

Ourika: An English Translation Study Guide

Ourika: An English Translation by Claire de Duras

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Plot Summary

Ourika by Claire de Duras is a fictional novel based on a true story about a young slave girl from Senegal who is raised and protected by a wealthy French family shortly before the French Revolution. Ourika does not realize her dependent status until she overhears her benefactress discussing it with her friend. She is stricken with despair upon realizing that, despite her intelligence and numerous talents, her race ensures that she will have no future, and this despair ultimately takes her life. Ourika recounts the heartrending tale of a young woman whose race combined with the superior education she has received causes her to feel "cut off from the entire human race" (p. 16).

The Introduction consists of two essays, by Joan DeJean and Margaret Waller respectively, about Claire de Duras and the significance of her decision to write about an educated black woman shortly after the French Revolution. In the Foreword by John Fowles, the translator talks about his love affair with books in general and particularly with *Ourika*. In the Introduction to *Ourika*, a young Parisian doctor tends a young, sick black nun in the convent at Faubourg Saint Jacques, who suffers from a prolonged melancholia. Since the doctor insists that she must cure the past to save the nun's life, the nun shares the sad story of her life after becoming better acquainted with the doctor. Chevalier rescued Ourika from a slaver in Senegal when she was two years old and gave her to his aunt, Mme. de B, when he returned to France. Mme. de B raised Ourika like a daughter, providing her with what was considered a girl's perfect education, and Ourika's only friend was Mme. de B's grandson, Charles, who was about the same age as she was. Ourika was treated kindly, well-educated and attractive, and she excelled at dancing, singing and drawing. Her life was peaceful until the day she overheard a conversation between Mme. de B and her friend, the marquise, which made her realize her dependent, despised status in society due to the color of her skin; after this, Ourika was stricken with despair that negatively impacted her health. The only distraction from her self-pity was when Charles left to travel abroad.

When the Revolution took a serious turn, it gave Ourika a wisp of hope that she might find her true place when the chaos settled, but she was soon disabused as she could not stand the great present suffering for the potential of her own small future happiness. Her interest in the idea of emancipating the Negroes only made her ashamed to belong to a race of barbarous murderers after the massacres at Santo Domingo. After Mme. de B's friends hid or traveled abroad to avoid persecution, an announcement came that the property of those who had traveled abroad would be confiscated, so Mme. de B summoned Charles to come home. Mme. de B, Charles, Ourika and an old priest retired to the country in Saint-Germain. The time spent at Saint-Germain was the happiest in Ourika's life after the end of her childhood delusions. Ourika felt needed by Mme. de B and was proud to be trusted by Charles. She was displeased when Mme. de B's friends returned after the Terror ended, as they scrutinized her disdainfully for being taken into Mme. de B's confidence.

After Charles fell in love with Mlle. de Themines, Ourika was stricken with a despair that led to a desperate illness when he announced that he wanted the trust in his marriage



to be exactly like the trust between him and Ourika. While Mme. de B attended Charles' wedding in Paris, Ourika was left alone at Saint-Germain and imagined dying abandoned. She recovered but grieved the loss of her friend, despite his frequent visits after his marriage. Ourika and Mme. de B returned to Paris when Anais became pregnant, but the birth of Charles' son increased Ourika's jealousy and despair with the knowledge that she would never be a wife or mother. While Ourika prayed to die, the marquise visited her to learn her sorrows, but after she insisted that Ourika's grief was the result of a secret, doomed passion for Charles, Ourika's despair increased as she wondered if the marquise was right. Her health worsened, and she nearly died. After the parish priest heard Ourika's final confession, he assured her that she was not guilty of improperly loving Charles, but she has sinned by being unhappy and not recognizing God's purpose for her life. Encouraged by the priest, Ourika decided to become a nun with Mme. de B's sad approval and against Charles' pleading. After the nun finishes her story, the doctor continues to visit, but her remedies prove vain when Ourika dies at the end of October.



Introduction by Joan DeJean, University of Pennsylvania

Introduction by Joan DeJean, University of Pennsylvania Summary

Ourika by Claire de Duras is a fictional novel based on a true story about a young slave girl from Senegal who is raised and protected by a wealthy French family shortly before the French Revolution. Ourika does not realize her dependent status until she overhears her benefactress discussing it with her friend. She is stricken with despair upon realizing that, despite her intelligence and numerous talents, her race ensures that she will have no future, and this despair ultimately takes her life. Ourika recounts the heartrending tale of a young woman whose race combined with the superior education she has received causes her to feel "cut off from the entire human race" (p. 16).

Claire-Louise Lechat de Coetnempren de Kersaint was born into the class and generation to most intensely feel the effects of the French Revolution. Her father, a member of the liberal aristocracy, was killed for refusing to vote in favor of the assassination of King Louis XVI, after which Claire and her mother fled France, finally deciding to live their exile in England, where Claire met her husband, Amedee-Bretagne-Malo de Durfort, who was also a member of a prominent family that had been impoverished during the Revolution. They married in 1797, and in 1808, they returned to France, where the monarchy was restored in 1814, and embarked on the life they had been destined for at birth; the duke was given important functions at court, and Claire presided over a salon in their apartment, which is where she first told the story of a black child brought back from Senegal shortly before the Revolution. She was encouraged to print her story, but she went public with her literary production gradually, and *Ourika* was first published privately in 1823 without a date or the author's name. It quickly became a best seller because it "was clearly one of those rare works that touch nerves acutely enough to become national obsessions" (p. ix).

Duras' first novel is about a black child rescued from slavery and brought to France, where she believes herself to be like the aristocrats until she discovers racial difference and prejudice. France had early instituted the Black Code, a set of laws governing the status of slaves, which inspired obsessive rewriting. During the French Revolution, abolitionists emerged, but the movement was wiped out after the slave insurrection in Santo Domingo in 1791. The Black Code was then reimposed in 1802 and reaffirmed in 1805. The French abolitionist movement was renewed in the decade before *Ourika* was published and was particularly active during the 1820s. This serves as a measure of the novel's audacity, as it is astounding that the French public made the novel a resounding commercial success. Even more remarkable is the manner in which Duras treated the subject, and her originality and daring are evident. *Ourika* was the first black heroine in a novel set in Europe and the first black female narrator in French literature, showing



that Duras created an individual African character through which she evoked the daily existence of those aristocrats who chose to live out the Revolution on French soil in her portrayal of revolutionary violence that is complicated by the heroine's racial consciousness. Slavery finally became illegal in the French colonies in 1848.

Introduction by Joan DeJean, University of Pennsylvania Analysis

In the first essay included in the Introduction, Joan DeJean from the University of Pennsylvania discusses the ways that the French Revolution affected Claire de Duras, the author of *Ourika*. She details how Duras first told this narrative in her salon and was encouraged to print the story, and eventually, Duras did publish *Ourika*, privately and anonymously. The novel was well received by Duras' contemporaries, and DeJean investigates the irony of the novel's reception in comparison to the strict laws written about slaves in the Black Code. Though blacks in France were forbidden many rights, *Ourika* dared to believe herself like the French aristocrats until she was forced to accept that racial difference and prejudice were a part of the society in which she was raised. It is even more astounding to note that *Ourika* is the first black heroine in a novel set in Europe and the first black female narrator in French literature, and this demonstrates Duras' daring and originality, especially given her high social status and how this could have been negatively impacted by her fictional work.



Introduction by Margaret Waller, Pomona College

Introduction by Margaret Waller, Pomona College Summary

In 1822, Claire, the duchess of Duras, retreated to her country estate at the age of forty-five, where she drafted five novels in one year, including *Ourika*. Though she desired privacy, she eventually made her writing public, and her first work, *Ourika*, was published in a limited private edition in 1823 with *Edouard* being published in a similar format two years later. While there was no name printed on the title page of either novel, the author's identity was an open secret, and male writers praised Duras' work in the press but resented her success, accusing her of affectation and vanity. When Stedhal and Latouche heard about the idea for Duras' third work of fiction, they wrote anonymous novels and passed them off as her work in order to capitalize on her fame. Duras never published her other works of fiction. The protagonist in *Ourika* is different from protagonists of other Romantic works because she is a black female from Africa and society imposes her marginalization, forcing her to "derive her sense of self from her value as an object of social exchange and from the tenuous identity she creates for herself as a subject" (p. xv). *Ourika* demonstrates one of the earliest examples of the pathology of emotion in literature; though she desires equality, it is denied to her because of the way her race is viewed by society. Additionally, *Ourika*'s horizon is limited by society's view of women's roles. She is resigned to the incurable malady of her blackness but finds consolation in religion. *Ourika* is not the eighteenth century African woman whose story inspired this work but a fictional character created by Duras who perhaps used race "as a metaphor and 'cure' for her own sense of alienation" (p. xx). Duras' choice had and continues to have complex effects because, as a black woman, *Ourika* highlights the roles of gender and race. *Ourika* uses Romantic empathy to shed new light on Enlightenment values and question the cruelty displayed in society.

