No Telephone to Heaven Study Guide

No Telephone to Heaven by Michelle Cliff

BOOKRAGS

Contents

No Telephone to Heaven Study Guide....1

Contents....2

Plot Summary....3

Chapter 1....5

Chapter 2....7

Chapter 3....10

Chapter 4....13

Chapter 5....15

Chapters 6 and 7....17

Chapters 8 and 9....19

Chapters 10 and 11....21

Characters....24

Objects/Places....28

Themes....31

Style....33

Quotes....36

Topics for Discussion....38

Plot Summary

This short poetic novel explores racial tensions between blacks and whites from two perspectives, that of a light skinned black woman and a darker skinned black man, each of whom internalizes the negative attitudes of whites and responds to them with violence. With a narrative that is fluid and rich in metaphor, the novel explores themes related to the nature of motherhood and of home.

As a rickety truck makes its way up a rain-soaked mountainside with a cargo of people and weapons, the novel begins its journeys back and forth through time and place. In both narratives, the focus is on a light skinned black woman named Clare. As she rides up the mountain, she reflects on her life to this point and how she became a revolutionary in the cause of Jamaican black rights.

Clare's narrative is paralleled by the story of a black man named Christopher who grow up poor in the slums of Kingston. His near-psychotic rage and frustration drove him to kill the upper-middle class family for whom he worked. Narration eventually reveals that although he remained at large and never faced legal consequences for his crimes, his mental state deteriorated, to the point that he becomes a familiarly, safely insane figure on Kingston's streets.

For her part, Clare's story begins with her parents, Boy and Kitty, and their decision to leave Jamaica for what they believe will be a better life in America (a decision triggered in part by Christopher's killings). The lighter skinned Boy is determined to put behind the inhibiting, violent racism he encountered in Jamaica, but when he discovers that similar racism is also prevalent in America, he does everything he can to make his family as white as possible. Kitty, however, feeling abandoned in her blackness, subversively tries to both maintain and defend it. She eventually leaves her husband and one daughter (Clare) to what she thinks is the white-defined life they want. Clare, however, discovers that she doesn't want to abandon her racial identity in the way her father has taught her, and so leaves for a journey of self-discovery and affirmation.

Clare's journey takes her first to England, where she loses herself in the study of ancient cultures and becomes friends with a fellow academic who, to Clare's disappointment, eventually reveals herself to be as racist as so many of the other people she has encountered. She abandons her studies and travels through Europe in the company of an expatriate American soldier who was wounded in Vietnam. She becomes pregnant with his child, but miscarries. Shortly afterward, the soldier abandons her and she finally returns to Jamaica. There she re-encounters an old friend, once known as Harry but now known as Harriet after a self-castration. Harriet introduces her to the world and the battles of a group of Jamaican revolutionaries, leading Clare to realize this is an opportunity to follow through on the altruistic ideals of both her mother and grandmother.

The stories of Clare and Christopher intersect again late in the novel when Christopher (now known simply as The Watchman) is hired to portray a "wild native" in a film about

blacks being produced and shot by whites in Jamaica. Clare, Harriet, and the other revolutionaries plot to sabotage and/or disrupt the shoot. The lives of both Clare and Christopher, as well as those of the other revolutionaries, are ended when the police, apparently alerted by a traitor to the revolutionary cause, strafe the trees and bushes around the setting for the shoot with gunfire. Clare's last moments are portrayed as being filled with memories of the Jamaican language. Narration concludes with a reference to day breaking.

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary

This short poetic novel explores racial tensions between blacks and whites from two perspectives, that of a light skinned black woman and a darker skinned black man, each of whom internalizes the negative attitudes of whites and responds to them with violence. With a narrative that is fluid and rich in metaphor, the novel explores themes related to the nature of motherhood and of home.

"Ruinate" The chapter begins with a footnoted definition of "ruinate" (see "Chapters 1 and 2 Analysis). The chapter proper begins with a description of how, on a "hot afternoon after a day of solid heavy rain", a rickety truck makes its precarious way along the slippery road around a mountain. Poetically written narration describes the two loads in its back - the first a group of men and women of mixed skin colors, dressed in stolen/borrowed khaki who think of themselves as soldiers, the second a load of weapons and food supplies. Narration describes how the men and women reclaimed the long-overgrown land once owned and cultivated by the grandmother (Miss Mattie) of one of the women, turning part of it into a garden and the other part into a ganja (marijuana) farm.

Narration also describes how the group of "soldiers" trades the ganja to a white American for weaponry, the manufacturing of which is "a big American business." There is then a description of the soldiers' lifestyle - their nightly ritual of making dinner and their sleeping and eating outside ("leaving the house to the bats and scorpions and lizards who now possessed it"). Finally, narration comments on how "Miss Mattie's granddaughter" distributed what food they didn't use among "people around who did not have enough land to support them" the way her mother and grandmother did.

Chapter 1 Analysis

The first point to note about this first chapter is the meaning of its title. A footnote defines "ruinate" as a uniquely Jamaican word, the term for "lands which were once cleared for agricultural purposes and have now lapsed back into ... 'bush'" with an increasingly sizable variety of vegetation coming into the land over the years. "Ruinate," the footnote suggests, "is an all-too-frequent sign on the Jamaican landscape." The concept of ruinate can be seen as having two levels of powerful metaphoric value throughout the book. The first is that the book portrays Jamaica as having its veneer of civilization and respect (i.e. the house) eaten away, overwhelmed, and devastated by the advancing, ultimately destructive, forces of the Jamaican people's suppressed passions, needs and rights (i.e. the jungle). In other words, as the jungle reclaims the house, so too do the Jamaican people strive to reclaim their individual, natural identity as human beings. This, in turn, relates to the second level of metaphorical meaning associated with ruinate. Protagonist Clare, in her return to Miss Mattie's home (Clare is

the here-unnamed granddaughter) is claiming her natural, compassionate self (see Chapter 7, "Magnanimous Warrior") after it having been veneered over by the "civilized" influences of her father and of the world. Clare is, in this sense, herself "ruinate."

All that said, this chapter, and indeed the book, is written with layer upon layer of metaphoric meaning, making it in some ways a lengthy prose poem. For example, the journey undertaken by the truck, as narrated first in this chapter and continuing throughout the book, can be seen as a metaphoric representation of the journeys of Clare and her companion Harriet (also on the truck) into their true selves and identities. Then, the presence of vermin and dangerous animals in the house further develops the metaphoric suggestion that the "civilization" represented by the house has become corrupt, while the fact that the "soldiers" eat and sleep outside reinforces the idea that they are essentially returning to nature, in the same way that the house is being consumed by nature.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary

"No Telephone to Heaven" This chapter begins with a searing poetic description of the life of a devalued slave in "this land", followed by the description of the truck driving up the mountain having NO TELEPHONE TO HEAVEN written across its sides. Narration describes how no-one in the truck knew why the words had been painted on the truck by its former owner, a drug dealer who took his profits from ganja sales to a new life in London. Narration comments on possible meanings of "no telephone to heaven" (see "Quotes," p. 16), and then discusses the different sorts of heaven and/or God the people in the truck attempted to worship and felt betrayed by. Narration also details the different frustrations and suffering (being a servant, being far from home, living in a society torn apart by constant violence) experienced by the Jamaican people, and then begins narration of how a young man named Paul discovered the emptiness of promises of God and faith for himself.

Paul arrives home from an all night party, at which he saw a light skinned girl vomiting into the swimming pool and was entertained by a drag artist called Harry/Harriet. Groggy from too many drugs and too much alcohol, he discovers his parents, sister, housekeeper and dog all with their throats cut and their bodies mutilated. He tracks down the family's yard worker, Christopher, and asks his help in burying the bodies, saying that the police will be useless in such a circumstance. Narration then shifts its focus to Christopher, describing how he stopped by the house early that morning, talked with Mavis, and then went to see the master and mistress of the house (Master Charles and Miss Evelyn) who were "sleeping deeply - what his grandmother would have called the sleep of the righteous." At that point, narration again shifts focus, describing in considerable detail Christopher's early life with his grandmother.

