

Song of the Shank Study Guide

Song of the Shank by Jeffery Renard Allen

(c)2015 BookRags, Inc. All rights reserved.



Contents

Song of the Shank Study Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Plot Summary.....	3
Chapter 1.....	6
Chapter 2.....	11
Chapter 3.....	16
Chapter 4.....	20
Chapter 5.....	24
Chapter 6.....	26
Chapter 7.....	30
Chapter 8.....	33
Chapter 9.....	37
Characters.....	40
Symbols and Symbolism.....	46
Settings.....	48
Themes and Motifs.....	50
Styles.....	55
Quotes.....	56



Plot Summary

Song of the Shank, by Renard Allen describes the life of Blind Tom and all of the caring and greedy people who care for him through the years. However, the story does not have a linear plot structure. It begins during Tom's adult years, then goes back to the early years describing his childhood, his family, and the many people who take control of his life as both he and his talents and abilities grow. The reader sees the many ways in which Tom's world is turned upside down over and over as he's switched from owner to owner and manager to manager, throughout his developmental years with the backdrop of the Civil War looming greatly behind all aspects of his life and that of the entire country.

While still a baby, Thomas' mother, Charity, realizes that he has been born blind. The entire family is placed at auction to be sold to another owner. General James Bethune buys the entire family and takes them to his plantation, Hundred Gates. There the family lives in the slave quarters and goes about the business of plantation work. Keeping up with a blind toddler proves to be a challenge. It actually takes his mother and sisters to accomplish this task, yet he still alludes them occasionally and gets into trouble and danger. As a toddler, Tom's family is already aware of his special abilities that become evident to them and their owners, the Bethunes, when he is witnessed recreating and mimicking all sounds. He is fascinated by every sound he hears and often wanders off to explore a sound he hears in a world he cannot see. Soon the family realizes that Thomas is not only blind, but developmentally challenged as well. Charity, his mother, describes him as, "Her unusual son...She prefers the term curious" (Ch. 3, par. 12). He does many dangerous things, even poking sticks in his own eyes until they bleed. Mrs. Mary Bethune allows Charity to bring him to "the big house" while she does her chores. Here they all discover together that Thomas' mimicking of sounds doesn't stop with animals and the daily sounds around him. While waiting in the Bethune house for his mother to complete her work, Thomas, as usual, wanders off. He ends up in the room with the piano where the Bethune girls have recently had their lesson. He climbs onto the bench and plays the very songs that the girls had been practicing. Once General Bethune hears of and observes this talent, he moves Thomas into "the big house" with his family where Thomas is put on display before the town first and then on to bigger venues. He is now known on the stage as "Blind Tom" and to the newspaper and interested public as Tom Bethune, no longer Thomas Wiggins.

After General Bethune's exploitation of Tom initially, the next person to manage and take advantage of Tom's talents is Perry Oliver. He and his "understudy," Seven, put much effort into trying to control and manage Tom with the idea that Tom will perform on stage making them a lot of money. Although Seven, a young boy himself, is the one who actually, not only took care of and trained Tom, but loved him too, their outcome is successful as expected. Tom stays with Perry Oliver and Seven for many years after they have groomed him for the stage. He is taken from city to city to perform his act and demonstrate his amazing abilities which include reciting speeches he has heard and entire chapters or sections of novels, all word-for-word. He gives interviews to the press and answers their questions with his own truthfulness and understanding of the world



and his life. As the Civil War becomes a reality, he represents the Southern armies going to war and during various battles with patriotic songs.

In light of the impending loss of the Civil War by the South, General Bethune takes Tom from Perry Oliver. He tells Oliver that he has profited from Tom for many years and that he, Bethune, must take him back because he can't be expected to lose everything after the losses at war. Tom can help General Bethune's family financially. Oliver and Seven are devastated by the loss of Tom.

During the time when General Bethune is reaping rewards from Tom's talent, a black man, named Tabbs Gross, approaches him and asks to take Tom with him and manage his career. He puts money upfront and offers the bulk of the payment when the contracts are signed. Although Mr. Gross meets alone; General Bethune brings his lawyer, Mr. Geryon; the stage manager, Mr. Warhurst; the pastor, Reverend H.D. Frye; and the medical specialist, Dr. Hollister. Although negotiations go better than Mr. Gross could have hoped, they sign contracts and transfer money, and they agree upon a location to trade Tom, himself. General Bethune has the money, but on the day that he is to bring Tom to Mr. Gross, he sends his lawyer saying that they found illegal activity in Mr. Gross' past, and because he lied, the contract is voided. They keep Tom and most of Tabbs' money.

Tom ends up in the custody of General Bethune's son, Sharpe and his wife Eliza, who formerly worked for a Dr. McCunes, a black doctor who runs the Eternally Benevolent Asylum for Ill-Fated Offspring of the Sable Race. Eliza was the house matron who met Sharpe when Sharpe offered for Tom to give a concert for the patients in the asylum. At that time, Tom was being cared for by Sharpe and his stage manager, Thomas Warhurst. Eliza was added to Tom's list of caretakers, along with the two men, between tours until the men left Tom in her care and never returned. She is the sole caretaker at that time.

When Eliza becomes Tom's caretaker and the war is raging on, they hide at her home in the country, and she does not put him on stage. Since he is not in the public's eye, his former child caretaker, Seven, finds another musical black man, a bit older than the real Blind Tom, and passes him off in concerts and tours as "the original Blind Tom," since the real Tom is no longer in the spotlight.

At the war's end, Mr. Gross decides to find Charity Greene Wiggins, Tom's mom, and bring her to Edgemere, an all-black island of refugees and freedmen. He promises her a reunion with her long-lost son, Tom. Although she is there for several weeks before actually seeing Tom, he is eventually brought to her. While Charity is waiting at Edgemere, Tabbs Gross returns to New York City where he has discovered that Eliza lives with Tom in an apartment after she has been staying in the country, basically hiding Tom from the world. Tabbs goes to their apartment, tells Eliza that he is there to get Tom and return him to his mother since he is now a free man. Exhausted from the non-stop care of Tom and her feelings of isolation from the world, she lets him go. At Edgemere, Tom refuses to play music and is very cold to his own mother for quite some time.



When events at Edgemere take a turn for the worse and Charity is already in the city working in the refugee camps, Tabbs dresses as a woman, takes Tom and a young orphan boy whom he's taken pity upon, and sneaks into the city and then further into the country where Eliza is now living once again, alone this time. He convinces her that it's too dangerous for Tom in the North and suggests that the four of them travel together and move to the South where soldiers guard the blacks from harm since the war's end. Along the way, Tabbs' disguise is revealed, and he is attacked by the white men on the train. The young orphan boy, who carries a shank or blade in his belt, comes to Tabbs' defense. Both are overtaken by the angry whites on the train. Eliza and Tom make it to their southern destination where they live in seclusion until the beautiful mysterious music coming from their apartment eventually comes to a stop.



Chapter 1

Summary

This chapter opens with Tom and Eliza staying in her country house. Tom truly loves the outdoors—the sounds, the nature, the smells, and the textures. Eliza is growing bored in the isolation of the country. She makes the decision to take Tom back into the city believing that it is safe enough to return. He's been out of the spotlight for quite some time, and people have been preoccupied with the war between the North and the South. Eliza decides not to tell Tom until the last minute. This chapter details Eliza's routine with Tom, cooking, eating, bathing, piano time, and bed time. Being very perceptive, Tom realizes that they are leaving and is packed and ready the morning Eliza plans to leave.

Eliza has forgotten how tense race relations are and soon gets a taste of this when the man running the carriages says that he is unable to help them because he is short an employee. It is obvious that he is lying. As Eliza and Tom head to the street, they encounter a kind black man who carries their luggage and walks with them to the train station. He refuses any compensation. Even afterward at the station the man waits to help them carry their bags onto the train. He is given many dirty looks for being a black man assisting a white woman and a black young man; however, the older man is not affected in any way. He realizes that he is helping the formerly famous, talented "Blind Tom." Eliza and Tom experience prejudicial treatment once again when they are made to wait until last for the conductor to take their train tickets.

Once they arrive in town and manage to catch a cab to their apartment, the driver refuses to help them carry their bags up to their fifth floor room. Then, when Eliza tries her key and it will not open the door, she decides to go to the superintendent's basement apartment for help. He claims that the humidity and weather changes have jammed the door, but he uses a different key which opens the door without any problems. He gives her the new key. He also carries their luggage into their apartment. When she is overwhelmed with the constant needs from Tom, she hangs out of her window breathing the air and looking over the city. After Tom and she are settled she leans out of the window, where she can see the island of Edgemere. This is an island where only the blacks live. She wonders if Tom might be happier living there than with her.

Eliza thinks back to the day that Tom became her sole responsibility. She had not accompanied her husband, Sharpe, the stage manager, Mr. Warhurst, and Tom to his concert. Tom was the only one who returned. He was hiding under the piano when she awoke. Getting no answers, she had to find a way to relate to him herself and to bring him out. Never finding out exactly what happened, Eliza realized that they only had each other from that point on. The flashback ends and Eliza realizes that she needs to return a candle that she'd borrowed from her landlord, Mr. Hub's, wife.



When Eliza goes to return the candle, Mr. Hub relays that one black man has been in her apartment while she was away and another, the driver, waited outside for the first man. Mr. Hub ran the men off and rekeyed her apartment. Eliza cannot imagine who the men could be.

Eliza reminisces again about her life in that same apartment with her husband, Sharpe. Although at that time many people wanted to be near to and meet the famous “Blind Tom,” the only people with whom Eliza and Sharpe kept company in the apartment building were Eliza’s former boss and his wife, Dr. and Mrs. McCunes. Eliza had been the house matron at the Eternally Benevolent Asylum for Ill-Fated Offspring of the Sable Race. She met Sharpe when he visited the asylum to offer a performance from Tom to their patients. In addition to a benefit concert, Sharpe ended up on an afternoon in the park date with Eliza where he told her about his family and about Tom’s life before him and with him. Eliza was concerned that she’d chosen the wrong spot to meet with Sharpe because after the Civil War, the park was taken over by the displaced Negroes from the war. She probed about Sharpe’s relationship with his family and learned that Sharpe didn’t agree with the owning of Tom; he and Tom had been both born into that. He was against his father, General Bethune, making a fool of himself by going to the North with his “Save the South” war talk. Sharpe explained that the general had raised and funded the first regiment of the war from his own pocket before there was even talk of war. This is all Eliza has time to think about as the flashback ends and she returns to the present day.

In the present, although General Bethune is expected soon for a three day visit there, Sharpe doesn’t want any part of it. He explains to Eliza that Tom has become dependent upon him and that they’ll be staying together. Eliza recommends that Dr. McCunes, also an eye doctor, reexamine Tom’s eyes. At first, Sharpe seems to take offense to the idea, but realizes that she merely wants to help.

The scene then jumps forward a bit, but is still in the past at a time when Sharpe and Eliza were already married. Sharpe, Warhurst, and Tom traveled the world leaving Eliza home alone, barely staying in contact with her. Eliza would never know when they would return, and it often surprised her when they did show up. It had become evident that something wasn’t right with the situation because he would return rested, while Tom would be worn out. He would bring Eliza gifts from around the world, but he didn’t show any interest in what she had been up to while he was away. Eventually, he tried to show his love through sexual means. She never felt that these encounters brought them close together emotionally, though. Soon, he would be gone again. Eliza can’t bear to think about this any longer and the flashback ends.

In the present, although she feels guilty and knows that it isn’t right to think of sending Tom away, Eliza is overwhelmed with a desire to think of what life could be for her if she takes him to Edgemere. Tom continues his usual actions—beginning a sentence, then reciting some old speech from his stage days, pulling her to the piano to listen to him play, chasing her around the house in a kind of hide-and-seek game. Tom is aware of her change in moods, but is unaware of the burden he places on Eliza. To bathe him,



she must get into the tub with him and help him get clean, then like a baby, she dries and powders him before he redresses.

Dr. Hollister comes for a visit occasionally. He does this about once a month claiming he's on his way to Saratoga Springs to check in on his racing horses stabled there. He begins this ritual shortly after Sharpe's death, or 'disappearance', claiming that he's maintaining Tom's "medical history." After this medical exam, Tom becomes sick to his stomach and throws up on his piano. Upon Dr. Hollister's return, Eliza tells him what happened and asks for a stomach remedy. The doctor tells Eliza that Tom is getting too fat. He prescribes for them to take walks, but knows good and well that a white woman cannot take a blind, mentally challenged black man out walking the neighborhood. She even hides from the neighbors within her own building. When it's time for the doctor to leave, Tom doesn't want him to go, so he agrees to stay with him awhile. Eliza takes that as an opportunity for her to get out of the house and walk the city alone. Although the doctor advises against it, she is determined to get some space. She enjoys her walk in the fall weather and listens to the ships sailing from the harbor to far off places.

A day or two later, Tom tells Eliza that Mr. Hub has been to visit while she was away. He explains that Mr. Hub is trying to drive them back to the house in the country with gifts of flowers and fish. Eliza realizes that she has been avoiding Tom in her own apartment. She is becoming repulsed by Tom and his needs, and even his presence. When she refuses to sit with him, he tries wrestling her to the floor with her head between the crease of his arm at the elbow. She has had enough. Without anyone to watch Tom, she flees the building. She notices a few things immediately—the autumn leaves have turned to barren trees; there is a lack of color in the open; she sees no one else on the street; and she notices the destruction that has touched so many homes. She walks several blocks before encountering a crowd of people standing in silence watching a regiment of black soldiers on parade. She now sees that these men have set up camp on the Great Lawn in Central Park. She is upset by this sight and returns home to find a nicely dressed Negro sitting on her steps. He introduces himself as Tabbs Gross and announces that he's spent much time and money to find Eliza and Tom. He is there in hopes of taking Tom and returning him to his mother who is now a resident of Edgemere. Since Sharpe had always told Eliza that Tom had no one; she is in shock to learn that Tom has a mother.

