Swing Time Study Guide

Swing Time by Zadie Smith

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Plot Summary

The following version of the book was used to make this Study Guide: Smith, Zadie. Swing Time. Penguin Press, 2016.

Swing Time is told from the first person perspective of an unnamed narrator. The novel is divided into seven sections and alternates between two rough time periods: the narrator's childhood and adolescence in Northwest London and her adulthood working for a pop star named Aimee, taking frequent trips to Africa to assist with Aimee's charity project. The novel focuses on the relationship between the narrator and her childhood friend Tracey, a talented dancer who eventually descends into poverty.

Tracey and the narrator met each other in 1982, at a dance class held in their neighborhood church. The first section detailed their respective family lives. The narrator was raised by her autodidactic, overbearing Jamaican mother who was politically oriented and disliked motherhood. The narrator's white father, whom her mother divorced when the narrator was a teenager, struggled to match his wife's commitment to political and intellectual causes. Tracey was raised by her single white mother, who provided minimal supervision but bought Tracey an excessive amount of toys and clothing. Tracey's black father, Louie, drifted in and out of prison and had another family. In Part One, the narrator discovered that her father also had two other children from a previous relationship. Tracey and the narrator bonded over their shared passion for dancing and their mixed race. At a birthday party for another girl in their dance class, the two were caught performing and videotaping a sexualized dance based off of a music video by the pop star Aimee.

The narrative cut to 1998, when the narrator had recently graduated from college and gained employment at a music channel called YTV. Aimee visited the music office to film a promotion; the narrator caught her attention and was later hired to be her assistant. As part of this job, the narrator began taking trips to an unnamed nation Africa to research a potential school charity project for Aimee. Assisted by a large team including a Sengalese man named Lamin and a man named Fern, Aimee successfully built the school but the narrator' questioned its effectiveness, as it provided little for the community. The narrator's mother became a Member of Parliament and began a relationship with a woman named Miriam.

The novel returned to the narrator's youth. The narrator purposely failed an entrance examination to a prestigious private high school and attended public school, while Tracey was accepted at a performing arts school and the two drifted apart. The narrator experimented with being Goth. One night, at a party during which she had lost her virginity to a stranger, she witnessed Tracey overdosing on drugs and had her mother drive her to the hospital. Later, the two were invited to assist at a dance show at their old studio; Tracey stole the ticket money from the show, and when the narrator's mother and the dance instructor accused her of doing so, Tracey's mother accused Mr. Booth, the piano player at the studio, of sexually assaulting Tracey.

The narrator studied media in college and had her first serious relationship. After graduating, she worked at a pizza restaurant and subsequently as a stage assistant for the show Guys and Dolls, which Tracey was performing in. After working there for several months, the narrator secured an internship at YTV. When she told Tracey that she was taking the new job, Tracey sent her a letter revealing that she had seen the narrator's father having sex with a black inflatable doll.

The narrative then returned to the African village; the narrator made several trips there and befriended a villager named Hawa, whom she stayed with and whom Lamin was attracted to. However, Aimee began a relationship with Lamin and wanted to acquire a visa for him to live in New York. The narrator was also given decreased responsibilities and removed from Aimee's inner circle because her mother was publicly criticizing the government of the African nation. When the narrator visited her mother, she discovered that Tracey had been sending her mother frequent angry emails about various conspiracies. The narrator visited Tracey and found that she had three children from three different fathers and was no longer dancing.

Fern declared his love for the narrator, who was ambivalent about his feelings. When the narrator returned to Africa again, she and Aimee met a beautiful baby that the narrator had an instant emotional connection with. The narrator began an affair with Lamin to prove her independence from Aimee; Fern discovered this affair and grew resentful because he was required to arrange Lamin's visa. Meanwhile, Aimee bypassed laws to adopt the baby that she and the narrator had met, naming her Sankofa. Fern revealed his knowledge of the affair and the narrator was fired, with nowhere to live and her New York visa set to expire in one month. The narrator stayed with acquaintances in the city and leaked information about Aimee's illegal adoption to gossip magazines. She flew back to London and paid for Lamin's flight to join her. Tracey released the provocative dance video from the birthday party the two had attended in childhood; this turned public opinion in the scandal against the narrator. The narrator discovered that her mother was severely ill and in hospice. She visited her mother, who told her she should adopt Tracey's children. On the day the narrator's mother died, the narrator went to Tracey's flat and stood outside, watching Tracey dancing with her children.

Prologue - Part 1: Early Days

Summary

In the prologue, the narrator watched a clip of Fred Astaire dancing in the movie Swing Time and was deeply moved by it, recalling watching it in childhood. The narrator mentioned that she had lost her job, and that a man named Lamin had as well. Lamin came to her apartment and the two surfed the Internet together in bed. The narrator said that she had received 30 texts but had expected thousands.