The young Christopher and his grandmother live a hardscrabble existence in the Dungle, the "dung-heap jungle where people squirmed across mountains of garbage". Narration describes how at one point, the two of them go to a church service led by Brother Josephus, who tells Christopher that because he bears the name of the saint who bore Jesus on his back, he (Christopher) is blessed and gives him a picture of Christ. A short time later, when Christopher is eight, his grandmother dies ... but not before tearing a handkerchief in two, giving him half and keeping half for herself. This, she tells, him, will quiet her soul. After she dies, Christopher goes in search of Brother Josephus to say a prayer over her body, but Josephus has disappeared. The body is taken away, and Christopher never knows where. For two years, he remains in the Dungle, feeling betrayed by Jesus (see "Quotes," p. 41) and fearful of being haunted by his grandmother's soul, being saved from death by Master Charles, who first takes him to serve his sister and then into his own part-time employ.

After several years of spending his free time on loose women and drinking a great deal, Christopher experiences a vision of his grandmother, and believes he is being asked to

find her and put her to rest. After drinking heavily, he visits Master Charles in his home (in what narration now reveals is the Christmas season) to ask for his help in finding her. Charles, startled awake, ridicules Christopher's request, saying that after thirteen years the idea is foolish. Feeling fury surge within him (see "Quotes," p. 47) and fingering his half of the handkerchief, Christopher pulls out the machete he and other laborers always carry and slashes away the lives of Master Charles, Miss Evelyn, their daughter, their housekeeper, and their dog. He then goes outside to wait for the arrival of their son, Paul.

Narration then returns to the moment after Paul's discovery of his parents' bodies, describing how Christopher slices his head off and how, in the moment of murder, Christopher recalls a moment ten years before, when "a light-skinned boy" called him to go fishing in the moonlight. The implication is that the boy is Paul, and that Christopher is recalling a time in their lives when they were friends. The chapter concludes with Christopher returning to the Dungle, a repetition of the NO TELEPHONE TO HEAVEN image, and commentary suggesting that the only way to fight suffering is with more suffering.

Chapter 2 Analysis

The first point to note about this chapter is the detailing of the truck image, now given a sense of identity through the description of the words painted on its side. For further consideration of this important image, see "Topics for Discussion - Discuss the metaphoric significance and meaning."

This chapter also develops images and ideas related to the nature of God and Heaven - or more specifically, the Christian God, and heaven as defined by the Christian faith. There is the very clear sense here, and throughout the book, that from the author's perspective Christianity is a central component of the racism-defined veneer of civilization that has been imposed upon the Jamaican people. The faith has, again in the author's perspective, actively and profoundly betrayed the people who have entrusted their lives and souls to it. This idea is graphically reinforced by the author's choice to set the massacre of Paul and his family at Christmas. This suggests that Charles (who, in many ways, is a metaphoric representative of the Jamaican people) is, on some level, taking revenge on Christianity and the people (who, it must be remembered, are described as sleeping the sleep of the righteous) for having abandoned him to a life of suffering.

Thirdly, it's important to note how the narrative in this chapter frequently shifts focus, peeling away layers of experience and story like the layers of an onion to reveal the core thematic truths at the heart of the novel. The truck narrative peels away to reveal the Paul narrative, which in turn is peeled away to reveal the Christopher narrative, which in turn is an exploration of each of the book's three themes, exploring the issue of racism, the nature and function of motherhood, and the values (positive and negative) of home and place. See "Topics for Discussion - Discuss ways in which the events of Chapter 2."

Fourth, it's in this chapter that the narrative style begins to incorporate Jamaican language and patois (dialect), with the author writing with the clear, distinctive voice of a Jamaican speaker. This lends a real sense of truth and/or immediacy to the narrative, a sense of real connection to both the subject matter and the way it's communicated.

Finally, there are two important examples of foreshadowing in this chapter. First, there are the references in the narrative of the party to the pale skinned girl (who later turns out to be protagonist Clare) and to Harry/Harriet (who later becomes Clare's best friend). Also, Charles' actions can be seen as foreshadowing of Clare's apparent intentions towards the racism-defined film crew in Chapter 11. For further consideration of the metaphoric relationship between Charles' acts of murder and Clare's apparent intentions as hinted at in the book's final chapter, see "Topics for Discussion - What do you think are the symbolic parallels."

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary

"The Dissolution of Mrs. White" The chapter opens with a quote from a Yoruban hymn: "I have an assassin for a lover." The chapter proper tells the story of Kitty Savage, brought to a new life in America by her husband Boy, proud of himself for leaving Jamaica after the murders of Paul and his family. Narration of the family's drive to New York City (after arriving in Florida at the end of their initial sea voyage) includes Boy's recollection of seeing "Gone with the Wind" at a drive-in theater.

When they arrive in New York, the light-skinned Kitty, Boy, and their daughters Clare and Jennie are met first by Kitty's dark-skinned cousins, who tell them to pass as white if they can. Later, when the family has their own apartment, Kitty and Boy cut ties with them, Boy having insisted that it's important to affiliate with those they want to pass as (i.e. whites) as much as possible. Both Kitty and Boy find work at a laundry, where Boy does deliveries and Kitty works with two black women preparing packages of clean laundry for return to the company's clients.

One of Kitty's responsibilities is to include little pre-printed notes with the clean laundry, notes with a photo of a warm-looking elderly white woman (the so-called Mrs. White) and sayings about how to live a good life, all of which conclude with the suggestion that the customer continue using White's Laundry. Meanwhile, Kitty occasionally eases her homesickness by visiting the centuries-old gravestone of a former slave, and by traveling into a part of the city where she finds stores stocking Jamaican food (see "Quotes," p. 65). For a while, she takes home such food for her family but eventually leaves behind when Boy tells her that bringing such food home may keep them from successfully passing as white.

In the middle of the chapter, narration suddenly shifts into the further past, describing a night when the family still lived in Jamaica when Kitty was wakened by the howling of dogs and by the frightened arrival of her servant/friend Dorothy, who says that such howling usually means that someone has died. The next morning, Kitty learns that her beloved mother, Miss Mattie (see Chapter 1) has died, a circumstance that Boy takes as a sign that he and his family should leave. Meanwhile, as Kitty prepares her mother's body for burial, she reflects on the loss of her mother's life (see "Quotes," p. 72).

Back in the present in New York, Kitty has an uncomfortable interview for a new job with a white banker, who speaks to her dismissively once he finds out she's from Jamaica. After weeping at the slave's grave, she goes to work, where she impulsively writes an edgier note than "Mrs. White" usually would. Later that day, after her period starts unexpectedly and she goes into a shop for some tampons, Kitty meets a Hispanic woman who describes a statuette of a dark-skinned Virgin Mary as La Morenita. "It means," the woman tells her, "the little dark one. They say she was cut from the life. From ebony." As the days go by, Kitty becomes bolder with her notes, writing (for

example) that "white people can be black-hearted." When Boy finds notes in her purse and berates her for putting their life in America at risk, she calls him "slave." That night she has a dream in which she visits her mother's homestead and is beckoned into the now dark, mysterious, abandoned house by La Morenita.

The next day, when Kitty arrives at work she discovers that the two black women she worked with have been fired - the owner believes they were the ones sending home the anti-white notes. When Kitty tells him that it was her, he doesn't believe her. That night, she quits her job, tells Boy she's going home, and "in a week she took the younger girl, the one who favored her, back home, and told the elder one to look after herself and her father."

Chapter 3 Analysis

Again, there are several important elements to note about this chapter. First is the title, with its reference to having an assassin for a lover, an apparent commentary on how Kitty sees her life as a Jamaican, and as a black woman, "assassinated" by her husband/lover.

A related point, and perhaps the most important element of the chapter, is the layering of irony and metaphoric meaning associated with Kitty's notes. First, there is the name of the character from whom the notes are "sent," Mrs. White, a name in this context loaded with implications of racism and power. The image is ironically turned on itself when Kitty starts sending anti-white messages out - in other words, Mrs. White is speaking as though she's black. Then there is the fact that Kitty uses the distribution of clean laundry as the medium for her message, and here again there are multiple levels of meaning. The first is that she is pointing out "dirty" or "unclean" behavior (i.e., racism) in association with an experience of cleanliness (i.e. newly laundered clothes, etc.). There is also Kitty's advocacy for freedom and respect for the sort of people (i.e., blacks) that white society sees as "dirty," again using the medium of "cleanliness" to make her point. Finally, there is the painful irony that in fighting for the rights of blacks, Kitty has caused the black women with whom she works considerable hardship. In short, throughout the chapter there is the sense that Kitty is fighting a losing battle, an aspect of her experience that may relate to the second of the chapter's key points, the relationship between Kitty and the dead slave.