Introduction by Margaret Waller, Pomona College Analysis

In the second part of the Introduction, Margaret Waller from Pomona College investigates Duras' success and how it was viewed by male writers of the time with envy. Due to some of these authors publishing anonymously to pass their work off as Duras' and capitalize on her fame, Duras only published two of the five novels she wrote, *Ourika* and *Edouard*. In her essay, Waller continues by comparing the protagonist in *Ourika* to the protagonists in other Romantic novels, noting that *Ourika*'s major difference lies in the fact that she is black and that society imposes her marginalization which forces her to "derive her sense of self from her value as an object of social



exchange and from the tenuous identity she creates for herself as a subject" (p. xv). This novel also presents an early example of the pathology of emotion in literature as the novel focuses on Ourika's feelings about the way her race is viewed by society and thus how equality is denied to her. Waller questions whether Duras used race as a metaphor for her own alienated feelings.



Foreword by John Fowles, 1994

Foreword by John Fowles, 1994 Summary

At the beginning of their careers, writers need understanding agents, editors and booksellers, and Fowles learned more about literature from Mr. Francis Norman at his antiquarian bookstore in Hampstead, London than at Oxford. Such a bookstore must be run by a person of humor, learning and curiosity, and it should be kept in a permanent state of apparent chaos and be catholic in its offerings as its primary function for young writers is to help them realize their tastes. At university, Fowles learned to appreciate the prescribed masterpieces but never had time to explore the bulk beneath the examination surface. He left Oxford confused about his real tastes in literature and only began to discover himself as a bookman when he began to frequent Mr. Norman's store. He regrets the disappearance of such shops. Fowles recently visited a neat, second-hand shop in Britain which makes bibliophily a coldly calculated science, whereas shops like Mr. Norman's show it to be a love affair. His particular affair with *Ourika* began thirty-two years earlier when he found a copy of this book at Mr. Norman's store. He had never heard of it, and it gave no indication of the author. First thinking he would be disappointed, Fowles realized he had stumbled upon a minor masterpiece long before finishing the novel, and his admiration for *Ourika* has grown with his numerous re-readings. He subconsciously chose the name of the hero in *Ourika* for the name of the hero in his own novel, *The French Lieutenant's Wife*, and he is retrospectively very certain that Duras' novel was very active in his unconscious during his desire to write about a woman who had been unfairly exiled from society. Fowles had no desire to write a historical novel, but this figure refused to become contemporary, and he chides himself for not realizing who she was. Discussing the first attempt by a white novelist to enter the black mind, Fowles says that *Ourika* is "convincing as an intelligent human being, intolerably torn between her negritude and her European-educated mind" (p. xxxi). Additionally, *Ourika* universalizes the particular racial context and is the case history of an outsider in human society.

Foreword by John Fowles, 1994 Analysis

In the Foreword by John Fowles, the translator of *Ourika* discusses how his love for books was nurtured and further explored at the secondhand bookstore run by Mr. Francis Norman in Hampstead, London. He also compares such bookstores to the tidy shops that turn a love affair into a coldly calculated science. Discussing his love affair with *Ourika* in particular, Fowles explains how he found a copy of the book in Norman's shop and, though he expected to be disappointed, discovered a minor masterpiece. He analyzes how his attraction to this novel inspired his own novel, *The French Lieutenant's Wife*, due to his desire to write about a woman who had been unjustly exiled from society, much like *Ourika* in Duras' masterpiece. Praising Duras for the first attempt by a white novel to enter the black mind, Fowles defends *Ourika* as a black

character, claiming she is "convincing as an intelligent human being, intolerably torn between her negritude and her European-educated mind" (p. xxxi).



Introduction to Ourika

Introduction to Ourika Summary

A few months after finishing medical studies at Montpellier and beginning to practice in Paris, a doctor is called to visit an ill, young nun at the convent in Faubourg Saint Jacques. Part of the building had been destroyed during the Revolution, leaving the cloisters open on one side, and a nun conducts the doctor past the cloisters into the garden where the sick nun sits at the end of a path, nearly hidden by her large, black veil. The anticlerical prejudices of her early years causes the doctor to be concerned for the nun who she supposed to have suffered many injustices, but when the nun turns to face her, the doctor is shocked to find that the nun is a negress; however, she is even more surprised by the nun's "welcoming grace of manner and the elegant simplicity of her language" (p. 4). The nun says that she wants to be cured now, but it has not always been so and perhaps that is the real reason for her illness. She feels weighed down and suffers from insomnia and fever, and her appearance confirms this, showing every sign of having suffered a prolonged and acute melancholia. Resolving to save the nun, the doctor tells her she must calm her imagination and push away all of her painful memories. The nun insists she is happy now, though she admits she has suffered over a long period, but she found her peace of mind very late. The doctor claims they must cure the nun's past, but she must first know it. Proclaiming that she is self-reconciled, the nun protests that not even the promise of all she once longed for could tempt her to change her present existence, but her long suffering slowly ruined her health to the point that she longed for death and is now being punished because it may be too late now that she wants to live. The doctor comforts her and promises a quick recovery, but a dark presentiment warns her that it is too late.

The doctor visits the nun several more times, and one day, the nun returns to the subject of her past. She is reluctant to talk about the peculiar miseries of her life but agrees to tell the doctors about the troubles that ruined her health once they know each other better, since the doctor claims she cannot cure the nun without this knowledge. The doctor visits the convent more frequently, and in the summer when she finds the nun alone on a bench, they continue their previous conversation with the nun telling the doctor her story as follows.

Introduction to Ourika Analysis

In Duras' Introduction to her story, she presents a frame story in which a doctor visits a convent in order to tend to a sick nun. This nun turns out to be Ourika, who shares her life history and her past sadness with the doctor in order to explain her present illness. The doctor is sympathetic toward Ourika's obvious melancholy and wants to cure her, but insists that they must cure her past sorrows in order to heal her present ill health. Though Ourika admits to being very unhappy, she claims to be self-reconciled in the present but worries that she is being punished for her past misery by a pending death.



The doctor promises a quick recovery, but the dark presentiment that warns her that it is already too late foreshadows Ourika's death. Although Ourika is reluctant to discuss her past with the doctor, the doctor's frequent visits allow them to grow better acquainted, and Ourika eventually shares the story of her past sorrows in the narrative that follows and is titled Ourika.



Ourika p. 7-16

Ourika p. 7-16 Summary

When she was two years old, Ourika was brought to France from Senegal by Chevalier de B, who took pity on her as she was taken aboard a slaver, bought her and gave her to his aunt, Mme. la Marechale de B when he returned to France,. Thus, Ourika's life was saved twice by being rescued from slavery and by being placed under the protection of Mme. de B; however, she has since shown ingratitude to Providence by being so unhappy, but understanding does not bring happiness. Though she learned the circumstances of her earliest childhood much later, her first memories are of Mme. de B's drawing room where she was fondled and spoiled by Mme. de B and her enthusiastic circle of friends. Ourika's fondest desire was simply to sit and watch Mme. de B, whom she loved greatly. She could not marvel at living in the lap of luxury because she knew no other way of life, and she was raised to appreciate good taste and be offended by bad taste, a demand that would have been dangerous even if she had a future, and she was as yet unaware that she had no future because she had never thought of her dark skin as a disadvantage. Mme. de B raised her two grandsons after their mother died young, and Charles, the younger brother and near her age, was Ourika's champion and friend when they were children; her first great sorrow was when he went away to school at the age of seven. While Charles studied, Ourika learned all that was considered essential for a girl's perfect education in order to please Mme. de B, such as singing, painting, English, and Italian. Ourika's intelligence was opened to her by her admiration for Mme. de B, but she did not know that her innocent studies would ripen into such bitter fruit, for she only thought of pleasing her mistress. Ourika's extensive reading exercised her imagination, and she was confident that Mme. de B would find a way to make her happy. In order to display Ourika's fashionably beautiful figure and her ability to dance perfectly, Mme. de B gave a ball, an example of the attention and favor Ourika was accorded, during which Ourika danced the comba, and when she was applauded, she was filled with unalloyed pleasure and nothing troubled her sense of security until a few days later when she overheard a conversation that "dropped the scales from [her] eyes and ended [her] childhood" (p. 11).