Section One depicted the narrator's childhood from the perspective of adulthood. In Chapter One, the narrator described meeting a girl named Tracey in 1982, at dance lessons held in church called St. Christopher's and run by a woman referred to as Miss Isabel. The narrator was instantly drawn to Tracey due to their similar brown skin and freckles. She stated that she and Tracey were from the same neighborhood and that neither "received benefits" (10), a fact of which her own mother was proud and Tracey's mother frustrated by.

In Chapters Two and Three, the narrator expanded on her description of her mother, who was extremely concerned with education and political causes and did not seem to enjoy motherhood. The narrator felt that her father was not intelligent enough to be married to her mother. The narrator and her father often visited her mother's brother Lambert, who lived in a more impoverished neighborhood in London. While the narrator and her father talked to Lambert, the narrator's mother studied college textbooks. In Chapter Four, the narrator stated that she was an excellent, emotional singer but that Tracey was a much better dancer. In Chapter Five, Miss Isabel made the narrator walk through chalk and told her that the arches of her feet were too flat for her to do ballet, although she could continue to tap dance. In Chapter Six, the narrator described playing with Tracey's toys and writing stories about professional dancers with Tracey. Chapters Seven and Eight explored Tracey's relationship with her father, who was not present in her life. Tracey often claimed that he was a backup dancer for Michael Jackson and constantly on tour, even pointing him out while the girls and Tracey's mother watched Jackson's Thriller music video. One day, while the narrator was playing at Tracey's house, her father violently knocked on the door and fought with Tracey's mother while Tracey played Pac-Man in her bed and the narrator stood still in Tracey's room. In Chapter Nine, the narrator spoke about many of the neighborhood's parents' negative attitude towards school and recalls an incident in which she met her father's children from a previous relationship. One was an older boy named John and the other a girl named Emma; John played hide and seek with the narrator and Emma cried. The narrator said she later embellished the incident in her mind, pointing out a building to Tracey that she imagined as the ballet school that Emma attended.

In Chapter 10, the narrator said that her mother was an inherently political person and that Tracey became fixated on the narrator's father; Tracey also transferred to the narrator's school. Tracey quickly became popular among her classmates and started a

trend of collecting and trading ‘Garbage Pail Cards’ until the teacher, Mr. Sherman, became frustrated and threw the cards away. After school, Tracey criticized the narrator for failing to learn a dance technique called wings. In Chapter 12, the narrator spoke about her and Tracey’s obsession with Fred Astaire and described how Tracey showed her a gun that was kept hidden in a drawer in her house and supposedly belonged to her father. In Chapter 13, the narrator described an incident in which her mother attempted to create a garden but discovered clay under the earth, then used the clay for the children to make pottery. In Chapter 14, the narrator described a game the children began playing during recess when they were nine. The boys would chase the girls around them and put their hands inside the girls’ underwear if they caught them. Later, the boys began reaching inside the girls’ underwear in class when the teacher was turned towards the blackboard. One day, a boy with eczema and another disabled boy named Jordan but called Spaz locked the narrator in a closet and raped her. Afterwards, she saw Tracey, who told her that a boy named Paul Barron was waiting at the gates for her. The narrator ran for the gates and found her father waiting for her. Driving home, the narrator saw Tracey, the boy with eczema and Spaz playing in the street.

Analysis

The prologue establishes the narrative framework of the novel—although the rest of Part 1 takes place in the narrator’s childhood, the prologue reveals that the novel also examines the narrator’s adulthood, allowing the reader insight into the contrast between the narrator’s adult life and her upbringing. In this way, the prologue also introduces one of the novel’s major thematic goals: the complicated effects of childhood events and the trajectory of one’s life. The prologue, which is deliberately obscure, also serves as a source of tension that accelerates the narrative pace of the first section; it hints at an additional plot line beyond the somewhat isolated childhood incidents of the passage.

One of the key thematic aspects of the novel is the child’s perspective. By examining formative events from such a perspective, Zadie Smith is able to address complex social issues through a narrow scope. For example, the narrator’s initial attraction to Tracey is motivated largely by shared race and social class but is also an innocent childhood decision that emerges naturally. By opening the novel with the dance lessons, Smith both introduces a key motif—dance—and is able to subtly describe the narrator’s socioeconomic status by describing her neighborhood and her non-dependence on government assistance.

