The River Between Us Study Guide

The River Between Us by Richard Peck

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Plot Summary

This novel for young people is set within the historical context of the American Civil War. It tells the story of the unlikely friendship that develops between two white teenage girls, the sophisticated, Southern Delphine and the farm-living, Northern Tilly. As the narrative explores the social, personal and physical repercussions of both the war and of the two girls' very different values, it also explores issues relating to racism, the necessity for transcending prejudice, and the relationship between past and present.

The novel begins with a prologue, set in the early 1900's, in which teenaged narrator Howard Hutchings describes his excitement at going on a car journey with his father and younger twin brothers to visit his grandparents. After a long, uncomfortable drive, Howard and his family arrive at the memory-filled home of Grandma Tilly, her husband Dr. Hutchings, the bedridden Delphine, and the war-wounded Uncle Noah.

The main body of the narrative consists of Grandma Tilly's story of how she and her family survived the American Civil War of the mid-1800's. At the time, the family consisted of fifteen year-old Tilly and her twin brother Noah, their Mama, and their younger sister Cass. Their father, referred to as Paw, had been gone for several years. One day, the family`s routine is disrupted by the arrival of a paddle boat from New Orleans. As Noah earns some extra money unloading cargo and luggage, Tilly watches the arrival of the beautiful, demanding, and evidently wealthy Delphine, accompanied by her black companion, Calinda. Delphine announces that she has been sent north by her family to protect her from the dangers of the war, and that she is looking for a place to stay. When one of the townspeople says the local hotel is not a fit place, Mama offers her home, and Delphine accepts, much to the fascination of Tilly and the nervous happiness of Noah, instantly infatuated with the vivacious Delphine.

Over the next several weeks, both Delphine and Calinda make themselves at home, the latter taking over the cooking and making friends with the shy Cass, the former making friends with Tilly. As both friendships become deeper, the war becomes more and more intense, and the townspeople come to suspect that Delphine is a spy for the south, suspicions that both Mama and Tilly confront and deny. Tensions come to a head in the aftermath of an appearance in the area by a touring showboat, at which Delphine dances with Noah, Tilly dances with the attractive Dr. Hutchings, and Calinda, much to the community`s shock, dances by herself. Shortly afterwards, Noah runs off to join the Northern army. Mama, having an intuition that he has fallen ill, sends Delphine and Tilly after him. Assisted by Dr. Hutchings, the two young women make their way to the military camp where Noah is being treated for dysentery, and help him recover. At the same time, Tilly discovers, much to her shock, that Delphine has African-American ancestry and is spending her life passing as white.

Once he is declared fit, Noah is sent back into combat, but almost immediately returns, having had one of his arms shot off. Delphine and Tilly help him recover, eventually taking him back to the farm, where they discover that the body of Paw has been sent

back to them in a coffin, and Mama, thinking that the coffin contained Noah, threw herself in the river.

The narrative then returns to the present and the narrative voice of Howard Hutchings, who reveals that after he and his family left the farm, his father told him that Grandma Tilly and her husband were not his real parents, and that his real mother and father were Delphine and Noah. He also reveals his intention to go and fight in the impending World War I, and urges Howard to be as proud of his family and ancestry as he is. The novel concludes with young Howard`s affirmation that he is, in fact, proud of his family ... his entire family, everything they were and everything they are.

Part 1, The Model T Ford Touring Car, 1916

Part 1, The Model T Ford Touring Car, 1916 Summary

This novel for young people is set within the historical context of the American Civil War. It tells the story of the unlikely friendship that develops between two white teenage girls, the sophisticated, Southern Delphine and the farm-living, Northern Tilly. As the narrative explores the social, personal and physical repercussions of both the war and of the two girls' very different values, it also explores issues relating to racism, the necessity for transcending prejudice, and the relationship between past and present.

Chapter 1 - Narrator Howard Leland Hutchings describes his excitement at learning that he and his younger twin brothers would be driving with their father from St. Louis, Missouri to Grand Tower, Illinois to visit his family (see "Quotes", p. 6). The only thing he knows about that family, Howard comments in narration, is that they all lived through the American Civil War (see "Objects/Places"). Howard's father also says his family includes not only his parents, but also his aunt and his uncle, a description which leads Howard to suggest that his father in fact has four parents. His father says that sounds about right. Howard then describes the extensive preparations made by the family for the trip and his mother's decision not to come, hinting at long-standing tensions between his mother and his father's family. As the trip begins, the day is bright and clear, and Howard recalls his last sight of his mother - turning back into the house as the Model T Ford was heading away (see "Quotes," p. 8).

The trip lasts two days. On the first day, each of the tires on the Ford goes flat in turn, but Howard's father repairs them and the journey continues. When night falls, they make camp and prepare to sleep in the car, Howard's father (a physician) not trusting the cleanliness of hotels. Around the campfire after supper, Howard's father spooks his three sons with stories of the mountain (The Devil's Backbone) near the house where he grew up, and of a female ghost in "old-time skirts with gray hair streaming down her back" that crosses the road between the Backbone and the nearby river.

The next day, the family arrives at Grand Tower, noting, across the river, another high stone outcropping on the Missouri side - Tower Rock. As the family arrives at the house by the Backbone, present tense narration describes how, "in the moving picture memory makes," Howard and his brothers are met by the emotional Grandma Tilly and her husband Grandpa (called Dr. Hutchings), the bedridden Aunt Delphine, and the war wounded Uncle Noah. Howard comments in narration on the shabby nature of the house, and of "the weight of its history, and mystery" (see "Quotes", p. 15).

Part 1, The Model T Ford Touring Car, 1916 Analysis

This first chapter is a clear, charming portrayal of childhood innocence. The voice of the narrator is guileless and enthusiastic, telling a good story of a happy time with an effective sense of the kind of immediacy and intimacy with which the very young tell stories to their elders. There are occasional glimpses of a mature perspective on this innocence, an insight into past experience that time and distance have brought into being (see, in particular, the quote from p. 15). But for the most part, the reader is brought engagingly and effectively into the world of an excited boy going on his first big trip.

Within that overall narrative sensibility, however, there are several important moments of foreshadowing. These include Howard's guileless suggestion that his father has four parents (a statement that proves to be more literally true than Howard could possibly know at this point) and the reference to the female ghost. This can be seen as a clear reference to the description of Mama in Chapter 9, and as a somewhat more oblique reference to Mama's death as described in Chapter 14. There is also the reference to the wounded Noah (the story of how he was wounded is told in Chapter 13), and the glancing reference to Howard's mother's reluctance to accompany her family on their visit. For further consideration of this aspect of the book, see "Topics for Discussion - Why, do you think ..."

Part 2, The House Astride the Devil's Backbone, 1861 - Section 1

Part 2, The House Astride the Devil's Backbone, 1861 - Section 1 Summary

Chapter 2 - The narrative voice shifts in this chapter, still in first person but from here on, and for most of the rest of the book, the perspective is that of Grandma Tilly, now a young girl. She describes being sent by her mother (Mama) to fetch her (Tilly's) younger sister Cass from the woods atop the Devil's Backbone, narration placing the action at a time early in the Civil War (see "Objects/Places"). Tilly looks for Cass where she (Cass) is usually found - on a flat rock high up on the Backbone, a place where she can look out over the river. Tilly describes Cass's history of having visions, in particular a vision of a tragically drowned wedding party but also of explorers, traders and Indians, all of whom were caught up, at various times, in a whirlpool in the river. When Tilly finds Cass, she discovers that Cass has been crying as the result of having another vision - of young boys in "blue and gray" all being killed. Tilly is disturbed to learn that this vision is of the future - all Cass's other visions have been of the past. Helping Cass down the hill and back to the house, Tilly is met by her twin brother Noah who, she comments in narration, has joined with a few other local boys to play at being soldiers for the North, pointing out that most of the boys in that area (including one named Curry Marshall) were supporters of the South. Lamenting the situation the boys had gotten themselves into (see "Quotes," p. 26), Tilly is shocked when Cass sees Noah and bursts into tears.