While drawing quietly at a table in Mme. de B's drawing room between a lacquer screen and the window, Ourika heard the marquise, a frank woman, enter, and begin to speak to Mme. de B about Ourika. The marquise praised Ourika, asking what Mme. de B intends to do with her, and Mme. de B answers that she loves Ourika like a daughter and wants to make her happy but sees the girl always alone in the world. The effect of these words on Ourika is indescribable, as she swiftly comprehended that she was black, dependent and despised and so would never be admitted into society. The marquise further claimed that only a man of low birth would marry a black woman, but due to her upbringing, Ourika "can only want the kind of husband who would never look at her" (p. 13). Mme. de B argued that Ourika might one day rise above her fate because she is so remarkable, but the marquise said society will have its revenge for the girl entering it without permission. Their quarrel was interrupted when another visitor



was announced, and Ourika slipped from the room to her own, where she temporarily relieved her swollen heart with tears.

The loss of her self-worth effected a profound change in Ourika's life as she lost sight of everything that had previously engaged her mind and saw herself hounded by contempt and misplaced in society, causing her to feel isolated though she had never known loneliness before. Her eyes were opened, and "[her] misfortune had already introduced mistrust into [her] heart" (p. 15). Everyone was struck by Ourika's altered appearance when she returned to the drawing room, and when she said she did not feel well, Mme. de B called for the doctor, who announced that Ourika was healthy. Mme. de B tried to cure Ourika's melancholy with all sorts of amusements, but Ourika was too resentful to feel generosity and could only pity herself. She was revolted by the color of her skin and saw it as a brand of shame which condemned her to loneliness and a lack of love; she claimed "I no longer belonged anywhere. I was cut off from the entire human race" (p. 16).

Ourika p. 7-16 Analysis

Although Ourika was born into slavery, she was rescued by Chevalier de B, who brought her to France and gave her to his aunt, Mme. de B. Ourika laments her ingratitude to God after being saved twice but justifies her unhappiness by claiming it is the result of understanding. Ourika lived a privileged childhood with Mme. de B, and she was loved greatly. She did not fully appreciate the benefits of her upbringing because it was the only way of life she had ever known, and she was not made to see her race as a disadvantage. Charles, Mme. de B's grandson, was Ourika's only friend as a child, and Ourika considered him to be like a brother to her. In order to please her benefactress, Ourika studied hard to fulfill the educational requirements set before her, and the fact that Mme. de B educated Ourika proves her love for the girl. Ourika provides the anecdote of the ball thrown for her as an example of the attention and favor that was accorded to her, and her sense of security was absolute. The mention of the conversation that ended her childhood foreshadows Ourika's discovery of racial difference and prejudice. The marquise confronted Mme. de B, claiming that her favor ensures Ourika's future misery because she has been raised to expect a higher standard of living in society than that which she will be permitted due to her race. Mme. de B argued that Ourika was so remarkable that she might rise above her distressing fate, but it was too late; Ourika had overheard the conversation and realized she would never be admitted into society because she was black, dependent and despised. Thus began Ourika's despair, which resulted in her first illness. Ourika could only pity herself and resented the color of her skin which caused her to feel "cut off from the entire human race" (p. 16).



Ourika p. 16-24

Ourika p. 16-24 Summary

Ourika soon saw how she might resign herself to such a fate. Her religious inclinations were owed to the priest who prepared her for first communion, but she "hadn't grasped that faith is of little use unless it informs every action one takes" (p. 16). She told her confessor nothing of her troubles because she did not consider unhappiness to be a sin. Her troubles negatively affected her health but improved her mind, as she now analyzed and criticized all that had previously pleased her. Mme. de B noticed the change in her nature and treated her kinder than usual, revealing her woes to help Ourika forget her own; Ourika "could feel in harmony with life only when [she] knew [herself] necessary, or at least useful, to [Mme. de B]" (p. 17). Though Ourika lamented that she might die without being regretted by a single person, this was unfair to Mme. de B, who loved her, but Ourika vainly longed for the privilege to be able to call her mother, and Mme. de B's family bonds gave Ourika a painful insight into her own situation. Though she would never have a family, she felt like a sister toward Charles, and when he left to travel abroad with his tutor and his elder brother, Ourika's sorrow over his departure gave her a temporary distraction from her own sorrows.

Soon after Charles left, the Revolution took a serious turn, and Ourika listened to conversations about the Revolution in Mme. de B's drawing room, hoping that she might find her true place at the end of this great chaos, but this hope did not last long because she "couldn't for long desire so much present evil for [her] own small future good" (p. 19). Her discontent was softened only by Mme. de B's kindness and trust, and her wistful glances seemed to suggest that only Ourika could understand her. When talking began about emancipating the Negroes, Ourika imagined others, noble-hearted like herself, somewhere else and was eager to know what would happen to them, but after the Santo Domingo massacres, she was shamed for "belonging to a race of barbarous murderers" (p. 21).

As the Revolution made rapid strides, Mme. de B's circle dispersed, some fleeing abroad and others hiding, but Mme. de B did neither, and they lived in isolation for several months until the end of 1792, when a decree announced the confiscation of the property of those who had escaped abroad. Since Mme. de B only had a life interest in her property and the capital belonged to her grandchildren, she summoned Charles home, and he returned to Paris in February of 1793, shortly after the king's assassination, an outrage which caused Mme. de B such strong grief that it affected her health; Ourika shared her feelings and suffered with her. Ourika seldom thought of her own troubles during the Terror because she no longer felt alone, since the whole world was miserable. Shortly after Charles' return, Mme. de B, Charles and Ourika left Paris for the country of Saint-Germain with a friend of Mme. de B, an old priest who was more intellectual than spiritual. Because Mme. de B had rendered services to two of the most influential leaders during the Terror, they shielded her from the fury of the revolutionaries several times, despite the danger to themselves, and Mme. de B was kept from prison



and guarded at home under the pretext of bad health with Charles, Ourika and the old priest caring for her to the best of their abilities. They suffered an indescribable anxiety and horror in those days, daily reading about many of Mme. de B's friends receiving the guillotine as the sentence for their loyalty to the monarchy, and they constantly feared that Mme. de B would suffer the same fate until the death of Robespierre brought the nightmare to an end and they were able to breathe freely again. The guards left them in solitude, but the misfortune strengthened the bonds between them and Ourika did not feel like an outsider then.

Ourika p. 16-24 Analysis

Because Ourika had not been raised in a particularly religious environment, she did not turn to God for consolation, and she did not discuss her sorrow with her confessor since she felt that unhappiness was not a sin; this foreshadows a future change in the way that Ourika would view God and her unhappiness. Ourika's sorrow caused her to criticize everything that had previously pleased her, and when Mme. de B noticed the change in Ourika's attitude, she treated Ourika as a confidante, which helped Ourika feel useful. Ourika, in her despair, ignored the fact that she was loved by Mme. de B and mourned the fact that she might die without being regretted by a single person. Ourika was jealous of Mme. de B's familial bonds as they reminded her of what she would never have. The only distraction from her self pity came when Charles left Paris to travel abroad. When the Revolution soon followed Charles' departure, it gave rise to hope for Ourika as she foresaw a more equitable society at the end of the great chaos, but she soon grew to hate the Revolution because of its great evil. The only consolation Ourika found in her misery was the love that Mme. de B obviously had for her. Though she took interest in the talk of emancipating the Negroes, Ourika only found further cause to be ashamed of her race after the massacres at Santo Domingo. When Charles returned to France to claim his estates, Ourika retired to Saint-Germain with Charles, Mme. de B and an old priest, and in isolation from the rest of society, she found some comfort in being useful to her friends. While Mme. de B's friends were persecuted by the revolutionaries, Ourika feared for her benefactress, but soon after Robespierre's death, she felt more secure. The misfortunes they had suffered strengthened the bonds between the four of them living at Saint-Germain, and Ourika no longer felt like an outsider among them.