The narrative never makes it explicitly clear what Kitty gains from her visits to the slave's grave, although there is the sense that she receives some form of validation and/or support for her experience of being oppressed. It may be, in fact, that as her time in America lengthens, she feels as dead (at least on the inside) as the slave does. Meanwhile, this chapter develops another aspect of Kitty's (and the book's) thematically central struggle with racism. This is the encounter with the dark-skinned La Morenita statuette, and for further consideration of the metaphoric value of the statuette, see "Topics for Discussion - Discuss the ways in which the La Morenita statuette (Chapter 3)."

Yet another important element in this chapter is the reference to "Gone with the Wind," also referenced in the following chapter in relation to Clare. "Gone with the Wind" was a massively popular novel and film in the mid- to late-1930s. It depicted the American South before, during and after the Civil War, and included what many critics, white and black (but mostly black) saw as racist portrayals of black slaves and servants. The treatment of the black characters (as slaves and/or as comic relief and/or as mentally deficient) clearly shapes Boy's reaction to his race - that is, he sees the way the characters are treated and decides he is never going to be treated the same way. In the following chapter, the narrative reveals that Clare too has seen the film, with her perspectives also being defined by the experience. For consideration of that aspect of her journey of transformation, see "Chapter 4 - Analysis."

Finally, there are important developments here in the book's thematic explorations of mother/daughter relationships. These include the story of Kitty's burial of her mother and the (somewhat surprisingly) terse narrative of Kitty's decision to abandon Clare, the latter laying the groundwork for the exploration of Clare's character that begins in the following chapter.

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 Summary

This chapter is neither numbered nor starts with a quote. As the initial narrative (of the journey up the mountain made by the truck named NO TELEPHONE TO HEAVEN) resumes, narration reveals that one of the women in the back of the truck is Clare Savage, the daughter of Kitty and the grand-daughter of Miss Mattie. As she struggles to retain her balance as the truck swerves along the mountain road, she experiences several memories of the circumstances that brought her to this place.

To begin with, Clare is identified as the pale-skinned woman who Paul saw vomiting into the swimming pool during the party described in Chapter 2. At this point, narration reveals that Clare and Paul had sex in the change-house, that Clare left Paul alone almost immediately after he climaxed, and that he therefore considered her cold. Narration also describes how this encounter took place while Clare was on vacation from her graduate studies in London.

Narration then describes how Clare's memories go even further into her past. They include her confusion and loss after her mother departed, of the refusal she received when she attempted to adopt a child, of Kitty's letters home (which became less frequent and less emotional as the years passed), and of her memories of seeing "Gone with the Wind" before she left Jamaica (taken there by an unorthodox white American teacher). She recalls Boy attempting to pass her off as white when registering for school but being caught in the lie, her shock and grief at reading of the death of black schoolgirls after a bomb is thrown at a church by a white racist. That memory leads her to recall how her grief over the girls became entwined with her fascination with the death of John F. Kennedy, and how, as the result of her father discovering her confusion, angrily told her she was black.

Narration also describes how Kitty suddenly died of a brain hemorrhage, how her letters made Clare come to believe that she had a responsibility to transcend her life (see "Quotes," p. 103), and how Clare's darker-skinned sister Jennie (whom Kitty had taken with her back to Jamaica) came to live with her and Boy. As narration describes how Jennie recreated her mother's habit of shopping for familiar food in Jamaican stores, it also reveals that Clare asked her why Kitty didn't take her (Clare) with her back to Jamaica. Jennie tells her that Kitty realized that the lighter skinned Clare would fit better in America, and also reveals that Miss Mattie's home and land has been abandoned.

Finally, narration describes how Boy became involved with an Italian woman who encouraged the darker skinned Jennie to become more American, and how Clare left home as soon as she could to go to university in London. The chapter closes with a description of the truck NO TELEPHONE TO HEAVEN arriving at a remote settlement, where Clare leads the other soldiers in distributing provisions to the people there.

Chapter 4 Analysis

As the narrative moves into fuller focus on its central character (Clare), it develops the metaphoric parallels between her experience in life and her experience on the back of the truck. On one level, the parallel is fairly simple - in both her life and on the truck, she is on a journey towards her destiny, said destiny being made apparent in the book's final moments. There is the very clear sense, beginning here and developing throughout the remainder of the book (as Clare embraces her racial identity more and more closely) that that destiny is in fact tied in with her race in general, and with her being Jamaican in particular. In other words, in the book's thematic perspective on both black and Jamaican, BEING both can and will, at this point in the history of Jamaica and of the civil rights movement, result in death.

Meanwhile, in the chapter's final moments (as Clare helps the poor of the community) there is the simultaneous sense that she is fulfilling the destiny of the two generations of mothers (Miss Mattie, Kitty) that came before her, a manifestation of the book's thematic focus on the nature of motherhood. Finally, another layer of meaning is added to both the book and to Clare's journey, in that the phrase "NO TELEPHONE TO HEAVEN" seems to be suggesting that Clare, and by extension other black people, are alone in their experience, that they can expect no help and/or support from God/heaven.

There is also, in this chapter, a second reference to "Gone with the Wind", coming into play as a means of defining the different perspectives of blackness experienced and lived by Boy and Clare. While their reactions to the film are essentially similar (i.e. negative), Boy's were anchored in the belief that white people thought the portrayals were right. Clare, on the other hand, realizes just how wrong they were. Also unlike her father, who accepts the racist circumstances that gave rise to those portrayals, Clare eventually decides to take action to transform and/or combat those circumstances. It's important to note, however, that she does so only after several of experience of the world and race beyond that which her father taught her.

Finally, there is the death of the black schoolgirls, which can be seen as a metaphoric representation of the death of blackness Clare is being taught to embrace by her father, a death she eventually refuses to accept. The resurrection of her blackness can be seen as Clare's subconscious, guilty attempt to resurrect the lives and spirits of the black girls.

Chapter 5

Chapter 5 Summary

"Et in Arcadia Ego" The chapter begins with a quote from a poem by Elizabeth Barrett Browning, in which a child cries out to heaven to be freed from her "dreadful" mother.

Narration describes Clare's experience in London - her small, one room apartment, how she spent her days visiting museums and art galleries, how she communicated with her father and sister back in America less and less, and how her solitude eventually became oppressive. A taxi pulling up outside her apartment building leads her to a fantasy of being visited by a woman she encountered on the subway, which in turn leads her to realize that it's time to make herself less alone. Narration describes her study of classics and literature, commenting at the same time that "people admired her mind and implied her good fortune in escaping the brain damage common" to people of her ancestry. Meanwhile, her studies lead her to an unexpected emotional experience (see "Quotes," p. 118).

At one point during her stay in London, Clare returns to Jamaica for a visit, where she dutifully visits her maternal aunt and uncle who both compliment her on taking after her mother (in terms of intelligence and industriousness). During that visit, narration points out that it was at this point in her life that she attended the party where she encountered Paul (see Chapters 2 and 4). Narration also describes how, in the midst of the shock surrounding the murders of Paul and his family, Clare witnesses the visit of a group of children from a local orphanage, children (she is told by her aunt) that are the fair skinned, sometimes even blond castoffs of interracial affairs between wealthy whites and their black servants.

Shortly afterward, Clare goes out to dinner with her friend Harry/Harriet (see Chapter 2). During their long conversation, H/H asks whether Clare has ever been tempted to have a lesbian affair, tells her of his childhood experience of being raped by a white man (see "Quotes," p. 130), and how he narrowly escaped being exiled into the Dungle (he was, instead, taken into the home of his white father). Later in Clare's visit, they go to a beautiful beach, picnic, and make love. H/H tells Clare that soon she will have to make a choice about where to live the rest of her life, reminding her of two things - that the island needs its children and, through a metaphorical reference to the dangerous spikiness of sugar cane, that the island is also dangerous. This leads Clare back to the present, "on the truck now, standing silently across from her friend," in which she recalls harvesting oysters with him and asks herself whether she would "remember her answer to [his] talk of the canefields".

Narration returns to the past, and Clare's memories of a brief relationship with a fellow academic named Liz. On a trip with Liz to visit her alma mater, Clare discovers a series of memorials to Pocahontas (see "Characters"), realizes how out of place she feels (see "Quotes," p. 136) and returns home early. Encounters with marching white supremacists

and with racist colleagues lead Clare to discover that Liz is, in her own way, just as racist. Shortly after, a letter arrives from Harry/Harriet, urging her to make a decision about coming home.

