

Sweet Whispers, Brother Rush Study Guide

Sweet Whispers, Brother Rush by Virginia Hamilton

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Plot Summary

Sweet Whispers, Brother Rush by Virginia Hamilton is a work of fiction. It takes place in the 1960s and 1970s in Midwestern United States. The story focuses on the Pratt family: Viola (M'Vy), Teresa (Tree) and Dabney. Tree is the head of the house as M'Vy is a practical nurse by trade. She claims that it is necessary to work away from home so that she can make enough money to support the house and the children.

The story begins with fourteen-year-old Sweet Teresa Pratt walking home from school. Teresa is nearly fifteen and is getting noticed by the boys on the corner. Some call out to Teresa, who they refer to as "Tree". Tree is embarrassed by the attention and clutches her books to hide her blossoming breasts. Tree is shy in the outside world, insecure and uncertain of her place. At home, Tree is in charge and has a great deal of responsibility. Tree takes care of her brother Dab as well as the house in general because her mother, M'Vy, comes home only one day a week.

Dabney (Dab) is a couple of years older than Tree. Dab has some type of unidentified mental issue. The exact cause is not identified but M'Vy tells people that Dab is mentally retarded. Despite Tree's help, the seventeen-year-old barely passes school. Their mother, Muh Vy, is happy to have her son stay off the streets. Tree and Dab have a special relationship.

Walking home from school one day, Tree spots a handsome man sitting on the steps. Tree is immediately entranced by the man, who is finely dressed and obviously out of his element. Over the next couple of weeks, Tree looks for the young man but sees him only occasionally.

At home, Tree tries to find ways to occupy her time when she is not taking care of the house or Dab. Tree is fascinated by a little room, no larger than a walk-in closet. The room is used for storing junk. One weekend, Tree and Dab decide to clean out the room so that Tree could have a private place of her own to draw. One afternoon Tree goes into the little room to find the young man, Brother Rush. Tree is stunned to see him yet is so excited that she does not speak. Then Tree realizes that the man is standing in the middle of the table, as if he is actually growing out of it. At that moment, Tree realizes that Brother Rush is a ghost.

Tree becomes interested in Brother Rush and why he never interacts with her or reacts to the surroundings. The mirror-like place in Brother Rush's hand is actually a portal to the past. Tree steps into the past on several occasions, learning deep and disturbing secrets about her family, including information about the father she never knew and the history of a dreaded blood disease that now affects Dab.

The story focuses on M'Vy's lack of attention to her children and the responsibilities she heaps on Tree's shoulders. M'Vy is self-serving, fearful, and filled with shame over her past abuse of Dab and the wish that he would die. Because of M'Vy's negligence, Dab does die. Tree blames M'Vy for all of her past mistakes. The family begins to fall apart

and threatens to be shattered once and for all until Tree begins to realize that she can have a better life and hope for the future.



chapters 1-4

chapters 1-4 Summary

Chapter 1: The story begins with fourteen-year-old Teresa walking home from school. Teresa is nearly fifteen and is getting noticed by the boys on the corner. Some call out to Teresa, who they refer to as "Tree". Tree is embarrassed by the attention and clutches her books to hide her blossoming breasts. The boys can tell that Tree is somewhat upset, so they leave her alone. Further down the street, Tree spots a very handsome young man sitting on a stoop. He is pale skinned with freckles and dressed in a very nice suit. Tree notices him immediately and becomes instantly smitten. He reminds Tree of a do-wah singer from the 1950s, with his sleek suit, fancy tie and belt-buckle that reads "Jazz" in fancy script. The man sits with his hand cupped over his ear as if he is recording a song. Tree keeps on walking and wonders if he noticed her, although he made no sign of recognition or acknowledgement.

Tree goes home to find her brother, Dab. Dab has some type of unidentified mental issue. Despite Tree's help, the seventeen-year-old barely passes school. Their mother, Muh Vy, is happy to have her son stay off the streets. Tree and Dab have a special relationship. They also respect each other's privacy. It is common for the siblings to be home alone since Muh Vy, a nurse, tends to perform in home care for patients. She is often gone for weeks at a time.

Chapter 2: This chapter starts out: "Tree wouldn't have ever known Brother Rush was a ghost if there hadn't been a little room in the house" (chap. 2, p. 18). The little room is no larger than a walk-in closet. Tree thinks it looks like someone put up doors to hide an alcove put in by mistake. The room is used for storing junk, including a broken TV, old comics and magazines, and shoes that the children had outgrown. One weekend, Tree and Dab decide to clean out the room so that Tree could have a private place of her own to draw. Tree's drawings are good. Tree also excels at school, which pleases Muh Vy. One of Tree's teachers suggests taking an achievement test that might help her to obtain a scholarship. Tree is uncertain about the tests.

Tree arrives home thinking about the rainy weekend ahead. She goes into the little room to find Brother Rush. Tree is stunned to see him, yet is so excited that she does not speak. Then Tree realizes that the man is standing in the middle of the table, as if he is actually growing out of it. At that moment, Tree realizes that Brother Rush is a ghost.

Chapter 3: Tree remembers she took off her sweater when entering the house and runs out of the room to get a sweatshirt. Although Tree is scared, she returns to the room to see Brother Rush. Tree is not sure how she knows Brother Rush's name or anything else. It just simply comes to her as if she has known it all along. Brother Rush does not speak but suddenly, Tree is transported to a strange place. It is a house with a nice yard. There is a woman holding a baby and she knows that there is another baby in the house. Tree feels like she is the woman and the baby at the same time. It is a confusing



scene for Tree. After a little while, Tree realizes that she is seeing things through her mother's eyes, as if she was Muh Vy. Tree is the baby.

The baby seems to be happy, particularly when visited by Brother Rush. The baby loves Brother Rush. The only other person Tree loves as much is her father. Brother Rush plays with Tree during the day; her father takes over at night. Tree always wants to be held by Brother Rush. One afternoon, Rush is delivering numbers and stops to see Muh Vy and the kids. He plays with Tree. As usual, Rush has to leave and get back to work. His name is fitting because he is always in a rush. Muh Vy worries about his driving habits. Muh Vy thinks Rush drives too fast.

Rush leaves the house and is on his way to his next stop when there is an accident. Muh Vy is still at home when is told that there has been an accident. Brother Rush is dead.

Chapter 4: Dab comes into the little room. Tree snaps back to the present. She has no idea how long she has been sitting in the dark. Brother Rush is gone. Dab comes in and does a little dance. Tree is still in a daze. Tree wants to tell Dab what has happened but knows that he will never understand. She tells Dab she has been in a dream. Tree is stunned to learn that she has been sitting in the little room for over two hours.