Ourika pages 24-31

Ourika pages 24-31 Summary

Ourika's only happiness after losing her childhood illusions came in the months following that grim period. While Mme. de B was indulgent, open-minded and witty with an abundance of common sense, Charles shared her character and intelligence with fine enthusiasms for justice and truth, and Ourika was flattered that he trusted and relied on her greatly. During their evening conversations around the table that ranged over everything, Mme. de B knew well how to demonstrate the absurdity of the old priest's positions on various subjects. Because she was fond of walking, the party walked through the forest of Saint-Germain daily with Mme. de B on the priest's arm and Charles and Ourika following far behind, and this is when Charles told Ourika his plans, hiding nothing, for "to him, [her] companionship was like existence itself. He enjoyed it without noticing it" (p. 26). It never occurred to her to discuss her troubles with Charles, and she forgot them during their conversations, while he never asked because he never guessed she might have secrets. Mme. de B tried so hard to make Ourika happy that she believed her to be so, and it was humiliating not to know how to tolerate the inevitable. Ourika tried to think of herself as little as possible by removing the mirrors from her room and hiding her skin beneath clothes in an attempt to be invisible and deceive herself. When the Terror came to an end toward the end of 1795, life returned to normal, and the remnants of Mme. de B's circle gathered around her, which caused Ourika no pleasure as she felt less like a part of society and was upset by the surprise and disapproval on the visitors' faces to see a black woman enjoying the close confidence of Mme. de B.

Ourika wished to be transported back to savagery of her native land which was less frightening than "this merciless society that declared [her] guilty of a crime it alone had committed" (p. 29). She allowed the face of this imaginary monster to obsess her because God had not yet taught her to exorcise such delusions and find the peace that lies in Him alone, so she sought sanctuary in Charles' affection, seeing him as perfect and finding pride in his friendship; however, his life was all harmony while hers was nothing but discord. One morning, a friend of Mme. de B visited with a proposal that he marry Mlle. de Themines, a rich heiress in distressing circumstances because her entire family was killed at the guillotine except a great-aunt who was over eighty years old and wanted her niece to marry immediately because she feared leaving her without family and protection. When Mme. de B consulted Charles about the match, he was alarmed at the idea of marrying so young but agreed to see the girl, and he had no more objections after meeting the pleasing young lady. Quickly falling in love with Anais de Themines, Charles told Ourika of his passion, and she was eager to meet the beautiful creature who made him so happy. When Mlle. de Themines finally visited them at Saint-Germain, Ourika did not have to endure the paining, disdainful scrutiny, because Charles had already spoken to Anais about Ourika, so Anais was very kind, and Ourika assured her of happiness with Charles, who had the sense of a much older man though he was only twenty-one years old. As Anais asked many questions about Charles,



Ourika answered with pleasure because nothing gave her greater pleasure than praising Charles.

Ourika pages 24-31 Analysis

After losing her childhood illusions, Ourika only experienced happiness again while at Saint-Germain directly during the Terror, and this was due to Mme. de B's indulgence and Charles' flattering trust in her. Charles and Ourika walked far behind Mme. de B and the old priest on their daily walks, and Charles hid nothing in their conversations while it never occurred to Ourika to tell him about her troubles since she did not think of them while she was with him. Meanwhile, Ourika tried to deceive herself by hiding her skin beneath clothing in an attempt to become invisible. When the French Revolution finally ended in 1795 and life began to return to normal, Ourika was distressed by the looks of surprise and disapproval on the faces of Mme. de B when they realized the great lady gave her close confidence to a young black woman. Ourika felt less like a part of society than ever before. She became obsessed with society's distaste for her race and sought sanctuary in Charles' affection, though their lives were at complete odds, his harmonic while hers was discordant. When Charles fell in love with Anais de Themines, Ourika was happy to see his joy, and she answered Mlle. de Themines' questions about Charles with pleasure because nothing made her happier than praising Charles.



Ourika pages 31-39

Ourika pages 31-39 Summary

Charles' marriage was delayed while the details of the contract were settled, and though Ourika missed him during his frequent visits to Anais in Paris, she chided herself for putting her own happiness before his. She was happy when he told her that he saw a return of his love in Anais, but one day, he told Ourika that he hoped his marriage would share the same entire trust as his friendship with Ourika, reminding her that he ignored the solitary secret of her existence and extinguishing her desire to tell him of it. His absences became more frequent, and he felt he had only started to live since meeting Anais and wondered what he had done to deserve so much luck, while Ourika wondered why she was condemned to exist alone and prayed for God to remove her from the world because "Nobody needed me, I was isolated from all" (p. 33). The thought gripped Ourika with a terrible violence, and she fell to her knees, thinking she would die right then.

Through her obviously increased melancholy, the nun assures the doctor that she only threw herself into that abyss because she did not understand it, but she is happy now because God took pity on her, though happy was the last thing she was in those days. Until that conversation with Charles, Ourika has been stronger than her troubles, but now they overwhelmed her. When Charles carried her to the house, remedies were applied with Charles and Mme. de B acting as her doctors, and as she regained consciousness, Ourika was touched deeply by the anxiety and self-reproach on their faces. While Mme. de B asked no questions, Charles overwhelmed Ourika with questions, but when he accepted her explanation that it was caused by the heat and the length of the walk, she thought that it was easy to deceive someone whose interests lay elsewhere. Soon after Ourika regained consciousness, Charles left, and Ourika's temperature ran high as she grew worse over the next two days.

Though she tended Ourika with her usual kindness, Mme. de B worried how she would get to Paris for Charles' wedding the next day, but she left when the doctors assured her that Ourika's life would not be endangered if she was left alone. Ourika's total isolation sent her into a state of complete hopelessness as she imagined herself dying far from those she loved, but realizing they did not need her, she was filled with "such a loathing of life that [she] sincerely wanted to die of the illness that had attacked [her]" (p. 36). As she envisioned Charles returning from his honeymoon to learn Ourika had died, she was filled with joy and revenge, but by having vengeful thoughts against one who had only shown her affection and encouragement, she felt guilty and tried to conquer her unhappiness but blamed herself for her ingratitude rather than looking for strength where it truly resided. She wanted to find peace in the grave and leave her share of happiness for Charles and Anais, but she recovered from her illness to lapse into listlessness.



Mme. de B made her home at Saint-Germain after Charles' marriage, but he often visited with his wife, which only increased Ourika's suffering as it was hard to bear the difference in their relationship when he was so near. Though Charles attributed the change in her attitude to her deteriorating health, Ourika suspected that Mme. de B guessed the truth and was deeply upset by it, but Ourika's pity was only for herself. When Anais became pregnant and they returned to Paris, Ourika's unhappiness increased when affronted with the daily display of domestic tranquility and happiness. During the months of her despair, Ourika gave herself up to her misery, giving up singing and painting and reading only books about despair. When Charles' son was born, Charles ran to Ourika to excitedly tell her the news, but the traces of their old intimacy only hurt her as she was reminded of the friend she no longer had. Ourika alone viewed Anais and her beautiful son sourly as it was a "vision of a happiness [she] could never know" (p. 39). Envious, Ourika wished she had been left to follow her own destiny on the slaver because at least then she would have had her own hut, a partner in life and children. She prayed to die because she could no longer endure living.

Ourika pages 31-39 Analysis

As Charles spent more time in Paris with Anais, Ourika missed him greatly, but she rebuked herself for sorrowing when he was so happy. It affected Ourika very negatively, though, when Charles stated that he wanted the trust between him and his future wife to be exactly like the trust between him and Ourika; she was so distressed by this idea because he ignored the solitary secret of her life. Moreover, Ourika prayed to die since she would otherwise be condemned to live in loneliness. She fell to her knees, ill, and Charles carried her back to the house where he and Mme. de B tended her.

The narrative returns to the doctor as the nun assures her that she is happy now, though she was not then, emphasizing the importance of this event in Ourika's despair and subsequent illness. Though she had been stronger than her troubles before this conversation with Charles, Ourika was now overwhelmed by them. She was greatly distressed when Charles left her that evening because, while she would have insisted he go, he did not even offer to stay so she could not attribute his enjoyment of the evening to herself, and this caused her condition to worsen over the next two days. When Mme. de B left Ourika to attend Charles' wedding, Ourika's health worsened as she felt alone and totally isolated, and she vengefully imagined Charles' grief to find her dead when he returned from his honeymoon. After she recovered, Ourika suffered more by Charles' visits to Saint-Germain with his new wife as the difference in their relationship reminded her that she had lost her only friend. Mme. de B and Ourika returned to Paris when Anais became pregnant, and the sight of Anais with her son filled Ourika with such envy since she would never be a mother that she prayed to die, wishing she had been left as a slave so that she could at least have her own hut, life partner and children.