Chapter 3 - That night at supper, Mama silently watches the red-eyed Cass and the suddenly silent Noah, Tilly commenting in narration how Mama worried about Cass and the potential damage that her strangeness could do to the family's reputation, already shaky because of their missing Paw. Tilly also describes Mama's fear of losing Noah, first to employment on the river and now to the war. That night, the family attends a community dance, where Mama takes a seat among the widows. Later in the evening, while Tilly is dancing with Noah, the festivities are interrupted by the arrival of a paddleboat from New Orleans. Noah, Curry Marshall, and several other young men hurry to the dock, hoping to get some money for helping to unload the freight. As other townspeople shout to the passengers for news of what's going on down South, Tilly is entranced by a richly dressed beautiful young woman, hurrying off the paddleboat and proclaiming at the top of her French-accented voice how difficult the voyage has been, how she can not continue on, and how she is looking for a hotel. Meanwhile, another woman (smaller, quieter, darker) is also coming off the boat, carrying several boxes and bags. The first woman introduces herself as Delphine Duval and, when she learns that the local hotel would not be a good place for her to stay, accepts Mama's offer of accommodation. Tilly introduces both herself and Noah, who suddenly seems quite tongue-tied in Delphine's presence. Delphine, meanwhile, introduces her companion,

Calinda, and follows Mama's lead back to the house. Tilly comments in narration that she "couldn't see a moment ahead."

Part 2, The House Astride the Devil's Backbone, 1861 - Section 1 Analysis

This section begins the main body of the narrative which, the book's final chapter reveals, is Grandma Tilly's recounting of her life story to young Howard. There are several important issues to note here. Among them is the establishment of setting - specifically, the placement of events at the time of the Civil War, in a community essentially torn between the two sides and their conflicting views on society (said conflict being essentially defined by very different views on race and slavery). For further consideration of the role of setting in the narrative, see "Style - Setting."

Other important elements include the introduction of Cass and the reference to her capacity for having visions, which play a role in several later narrative developments. These include the reference to the soldiers in blue and gray, the colors of the uniforms worn by the opposing sides in the Civil War, and Cass's tears when she sees Noah (a foreshadowing of his eventual, inevitable injury). The reference to visions also foreshadows Cass's sudden, growing, secure friendship with the similarly gifted Calinda, and the calamitous role that such visions play in the disintegration of the family (Chapter 13). A related point is the irony of the final line of Chapter 3 - Tilly, unlike her sister, is entirely unable to see the future.

The most important element of this section is the appearance of Delphine, and here there are several related points. The first is that she immediately comes across as worldly and sophisticated, portrayed by Tilly's recollection as someone vastly more mature than she is. It therefore comes as a surprise when later in the narrative (Chapter 10), Delphine's age is revealed to be fifteen, actually a few months younger than Tilly. The second point to note about Delphine's appearance in the narrative is that it contrasts vividly with how she had been portrayed in Chapter 1 - overweight, bedridden, and virtually empty of life, a state of being that could not be more different from the vivacious, imperious, volatile image she presents here. Then there is the almost immediately evident attraction that Noah feels towards her, an attraction that simmers throughout the narrative and which, the final chapter reveals, is in fact the foundation of a mutual, lifelong devotion. Finally, there is the simultaneous appearance of Calinda, here portrayed as a virtual slave to Delphine but who, Delphine herself reveals to Tilly, is in fact her sister, viewed by the world and, Delphine implies, by their own family as inferior because of her darker color (see "Themes - Racism").

Part 2, The House Astride the Devil's Backbone, 1861 - Section 2

Part 2, The House Astride the Devil's Backbone, 1861 - Section 2 Summary

Chapter 4 - Early the next morning, Tilly is woken by Mama, who tells her to be careful what she says around the very Southern Delphine, who might not realize that she's in the North, and Calinda, who might be a slave. A short while later, preparations for breakfast are interrupted by the frightened Cass, who says Calinda is killing Delphine. Mama and Tilly rush upstairs, only to discover that Calinda is lacing Delphine into a set of corsets. When Delphine and Calinda eventually come down for breakfast, the suddenly nervous and awkward Noah makes room for them (see "Quotes," p. 47). Nibbling at the food that the suspicious Calinda isn't touching, Delphine pays particular attention to Noah as she chatters about her life in New Orleans and her socially prominent mother. At one point, Mama and Tilly both notice that Calinda tries to make Delphine be quiet (see "Quotes," p. 50), but Delphine continues talking.

Chapter 5 - After Delphine and Calinda spend most of the morning unpacking, Mama allows Tilly to accompany Delphine into town to see the shops. Delphine spends very little time in the poorly supplied general store, crossing the street to the store that fronts the blacksmith's shop where Noah works. There, she interrupts an argument between Northern and Southern loyalists and orders some lamps, oil and matches from clerk Curry Marshall, noticing as she does so that Tilly is attracted to him. She then directs Tilly to take her up onto the Devil's Backbone, where Tilly is surprised to see that Cass is not in her usual place. Settling in to look at the view, Delphine chatters on about her successful, popular father (see "Quotes," p. 56), leading Tilly to contemplate her long-absent Paw. Much to Delphine's interest, Tilly also confesses that Cass has visions, and is surprised to learn from Delphine that Calinda does as well. When Tilly and Delphine return to the house, they discover that Calinda has been doing the cooking, with Cass's help. That night, Tilly and her family eat heartily, in spite of the people of the region having sworn never to have anything to do, in any way, with Southern lifestyles. After dinner, Delphine settles down with some mending and Calinda brings out a pack of playing cards. "How at home our visitors were, these light bringers," Tilly comments in narration. "How settled they seemed to be, not like birds of passage at all."

Part 2, The House Astride the Devil's Backbone, 1861 - Section 2 Analysis

A corset is an undergarment worn by women in various forms over the centuries. It was designed to cinch in the waist to make it appear smaller and lift the bosom to make it appear larger. Constrictive and often damaging, it restricted the ability of women to

move and often their ability to breathe. On a more symbolic level, corsets can be seen as representing or embodying the centuries-long practice of women's sexual, emotional and spiritual lives also being restricted. With that in mind, it could be argued that Calinda's lacing of Delphine into tight corsets can be seen as representing the limits of what Delphine could achieve or become, given her parentage and ancestry (see Chapter 12).

Meanwhile, racially defined tensions between North and South during the time of the Civil War carry over here into the characters' reactions to food in Chapter 4. On the other hand, the family's acceptance of Calinda's Southern cooking in Chapter 5 can be seen as echoing or reinforcing the idea that Tilly's Northern family and Delphine's Southern nature come to peaceful terms with each other in ways that Northern and Southern governments could not. There is, perhaps, a hint here that in the book's thematic perspective, the war and all the destruction it brought might have been avoided if people on opposite sides had gotten to know each other as people, rather than as manifestations of their various states' political and social positions.

Another interesting element of this section is the way both parallels and differences in the lives and perspectives of Delphine and Tilly begin to emerge. See "Topics for Discussion - In what ways are ..."

Finally, there is the reference to Calinda's playing cards which, as the narrative later reveals, are not merely for playing games - they are also for telling the future, something that plays an important role in the narrative in Chapter 13.