Analysis

As this chapter begins, a third person limited narrator tells the reader that Eliza and Tom live alone in her home in the country. The reader is given hints that there have been reasons to "hide" Tom from the world. Eliza first becomes concerned when she sees footprints that indicate that someone had clearly been spying through the windows. She becomes suspicious and admits this has been a problem in the past, but shouldn't be now that Tom is in hiding. She reminisces about how reporters used to hound them to get an interview or a photo of Tom during his famous years. Back then she was taught to never open the door, but to give quick, precise, and polite statements to the journalists through the door.



At this point, the reader is unaware of why Tom needs to be hidden away and why he is so popular with the press. Eliza is insistent upon justifying her decision to move back. After dinner, still avoiding her confession that they are leaving the next day, Eliza reflects on Tom's musical ability as she listens to him practice the piano. Taking three years off from making music doesn't seem to have hurt his ability at all, she thinks to herself.

This chapter describes how difficult it is to take care of this blind, child-like young man. Eliza must deal with his many temper tantrums and episodes, clean up when he gets sick or has an accident, and must actually get into the tub with him to get him to bathe. Tom insists that she sit and listen to his piano practice. It is very taxing on her, and though she is only 23 at the time, she confesses that she feels much, much older.

Toward the end of the chapter, she has grown tired of being cooped up with him 24 hours a day, seven days a week. The reader sees into Eliza's personality, here. She is shown to have been a sweet, intelligent house matron at the asylum. She has been excited about working with Dr. McCunes and was confident enough in what she wanted in life to actually ask Sharpe Bethune to go for a walk in Central Park with her.

The relationship between Eliza and Sharpe once they were married was very unsatisfying and lonely for Eliza. Sharpe was always on tour with Tom and the stage manager, Thomas Warhurst. Although she wrote him, he rarely answered. When he returned, he did so without notice and didn't care to know what she'd been doing while he was been away.

Race, of course, is a major issue (and theme) in this novel throughout. Tom is a blind, black man whose talents elevate him into the honored position of the public spotlight. Everyone, white and black, is amazed by his abilities. Sharpe comments that he figures that Tom doesn't even know that he's a Negro, which is just as well for the time being. This thought is supported by many of the statements made by Tom, himself, as the novel, and Tom's life progress. When Warhurst can't understand why Tom misbehaves for him and not Sharpe, he is told that Tom thinks that he is white and that Warhurst is black. This shocks Warhurst. Having been raised in the Southern white Bethune family who is very intent on going to war with the North and maintaining their possessions, namely their slaves, Tom treats everyone he assumes is black in the same manner that General Bethune, himself, does. This indicates that Tom, ironically, does not know that he, himself, is African American.

Obviously, Tom is not the only prejudiced person during this time period. The first chapter in the present tense is in 1866, which is after the end of the Civil War, but there are several flashbacks to earlier years even before the war began. When Sharpe met Eliza at the asylum, he was surprised that she suggested that Tom be examined by a Negro eye doctor, Dr. McCunes.



Discussion Question 1

How does Eliza Bethune end up caring for Tom?

Discussion Question 2

Why does Eliza feel it's safer for her and Tom in the country house? Why does she decide to return to the city?

Discussion Question 3

Why do you think Sharpe left Eliza and Tom?

Vocabulary

mutilated, regurgitated, thwart, veranda, prominence, arrogance, pretense, macadam, vulnerable, pendular, sanctuary, disjointed, settee, incongruous, reclamation, rarefied, hiatus



Chapter 2

Summary

This chapter begins with the description of the Negro regiment in Central Park on the Great Lawn. Tents full of men with broken spirits and some with physical wounds as well cover the main lawn. The reader is told that the Negro men had enlisted in the all-Negro regiment to fight against slavery, but found that once the war was over that they were expected to stay on to protect and care for the Freedmen in the South. They have been moving from one Southern town to another for this service and have been dealing with men calling themselves the Ku Klux Klan.

Now, more than 75 soldiers, who have pooled their resources and obtained transportation back home to New York, are camped in protest on the lawn in Central Park. The reader is told that when the soldiers returned back to their families in New York they found that their homes have been overturned and taken over by the whites, whom they call the alabasters. To make matters worse, many of the displaced Southern blacks have sought refuge in New York and they didn't have anywhere to go either. The soldiers have nowhere else to go and end up as refugees themselves living in a tented camp set up on the Great Lawn in Central Park where they endure all types of weather, hunt and eat park creatures, and sleep on pallets or hammocks. Although Freedmen are working with the alabasters to create a new city, new streets, new neighborhoods, and new houses, these dejected soldiers who fought for those freedoms are living in the park waiting to be noticed and waiting for the ability to integrate into the new world. Ashamed of how these men are being treated, Tabbs Gross walks by the camp keeping his distance as he makes his way to the ferry that will take him to Edgemere, the black island.

The focus shifts to focus on Tabbs Gross. Tabbs thinks of how much happier he is living in Edgemere, away from the city, and the problems of the past that remain there. He feels relief to live his new, quiet life here. He does want to reenter the city eventually, but he wants to go there once he can be on top, making his own money through the comeback of "Blind Tom" under his management.

Tom leaves Eliza and is brought to Edgemere the Home for the Education and Edification of African Orphans where he is reunited with his mother and expected to take up the piano again to prepare for his return to the stage. Tom doesn't realize at the time that this is the reason for his being pushed to practice. Tom refuses to touch the piano, however. He just sits there all day while his mother, Charity, waits in the pews trying to be supportive, hoping he'll start playing. As she waits in the pews, the orphans often sneak in the church to get a look at Tom. At the same time, she is hoping to make up to him the time she did not have in his childhood, when he was being raised away from her. Tom keeps asking her throughout the day if she is 'her'. Charity isn't sure whom he's referring to, and thinks that he's asking if she is his mother. However, when



she tells him yes and gives him a hug he angrily shoves her away. Tom stops eating much and seems sad and subdued.

Charity thinks back to how difficult it used to be to settle Tom (Thomas) down when he was a child. It took her, his dad, Mingo, and his sisters to watch after him and to help tire him out, so he wouldn't wander off. He was fearless as he explored Nature. He was fascinated by all sounds and textures that he encountered. She remembers his explanations at the end of the day detailing his daily adventure; although, she couldn't understand his rambling speech, she could pick out enough words to understand what he was talking about. In those days, he could not sit still, and he was a healthy eater. She recalls a time when Thomas would go to the Bethune house with her while she did her chores. Miss Toon, Mrs. Bethune, would sit in the parlor with him and allow him to practice on the piano. She had always believed that Hundred Gates would be the only sight she would see through her life, that maybe there wasn't really anything much beyond that sight.

Back in the present, Charity is grateful for her move to Edgemere and her reunion with Thomas. Charity remembers all of the pain she's felt through the years after Thomas was taken from her.

Thinking about Thomas being taken from her brings Charity to remember her arrival at Edgemere with Tabbs. She was shocked at every new sight. She was happy to feel free, to be in a new place, and to know that she would soon see Thomas. The orphans were very interested in her and what she was doing there. Tabbs showed her to her room at the orphanage where she was to stay until Thomas was brought to her a week later. When she was called into the chapel to see Thomas, they were joined by Mr. Tabbs, Mr. Ruggles, Lieutenant Drinkwater, Deacon Double, and Reverend Wire. When she tried to touch Thomas, he pulled away from them. She asked Reverend Wire, who was a black doctor, to examine Thomas. He found him in good physical health, but the reunification with his mother had been too overwhelming and upsetting to him. The flashback ends.

Back in the present, the orphans sneak into the chapel. They are mouthy with Charity and say they are not scared of her. Charity grabs a knife, and the boys run away. For some reason, Thomas takes this as a cue to begin playing the piano. He tries to talk to his mother and make hand gestures, but Charity doesn't understand sign language.

Reverend Wire travels on the ferry to the city to help the people in the encampment in Central Park. He sees patients all day and feels sad for them. He believes that Jehovah has given him the ability to speak compassionately to these people and to help heal them physically. He feels it is his duty. As he's wrapping up for the night, he is summoned to meet with a group of soldiers. Lieutenant Drinkwater is their leader. Drinkwater calls Reverend Wire to complain about the refugees' situation in the tent community. Deacon Double is already present. The problem is that even though they have fought for freedom and returned to no homes, the city officials are requiring them to give up their weapons. They want the soldiers' rifles, but are not willing to give back



the soldiers houses that were confiscated during the war. Reverend Wire agrees to speak for them.

Analysis

Much of this chapter is about Charity, her memories of the past and her present happiness in her new home, but disappointment at the strained reunion with Thomas. The Negro camp set up in Central Park for the returned, and now displaced, soldiers encompasses much of this chapter, as well.

Upon their return from fighting for the country, the soldiers find that they have been removed from their own homes which have been taken over by whites and are not to be returned. They are disheartened, to say the least. Before the soldiers' return, displaced Negroes often sought refuge on the island of Edgemere. At the end of the war, these Negro soldiers were saddened to find that although the South surrendered, these soldiers couldn't quickly return home. Once they were able to return, they pooled their money and took a boat back to New York.

The theme of Racism is demonstrated heavily in this chapter. It is most evidently demonstrated when the Freedmen, who were forced to turn to Edgemere, are being given help from the city through the building of new streets and neighborhoods, but the soldiers are still stranded, unhelped in the park. Reverend Wire is distraught by the way they live, the hunger they experience, the weather they endure, and the illnesses that overtakes them. The returned soldiers are extremely upset and on the verge of fury, not only because of the conditions in which they live, but also because the city wants them to give up their arms. They are already broken by their living conditions; taking their weapons will be the final straw. Because they respect and look up to the Reverend, they call on him to help them convince the city to allow them to keep their weapons or to strike the deal that they will give up their weapons if the city will give them their confiscated homes back to them, allowing them to move out of the park. Although Reverend Wire believes there is no hope in this action, he agrees to be their voice.

Charity is upset at the fact that Thomas won't speak to her or play the piano. He isn't eating much and doesn't want her to touch him. She tells him that she is his mother, but he pushes her away. When he asks if Charity is 'her', Charity believes that he is asking if she, his mother, is there, but actually, when he says "she," he means Eliza, his familiar caretaker. No one even realizes this, and Tom is unable to verbalize. Charity often flashes back to the past when Tom was young and they were all a family. She thinks of his active nature and his excited behavior at everyday discoveries. After a day of exploring, he would try to relay to her all of the exciting things he'd uncovered that day. Charity knows that it will take time for Thomas to become reacquainted with her, but she doesn't really see the whole picture. Thomas is not a normal young man. He is not only blind, but has mental challenges as well. She's worried that he doesn't remember all of their life together from those early years. Just because she remembers her short time with him doesn't mean that he will ever remember. Most of her memories of his



childhood gather around his time in the Bethune home, playing music with Mrs. Bethune, and eating dinner with their family.

What Charity neglects to realize is that a majority of Tom's memories include his time with white people. She doesn't understand that Thomas believes himself to be white and that he treats blacks the same way he has heard his "family," the Bethunes, and all of his white managers speak about them. Therefore, when he asks if 'she's there' and Charity says she is, he doesn't believe her because he's talking about Eliza, and he can hear that his mother, this person he doesn't remember, is a Negro woman, foreign to him.

Charity sees her separation from Thomas as a kidnapping. Charity and Thomas see their situation in very different ways. He has mental disabilities that hinder the way he thinks and reacts to others and to situations. He knows that people have always cared for him, but they have been white; therefore, although Charity thinks that Thomas should be comforted to finally be with his own kind, but he doesn't see it that way. Charity feels so happy to be free and experiencing a new life, a new world. She is trying to shake the bad memories of times past. Because she feels this way, she believes, in the beginning at least, that Thomas must feel the same way. Charity finally realizes that Thomas just doesn't get it.

Her past is not totally wiped from her mind. When mischievous orphans sneak up on her in the chapel and threaten her the author lets the reader gain insight into her interior landscape (and gives the reader a clue as to the title of the novel), as in her confrontation with the boys the word 'shank' is referred to as something that is dead.

Religion, as a theme, is demonstrated in this chapter. Religion has often been the strength that people have relied on during times of strife. Slavery is very often associated with quoting the Bible and singing rituals; therefore, it is not surprising that during this time directly before, during, and after the Civil War people turned to this practice. Bible quotes are used periodically throughout as well, such as, "Let us cast off deeds of darkness and put on the armor of the light" (Ch. 2, par. 4). She relies on prayers and hopes that her circumstances can change, believing that her faith, and that of others will help make that change.

Discussion Question 1

Why would Reverend Wire leave the safety of Edgemere Island to go into the refugee park in Central Park?

Discussion Question 2

If the North fought in the war to free Negroes from slavery, why did the people of New York City steal their homes, refuse to return them, and force them to take up camp in Central Park?



Discussion Question 3

What are Tabbs' intentions when he brings Tom to Edgemere?