Ourika pages 39-47

Ourika pages 39-47 Summary

As Ourika knelt in her bedroom and prayed for death, the marquise, who had recently returned from England where she lived during the Revolution, entered, causing Ourika to panic because seeing the marquise always reminded her of first having her eyes opened and elicited much distress. The marquise claimed she had always been fond of Ourika and was saddened to see the girl's disheartened state, so she advised Ourika to find the brighter side of things since she was so intelligent, but Ourika argued that "intelligence only makes real misfortunes seem worse. It makes them take so many different forms" (p. 40). The marquise insisted that it was madness to fight the inevitable and that common sense suggests resignation and distraction, and Ourika should find things she likes doing to pass the time, for she had many gifts and it would bring pleasure to her friends. When Ourika objected that she had no friends, only protectors, the marquise claimed Ourika was making herself miserable to no purpose and asked to know her secret in order to help her, but when Ourika confessed that her problems were her social situation and the color of her skin, the marquise grew angry and claimed Ourika's suffering came from an insane and doomed passion for Charles that made her unable to accept the fact that she was black, before leaving with far less sympathy for Ourika than when she first entered the room.

This revelation illuminated the depths of Ourika's suffering and made her wonder if her longing for affection and fears of isolation were produced by a forbidden lust for Charles. Though there was nothing in her actions to suggest this and she has always loved him innocently as a childhood friend, a voice deep in Ourika's heart screamed that the marquise was right. Calling out to God in outrage because now to suffer must even be sinful, Ourika collapsed and was feverish that night. Her death expected, a parish priest was summoned to administer extreme unction, but God took pity on her, and she regained consciousness within two weeks. Ourika wished to make her last confession because some instinct drove her toward God, and when the priest heard her confession, he reassured her on the love of which she was accused. He told her that her heart was innocent and she was only guilty of hurting herself and not accepting the happiness God had offered her. He encouraged her to pray to God, and his words brought peace to Ourika's soul as she reflected on them endlessly. She had never recognized her proper responsibilities, instead chasing life's pleasures and neglecting true happiness, but she realized it was not too late; perhaps, God had rescued her from savagery and ignorance by bringing her to this alien land and teaching her His law. She decides to follow it so that "never again shall [she] use His gifts to offend Him. Never again shall He be accused of [her] weakness" (p. 46). These new thoughts about her situation brought peace to Ourika's mind, and she decided to become a nun. Mme. de B took the news sadly but finally agreed, while Charles begged in vain for Ourika to stay with his grandmother. The nun abruptly ends her story here, and though the doctor continues to visit her, her efforts prove futile when Ourika dies in late October.



Ourika pages 39-47 Analysis

During Ourika's prayers for death, the marquise entered her room, reminding Ourika of her initial descent into despair. Insisting that she was concerned for the girl, the marquise begged Ourika to confide in her as to the reason for her melancholy state, but when Ourika claimed that her sorrow was due to her social situation and her race, the marquise angrily rejected this notion. Instead, she professed that Ourika had made herself sad and sick due to an insane and doomed passion for Charles; otherwise, she would be able to come to terms with being black. After the marquise left, Ourika was plagued with the idea that perhaps a forbidden lust for Charles had produced her longing for affection and fears of isolation, and she lapsed into a horrible illness as she realized that, now, even to suffer must be a sin. The illness nearly killed Ourika, but Mme. de B and Charles tended her faithfully. When she recovered enough to give her last confession to the parish priest, he assured her that her heart was innocent of what she was accused and that her only sin was in being unhappy when God had given her the chance to find happiness. These words brought peace to Ourika, and she decided to turn her life over to God and become a nun. Mme. de B sadly condoned her plan because she felt she had already caused Ourika too much sorrow to oppose her wishes, but Charles begged in vain for her to stay with his grandmother. The nun ended her story here. The doctor reports that though she continued to tend the nun, Ourika died in late October.



Characters

Ourika

Ourika is the protagonist of *Ourika* by Claire de Duras, and this novel explores her sorrow after discovering racism and prejudice in the Parisian society in which she was raised. In the Introduction to *Ourika*, a young Parisian doctor tends a young, sick black nun in the convent at Faubourg Saint Jacques, who suffers from a prolonged melancholia. Since the doctor insists that she must cure the past to save the nun's life, the nun shares the sad story of her life after becoming better acquainted with the doctor. Chevalier rescued Ourika from a slaver in Senegal when she was two years old and gave her to his aunt, Mme. de B, when he returned to France. Mme. de B raised Ourika like a daughter, providing her with what was considered a girl's perfect education, and Ourika's only friend was Mme. de B's grandson, Charles, who was about the same age as she was. Ourika was treated kindly, well-educated and attractive, and she excelled at dancing, singing and drawing. Her life was peaceful until the day she overheard a conversation between Mme. de B and her friend, the marquise, which made her realize her dependent, despised status in society due to the color of her skin; after this, Ourika was stricken with despair that negatively impacted her health. The only distraction from her self-pity was when Charles left to travel abroad.

When the Revolution took a serious turn, it gave Ourika a wisp of hope that she might find her true place when the chaos settled, but she was soon disabused as she could not stand the great present suffering for the potential of her own small future happiness. Her interest in the idea of emancipating the negroes only made her ashamed to belong to a race of barbarous murderers after the massacres at Santo Domingo. After Mme. de B's friends hid or traveled abroad to avoid persecution, an announcement came that the property of those who had traveled abroad would be confiscated, so Mme. de B summoned Charles to come home. Mme. de B, Charles, Ourika and an old priest retired to the country in Saint-Germain. The time spent at Saint-Germain was the happiest in Ourika's life after the end of her childhood delusions. Ourika felt needed by Mme. de B and was proud to be trusted by Charles. She was displeased when Mme. de B's friends returned after the Terror ended as they scrutinized her disdainfully for being taken into Mme. de B's confidence.

After Charles fell in love with Mlle. de Themines, Ourika was stricken with a despair that led to a desperate illness when he announced that he wanted the trust in his marriage to be exactly like the trust between him and Ourika. While Mme. de B attended Charles' wedding in Paris, Ourika was left alone at Saint-Germain and imagined dying abandoned. She recovered, but grieved the loss of her friend despite his frequent visits after his marriage. Ourika and Mme. de B returned to Paris when Anais became pregnant, but the birth of Charles' son increased Ourika's jealousy and despair with the knowledge that she would never be a wife or mother. While Ourika prayed to die, the marquise visited her to learn her sorrows, but after she insisted that Ourika's grief was the result of a secret, doomed passion for Charles, Ourika's despair increased as she



wondered if the marquise was right. Her health worsened, and she nearly died. After the parish priest heard Ourika's final confession, he assured her that she was not guilty of improperly loving Charles, but she has sinned by being unhappy and not recognizing God's purpose for her life. Encouraged by the priest, Ourika decided to become a nun with Mme. de B's sad approval and against Charles' pleading. After the nun finishes her story, the doctor continues to visit, but her remedies prove vain when Ourika dies at the end of October.

Charles de B

Charles de B is the youngest grandson of Mme. de B. He was about the same age as Ourika and was her only friend when she was a child, acting as her champion, adviser and defender. At the age of seven, he went away to school, causing Ourika much sadness. Later, he traveled abroad with his elder brother and their tutor, but Mme. de B summoned him home in February 1793 during the French Revolution when the government announced the confiscation of property belonging to those abroad; this was because her properties rightfully belonged to her grandsons, and she only possessed a life interest in them. Charles accompanied his grandmother, Ourika and the old priest to their country home in Saint-Germain, where he helped nurse Mme. de B during her illness caused by despair over the king's execution. Charles shared his grandmother's character and intelligence. He was shrewd, firm and open but without the power of qualification due to his youth. He possessed two fine enthusiasms for justice and truth, and he hated affectation. He rarely acted without thinking first.