The narrator then introduces her mother, who is a key character both plot-wise and thematically. From the first sentence of chapter 2—“What do we want from our mothers? ... Complete submission" (18) – the narrator characterizes her relationship with her mother as tense and oppositional. Her mother’s aim for intellectual success is depicted as unfamiliar to the narrator, her father, and the community as a whole: subsumed by the neighborhood and the society that they are accustomed to, the narrator and her father are unable to understand the mother’s aspirations. The narrator makes this clear in an anecdote describing how her father and mother met—they were at a political group meeting, but her father was there to meet girls while her mother was

there to absorb ideas. To some extent, the narrator's mother understands and even encourages this disconnect, as depicted by her encouragement of the narrator and her father visiting Lambert. Lambert serves as a foil to his sister—he has a complete lack of ambition and refuses to look beyond his current situation. This is not necessarily a truly bad outlook; Smith demonstrates that Lambert is somewhat content with his life while the narrator's mother is constantly dissatisfied.

The primary focus of the section, however, is the relationship between the narrator and Tracey, which is close and complex from the start. Tracey establishes her alpha role in the relationship early on, and becomes resentful of the narrator's singing abilities and protective of her dancing abilities. Smith uses the literal spotlight of the stage to demonstrate Tracey's intense desire for attention and praise. The narrator, however, is passionate about dance more for its connection to Tracey and what she represents—power, danger—than out of the benefits it can provide her, as demonstrated in Chapter 5 when Miss Isabel makes her walk through chalk to demonstrate her flat feet. It is worth noting that the narrator's mother encourages Miss Isabel to do this; she has a negative opinion towards an obsession with dance and seeks to steer her daughter towards more intellectual pursuits.

The narrator's description of the girls' respective homes and the according games they played when there is important in subtly establishing the parameters of their lives and how their upbringings both connect and diverge. As she does throughout the section, Smith uses subtle but significant details to create a comprehensive tapestry of the girls' relationship. Tracey's wealth of toys demonstrates her fixation on the material, which corresponds with her desire for concrete praise and attention. Similarly, the amount of toys indicates that Tracey's mother is more than willing to provide such attention, entrenching Tracey's personality traits. The stories that the girls write at the narrator's house are important for another reason—they reveal more ominous trends behind childhood fantasies. The heroines in the girls' stories are always blonde and blue-eyed, reflecting their perception of what dancers should look like and foreshadowing the complications they will face as they grow into the dance world.

The narrator's descriptions of Tracey's father also serve this function in the novel—they introduce complex emotional themes in the context of childhood. The childlike perspective, combined with the adult narrative voice, is an advantage in these descriptions, since it creates a balance of innocent and cynical commentary. From the child's perspective, Tracey's father can be construed as a direct villain, a mysterious force to be feared. Yet the narrative distance lends the father's actions context. Furthermore, the narrator's acceptance when Tracey says her father is a dancer for Michael Jackson—even though she recognizes on at least some level that it is a lie—is indicative of the power dynamics between the two. The narrator is unwilling to disturb the balance of their relationship and would rather accept Tracey's claim than contradict it, even though it would be easy to do so.

Chapter 9 introduces another major concept—class distinctions—in a subtle fashion. By describing the parents' wariness of school throughout the neighborhood, the narrator demonstrates how ingrained discrimination is within the educational system and society

at large, how the strict hierarchal system of authority creates effects that echo into adulthood. The lingering anxiety that the adults feel about school also advances one of the novel's central themes: that childhood events can have a permanent effect on one's life.

Prior to Chapter 9, Smith established a relatively pure dichotomy between the narrator and Tracey's home life—the narrator benefitted from her mother's intellect and father's support, while Tracey's mother did not provide parental guidance and her father was absent. The introduction of the father's children from a previous marriage, however, disturbs this image and indicates potential problems in the narrator's home life. Furthermore, meeting these children serves as a formative childhood event, a scene typical of a bildungsroman (a novel that depicts the narrator's maturation from adolescence to adulthood).

Tracey seeks a replacement parental figure in the narrator's father, prompting the narrator's suspicions and jealousy. The differences in the two girls' family lives highlights the power imbalance in their relationship—Tracey benefits from the narrator's parents, while Tracey's mother is indifferent and suspicious towards the narrator. Furthermore, by inserting Tracey into the narrator's school, Smith allows the reader to gain a sense of her character outside of her private interactinos with the narrator and her performance in dance class. The scene with the Garbage Pail Kids cards clearly demonstrates Tracey's intense desire for power and her relative ease in gaining it.

Fred Astaire is a critical symbol in the novel—he represents the vision the girls' aspire to, yet as a white male he benefits from structural social advantages the girls already are acknowledging that they are excluded from. Therefore, Astaire is both a symbol of class distinctions and racism.

The discovery of the gun in Chapter Twelve is also symbolic: it reveals the danger located beneath the surface of Tracey's life. As a child, the narrator perceives this submerged danger as exciting and glamorous—she carves the eventfulness of Tracey's life. Yet both the adult narrator and the reader are warned that such danger carries consequences.