Vocabulary

shod, tangibly, beseeching, conjoinings, metamorphosis, skeptical, climes, emancipated, expelled, expunged, maiming, alabaster, auspices, retribution, duly, austere, retaliatory, immolation, sabotage, commandeered



Chapter 3

Summary

This chapter is set before Thomas was taken from Charity and gives the reader some backstory to the storyline that has already been introduced. The majority of the action is told from Charity's viewpoint. As this chapter opens up, a much younger Charity talks about her son, Thomas. She talks about Thomas's difficulty in walking, and that he's staying on all fours longer than most children his age. During his crawling stages, Charity shares, Thomas crawls up to the piano while the Bethune girls are practicing piano. After they leave the room, Thomas pulls up to the piano and plays the music that the girls have been playing.

This continues over and over until General Bethune comes home, and his oldest daughter tells him the secret. The General calls to speak with Thomas' parents, then agrees to let Mrs. Bethune teach piano to Thomas. Next, he tells Charity to bring Thomas to his house for manners training. The Bethunes have a doctor check him out. The doctor is fascinated because he has only seen one other case of this type of eye condition, and it wasn't this far along. The house is full of music when Thomas is around. They assume that Thomas is not smart or talented because that's how they feel about the entire black race, but Thomas proves that theory wrong. Thomas' parents start to worry about the attention that he's getting from the general. Charity tells her daughters to help keep Thomas away from the house.

Taking a moment for herself, Charity remembers the day that her family came to be with the Bethunes. The trader had them front and center and was allowing them to be poked and prodded by the men deciding which "merchandise" to purchase. General Bethune showed up. The entire family was up for sale because of a foreclosure from their former owner. The general took his time; Domingo told the general that he could do the work of two men. After a bit, the General decided to take the entire family. He haggled with the trader until he found a fair price. He bought Charity, Domingo, Thomas, and the three daughters.

Back in the present, the General is more than pleased to find out what Tom is capable of doing. Besides the training he institutes for Tom, he also instructs his wife to bring Tom in a carriage once a week through the town. Charity doesn't want to admit it, but being relieved of Tom one day per week is actually a relief to her. He is definitely a handful. She finds herself secretly wishing she could have more time away from Thomas.

Charity takes note of all chores expected of her and those of her husband, Domingo—Mingo. When the General hires another helper, Antoinette, he starts taking Charity into the printing office with him daily. She is there to do any odd job he requires through the day. She is able to dress in nicer clothes and be exposed to others. This time also gives her time away from Thomas. Although Tom is hard to control, her family does not want



to lose him. They even try tethering him to a post to keep him out of trouble and out of the General's way, but one evening the General send Antoinette to get Charity and Thomas. He tells Charity to make a pallet in the kitchen for Tom to sleep on and that he will be living with the Bethune family from now on. He tells her how lucky she should feel that he took pity on them this way and not in some other cruel manner. Tom does very well living there. He has constant access to the piano and enjoys his time playing music.

The focus shifts to Mrs. Bethune, who wishes she could move to a big city. She can't because it would upset her husband. She takes good care of Tom and listens to him play. One day, he plays a tune and tells her that it's the sound of rain. She asks him to play it again while she writes the notes on sheet music. When she shows her husband his composition, he buys an upright piano to allow them to compose music and not merely play it. Tom enjoys playing for the family, especially the women. Dr. Hollister surprises them all when he tells them that he believes that Tom can see large bright objects if they are right in front of him.

Mrs. Bethune allows Tom to play alone at the piano for hours. When he's not playing music, he's exploring. Eventually, she discovers that her daughter has been sending Antoinette with notes to the neighbors inviting them to hear Tom play. This gives the General the idea to do the same thing on a larger scale. The young reverend, or "the boy Bible-mouth," H. D. Frye, becomes a frequent observer at these music parties. Charity works as a server for the parties and is struck by the fact that she doesn't have any feelings at all about her son being the show. After hearing Tom play, the reverend requests that he play at church on Sunday. Tom makes an announcement to the room that he doesn't play church music. They seem appalled, and the General ends the party. Charity talks to Mingo about the reverend's request. Mingo thinks that there's nothing wrong with it.

Mrs. Bethune becomes deathly ill. Sharpe stays by her side, and Tom's music is postponed until her death. When they are all dressed up on a Sunday for church, Charity and her family see Thomas dressed nicer than ever before. They rush to help him up into the carriage with the Bethune family, and he yanks away from them as if he has never known them.

Analysis

The topic speaking to the difficulty of raising a disabled child is prominent in this chapter. The family is put up for auction because a former owner could no longer afford to keep them. Although they hope to stay together, the chances of a family of six being bought together were extremely slim, especially when their youngest child is disabled. They can't bear the thought of being separated. When Mingo sees the General at the auction, he steps forward and speaks to him, imploring him with his eyes to please take them all. General Bethune plays it cool. As Charity watches him, he doesn't want to appear as if he's eager to buy them, yet he doesn't want to seem disinterested either. Fortunately, the General takes them all.



At first, it is only the five family members who realize the burden that comes with caring for a child that is blind and mentally deficient. Thomas is fascinated by sounds. Every sound or vibration is a mystery. He begins to mimic all sounds. He even stops drinking his milk to distinguish between the drinking sounds and the silence. He doesn't learn to move for his first fifteen months, preferring to lie in one place shaking, listening to and making noises. Once he does learn to crawl, he gets into even more trouble. It takes the entire family to keep up with him. Charity eventually has to take him to the Bethune house with her while she cleans to keep an eye on him.

After the General discovers Tom's special talents, Charity tries to keep Tom from them even more by tying him to a post and having her daughters watch him. This doesn't work well or last for long. Once the General knows what he is capable of, he systematically works to remove Tom from Charity and her family. He gives Charity a job at his printing office where she is required go everyday with the General. Obviously, Tom isn't there, and Charity actually finds it a relief. Then, the General insists that once per week, Tom take a carriage ride with the Bethunes into the town. Charity finds no harm in this because even though she is ashamed to admit it, she is glad for the break and begins to secretly wish it was more often. Finally, the General tells Charity to make a pallet in the kitchen for Tom to sleep on and tells her that Tom will now be living with him. Charity is present at the concerts the General holds in his home. She watches Tom play without emotion and gets the same unemotional response from her family when she returns home, without Tom, and tells them about the evening. Although they try not to admit it, life is easier without Tom around, and they slowly seem to forget about him when he's not there. Out of sight—out of mind.

Prejudice and Racism as themes are demonstrated in two main areas in this chapter. First at the auction when the entire family is for sale, and the customers are allowed to poke and prod "the merchandise." It's degrading. Not only would it be hard to sell a family of six, but a family with a disabled child would be next to impossible. Secondly, knowing that they'll probably be separated, Mingo takes a bold step and speaks to the General hoping he will take them all together, which he does. General Bethune and the trader haggle over the price, which demonstrates the theme of Racism.

The theme of Racism continues as Mary Bethune works hard to develop Tom's musical style and ability, but is warned that she is probably wasting her time because he is a Negro. Although Mary Bethune has faith in his talents, she is shot down by the many prejudices that revolve around the Negro race during that time. Still, she continues to try, and he continues to learn. When Mary Bethune dies and the family is dressed up to go to the church on Sunday, Charity and Domingo are shocked to see how proper and well-dressed Tom is. They rush to help him up into the Bethune family carriage.

The theme of Religion is demonstrated when the pastor H.D. Frye comes to hear Tom play. Charity watches the crowd as Tom performs and she hears their amazement. The pastor is impressed by Tom's talent and asks if the General will bring Tom to play at church on Sunday. The General refuses, and it becomes apparent that his views do not align with that of most who live in his town. This insult to the church can be seen on every face, and the party is ended. When the doctor visits and again discusses the



Negro race, General Bethune makes plain his feelings about racism and prejudice. He says that he doesn't agree with what many say in regards to the black race being children of the devil, or that Africa is the stronghold of the Devil. This quite clearly draws the battle-lines and sets up the tension and conflict that will continue throughout the rest of the novel.

Discussion Question 1

What would make General Bethune decide to buy an entire family?

Discussion Question 2

What were some of the difficulties that Tom's family faced because of his blindness?

Discussion Question 3

How does Thomas view his real family in terms of relationships?

Vocabulary

warbling, gyrations, tangible, fret, chitlins, imbibe, discernible, ambulation, lope, gourds, scrutinizing, conspirators



Chapter 4

Summary

This chapter is told from the viewpoint of Perry Oliver, who is crashing a concert at the Bethunes' so he can hear the blind Negro play piano. Perry makes a point to speak to Mary Bethune and many other guests. He observes and judges Sharpe Bethune who actually comes over to visit with him during the party. At this time, Tom is no older than five or six, but is talented well beyond his years. As is everyone upon hearing Tom play, Perry is very impressed.

Two years pass and Perry Oliver with his young assistant, Seven, return to Georgia to meet with General Bethune about Tom. It is late when they arrive, so they decide to spend the night in town. The reader sees that Seven is highly prejudiced in his belief systems as he becomes quite agitated that one of the black porters at the station wants to carry their bag for them. Perry has to insist that Seven calm down and allow the porters to do their job. When they arrive at the hotel, they meet Mrs. Rudge. She seems to know a little bit about everyone and everything in that town. Perry takes advantage of her knowledge. She tells him about the generosity of General Bethune, and how heart-broken he and his family were when his wife died. He tells Perry that the General had to hire someone to run the print shop because Sharpe was not around, and he had to tend to things at his home. Perry notes that she doesn't mention Tom.

Perry Oliver and Seven take a carriage to Hundred Gates to meet with General Bethune. When Perry has the opportunity to speak to the general, Perry is asked if they have met before. He tells the General that he had attended a party at Hundred Gates and produced a copy of the invitation that he had found on the ground the day he crashed the party uninvited. Perry knows that the General's main goal at this point is his push toward Civil War. Perry plays to his cause and agrees that he wants that, too. He puts forth a proposition to the General to take Tom off of his hands during these busy times. Perry claims that he has lined up instructors from Europe, who have lined up to help him hone Tom's talent. He offers the General \$5,000 upon signing a contract for Tom, and a total of \$15,000 over a three year period. Perry is prepared to haggle and convince the General of the benefits of Perry's management of Tom. Perry is very surprised to get such a quick, positive response. The General agrees to sign the contract and offers to send Tom to him through Perry's choice of transportation.

Seven is given the job of training Tom on proper behavior. It is quite an undertaking. The closest piano to them is at a place called Scaldy Bill's Drinkery and Eatery. The owner, William Oakley, lets them use the piano for free as long as they agree to eat three meals a day from his place. Tom grows to depend on Seven and even to follow all of his directions. When Seven leaves Tom and Perry alone while getting their food, Perry is nervous to be alone with Tom at first. Perry finds that if he hums a tune, Tom will repeat it back to him.



Perry recalls when he'd first introduced Tom to Seven. When Tom first arrived at Perry and Seven's home, Perry wanted to surprise Seven who had always thought they should get a black person to work for them. When Seven first took charge of him, Tom swung at Seven and kicked him. At first, scared and not knowing them, Tom just stood in a corner. He refused to eat and went to the bathroom in his pants, never leaving that corner. He stood, and eventually sat, in that mess for a few days. Seven eventually convinced him to eat and let Seven bathe him. Then, little by little, he made Tom feel comfortable. Seven had never been exposed to a blind person and would test Tom by holding fingers up in front of his face, asking how many he was showing. Seven was surprised to find that Perry did not buy Tom. and that he still belonged to the General still. With this, the flashback ends.

In the present, they take Tom to William Oakley's place, but Tom refuses to play the piano because it is out of tune. Once the piano is tuned, Tom and Seven regularly go to the place to practice. Seven takes full responsibility for all of Tom's daily life. After quite a while of this routine of practicing, eating there, and returning home, the bar owner tells Seven to give a message to Perry. He is offering to sell the piano to them at a fair price and have it delivered for free. Perry tells Seven that he'll take care of it. When Perry goes into the bar to make the deal for the piano, he ends up spilling his guts, his troubles and obstacles, to Mr. Oakley, the owner. Mr. Oakley gives advice, but also tells Perry who he needs to contact to teach Tom the piano.

W.P. Howard is the music instructor they hire. He's supposed to be the best in his field. During his discussion with Professor Howard, Perry gets the feeling that Howard doesn't care for him, but he hires him anyway. He pays twice the normal fees and brings Tom to see him three to four times per week. Perry is so pleased with the arrangement, he decides to treat Seven, Tom's true caretaker, to a new hat, a Paul Morphy hat. Paul Morphy is a famous chess player who Seven follows regularly. Professor Howard is impressed by Tom's skill, but wants him to do more than copy what others do. He teaches Tom about the difference in the notes. He places Tom on his lap to allow Tom to place his hands and feet on the professor's to get a better feel for what he's trying to teach him. Although Tom thrives under the professor's instruction, Howard is not thrilled with Seven being in the room for the lessons. He sends him into the kitchen for food or outside to tend to the horses. Finally, Seven brings his newspaper to the lessons and pretends to read the whole time. Howard stops sending him out. Seven continues to care for Tom, rubbing his neck, his feet, and shoulders when Tom claims to have problems in these areas.

Perry Oliver convinces Professor Howard to create "an authenticity of Tom's genius." Because the Professor's name never occurs on the document, Perry later takes credit for it. Perry pays Howard to help get Tom ready to perform publicly. Then, he decides to change Tom's name to "Blind Tom" and names the show "Blind Tom Exhibition." Perry rents the hall, buys Tom a suit, advertises, and sends the letter of authenticity to General Bethune. When Seven is concerned that not enough people will be interested in coming to the show, he loads their piano on a wagon and takes Tom out daily to sing and play piano in public. This stunt works, and they play to a full house. Perry pays Howard triple his fee to help with the line-up of songs for the concert. Howard does it,



but is sad that even though he put in all of the work with Tom, Perry will present him to the world and reap the benefits. The concert is a success, and Perry is overcome with emotions that his dream is coming true.