Charles was reserved by nature, so Ourika was flattered that he trusted her. He shared his secrets with Ourika during their daily walks, and she found sanctuary in his friendship. When he fell in love with and became betrothed to Mlle. de Themines, Ourika was happy for him, though she missed him during his frequent excursions to Paris. When he confided that he wanted the trust in his marriage to be exactly like the truth between Ourika and himself, Ourika was cut because he ignored the solitary secret of her existence. This, along with Charles' fervent confession of his love for Anais de Themines, caused Ourika to sink into an illness that threatened her life. After his marriage, Charles frequently visited Saint-Germain with his wife, causing Ourika despair as she was reminded that she had lost him as her friend. When his wife gave birth to a son, Charles ran to tell Ourika the good news, but the remembrance of a friend she no longer had only injured her. After Ourika fell ill due to her despair caused by the marquise's accusations, Charles, along with Mme. de B, nursed Ourika to health, but when Ourika decided to become a nun, Charles begged in vain for her to stay with his grandmother.

Mme. la Marechale de B

Mme. de B is an older French aristocratic lady living in Paris who received Ourika, a young black slave girl, from her nephew, Chevalier de B. Mme. de B raised her two grandsons after their mother died young. She was one of the most attractive women of



her time and combined a fine mind with a genuine warmth of heart that made her highly valued by her friends. Mme. de B acted as a protector and benefactress to the girl, raising her and loving her like a daughter. She treated Ourika kindly and educated her properly, also teaching her good taste. She guided Ourika's intellect and formed her judgment. Mme. de B was open-minded and indulgent, and she never snubbed people by twisting their meanings or criticizing them too harshly. She was witty and possessed a great deal of common sense. Ourika wanted nothing more than to be near Mme. de B when she was a child.

When confronted by the marquise, Mme. de B admitted that she saw Ourika as always being alone, and this led to Ourika's misery and despair. Mme. de B worried when Ourika grew ill and tried to nurse her, offering various amusements in an attempt to distract her from her sorrow. After the confiscation of property from those traveling abroad was announced, Mme. de B summoned Charles home, and she, Charles, Ourika and an old priest relocated to Saint-Germain. Mme. de B grew sick with grief after the king was executed, and she lived in constant fear of execution during the French Revolution. Mme. de B took Ourika into her confidence during their time at Saint-Germain, making this time the happiest of Ourika's life after the end of her childish delusions. She nursed Ourika during her illnesses, and when Ourika decided to become a nun, she sadly agreed, claiming "I've done you so much harm in wishing to do you good. I don't feel I have the right to oppose you now" (p. 46).

Doctor

The doctor in the Introduction visits Ourika at the convent in Faubourg Saint Jacques shortly after finishing medical school and beginning to practice in Paris. She is concerned for the nun, and her sympathy increases as she imagines the injustices the nun must have suffered. The doctor is shocked to discover that the nun is a black woman suffering from a prolonged melancholia. She insists that the nun must cure her past sadness in order to save her health and her life. Though she promises a quick recovery when she first meets the nun, a dark presentiment warns the doctor that it may already be too late. The doctor visits more frequently until the nun is comfortable enough to confide in her about her past. The doctor sympathetically listens to Ourika's story, and though she continues to tend her, the doctor's attempts prove unavailing as she fails to save Ourika.

Marquise

The marquise is a friend of Mme. de B. She was a bleakly practical lady with an incisive mind. She was frank even with her friends, as well as inquisitorial and persistent. She was the least agreeable of Mme. de B's circle, and Ourika was frightened of her. One day, the marquise approached Mme. de B and, after praising Ourika, demanded to know what Mme. de B meant to do with her. She claimed Mme. de B was making Ourika's future misery certain because since she was educated, Ourika would never want the type of man who would marry a black woman. She claimed to have Ourika's



interest at heart, accusing Mme. de B of destroying Ourika's happiness. Ourika overheard this conversation, and it led to her despair, which eventually caused her illness and death. Years later, the marquise confronted Ourika, asking the reason for her unhappiness, but the marquise disbelieved Ourika when she cited her race and social status as the cause of her misery. Instead, she accused Ourika of being sad because her doomed and insane love for Charles made it impossible for her to accept her blackness. The marquise's accusation caused Ourika to collapse into an illness that nearly killed her.

Anais de Themines

Anais de Themines is a rich heiress in a distressing situation. Her entire family was killed beneath the guillotine, except for an old great-aunt who became her guardian and wanted to marry her off for fear of leaving her niece without family or protection. Anais had birth, fortune and upbringing. She was sixteen years old, modest and pretty without coquettishness. A friend of Mme. de B proposed that Charles should marry Anais de Themines, and Charles fell in love with her quickly after they met. Anais treated Ourika kindly, asking many questions about Charles, which Ourika answered with pleasure. After she married Charles and bore a son, Ourika was jealous of Anais since she had what Ourika never would have: a husband and a child.

Parish Priest

The parish priest is summoned to administer extreme unction to Ourika during her severe illness caused by the marquise's accusations. He visited daily because he wanted to hear Ourika's confession once she was in a fit state. When he finally heard her confession, he showed no shock at the state of her soul and instead reassured her that her heart was innocent of the love she was accused of harboring for Charles. The priest claimed that Ourika was guilty of not enjoying the happiness that God had bestowed upon her and advised her to pray to God since "for Him there is neither black nor white. All hearts are equal in His eyes" (p. 45). The priest encouraged Ourika, and his words brought a peace to her soul, which convinced her to become a nun.

Old Priest

The old priest is the only one of Mme. de B's friends who is left when the others flee France or go into hiding during the Revolution. He mocked religion as he was more intellectual than spiritual. He joined Mme. de B, Ourika and Charles when they left Paris and moved to Saint-Germain. He was easy to get along with, though he manufactured a set of wrong ideas which he argued for sincerely until Mme. de B effectively demonstrated the absurdities of his mind. He was never angry when Mme. de B turned his ideas upside down.



Charles' Son

Charles's son was born to Charles and Anais. He was as pretty as Anais, and Charles happily ran to tell Ourika the good news when his son was born. Ourika was so envious of Anais' ability to become a mother that she prayed for death.

Chevalier de B

The Chevalier de B was the governor of Senegal when he rescued Ourika from a slaver. He took pity on the two-year-old girl and bought her. When he returned to France, he gave Ourika to his aunt, Mme. de B.



Objects/Places

Convent in Faubourg Saint Jacques

The convent in Faubourg Saint Jacques is where Ourika retires as a nun after her sadness nearly causes her death. This is the setting of the Introduction to Ourika and where the doctor visits and tends the sick nun. Ourika dies at the convent in late October.

Senegal

Senegal is the African nation where Ourika was born and from where she was saved from a slaver by Chevalier de B when she was two years old.

France

France is the main setting of this novel and is where Ourika lives.

Mme. de B's Drawing Room

Mme. de B's drawing room is where Ourika spent her early years, listening to Mme. de B and her friends and becoming educated. This is also where she learned of her social misfortune while drawing between the window and lacquer screen, which allowed her to overhear the conversation about her between Mme. de B and the marquise.

Saint-Germain

Saint-Germain is the country estate to which Mme. de B, Charles, Ourika and the old priest retired during the terror caused by the French Revolution.

French Revolution

The French Revolution is a time of great terror for Mme. de B as many of her friends are executed by the revolutionaries, and this is when she, Charles, Ourika and the old priest retired to Saint-Germain. During the French Revolution, Ourika was happy because she felt that Mme. de B needed her.

Charles' Marriage

Charles marries Mlle. de Themines shortly after the French Revolution. Although Ourika is happy for her friend's happiness, she misses him and falls ill when he says he wants



the trust in his marriage to be exactly like the trust between him and Ourika. Her despair and illness continue to increase after his marriage because she feels that she has lost her only friend.

Ourika's Prayers

During her illness, Ourika prays for death because she feels like no one needs her; however, God saves her life and gives her peace.

Guillotine

During the French Revolution, many of Mme. de B's friends are killed at the guillotine.

Ourika's Sins

Although the marquise claims that Ourika sins by having a doomed and insane love for Charles, the parish priest assures Ourika that her heart is innocent and her sin is making herself so unhappy that she nearly dies, though God granted her the opportunity for happiness.