Chapter 13 returns to the narrator's examination of her mother's personality. The simple anecdote of building a garden reveals that her mother is not only tenacious, she is proud. She refuses to admit that the clay was an obstacle in her path and attempts to claim that the pottery was her goal all along. The narrator perceives this pride as her mother's fatal flaw—this is also significant because the narrator perceives herself her to lack pride, thus creating a key distinction between her and her mother.

Finally, in Chapter 14, the narrator addresses her first sexual experiences, again calling attention to potentially formative events. The bizarre sexual game the children play achieves the same symbolic purpose as the gun hidden in Tracey's apartment—underneath a cover of innocence lies explosive danger. The narrator is incredibly blasé about being sexually assaulted, indicating that she never made any attempt to pursue justice. Such a terrifying and life-changing event is described with the same tone as her

references to the game as a whole. This event increase by manifold the narrator’s sense that she is controlled by outside forces and has little power over her own identity.

Tracey and the narrator’s mother are the most important characters in this section. They demonstrate that the narrator’s upbringing was characterized by powerful women; more specifically, powerful women that attempt to dominate her. The resultant sense of loyalty and subjugation produced in the narrator has significant consequences for the duration of the novel.

Discussion Question 1

How are Tracey and the narrator's mother similar? How are they different?

Discussion Question 2

What is the thematic significance of Tracey's talent in dance?

Discussion Question 3

Analyze the scene in which the narrator meets her half-siblings (Chapter Nine). How does this scene contribute to the novel?

Vocabulary

stoicism, colloquial, ponderous, melancholy, servitude, pragmatic, espadrilles, mohair, euphemism, attrition, diligence, lamented, intricate, incontinent, extracted, consummation, clarion, arbitrary, incessant,

Part 2: Early and Late

Summary

In Chapter 1, the narrator mentioned she saw the pop star Aimee for the first time in a music video when she was ten and became obsessed with her dancing technique. The narrator and Tracey went to Lily Bingham's birthday party and Tracey, feeling uncomfortable, became extremely sarcastic and angry, mocking the movie that the girls went to see—The Jungle Book—and calling a fellow classmate a "Paki" in the car on the way home from the theater. Later in the party, Tracey and the narrator organized a dance show for the other girls. They wore Lily's mother's lingerie and performed an extremely provocative dance. Lily's mother caught them and told the narrator's mother, who dragged them away and raged at them.

Chapter Two jumped forward to the narrator's late twenties, when she was working at a music video channel called YTV. Appearances were prioritized at her workplace and almost all employees received many free benefits and transportation, drank heavily, finished their work early and did drugs at work. The narrator's boss, Zoe, was hardworking and self-sufficient but addicted to cocaine. One day, the narrator learned that the pop star Aimee would be visiting their office and she would be required to give her anything she needed and show her around. When Aimee visited in Chapter Three, the narrator was star-struck and told Aimee that she preferred older music to hers. By Chapter Three, the narrator had also discovered a pseudonym that Tracey went by on the Internet and had discovered many blog posts and comments that Tracey had written, claiming a conspiracy that the world was and had been run by lizards.

In Chapter Four, the narrator returned to her childhood and said that Tracey hung up posters of Aimee while she hung up posters of older dancers. One day, the narrator watched a video of the Nicholas Brothers and told Tracey that they were the original best dancers, mentioning that Tracey had gotten her dance skills from her father. Tracey told the narrator never to talk about her father again.

Chapter Five again switched back to the narrator's time as Aimee's assistant. She felt uncomfortable around Aimee and failed at many of her tasks, so Aimee took the narrator and Aimee's bodyguard, Granger, to the Heath. Aimee gave the narrator a joint and the two shared an emotional time together, walking through an art museum and swimming in a pond. They had a conversation about motherhood—Aimee had a son and was pregnant with a daughter—and the narrator insisted she would never be a mother.

In Chapter Six, the narrative returned to childhood, when the narrator realized that Tracey's father had gone to prison. As Tracey became more involved in dance, the narrator began spending more time with Lily Bingham, who criticized her for watching music videos with only black dancers. In Chapter Seven, the narrator described her singing lessons with Mr. Booth, a piano player, whom she talked with about Fred

Astaire. One day, Tracey insinuated that Mr. Booth was a pedophile, and Tracey's mother smirked.

Analysis

Just as in the last section, this section opens with a reference to Aimee, again foreshadowing the narrator's employment. This reference also draws a connection between the narrator's childhood and adulthood, highlighting their relationship—a simple event from childhood, the witnessing of a rising pop star, translates into an entirely different career trajectory.

Chapter One is perhaps the most explicit address towards race and social class thus far in the novel. Even a simple detail—like how Tracey and the narrator arrived in neat dresses while the other girls were casually dressed—reveals much about their situation. Tracey, sensing the unfairness of this power imbalance, reacts violently, while the narrator withdraws, revealing a further distinction in their personalities. Although young, Tracey already has an incredible sense of how to draw the implicit tensions of a situation into the open. She utilizes sarcasm and disrespect as weapons, trying to transform the internal discomfort she feels into a discomfort shared by all present. This is why she calls a classmate a racial slur; once she senses that the authority figure—Lily's mom—is reluctant to address such an insult, she understands that she is successful in this attempt to gain power, and thus presses her advantage further.