Analysis

This chapter is about the exploitation of Tom. Although General Bethune has already taken advantage of Tom's talents, he is not the last. Perry Oliver, upon hearing Tom play, decides that he can put Tom on stage and make money from his abilities. Not only does Perry take advantage and earn money from Tom's actions, he also uses Seven, his understudy, as a caretaker for Tom. Perry wants to prepare Tom socially and musically for performing, but he doesn't put in the work. He relies on Seven, who is almost the same age as Tom, to teach Tom manners, how to listen, to mind his commands, and to eat properly. Seven takes great pains to gain Tom's trust and begins to teach him the needed skills. When they are at the bar practicing piano, a man comes up to talk to them. He asks Seven if Tom is his boy, and he says that he is. Seven becomes a surrogate family member to Tom. Tom comes to rely on Seven for everything, even caring emotions. They actually build a true bond.

Perry also uses Professor Howard to teach musical discipline to Tom, preparing him to perform. Perry convinced Professor Howard to recruit the local musical scientists to listen to Tom play and to sign an endorsement claiming that Tom is in fact a musical genius. When the professor wrote the document and had his colleagues sign it, he turned it over to Perry Oliver.

Again the themes of Religion and Prejudice are demonstrated throughout the chapter. Sometimes it's a matter of Tom speaking gibberish. He doesn't seem to realize that he is black and speaks of the race in a negative way. One day for no reason, he starts to spout off calling various items in the room, niggers. Seven doesn't understand why Tom randomly speaks this way. After one of Tom's concerts at the Bethune residence, people are asking about the mystery of Tom's ability, wondering if he is just a 'freak of nature', or if he was sent by the devil to plague the white race.

When Perry Oliver first sees Tom at the Bethune home, he overhears a stranger whisper disparagingly that a 'nigger' that would do what was asked of him with his eyes closed was a great find. When asked by Perry to fetch a taxi, Seven, who is also very prejudiced, says that none of them were suitable as all of the drivers were black. When Perry was trying to convince the General that he should be given custody of managing Tom, Perry says that all 'niggers' are meant to earn their keep. He goes on to state that 'their kind' was built for work, not charity. Unfortunately, the way that people of this time period spoke of the Negro race was actually a sign of the times. Even blacks referred to themselves using that offensive word.

Before being taken advantage of, Professor Howard was a very firm teacher of music. He gave lessons to Tom and was often very strict with him, not realizing how difficult it was to make Tom feel comfortable enough to learn. He may be firm with Tom, but he



does teach him more than mimicking the music of others. He recognizes Tom's talent and even envies it.

Discussion Question 1

What changed Seven's attitude from being prejudiced against blacks to taking care of and protecting Tom as if he were family?

Discussion Question 2

Would Perry have achieved the same success with Tom if Seven were not involved?

Discussion Question 3

Why does Perry exclude Dr. Howard, the music professor, from Tom's career?

Vocabulary

provincial, opportunistic, ingratiating, feigned, elitism, reticence, frenzied, stagy, barbaric, conundrum, allemande, suppositions, donning, urchin



Chapter 5

Summary

This chapter begins with descriptions of Blind Tom's performances. Perry Oliver is his manager, and he plays patriotic songs, classical songs, and his own compositions. He also recites chapters in Greek, Latin, and French. He quotes philosophy and the Bible. There is even a part of the performance where the audience is asked to see if they can "stump" Tom by asking him to recite something, or to replay something that the participant demonstrates.

The show travels the world, and Tom is interviewed by reporters everywhere. Tom plays for the Southern army leaving home and the Grand Union Army leaving Washington. He plays at the White House. Eventually, Perry observes three ladies in black who weep and wear black at every concert. This is unsettling to Perry. Not long after that began, General Bethune tells Perry that he is taking Tom back. The General realizes that the South will lose the war and wants to ensure financial security for his family in light of the upcoming losses. Perry is devastated. He complains about the time and effort he has put into Tom. The General reminds him that he also benefited financially from his years with Tom. Both Perry Oliver and Seven are devastated at the loss of Tom.

Analysis

In this chapter, Tom's performances are described in detail. His talent is beyond the imagination of the audience and of all who are exposed to it. Although Perry has possession of him, Tom is still used for Southern political purposes. After playing at the White House for President Buchanan, he is interviewed by reporters. He is used to inspire the soldiers and send them off to war. He represents battles, firing of the cannons, arrival of train cars, and the generals who command the soldiers. When General Bethune tells Perry he will be taking Tom back, he does this because he realizes that the South, the side he supports, is going to lose the war. He will lose a lot more than just his slaves. He needs the money that Tom can bring in to help support his family after the war. Perry is very upset, but the general tells him that he has already benefited from Tom's talents, and he, the General, cannot choose Perry's welfare over that of his own family.

Symbolism and foreshadowing can be seen in the appearance of the three crying ladies. They may very well represent 'the FATES' from Greek mythology, indicating that something tumultuous is about to happen to Tom. This is reinforced when Perry starts to feel uneasy about these women showing up at concert after concert in city after city. Perry notices that it isn't the same three women in each city, either, but rather different women, but always three, and always dressed in black and crying. Perry has an unsettling dream and directly after these events General Bethune comes to take Tom away.



Discussion Question 1

Since Tom is black, in what ways could he help the efforts of the South by performing as they go off to war?

Discussion Question 2

Discuss the symbolism of the women dressed in black.

Discussion Question 3

If so many people during this time period were prejudiced against blacks, why would so many people be drawn to Tom's concerts?

Vocabulary

contortions, spasmodic, permutations, oratory, redolent, melee, ludicrous, axis, pirouette, rudimentary

Chapter 6

Summary

Seven is the focus of the first part of the chapter. He is now 20-something years old, and it has been more than five years since the world has seen Blind Tom. Some people think Tom has just disappeared; some think he has died. Because Seven is not sure, he feels safe to use another mentally challenged black man, Juluster, who is more than 10 years older than Tom, to take the stage and claim to be “The Original Blind Tom.” The war has been over for three years, and Seven makes arrangements for a show in New York. He must register for the show in a small building in the Central Park area. This is the same area where the Negro soldiers have set up camp after returning from war. He has heard that this is a dangerous part of town and that anyone with a white face may be killed or injured. He is very nervous, but makes it out okay.

The focus shifts to Reverend Wire. Wire talks to Tabbs about the growing number of people and the growing numbers of illness and death at the camps of the Freedmen. Tabbs, who is at Wire’s home, is having a drink and listening to Wire talk. Wire feels overwhelmed; even the nurses and doctors are dying there. The whole time that Wire is talking Tabbs is trying to think of a polite way to ask Wire for more money to help him with Tom. Wire asks Tabbs why he doesn’t ever work in the camps to help people. Tabbs tries to evade the question, but does realize that he really hasn’t done anything to repay all that Wire has done for him.

Tabbs thinks back to his early days on the island. The sailors on the shore had caught a thief and had beaten him, then stuffed him in a bag where they planned to throw him into the ocean to drown. Wire spoke to the people and agreed with them, but told them that justice should be left to God. Before they left the beach, Wire had made arrangements to have the sailors safely take the thief to the mainland. Tabbs was amazed at the effect Wire had on the people. The flashback ends.

Back in the present, Tabbs leaves Wire’s house without asking for the money and goes to the chapel where Tom and Charity are going through the usual argument of Tom not playing the piano. Tabbs is worried. It’s been months, and Tom still hasn’t played an entire song. Tom keeps telling Tabbs that “he wants HER.” Tabbs thinks he’s talking about Charity. She has taken a paying job at the Home on the island and isn’t with Tom all day anymore. Tabbs goes to Charity and asks her to help him get Tom motivated to go back to entertaining and that she will get future earnings from his concerts. She doesn’t seem to have any control over making him play.

Tabbs visits Ruggles, known to the islanders as, Mr. David, the headmaster of the orphanage. He discovers that Wire is leaving the island to work full time in the camps in the park. Tabbs asks Ruggles, who is Charity’s boss, to send her away to help Wire get settled, and this will allow him to work on Tom without distraction. It’s not working. Dr. McCunes comes to examine Tom, and they find that Tom remembers him and his family



from when they lived in the building together with Sharpe and Eliza Bethune. Tabbs asks Tom if he likes him. He says yes, but also says “Bring HER to me now.”

Tabbs remembers his trip to see Simon Coffin, the lawyer, from Georgia who was the most visible and influential person for the Negro cause. In this memory, Mr. Coffin agreed that Tabbs had a case and told him that the General had fled to a plantation in Virginia named Elway, near the capital. Mr. Coffin had already found out that General Bethune had money because he already completed a lawsuit and had to pay Perry Oliver, a former manager of Tom’s, for a broken contract. Tabbs was not happy with this news. He didn’t want to win his money back; he wanted to win Tom in court. Coffin explained that it wouldn’t likely happen, but Tabbs agreed to have Coffin file a claim anyway.

In another flashback, Tabbs thinks back to when he first heard of Tom through gossip and newspaper articles. He sneaked into a concert to hear him play and was very impressed. He decided then that he would try to take possession of Tom and his career. Tabbs was 24 years old at the time and operated independently of employers. Thomas Warhurst was Tom’s manager at the time. A month after that concert, Tabbs went to see General Bethune and gave him a \$1,000 down payment with the agreement that he would pay \$4,000 more if they signed contracts that turned Tom over to Tabbs. They met a second time with the General’s attorney, Mr. Geryon; Tom’s doctor, Dr. Hollister; the manager, Mr. Warhurst; and the town pastor, Reverend Frye. Tabbs agreed to sign with a lawyer of his own.

They signed the contract that he brought and one that Bethune had drawn up with his conditions. They agreed to hand Tom over after he finished his town concert and said his goodbyes to his family. Bethune changed the meeting of exchange to another day and place. When Tabbs arrived at the restaurant, Bethune didn’t show, but sent Mr. Geryon to tell Tabbs that he should be arrested for his past actions in life; therefore, their contract with him is voided. Geryon returned a thousand dollars and said they would keep the rest as fees. Tabbs cornered Bethune after a concert, but didn’t get what he wanted and never saw Bethune again. For a while, Tabbs was so obsessed that he followed them around Tom’s concert schedule. The flashback ends with Tabbs realizing that it has been almost three years since he’d lost track of Tom.

Back in the present, Coffin agrees that Tabbs should stay in town and return to his office a few days later for word about the lawsuit. While waiting at the hotel, Tabbs runs into Dr. Hollister who advises him that Bethune no longer has Tom and that Tabbs should find Tom’s real mother and ask her to try to get Tom. He and a driver find her at the Bethune home caring for the General’s daughters. The girls are taken at gun point into another room while Tabbs speaks to Charity who has changed her name from Bethune to Greene Wiggins. She tells Tabbs that Tom is living with Mr. Sharpe Bethune’s wife in New York.



Analysis

It is evident that Tabbs is not a grateful man. Although he has obviously been cheated by General Bethune, he too has taken advantage of people to get what he wants where Tom is concerned. Upon arriving at Edgemere, Tom accepts the generosity of Wire who has done a lot to help Tabbs get and care for Tom without any gratitude in return. Tabbs doesn't even work in the camps to help. While the doctor tells him how bad things have gotten, Tabbs is trying to figure out a way to get more money from Wire.

Wire doesn't come right out and say it, but he realizes that Tabbs is being selfish. Tabbs tries to justify his need of money from Wire by claiming in his mind that it is for Tom's sake. When he originally went to see General Bethune to buy Tom, he was so cocky that he was taken advantage of by the General. When Tom visits his friend of more than 20 years, Ruggles, he goes there with the sole purpose of asking Ruggles to send Charity away, so he can be alone with Tom. Tabbs is a taker, not a giver. He acts as if the world owes him, especially where Tom is concerned. When Tabbs goes to seek justice from Mr. Coffin, he is upset that he will only be able to get his stolen money back from Bethune.

Wire, on the other hand, is a selfless man. He is a giver. He helps the people on the island; he helps the displaced soldiers in the camp; and he helps Tabbs quite a bit, even though he knows the kind of man Tabbs is. When Wire was confronted with the sailors, he was very kindly and in an intelligent way talked the people into not killing the thief they had caught. He not only saved the sailors from murdering the man; he also helped them believe it was their idea and allowed them to feel good about themselves about the decision to let the thief go.

The theme of Religion is demonstrated in this chapter. Wire is a reverend as well as a doctor. He quotes scripture to the sailors who capture the thief and uses God and his teachings as a way to dissuade the men from killing the thief. When Tabbs asks Charity to help him get Tom motivated to go back to the stage, he offers her a percentage of all of the earnings Tom may make. Constant references are made to God and Jesus. When Wire greets the island children, he leans down enabling each child to kiss the large silver cross. When Tabbs convinces Ruggles to send Charity off the island for a bit, he feels torn, a moment of conscience, claiming to not want to separate mother and son again.

A frequent reference to fishing is seen throughout this chapter. When Tabbs goes to visit Ruggles at his home, he brings a parcel of fish. When Tabbs gave Bethune the initial \$1,000 for the down payment, he knew it was risky, but he thought, "...small bait for the larger catch" (Ch. 6, par.5). When he completed his first dealing with Bethune, he was very happy and surprised to have bargained so easily. "He hooked his hand into the General's—brown to pink—gave it a firm tug before letting go, leaving the other to feel like the fish lucky enough to yank free of a captor's hook whatever blood and flesh lost" (Ch. 6, par. 17). Upon his return to the South after the war, Tabbs stays in a hotel and



looks around town for signs of Bethune. When he is first introduced to the Southern meal of fish and grits, he reflects back to fishing with Ruggles when he was a child.