Themes

Race

Race is arguably the most important theme in *Ourika* by Claire de Duras. Race drives much of the novel's plot as its focus is on Ourika's inner turmoil after discovering the racism of the society in which she lived. Much of the essays in the Introduction and the Foreword emphasize the significance of Duras' decision to write about a black woman particularly in regard to society's position on blacks and Duras' own status within society in France. Ourika was rescued from the bonds of slavery when she was two years old and raised by Mme. de B who treated her kindly, raising her like a daughter and educating her like a French aristocrat. Ourika did not regret being black because she did not realize that the color of her skin would be a disadvantage. This changed after an overheard conversation between Mme. de B and the marquise forced her to realize that her race made her dependent and despised in the prejudiced Parisian society where she lived. During the conversation, the marquise accused Mme. de B of ensuring Ourika's future misery by educating her when only a man of low birth would marry a negress and father mulatto children.

Ourika saw herself as being held in contempt and having no place in society. Despair overwhelmed her as she began to see her black skin as a "brand of shame" (p. 16). During the talk of emancipating the Negroes, Ourika imagined them as noble-hearted, but the massacres at Santo Domingo left only added the "shame of belonging to a race of barbarous murderers" (p. 21). When Mme. de B's friends returned to France after the Revolution, they hurt Ourika with looks of disdainful scrutiny that a negress has been taken into Mme. de B's confidence. Ourika's despair increased after Charles' marriage and the birth of his son since she would never be a wife or mother; she wished she had been left in slavery because then she would have a life partner and children at least. The marquise claimed that an insane and doomed passion for Charles is what prevented Ourika from coming "perfectly well to terms with being black" (p. 42). After the parish priest assured her that God does not see black or white, Ourika became a nun.

Religion

Ourika introduces the theme of religion in the Introduction when the Parisian doctor visits a sick nun at the convent in Faubourg Saint Jacques. The doctor's youthful anticlerical prejudices increases her sympathy for the nun as she imagines the kind of injustices the nun must have suffered. Ourika begins her story with chiding herself for having "shown ingratitude to Providence by being so unhappy since... being rescued from slavery [and] placed under the protection of Mme. de B" (p. 7). Since Mme. de B was not particularly religious, Ourika owed her religious feelings to a worthy priest who administered her first communion, but at the time that she first fell into despair after discovering racism and prejudice; she "hadn't grasped that faith is of little use unless it informs every action one takes" (p. 16). Ourika's faith took up a few minutes of each day



and had nothing to do with the rest of her time. She did not tell her confessor, who she saw two or three times each year, about her sorrow, because she did not consider unhappiness to be a sin.

The priest who accompanied Mme. de B, Ourika and Charles to Saint-Germain frequently mocked religion, and he was more intellectual than spiritual. The sorrow that followed Charles' marriage and the birth of his son caused Ourika to pray for death, and though her following illness nearly killed her, God took pity on her and preserved her life. An instinct drove her to God as she recovered, and she made her confession to a parish priest. This priest reassured her on the love for Charles, which the marquise accused her of but said she had sinned by rejecting the "possibility of happiness He bestowed on [her]" (p. 45). He advised Ourika to pray to God who saw all hearts as equal and saw neither black nor white. Encouraged by the priest, Ourika thought that perhaps God had brought her to France, saving her from ignorance and savagery, in order to bring her to Him. Promising never again to use His gifts to offend Him, she decided to become a nun.

Relationships

An important aspect in *Ourika* is the relationships between the novel's characters. Ourika refuses to tell the story of her past to the doctor in the Introduction until they become better acquainted. Mme. de B raised Ourika in happiness, and Ourika was content to be at her side, wanting nothing more from life. As a child, her only friend was Charles, who was her champion, adviser and defender. Mme. de B loved Ourika as a daughter and ensured that she was taught all that was considered essential for a girl's perfect education. In turn, Ourika excelled at learning out of her desire to please her benefactress. During her conversation with the marquise, Mme. de B saw Ourika as always being alone but sought a solution because of her love for the girl. When Ourika was stricken with despair after discovering racism in society, Mme. de B tried to distract her with all sorts of amusements, but Ourika longed in vain only to be able to call her mother.

Ourika was happy again only when she was taken into the confidences of Mme. de B and Charles while living in Saint-Germain during the French Revolution, but she was displeased when Mme. de B's friends returned after the Terror ended. Although she was happy for Charles when he fell in love with and married Anais de Themines, Ourika was upset when he confided that he wanted the trust in his marriage to be exactly like the trust between Ourika and himself, because he ignored the solitary secret of her life which caused her so much unhappiness. She was jealous when Anais gave birth to a son since she would never be a wife or mother, and she deeply feels the loss of her only friend after Charles' marriage. When the marquise accused her of a doomed and insane passion for Charles, Ourika nearly died of despair when an inner voice declared that the marquise was right; however, the parish priest to whom she made her confession assured her that her heart was innocent of this love. After Ourika decided to become a nun, Charles tried in vain to persuade her to stay with his grandmother, but Mme. de B

sadly agreed, claiming "I've done you so much harm in wishing to do you good. I don't feel I have the right to oppose you now" (p. 46).



Style

Point of View

In *Ourika* by Claire de Duras, the Introduction written by Jean DeJean and Margaret Waller was written in third person, but John Fowles wrote the Foreword in first person. Duras also wrote *Ourika*, including her Introduction, in first person. This point of view is limited and reliable which can be seen quite obviously the fact that *Ourika*, the narrator, is privy only to the inner workings of her own mind; though she conjectures about others' thoughts and feelings, she can only speak with authority upon her own thoughts and emotions. This point of view is important since the novel serves as *Ourika*'s autobiography in which she examines the sorrow that led to her illness.

The story is told mostly through the use of exposition with some conversations being described or paraphrased. There are very few instances of actual quoted dialogue between the characters in the novel. Most of the exposition is actually more of a monologue in which *Ourika* describes and discusses her feelings based on certain events in her past. This is beneficial to the novel as its purpose is to focus on *Ourika*'s experiences and how they affected her thoughts, feelings and beliefs as she discovered racism and prejudice and how it would determine her future. The viewpoint of the Introduction is that of the doctor, but the actual narrative of *Ourika* is seen through the eyes of the narrator and title character, *Ourika*.

Setting

This novel is set in the real world, in France during the French Revolution in the late eighteenth century. The majority of the characters are French aristocrats which serve to contrast with *Ourika*'s dependent state caused by her race and gender and increased by her education. Revolutionaries are abstract characters who are mentioned as antagonists, but they do not actually appear in the novel. The doctor in the Introduction is educated and feels sympathy for the sick black nun. *Ourika*'s black skin is important to the novel's plot as it causes her despair when she realizes her dependent, despised social situation and that it causes her to be destined to spend her life alone. The novel focuses on how this despair leads to *Ourika*'s illness and ultimately to her untimely death.

The convent in Faubourg Saint Jacques is where *Ourika* retires as a nun after her sadness nearly causes her death. This is the setting of the Introduction to *Ourika* and where the doctor visits and tends the sick nun. *Ourika* dies at the convent in late October. Senegal is the African nation where *Ourika* was born and from where she was saved from a slaver by Chevalier de B when she was two years old. France is the main setting of this novel and is where *Ourika* lives. Mme. de B's drawing room is where *Ourika* spent her early years, listening to Mme. de B and her friends and becoming educated. This is also where she learned of her social misfortune while drawing



between the window and lacquer screen, which allowed her to overhear the conversation about her between Mme. de B and the marquise. Saint-Germain is the country estate to which Mme. de B, Charles, Ourika and the old priest retired during the terror caused by the French Revolution.

Language and Meaning

While the language of Ourika tends to be fairly casual and informal, the language also serves to emphasize Ourika's education. The sentences are constructed properly, and her conversation is often insightful. The language in this novel demonstrates Ourika's education and up-bringing, which sharply contrasts with the life she can expect due to the color of her skin. This serves to emphasize the injustice of racism in her society as well as to explain the reason for her despair. The language aids comprehension of the novel as it allows the reader to better sympathize with Ourika's desperate plight.

The language of Ourika characterizes Ourika's education and upbringing. The novel is told mostly through exposition in the form of a monologue as Ourika shares the story of her past and examines the cause of the sorrow that has so negatively affected her health. The language aids the writing style as it adds to the sympathy that Claire de Duras tries to generate for her protagonist by stressing how Ourika's education and character make her more than fit to participate in society, emphasizing that it is only her race that unfairly excludes her from doing so. Overall, the language is easy to understand and very effective in the aforementioned purposes.

