever enjoyed when she was a girl.

I loved my homeland, yet I wanted to leave.... The desire to travel was in my blood.

-- Camille (Chapter 7 paragraph 27)

Importance: From the start, Camille is restless. He finds Saint Thomas too small an island to live on, and wants to experience the rest of the world. Likewise, his focus on art instead of business only adds to his sense of restlessness. When his mother finances a chance to study art in Paris, Camille is hooked. He will never end up at the family business forever. He will do whatever he must to live life how he wants to live it.

Who your parents were means nothing to me.

-- Henri Cohen (Chapter 8 paragraph 190)

Importance: When Lydia discovers she is part black, she tells her husband out of a sense of honesty. She worries, however, that he will make her leave or love her less. Henri does neither. He tells her his love for her is unchanged, and that is that. This



demonstrates that Henri is not only a good man, but attitudes about marriage and who may marry are slowly, but surely changing.

I could see he was torn. He had approved my plan to finally go to France; my daughter Delphine was seriously ill in Paris, and my son Camille would soon be going there to study. There was no longer any reason for me to stay.

-- Rachel (Chapter 11 paragraph 1)

Importance: Rachel, after wanting to leave Saint Thomas since childhood, now has the chance to do so in very late middle-age. At 60 years old, there is nothing holding her back from leaving Saint Thomas for France. She reveals that with everyone tending toward France, she will tend toward France as well. Despite her age, Rachel's life is far from over. It is about to change in important and unforeseen ways which will test Rachel's tolerance and resolve.

In more than thirty years we had never spent one night apart. After all this time, he was still in love with me...

-- Rachel (Chapter 11 paragraph 2)

Importance: Rachel's decision to leave for France will separate her from Frederic for a while. Although it is not permanent, she knows she will miss Frederic like crazy. Decades later, he is still deeply in love with her. This demonstrates just how much Frederic has come to mean to her, and how the struggle to finally marry him was worth it. However, it also sets Rachel and Frederic up to become hypocrites when they turn around and denounce their son's marriage to a younger Catholic girl.

We pay a price for everything, I saw that now.

-- Rachel (Chapter 11 paragraph 6)

Importance: As Rachel heads to France, she comes to understand that a price is paid for everything people do, and everything that happens to people. With every choice is a consequence. With freedom comes responsibility. With love come sacrifices and heartache. This wisdom helps Rachel to soften her stance toward her mother's insistence on being realistic, but also hardens Rachel against her son's desire to marry for love.