As throughout the entire novel, the theme of Race is also demonstrated here. When Tabbs returns to the South to meet with Mr. Coffin, he is surprised and pleased to see that the Union soldiers are protecting the blacks and that the whites he passes are often down and out. He was pleased when he passed the soldiers, and they were kind to him. When the driver was unable to find the lawyer's office, and Tabbs had to walk through the town to find it, he came upon a white man with no shoes and is dirty, carrying a basket of crab apples.

Discussion Question 1

Why is Tabbs Gross so obsessed with Tom?

Discussion Question 2

How was Tabbs able to be taken advantage of by General Bethune?

Discussion Question 3

Debate whether or not Tabbs is entitled to possession of Tom, or just the stolen money as Mr. Coffin suggests.

Vocabulary

coaxing, desist, keener, forlornness, preposterous, mayhem, stippled, projectile, conscription, crass, enunciation



Chapter 7

Summary

Still focused on Tabbs' storyline, the reader sees Tabbs whining to Ruggles about not getting anywhere with Tom. He's feeling sorry for himself. Ruggles explains to him that he's not the only one who has had it rough because of white people being mean. Ruggles lost his house and family and was sent to this island, he reminds Tabbs, but he doesn't hold hate for them anymore. Although he had a limp due to one leg being shorter than the other, somehow after all the trials he went through, his legs are now equal, he says. Wire tells him that's a sign that he should give himself to the church. Truggles says that he knows that and that is why he holds a position as headmaster at the orphanage.

Tabbs is sitting with Tom while the boy is drinking his milk. He tells Tom that he plans to take him back to the orphanage. Tom asks Tabbs questions about whether or not Tabbs saw him in concert and if he bought tickets. Tabbs is pleased that he remembers those days. They go to the piano where Tom tells Tabbs that he will teach him how to play the piano. Tom is playing again. Wire comes into his house to find them there. Wire talks about how God has led them this far and has a plan for them. Eventually, Tom asks Wire if he brought 'her'. Wire tells him that his mother decided to stay behind in the city. Tom seems very sad.

Drinkwater and a few of his remaining soldiers go to the chapel to tell Wire and Deacon Double about the city's attack on the camps in Central Park. All of his men are killed except those in the room. Wire doesn't put much faith into the way that Double looks, speaks, and dresses until he has them all participate in the ritual of washing each other's feet. Wire knows that Double is giving the men peace of mind. Wire realizes that he has had a dream similar to this before.

Charity is working in the camps in the park with Wire. She stays in the room watching Reverend Wire write his sermon. He seems disgusted and ignores her. She thinks back to a time when Thomas told her he didn't want her to touch him.

Twelve deacons make up the Vigilance Committee, which meets weekly for reports about their areas and their people. Deacon Double reads a news article to the group that says that the Negroes are undesired and should be pushed to the edge of the city to make their own lives. Deacon Double's suggestion is to arm each of the congregations with guns and projectiles. Wire is against this, of course. The deacon assures Wire that it would only be in self-defense that they would use the weapons.

Charity thinks back to a time when she gave Thomas milk and all the while she was thinking that Tabbs was not what she thought. He was just another sly trickster who told her he could give her back her son. He hadn't returned the son she knew. He was the



same boy, but different. He said odd things to her and treated her like she was evil. He called her a nurse, but she wasn't.

Back in the present day, Charity is upset by the injuries, blood, and decay that comes with the strays who enter the camp. She is amazed that Wire treats everyone the same. He comforts them by touching their shoulders and comforts them through medicine and words. Charity does not like being there. Every evening she ventures into the city for a walk trying to see the city through Wire's eyes, but she sees all bad things. When someone grabs her shoulder and calls out, she is afraid that she's being attacked. She turns to see who it is and they realize they have the wrong person. This makes Charity think about being lost in the city. She could be lost and no one would know her. She could disappear, so she does. She decides to wander away into a new unknown life away from there.

Analysis

The fishing references continue in this chapter. When Tabbs is complaining to Ruggles about how things are not going as well as planned with Tom, Ruggles wants to show Tabbs that he's had many troubles too and that through his struggles, his uneven legs have evened out, and are a blessing from God. This may be the author's way of suggesting that when a person does not focus on what they don't have, and instead focuses on what they do have, then the inequities go away. They even out, like Ruggles's legs. When Ruggles jumps up to show Tabbs his legs there is a comparison to fish being yanked from the water. Interestingly, the fish references from this story all revolve around Tabbs and Ruggles. When they first met and Ruggles hired Tabbs to convince people to come to his exhibit, he was basically asking him to fish for men, lure them in, and hook them into paying for the exhibit, allowing them to earn money.

Religion is demonstrated as a theme in this chapter. When Wire hears Tom play the piano and knows that Tabbs is back in business, he says to Tom that God spoke to him and told him to treat Tom like a son. Also, the number three is often used as a religious reference to the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost—the trinity of the church. Many religions also believe that there are three aspects to Grace—Faith, Hope, and Love. After Tabbs and Tom leave Wire alone in the church, the narrator describes Wire as walking around the room looking everywhere at once with his 'three heads'. In Greek mythology, a three-headed dog is said to guard the gates of hell. The three heads represent the three greatest areas where people fall short and may end up in hell, mythically speaking.

After the park is attacked by the city and when the broken men gather in the chapel to tell what happened, Deacon Double has the men take off their shoes and socks. He pours water into a basin and washes Drinkwater's feet. Then, he passes the emptied basin and pitcher of water around the room to allow each man to wash the feet of the man beside him. This is also a reference to the Bible. Before being crucified, Jesus washed the feet of his apostles. Another interesting thing to note is that when the



Vigilante Committee meets at the church, it is made up of twelve deacons. The parallel is made again to Christianity as Jesus had twelve apostles.

The injustices placed on the African Americans in this novel are abundant. When Tabbs feels sorry for himself and complains to Ruggles, Ruggles loses patience with him. Tabbs acts as if he is the only one who was wronged by white people. Ruggles reminds him that his own house was burned to the ground, his friends were killed, and that he'd picked up arms against the 'alabasters' before.

Obviously, the attack on the already broken people in the camp in Central Park was a horrible action toward them. When the Vigilante Committee hears what the newspapers say about these people, they are upset enough to want to take justice into their own hands by arming themselves. Deacon Double read an announcement which demonstrates the theme of Racism. The announcement states that negroes are undesirable to live among whites and that they should be confined to large tracts of unimproved land at the edge of town, where they can build their own colonies and where their diseases and way of life won't inflict injustice or disgust on 'worthy citizens'.

Discussion Question 1

Why is Tom distant from his mother?

Discussion Question 2

How does sending Charity to the refugee camp to work, help Tabbs with Tom?

Discussion Question 3

If Charity loves Tom, why does she disappear to start a new life?

Vocabulary

impediment, impasse, ruminations, ensnared, clarion, reticent, presentiment, anticipatory, aura, shoddy, assayed



Chapter 8

Summary

This chapter begins with the “Original Blind Tom” holding a concert in New York City. This fake Blind Tom is very talented, but he talks way too much for Seven’s comfort. Juluster, the “Original Blind Tom,” wants to play songs that were not planned for the program. He talks to reporters and tells them what inspired his songs and how he feels about his mom and dad. The real Blind Tom wouldn’t ramble on the way this guy does. It makes Seven nervous. The concert goes well, and Seven tries to justify to himself that he’s not taking advantage of Tom, but he’s doing this in Tom’s memory. Seven doesn’t want to believe what he sees, but the three weeping women in black are in one of the first few rows. They continue showing up for the concerts. Over the next few weeks, Seven feels fearful that his time is running out. After Perry Oliver saw these three women, General Bethune took the real Tom back, ruining Perry’s career. After one concert one of the women corners Seven back stage and tells him that she knows that this man is not the real Blind Tom but is an impostor. He does his best to dismiss her and hurries to leave the building.

Juluster shakes Wire’s hand after one of his concerts. This impostor introduces himself as Blind Tom. Wire speaks in a louder than necessary voice which worries Seven. Seven hopes that the preacher just wants a quick donation or something and will be on his way. Wire tells Seven that he’s done a good job, but insinuates that he knows that this is not the real Blind Tom. Wire tells Seven that he doesn’t have a problem with him passing off this talented impostor as Blind Tom. He also speaks in a way that lets Seven know that he knows all about the real Blind Tom and will want something from them. Wire says he doesn’t want something for himself, but he needs material and immaterial things for those displaced who are living in the camps in the park. Seven says he’ll try, and Wire insinuates that Seven will do whatever Wire asks, whenever he asks it.

When Wire tells Tabbs about this show, Tabbs takes it so hard that it makes him physically ill. He stays bedridden. Tom tries to help care for Tabbs through his comforting words. Tabbs sees that Tom is looking pitiful with his dirty clothes and exhausted look. He asks again for Tabbs to take him to HER. Ruggles comes to visit the bedridden Tabbs. He tells him that he’s being ridiculous and to get out of bed and go to a meeting at the church with him. Ruggles has been appointed Postmaster now. He forces Tabbs to go to the Vigilance Committee meeting at Wire’s church, Resurrection African Christian Episcopal (whose abbreviation spells RACE). Tabbs sits back watching the crowd and listening to what they say thinking that maybe he could just stay on the island. He doesn’t want to return to the city, although it’s originally his home, he feels like an outsider among the alabasters. Edgemere is an all-black island, and he’d be better off there.

Although soldiers are supposed to be guarding the strays in the city, the news at the meeting is that the soldiers are pulling out of the city. Ruggles says that they can protect



the strays and the island themselves without help from outsiders. Due to the loss of soldier protection, more and more strays flee to the island. Tabbs just watches as the strays begin setting up tents and temporary shelter in the main square on the island. The more mouths to feed, the less food to go around. They continue to get news of mass graves and horrible things being done to the strays in the city. Hungry dogs start killing chickens. The black-robed deacons begin shooting the dogs on sight and tearing down the strays' shelters. Tabbs sees a black-robed deacon guarding several strays tied up on their hands and knees drinking from the horse fountain. The new refugees on the island are getting sick and dying. When the Vigilance Committee meets, Tabbs tells them that he thought they were going to help and protect these people. Later, Tabbs runs into Deacon Double on the street and goes into his office with him. Double tells Tabbs about his thoughts about this situation. He believes that God would want them to defend themselves. He has three cabinets or bookcases full of guns. A few evenings per week during this troubled time, Ruggles stops by to see Tabbs after work.

Tabbs is away, and Tom asks to see "HER." Reverend Pastor asks Tom to help with the Easter Sunday service. Tom says he doesn't do church music. The pastor makes two men hold Tom while he preaches to the congregation. They force Tom onto the piano bench, and the church people chant, "Play! Play! Play!". Tom refuses to play. The preacher says that God gave everyone talents, and it's the people who blow their chances. He says they need to overcome their racial history. They force Tom to take communion. He still refuses to play, so the men take him back. When Tabbs returns, Wire tells him that he's sorry they took Tom and things got out of hand. Tabbs tries to remind him that it's his church, and he should be in charge.

The young homeless kids, the blackers, use dirty rags and try to get people to let them blacken their shoes when the kids themselves have no shoes. Tabbs refuses, but feels bad and gives the boy he refused a silver dollar coin.

Tom keeps saying he wants 'HER'. Tabbs finally realizes that he's talking about Eliza Bethune and not his mother.

The kids try to attract business when they dance and sing in the streets. The boy asks Tabbs for a job. Wire is sad about what is happening on the island. He hears Deacon Double preaching to the people. Wire is their preacher and should be the one talking. Double preaches about the alabasters and death. Double talks about going to war with them. Ruggles gets caught up in the hype, but Wire tries to keep a level head.

Deacon Double is preaching on the beach with all of the black-robed deacons standing around. Double makes Drinkwater kneel in the sand. He takes a vial of red liquid from his robe, tells them that it's consecrated blood and puts drops of it in their mouths, starting with the kneeling Drinkwater. Tabbs is shocked and realizes that Tom is standing next to him. Double talks about getting revenge. Then, he has a seizure during his "ceremony," falls to the floor, and literally raises up as two people who go to separate podiums and begin to preach that if they die, they will be raised up from ashes. Tabbs, who didn't participate in this ceremony, is freaked out and decides right then that he and Tom will be gone from the island by morning.



Analysis

Religion as a theme is demonstrated in this chapter. The impostor Blind Tom, who talks too much and not in the same manner as the real Tom, tells about going to church and Bible study every Sunday with his mother. He claims that thinking of Noah, the ark, and the flood is what led him to compose "The Rain Storm." When Seven is trying to justify to himself the idea that he is not stealing Tom's identity with this impostor, but he's paying homage to him, he thinks of a Bible quote that is used often in church during communion: "Do this in memory of me" (56). As Deacon Double begins his preaching of the people defending themselves with weapons after the soldiers leave, not everyone takes his viewpoint.

As this same church service continues, the Reverend continues preaching, leading up to the expectation that Tom will play the piano, which he doesn't. The deacons in this church are using their religious beliefs and congregational audience to further their idea of what should be done with this post-war situation in which they find themselves.

Just as Jesus had twelve apostles in the Bible, the twelve deacons refer back to this. Wire has let the Vigilance Committee take over his church; he is giving them all the power. During the final sermon in this chapter preached by Deacon Double, he is trying to give the message to his people through his sermon that their enemies, who are not faithful to God, that their enemies should be punished. He presents his message saying that the bad things their enemies do, such as breaking the commandments and harming his people, should bring punishment upon them.