Tree instructs Dab to take a bath while she makes dinner. Dab is acting very strangely, even more so than usual. Tree does not understand Dab's behavior.

chapters 1-4 Analysis

The reader is introduced to fourteen-year-old Teresa, aka Tree, her brother Dabney, Muh Vy (in absentia) and Brother Rush. The story opens with Tree walking home from school. Tree has just begun to develop a woman's body and is embarrassed about the changes, particularly when the boys on the corner catcall to her. One of the boys can see that Tree is uneasy and tells the others to stop. The comments are fairly good natured. The boys also mention Tree's older brother Dabney, who is waiting at home for his sister.

The author never says exactly what is wrong with Dabney. The story supposedly takes place in the 1960s and 1970s, so it is unlikely that the boy's diagnosis was "retarded"; however, that is the term used. Tree takes offense at this word and tries to convince herself that Dab is not retarded, he is just Dab.

Viola, aka Muh Vy, leaves Tree home with Dab for weeks at a time. Muh Vy comes home on Saturday if she does not have to work. Otherwise, everything falls to Tree from the cooking and cleaning to schoolwork plus the monumental task of caring for Dab. This can be seen as negligence and even child abuse as a fourteen-year-old girl should not have such responsibilities. It seems that Muh Vy relies entirely too much on Tree and perhaps even avoids coming home to face the bleak family situation.



Tree's first encounter with Brother Rush is mysterious. Tree believes that she fell head over heels with Brother Rush, never realizing that he is a ghost. Brother Rush's good looks and fancy clothes make him stand out from the other boys on the street. Additionally, there is some mystic charisma that draws Tree to him.

The first experience in the little room is both poignant and humorous. It is humorous when Tree realizes that Brother Rush must be a ghost. Tree approaches the information with a "why me" attitude. Going back in time to her early childhood is poignant in several ways. The events of that day also show Tree that there are many secrets and perhaps a few skeletons in the closet.



Chapters 5-8

Chapters 5-8 Summary

Chapter 5: The doorbell rings on Saturday morning. Tree wakes Dab, telling him that M'Vy is home. If M'Vy has her hands full or has forgotten her key, she will ring the bell. Tree runs to the door but it is not M'Vy, it is Miss Ole Lady Cenithia Pricherd. M'Vy hired Miss Pricherd to clean the house on Saturdays. Tree is not happy about the old woman being there. According to Tree, she sits down every ten minutes and eats all of the food in the house. On top of that, she never finishes the work even though Tree helps. Tree says she does not mind if Miss Pricherd takes breaks and eats the food, she just wishes the old woman wouldn't try to be so sneaky about it. Tree says Miss Pricherd is not a very good sneak.

Today Tree has made a list for Miss Pricherd and tells her that the list was written out by M'Vy. Miss Pricherd seems suspicious since M'Vy had never written out a list before. Of course, it was actually Tree's list, which Miss Pricherd suspected all along.

Tree goes into Dab's room to tell him it is time to get up because Miss Pricherd has come to clean. If Dab wants his room cleaned, he has to get out of bed. Dab tells Tree that he can't move. Tree says everything hurts and he can't stand to be touched. Tree checks for fever. Dab's head feels normal. Tree tells Dab she will go into the kitchen and make breakfast. Dab manages to eat something and says he feels a little bit better but that he still has a lot of aches and pains.

Tree goes back into the kitchen, expecting to find Miss Pricherd. Miss Pricherd is nowhere to be found. Tree has an idea and runs toward the little room. The only room Tree wanted Miss Pricherd to stay away from was the little room, the room where she draws her pictures and sees Brother Rush. Tree gets there too late and Miss Pricherd opens the door. Brother Rush stands in the center of the table as he had the first time Tree had seen him. Miss Pricherd nearly faints from the sight. When Miss Pricherd looks again, Brother Rush is gone. Tree tries hard to tell Miss Pricherd that she didn't see a thing and that the older woman was mostly likely having hallucinations from not eating for a couple of days. Tree gives Miss Pricherd food plus something to take home with her.

Chapter 6: Tree notices that it always seems to be night in the house. Even during the day, Tree feels the need to turn on the lights. Dab stays in bed. Tree is worried about Dab but he assures her that he can still roll over and should be fine.

Tree thinks about Miss Pricherd. Tree had taken Miss Pricherd back to the little room to show her that what she saw was an image created by shadows and light. Tree had prayed that Brother Rush would be gone. The room was empty. Tree is relieved that Miss Pricherd believed Tree's explanation and is finally gone. Tree waits for M'Vy to



come home. By six o'clock M'Vy had not returned. Brother Rush, on the other hand, made another appearance.

Tree cannot resist the urge to return to the little room. The button on the door knob is broken. Tree wonders why the broken things in the house never seem to get fixed. Tree wonders who can fix Dab.

Tree goes into Dab's room and tells him to go to the little room with her. Tree wants Dab to experience the same things she had when Brother Rush took her away. Dab goes into the room. He looks at Brother Rush. Tree tries to explain that Brother Rush is a ghost. Dab does not seem to understand. Dab is afraid. Tree tries to coax Dab into going with her to the other side where there are blooming flowers and sunshine. Tree shows Dab the mirror-like object in Brother Rush's hand. It is silver and green and Tree can see sunlight. She starts to go in, hoping Dab will follow. Brother Rush seems to disappear. Tree calls out, asking Brother Rush why he is doing this to her. There is no answer. Tree continues to walk into the sunlight.

It is not long before Tree is whisked away. She is in a car with M'Vy and Dab. Brother Rush is driving. Brother Rush drives very fast and it scares M'Vy. The car comes close to the edge of the road at times. M'Vy hangs on and tells Brother Rush to slow down. Brother Rush does not slow down. Dab is in the back seat. He tries to crawl into the front seat to be with Tree. Dab falls over the seat and lands with his head on the seat and his legs in the air. M'Vy picks up a switch and begins to hit Dab's legs over and over again. Brother Rush tries to get M'Vy to stop but she refuses. Finally, Brother Rush manages to get the switch away from Vy and tosses it into the back seat. Brother Rush rights Dab on the seat and then places the boy on his lap so he can help Brother Rush steer the car.

Tree is no longer in the scene but pictures it like a movie. The family is going to Aunt Binnie's house. Binnie is Vy's sister. The kids play with the dog and are allowed to go upstairs and play with the toys. Tree finds a rope and says she is going to tie Dab to the bed. Dab becomes very upset and starts to cry.