Part 2, The House Astride the Devil's Backbone, 1861 - Section 3

Part 2, The House Astride the Devil's Backbone, 1861 - Section 3 Summary

Chapter 6 - That summer, boats continue to bring supplies from the South, for both the town and for Delphine. In one of the shipments that comes to her from her mother, Delphine finds the hand mirror for which she has been longing. Tilly becomes fascinated with the mirror, seeing herself for the first time (see "Quotes," p. 62). In another shipment, there is a dress for Mama, offered by Delphine's mother in gratitude for her (Mama) giving Delphine a place to stay. Mama at first refuses it, seeing it as charity, but then changes her mind and tells Tilly to put it into the "death drawer," where all the shrouds and wrapping cloths for burial are kept. Tilly comments in narration that nothing in the death drawer was ever used, and that its contents are still there. Also that summer Calinda, with the help of Cass, goes into business selling Southern-style candy to travelers on the boats. As the friendship between Cass and Calinda deepens, Tilly mourns for the closeness she used to have with Cass herself , but realizes Cass is better off spending time with Calinda (see "Quotes," p. 65). One night, though, Tilly wakes up in the middle of a stormy night and sees Cass at the window, teary and sad because of another vision. Tilly also witnesses an encounter between Calinda and Delphine over the headscarf (a tignon) that Calinda has given Cass to wear. Tilly wonders whether the scarf is a sign of slavery, but after getting the scarf off Cass's head, Delphine comments that Cass hasn't "earned" the tignon. Meanwhile, Curry joins up to fight for the South, leaving his precious possessions with Tilly and, in turn, causing her to realize that she no longer has interest in him (see "Quotes," p. 70). As summer becomes hotter and more oppressive, a surprise victory by the South causes a rush of patriotism in the North, even at the home of Dr. Hutchings, who was thought to be a peacemaker. Tilly comments in narration that, "You'd have thought that being on the same side would have encouraged people to pull together. But people aren't made that way."

Chapter 7 - One day, while Delphine is making one of her regular visits to the town (visits to which the men-folk excitedly look forward), Mama and Tilly are visited by three of the town's ladies, who accuse Delphine and Calinda of being spies. Mama speaks her mind in defense of Delphine and Calinda, and in response, the women pass remarks about Paw being missing and about it being inappropriate that someone like Delphine be around a boy like Noah. This leads Mama to make comments about one of the other women's sons, and the three women leave in a hurry. After they've gone, Mama comments to Tilly about how hard she (Mama) has worked to steer clear of trouble, and how a bit of Delphine's independence seems to have rubbed off on both of them (see "Quotes," p. 80). When Delphine returns, she brings news of a touring showboat arriving from the South which she is eager to see. Later that evening, Noah

returns, furious at having had an altercation in town with other people who think Delphine is a spy. In narration, Tilly comments that all this judgment of what they were doing led the family to a defiant determination to attend the showboat show.

Part 2, The House Astride the Devil's Backbone, 1861 - Section 3 Analysis

The mirror is one of the few clear, almost overt, symbols in the book. The essential value of that symbolism is summed up in Tilly's commenting that after the mirror arrived, she was able to see herself for the first time. This comment on her physical reflection can be seen as having a metaphoric echo in Mama's reference to how Delphine's presence is triggering change in both her and Tilly - Delphine herself, like the mirror, is helping the two women see more of themselves than they have ever seen before. The same point could also be made of Cass, although Delphine's effect on her is somewhat more indirect. While it is Calinda who has the most transformative effect on Cass, Calinda is only present because Delphine is. Meanwhile, another important symbol is the tignon, the meaning of which is explored further in "Objects/Places - The Tignon."

Other important elements introduced in this section include the reference to Dr. Hutchings, who here makes his first appearance since being glimpsed briefly in Chapter 1. In this section, he shows up almost in passing, but he becomes an increasingly important figure as the narrative unfolds (Chapters 8, 13). Here it's interesting to note that in Chapter 1, he is referred to as Tilly's husband, which means that his appearance here is both a foreshadowing of the developing relationship to come and an echo of the reference in Chapter 1 to what that relationship develops INTO.

Finally, there are Tilly's comments about the death drawer, which foreshadow nothing really specific, but which nevertheless carry with them a sense of foreboding, of dark and painful things to come. This sense is echoed and reinforced by Cass's apparent vision, the exact nature of which is never specifically revealed but which could justifiably be interpreted to be another vision of the war in general, and of Noah's injury in particular ... or perhaps even of Mama's death.

Part 2, The House Astride the Devil's Backbone, 1861 - Section 4

Part 2, The House Astride the Devil's Backbone, 1861 - Section 4 Summary

Chapter 8 - On the day of the showboat performance, Delphine spends most of the time in her room getting ready, with the help of Calinda and Cass who, late in the day and to the surprise of both Mama and Tilly, emerges from Delphine's room with her hair done and her face made up, dressed in one of Delphine's dresses. The amazed, and suddenly hopeful, Mama sends Tilly to Delphine's room as well, and she too is transformed. That night, the entire community, with the exception of the preacher and his wife, turns out to see the show, which Delphine doesn't really seem to enjoy ... that is, until Noah asks her to dance. As Noah and Delphine waltz, Tilly is surprised to be invited to dance by Dr. Hutchings, who compliments her on how she looks. After the waltz finishes, one of the black musicians steps forward and insistently calls for Calinda to dance. She initially refuses, but eventually steps forward, dancing a dance called the Calinda that is freer and more sensual than anything danced earlier in the evening. Tilly watches as Delphine moves her body in time with the dance (see "Quotes," p. 93), both her and Calinda's movements becoming more and more frenzied until finally, the music stops and Calinda rushes out. Tilly's conversation with the breathless Delphine reveals that Calinda is famous in New Orleans for her dancing skills, and that she is called Calinda after the dance - her real name is CoinCoin, "an ancient name, older than the islands, back, back before ..." but then Delphine stops herself. "Another door closed inside her." Shortly afterwards, and on the night before his and Tilly's sixteenth birthday, Noah leaves to join the war. Tilly tries to comfort her, but Mama shakes her off, wanting only now. "The time the showboat come," Tilly comments in narration, "was a bright dream I must have had before the world went dark."

Chapter 9 - Noah's first couple of letters are cheery and positive, but Tilly and the rest of the town soon learn how harsh the conditions are that he and the other soldiers are living under, conditions that worsen when Noah's regiment is shipped down to Cairo, closer to the front line. Dr. Hutchings goes to Cairo to help ease a shortage of doctors, and sends word back that half the men are sick and the other half drunk. Shortly afterwards, the restless Tilly becomes aware of someone in the kitchen. She goes down to see, and discovers Mama, looking like "a haunt with long tangled gray hair ... in her old night dress". Mama, who reveals she has visions, just like Cass, tells Tilly she knows Noah is sick, that she wants Tilly to go find him and bring him home. They're interrupted by Calinda, who helps Tilly get Mama to bed and, later, tells Tilly that when she goes, she should take Delphine with her, who would come in handy when dealing with men. "She is meant for men," Calinda says. After days of preparation and packing all of the fussy Delphine's possessions, as well as food and medicines, Tilly and Delphine prepare to leave. As they're going, Calinda reads her fortune-telling cards, and has a

very quick, very intense conversation with Delphine. Tilly, meanwhile, lets Mama know that the journey is about to begin ...

Part 2, The House Astride the Devil's Backbone, 1861 - Section 4 Analysis

The physical transformations of both Cass and Tilly at the beginning of Chapter 8 can be seen as echoing inner, emotional/spiritual transformations. As they are both discovering comfort and value in who they are and who they can be (again, thanks to the literal and metaphorical mirrors provided by Delphine and Calinda), here they both discover comfort and value in physical attractiveness. For Tilly, that value, that sense of inner beauty manifesting externally, is reinforced by the reaction she gets from Dr. Hutchings at the showboat performance.

The showboat performance is important in other ways as well. The most significant is that it hints at a deeper connection between the white Delphine and the much darker, clearly black Calinda, the nature of which is revealed in the following section. Also at the performance, Tilly discovers, much to her surprise, that Noah's feelings for Delphine seem to be reciprocated. Her sense that Delphine cares as much for her brother as he cares for her is reinforced later in the narrative when Tilly observes just how upset Delpine becomes when she sees Noah's illness and, later, his injury. The final important element of the performance is the reference in Tilly's narration to "another door" closing inside Delphine. This line reveals that Tilly, for some time up to now and for some time to come, has the sense that Delphine is very guarded about herself and about her inner life. The reasons why (i.e. her racial heritage) are revealed in the following sections.

Finally, there is the reference to Mama looking like "a haunt," again an echo of the reference in Chapter 1 to a female ghost, and a foreshadowing of Cass's revelation of Mana's death in Chapter 14.