Finally, the number three is an important religious factor in this chapter. As previously discussed, the number three has several religious connotations. When Perry Oliver, Tom's former manager, begins to see three weeping women dressed in black appearing at the concerts, destruction of his life occurred. Because of this, when these ladies begin to appear at the fake "Original Blind Tom's" concerts, Seven becomes concerned that doom is pending. When Ruggles visits Tabbs at his sick bed, he tries to tell Tabbs that he shouldn't worry about the impostor Tom. He compares this fake Tom to a defect, referencing a three legged cow.

Continuing the references to the number three, Tabbs is shown Deacon Double's office which holds the weapons meant to be used in this religious war. They are kept in three cabinets against three walls. Also, Tabbs sees three girls, who are 'strays' sitting out in the sunlight. While many of the townspeople wait to hear Wire speak about the devastation of death and the people in exile, Deacon Double steps in uninvited and starts talking to them. He tells them that God has three rings, which include birth, death, and resurrection. This is the beginning of Double's effort to convince the people of dying for their cause because they could be resurrected like Christ.

Discussion Question 1

If Seven was so attached to Tom, why would he find a fake Tom to send on tour?



Discussion Question 2

What is the meaning of the three weeping ladies showing up again in the story?

Discussion Question 3

Discuss the continued Biblical and mythological parallelisms that exist with the Vigilance Committee.

Vocabulary

virtuoso, sable, analogous, impetus, deluges, consternation, amalgamation, askew, bemused, illusions, disclosure, rheumatic, constrained, accelerates, pristine, neoclassical, interlacing, arcade, labyrinth



Chapter 9

Summary

Eliza Bethune is back in the country. The house is very run down and has a moldy smell. While still in the city, she heard mobs and saw fire and light. She knows she cannot return to the city. Sometimes when she sleeps, she dreams of Tom in the days she cared for him and that he's speaking to her. She remembers the General and his interactions with her and Tom. She hears a knock on the door. In the old days, it would have been journalists trying to see Tom, but now she's not sure who could be there. When she opens the door, she sees a woman, whom she assumes is Tom's mom. With her is Tom, and a Negro boy. When they enter her home, the woman takes off her wig revealing that it is not Tom's mother, but it is Tabbs in disguise. Tom is very happy to be reunited with Eliza again. He even crawls on the floor under the piano that used to be a resting place for him in his younger days. Eliza is also happy to see Tom. She had been worried that he may have died already. They tell her that they have come to take her to the safety of the South. The soldiers protect the Freedmen. The North is dangerous and in conflict. They decide to take a train and Tabbs dresses like a woman again.

They are nervous about going to the train station and getting on the train. They fear that people may make a big deal about a white woman traveling with three black people. They are also worry that people may recognize that Tabbs is not a woman, but a man in disguise. Once on the train, they work their way through wondering eyes to a back car. As they sit together, Tom and Eliza talk calmly. When four white people enter the car where they are sitting quietly, they say hello to the group. Eliza does the talking and tells them that the black woman is mute, Tom is blind, and the other is only a boy. Tom starts talking to himself and singing. The group of white people start to get upset that Tom won't stop singing.

The white men discover that Tabbs is really a man. They carry him out of the car, beating him the whole time. The young black boy gets upset, takes the shank he has hidden in his boot, and kills four white men in an attempt to try and save Tabbs, only to be overtaken himself. The men throw a half-dead Tabbs off the train and chase him across the land throwing rocks. They finally catch and kill him.

The book ends with the explanation that Eliza and Tom make it to the South and live in a third-floor apartment at 6 Gracie Square. There are only a few occasions where they ever saw Tom at all and only a few more times of seeing Eliza. They all heard his piano playing for many years until one day when Tom looks out of the window, takes a deep breath, and closes the window. The music is never heard again.



Analysis

The theme of Race is demonstrated in this chapter. It is set before, during, and after the Civil War which was largely fought over race and ownership issues. Prejudice is shown to have swung both ways with blacks calling whites “alabasters” and “woogies” and with the whites calling blacks “nigger” and mistreating and demeaning the entire race in every possible way. Although the war was won by the North, blacks were not assimilated flawlessly into society. As seen in this chapter, the whites not only took over the homes of the Negroes who fought for the North in the war, but they attacked the displaced refugees and their families after the war. Because of the craziness in the city and the potential fanatics on the island, Tabbs knew that he needed to get those boys to safety. He even had to disguise himself as a woman hoping that people would not attack a woman, and he could safely pass through the city getting the boys to safety.

Decay and destruction are prevalent in this chapter. Eliza begins the chapter in the country house which used to be airy and fresh, described as the epitome of nature at its best, but now is in complete disrepair. The house looks as if it has been in a flood and the walls are moldy. The furnishings and structure are both in terrible shape. The house looks and smells old and musty. The town’s Central Park was first made into a refugee camp, and then practically burned down when the soldiers who protected them were moved out of the city. The island of Edgemere went from being a calm nice retreat for the displaced and mistreated families and orphans, to an overcrowded destructive community that shot starving dogs on sight to stop them from killing and eating chickens and other food sources. The town turned into another refugee camp where people turned on each other and the religious community went from respectful guidance and prayer to trying to raise an army for revenge in God’s name.

Discussion Question 1

Why would the white community attack the Central Park camp?

Discussion Question 2

What will, most likely, be the next move for the Vigilance Committee and its followers?

Discussion Question 3

What does the title Song of Shank have to do with the contents of the book?

Vocabulary

prevaricator, mirages, supine, gunwale, dingy, nimbly, deformity, stringent, mongrel, covenants, unbefitting, eloquent, equanimity, expelled, unambiguous, slovenliness,

famished, obstinacy, amenable, immaculate, vista, armaments, fomenting, incarnated, prophets, emancipation



Characters

Tom/Blind Tom/Thomas Greene Wiggins

The book follows the life of Tom from his infancy when his family was sold to General Bethune to his death as an adult living with his surrogate mother, Eliza Bethune. Tom was blind from birth. He was fascinated by all of the sounds around him from the sounds of his own bodily functions to the sounds of other people and of nature. He was mentally challenged which made it difficult for people to carry on a normal conversation with him. He didn't crawl for quite some time after his birth, then didn't walk until a few years later. He never seemed to have difficulties finding his way around once he was older. He was always drawn to sounds of all types. Tom was an extremely talented person. He could play every song on the piano just by hearing it once. As he got older, he even composed his own musical pieces. He had a great memory and could recite chapters of books, including the Bible. He bonded over the years with many of the caregivers in whose hands he had been placed. His strongest bond, however, ended up being with Eliza Bethune, General Bethune's daughter-in-law.

Eliza Bethune

Eliza was a young white woman working for a group home under a black doctor, Dr. McCunes. She met her husband, Sharpe Bethune, when he was managing Blind Tom as he toured the world. Sharpe came to the group home and offered to have Tom give a concert for the occupants. Sharpe and Eliza would later be married. When Sharpe and Tom went on tour, Eliza was left on her own. Even when her husband returned, she was not the center of anyone's attention. When her husband died (or left), she was left to care for Tom. She kept him in the apartment in the city and vacationed in her country home. Then, she felt the need to get him away from others and moved back to the country.

Eliza was Tom's sole caretaker for many years. When she couldn't bear being alone with him any more, she brought him back to the city. Being the only person to care for him took its toll on her, and when Tabbs Gross came to her and said he wanted to take Tom to his biological mother, Eliza let Tom go. She was relieved to be without him at first, but then became nostalgic about her days with Tom and missed him. When the city began to riot, she moved to the country house and was happy when Mr. Gross brought Tom back to her and included her in his plan to escape to the South. She ends up taking care of Tom in the South until his death.

Tabbs Gross

Tabbs was a black man who worked as a young boy hustling to get people into an exhibit so that he and his employer, Ruggles, could make a quick buck. When he was older and he heard about Blind Tom, he snuck into the concert to hear him. At that point,



Tabbs became obsessed with getting his hands on Tom to make money until the day that Tabbs, himself, was killed. He tried to buy Tom from General Bethune, but was young and inexperienced, and the General took advantage of that and basically took Tabbs' money and didn't hand Tom over to him. Tabbs became so obsessed that he followed all of Tom's concerts until Tom disappeared from the public eye during the war years. Tabbs tried to hire an attorney to force the General to hand Tom over once the war ended, but the attorney said he could only get his money back, not receive Tom.

Tabbs found Tom's biological mother, Charity, and convinced her to move to Edgemere where Tabbs promised with her backing he would bring Tom back to her. Still obsessed with Tom, Tabbs tracked Tom to the country house, but missed them. He broke into their city apartment to wait for them until the superintendent ran him off. Finally, he confronted Eliza and said he was there to get Tom and take him back to his mother. He worked tirelessly to get Tom to bond with his mother, so she could convince him to start playing piano again. When he found out about the fake Blind Tom, he became so distressed, he took to his sick bed.

When things started going bad on the island of Edgemere due to influx of people in exile overflowing there and when the deacons seem to be raising a following to go to war, Tabbs realized that he needed to save Tom and get him away from this craziness. He took Tom and the young urchin boy and covertly took them to the city, and then on to Eliza's country home. He then convinced Eliza that they should stick together, and they would be safer to take the kids down South where the soldiers could protect them. He even dressed as a woman to make the train ride and not attract attention to himself. Unfortunately, Tom, without realizing it, outed his identity, and the men on the train beat Tabbs almost to death and threw him off the train. The attackers followed him, chased him across an empty stretch of land, threw rocks at him, and eventually, killed him. Although he started off selfishly wanting Tom to have him make money for Tabbs, but in the end, he became almost paternal to Tom and thought only of his safety. He died trying to get him to safety.

General Bethune

General Bethune is a war veteran from the Mexican-American war. He has an injured leg that causes him to limp and have the need for canes. He is a strong Southern figure who is not only a veteran, but also owns a printing company and is a prominent figure in the community. General Bethune stirs up support for the cause of starting a war with the North supporting succession. He even funded the first regiment with his own money hoping to get the ball rolling. He is a stern and often cruel man. When he is kind enough to buy Tom's entire family at auction, so they won't be separated, the reader is led to believe that he is a kind man. He buys them even before he knows that Tom is gifted. Of course, the readers' attitude toward him turns when he shows his true colors and not only exploits Tom to make money, but takes him away from his family, bounces him from manager to manager, cheats these same managers out of their contracts, and takes Tom back when he sees that his war is going to be lost and he needs financial security.



Charity Bethune/Charity Greene Wiggins

Charity is Tom's biological mother. When Tom is a baby, she struggles with keeping him out of trouble. Once he is mobile, he wanders off and hurts himself or bothers other people. It takes everyone in their family to keep up with him while still trying to keep up with their work on the plantation. Although she loves Thomas, he is very overwhelming to her. She finds that once General Bethune allows his wife Mary to train Thomas on the piano, it gives Charity a relief from constantly watching over him. She is even more relieved when the general changes her job to work at the printing press where she gets to dress nicer, avoid manual labor, eat lunch out without preparing it, and most importantly, have more time away from the responsibility of Thomas.

When the General tells her that he plans to keep Thomas for himself, she is upset or in shock at first, but quickly gets over it to the point where she admits to feeling nothing when she sees Thomas playing a concert at the house where she is working as a server. She doesn't have contact with Thomas for years, but continues to care for the Bethune girls even after the war when she is a free woman. When Tabbs finds her and offers to take her to Thomas to reunite them, she seems to become nostalgic and wants to be with her son. When she sees him, he does not respond well to her. He does not lovingly accept her as she thought he would. He doesn't really know her as his mother or at all really because he was taken from her at a young age. She stays with Thomas at Edgemere after Tabbs brings him to her.

Charity tries to talk to Thomas, to help him remember her, and to get him to play the piano again. She ends up working in the orphanage taking care of the children. When Tabbs thinks she is hindering his efforts with Thomas, he has her sent to the city refugee camps to act as a nurse. She is not equipped for that job. She doesn't even have the heart for it and is grossed out by their filth and injuries. When she takes a walk into the city after a day at the camp, she is exhausted mentally and physically. She realizes that if she just walked off and didn't return it would not affect anyone else, and she could disappear and start a new life on her own. So, when Thomas won't give her the affection she had hoped for and she doesn't like the job she's forced to do, she decides to just abandon Thomas again to start a new life.

Perry Oliver

Perry is the first person who General Bethune contracts Tom out to. Perry, a white man, crashes a party at the Bethune home where he hears Tom for the first time. He waits until an opportune time and returns to General Bethune with a contract to manage Tom. The General agrees, and Tom moves in with Perry Oliver and his "understudy" Seven who is also a young boy. Perry leaves Seven with the responsibility of grooming Tom, teaching him manners, teaching him to listen, teaching him to behave, and seeing to his daily needs. Meanwhile, Perry secures a piano on which Tom can practice, arranges for instruction from a professor of music, and launches his world tour where they make a lot of money. Perry is happy in his life with Tom and Seven. He makes a lot of money and



becomes accustomed to a certain style of life. When General Bethune takes Tom back when the war seems hopeless for the South, Perry is crushed. Feeling defeated and depressed, Perry leaves Tom with the general. Years later, he sues the General for breach of contract and wins the money that he was cheated out of from the original contract.