Structure

Ourika consists of an Introduction of two essays, a Foreword, the Introduction to the novel and the novel itself. The Introduction comprises fourteen pages, the Foreword consists of five pages, and the novel along with its Introduction is forty-seven pages long. The novel itself is not separated into chapters, but the novel is very detailed as Ourika describes her past and how it has led to her debilitating despair. Ourika is an abbreviated autobiography about the protagonist's life, spanning over approximately twenty years and specifically focusing on about five years during which Ourika was stricken with despair after discovering the prejudices of society.

Ourika by Claire de Duras is a fictional novel based on a story about a young slave girl from Senegal who is raised and protected by a wealthy French family shortly before the French Revolution. Ourika does not realize her dependent status until she overhears her benefactress discussing it with her friend. She is stricken with despair upon realizing that, despite her intelligence and numerous talents, her race ensures that she will have no future, and this despair ultimately takes her life. Ourika recounts the heartrending tale of a young woman whose race combined with the superior education she has received causes her to feel "cut off from the entire human race" (p. 16).

The novel is quick paced and very easy to understand. The Introduction to Ourika is the doctor's flashback to the previous summer when she tended the ill black nun, and the



narrative itself is presented entirely as a flashback as Ourika reflects on her past and how her despair led to her illness and eventually her death which occurs in the doctor's flashback. The novel is easy to read and understand, and while sad, it is very interesting to explore this first attempt by a white novelist to enter the black mind.



Quotes

"Like the most illustrious women writers of the Old Regime, from Lafayette to de Stael, Duras first became celebrated for her display of intelligence and conversational brilliance in the salons and only subsequently moved from this semiprivate arena to the public literary marketplace."

Introduction by Joan DeJean, p. viii

"Against that background of controversy, we can best measure the novel's audacity. Not only was Duras's heroine brought to France after the law forbidding the country to all people of color had gone into effect; once there, Ourika proceeded to live out the very scenarios that French law had been attempting to ward off for a century and a half: she believes herself the equal of the French and even dares to fall in love with one of them."

Introduction by Joan DeJean, p. x

"As a woman living in the eighteenth century and as a young girl bought out of slavery and given to a noblewoman in France, Ourika derives her sense of self from her value as an object of social exchange and from the tenuous identity she creates for herself as a subject. The traditional Romantic hero flees society and roams aimlessly in search of a home he will never find. Ourika, by contrast, lacks the prerogative of mobility. Her social exclusion instead produces a paralyzing sense of psychological alienation that wreaks havoc not only on her soul but also on her body."

Introduction by Margaret Waller, p. xv

"Whatever the author's explicit intentions or unconscious motivations, the choices Duras made had and continue to have complex effects. Making the Romantic hero a woman, 'Ourika' highlights the key role that gender plays in the representation of the alienated Romantic protagonist. Making her black as well, the novel shows race as a social construction and vigorously protests the injustices to which it gives rise."

Introduction by Margaret Waller, p. xx

"I could only weep for those two dusty, overcrowded rooms in Hampstead, where nothing could be found at once and somehow everything turned up in the end. The one place makes bibliophily seem a coldly calculated science; the other, a love affair."

Foreword by John Fowles, p. xxviii

"'You've been called to see a very sick person. I do want to be cured now. But it hasn't always been so, and perhaps that is the real cause of my illness.'"

Nun, Introduction to Ourika, p. 4

"'The miseries of my life must seem so peculiar that I've always been reluctant to talk about them. No one can gauge how much another has suffered. You confide in people- then they tell you it was your own fault.'"

Nun, Introduction to Ourika, pp. 5-6



"Rescued from slavery, placed under the protection of Mme. de B- it was as if my life has been twice saved. I have shown ingratitude to Providence by being so unhappy since. But does understanding bring happiness? I suspect the reverse is true. The privileges of knowledge have to be bought at the cost of the consolations of ignorance."
Ourika, p. 7

"What concerns me now is that you are making her future misery certain. What could please her now, having spent all her life close by your side?... To whom do you propose marrying her? With her intelligence, with the education you've given her? What kind of man would marry a negress? Even supposing you could bribe some fellow to father mulatto children, he could only be of low birth. She could never be happy with such a man. She can only want the kind of husband who would never look at her."
Marquise, p. 13

"I no longer belonged anywhere. I was cut off from the entire human race."
Ourika, p. 16

"I could feel in harmony with life only when I knew myself necessary, or at least useful, to [Mme. de B]."
Ourika, p. 17

"One is quick to grasp at any consolation, and I sensed that at the end of this great chaos I might find my true place. When personal destiny was turned upside down, all social caste overthrown, all prejudices had disappeared, a state of affairs might one day come to pass where I would feel myself less exiled. If I truly possessed some superiority of mind, some hidden quality, then it would be appreciated when my color no longer isolated me, as it had until then, in the heart of society. But it so happened that these very qualities that I saw in myself soon disabused me. I couldn't for long desire so much present evil for my own small future good."
Ourika, p. 19

"While the Terror lasted, I seldom thought of my own troubles. I should have been ashamed to feel a victim among so many greater tragedies. In any case all the world was miserable, and I no longer felt alone. A view of life is like a motherland. It is a possession mutually shared. Those who uphold and defend it are like brothers."
Ourika, pp. 22-23

"It was as if misfortune had strengthened all the bonds between us. Then, at least, I did not feel myself an outsider."
Ourika, p. 24

"[Charles] had depended on me for so long. To him, my companionship was like existence itself. He enjoyed it without noticing it. I was not required to pay attention, to show interest. He knew very well that when he talked about himself, he talked about me. I was closer to him than he was himself. The magic of such intimacy is that it can



be a substitute for anything- even happiness."
Ourika, pp. 26-27

"Alas, it was really the face of the imaginary monster I had allowed to obsess me. God had not then taught me how to exorcise such delusions. I had still to learn that peace lies in Him alone."
Ourika, p. 29

"I want to have her entire trust, I want her to have mine. I shan't hide anything, she shall know my every thought, every secret feeling of my heart. I want a trust between us exactly like yours and mine."
Charles, p. 31

"Unspoken desires have a kind of modesty- if they are not guessed, they can't be satisfied. It's as if they need two people to exist."
Ourika, p. 35

"In my life I had only them; but they had no need of me. Nobody had need of me. This appalling awareness of the futility of one's existence is the most damaging of all emotions. It gave me such a loathing of life that I sincerely wanted to die of the illness that had attacked me."
Ourika, p. 36

"I had done nothing- and yet here I was, condemned never to know the only feelings my heart was created for."
Ourika, p. 39

"Madame, intelligence only makes real misfortunes seem worse. It makes them take so many different forms."
Ourika, p. 40

"Nothing has purpose in my life. Not even my unhappiness."
Ourika, p. 41

"Since you refuse me your trust, since you pretend there's no secret at the bottom of all this, very kind- I shall take it on myself to inform you that there is. Yes, my child. All your misery, all your suffering comes from just one thing: an insane and doomed passion for Charles. And if you weren't madly in love with him, you could come to terms with being black."
Marquise, p. 42

"Your heart is innocent. You have hurt only yourself. But for all that, you are guilty. God will one day ask you to account for the possibility of happiness He bestowed on you. And what have you done with it? This happiness was in your own hands, since our happiness lies in doing our duty. I wonder if you have ever known your duty, let alone performed it. God is the purpose of man. Yet what has your purpose been? But you



must take heart, my child, and pray to Him. He waits with open arms. For Him there is neither black nor white. All hearts are equal in His eyes. And yours promises to be worthy."

Parish priest, p. 45

"I've done you so much harm in wishing to do you good. I don't feel I have the right to oppose you now."

Mme. de B, p. 46



Topics for Discussion

Why is it significant that Claire de Duras wrote a novel about a black woman? How does Duras' social status affect the novel's reception?

What caused Ourika's unhappiness in the novel?

How did Mme. de B feel about Ourika? How did Ourika feel about Mme. de B?

How did Ourika's upbringing contribute to her unhappiness?

What role did race play in Ourika?

What were Ourika's feelings for Charles throughout the narrative, and how did they affect her state of mind?

What was Ourika's actual sin, and how did this lead to her death?

At the time that the doctor interviewed Ourika, was Ourika happy as she claimed? Provide evidence to support your answer.