The narrator's lack of adult identity and her general ambiguity about her path in life is emphasized by the conditions of her work environment. The narrator states that she feels time is not a concept at work, allowing her to remain aimless. The entire workplace, in fact, seems to echo facets of her childhood, drawing together this chapter with the previous and diminishing the sense of a drastic narrative shift. Zoe is yet another powerful woman in the narrator's life –Smith deliberately focuses the text on these women to emphasize their effect on the narrator. Zoe, however, also functions as a precursor of Aimee, who has unprecedented control over the narrator. When the narrator meets Aimee in Chapter Three, however, her reaction echoes that of Tracey's at the birthday party and presents another parallel between chapters Two and Three: she is instantly protective and lashes out to mask her discomfort. For a superstar, however, such a reaction is refreshing, and the intended (subconscious) effect is not achieved. Chapter Three is also significant for its brief reference to Tracey--Tracey's conspiracy theories, although outlandish, echo the same rebelliousness and contempt that she had displayed at Lily's birthday party and throughout her childhood. The theories also emphasized how far apart the narrator and Tracey had grown.

Chapter Four represents another shift, but there are again connections that orient the reader. Smith opens the chapter with a reference to Aimee, seamlessly integrating her presence into both sections of the same novel in the same manner that Aimee inserts her presence into the narrator's life. Chapter Four is not only connected to Chapter Three, however; it also continues the thematic strain of Chapter Two by again introducing the concepts of race and heritage. The narrator is attracted to old music

videos despite the clear racism inherent in many of their plotlines and casting. To the narrator, the Nicholas Brothers represent the raw beauty and power of dance—to her, they are primary representatives of the power of her body. At this point, she is solely concerned with this physical power; as she states, her mother's attempts to connect dance to the historical and the political hold little attraction for her. The Nicholas Brothers make the narrator proud of her heritage, yet when she attempts to share this pride with Tracey she is rejected. Tracey, abandoned by her father, seeks to carve a new path and would rather reject the traditional than linger in it. The relentlessly self-editorializing narrator exists in the past, while Tracey craves the future.

Chapter Five introduces a somewhat ominous aspect in Aimee and the narrator's working relationship. When Aimee takes the narrator to the park, she claims that she is only attempting to make her feel more at ease. Yet the text of the chapter hints that Aimee is attempting to do much more—she hopes to control the narrator more thoroughly and attain her complete allegiance. By welcoming (or at least seeming to welcome) the narrator into her inner circle, Aimee is both granting her unprecedented access and drawing her into a world in which she may not be able to exist separately from. This is a pattern for Aimee, who demonstrated her absolute control over her previous assistant by taking a bath with her. When Aimee and the narrator speak about motherhood and children, they are opening doors to a new emotional space which carries intense weight for the narrator, though perhaps not as much for Aimee. The narrator's statements in this conversation—that she never plans to be a mother—are also telling. The narrator has no desire to inherit the responsibility of having a child, and she also hopes to avoid the path of her own mother, who often appeared trapped by these responsibilities.

Chapter Six continues the thematic pattern of the childhood chapters in this section—together, they depict a few key events in the narrator's introduction to racism. Her conversation with Lily Bingham shows her the subtleties of racism; Lily is in some ways attempting to accuse the narrator of racism for favoring music videos with black dancers, while also using the word "we"—as in white people-- to create a clear racial distinction between her and the narrator. The conversation perplexed the narrator at the time and its effects can still be felt in her adulthood.

Chapter Seven breaks the alternating pattern of the previous chapters and reveals another clear distinction between the narrator's upbringing and Tracey's. The narrator cannot imagine her mother smirking at an insulting thing that her child had said to someone else, and this simple gesture signifies a depth of difference in the two girls' relationships with their respective mothers. Tracey's mother is more of an accomplice than an authority figure—she exercises little control over Tracey and draws out the more negative aspects of Tracey's personality.

Discussion Question 1

How does the narrator react to Tracey's increasing involvement in dance? What does this signify in terms of their relationship?

Discussion Question 2

What is the significance of the art that Tracey and the narrator examine?

Discussion Question 3

What is the purpose of the structure in this section? How do the alternating time periods contribute to the plot and the theme?