Part 2, The House Astride the Devil's Backbone, 1861 - Section 5

Part 2, The House Astride the Devil's Backbone, 1861 - Section 5 Summary

Chapter 10 - The difficult train journey to Cairo is made easier for Delphine and Tilly by the gentlemanly assistance of a pair of soldiers, who give them their seats. Conversation during the journey reveals to Tilly that Delphine is fifteen, only a few months younger than she is. Delphine also hints that she doesn't define marriage the way other people do. When Delphine and Tilly arrive in Cairo, they are met by Dr. Hutchings, who first takes them to where they are to stay (the summer kitchen of a large home owned by a widow) and then to the military camp, Camp Defiance. The first thing they see is a young man about Noah's age tied to a wagon with a sign around his neck labeling him as a thief. Hutchings explained to the shocked Tilly that that's the military version of justice (see "Quotes," p. 112). Meanwhile Delphine, in spite of Dr. Hutchings' resistance, insists upon seeing Noah right away. She and Tilly make their way to the nearest hospital tent. When they go in, they are nearly knocked off their feet by the smell - of vomit, of excrement, of illness. They have the right tent, though - Noah is there, very thin but recovered from the dysentery that laid him low. He recognizes and welcomes them, explaining that as the healthiest man in the tent he is the tent's nurse. Tilly sends Hutchings for some water and then gives the tearfully grateful Noah some of the food she brought. As Noah eats, Tilly notices that at the side of his cot is a book on the arts of war, and comments in narration on how "men's minds are made and how they think, if you can call it thought at all."

Chapter 11 - When they got back to the summer kitchen Tilly, who is almost too tired to stand, helps Delphine unpack all her belongings, including the hand mirror and a portrait of her yellow-haired father. As Tilly describes the fullness of the days, taken up with nursing the boys and cleaning up both their persons and their accommodations, she also comments that their landlady, Mrs. Hanrahan, took care of several officers in her large house, officers that Tilly says didn't really seem to be all that ill. Meanwhile, Noah becomes stronger by the day, and is eventually called back up into active service. As he prepares to go, Tilly prepares herself for an attack which comes sooner than she expected, in an equally unexpected place and in an unexpected way - the summer kitchen.

Chapter 12 - One evening, Mrs. Hanrahan pays what she says is a long overdue call to her new tenants, Tilly and Delphine, and to Tilly's surprise, comments negatively on Delphine being "a colored gal." The resulting confrontation ends with Mrs. Hanrahan leaving in a huff and Delphine explaining to Tilly who she is ... a product of the New Orleans practice of plaçage. The practice, found only in New Orleans, sees a wealthy white man become involved with a free, independent black woman, father one or more

children by her, and set them all up in a high-status home (see "Quotes," p. 130). She adds that had it not been for the war, she might already have a white man of her own. Delphine also reveals that Calinda is not her slave, but her sister.

Part 2, The House Astride the Devil's Backbone, 1861 - Section 5 Analysis

The most noteworthy elements of this section are its two almost shocking revelations. The first is that Delphine is only fifteen years old, which is a shock because up to this point, she has been portrayed as extremely worldly and sophisticated, coming across as being at least in her mid-twenties. The second, and perhaps even more surprising , revelation is that she has partial black ancestry, and is the result of a long established practice of sexual (if not fully social) integration in New Orleans ... a practice tolerated, it seems, but not necessarily accepted, valued, or respected. Here, then, is a prime manifestation of the narrative's thematic interest in the subject of racism - specifically, internalized racism. Delphine, who is clearly able to pass as white, except when it comes to the racism-oriented astuteness of Mrs. Hanrahan, clearly and unquestioningly sees the value of having Caucasian skin tone and features rather than African ones like her sister. In other words, she essentially rejects a fundamental part of herself, albeit out of a degree of necessity - she can have a much better life if she is white. Hence her adoration of her "yellow-haired" father, the man whose essential racial identity has made it possible for her to be treated like more of a human being than her very own sister. Here it's important to note that while the practice of plaçage may have virtually disappeared from the New Orleans way of life, the practice of "passing" (i.e. African-Americans with light enough skin and Caucasian enough features passing for white), and the hope that passing might be possible, continues even today. See "Topics for Discussion - Consider and discuss the practice of ..."

Other important elements of this section include the reference to military justice, which is far more harsh and uncompromising than contemporary military practice, and to the description of Noah's circumstances (blunt, direct, and powerfully evocative of the very real difficulties faced by the soldiers of the time). Then there is Tilly's comment on the male mindset about war, which can be seen as being a sharp commentary on the male mindset in general, and the reference to the officers being cared for by Mrs. Hanrahan (evocative of how money and status brought improved treatment and living conditions, as they have always done). Finally, there is the reference to Mrs. Hanrahan's assault on Delphine as an "attack," a reference which, it could be argued, is a representation of the Civil War in miniature. Delphine represents the North with its views of black people as human beings worthy of dignity, and Mrs. Hanrahan the South with its views of black people being, essentially, sub-human property. Here it's important to note that Mrs. Hanrahan (i.e. the narrative) never explains why or how, exactly, she concludes that Delphine has black ancestry.

Part 2, The House Astride the Devil's Backbone, 1861 - Section 6

Part 2, The House Astride the Devil's Backbone, 1861 - Section 6 Summary

Chapter 13 - The day before Noah is to be shipped out, he poses for a photo with Delphine and Tilly that, Tilly says in narration, she still has. The first attempt ends with the photographic glass accidentally shattering on the floor, which Delphine says is a bad omen. Later, on their way to the docks to see Noah off, the ladies encounter Dr. Hutchings, now dressed in uniform. They see him off as well, along with three hundred other soldiers, sailing down the river into what history records as the infamous Battle of Belmont. As she and Delphine watch the boats leave, Tilly realizes just how much Delphine is in love with Noah. The next day, Noah is among the few living soldiers who return from the battle, but he has been seriously injured - his left arm was almost completely blown off. Hutchings tells Tilly that he took the arm off completely on the boat and threw the arm into the river along with all the other limbs he had to amputate. Noah is nursed back to health in the summer kitchen, delirious with fever and pain from the missing arm. At one point, Tilly considers sending a letter home telling everyone there that Noah is alive. Delphine says that Calinda, for one, would never believe it, since she had seen death in her fortune-telling cards - a coffin being shipped up the river to the family home.

Chapter 14 - As they nurse Noah back to health, Delphine and Tilly talk more deeply about Tilly's life in New Orleans. Delphine reveals that she believes the South will lose the war and that as a result her life back home will be over. She also reveals that she has a brother in Paris. His skin is as white as hers, she says, and in France he will become a Frenchman; no-one will ask questions, and he will have a good life. Eventually Noah recovers enough to be taken home. As Delphine and Tilly prepare to leave, Mrs. Hanrahan violently rids herself of any sign that Delphine had been there, and Tilly realizes how strongly attracted she and Dr. Hutchings are to each other. She and Delphine take Noah on the train back north, Tilly noting their good fortune in the f ace of so many soldiers who have been left on their own to walk. When they arrive back in Grand Tower, Tilly is delighted at the sight of her home (see "Quotes," p. 143) but is shocked by a series of surprises. Cass is again thin and pale looking; the body of Paw, who had been fighting on the side of the South (see "Quotes," p. 144) has been shipped home (the coffin on the river envisioned by Calinda); and Mama, convinced that Noah was the body in the arriving coffin, threw herself in the river and drowned. After viewing Paw's coffin in the woodshed, Noah leads Cass and Tilly back into the house.