Chapter 5 Analysis

There are several important elements in this chapter. The first is the quote from Elizabeth Barrett Browning, which in the context of the book should probably not be taken literally. There is the sense that the "horrible mother" referred to by the quote is not Clare's biological mother (although it could be argued that by abandoning her daughter, Kitty did behave horribly). No, the "horrible mother" is racism, the existence of which "gave birth" to Clare's lack of identity and self-definition.

Another important point is the way the narrative layers its portrayals of time in the same way as it layers Clare's experiences, present experiences triggering recollections of the past that in turn add meaning to the present. Then there are the developments of the book's mother/daughter theme, manifest in several ways. Harry/Harriet, perhaps incongruously, is a key example here, in that in spite of his/her physical maleness, he/she is in fact portrayed as having a more feminine, maternal side to her than Clare's birth mother, Kitty.

Liz is also a maternal figure, manifesting a mentor-like interest in introducing Clare to a broader experience of life which, in fact, is an education in ways other than what she (Liz) seems to intend. In other words, she shows Clare a different face of racism, a face disguised by compassion. This, in turn, is another manifestation of the book's thematic focus on racism, a core component of H/H's challenge to Clare. Is she, H/H asks (and by extension, so does the novel) going to keep living her life underneath the spell and control of racism, or is she going to come out from under its control, define her life on her own terms, and embrace her race?

What's particularly interesting about this last aspect of the chapter is the way the narrative suggests that this is, in fact, what she's done. The over-arching narrative line of Clare's ride on the truck clearly indicates, stage by stage and moment by moment and image by image, that she is moving towards a truer, more open recognition of who she is. Specifically, the truck narrative has portrayed her as embodying and/or recreating the generosity of spirit in her family's line / life, as being a soldier, and as being in the company of Harry/Harriet. In other words, all indications are that she has done as he asks, but intriguingly, the narrative hasn't yet fully answered the question of how she GOT there. That is still to come.

Chapters 6 and 7

Chapters 6 and 7 Summary

There are no quotes at the beginning of either of these chapters.

"Organ Harvester" "Standing in the truck," narration begins, "should Clare think of Bobby ... she might conjure him as she had conjured him before." Narration goes on to describe how, after their initial meeting in a bar, Clare left her school and traveled with Bobby (eventually revealed to be an American deserter from the Vietnam War) across Europe, partly in search of a cure for the permanently open wound in his leg and partly in search of escape from their lives. Narration describes Bobby's frequent nightmares, his stays in hospital, and his forging of his discharge papers.

In dialogue, Bobby asks Clare to stop asking about the war and urges her to just be agreeable. Reminded of her father's frequent admonitions to not "ask about things which don't concern [her]," Clare reassures Bobby that she can indeed be agreeable (see "Quotes," p. 152). They discuss Clare's reluctance to return home to be with her family, with Bobby telling her there will have to come a time that she separates herself from all her family and claims her own life. Tender lovemaking results, a few months later, in Clare becoming pregnant and in Bobby urging her to abort the baby, revealing as he does so that the reason his wound won't close is because he has been infected with a nerve toxin used in Vietnam that has damaged his sperm. Narration describes how Clare is saved having to make the choice when she miscarries - in bed, staining the sheets and spilling her blood over Bobby as he sleeps. This incident triggers waking nightmares and hallucinations in Bobby who eventually is calmed down, a bit, by Clare. When she says she's going out to get some food, he doubts that she will return, but she convinces him. While out, she discovers that a letter has come for her from Harry/Harriet, written on "a day of national mourning." In it, s/he describes the massacre of a group of old women gathered to commemorate the murders of another group of old women, and urges Clare to make changes in her life the way he has. "We got to do something," he writes, "besides pray for the souls of our old women."

The short chapter "Magnanimous Warrior" is, in fact, a lengthy prose poem, rich with imagery portraying an archetypal, powerful woman, a farmer and a fighter. "She can cure. She can kill ... mother who goes forth emitting flames from her eyes. Nose. Mouth. Ears. Vulva. Anus ... rambling mother." The final part of the chapter cries out that this woman has been forgotten and abandoned, ending with a cry for the reader to "remember how to love her".

Chapters 6 and 7 Analysis

The first point to note about this section is the title of Chapter 6, "Organ Harvester," a nickname given to Bobby and other soldiers like him as the result of their experiences

fighting in the Vietnam War (see "Objects/Places"). The nickname possibly refers to the seemingly random amount of killing he and other soldiers did. A related point is the discussion of Bobby's never-healing wound. The toxin that causes the wound is never specifically named but can be identified as Agent Orange, a defoliant used to rid the jungles of the combat zone of the potential camouflage provided by leaves and grasses. Large numbers of American soldiers who survived Vietnam have, in the years since the war, reported significant side effects (including the sort experienced by Bobby here) resulting from their exposure to Agent Orange. Meanwhile, Bobby's wound can be seen in a metaphorical context. For further consideration of this aspect of the book, see "Topics for Discussion - In what ways is Bobby's open wound."

Meanwhile, several important elements of this section focus on the novel's thematic consideration of mother/daughter relationships. These include Clare's "mothering" of the wounded Bobby, her becoming pregnant and her subsequent miscarriage (another manifestation of the book's thematic suggestion that, at this point in her life, the psychologically wounded Clare is unfit and/or unprepared to be a mother) and the letter from Harry/Harriet (here again a serving as a mentoring mother figure). Perhaps most importantly in the explorations of this theme not only in this section but in the bock as a whole is the chapter "Magnanimous Warrior," an intensely written exploration and/or celebration of the power of female, maternal energy and function. The images here are, in many ways, a detailed exploration of various manifestations of the mother "archetype," a term used to describe an all-encompassing universal experience. The images listed in "Magnanimous Warrior" (and there are many more than are quoted here) are all aspects of the archetype, with most manifesting in one form or another throughout the book.

Chapters 8 and 9

Chapters 8 and 9 Summary

"Homebound" Narration describes how Clare searched for Bobby all over Paris (he apparently moved out while she was shopping and reading the letter from Harry/Harriet), but eventually gave up and booked herself passage on a sea voyage back to Jamaica. On the trip, she becomes violently ill, arriving in hospital to be diagnosed with a severe infection in her uterus and to find that Harry/Harriet is now just Harriet - she castrated herself and is now living as a woman.

After a brief interlude describing Clare's hospital-room encounter with a black moth (see "Quotes," p. 170), and another describing how Harriet has finally found her calling as a nurse (see "Quotes," p. 171), narration then describes Clare and Harriet's visit to Miss Mattie's homestead, now deeded to Clare following the departure of her aunt and uncle for Florida. After exploring the abandoned house and land, Clare and Harriet settle by a river where Clare describes her childhood - specifically, how her mother knew and understood practically every inch of the land and water on the property. "I was blessed to have her here," Clare thinks. "Her passion of place. Her sense of the people. Here is her; leave it at that." Finally, she recalls for herself of the "burial place of slaves," also on the property. "Unquiet ground" where "children feared the anger of the spirits, who did not rest, who had not been sung to their new home."

"De Watchman" begins with a quote from a folk hymn that describes a god who kills a family. "Even with water present in the house," the hymn says, "he washes himself with blood." The chapter proper briefly and poetically describes what happened to Christopher in the years after his murders of Paul and his family - how he (Christopher) was never caught or prosecuted, how the story slowly disappeared from the newspapers, and how he took to wandering. He "spent his days and nights getting old on the street, retreating ... to the shanties, shacks, back-o-wall parts of town he knew, gray boards cotched against each other. His teeth went. Old women offered him tins of watery coffee. He stared at their generosity ... he was the watchman of downtown. As such he became known." The chapter concludes with a description of how, on the night the old women burned (see the end of Chapter 6), he walked up and down in front of the fire howling in grief.