Vocabulary

indisputable, neurosis, condescension, androgynous, diamente, matador, curlicue, distortion, epithets, buoyancy, ventilation, quintessentially, prudishly, dossier, interminably, elaborate, erudition, excruciated, indecipherable, proprietorial, dainty, adamant, magnolia, incontinent, cherubic, accelerant, unsolicited, iridescent, maneuvering, prospective

Part 3: Intermission

Summary

Chapter 1 of Part 3 returned to the narrator's job as an assistant for Aimee, who was now making plans to build a girls' school in Africa and attempt to alleviate poverty there.

In Chapter 2, the narrator described how Aimee worked hard every day to stay youthful. She danced with extreme effort that appeared erotic. Judy, Aimee's other assistant, was pragmatic and crisp. One night, the narrator and Aimee went to a club together and became extremely intoxicated. The narrator sang along with the piano and accidentally continued to sing past the end of the song. On the way home, Aimee appeared frustrated and questioned the narrator on what she wanted to do with her life, insisting that she could not be her assistant forever.

In Chapter 3, the narrator described a night in which she went to a 90s hip-hop concert alone and had sex with the doorman. The narrative then returned to the narrator's night out with Aimee; the narrator told Aimee that she had seen Tracey after a date; she insinuated that a sexual incident had occurred between her father and Tracey, and said that her father had passed away.

In Chapter 4, the narrator reflected on how she lost her sense of time in her twenties and had never started a family. Her mother was now about to become a Member of Parliament and campaigned with her partner, an innocuous woman named Miriam. The narrator had lunch with her mother and Miriam; her mother criticized Aimee throughout and said the narrator was too focused on her job. However, at the end of the lunch Miriam gave the narrator a binder to assist Aimee in her humanitarian project in Africa. The narrator and her mother talked about an incident when three boys fall off a bridge into freezing water. The narrator also reflected on her father's funeral, when she had again seen his other children, John and Emma.

Analysis

Part Three explores the concept of identity more concretely by focusing solely on the recent past and the narrator's adulthood. This technique allows the reader to perceive more clearly how the narrator functions within the context of adulthood. This section also shifts the novel's focus onto the protagonist and away from Tracey, granting the reader greater access into the narrator's perspective in general.

The narrator is conflicted about Aimee's plan to build a school. On one hand, she supports the plan—simultaneously, however, she recognizes the casual appropriation inherent in many of Aimee's actions. Aimee even incorporates ideas into her music that aren't hers; the narrator worries that Aimee will apply such an attitude to her actions in Africa. At the center of Aimee's privileged superstar lifestyle is a willful naivety, a desire to overlook complications. The narrator's descriptions of Aimee are uniform in depicting

her self-centered mindset: the narrator's entire life has also been appropriated, in a sense, as she becomes completely committed to assisting Aimee.

Even as the narrator remains somewhat willfully blind to Aimee's flaws—despite her reservations about the African school project, she wholly commits herself to it—Aimee is unafraid to analyze the narrator's own problems, specifically those regarding identity. When the narrator out-sings Aimee while intoxicated, Aimee interprets this as a signal of dissatisfaction; the narrator is not truly meant to be Aimee's assistant, but would rather graft her identity onto someone else's than establish her own. Aimee provides an escape mechanism for the narrator; as long as her life and goals are subsumed into Aimee's, she has no need to determine what she really desires. The narrator's frustration regarding her identity is further explored in Chapter Four. Prior to this chapter, the narrator had focused on her actions as they related to Aimee, thus emphasizing her dependence on Aimee for a sense of purpose. When the narrator does focus on events in her life independent from Aimee, she reveals a thorough lack of control. She turns to sex for comfort but is unable to find any, instead becoming further isolated from herself. By choosing to describe the incident with Tracey that destroyed the two girls' friendship, Smith links the end of their friendship with the narrator's lack of identity. Tracey had always been a crucial part of the narrator's perception of herself.

This chapter also details the narrator's relationship with her mother once in adulthood. Again, Smith is emphasizing the effects of childhood events and attitudes on adult outcomes; the same tensions that had governed the mother-child relationship in the narrator's youth are still present and are perhaps stronger. The narrator's mother constantly criticizes the narrator's career path because it deviates from the one that she had planned. Furthermore, the narrator's inability to remain unaffected by her mother's complaints signifies her continued reliance on her mother. Although the narrator is capable of acknowledging her mother's many accomplishments, she still does not find her mother to be a role model, which also contributes to her struggle with identity.

Discussion Question 1

What function does Miriam play in this chapter? How would you characterize the narrator's attitude towards Miriam?

Discussion Question 2

Analyze the conversation between the narrator and Aimee about Tracey. Why would Smith choose to release crucial information about Tracey and the narrator's friendship in this way?

Discussion Question 3

What is the significance of the narrator's brief mention of her father's funeral?