Part 2, The House Astride the Devil's Backbone, 1861 - Section 6 Analysis

This section contains the climax of the main portion of the narrative (i.e. Tilly's story) - specifically, the return of the wounded Noah from battle. His injury and long recovery function on several levels. These include its metaphoric evocation of how the social fabric of the entire United States was maimed, like Noah, in the aftermath of the Civil War, and as a similarly metaphoric manifestation of the river as a repository of suffering (i.e. his and other amputated limbs). His injury and return also serve as a trigger for his deepening relationship with Delphine, while his return home offers metaphoric hope that even in the greatest suffering, there are still positive possibilities for the future. This last, in turn, is echoed in Tilly's discovery of the potential for a relationship between her and Dr. Hutchings. Here again, her commentary is both an echo of what the reader knows from Chapter 1 and will discover in Chapter 15 about their relationship.

Other important points to note include the fact that, as is the case with the narrative context of the entire book, the context of Noah's injury (i.e. the Battle of Belmont) is based on actual historical events and circumstances (see "Objects/Places - The Battle of Belmont"). Then there is the revelation of Delphine's brother, which can be seen not only as a further manifestation of how racism manifested and functioned at this time and place and, it could be argued, continues to function today, but also as a manifestation of sexism. Delphine's brother can make his own life as an independent man, a life that takes him even further away from his ancestry (a distance metaphorically represented by his geographical distance from his family). Delphine, by contrast, could only have lived as independently as a relationship WITH a man could allow.

Finally, there is the series of revelations that emerges at the end of Chapter 14 - specifically, the deaths of both Paw and Mama. The former, when juxtaposed with Noah's injuries, can be seen as evocative of a situation that often emerged in the real-life circumstances of the Civil War - family members living in opposing parts of the United States often found themselves opposing each other, either directly or indirectly, on the battlefield. The latter is both ironic and sad, given that Mama clearly did not have enough capacity for visions to realize the true identity of the person in the coffin. Neither did she have enough spiritual or emotional courage to face the truth, letting fear (i.e. of Noah's death) overcome her, in ways that, arguably, neither of her daughters nor her houseguests ever did. In other words, all four of the young women in Mama's house (Tilly, Delphine, Cass and Calinda) display forms of bravery and strength that enable each of them, albeit in very different ways, to face and cope with their respective realities. See "Topics for Discussion - In what ways do the book's four young women ..."

Part 3, Time and the Mississippi River, 1916

Part 3, Time and the Mississippi River, 1916 Summary

Chapter 15 - The narrative voice returns to that of Howard Hutchings. He describes how his father spends most of his time during the family's visit talking with Delphine. At the same time, Howard spends most of his time talking with Grandma Tilly, or rather, listening to her as she tells the story revealed in the middle section of the book. "She handed over the past like a parcel," Howard comments in narration, "seizing these days to do it." He also comments on her suggestion that time is like a river, that it only flows in one direction, by suggesting that she has caused time to move in reverse ... that she took him into the past.

On the day before Howard and his family are to leave for home, he and Tilly spend one last afternoon together, Tilly pointing out the cemetery where Cass is buried, having died from diphtheria the year after the war ended, and where Paw is also buried. Tilly also reveals that after the war, Calinda went to California where, she believed, she could pass as Spanish, and that Mama was "taken by the river." Finally, Tilly reveals that Noah and Delphine never married; it would have been, according to Delphine, a betrayal of everything valued by her mother who was, Tilly says, killed during the war.

The next day, Howard's father allows him to drive the car as Howard's father waves goodbye to his family - the ones who could come to the porch to wave, that is. Delphine, Howard comments in narration, is dying and unable to leave her bed. That night, as they've stopped for food and for sleep, with the two boys in the back seat of the car, Howard's father reveals a few more family secrets. First, he reveals that Delphine and Noah are his true parents, that Delphine gave custody of him to Tilly and Dr. Hutchings in order to protect him from potential prejudice, and that Howard's father is planning to go fight in the new war ... World War I. His father adds that it is now up to Howard to be the man of the family (see "Quotes," p. 157), and that he hopes that Howard will one day be as proud of the family that came before him as he is. Howard comments in narration that he is already proud, and determined to make sure that when the time comes, his own family is also proud.

Part 3, Time and the Mississippi River, 1916 Analysis

This chapter is essentially an epilogue, in the same way as the first chapter is essentially a prologue, both chapters providing what amounts to a pair of bookends to the main story. That is not to say that this final chapter is devoid of information or without narrative purpose. On the contrary, Howard's story provides the narrative with one last surprising revelation - the true identity of his father's parents ... of his grandparents. Here it's particularly interesting to note that Howard makes no comment

whatsoever on his discovery that he has African-American ancestry ... no direct comment, that is. The comments in the book's final moments, both his own and those he quotes of his father, clearly imply that in their minds, such ancestry is absolutely nothing to be ashamed of - in fact, it is something to be proud of. One wonders, however, whether Howard's mother, not to mention other white people of the time (the early 1900's) would feel the same way. For further consideration of this aspect of the book, see "Topics for Discussion - Why, do you think, Howard's northern mother..."

Another important element in this section is the likening of time to a river and the reference to the impending World War I, both manifestations of one of the narrative's secondary thematic interests, the relationship between past and present. Finally, there is Delphine's comment that to marry in the traditional way would be a betrayal of her mother's beliefs and values. While neither she nor the narrative explicitly defines what those values are, there is the sense that among the most important of them are independence and freedom, of the sort that women benefiting financially and socially from the process of plaçage have had to proclaim as a virtue. It could also be argued, however, that this sort of freedom can be perceived, under other circumstances and with an eye to the inherent racism of the system, as rejection, secrecy, or shame.

Characters

Tilly

Tilly is the novel's central character and protagonist. She appears as an elderly woman in Chapters 1 and 15 (the book's Prologue and Epilogue), only glimpsed in the former and spoken of in the latter. In the main body of the work, of which she is the narrator, she is a teenaged girl of fifteen, portrayed as unsophisticated but sensitive and compassionate, curious and well intentioned. She cares deeply for her family, particularly her younger sister Cass and her twin brother Noah. When the much more worldly Delphine comes into her life and the two young women become closer friends, Tilly becomes increasingly aware of herself as a human being, a transformation both symbolized and initiated by her first sight of herself in Delphine's hand mirror (see Chapter 6, and also "Objects/Places"). As a result of Delphine's presence and influence, Tilly discovers strength, courage, and compassion, as well as a capacity for love and insight, that she never knew she had. She comes to realize the power and value of seeing and valuing people for who and what they are, not for what they are believed or rumored to be. This can be seen as one of the work's themes, the value of looking past prejudice, a thematic consideration which, in turn, can be seen as being grounded in Tilly's capacity for unconditional love, demonstrated first in her acceptance and recognition of both the good and bad in all the people around her (Delphine's essential selfishness, Cass's vulnerability and moodiness, Mama's bossiness) and, perhaps most importantly, in her adoption of Delphine and Noah's child as her own (see Chapter 15).

Delphine

New Orleans-born Delphine is the book's other main character, and is arguably the work's primary antagonist, in the sense that she, like many antagonists, is the primary trigger of change or conflict with the protagonist. She challenges Tilly and triggers change in her, not so much through angry confrontation or manipulation, but simply by being who she is ... someone very different from Tilly, to whom Delphine is similar in age (Delphine is a few months younger). Delphine is far more worldly and sophisticated, accustomed to both wealth and being waited upon. She comes across as somewhat spoiled and selfish, but is also strong willed and independent-minded, determined and confident, all aspects of her personality that rub off not only on Tilly, triggering lasting change, but on Mama as well, for whom the change is not quite so enduring.

Delphine, as she admits to Tilly, is a product of the lifestyle, found only in New Orleans, of plaçage, a system in which wealthy and influential white men established and sustained relationships with free, independent black women and any children they may have had together. As a result of her ancestry, Delphine is able to pass as white, and receive all the social and economic advantages of being white, whereas her darker sister Calinda (see below) is unable to do so. Also as a result of her ancestry, however, Delphine has very clear ideas on what relationships with the opposite sex should be,

with the result that she has very different, some might say limited, ideas about marriage. This is why, as an adult, she refused to marry Noah and insisted their child be raised by a legitimately married couple, Tilly and Dr. Hutchings.