Chapters 8 and 9 Analysis

An interesting element here is the juxtaposition of traditional, archetypal male and female energies. In "Magnanimous Warrior" (see Chapter 7), the book explores the female archetype, while the novel as a whole can be seen as an exploration of a woman's search for the archetype within herself. That search continues in "Homebound," with Clare coming closer to an end to that search through connecting more thoroughly with the mothers in her past, Miss Mattie, Kitty, and perhaps even

mother earth. On the other hand, in its narrative of Christopher's life, "De Watchman" continues an exploration of what can be seen as an archetypal male experience - that of purposeless violence as committed by the character in Chapter 2. "De Watchman," in portraying the deterioration of an individual's spiritual and physical existence resulting from such violence is, in the context of the book as a whole, portraying his experience as archetypal, suggesting on some level that for (most? all?) men who conduct an act of violence, the result is a kind of insanity, a dissociation from reality. The portrayal of Christopher as "howling in grief" can, also in the context of the book as a whole, be seen as a cry from the soul, an archetypal grieving of the male for the violence he has done to the female. In this context, the meaning of the chapter's title becomes vividly clear.

A final component of this male/female juxtaposition is the narrative of what happens to Harry/Harriet. When he cuts off his testicles in a determined effort to become even more of a she, there is the sense that the novel is suggesting that male energy, male violence, must itself be cut off and/or amputated in order to allow the female, the nurturing, the self-determining, the "magnanimous warrior" to emerge. Harriet, after the surgery, is nothing if not magnanimous, and in her own way she is certainly a warrior, a lesson that she both consciously and unconsciously passes on to Clare.

Chapters 10 and 11

Chapters 10 and 11 Summary

"The Great Beast" begins with a Jamaican proverb that states "No one black dies a natural death." The first part of the chapter picks up where Chapter 8 left off - with Clare and Harriet leaving the riverbank and walking into the nearby town. As they walk, Clare speaks of the various people she remembers, colorful characters with colorful lives. When they reach a shop where Clare wants to purchase a fondly remembered treat, she finds that the saleswoman she remembers from when she was a girl, Miss Cherry, still works there. Their conversation is edgy and almost confrontational, with Miss Cherry speaking disdainfully of the mess country has become. Narration then shifts focus to Harriet who visits her people, is invited to eat dinner, and only afterward realizes that she has eaten a stew made from an iguana, which she later learns (from the news) was stolen from a nearby zoo. When she finds Clare at home, she (Harriet) tells her it's time to make a change.

The second part of the chapter is written in dialogue form. Clare speaks with an interviewer who, narration suggests, is the leader of a group of revolutionaries, determined to make things better in Jamaica for the children. Clare answers all the interviewer's questions (about where she's been, what she's done, what she's learned, what she believes, whether she thinks she could kill, under what circumstances), listening as the interviewer lists all the troubles in the country that must be fought. She offers the use of her family's land, and when the interviewer tells her that she could be prosecuted, she replies that "her mother told her to help her people". The interviewer tells Clare to think carefully and deeply about other revolutionaries "who are gone", and then departs. "The two women," narration then comments, "shook hands."

"Film Noir" begins with a lengthy quote from black poet Derek Walcott, in which the faces of white people in a photograph darken as the photograph ages.

Underneath her grandmother's house, Clare discovers remnants of her mother's childhood - toys, schoolbooks - and kills a scorpion with one of the texts. She collects some of the things into a canvas bag and goes out to join Harriet, who is calling for her.

Narration then includes a newspaper ad (ostensibly from the New York Times, advertising Jamaica as a good location for a film) and then follows a discussion between an American and an Englishman, members of a film production team working on a movie. As they complain about the poor quality of their drinks and compare experiences on other movie shoots, conversation reveals that they are there to meet the Watchman (whom the reader knows to be Christopher). When the Watchman finally arrives, the filmmakers hire him to play a part in the film which is soon revealed to be that of the forest god Sasabonsam.

The truck (NO TELEPHONE TO HEAVEN) arrives at the location for the film shoot. Clare and Harriet take their positions, "hidden by dark and green, separate, silent," and watch as preparations are made to shoot a scene, which includes the Watchman climbing into a tree and howling like a monster. Suddenly the lights go out. Clare and the others are "confused. This was not meant to happen; it had not been in the plan." The howls of "Sasabonsam" continue, the actors and technicians flee ("as they had been warned" to do, in this country of pervasive and sudden violence), and dodging the sweeps of light from suddenly arriving helicopters, some of Clare's allies wonder to themselves who had betrayed them. There is sudden gunfire from the helicopters. Some of the revolutionaries return fire, but all are ultimately shot ... Clare among them. "She remembered language," narration writes. "Then ... it was gone."

After a transcription of some of the sounds Clare recalls in her final moments, the novel concludes with the phrase "Day broke."

Chapters 10 and 11 Analysis

There are several very important elements to this section of the book. The first is the quote at the beginning of Chapter 10, which functions on two levels ... as a summing up of the book's overall thematic perspective on racism, and as a foreshadowing of Clare's death at the end of Chapter 11. A related element is the quote at the beginning of that chapter, which poetically reinforces the idea that Clare, over the course of her journey of transformation, has become "blacker," a situation that, when considered in juxtaposition with the quote from Chapter 10, seems to be a/the key factor in her death. This is profoundly ironic, in that her search for self and identity has ultimately been futile, although it could be argued that in the moment of her death, in spite of its essentially being ignominious and humiliating, she has become ennobled. Either way, however, the events of the book's conclusion suggests that the essential, existential futility at the core of Clare's struggle for individual and racial identity is, by metaphoric implication, shared by anyone and everyone whose lives are essentially defined by discrimination. There is, however, a glimmer of hope implied by the book's final lines. "Day broke" suggests the arrival of light, traditionally associated with hope and with positive energy, an image that suggests that on some level and in spite of her violent death, Clare has finally transcended the torturous life her race had imprisoned her in.

Meanwhile, there are the titles of the two chapters. "The Great Beast" functions on several levels, including as a metaphoric representation of "the great beast" of racism (which Clare and Harriet are about to encounter) and a reference to the iguana eaten by Harriet and her family (a symbolic representation of how society has consumed "the beast" of nature for its own purposes). "Film Noir," meanwhile (which includes the French word for the color black, "noir"), is a term to describe a certain kind of American film focusing on dark, shadowy characters, murders, and lust. This title functions on several levels. The film being shot is about blacks, but is portrayed as being grounded in the "dark" side of the experience of being black (i.e., racism). Then, in the tradition of film noir, events of the chapter (including those of the producers, of Clare and her team, and of those who slaughter them) are anchored in betrayal and destruction, both

physical and spiritual. Finally, a traditional component of film noir was the involvement of a seductive, amoral female. It may very well be that part of the author's intention in giving the chapter this title is to add a layer of metaphorical meaning to the idea/image of the "Magnanimous Warrior." Specifically, this is the possibility that her actions and attitudes can lead to her own self-destruction.

Then there is the character of Christopher, now referred to as The Watchman. As previously discussed (see Chapter 8 and 9, Analysis), the character seems to be intended, at least on some level, as a metaphoric counterpoint to Clare's embodiment of the female experience. This intention, first manifest in his acts of murder in Chapter 2, continues here, albeit without conscious action from the character. In other words, Christopher/The Watchman seems to attract, trigger violence, a metaphoric suggestion that the influence of inherently violent male energy is inescapable.

Finally, two essential components of this section are considered further in "Topics for Discussion." First is the metaphoric relationship between Charles' acts of murder and Clare's apparent intentions as hinted at in the book's final chapter (see "Topics for Discussion - What do you think are the symbolic parallels"). Second is the further exploration of the book's thematic focus on the mother/daughter relationship. For further consideration of this, see "Topics for Discussion - Discuss the various mother/daughter relationships."

Characters

Clare Savage

There are arguably two central characters in the book, Clare and Christopher (The Watchman). While Clare receives far more narrative attention and "page time," for lack of a better phrase, ultimately the two characters can be seen as discussed throughout the Analysis, they can be seen as embodying opposing archetypal spiritual / emotional / experiential principles, with Clare personifying the female (maternal, nurturing, powerful) and Christopher personifying the male (independent, destructive, also powerful). These embodiments seem thematically essential and inevitably entwined, with both characters encountering and/or living out their true selves within a context of racism, responding to the spiritual corruption it engenders with very different actions.