BOOKRAGS

Vocabulary

obligation, prospective, distortion, epiphanies, dilation, faux, bellwether, menopausal, civilian, scuzzy, maudlin, jobbing, deference, sentimental, tolerability, spurred, partition, applicable, obscure, amorphously, concede, aspirational, woozily, clarity, rogue, underwhelming, frivolousness, genteelly, adjunct, buffer, inscrutably, banal, prurient, discreet, grotesque

Part 4: Middle Passage

Summary

Chapter One was set in Africa, where the narrator had travelled to meet Aimee and assess the economic situation of the village that she hoped to assist. The narrator and her guide, Lamin, attempted to board a plane but were stopped by an initiation ritual in which the boys of the village are led by a ceremonial dancer called a kankurang to the bush, where they are circumcised and symbolically turned into adults.

In Chapter Two, the narrator described how Tracey's body began developing early in adolescence, and she wore skimpy clothes and spent most of her time with boys. The narrator and the other girls in the grade shunned Tracey and had 'boyfriends' who were determined by their friends.

Chapter Three returned to the scene in Chapter One; the narrator and Lamin missed the plane but were carried to a boat by muscular boys. As they waited for the next boat, Lamin talked with his "age mate," a girl he'd grown up with, and the narrator noted that Lamin was respected and funny among his friends but treated her with cold, uncomfortable civility. The narrator felt a sense of uselessness in attempting to combat the poverty of the country. She went on her computer and discovered that Aimee's net worth was higher than the entire GDP of the African country.

Chapter Four returned to the narrator's adolescence; Tracey's father, Louie, was released from prison and bought milkshakes for Tracey and the narrator. He had the girls close their eyes and pick horses to bet on from a list; the narrator's choice, Theory Test, won them a hundred and fifty quid and they bought records. The narrator watched Tracey's father dance and realized that Tracey's lie—that her father was a backup dancer for Michael Jackson—made sense when watching him dancing. Returning home, the narrator was chastised by her mother, who accused her of throwing away her education.

In Chapter Five, the same time frame continued, and Tracey was beginning to avoid the narrator. One day, the narrator watched a film called Ali Baba Goes to Town, depicting a group of dancers dressed as Africans dancing—one of the girls in the video looked and moved exactly like Tracey, and the narrator showed her the video.

Chapter Six returned to the narrator's trip to Africa; she picked Aimee up at her hotel and realized that, when she was with Aimee, none of the chaos or checkpoints of the normal drive occurred. Aimee hired an economist named Carrapichano to oversee the school's construction; she also travelled with her two children, Judy, and a third assistant, Laura.

In Chapter Seven, again returning to adolescence, the narrator and Tracey discovered that the dancer from Ali Baba Goes to Town was named Jeni LeGon. The narrators' parents divorced but continued to live in the same house.

In Chapter Eight, the narrator began doubting Aimee's commitment to the cause of building the school and worried that the school would not be successful. She also noticed that Aimee began flirting with Lamin.

In Chapter Nine, the narrator's teacher, Miss Bradwell, had the students bring their home reading to class. When she saw the narrator's large dance biographies, she recommended that the narrator take a test for a prestigious private school. The narrator, however, became resentful during the test and didn't answer many of the questions, failing.

In Chapter 10, Tracey was accepted at a dance school; her mother gave the narrator and the narrator's mother a tape of her audition, and the narrator realized that Tracey had copied Jeni LeGon's solo for the original composition part of her audition. The narrator seldom saw Tracey from ages thirteen through fifteen, although she sometimes saw her on the street, high, wearing dancing clothes and walking with tall boys. The narrator became Goth.

Chapter 11 detailed the narrator's second trip to Africa, which she took alone with a man named Fern, who Aimee had also hired to work on the project. She stayed at a middle-class African woman named Hawa's home; Hawa was friendly, gossipy, and extremely popular in the village. She worked as a teacher at the school, and one day the narrator noticed that she always copied the English translation of a phrase on the board without making her students translate it first. When the narrator did not let her write the English phrase on the board, few of the students could translate it alone. Carrapichano criticized her for this action, saying that she had humiliated the teacher.

In Chapter 12, the narrator said she attempted to rebel as a Goth but failed. She went to a party and wandered into an empty booth to drink vodka. A boy entered the booth and the narrator lost her virginity to him without speaking to him. As she was leaving the party, she saw Tracey being pinned to a wall by a man and realized it was Tracey, who was bleeding from her nose and vomiting. The narrator stayed with Tracey until the narrator's mother arrived and took them to the hospital, where they found that Tracey had overdosed.

Analysis

The kankurang has a significant emotional effect on the narrator. The chaos associated with the ritual (for those that do not understand it) disillusions the narrator; she expected to feel a sense of belonging in Africa, but realizes that she is alienated from this culture. The initiation ritual symbolizes the character's own problems with determining a path in life – there are no clearly marked rites of passage for her.