Chapter 7: Tree has no concept of time. When she comes back to herself, Tree is standing in the kitchen. It is six-thirty. Dinner is usually held at six o'clock. Tree decides to make macaroni and cheese from scratch. Dab likes macaroni and cheese. Tree is proud that she knows how to make a white sauce and does not have to use pre-packaged food.

Dab is very quiet. Tree notices that Dab is upset. Dab says his stomach hurts and he does not feel well. Tree offers to help Dab go back to bed. Dab refuses and says he wants to stay in the kitchen with Tree. Tree tells Dab he probably feels sick from the car ride. Dab says he wasn't in a car, he went to funerals. Tree is shocked and says she is sure Dab was in the car with her, M'Vy and Rush. Dab shakes his head and says he was at Uncle Willie's funeral. Tree knows that Uncle Willie died a long time ago and that they had never met him. Tree asks Dab about the other funeral. She asks who died. Dab will not reply. Tree sees Dab go into his mind and decides that she must not think



too hard about it or she will also go into her own mind and she might not be able to come back.

Dab sits at the kitchen table, completely lost in his own thoughts. As Tree is washing the dishes, she gets the sensation that someone is standing behind her. Tree is scared but does not dare to alert and upset Dab. Tree gathers her courage and turns around. The only other person in the kitchen is Dab. Tree tells Dab that dinner will be ready soon and asks him if he would like to go into the living room to read until it was time to eat.

Dab picks his favorite chapter in his favorite book - The Cool World. Tree asks Dab various questions about the book, including the name of the author. Tree also explains copyright. The rest of the chapter discusses the reading of the book. There are several passages included and very little commentary by Dab or Tree.

Chapter 8: Tree wakes up in the middle of the night. At first she thinks that maybe someone had been trying to break in or that Brother Rush had returned. Tree reaches for a canister of tear gas she keeps next to the bed. Tree runs through options for getting away if there is someone in the house. Tree suddenly remembers the noise that woke her. It was the sound of M'Vy tossing her purse on the top of the glass coffee table. Tree puts on her robe and follows a trail of M'Vy's clothes until she reaches the kitchen. Almost immediately Tree begins to cry. She can't seem to stop. M'Vy thinks Tree is crying because she misses her mother. Tree tries to tell M'Vy about Dab being sick. M'Vy brushes it aside and says that it is probably just the flu. Tree sees that she cannot make M'Vy understand. M'Vy will have to see for herself.

Tree wants to tell M'Vy about Brother Rush but does not know how to broach the subject. Finally, Tree asks M'Vy if she believes in ghosts. Before M'Vy can answer Tree begins to sob again. M'Vy cannot calm the girl.

Out of the blue, Tree asks M'Vy if she has a friend. M'Vy says she does and his name is Sylvester Wiley. D. Smith. M'Vy calls him Silversmith. M'Vy tells Tree about Silversmith helping her to get a car. Suddenly Tree is angry. How could M'Vy get a car and not tell her about it? Tree becomes even angrier when she learns that M'Vy has had the car for three months. Tree starts to backtalk M'Vy. M'Vy argues with Tree. Tree asks M'Vy if she hit Dab when he was a baby. M'Vy is so stunned by the question that she drops the Pyrex pot filled with boiling water. The pot smashes and M'Vy is burned and cut. Tree tends to M'Vy's wounds. M'Vy collapses to the floor as if she no longer has any bones in her body. Tree tells her mother that she knows about Dab's beatings and other things about the time when she was very small. M'Vy admits to beating Dab and cannot figure out how Tree could know. Tree tells M'Vy about Brother Rush. M'Vy tells Tree that Rush was her baby brother, that his actual name was "Brother".

Tree also manages to convince M'Vy that Dab is truly sick and needs to see a doctor. M'Vy believes Tree now, in part because of her story about Brother Rush. Tree takes M'Vy to the little room.



Chapters 5-8 Analysis

The arrival of Ole Lady Miss Cenithia Pricherd is an affront to Tree. Tree knows that the woman has been hired to come but feels that her home is being invaded in some way and that her authority is being challenged. These feelings are reinforced when Miss Pricherd questions the list of things to do. Tree feels more violated when Miss Pricherd goes to the little room.

The darkness in the house is symbolic. It occurs when Dab becomes seriously ill and Tree begins to learn about the family's secrets from Brother Rush. Tree feels that it is night all of the time and even the illumination from the lamps does not seem to be enough to cut through the gloom.

The first major turning point for Tree is when she goes with Brother Rush for the first time. The story becomes a little muddled as Tree is at one time herself as well as Vy; is present in the story and then is not, watching it as if it is a movie. Eventually, the reader figures out what the author is doing with the characters, attempting to give the story more of a first person perspective through a third person point of view.

Tree receives a lot of shocking knowledge through this first trip. For the first time, Tree experiences what it is like to be M'Vy, a young woman with two small children, one of which is mentally retarded. Tree had no idea what life was like then, including the fact that she had a father and an aunt and uncle she knew nothing about before this day. The most horrifying part of the experience takes place when M'Vy beats Dab until Brother Rush takes away the switch. The experience only confirms Tree's knowledge that M'Vy is sickened by Dab and most likely loathes him even though he is M'Vy's son.

The absence of M'Vy is telling. Clearly it is not only the work that is keeping M'Vy from being at home. M'Vy has excuses as to why she stays away. The absence is made even more obvious when Tree thinks her mother is not the same height she was the last time Tree saw her. Additionally, the purchase of the car three months earlier enrages Tree. Tree feels left out, used, and unloved. M'Vy does little to show her affections toward her children, letting the reader know that her maternal instincts are greatly lacking if not absent altogether. This fact is magnified by M'Vy's inattentiveness to Dab's illness, even when Tree insists that Dab needs to see a doctor.



chapters 9-12

chapters 9-12 Summary

Chapter 9: M'Vy follows Tree into the little room. M'Vy is very scared. Tree reaches out to hold M'Vy's hand. It is cold and covered with sweat. Tree refuses to turn on the light because she feels that Brother Rush is on his way. M'Vy says she can feel it. Tree looks up and sees Dab in the doorway. Dab must be feeling better if he was able to put on his robe.

Tree goes back to that summer. Brother Rush is taking her for a ride in the big red Buick. Dab is at her side. Tree stands on the seat, happy to be in the car with no socks and shoes. Dab throws Tree's socks out the window. Brother is angry. Brother takes them to a park where they sit on the fence and drink Kool-Aid. Brother Rush falls asleep in the grass. Tree asks Dab to take her to the bathroom. Dab refuses, so Tree wets herself. Dab and Tree walk and play in the sunshine. Dab drinks the rest of the liquid in Brother Rush's bottle. Later, as Dab and Tree walk far away from the sleeping Brother Rush, Dab falls to the ground and has a seizure. The only thing Tree can think about is that M'Vy will punish Dab for getting grass stains on his pants.