Noah

Noah is Tilly's beloved twin brother, quieter than she is but just as hard working and just as devoted to family. He carries the weight and responsibility of being the head of the household at a very young age, his father having disappeared several years before the narrative begins. He becomes infatuated with, and devoted to, Delphine almost at first sight (Chapter 3), but is unable or unwilling to reveal his feelings to her until the dance on the showboat (Chapter 8), shortly before he goes off to war. The narrative never explicitly comments on whether this latter circumstance plays an important and/or triggering role in his decision to ask her to dance, but it would be reasonable to assume that it might. The adult Noah is a distant, but intriguing, presence in both the prologue and the epilogue (Chapters 1 and 15).

Cass

Cass appears only in the main body of the story (i.e. the sections set in the past and narrated by Tilly). She is Tilly and Noah's younger sister, small and slender and frail, and has "visions," glimpses of the past and the future. Her name is perhaps an evocation of Cassandra, a woman in Ancient Greek mythology who, like Cass, was haunted by visions of the future. In any case, this Cass is a needy, sensitive presence, who inspires a spirit of protectiveness in the other members of her family, all of whom are pleased when she develops a friendship with Delphine's "companion" Calinda (see below). Cass dies shortly after the war and is buried, according to Tilly's commentary in Chapter 15, in a cemetery at the bottom of the hill.

Mama, Paw

Mama is the mother of Tilly, Noah and Cass, and has raised them alone for several years as the result of Paw's long-ago disappearance. At first glance, Mama is tough and stern, but also has a deep relationship with Noah, of whom she is extremely protective. She also has a close relationship with Cass, due in part to their both having the capacity for visions. Her relationship with Tilly is less close, as evidenced by Mama's comment in Chapter 9, when she is sending Tilly and Delphine to rescue Noah, that she (Mama) can "spare" Tilly, but can't "spare" Noah. It's interesting to note that Tilly doesn't seem to blame or resent Mama at all for saying such a thing or having such feelings, perhaps another example of Tilly's capacity for unconditional love (see "Tilly," above).

Calinda

The dark-skinned Calinda arrives on the ship from New Orleans with Delphine, and at Tilly's first glance appears to be a servant, perhaps even a slave. Over the course of the narrative, however, the mysterious, quiet Calinda, who, like Cass, can see visions, is revealed to be Delphine's sister, her darker skin tone marking her as inferior in the minds of both her family and the society (the Southern United States) from which she comes. She is friend and confidante to Delphine and to Cass, but eventually chooses to leave for California where, as Tilly tells Howard in Chapter 15, she could hopefully pass as Hispanic, escaping the racism-defined constrictions and conditions of her life.

Dr. (William) Hutchings

The man who eventually became her husband is portrayed in Tilly's narrative of the past as quiet, responsible, respectful and determined. His attraction to her, and eventual desire to dance with her, come as a considerable surprise to her, but a welcome one, his attentions proving to her that, in her own way, she can be as desirable as Delphine. An interesting aspect of this character is how Tilly, according to Howard's narration, only refers to him, with other people, as Dr. Hutchings. Referring to him in such a way is not intended to suggest that their marriage was formal or loveless, but rather a reflection of the habit of the times and the practices of respect and formality.

Curry Marshall

Curry Marshall is a boy in Grand Tower on whom Tilly has a crush. Rough around the edges and a supporter of the Southern cause, Curry loses Tilly's interest when she, as the result of Delphine's influence, comes to realize that there is more to life, and more to living, than what she has discovered living in Grand Tower.

Mrs. Hanrahan

The well-off Mrs. Hanrahan is the woman with whom Delphine and Tilly make their temporary home when they travel to Cairo to retrieve Noah. The observant, sharp-tongued, and racist Mrs. Hanrahan concludes that Delphine has black ancestry almost as soon as the two women meet, and her confrontation with Delphine on the subject triggers realizations in Tilly that her friend is not what she believed her to be.

Howard Leland Hutchings

Howard is the narrator of the prologue and the epilogue (Chapters 1 and 15). Similar in age to the young Tilly and Noah, Howard is excited to be visiting them in the company of his father, and moved by both his grandmother's story and his father's revelation of truths that Tilly did not include in that story. This is the family secret that he is not, in

fact, Tilly's son, but is instead the child of Delphine and Noah, whom Howard had believed to be his father's uncle and aunt. When his father urges him to be proud of his family, Howard's narration indicates that he already is, another manifestation of the book's thematic interest in looking past prejudice to the truth of identity.

Dr. William Hutchings Jr.

The junior Dr. Hutchings is Howard's father, and for all intents and purposes the son of Dr. Hutchings and Tilly. He is, however, eventually revealed to be the biological child of the couple he had believed to be his uncle and aunt, Noah and Delphine, the latter unable to "trust the world" to not see her for what she was and turn on her son. Nevertheless, William Hutchings Jr. has pride in all of his family, pride he passes on to his son.

Objects/Places

The Model T Ford

This is the vehicle, one of the earliest and most famous automobiles ever made, in which Howard Hutchings is taken by his father to see his grandparents.

St. Louis, Missouri

St. Louis is the hometown of Howard Hutchings, narrator of Chapters 1 and 15, and his family. Larger, more urban and more sophisticated, as well as being further north, St. Louis is glancingly portrayed as a significant contrast to the small, rural, and rougher town (see "Grand Tower, Illinois" below) from which his father comes.

The Mississippi River

The Mississippi River divides Missouri from Illinois, and which separates the two mountains. When Howard's father takes his sons from St. Louis to Grand Tower, his travel plans center on keeping the river on his right side - in other words, he is traveling on the eastern side of the river.

Grand Tower, Illinois

Grand Tower is a small community in Southern Illinois. Close to the border between the Northern and Southern parts of the United States in the Civil War, its loyalties were divided and tensions between the two parts of the community volatile.

The Devil's Backbone (Illinois), Tower Rock (Missouri)

Grand Tower is built near this mountain, a high and rocky ridge on the Illinois side of the border. On the Missouri side is a similarly rocky hill called Tower Rock which, although it's on the opposite side of the river, gave Grand Tower its name - no-one, Grandma Tilly explains to her grandson, wanted to live in a town named after the Devil.

Grand Tower house

This is the house to which Howard and his family travels in Chapter 1, which they leave in Chapter 15, and which is the primary setting for the narrative of all the chapters in between ... the decades old family farm inherited by Grandma Tilly and Uncle Noah after the suicide of their mother. The house is described as shabby and in bad repair, but nonetheless with a warm and welcoming atmosphere full of memories.

Delphine's Mirror

After Delphine has settled in at Tilly's home, her mother sends her a package of things from home, including a hand mirror in which Tilly sees her own face for the first time. As previously discussed, the mirror is a symbolic representation of what Delphine herself does for Tilly - awaken her to insight about herself. But where the mirror enables Tilly to see her outer side, Delphine enables Tilly to discover things about her INNER life.

Cairo

Cairo (pronounced "kay-ro" is the largest community in "Egypt," and is rough, violent and angry. Tilly and Delphine travel to Cairo to retrieve the extremely ill Noah.

Camp Defiance

At the junction of the Mississippi and Ohio Rivers near Cairo, Camp Defiance is set up as the headquarters for the Northern army in the region. Filthy, disorganized and riddled with disease, Tilly and Delphine make their way to, and through, the camp to find and retrieve the extremely ill Noah.

Mrs. Hanrahan's House

This house, or rather its back kitchen, is where Tilly and Delphine stay in Cairo when they travel there in search of Noah. Cramped and uncomfortable, made even more so when Delphine unpacks all her belongings, the house of the wealthy Mrs. Hanrahan is the setting for one of the narrative's most important confrontations - the argument between Mrs. Hanrahan and Delphine, through which Tilly discovers the secret of Delphine's ancestry.