The main point to note about Clare is her journey of transformation. She starts out a naïve girl governed by her father but with a curiosity about herself and about her race that remains stifled for a good part of her life as she victimizes herself and moves through avoidance of her racial truth. Eventually, however, she undertakes a profound internal and external search for both power and identity, eventually emerging as a mature, socially passionate and conscious woman whose answers to her childhood curiosity lead her to a form of enlightenment. In other words, Clare discovers her female and racial identity over the course of the narrative, empowering herself as a "Magnanimous Warrior." There is also the metaphorical sense throughout the narrative that she is returning to her natural state, discovering and affirming her innate, long suppressed but now surging identity. For consideration of how her name is a reflection of this aspect of her character and story, see "Topics for Discussion - Discuss the metaphoric implications."

Finally, it's important to note that while she and Christopher end up dead, only Clare's final moments are described in terms (albeit metaphoric) that suggest a transcendence of circumstance ... the final lines of the novel refer to day breaking. The implication here is that she has finally escaped the racist, sexist traps for her set by the world in which she lives and dies.

Christopher (The Watchman)

As discussed above, Christopher is in some ways a parallel protagonist to Clare, his presence and story illuminating Clare's primarily through contrast. Specifically, while Clare takes considerable time to open herself to, understand and accept her racial and gender identity, Christopher seems born to his, coming across right from his first appearance and through the flashback narrative of his childhood as having a profound, if unconscious, experience of the male drive towards both survival and dominance. He aggressively stakes his claim for independence and identity from youth, eventually becoming lost in the psychotic, dissociative repercussions of his violent (male?)

tendencies. This, the book contends in theme and narrative, is the result of racism. In other words, he is born male and black, but the book's thematic and narrative contention is that because of racism, both aspects of his personality are corrupted, leading to his eventual separation from reality (that is, to his becoming The Watchman) and his death. He is born, lives, and dies trapped within the madness of violence and loss of identity that racism, from the book's perspective, inevitably and painfully triggers.

Harry/Harriet

This character functions on a number of very important levels. Perhaps most straightforwardly, s/he is Clare's friend and confidante, mentor and inspiration. On another level, s/he is a metaphoric embodiment of the male/female energies embodied by Clare on the one hand and by Christopher on the other, a symbolic suggestion by the author that it is possible for those two energies to reconcile themselves, to come to a place of harmony and co-existence. It's important to note, however, that for the author such harmony can come into being only as the result of the amputation of at least a degree of maleness. In the same way as Harry amputates his testicles, the author seems to be suggesting that maleness needs to amputate its tendency towards violence in order to achieve unity with the female (in the same way as Harriet, once Harry's testicles are gone, is free to embrace her female nurturing side). It's important to note that Harry does not amputate his PENIS, making him not entirely female but something between, something both, something more balanced. In other words, the character of Harry/Harriet suggests that the female needs something of the male (power? assertiveness?), while the male needs something of the female (compassion? grace?).

It's interesting to note, meanwhile, that the discrimination Harry/Harriet faces is not racial in origin. S/he is confronted far more often, and far more painfully, by sexual/gender discrimination. There is, therefore, the resulting sense that on some level, the author's thematic emphasis on the traumas triggered by racism extends also to orientational discrimination. In any case, Harry/Harriet is a powerful symbol and/or representation of hope and/or transcendence.

Kitty, Boy and Jennie Savage

Kitty is Clare's mother, Boy her father, and Jennie her sister. Kitty and Boy are both lighter skinned, while Jennie is darker. Despite their similar pigmentation, however, Kitty and Boy have very different racial perspectives. The further away she is from her black homeland and fellow black people, the blacker Kitty feels she is and wants to be. Boy, on the other hand, sees blackness as a handicap, and strives for both himself and his family to be as white as possible (it's interesting to note that "boy" has, over the centuries, been a derogatory term, with racist overtones, used to refer to black males). Jennie, a peripheral character at most, absorbs her mother's teachings, while Clare at first absorbs her father's and lives according to them, but eventually comes to realize she believes more along the lines of what her mother believes. Here, the book's thematic focus on racism entwines with its thematic exploration of the mother/daughter

relationship. There is also an interesting irony here, in that while the black-oriented Kitty emotionally abandons her white-oriented daughter, that daughter grows up to be a proud black woman, a warrior against the systemic racism that she believes has destroyed the lives and spirits of ALL her family, both her biological family and her extended racial family.

Miss Mattie

Miss Mattie is Kitty's mother and Clare's grandmother. Although she never actually appears in the book and is referred to only by others or in narration, she is nevertheless an influential presence, her generosity and community spirit proving to be profound, important motivators in Clare's journey of transformation towards self-acceptance and empowerment.

Master Charles, Miss Evelyn, Paul

These three characters are murdered by Charles in Chapter 2, the victims of both his experience of racism and his subconscious, archetypal male tendency towards violence. They are also portrayed as the objects of his desire to take revenge on Christianity for having oppressed/suppressed him throughout his life.

Brother Josephus

The Roman Catholic Brother Josephus is, on some level, a positive counterpoint to the negative portrayal of Christianity throughout the book and specifically embodied in the characters of Charles, Evelyn and Paul. His compassion for Christopher, albeit misguided and somewhat unusually expressed, is nevertheless an important component in developing his (Christopher's) sense of self-preservation and identity. It must be noted, however, that Josephus' compassion, and Christopher's reaction to it, ultimately become corrupted by what the novel portrays as Christopher's inevitable, inherent male-oriented tendency to violence.

Pocahontas

In Chapter 5, Clare encounters a statue of Pocahontas, the mythologized Indian heroine who suppressed her native, true identity and eventually died of a disease never encountered by her race. There is the sense here that Clare is in a similar situation, in the process of being corrupted and eventually losing her life to the disease of racism.

Bobby

Bobby is Clare's lover, an American soldier wounded in the Vietnam War who deserted the army. He suffers from a wound in his leg that never fully heals, the result of his being

infected by Agent Orange, a toxic chemical used by the American forces in combat. In the metaphoric language of the novel, he and his wound represent the open, ongoing wounds suffered by Clare, and by implication all black people, as the result of racism. His relationship with Clare, to take the metaphor further, is an externalization of Clare's inner encounters with what a life defined by racism has caused her to be.

Liz

Liz is an older white academic whom Clare encounters during her studies in England. Her initially maternal compassion for Clare turns out to be a mask for even more racist attitudes of the sort Clare has become accustomed to. The encounter with Liz, however, turns out to be an important turning point in Clare's transformation, in that she realizes she can no longer let herself passively accept the racism-defined life into which she has moved herself.

The Interviewer

This character, never identified by name and not identified by gender until late in the scene in which she appears, interviews Clare to determine whether she would be a good candidate to participate in revolutionary activities in Jamaica. The interviewer's questions cause Clare to examine and define herself in ways she had not previously done, with the result that she comes to an important turning point in her journey of transformation. She realizes, accepts, and acknowledges herself as both black and a woman, capable of self-responsibility, self-determination, and self-respect, all of which she realizes can, and should, be put to good use in the support/service of others like her.

Objects/Places

Jamaica

The tropical island of Jamaica is one of the book's primary settings. Much of the action takes place here, in an atmosphere of oppressive heat that manifests both climatically and emotionally—that is, the heat of social and political unrest. In other words, it provides both a physical and psychological context for the book's plot and themes.

America

America is the second of the book's primary settings, a symbol of hope for many of the characters but for at least two (Clare and her mother Kitty), a manifestation of racial oppression that they struggle their entire lives to escape.

England

The third of the book's primary settings, England is the country to which Clare flees in the hope of escaping the racism she finds in America, the corrosive control of her father, the desperation in her home country of Jamaica, and the sense of emptiness she feels in her own soul.

Europe

After leaving England, Clare travels through Europe with American army deserter Bobby, a physical journey that parallels her spiritual / emotional journey into the truth of herself ... who she is, what she wants, and what she believes.

The Truck

The narrative of the book is anchored by a journey of a second hand truck with the phrase "NO TELEPHONE TO HEAVEN" written in faded letters on its side. For consideration of the symbolic value of in both the truck and the phrase, see "Topics for Discussion - Discuss the metaphoric significance and meaning of ..."

The Dungle

This is the nickname given to the slummy part of Kingston, Jamaica's capital city, home to the young Christopher and a part of town avoided by Clare and other characters. The word is an apparent hybrid of "dung-heap" and "jungle," with narration making it clear

that life there is about as unpleasant and oppressive as the two root words might suggest.