Chapter 10: Tree and Dab are still small children. They are in the park playing while Brother Rush sleeps. Brother Rush has covered his face and neck to guard against sunlight. He also wears gloves. Tree is fascinated by the soft yellow suede gloves and takes them from Brother Rush's hands. Brother Rush's hands are covered with white scars and sores. Tree recoils. Dab looks away but Tree does not. She is fascinated by the gruesome sight of red sores and welts. Brother Rush's hands clench and tremble. Tree recognizes his hands as being sick hands, full of pain. Brother Rush wakes up and picks the gloves up from the ground where Tree had dropped them. He asks the children why they let him fall asleep. Brother Rush gets up and then doubles over in pain, much like Dab had done a short time before. Tree notices this behavior and hears Brother Rush mutter about no more light. Brother Rush keeps his hat on in the car, another oddity noticed by Tree.

Brother Rush takes the children home. The children want to go to Brother Rush's house while he picks something up. Tree notices that the house is nearly empty and has no lights except for a small night light. Brother Rush meets up with a man to go to a ball game. Tree is in the back seat although no one can see or hear her. Tree gives up on trying to get Brother Rush's attention.

The Brother Rush in the car is a much older Brother Rush, not the eighteen or nineteen-year-old who appears in the little room. This Brother Rush is middle aged, as is the man driving the car. Through conversation, Tree learns that the driver is Ken, her father. There is a bicycle in the road and Ken has an accident. In an attempt to avoid the cyclist, Ken steers in the other direction and the car goes air born. Brother Rush's door flies open and his head snaps back. Tree had time to brace herself but Brother Rush did



not. Moments later, Brother Rush is flying through the air. Tree wants desperately to be somewhere else. Almost instantly she is cast back into the trunk and comes out in the little room.

M'Vy is there with Dab. Once again Dab has had a completely different experience. M'Vy says she did not see Brother Rush but she believes Tree and Dab when they say they have seen the ghost. M'Vy makes an effort to comfort the children. She hugs Tree close and pats Dab's shoulder. M'Vy does not know how to treat Dab. M'Vy has always blamed Dab for being a half-wit. Even the thought of Dab makes M'Vy sick. M'Vy is ashamed and hangs her head.

Chapter 11: M'Vy puts Dab to bed and spends most of the day watching over him. M'Vy feels less guilt when she takes care of Dab, although it still makes her sick. When Tree asks what is wrong with Dab, Vy says it is a long story and hints of a genetic or blood born illness. M'Vy tells Tree to search the room. Tree does not understand at first. They find a pack of white pills. Tree is stunned and cannot believe that Dab is a junkie. M'Vy says it is not like that; Dab has been sick for a really long time. M'Vy admits to being in denial.

Tree visits Dab later. Tree thinks Dab looks like something from "The Exorcist", with his eyes wide and yellow teeth; smiling so big that he looks rabid. Tree is afraid to go near.

M'Vy makes a phone call. While Tree waits for her to finish, she falls asleep in front of the TV. The sound of the doorbell wakes Tree. Tree answers the door to find Vy's friend, Silversmith, standing there. Silversmith is a very large man with a graying afro and large features. He is polite to Tree. Immediately, Tree can see that there is a strong bond between Silversmith and M'Vy.

M'Vy tells Tree that it is time to go out. Tree becomes angry, thinking that Dab is much too sick to go out to eat and she will refuse to leave him home alone. Vy says Dab is too sick to stay at home. Vy says she is sorry for leaving Dab at home with Tree all the time, considering how sick he has been. Suddenly, Tree becomes enraged and screams at Vy and Silversmith. The three sit down to have a talk.

M'Vy tells Silversmith about Brother Rush. M'Vy says she believes Tree. "But there be a ghost her in this place. I know my Tree. This girl wouldn't lie about nothing" (Chap. 11, p. 130).

M'Vy admits to keeping the details of her family a secret. She talks about Brother Rush and about Ken, her husband and the father of Tree and Dab. M'Vy says she wanted to keep a closed fist to try to beat fate. Bit by bit the story comes out, with some of the details filled in by Tree. M'Vy is still shocked that Tree knows things she could not know. It only solidifies the presence of Brother Rush. Tree says she knows about the car accident and that Brother Rush died that day. M'Vy is stunned and begins to tell the story. Brother Rush died that day but Ken did not. Tree demands to know why M'Vy never told her about any of it. Tree also picks up on the fact that M'Vy says they buried Brother in his finest suit just like they had with her brothers. Neither Tree nor Silversmith



knew M'Vy had brothers. After much prodding by Tree, M'Vy says that Ken is still alive but that she has no idea what has happened to him. Tree feels as if she gained and lost a father in one day.

Chapter 12: The stories begin to tumble out. M'Vy talks about Ken and his love for baseball. Tree and Silversmith sit and listen. It occurs to Tree that she has never asked any questions. It might be because Tree knows nothing about families except for what sees on TV. Tree decides she needs to ask questions. "She never knew to ask about some father for the simple reason she had no idea there was one" (Chap. 12, p. 135).

Noises come from Dab's room. Tree has almost forgotten about Dab while listening to M'Vy's stories. The trio rushes into see Dab, who seems to be getting worse. In addition to the illness, Dab is suffering from withdrawal. M'Vy worries about taking him to the hospital because they will only think about the drugs, not his real illness. Silversmith carries Dab to the car and soon they are driving through the night to the medical center.

chapters 9-12 Analysis

This section begins to show a great deal about M'Vy's character. M'Vy is emotionally stunted and relies on her fourteen-year-old daughter to hold the family together. When Tree takes M'Vy to the little room, M'Vy clutches onto Tree's hand as if the roles of mother and daughter are reversed. Tree attempts to soothe M'Vy by telling her not to be afraid, that Brother Rush will not cause harm. This seems even more unusual considering that Brother Rush and M'Vy were very close when he was alive. Now, Tree, who has never known anything about Brother Rush until the day she saw him on the street, is the one comforting M'Vy.