Plaçage

"Plaçage" is the term given to the practice, unique to New Orleans, of a wealthy and influential white man giving financial support and a degree of social status to his non-white mistresses and their children. The women who benefitted from plaçage considered themselves, and were often considered by white citizens, as being of a higher class than poorer, less advantaged, so-called "pure" whites like the Irish-ancestored Mrs. Hanrahan. Delphine is a second generation descendant of plaçage, her black grandmother having chosen a powerful white man and given birth to Delphine's mother, who herself chose a similarly powerful white man and subsequently gave birth to Delphine (see "Quotes," p. 129).

The Tignon

The tignon is a particular style of headscarf worn by Calinda throughout the narrative, and which Cass, in emulation of her friend, puts on at one point (Chapter 6), only to have it ripped off by the angry Delphine. According to the author's afterword, the tignon became the accepted headgear for women benefitting from the plaçage system - women of the time had to cover their heads, the women of plaçage wearing the headscarves of female slaves decorated with feathers and jewels to proclaim their heightened status. Delphine's angry comment in Chapter 6 that Cass has not "earned" the tignon suggests that for Delphine, Cass has not reached a high enough financial or social status. It is, in other words, a negative judgment of the sort that, ironically enough, Delphine refuses to accept from other people about HER. She is, in this moment, a hypocrite.

Themes

Racism

An atmosphere of racism pervades the entire novel, particularly the central section narrated by the younger Tilly. There, virtually every narrative element having to do with Delphine and Calinda is defined to one degree or another by racist sensibilities or, to be strictly accurate, by the fact that they're from the Southern United States, a part of the world in which the entire culture was grounded in systemic racism, primarily manifesting in the form of slavery. More specifically, the American Civil War, the context within which the central narrative is set, was fought on the grounds of the South's determination to perpetuate that racism and the North's determination to bring it to an end. Also, Delphine's social situation as the descendent of a black woman is completely defined by racist perceptions and beliefs, as is the situation of Calinda. A vivid manifestation of those beliefs can be found in the relationship between Delphine and Mrs. Hanrahan, the attitudes of the latter manifesting the bitter, violent racism of the American South of the time and, some would argue, of today.

In the prologue and epilogue, Chapters 1 and 15, the question of racism is explored more subtly. In fact, the racism in Chapter 1, or the implication of racism, is perceivable only in hindsight - see "Topics for Discussion - Why, do you think, Howard's Northern mother..." In Chapter 15, the question of race is never overtly discussed, but given its presence in what has gone before (i.e. Tilly's story); the reader cannot fail to notice the implications of Howard's father's urging of his son to be proud of his family - all of his family. This, in fact, is the key manifestation, in the novel, of its second major theme, the necessity for and value of looking past prejudice.

Looking Past Prejudice

This theme manifests on several levels throughout the narrative. The most significant, as indicated above, is contained in the implications of what Howard's father tells him about having pride in his family. Howard is, in no uncertain terms, told to take pride in EVERYTHING his family, including the partly black Delphine, has accomplished. Howard's closing affirmation that he is, in fact, very proud of his family asserts to the reader that he is doing or has done what his father asks. In moving beyond the racism that, in many ways, has defined the lives of his family for generations, Howard is enacting and manifesting the book's second primary theme, the need for looking past and transcending prejudice.

Other ways in which this theme manifests relate to prejudices other than racial. Delphine, in making friends with Tilly and embracing her own love for Noah, becomes able to look past her prejudices against poverty and the lower classes. Mama becomes able to look past her prejudices against Southern people and against wealth to embrace and help Delphine, a person who is, plain and simple, in need. All these examples of

how prejudice can be transcended are highlighted by the contrasting presence of characters and/or situations where prejudice manifests clearly and vividly. These include the previously discussed appearance of Mrs. Hanrahan, and also the appearance of the town ladies when they visit Mama in an effort to convince her that Delphine is a spy (Chapter 7).

Both the book's thematic interest in racism and in looking past prejudice are, in their turn, defined by the book's third major theme, the relationship between past and present.

The Relationship between Past and Present

Racism and prejudice are, in a fundamental way, attitudes defined by past experience, by beliefs and values imparted by those who have gone before. In other words, they are learned behaviors. In the words of the famous, anti-racism anthem from the musical "South Pacific," "You've got to be taught to be afraid / Of those whose skin is a different shade / Or those whose eyes are oddly made / You've got to be carefully taught." With that in mind, then, the first aspect of the book's thematic exploration of past and present is manifest in its second primary theme - the transcendence of prejudice of any sort is a triumph of present over past.

The relationship between past and present, or more specifically how the present is defined by the past, manifests in other ways as well - in how the situation of Tilly's family in the present is defined by the past disappearance of Paw, and in how Delphine's present day life is defined by choices made by her parents and grandparents. Cass's visions of the past can, in some way, be seen as metaphoric echoes of all these situations ... in the same way as her present is literally haunted by experiences of the past, the present situations of those around her are "haunted" by what has previously happened in THEIR lives.

One last manifestation of this theme can be found in Chapter 15, at the point where narrator Howard comments, almost in passing, on the impending departure of his father to fight in World War I. There is a sense of the cyclical here, of history repeating itself - of Howard`s father going off to war in the same way as his grandfather did and, if the reader thinks forward a few years, as Howard himself might well end up doing ... only in his case, he might end up going into World War II. The idea here is that the past not only informs the present, but is recreated in the present - that life, and time, are ultimately cyclical.

Style

Point of View

The story is told from two different narrative points of view. The first and final chapters, essentially the book's prologue and epilogue, are recounted in the first person subjective voice of narrator Howard Hutchings, an adult recalling an incident in his childhood and doing so from the point of view of a somewhat naïve, but undeniably open minded, young man discovering new truths about himself, his family, and his life. Howard portrays himself as excited about the possibilities of life, both in terms of what he is experiencing in the present and, as the final chapter makes clear, how experiences in the past have made his present day family who and what they are.

The chapters in between are recounted in the first person subjective voice of Tilly, who appears in the Howard Hutchings chapters as his elderly grandmother and who, like Howard, is an adult telling a story of what happened in childhood. For further consideration of the differences and similarities in the narrative voices and/or experiences of these two narrators, see "Language and Meaning" below. In terms of point of view, though, it's essential to note that both the younger Tilly and the younger Howard accept people, situations and circumstances as they are; in other words, they are both essentially free, or become essentially free, from prejudice. As such, they embody and manifest one of the narrative's central themes, and are representative of the work's thematic point of view, its essential contention that racism, and indeed prejudice of any sort, are negative to the point of being destructive, a situation that is also inherent in the next of the book's stylistic considerations, its setting.

Setting

The main body of the narrative, the central section narrated by Tilly, is set in America in the mid-1800's. Specifically, the action unfolds during the four tumultuous years of the American Civil War fought between the Northern states, which advocated equality and freedom for slaves, and the Southern states, which fought to retain the institution of slavery, the foundation upon which their entire economic and social structure was constructed. It is, in short, the ideal setting for an exploration of themes related to the nature of prejudice and the need for and value of transcending it. Here, it's important to note that the national scope of these prejudice-based divisions is echoed in the specific locality in which the narrative is set - in a small town on one side of the Mississippi River, the "river" of the book's title. For further consideration of the book's title and its thematic implications, see "Topics for Discussion - What are the literal and metaphorical meanings ..."

The opening and closing chapters of the book, by contrast, are set in a time more than fifty years later. In terms of actual history, it was a time when memories of the Civil War were still fresh and many of the divisions that both triggered and emerged from the war

were still present. In terms of the novel, however, this last situation is implied, rather than explicitly discussed. There are oblique references to lingering racism and prejudice in the comments made by Howard's father about Delphine's worries about her child (Chapter 15) and in the passing reference to the unhappiness of Howard's mother (Chapter 1).

Language and Meaning

In both the cases of the book's two narrators (see "Point of View" above), the language used is, for the most part, appropriate to the experiences of the young people whose lives are being described. Here it's important to note that while narrator Tilly is describing life lived in a very different time and place from that of her eventual grandson (narrator Howard), several elements of their narrative voices are, perhaps surprisingly, similar. The two narrators both portray, in their younger selves, a sense of curiosity and excitement, of eagerness to know more about the world and a willingness to embrace what they discover. In other words language, like "Point of View" above, simultaneously manifests and defines the work's central themes.