Seven

Seven is a young white boy, not yet a teen, in the beginning of his time with Tom. He is very prejudiced before Tom comes into his life. He continually told Perry Oliver that they should get themselves a “nigger.” When Perry brings Tom home, Seven is very surprised and upset at first. He eventually sees how distraught and scared Tom is being with strangers. Seven is extremely patient with Tom. He becomes his teacher, his trainer, his caretaker, and his friend. Seven is gentle, but firm with Tom. He is also very protective over him. When he takes Tom to his piano lessons, he is suspicious of the teacher and constantly watches him.

Before Tom performs his first concert under Perry’s management, Seven comes up with a way to promote Tom, so they will have a big turnout. Seven loads Tom and the piano on a truck bed and drives him around the town where he sings and plays for the public, then announces the concert. The actual concert is a great success. From there, Seven travels with Perry and Tom around the world to all of his performances. Seven is crushed when Tom is taken from them.

Later, as an adult and after Tom dropped from the public eye during the war, Seven finds a guy who is almost as talented as Tom and tried to pass him off in concerts as “The Original Blind Tom.” When he plays a concert in New York City, some people recognize that he isn’t being honest. His scam is over.

Reverend Wire

Wire lives on Edgemere Island. He is a black preacher and a doctor. He agrees to allow Tabbs to bring Tom to his home where he cares for him and once he’s in full health, he allows him to stay at the orphanage on the island and then again in Wire’s home. Wire is a spiritual guide for the Edgemere community. When the war ends and strays end up camping in Central Park, Wire moves to the camp to care for the sick and injured people. He is very compassionate and treats everyone as equals. Even though many strays come in dirty, bloody, and unsanitary, Wire places his hand on their shoulders for comfort, and he cares for their injuries. He takes on the worries of their world and struggles to keep up his faith. When he returns to the island and his congregation, he is overtaken by Deacon Double and his committee of deacons. Wire has the right to lead his congregation but is pushed aside as Deacon Double steps in and preaches his beliefs before Wire has the chance to speak. Wire is beaten down emotionally from caring for the strays and from the entire war residue that he doesn’t fight Double when he is left behind.



Ruggles

Ruggles is one of Tabbs' oldest friends. He's a black gentleman who is old enough to be Tabbs' father. They meet when Tabbs is a young boy, and Ruggles hires Tabbs to lure people into his scam of a business. Ruggles has one leg longer than the other. As the war came, he was forced from his home and had many friends and family killed during these harsh years. He is exiled to Edgemere. After making the trip, miraculously, both of his legs are the same length. Reverend Wire tells him that is a sign from God and that he should help others now. He becomes the headmaster of the orphanage on the island and eventually also takes on the job of Postmaster. When the deacons promote arming themselves with weapons to protect the people on the island, Ruggles is drawn into the hype of the situation. He feels that they should rely on themselves for protection and not the white soldiers.

Deacon Double

Although initially Deacon Double is an inspirational leader to the strays in Central Park and to the people on the island. After the soldiers desert the strays in the city and many are exiled to the island, Double begins to change. First, he suggests that they arm their congregations with weapons to protect themselves. This turns into a full campaign for revenge. He uses the pulpit as a place to spread his anger and his ideas about how to overtake the whites in the city. He forms the Vigilance Committee of twelve deacons who move from inspiring faith in God to asking God's help in getting revenge.

Dr. Hollister

Dr. Hollister is Tom's first doctor. He is hired by General Bethune to examine the extent of Tom's blindness. Dr. Hollister is a white southerner. Even when Tom is with Eliza, Dr. Hollister continues to stop by their apartment to give Tom check ups. He is the person who gives Tabbs the idea of using Charity to get Tom in his possession.

Dr. McCune

Dr. McCune is a black doctor who works at a home in the city. He is Eliza's boss when she is the house matron of the same home. He and his family end up living in the same building with Eliza after she marries Sharpe Bethune. The two couples become good friends. He also examines Tom at a young age and again when he's older and living with Tabbs.

Sharpe Bethune

Sharpe is a puppet to his father's obsession over Tom's ability to make the family money. He doesn't hold his father's beliefs. He does take charge of Tom with the help of



the manager Mr. Warhurst. Sharpe married Eliza, but leaves her often touring with Tom. He rarely returns her mail while he's away and isn't interested in her life when he returns. Eventually, he disappears from her life leaving her to care for Tom. Eliza is never sure whether Sharpe died or just ran off.

Thomas Warhurst, Reverend Frye, Mr. Geryon

These men are pawns in General Bethune's game of earning money at Tom's expense and cheating others to gain all that he can. Thomas Warhurst is Tom's manager for a period. Reverend Frye is the pastor of the Bethune Family's church. Mr. Geryon is the General's attorney.

Mr. Howard

During Tom's time with Perry Oliver, Mr. Howard is his professor of music who gets local musical experts to sign a form authenticating Tom's talents. He is used by Perry because after doing the instructions and the form, Dr. Howard is dropped from Tom's life.

Mr. Coffin, Esquire

Mr. Coffin is the white attorney that Tabbs hires to try to gain control of Tom after he is cheated out of his money and contract to buy Tom. He tells Tabbs that he can't get Tom, but can get money. Tabbs just finds another way to get Tom.

Lieutenant Drinkwater

Drinkwater is a black platoon leader who tries to keep his troops protected, safe, and healthy when they are forced to set up the refugee camp in Central Park. He often turns to Reverend Wire and Deacon Double for guidance when tragedy strikes the camp.

Vigilance Committee

This is a group of black men who originally were formed to report issues that each sector was having. However, organized and rallied by Deacon Double, they begin to arm themselves and become militant. There are 12 men in the group and may symbolize the disciples of Christ.



Symbols and Symbolism

The Color Black

The color black is often used to symbolize death, destruction, and bad omens. This color appears many times in the story and always at a time just before or during a bad action. The three weeping ladies, shown in two separate sections of the book, wear all black. Directly after Perry Oliver, then Seven, sees these ladies, the money they are earning from Tom, and even fake Tom, came to a halt. On Edgemere Island, young refugee girls wear black, and the island plunges into despair. The twelve deacons wear black robes and as their group gets stronger they become darker in their message to the people of the island.

The Number Three

The number three has great significance in the religious world. The trinity in the Bible consists of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. Also found in Christian teachings is that Grace is obtained through three things: faith, hope, and love. The weeping ladies that symbolically bring about the doom of the careers of Perry Oliver and Seven show that just as the number three stands for holy things, the opposite is true in this case. Actually, the ending of Perry and Seven's reigns may be bad for them, but also ends them taking advantage of Tom and the fake Blind Tom.

The Number 12

In the Bible, Jesus has twelve Apostles. When Deacon Double creates the Vigilance Committee, he enlists twelve deacons to be his devotees in convincing the crowd to follow his beliefs and his teachings, just as Jesus did in the Bible. Although, Double's message is dark, not peaceful and enlightened.

Fishing References

The fishing references all focus around Tabbs and Ruggles. Ruggles is older and actually lures in Tabbs as a young boy to help him with his scams. Later in life, Ruggles lures Tabbs to stay on the island and to go to the Vigilance Committee meetings. He also lures Tabbs from his sickbed when he feels sorry for himself about Tom. Tabbs refers to fishing when he gets into trouble. He often talks about worms on the hook.

Civil War

The Civil War represents the prejudice and conflict between not only the North and the South, but also, the black and white communities. Although the blacks from the North



fight for freedom from slavery for their Southern people, they are treated harshly by the North upon returning from that very fight, a fight to defend the North and the freedom of blacks.

Deacons' Robes

The twelve deacons who serve as the Vigilance Committee wear robes of black with red crosses on them. This symbolizes the exact opposite of the white men in white hooded robes who want to wipe out blacks. The black-robed deacons wish to fight to do the same to eliminate the whites.

Eliza's Country Home

When Eliza is young and caring for Tom, the home is bright and airy and well-kept. When Tabbs finds Eliza back at the country home when after the war, the house is in terrible disrepair and worn down, just like its owner.

Tom's Obsession with Eliza

Tom was taken from his biological mother at a young age. He spent a majority of his years being cared for by Eliza; therefore, he connects to Eliza as people may connect to their original mom. So, when he was taken from Eliza, he continually asked for "her." It took Tabbs a long time to figure out that he didn't want his real mom, but Eliza.

Tom's Belief that He is White

Because Tom was raised from a young age by the Bethune family and then shifted from one white manager and caretaker to another and the fact that he's blind and can't see for himself, he believes he is white. Therefore, he mistreats and speaks cruelly to black people just as the people who raised him do.

Use of Bible to Justify Violence

The Vigilance Committee began by gathering to keep track of what was happening in the Central Park refugee camps. The committee preaches about God's love, but shifts to discussing God's taking revenge on others. Jesus preached love; God often punished those who did not follow him. The deacons take phrases from the Bible and make them fit into their belief of revenge.



Settings

Country House

In the beginning, the country house is a peaceful, clean, serene place. Tom and Eliza are both happy there with their modern, well-kept furnishings. When Eliza moves back to the country after the war, the house is run down, not well-kept, and moldy/musty which actually reflects the way the people feel as well.

City Apartment

The city apartment is modern, well-furnished and allows them to mingle with other people besides themselves. It is not as safe as the country home because Tom is a former celebrity who could be exposed and because Eliza is white and Tom is black which could cause problems for them during these racially turbulent years.

Hundred Gates

Hundred Gates is the original plantation of General Bethune. When his family was young, the home was well-kept and had slaves doing the manual labor. They had grand furniture and a piano with a yard of flower gardens and beautiful gates across the property. As the war took a turn for the worse, the family had to run from the plantation.

Edgemere Island

In the beginning, Edgemere was the safehaven from the blacks who were forced from the city during the war. They created a comfortable community where they had an orphanage and thrived together to live a peaceful life. The island continues to change for the worse as the city gets into more and more distress. When the refugee camp is attacked, more people flee in exile to the island which quickly becomes overcrowded and violent.

Refugee Camp

When the black soldiers fighting for the North return to their homes, the homes have been overtaken by whites who remained in the city. The whites refused to give up their newly acquired homes and force the returning soldiers to set up a refugee camp in Central Park. The camp is made up of make-shift shelters and tents. The people are starving, unsanitary, and ill. They are provoked and finally attacked by the whites who become tired of the eyesore of the camp and the crime that flows from it as well.

Train

The train is only a brief setting, but it's the place where Tabbs is attacked before he is killed. When Tabbs, dressed as a woman, the young Negro boy, Tom, and Eliza are on the train, they are in a berth alone. Tom and Eliza are sitting in seats facing Tabbs and the boy. When Tabbs is discovered, the white men on the train beat him in the aisles.



Themes and Motifs

Racism

Tom is a blind, black man whose talents elevate him into the honored position of the public spotlight. Everyone, white and black, is amazed by his abilities. This thought is supported by many of the statements made by Tom, himself, as the novel, and Tom's life progress. Tom does not believe that he, himself, is an African American and instead treats blacks as he believes the whites treat them. So, in many respects, the racism that is perpetuated is often exercised by Tom towards others.

Obviously, Tom is not the only prejudiced person during this time period. The first chapter in the present tense is in 1866, which is after the end of the Civil War, but there are several flashbacks to earlier years even before the war began. When Sharpe meets Eliza at the asylum, he is surprised that she suggests that Tom be examined by a Negro eye doctor, Dr. McCune. When Eliza makes the suggestion, Sharpe responds saying that the family wouldn't stand for that kind of doctor to attend to their prize Negro.

Open examples of Racism exist when the reader sees Tom's entire family for sale. The way in which they are treated, as if they are cattle, is degrading. Worse still is the fact that the family most likely will not be allowed to stay together. Racism is shown to be an institution that is not respectful of family ties, nor even recognizes the rights of the African to have them. Later, when the entire family IS purchased, Mary Bethune discovers Tom's ability to mimic music. She sets to teaching him, but her father warns her that the 'negro' doesn't have the capacity to really know what he's repeating and that he would never be able to actually play like a white person would. Mary rejects the prejudice and racism of her family and continues to work with Tom. This is why, in many respects, Tom doesn't realize that he's black.

Likewise, the reader sees blacks acting with the same amount of racism. This is particularly evident when Tabbs goes back to the south to meet with Coffin and he sees many of the whites are destitute and hungry. Tabbs is happy to see the whites suffering like the blacks had been made to suffer for so many years.

Lastly, the reader sees the whites still turning on the blacks when they attack Central Park. The Vigilance Committee believes what has been written in the papers about the 'Negroes' living in the city and how they will bring disease and immorality into their community. This incites the violence that occurs. Overall, it is shown to be a divisive and destructive force.

Religion

Throughout this novel, religion is a prevalent topic, particularly the theme of using religion to one's advantage to support a cause. Many times throughout history, people working toward a cause have rightly and deceptively used the Bible and religious



teachings as a way to prove their point to the general public. This exact thing happens in this story. When General Bethune begins exposing Tom to the public, he includes an invitation to the new young pastor, Reverend H. D. Frye, who is consulted throughout Tom's time with the general. He uses Bible verses himself as a way to make older parishioners have faith in such a young pastor. The Reverend Frye asks people to name a scripture or chapter of the Bible, and he can repeat it back to them from memory. He thinks of himself as a guiding religious figure where Tom is concerned. He sits in on contract deals with the general when others want to buy him, although he is a Southern minister whose followers include mostly slave owners.