The truth about Brother Rush's illness becomes evident in this section. Brother Rush keeps a jar of some kind of alcohol under the seat of his car. Tree and Dab are small children, probably ages two and four. Brother takes them to a park or grassy open area where they drink Kool-Aid and enjoy the sun. Brother falls asleep on the ground, not concerned about the safety of the children. Tree sees her first example of Dab's illness after he takes a drink of Brother Rush's drink. Dab has his first seizure and is wracked with pain. Dab and Tree are too young to understand. Noticing Dab's hands is a pivotal moment. There is obviously something seriously wrong with Brother's hands. The scars and sores fascinate Tree. Brother's reaction to falling asleep in the sand is out of proportion considering that he was the one to lie down in the grass. The whole way home Brother complains about the light burning his flesh.

The next trip taken by Tree is a short time afterward. Once again, Tree and Dab are taken to separate places. Tree does not know about Dab's experiences because he refuses to talk about it. Tree is surprised to see Brother Rush in a much older form than eighteen or nineteen. At first Tree does not realize that the driver of the car is her father, Ken. Tree tries to call out but no one can hear her. Tree is dumbstruck when she sees the bicyclist in the road. Brother sees the woman but does not call out. Ken swerves to miss the cyclist. In a split second, Brother is out of the car and flying through the air.



Even without seeing the result, Tree knows Brother Rush will die. Tree begs to go back to the little room and is whisked away.

M'Vy tells Tree that she did not see Brother Rush but she did feel his presence. Although M'Vy did not see Brother Rush, she believes Tree and Dab. M'Vy finally begins to tell Tree about her baby brother, although she does not address his illness.

Dab becomes seriously ill. M'Vy sits by his bed and tends to him instead of taking him to the hospital. As a practical nurse she knows this is wrong. As a mother, she knows that she is neglecting her child and that he will most likely die. M'Vy claims she has been in denial but being faced with the truth does not prompt her to take action.

Silversmith arrives at the Pratt house after a long conversation with M'Vy over the phone. It was only a brief time before that Tree even knew Silversmith existed; now he is at the door. Tree is in awe of Silversmith because of his size, his demeanor and his obvious affection for M'Vy. Tree is taken with Silversmith as she finds him to be comforting and stable. However, Tree is jealous that M'Vy has chosen to confess a great deal to Silversmith, telling him things that M'Vy should have said to Tree long ago. M'Vy finally begins to tell the stories from her past. Once M'Vy starts to talk, she acts as if a dam has burst inside of her.

Despite Dab's obvious distress, some of which is detox from the drugs, M'Vy still has to be persuaded to take him to the hospital. M'Vy's biggest concern is that Dab will act like a junkie in withdrawal. The truth is that Dab is in withdrawal and the physical effects are making Dab much worse. The presence of the pills is never fully explained. M'Vy and Tree find packets of pills in Dab's room. M'Vy knows about the pills, which suggests she may have given them to Dab. A likely scenario is that Dab bought them off the street, yet Dab never seems to leave the house.

M'Vy knows in her heart that Dab will never leave the hospital. This fact only compounds her grief.



chapters 13-17

chapters 13-17 Summary

Chapter 13: The group arrives at the hospital. M'Vy insists on going in through General Admittance because it will be faster. There is a great deal of paperwork that must be done and Dab cannot be seen until it is finished. M'Vy asks to see a nurse. She takes a file folder out of her large purse and shows it to the nurse, explaining that Dab has porphyria, a rare blood disease. M'Vy explains that all of her brothers have it and all are dead. Brother died in a car crash but he was very ill.

There is a great deal of waiting. Silversmith stays with Tree while M'Vy attends to Dab's admittance and care. Tree feels safe with Silversmith. He acts like a father, which is comforting to Tree. Tree is extremely frightened and upset. Tree feels a great deal of shame, as if it is her fault that Dab is sick. Silversmith takes Tree to the cafeteria. While they eat, Silversmith has an important conversation with Tree about acceptance and understanding what is going on with Dab. M'Vy comes in and says that Dab is in a special room and will require a lot of high level care. Silversmith says he will take Tree home and wait for M'Vy to call.

Chapter 14: Tree has a terrible nightmare. She and Dab are walking on a cable high in the air. Tree falls and lands on the wet pavement. Tree calls to Dab but Dab is too busy dancing to hear his little sister. Tree wakes up, terrified. Silversmith picks her up and puts her back in bed. Once again, Tree is ashamed. Tree sleeps through the rest of the night and until noon the next day. Tree wakes up to an empty house. She listens for a while and calls out to Silversmith. Tree goes in to the kitchen and finds a note on the refrigerator. It makes Tree laugh. Immediately, Tree feels bad about laughing when Dab is so sick. Tree must see Brother Rush. Tree goes to the little room but Brother Rush is not there. Tree returns to the kitchen and finds the Chinese food left for her by Silversmith. Tree eats and tells Dab in her head that he would love the food and even though she is eating, she thinks of him every minute.

M'Vy calls to say that she is still at the hospital and Dab has made it through the night. Dab cannot speak. M'Vy does not know what is going to happen but tells Tree to pray. Tree tries to hide the tears in her voice.

Chapter 15: Tree knows as soon as M'Vy walks into the house that Dab is dead. Tree immediately becomes hysterical, running from room to room, flinging herself against furniture, screaming at M'Vy. M'Vy says Dab died from the respiratory paralysis. Once it starts it cannot be stopped. M'Vy says she should have had the children tested. They used to think it only happened to the men in the family but girls and women can get it too. Tree gushes rage and hate at M'Vy. "Damn you, it your fault! You did it. You beat him up. He didn't die; you killed him, M'Vy! He ain't dead, he ain't dead, unh-uh. My brother, Dab. He didn't, no he didn't, it's a lie! How come you didn't do something



sooner? You don't even think of Dab, when all the mens die off. You killing him, can't you do something?" (Chap. 15, p. 173).

Tree exhausts herself from running through the house. Eventually, she sits down between M'Vy and Silversmith. Tree gets up to go to the bathroom but M'Vy knows she is going to see Brother Rush.

Brother Rush appears this time and Tree goes into the light to find herself sitting in the back of the car. Dab is with Brother Rush, looking very handsome in a dark gray suit with a pinstripe. Tree is disappointed because she is the same age as she is in real life. Tree panics and wants to get out of the car. Tree realizes that Dab really is dead. Tree also learns that Brother Rush did not fall out of the car - he jumped.

Chapter 16: Tree tells M'Vy what she learned about Brother. M'Vy thinks Tree is just being hateful. Tree says she understands that Dab is dead. She talks about Brother Rush leaning out of the car, hoping to fall. M'Vy does not believe it. Tree talks about how good Dab looks in his gray suit. She tells M'Vy exactly what they need to buy for the funeral, where it should be held, and the color of the casket. M'Vy refuses to hear any of it. M'Vy says there will be a funeral but she does not have the money to pay for all of the things Tree wants for Dab. M'Vy says Dab has no friends and there is no point in having a funeral in the church. Tree says that Silversmith will give them the money but M'Vy refuses. Tree begins to rant again and threatens to run away. "Whatever you want to think,' Vy said. 'I know you hate me. I know you gone blame me for it all'" (M'Vy to Tree, chap. 16, p. 185).