The Torn Handkerchief

As Christopher's grandmother lies dying, she tears her handkerchief in two and gives him half, in a gesture apparently intended to help him remember where he came from and what life in the Dungle, and by extension life in Jamaica (as defined by racial oppression) has done to both of them. Later, as he's about to kill Master Charles and Miss Evelyn, Charles clutches his half of the handkerchief, suggesting that on some level, his act of murder is an act of revenge for what people like them have done to people like him.

Gone with the Wind

"Gone with the Wind" was a phenomenally successful novel and film about the Civil War, with both book and film appearing in the late-1930s. Both works, but especially the film, were condemned by critics and black readers/audiences for their racist attitudes towards the black characters. On separate occasions in each character's formative years, Boy and Clare see the film version, a circumstance that shapes their perceptions of how black people are treated negatively even in the beacon-of-hope America.

Kitty's Notes

As Kitty becomes more and more aware of her racism-defined relationship with the white-oriented world of New York City, she takes action in the only way she can: by slipping subversive, anti-racism notes in with the clean laundry she packages for return to clients.

Bobby's Leg Wound

Bobby, the soldier with whom Clare travels through Europe, has a wound in his leg that, in spite of Clare's varied, almost insistent efforts at treating, remains unhealed and un-healable. For consideration of the wound's potential and/or apparent metaphorical value, see Chapter 6.

The Vietnam War

In the 1960s and early-1970s, America became politically and militarily involved in a war between North and South Vietnam. Said involvement was highly controversial both in America and around the world, with tension arising from both the nation's commitment and the effect that commitment had on individual soldiers continuing through the decades to the present day. Bobby's experiences, both as a deserter and as a collateral

victim of the unnamed toxin likely identifiable as Agent Orange, are grounded in similar experiences of veterans of the war's veterans.

The Film Shoot in the Mountains

In the book's final chapter, an outside film company comes to Jamaica to shoot a film, taking economic and social advantage of the people and circumstances there. For further consideration of the shoot's metaphorical relationship to the story and its themes, see "Topics for Discussion - What do you think are the symbolic parallels."

Themes

Racism

Both the action of the narrative (the plot) and the journey of transformation of its central characters (Clare and Charles) are defined and motivated by experiences of racism - specifically, the negative attitudes of whites towards blacks, and the resulting internalization of those attitudes by blacks towards themselves. There is the sense throughout the book that the author is portraying Jamaica, with all its economic and social troubles, as having gotten to that place as a result of systematic and lasting exploitation by whites. Then, when Boy Savage emigrates with his family from Jamaica to America, it is with the hope that the so-called American Dream of freedom and equality for all will extend to his race. He and the rest of his family, however, soon discover the futility of that hope, realizing that racism is both more apparent and more overt in America.

They respond in different ways, with the lighter skinned Boy attempting to "pass" as white and encouraging his similarly pigmented daughter Clare to do the same, while the darker skinned Kitty becomes more and more resentful of the circumstances under which she is being forced to live and eventually gets out. Eventually Clare comes to realize the validity of her mother's perspective, experiences her own steadily increasing anger and resentment and finally, in her apparent decision to join the revolutionaries, decides to take the kind of action that her mother did in writing her notes in the laundry. In other words, both women choose to combat the racism they personally experience in their own way.

Part of the reason the experience of racism is so unpleasant for the characters is related to one of the book's secondary themes, the value of home and the effect of place on an individual's life.

Home and Place

Several times throughout the novel, but most dramatically in her interview with the revolutionaries in Chapter 10, it is suggested to Clare that she has a particular sensitivity to "place", that she is restlessly seeking a physical situation, a home, where she can feel safe and that she belongs. This aspect of her life and experience, the narrative suggests, is a characteristic inherited from her parents who both, albeit in different ways and for different reasons, also seek such a "place." All three of them, the narrative also suggests, are in their search seeking a situation in which they can feel safe from the influences and dangers of racism. The implication here, as is generally the case when characters experience changes in, and/or a search for, their sense of "place," is not so much that they're looking for an external experience, but that they are in fact searching for an internal experience of feeling right, and safe. They are looking

for a feeling of home, of feeling secure in themselves as opposed to in a country, a town, or a house.

This idea of safety and home is explored and exploded several times, from Charles' murderous home invasion in Chapter 20 to Boy's move to America with his family to Kitty's return to Jamaica with her daughter to Clare's moves to London and Jamaica to her travels through Europe with Bobby. All along, the novel suggests that the search for a physical home is an externalization of an internal search for self, and for both meaning and security in that self. The book's ending, therefore, is profoundly ironic to the point of being tragic, in that when Clare finally finds what seems to be the sense of home she's always sought, she's destroyed.

Motherhood

The archetypal, multi-faceted relationship between mother and child, or perhaps more appropriately mother-FIGURE and child, is explored several times throughout the book. First, there is the relationship between Charles and his grandmother, a maternal presence in his life that physically vanishes from his life when he is young and impressionable, but remains in the form of the torn handkerchief. His slaughter of the white-friendly family is an act of revenge for how this mother-figure was treated by what Christopher perceives as the white-dominated world, an action that has its echoes in Clare's eventual decision to join the revolutionaries (see "Topics for Discussion - What do you think are the symbolic parallels). Then there is Kitty, her complex relationship with her own mother (Miss Mattie) and her neglectful mothering of the lighter-skinned, more assimilated Clare and the darker skinned, more outsider-ish Jennie, with both mothering choices essentially being portrayed in the novel as being mistakes.

There are also Clare's experiences of motherhood - her attempt to adopt a child, the miscarriage of the baby she conceives with Bobby. In their failure, both can be seen as metaphoric attempts to "give birth" to a sense of self, of true racial identity, since they take place before Clare, responding to the influence of Harry/Harriet, is able to (develop? give birth to?) her personal sense of race, and of pride in her race. Harry/Harriet can also be seen as a mother figure, especially after "Harry" castrates himself and becomes "Harriet", her recognized nurturing side being something of an archetypal characteristic of motherhood. There is also the possibility that the female revolutionary interviewing Clare in Chapter 10 is a kind of mother figure, guiding her and inspiring her to take new action on her new insights into herself and her rice.

Finally, for consideration of the metaphoric value of other mother symbols / representations in the book, see "Topics for Discussion - Discuss the ways in which the La Morenita statuette."

Style

Point of View

Overall, the novel is narrated from the third person, past tense point of view, but one of the more intriguing and engaging aspects of the novel is how it shifts its perspective from one character to another. To begin with, there the an anchoring through line, focusing on the experience and perspective of a woman traveling in the back of a ramshackle truck. At first, this woman is only identified as the granddaughter of a now-dead landowner, but is later named as Clare Savage, the character whose perspective and experience defines the narrative's point of view throughout much of its second half. That said, there are substantial portions of the story narrated from the perspective of other characters - the murders in Chapter 2, the background to those murders in Chapter 3, the experiences of Clare's family in Chapter 4. These shifting points of view simultaneously add variety to the book's narrative and ground the experiences of its central characters in a similarity of experience, that of racism. In other words, the book's shifting points of view create a sense of universality, of the pervasiveness and broad impact of racism, and of the range of human suffering that it triggers.

On another level, the writing of the book comes across as being undertaken from an authorial perspective defined by a sense of poetry. Language, as discussed below, is often utilized to define image as much as to define action, an authorial point of view that gives the reader the sense that a priority for the author was creating a visceral and thought-provoking experience for the reader, an experience that echoes the visceral, instinctive nature of Clare's journey of transformation.

Setting

The narrative takes place in several settings - various parts of Jamaica (including Kingston, the capital city, and its slums), America (specifically New York City), and England being the primary ones. Each has metaphoric meanings for the characters, with different characters often reacting in different ways to the same setting. Jamaica, for example, is viewed by Boy as a place to escape from, by Kitty as a place to escape to, by Clare and Harry/Harriet as a place to save, by Charles as a place to survive, and by whites as a place to exploit. By contrast, America is seen by Boy as a place of new beginnings and of hope, by Kitty as a place of oppression, and by Clare as a place of corruption and despair. In other words, setting plays an important role throughout the book in defining and motivating the experiences and actions of its characters. This is particularly true for Clare (see "Themes - Home and Place"). Meanwhile, it's important to note the novel's setting in time - the 1960s and '70s which, for both America and Jamaica (the book's primary settings of place), were decades of great upheaval and social unrest. It's important to note that a key component of that upheaval and unrest, a component that is referred to glancingly a couple of times throughout the book, was the American Civil Rights movement, in which blacks took various forms of action to change

the racism-defined circumstances in which they were living. With that in mind, it's possible to consider Clare's transformation, and perhaps even the book itself, as a metaphoric representation of the movement's struggle, of the goals and frustrations of the particular time in which the narrative is set.