Once Tom reaches the island of Edgemere through the efforts of Tabbs Gross, he is introduced to Reverend Wire, a prominent black citizen there. Reverend Wire is a minister and a doctor. His entire goal in life is to be of help to others. As a doctor at the refugee camp in Central Park, he doesn't discriminate against anyone even if they are sick, bloody, or filthy. On the island, he leads his church and gives charity to all. In his sermons, of course, Bible quotes and stories will be included. When he feels distraught over the harshness of war and injustice that he sees daily, he prays for help and guidance. Even though, he doesn't really agree with Deacon Double's methods, he does appreciate his help at the camp when the refugees are attacked. He was distraught and at a loss for what to say, but appreciated when Deacon Double stepped in and simulated the washing of the feet ritual that Jesus did with his Apostles in the Bible. When Reverend Wire comes upon a group of sailors who are torturing a thief they have in their possession, Reverend Wire doesn't tell them they are wrong. He uses scripture and examples from real life as a way to guide the men into stopping the torture and making them believe it was their idea. Then, he is able to congratulate the men on being so mature and warn the thief that he is lucky that they show mercy.

At a time when Reverend Wire is in the refugee camp caring for the sick and wounded and Tabbs is off the island, Tom is left on his own. The Reverend Pastor who is in charge of their Easter Sunday service had men carry Tom to the church and put him through a lot of trauma trying to get him to sing and play the piano for them. They force him to take communion, and it freaks him out. He has to be carried back to his room. Reverend Wire apologizes when he realizes that the deacons took advantage of Tom during his and Tabbs' absence.

Deacon Double starts off as a religious guide of comfort and flows into becoming an extremist. He begins comforting soldiers and washing their feet, but moves on to more dangerous ways. Instead of merely holding prayers for the refugees left unguarded in Central Park when the protection of the soldiers is lifted by the government. He first suggests that they arm their congregations with weapons to help protect them. Next, he organizes the Vigilance Committee which consists of twelve other deacons, mirroring the twelve apostles that Jesus has in the Bible. Finally, the move that Deacon Double pulls that makes Tabbs decide to take Tom and the young black boy away from the island is when he holds a disturbing ceremony on the beach. During this ceremony, he has one man kneel in the sand on the beach, says many grand words of pray over him, brings out a vial of red liquid, claims it's consecrated blood, and puts a drop on the man's tongue. He follows up by doing the same to the other followers on the beach.



Immediately after that, he falls to the ground in a seizure-like state and rises as two different people, two exact Deacon Doubles. He preaches about how, like Jesus, those who die can rise from ashes again. This is meant to justify his push for his followers to arm themselves and to even attack whites.

Family Ties

This is another important topic throughout the novel. Tom is a black man born into slavery. Once his talent is discovered, he is taken from his biological family at an early age, too young to even remember them. He sees the Bethunes as his original family, and identifies with them and their ethnicity. When Mrs. Bethune dies and Charity and Mingo try to help the well-dressed Tom into the carriage to go to the church, he shakes them off of his arm and uses racist slurs. Even when he is reunited with Charity on the island in New York, he doesn't recognize her as a part of his life. He is cared for by his family; by General Bethune and his wife Mary, a white couple; by Perry Oliver and Seven, both white; by Tabbs a black man; by Sharpe Bethune and manager Thomas Warhurst; and by Eliza Bethune, a white woman married to Sharpe. Therefore, he has been cared for throughout his life by both blacks and whites. He is blind and has spent most of his formative years with white people; therefore, he believes he is white as well.

When his family was first put up for auction, they realized that he was blind, but didn't find out about his mental disabilities until he was a bit older. Once Charity, Mingo, and their daughters realized what a handful Tom was to be, it took all of them to watch over him and keep him from trouble. It was almost impossible to complete their daily work and keep an eye on Tom. When the Bethunes took an interest in him and spent extra time with him, it was a relief to Charity. She was overwhelmed working and making sure that he didn't get hurt or into trouble. When the general told her that Tom was going to live with his family from now on, she was sad, but also a bit relieved. Once Tom's birth family was used to him being with the Bethunes, they seemed less and less concerned with his daily life. Even when the Bethunes held a concert featuring Tom and Charity was the server, she watched him play with little emotion. When she explained to Mingo that the reverend wants Tom to play piano in church, he says it doesn't matter to him, can't do any harm, and they go about their own business.

Even when Charity is brought to Tom when he is grown after the war, he does not recognize her. Over and over, she tries to get him to remember or at least to warm up to her, but he doesn't. He continually tells Tabbs that he wants "her." Everyone assumed he was talking about his mother when actually he was talking about Eliza Bethune. She's the one who cared for him twenty-four hours a day during his developmental years. Even though as his sole caregiver, she became tired and did not fight Tabbs taking him away. However, she grieved him from that day on. She wasn't truly happy until her family, Tom, her figurative son, was back in her life for good. She cared for him until he died.

When Charity is asked to leave the island and help Reverend Wire at the refugee camps, she doesn't miss Tom. She only feels sorry for herself. She becomes so self-



involved that while taking an evening stroll to clear her head, she decides that she can just keep walking and never look back. She becomes invisible and knows that no one will try to find her. She doesn't give any thought to how Tom will react to her disappearance, and actually, he doesn't care because he doesn't see her as his family. He longs for Eliza, whom he sees as a mother-figure.

Taking Advantage of Others

Practically, everyone who came into contact with Tom used him in one way or another. General Bethune used him off and on throughout his life as a money maker. Following him, almost everyone else who became his caretaker does the same thing. Seven and Eliza may be the only people who actually loved and cared for Tom as a person, not only for what he can do for them financially. Eliza actually hides him from the public to keep him safe.

Seven, although he truly loved Tom, goes on, after Tom is believed to be dead, and takes advantage of another blind black man who also is musically talented. He uses the fake "Original Blind Tom" to make money for himself. He tries to not only take advantage of the man, but also takes advantage of the real Tom's previous notoriety with the public. He is eventually exposed as a fraud when he finds out that the real Tom is alive. The real Tom was truly like a brother to him, but he ends up losing the real Tom and his money-maker "Original Blind Tom."

Perry Oliver is also a user. First, he uses Professor Howard as a tool to teach Tom the technique he needs and gets the professor to have his colleagues sign a document of authenticity concerning Tom. Then, Oliver drops the professor like a hot potato. He doesn't want to share credit or money with the professor for any of Tom's abilities.

Perry also uses Seven, his "understudy." He keeps him as an apprentice first, then when Tom comes into the picture, without previous knowledge for Seven, Seven becomes Tom's main caretaker. Oliver would not have been able to handle the day-to-day Tom preparing him to actually learn from Professor Howard's lessons without Seven's help. Seven was upset at first and had a hard time coming to terms with all it would take to care for Tom, but once he jumped on board, he was able to not only train Tom in day-to-day life, they became family, like brothers.

War

When it comes to the Civil War, the war between the North and the South, General Bethune seems to be the main person in the story who actually wants to get it all started. He uses his own money to fund a troop to fight. He is glad when they engage and the war begins. Even as the war progresses, he makes sure that regardless of what happens to anyone else on either side, he and his family are protected. When he sees that the South will lose, he takes Tom away from Perry Oliver as a financial security for himself. Then, he also makes a deal with Tabbs Gross to buy Tom, then reneges on the contract with him and keeps Tom taking Tabbs' money and dreams.



Those living on the island of Edgemere change throughout the war. First, the majority of people who live there have been exiled to the island from New York City. Even those blacks who lived free in the North in New York lost their homes during and after the war. Those men who enlisted to help fight for the cause and win the war for the North left their families who were run, not only out of their own homes, but were also exiled to the island of Edgemere. Most of the citizens on the island have found a happy refuge there and did not plan to try to reclaim their city homes.

The soldiers who enlisted to fight for the North were surprised when the war ended. First, they were surprised that they weren't immediately released to go home. They were asked to patrol the Southern towns keeping peace so that the blacks were not bothered by bitter white former slave owners. After doing their time protecting the citizens, they were finally allowed to return home to New York City where they found that their homes had been overtaken by whites who had no intentions of returning them. Many of their family members were gone. The soldiers themselves had to make temporary shelters and set up tents in Central Park. At first, they were just weak, dirty, sick, and injured from returning from the war to no home. Then, they were further humiliated by having to stay there with no solution in sight. The people got worse and worse.

Finally, the biggest shock came when the "free" black soldiers who lost their homes and had to live in tents in the park were attacked by the whites in the city because they considered these people to be a nuisance and trouble. Instead of thanking them for helping or even helping them assimilate back into society, these people chose to attack the camp because the people were dirty and in the way and some stole to survive. Most people are affected by war in their country, but these men were true casualties of war and of the "peace" they returned to.

Styles

Point of View

While the book is primarily written from the third person limited point of view, the very start of the book is told in present tense, first person. However, as the novel progresses, the reader is immersed continually in a barrage of flashbacks and memories from various characters. This enables the reader to grasp the motivation of the various characters and allows insight into the day and age in which Thomas found himself, and why he was treated and viewed in the way he was by various people he came into contact with.

The point of view may switch from first to third, now and again, but seems to always be centrally focused on Thomas and the incredible musical talent that he had. With it he was able to force the discussion about racism and to break through the racial barriers and stereotypes about blacks during and after the Civil War.

Language and Meaning

The author chooses to write straightforwardly from paragraph to paragraph. No quotation marks or references to whom is speaking are used. When the thoughts of the character or a more detailed explanation of what is being discussed is pointed out, the author puts those explanations in italics and sometimes in italics and in parentheses. This creates an almost disjointed, stream of consciousness style of writing that some readers may find jarring. However, the author also uses this language and meaning as a method of characterization.

Structure

The story is told in a nonlinear plot structure. The book starts in 1866 after the Civil War. It moves into what happened in 1867, then flashes back to the years before the war 1849-1862. It continues into the years leading up to the Civil War. Then it picks up after the war again in 1868 to 1869.

This jumping around in a timeline can often be difficult for readers who are not as adept at sequencing as others and may serve to confuse the less able reader. The book consists of only nine chapters, but many chapters have well over 200 pages in them, making it a lengthy read.



Quotes

Eyes are globes that map the feelings of the face.

-- Narrator (Chapter 1 paragraph 92)

Importance: The narrator is describing Tom and the fact that he doesn't have any sight in his eyes, and what a disadvantage that puts him at.

It would hardly have been fitting for her to strike up any conversation with the Negro. Knows well how to play her part.

-- Eliza (Chapter 1 paragraph 295)

Importance: Eliza realizes that although she is not prejudiced, others in the country, especially so recently after the Civil War, are very offended by seeing a white woman with a black young man.

A discovery: the blind can actually cry. (How had she escaped noticing this among the blind children at the Asylum those many years ago?)

-- Eliza (Chapter 1 paragraph 552)

Importance: Before ever taking care of Tom, Eliza worked in the Asylum where many of the people had eye problems. She treated their eyes as the doctor recommended to take care of their illness, but it wasn't until she cared for Tom that she saw them as a regular person instead of as "the other" who is different from regular people.

I am Blind Tom, one of the greatest humans to walk the earth.

-- Tom (Chapter 1 paragraph 661)

Importance: From the time that General Bethune stakes his claim on Tom, he is told over and over by many people how remarkable he is. He is very skilled and has extraordinary abilities, but his ego is inflated because of the hype that his managers give to the audience to earn money.

...at the far point of their lives, mother and son on the verge of great joy after an existence of great sorrow, granted the means to pick up from where they left off eleven years ago when Thomas was so rudely and wrongly taken from her at Hundred Gates.

-- Narrator (Chapter 2 paragraph 52)

Importance: When Tabbs returns Tom to his mother, everyone feels that it will be a happy time because he was taken from her. But no one takes into consideration the fact that Tom was very young when he was taken. He may not remember his original family because of all that he has gone through since that time.

He can't observe the universe so the universe is without boundaries.

-- Narrator (Chapter 3 paragraph 24)



Importance: Being blind, Tom can't see any limitations. He follows sounds and has no reference to what is a stopping point or boundary. He has no boundaries because he doesn't realize that they exist.

...the General wanted freedom now, independence now: Fellow citizens, ready our sharpshooters. The best army will be the army with the best eyes.
-- General Bethune (Chapter 4 paragraph 35)

Importance: General Bethune believes that sharpshooters who can see well, will help win the war for his cause because they are able to kill undesirables.

Nothing is foul for those who win.
-- Narrator (Chapter 6 paragraph 55)

Importance: This sentiment, shared by the Narrator, is an indication of how the victor can often become oblivious to the obvious problems that come with being the winner in a war. The aftermath is often worse than the actual war...and lasts longer.

Maybe we're just not like them. We've been free from the start.
-- Ruggles (Chapter 7 paragraph 71)

Importance: Ruggles and Tabbs are from the North, and have never known slavery first hand. They are largely dealing throughout the post-war era with people who have been enslaved.

Neither borrowers nor lenders be,' Ruggles says.
-- Ruggles (Chapter 8 paragraph 75)

Importance: This is originally a quote from Shakespeare in his famous play Hamlet. In this story, the Vigilance Committee was discussing the Northern soldiers leaving their post of guarding the people in the park. Deacon Double and Ruggles suggest that the Negroes should care for their own. They don't need to "borrow" help from the whites, and there's no reason to help them either.

Divine power operates far beyond the limitations of what my human awareness can grasp or my five senses can detect.
-- Vigilance Committee (Chapter 8 paragraph 48)

Importance: The deacons preach this to the congregation when the Vigilance Committee begins to tell the people that they should arm themselves to protect their families from the white people who are attacking the strays.

Mischief always holds the seeds of further disruption and destruction.
-- Vigilance Committee (Chapter 9 paragraph 12)

Importance: This statement follows the belief of the Vigilance Committee, who tries to

let the congregation know that when people are troublemakers, they usually have much more harm in mind than how they begin.