M'Vy says there is a lot that she has to tell Tree. The first thing is that she and Silversmith have started a catering business. M'Vy tells Tree about the business and the expenses. M'Vy will not budge on the funeral arrangements. Tree decides to leave. After packing her things Tree realizes that she has no place to go. Tree falls asleep.

When Tree wakes up she finds Miss Pricherd cleaning Dab's room. Tree becomes angry, thinking that Miss Pricherd is throwing away Dab's things. Miss Pricherd says that M'Vy has hired her to live with Tree so she will not be alone. Miss Pricherd will take Dab's room. Nothing is being thrown away, just stored. Tree tells Miss Pricherd she is leaving. Miss Pricherd asks Tree to wait until after the funeral.

Chapter 17: It is the day of the funeral. Tree insists on having an open casket, at least for a little while. Things seem to be a little bit better with Tree. M'Vy seems to have aged a great deal and become smaller. At the funeral, Tree meets Don, Silversmith's son. Don and Tree hit it off. Don flirts with the naïve Tree over dinner. The teens spend a long time talking in Tree's room. Don shares some of his experiences and compares them to what Tree is going through at the minute.

Tree and M'Vy have another talk. M'Vy apologizes for the things she has done wrong even though she knows Tree will never forgive her. M'Vy tries to ease Tree's mind about the porphyria. Later, Tree realizes that having M'Vy and Miss Pricherd in the house



gives her the best sense of family she can remember. Tree jokingly calls Miss Pricherd "Granny Pricherd". The old woman laughs and does a little dance in her slippers.

chapters 13-17 Analysis

The death of Dab is extremely hard on Tree. Ever since she was a little girl, Tree is the one to take care of Dab. Tree's ranting and raving is perfectly normal and M'Vy knows that it will pass. Silversmith tries to be reasonable and to tend to all sides, not just M'Vy's side. Tree appreciates that.

The ending of the story is quite typical. Tree never runs away because she has little money and no place to go. Additionally, Tree really does not want to leave her home. The feud with M'Vy will blow over. The presence of Silversmith and Miss Pricherd give Tree a sense of family she has never known. It is hard for Tree to believe M'Vy's promises to reform but there is hope.

Characters

Sweet Teresa Pratt

The story begins with fourteen-year-old Sweet Teresa Pratt walking home from school. Teresa is nearly fifteen and is getting noticed by the boys on the corner. Some call out to Teresa, who they refer to as "Tree". Tree is embarrassed by the attention and clutches her books to hide her blossoming breasts. Tree is shy in the outside world, insecure and uncertain of her place. At home, Tree is in charge and has a great deal of responsibility. Tree takes care of her brother Dab as well as the house in general because her mother, M'Vy, comes home only one day a week.

Tree struggles with her duties, especially when it comes to caring for Dab. Tree treats Dab gingerly and often does not know what to do when he has a setback from his mental issues or disease. Tree has learned a lot from M'Vy in regards to taking care of minor ailments, but Dab's issues are far beyond the scope of Tree's knowledge.

Later in the story, Tree realizes for the first time that she is lonely and does not like being forced to take care of Dab, despite the fact that she loves him fiercely and would do anything to help and/or protect him. When Dab dies, Tree has a breakdown. At the end of the story, it seems that Tree may be okay after all.

Viola Pratt

Viola Pratt is the mother to Tree and Dab. Viola goes by many different names, including Vy and Muh Vy, although the children tend to call her M'Vy.

M'Vy is a practical nurse by trade. She claims that it is necessary to work away from home so that she can make enough money to support the house and the children. Tree will learn later on that M'Vy has been working at another business and has been staying away even when it is not necessary. M'Vy does not know how to take care of her children and seems to have little interest in taking care of Tree. M'Vy loathes Dab and barely spares him a glance. Even when Dab is at his worst, M'Vy will not touch or comfort him the way a mother should when dealing with a sick child. M'Vy feels a great deal of shame, guilt and regret over her actions when she was a young mother, particularly when it comes to Dab. Still, it is obvious that M'Vy is relieved when Dab is dead.

The fact that M'Vy did not tell Tree about the car is another example of how the mother is keeping one more secret from the daughter. The same can be said of the relationship with Silversmith. Fortunately, Tree likes Silversmith, which may be the only reason Tree stays home through the funeral. Tree often despises and hates M'Vy. It seems to go beyond the typical teenage angst and one can easily see how M'Vy can be to blame for some of the family's troubles.



M'Vy claims to have made changes at the end of the story, but her behavior to date leaves the reader with a healthy dose of skepticism.

Brother Rush

Brother Rush was Vy's younger brother. His actual name was "Brother". Brother suffered from porphyria and eventually committed suicide during a car accident. It is Brother Rush that visits Tree and tells her the family secrets.

Sylvester Wley D. Smith

Sylvester Wley D. Smith, also known as "Silversmith", is Vy's boyfriend. Silversmith arrives on the scene just before Dab is taken to the hospital. Tree likes Silversmith.

Dabney Pratt

Dabney ("Dab") Pratt is Vy's son and Tree's brother. Dab suffers from some kind of developmental disability as well as porphyria. Dab has turned to drugs which makes his porphyric state fatal.

Ole Lady Miss Cenithia Pricherd

Ole Lady Miss Cenithia Pricherd is the cleaning woman that comes on Saturday's to help Tree with the housework. M'Vy also intends for Miss Pricherd to be company for Tree. The relationship between Tree and Miss Pricherd changes right after she takes over Dab's room and becomes a resident of the house.

Don Smith

Don Smith is Silversmith's son. Don is nineteen years old and attends community college. Don develops a crush on Tree.

Ken Pratt

Ken Pratt was Vy's husband and the father to Dab and Tree. One day, Ken left and never came back.

Aunt Binnie

Aunt Binnie is Vy's sister. Aunt Binnie's house is a common destination for the family.

The Rush Brothers

The Rush brothers are a group of four brothers that have suffered greatly from porphyria. All died. Brother's death was actually suicide, but Vy believes that porphyria is the cause of all the deaths in her family.