One other point to note about the work's use of language is the stark, uncompromising way in which the conditions of Noah and the other soldiers are portrayed. The sense of atmosphere around the camp where they are quartered (Camp Defiance - see "Objects/Places"), the sense of squalor and decay, the smell and the dirt and the disease - all are powerfully and vividly evoked. The reader gets a very clear experience of what Noah and the soldiers are living through, not to mention the shock and surprise the delicate Delphine and the less delicate but still sensitive Tilly experience when they encounter that atmosphere for the first time.

Finally, there is the subtle evocation of meaning in the sensitively written final chapter. The words "racism" or "black" are never used, but it is nevertheless completely clear that when Howard's father asks him to ensure that he has pride in his family, he is in fact talking about pride in the black side of the family.

Structure

As previously discussed, the narrative is bookended by two chapters that essentially serve as a prologue, or introduction (Chapter 1) and an epilogue, or summing up (Chapter 15). These two chapters, also as previously discussed, contain scenes and conversations that, in many ways, sum up the work's central themes - specifically, its interest in and commentary on racism and the value of transcending prejudice of all sorts. The narrative of Chapter 15 also contains references to the central section of the book (Chapters 2 through 14) being a story told to the youthful Howard Hutchings (narrator of Chapters 1 and 15) by his grandmother Tilly who, in the central section, is a young woman of fifteen. In this context, structure can be seen as echoing and manifesting theme - specifically, the book's thematic interest in exploring the relationship between past and present.

Within this structure, the narrative of the middle section follows a narrative line that in technical terms is traditionally described as episodic ... as a depiction of a series of incidents that are lightly tied together by the experiences of the characters and the thematic intent of the novel. This is different from similarly traditional plot driven structure, in which incidents are portrayed as having a direct cause-and-effect, action-reaction relationship (i.e. this happens, then that happens as a result). This structure echoes the narrative voice and point of view of the narrator, the elderly Tilly (see "Point of View" above), the vaguely rambling style of the storytelling reflecting the sometimes unfocused state of mind of the elderly.

Quotes

"Apparently, my dad had been young once, but I couldn't picture it. Even at the age of fifteen I knew but little about who he was and where he'd come from. And so I knew but little about myself."
Chapter 1, p. 6

"The Ford was a touring car, which meant it had a canvas pull-up roof in case of rain, or for when you spent a night on the road."
Ibid, p. 8

"The paper was loose and peeling on the walls. I wondered how many layers you'd have to scrape away until you came to the time when these old people were young. If they ever were. I wondered how quiet you'd have to be to hear the voices of those times."
Ibid, p. 15

"That was the way with Delphine. You tried to think of ways to please her. I saw that on the first day ... I looked back to the way life had been yesterday, and couldn't find it."
Chapter 4, p. 47

"... Delphine ... could tell you so much that you thought you'd heard it all. Her conversation was a lacework fan that opened and closed, concealing and revealing."
Ibid, p. 50

"It took her no time to make me see the vast sweep of Duval cotton fields stretching for miles back from the river. She raised before my very eyes the columns that held up their deep porches, white as marble in the dazzling day. I saw the great houses of the Duvals standing in gardens hung with Spanish moss."
Chapter 5, p. 56

"...it made me so real. I'm not sure I knew that I existed and took up space of my own before I saw me in that mirror."
Chapter 6, p. 62

"...she needed what I couldn't give. Her and Calinda spoke a language I was deaf to, a language of prophecies and cures, of visions and the medicines waiting out in the timber to heal the afflicted. They spoke in tongues foreign to me, even when they weren't speaking at all."
Ibid, p. 65

"I caught a glimpse of happiness, and saw it was a bird on a branch, fixing to take wing."
Ibid, p. 66

"...Delphine made me begin to look around myself, and farther from myself. I didn't know what to make of that great world she come from, but she made me want more in my small one. And so Curry and me wasn't to be."
Ibid, p. 70

"I didn't know grown people changed, or were changed. I thought being grown was safer than that."
Chapter 7, p. 80

"They were both being called back by the mysterious place where they'd begun. I seemed to smell all the scents that traveled in their trunks, the spice and sweetgrass, the coffee and damp."
Chapter 8, p. 93

"He wasn't Noah, but he was somebody's son. I saw then that I was going to have to be stronger than I was. 'Military justice is rough justice,' Dr. Hutchings said, 'or no justice at all.'"
Chapter 10, p. 112

"All I could think of was what a terrible place the world is. What a mean, ugly, hard place. I swore if I ever got back to Grand Tower, they'd have to bind and gag me and drag me behind a mule to get me out of town again."
Chapter 11, p. 127

"'I am a ... free woman of color. French blood flow through me and Spanish blood and African blood. It is the African blood they despise. Is it not curious?" Chapter 12, p. 129

"'We free people of color live on a kind of island, lapped by a sea of slavery. Beyond that sea is this territory up here ... like the mountains of the moon to us.'"
Ibid, p. 130

"How many, I wondered, began that way, in the wake of war? How many like Noah reached out with the only hands they had left to women who would help them heal?"
Chapter 14, p. 142

"... that was the very last time when I was truly young, young in my heart. That breathless moment in the rattling backboard, almost safely home."
Ibid, p. 143

"It was fitting that Paw had ended up fighting on the other side. He'd never been on ours."
Ibid, p. 144

"At first I didn't know how to listen to tales that old. But we began to edge across the years toward each other, Grandma Tilly and I. I began to see the yellow lamplight on their faces, just a flicker at first. I heard calliope music wavering over the water. At every turn the story took, I remembered I was just about the age now they were then."
Chapter 15, p. 151

"This was something Grandma Tilly couldn't understand - how war promises a boy it can make a man out of him."
Ibid, p. 157

Topics for Discussion

Why, do you think, Howard's northern mother is reluctant to join her family on the visit to her husband's parents?

In what ways are the circumstances of Tilly and Delphine similar? Consider, in particular, their family situation and their personal character. In what ways are their circumstances, and their responses to those circumstances, very different? Consider, in particular, their perspectives on their fathers and how their relationships with their fathers evolve and/or manifest.

Consider and discuss the practice of, and need for "passing" (i.e. black people with the "right" skin tone and the "right" sort of features "passing" as white). Why do you think this was important during the time of the novel's setting (i.e. the Civil War)? Why do you think passing might be important now, as it still is? What do black people stand to gain if they are perceived as white? What do they stand to lose if they are perceived as black?

In what ways do each of the book's four young women (Tilly, Delphine, Calinda, Cass) display courage and strength in facing, and dealing with, their respective realities? In what ways do they conquer fear? In what ways do they make difficult choices in order to survive? In what ways do their respective choices echo each other?

What is your experience of racism? Have you ever been on the receiving end of racist comments or actions? Have you ever witnessed them? What is your experience of discrimination in general? Where do you think it comes from? Why do you think people practice discrimination? How does it feel when you are discriminated against, or observe someone being discriminated against?

Have you ever had an experience where you have deliberately chosen to move past a prejudice and see a human being and/or situation for what it is, free of previous beliefs or conditioning? What triggered that choice? What consequences did you experience for that choice?

What past beliefs and/or values have you let go of as you come, as Tilly does, to a greater understanding of the world and the different sorts of people and values in it? Did the need and/or capacity for letting go of those beliefs come as a surprise? Did you think you would be able to let go of such beliefs?

What are the literal and metaphorical meanings of the book's title? What actual river does it refer to? What kind of symbolic "river" exists between the characters? Who is the "us" of the title? What, do you think, is the symbolic value of the river being both a bringer of sustenance (i.e. the boats of goods) and a repository of death (i.e. the bodies of the soldiers envisioned by Cass, the body of Mama, the dead/amputated limbs of Noah and the other soldiers)?

Howard Hutchings makes surprising discoveries about his family, and is in some ways changed by them. Have you ever made discoveries about your parents and grandparents that changed your views?