Language and Meaning

Language is one of the most interesting aspects of the book for two main reasons. First, as discussed in "Point of View" above, there is a very strong poetic sensibility in the writing, an intensity of image that moves the reader into unexpected interpretations and understandings of events, situations, and character. This is most vividly evident in Chapter 7, "Magnanimous Warrior" which is, in many ways, a prose poem, an almost stream of consciousness succession of intense imagery that explores the seemingly almost limitless aspects of (Jamaican? archetypal?) womanhood.

The second language-related point is there is a strong sense of dialect and perspective about both the prose and the dialogue, a vivid savor of Jamaica, with both dialogue and prose often incorporating local phrasings, words, and spellings. This takes the reader even more deeply into the experience of the characters and their experiences of being separated from the conventions into which some of them are struggling to integrate and others of them are struggling to remain free of. At the same time, however, differences in language can't disguise the fact that while there may be significant, sometimes extreme differences in both the means and the specifics of communication, human beings are essentially all about the same things - the search for respect, dignity and freedom. In other words, no matter how differently the characters say what they say, their essential humanity is the same, a stylistic reinforcement of the book's thematic concern with the dangers and suffering associated with racism-based isolation.

Structure

The book's many shifts in perspective (as touched upon in "Point of View" above) are reflected in its structure as well, as the narrative frequently moves between past and present, from the life and experience of one character and into the lives and experiences of others, movements are reflected in the book's chapter-to-chapter structure. That structure is defined by a central narrative framework (the narrative of the truck ride up the hill) that both triggers and explores a single line of history (the experiences of Clare and her family), but also features breakout chapters that explore parallel narratives (focusing at various times on Paul, Charles, and/or the Magnanimous Warrior). Ultimately, the sense here is of a mosaic, of related chunks of narrative and experience defined by the book's various themes rather than by a single plot. This, in turn, is in keeping with the book's overall poetic sensibility, which tends to reveal meaning through juxtaposition and image rather than through linear description.

The book's free-flowing sense of structure sometimes feels more confusing than illuminating, with the lengthy sections focusing on Charles and Paul in particular having

the potential to trigger, in the reader, a wondering about what's going on and where focus and attention should be. Ultimately, however, this structure becomes powerfully effective in the book's final moments, as the author puts the final piece of the mosaic into place. In other words, the book's structural style awakens in the reader a parallel experience to Clare's struggle for clarity and insight.

Quotes

"Their alikeness was something they needed, which could be important, even vital, to them - for the shades of their skin, places traveled to and from, events experienced, things understood ... acts of violence committed, books read ... ones they loved, living family, varied widely, came between them." p. 4

"The forest had obliterated the family graves, so that the grandmother and her husband, and their son who died before them, were wrapped by wild vines which tangled the mango trees shading their plots, linking them further to the wild trees, anchoring their duppies to the ground." p. 8

"NO TELEPHONE TO HEAVEN. No voice to God. A waste to try. Cut off. No way of reaching out or up. Maybe only one way. Not God's way. No matter if him is Jesus or him is Jah. Him not gwan like dis one lickle bit. NO TELEPHONE TO HEAVEN." p. 16

"The thing that happened to other people had happened to him. An open door could signify but one reality at that hour on that hot morning in that sloping yard in that well kept part of the city." p. 24

"Turning the pages of his grandmother's Bible [Christopher] could not bring Jesus to life. He did not hear Him in his heart. The Word was beyond him." p. 41

"She spoke to him. He let go. A force passed through him. He had no past. He had no future. He was phosphorous. Light-bearing. He was light igniting the air around him. The source of all danger. He was the carrier of fire. He was the black light that arises from bone ash." p. 47

"In these shops, [Kitty] broke her silence, here she felt most the loss of home, of voice, even as she brushed the loose dirt off the yam-skin, imagining its origin in the busy ... in these places she was unto herself, speaking to the shopkeepers as if solitary." p. 65

"Her mother could not respond to her. Where had she gone? Where were her ideas? Her beliefs? Where were her mind and memory? It seemed impossible that these things could have vanished into thin air." p. 72

"The albino gorilla moving through the underbrush. Hiding form the poachers who would claim her and crush her in a packing crate against the darker ones offended by her pelt. Make ashtrays of her hands, and a trophy of her head. She cowers in the bush fearing capture. Waiting for someone to come. Crouching. Not speaking for years. Not feeling much of anything, except a vague dread that she belongs nowhere." p. 91

"A reminder, daughter - never forget who your people are. Your responsibilities lie beyond me, beyond yourself. There is a space between who you are and who you will become. Fill it." p. 103

"When she read how Marguerite de Navarre sat by the bedside of a dying friend to detect the exact instant the soul departed the body, she wept." p. 118

"If the dead speak to you in a dream it means you will soon be amongst them ... her mother was standing next to the bed, looking down at her daughter. Making as if to speak. Then drawing her hand across her mouth as if to wipe away her words." p. 116

"I have been tempted in my life to think 'symbol' - that is what he did to me but a symbol for what they did to all of us ... but that's not right. I only suffered what my mother suffered - no more, no less. Not symbol, not allegory, not something in a story ... I am merely a person who felt the overgrown cock of a big whiteman ..." p. 130

"Something was wrong. She had no sense of the woman under the weight of all those monuments. She thought of her, her youth, her color, her strangeness, her unbearable loneliness. Where was she now?" p. 137

"Drawn to him as friend; later, lover. But also as protector and healer. She felt her petty, private misery recede, faced with the concreteness of his broken skin. Still - she failed him. She could not stop the flow of us, she could not prevent the cold eyes against his brown skin." p. 145

"'I can agree, I can be agreeable, in five languages ... I was raised by my father to be that way. To be the soft-spoken little sambo, creole, invisible neger, what have you, blending into the majority with ease...'" p. 152

"I feel like a shadow - like a ghost - like I could float through my days without ever touching - anyone. I truly cannot remember when I did not feel this way. Locked off." p.

"With life so short, why should [the witch-moth] sleep it away, on high in that hot room? Why not swoop, wild, her wingspan glancing at the doctor's straightened hair, knocking his glasses askew ... she thought of touching her, the grain of her pattern black on black." p. 170

"None of her people downtown let on if they knew a male organ swing gently under her bleached and starched skirt. Or that white powder on her brown face hid a five o'clock shadow ... for her people, but a very few, did not suffer freaks gladly - unless the freaks became characters, entertainment. Mad, unclean diversions ... and still she was able to love them. How was that?" p. 171.

"Once she put the ruinate of her grandmother's place behind her, the road lay before Clare as a relief map, each feature ... familiar." p. 183

"I returned to this island to mend - to bury - my mother - I returned to this island because there was nowhere else - I could live no longer in borrowed countries, on borrowed time." p. 193

Topics for Discussion

Discuss the metaphoric implications of the names of the central characters, Clare Savage and Christopher. In what ways do they illustrate the natures of the characters' journeys? In what ways do the implications of the names echo and/or challenge each other? Consider also Christopher's nickname, The Watchman. What are the metaphoric implications of this name?

Discuss the metaphoric implications of the names of the central characters, Clare Savage and Christopher. In what ways do they illustrate the natures of the characters' journeys? In what ways do the implications of the names echo and/or challenge each other? Consider also Christopher's nickname, The Watchman. What are the metaphoric implications of this name?

Discuss ways in which the events of Chapter 2 (Charles' murder of Paul and his family) manifest and/or dramatize the book's three central themes.

In what ways does the physical transformation of Harry/Harriet parallel Clare's spiritual/emotional transformation?

What do you think are the symbolic parallels between Charles' acts of murder and Clare's apparent intentions in the book's final chapter?

Discuss the ways in which the La Morenita statuette, the advertising symbol Mrs. White (both Chapter 3) and the Magnanimous Warrior (Chapter 7) reflect and manifest aspects of the book's thematic focus on motherhood.

In what ways is Bobby's open wound a metaphor for both his experiences in the war and Clare's experiences: as a Jamaican, as a black woman, and as an abandoned child?

Discuss the various mother/daughter relationships explored in the book's final chapters. Include Miss Cherry, the Interviewer, and Clare's experience under the house in your considerations.