Objects/Places

Little Room

The little room is no larger than a walk-in closet. Tree thinks it looks like someone put up doors to hide an alcove put in by mistake. The room is used for storing junk, including a broken TV, old comics and magazines, and shoes that the children had outgrown. One weekend, Tree and Dab decide to clean out the room so that Tree could have a private place of her own to draw.

There is a table in the middle of the room, the item of most interest to Tree since it can be used as an art table. The table takes on a new identity the first time Tree sees Brother Rush in the little room. Brother Rush is standing in the middle of the table, as if he is actually growing out of it. At that moment, Tree realizes that Brother Rush is a ghost.

Everyone else in the house seems to be afraid of the little room. Tree encourages Dab and M'Vy to come into the room to see Brother Rush. Dab is hesitant and M'Vy is afraid.

Pratt House

The Pratt House is located somewhere in the Midwest, most likely Ohio. It is the main setting of the story as the majority of the action takes place in the house, usually in the absence of M'Vy. The house is located in a low income section of a nameless city. It is close enough for Tree to walk to and from school and is also located relatively near the streets commonly used by drug dealers and gangs of people. It is on one of those streets that Tree first sees Brother Rush.

The house has at least six rooms: kitchen, bathroom, living room, and three bedrooms. The "little room" as it is called is actually an enclosed closet or alcove. Each of the Pratts has his/her own bedroom. Most of the story takes place in the little room, the kitchen, or Dab's bedroom.

The house is relatively well kept and tidy thanks to Tree and Miss Pricherd. Tree is protective of the space and feels violated when someone goes into one of the rooms without her knowledge. This is particularly true of her bedroom, Dab's bedroom, and the little room.

After Dab dies, the house takes on a different feel. It is much less dark and dismal.



Other Side

Brother Rush holds up a mirror-like object that leads to the other side, a place without time restraints and where the traveler can and/or will see events that are important to that specific individual.

The Street

The first place Tree sees Brother Rush is on the street as she is walking home from school.

Aunt Binnie's House

Aunt Binnie's house is a common destination for the young Vy and the children.

Big Red Buick

The big red Buick is the car driven by Brother Rush.

Dab's Bedroom

Dab spends a great deal of time in his bedroom. It is common for Dab to bring girls home to spend the night. Dab also spends a great deal of time in bed when he becomes ill or upset.

Light up Sneakers

Dab's favorite shoes were his light up sneakers. Dab would wear the shoes when he danced or to make Tree laugh. Tree keeps the shoes after Dab dies.

Community Medical Center

Community Medical Center is the hospital to which Dab is transported after his worst bout with the porphyria. Dab also dies at the hospital.

Catering Business

The catering business is the new enterprise started by M'Vy and Silversmith. The business has a chance at being a success, but it takes M'Vy away from home most of the time.



Themes

Porphyria

Virginia Hamilton uses an unusual form of disease in the story. The disease, porphyria, is a genetic blood borne disease thought to be transferred through the male gender in families. M'Vy states she has learned that porphyria can also attack females, although it is not as common. Brother Rush and M'Vy's other brothers had acute cases of porphyria. Brother is the only one that didn't die from the disease, although the story strongly suggests that it is the reason for his suicide.

The disease is caused by anomalies in certain enzymes. M'Vy tries to explain the disease to the nurse at the hospital. It is clear that M'Vy knows a great deal about the disease. M'Vy also has tests and information on Brother's condition which she believes can help Dab.

The symptoms of porphyria, as stated in the book, include: discoloration of skin, unusually discolored urine and stools, extreme sensitivity to light, seizures, and mental illness. Drugs and alcohol have severe adverse effects on people suffering from porphyria. M'Vy tells Tree that they will be fine as long as they never drink alcohol or take drugs, especially barbiturates. The disease is not curable; however, it can go into remission with the proper care. In Dab's case, it brought on respiratory paralysis, which is one of the causes of his death.

Child Abuse

There are many examples of child abuse in the story, including neglect, negligence, and mental and physical abuse. While the physical abuse is most easily recognized, the mental and emotional abuse, along with negligence and neglect, are the most prevalent in the story.

Tree witnesses physical abuse when M'Vy, Tree, Dab and Brother are in the car. M'Vy loses her temper and beats Dab with a switch across the backs of his legs. He tries to crawl into the front seat to be with Tree. Dab falls over the seat and lands with his head on the seat and his legs in the air. M'Vy picks up a switch and begins to hit Dab's legs over and over again. Brother Rush tries to get M'Vy to stop but she refuses. Finally, Brother Rush manages to get the switch away from Vy and tosses it into the back seat. Brother treats Dab's legs with alcohol, which burns the boy's skin.

M'Vy is clearly negligent in her care of Dab and Tree. Tree assumes far too many responsibilities for a girl her age. Tree has little recourse and no support. Tree's needs are ignored so that M'Vy can live her life despite her family's needs. The negligence and neglect regarding Dab is astounding. If Dab had been outside the home, surely it would have been recognized by a teacher or other responsible adult. M'Vy knows that Dab is sick and can die from the porphyria but does nothing to help him until it is too late.



Secrets

M'Vy keeps the majority of her history and her family's history secret. It is not until she is confronted by Tree that M'Vy admits to keeping the details of her family a secret. Once Tree confronts M'Vy, M'Vy begins to talk non-stop, as if a dam had broken inside. She talks about Brother Rush and about Ken, her husband and the father of Tree and Dab. M'Vy says she wanted to keep a closed fist to try to beat fate. Bit by bit the story comes out with some of the details filled in by Tree. M'Vy is still shocked that Tree knows things she could not know. It only solidifies the presence of Brother Rush. Tree says she knows about the car accident and that Brother Rush died that day. M'Vy is stunned and begins to tell the story. Brother Rush died that day but Ken did not. Tree demands to know why M'Vy never told her about any of it. Tree also picks up on the fact that M'Vy says they buried Brother in his finest suit just like they had with her brothers. Neither Tree nor Silversmith knew M'Vy had brothers.

M'Vy feels that she was protecting her family by keeping the secrets when she was actually trying to protect herself, to hide her guilt and shame. If M'Vy had not kept the secret about the porphyria and the drugs, Dab might have lived.

Tree is angry that so many secrets have been kept from her, even the smallest things have been omitted when M'Vy talks about her family, which is rare. Tree must learn the secrets on her own with the help of Brother Rush.

Style

Point of View

The point of view used in *Sweet Whispers, Brother Rush* by Virginia Hamilton is third person omniscient. This point of view works well in the story as there are several components and underlying factors that would not be revealed otherwise. While the first person point of view might have been interesting when coming from the characters in their time of confusion, third person conveys the entire story and not just the subjective opinions of the characters. It also permits the reader to take part in the journey and development of each character in the story.

The point of view is helpful, particularly when Tree first encounters Brother Rush in her little room. Brother Rush does not speak but stands in the middle of the table like he was a plant. Hamilton manages to convey Tree's shock while observing the scene. Tree's first trip back to her first years would not have made sense in any other way, as Tree was experiencing her own feelings as well as those of Vy. At first, the point of view during that first trip is somewhat confusing, but Hamilton eventually explains that the strange house was where her family lived when she was a baby and that she was not the mother.

The point of view also allows the author to maintain a sense of mystery about Dab's mental condition and illness.

Setting

The Pratt House is located somewhere in the Midwest, most likely Ohio. It is the main setting of the story as the majority of the action takes place in the house, usually in the absence of M'Vy. The house is located in a low income section of a nameless city. It is close enough for Tree to walk to and from school and is also located relatively near the streets commonly used by drug dealers and gangs of people. It is on one of those streets that Tree first sees Brother Rush.

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Language and Meaning

The language and meaning used in *Sweet Whispers, Brother Rush* by Virginia Hamilton reflects the times in which the story is set. Hamilton does not give an exact time period for any of the stories but offers clues to the reader that might help to pinpoint a general era. For example, there are several references to the 1950s and how things have changed since that time. There are cultural references in the present as well as the era in which Tree travels when she is with Brother Rush. One reference that does not fit entirely is the scene in which Tree rides in a car for the first time. The episode at the hospital also indicates that not much has changed in the way of segregation. M'Vy has to work hard to be heard. "Another part is that Dabney some amount of retarded, you unnerstan? He just some slow" (M'Vy to the nurse, chap. 13, p. 148).

Overall, the time periods dictate the language but not in such a way to make the language difficult for the reader. The language used is common but Hamilton uses it in such a way that the common language used reflects the times and proper behavior of the characters. Even the most difficult use of street slang can be understood through the mood, scene, and context.

Structure

Sweet Whispers, Brother Rush by Virginia Hamilton is a work of fiction. It is comprised of 215 pages, separated into seventeen chapters. The shortest chapter is five pages; the longest chapter is thirty-three pages; the average length of the chapters is fourteen pages.

The book is written in chronological order except for the trips to the past, taken by Tree and Dab. In the first trip, Tree is a baby sitting on her mother's lap. At the same time, Tree is also the young M'Vy. No major instances happen in this vision.

The second trip involves Tree and Dab as small children, riding in Brother Rush's large red Buick. Brother is driving much too fast and it scares M'Vy. Brother will not slow down. Dab desperately wants to be in the front seat with Tree but is told that he has to sit in the back. Tree's teenage mind is appalled when M'Vy begins to beat Dab with a switch. The incident confirms Tree's former assumptions that Dab had been beaten as a child. M'Vy states that it is her right to do so.

The third trip is to the park, where the author gives very specific clues to the disease shared by Brother and Dab, as well as the rest of M'Vy's family.

The fourth trip shows Tree what really happened to Brother Rush. When Tree confronts her mother, M'Vy finally admits to everything, including keeping those great and horrible secrets.

The balance of the book begins with a fourteen year old practicing lines for a play. It feels surreal yet Tree knows that it is all true.



Quotes

"Tree wouldn't have ever known Brother Rush was a ghost if there hadn't been a little room in the house."

Chap. 2, p. 18

"She heard a noise and gazed around the little room. She felt panic, for fear the ghost had returned."

Chap. 4, p. 35

"She laughed, amazed as always, the way he could seem to recover his mind from something as simple as a bath or walking out in the rain."

Chap. 4, p. 42

"She wouldn't ask him to set the table. It would have been too much to ask him to take a bath and set the table all on the same night."

Chap. 4, p. 44

"Her mind felt blank and then she had the sensation that she was evaporating into the silence."

Chap. 7, p. 76

"She didn't dare call out to Dab and make him fearful. Any time she sensed danger and Dab was nearby, he would feel the danger from her."

Chap. 7, p. 79

"The cold of the little room wrapped round Tree. No peculiar light announced the presence of Rush, the ghost. But there was something settling in."

Chap. 9, p. 100

"My daughter, Tree, has seen the mystery!"

Chap. 11, p. 129

"She never knew to ask about some father for the simple reason she had no idea there was one."

Chap. 12, p. 135

"Another part is that Dabney some amount of retarded, you unnerstan? He just some slow."

Cap. 12, p. 148

"They didn't seem to care that people all around would see them and stare at them - two big black people, looking out of the ordinary, looking strange, Tree thought, even if they were dressed nice."

Chap. 12, p. 152



"Whatever you want to think,' Vy said. 'I know you hate me. I know you gone blame me for it all.'"

Chap. 16, p. 185



Topics for Discussion

Do you think Tree actually hates M'Vy? Does Tree believe that M'Vy is responsible for Dab's death? Do you agree or disagree with Tree that Dab's death is actually murder? What did M'Vy do that hastened Dab's death? Were M'Vy's actions intentional? Explain.

M'Vy tells Tree that drugs and alcohol accelerate and worsen the symptoms of porphyria. How is that possible? What changes occur with the use of drugs and/or alcohol? Does one have to be an addict like Dab or does any amount hurt the afflicted person? Where did Dab get his drugs? What type of drugs were they and how did they make Dab's disease worse than it was before?

Silversmith makes an appearance when M'Vy realizes that Dab is gravely ill. What is Tree's response to Silversmith? What is Silversmith's demeanor? How does he feel about the children? What is the relationship between M'Vy and Silversmith? How does Silversmith's presence help or hinder the situation?

What is Tree's first reaction when she sees Brother Rush on the street? What is Tree's reaction when Brother Rush first appears in the little room? Why do you think Brother Rush always appears in the middle of the table? Why does Brother Rush appear as a young man when he was actually much older when he died? Do you believe in ghosts? Explain.

Write a journal page from the point of view of Tree or discuss what might happen with Tree over the next year and the next five years.

There are many examples of child abuse in the story, including neglect, negligence, and mental and physical abuse. Discuss the incidents of abuse. Does anyone outside the family know about the child abuse? If so, why does it continue? When did M'Vy stop beating Dab with a switch? Why did M'Vy abuse Dab? Compare Dab's abuse with the abuse of Tree.

Examine the concept of the other side. What is the other side? What is the mirror-like thing Brother holds in his hand? How is it possible for Tree to go back in time and inhabit her own body? Why are those specific time frames chosen? Why does Dab go to a different time and event? What is learned by going to the other side? Would you go? Explain.