Chapter Two introduces the alternating time structure of this section. This chapter navigates the complicated and subtle politics of childhood friendships. Furthermore, Smith's emphasis on Tracey's developing body allows her to continue exploring the value of the body itself – particularly the black body. The narrator's loyalty to the other undeveloped girls in her class exceeds her longstanding loyalty to Tracey, thus emphasizing how the physical can translate into the moral and emotional. For the narrator and her classmates, sexuality is associated with moral wrongdoing.

This shared condemnation of Tracey serves as a bonding factor between the other girls, drawing them closer in response to an "other" and echoing themes of racism. Yet in Chapter 3, the misguided sense of belonging the narrator had attained in childhood evaporates. In fact, due to Lamin's attitude towards her, the narrator experiences the same alienation that Tracey had suffered in middle school. The distinction is once again based on her body—because she looks like a foreigner, she is treated differently Furthermore, the fact that Aimee wants to build a school reinforces these echoes of childhood which haunt the narrator.

Chapters Three and Six explore the theme of neocolonialism as well. Aimee's privileged life prevents her from fully understanding the complications that arise when exploring a different culture. To her, all differences stem from personality traits and not structural distinctions. Aimee does not even fully experience the culture that she is attempting to assist—the narrator notes in Chapter Six that Aimee is driven in an air-conditioned car and exempt from the typical traffic. Aimee's collection of assistants shelter her from reality, allowing her to exist in Africa without integrating herself into it. While she expects her assistants to live with their African hosts, she secludes herself in a hotel. All of these actions create a general sense of, if not hypocrisy, than ignorance on Aimee's part of the realities of the charitable cause she has chosen. The final sentence of Chapter Three, when the narrator discovers that Aimee's GDP is higher than the unnamed nation itself, emphasizes the incredible disconnect between Aimee's life and the lives of the people that she ostensibly hopes to assist but does not try to understand. By Chapter Eight, the narrator's suspicions are confirmed

Chapters Four, Five, Seven, Nine and Ten depict the shifts in the narrator and Tracey's friendship that parallel the many other changes associated with adolescence. Louie's return is both a highlight in their relationship—the girls' friendship grows stronger by shared exposure to an adult that Tracey cares deeply about—as well as another challenge, as the narrator's mother reacts strongly against the excursion. Tracey's father represents pure vitality and little self-awareness, a concept that the narrator's mother rejects. Louie thrives on gambling, dancing, food, music; vivid enjoyments that serve little political purpose. The narrator's mother scorns enjoyment for enjoyment's sake, and is unable to understand the satisfaction that Louie, the narrator, and Tracey glean from dance.

Chapters Five and Seven extremely significant for the narrator and Tracey because they mark the first time they witnessed a role model of their own skin color in the dance industry. Jeni LeGon becomes a symbol of success for them, proof that they can thrive in a world prejudiced against them. The fact that the narrator introduces Tracey to Jeni

LeGon is also significant—the narrator is essential for Tracey's success, linking their individual growth as dancers and as people.

Chapters Nine and Ten, however, reverse the theme of unity emphasized by Chapters Five and Seven. Tracey and the narrator's relationship is not immune to the pressures of adolescence and its dissolution is not specific to Tracey and the narrator—the narrator herself mentions that their diverging interests draw them apart, a common trend in adolescent friendships. In Chapter Ten, Tracey's acceptance into dance school is a symbolic recognition of the widening chasm between the girls. Dance is a major uniting link in their friendship, yet the gap between their skills makes that link unsustainable. The importance of dance to their friendship firmly secures Tracey's dominance—as long as dance is their primary bond, Tracey will hold power over the narrator due to her inarguably superior skills.

Chapter Nine reveals the narrator's growing awareness of and dissatisfaction with the social system in place around her and is also the most acute acknowledgment of her mother's political lessons. The narrator's conscious decision to fail the test is ironic because her mother fervently wished her to attend the school—the narrator's act of rebellion is informed by her mother's political leanings.

Although the narrator is more aware of African culture than Aimee, she is still isolated from it, as Chapter 11 details. Chapter 11 also explores the relationship between Hawa and the narrator. Within the context of the village, Hawa is yet another powerful woman, and the narrator's fascination with her continues the thematic thread of her character. Hawa and the narrator are also connected by their shared desire to not have children; they both wish to remain free of societally imposed constraints.

Chapter 12 connects Tracey and the narrator by illustrating a particularly formative night in both of their adolescences; a night conducted separately but resulting in an unexpected connection. The narrator loses her virginity while Tracey experiences a drug overdose, representing a severe loss of innocence for both characters. This chapter demonstrates the symbolic pull between the two characters and the ways in which their life navigate similar courses even when they are estranged. Furthermore, the assistance of the narrator's mother represents the importance of family life in individual outcomes—both Tracey and the narrator benefit from the narrator's involved mother, while Tracey would have suffered much worse physical injury if her mother had been expected to assist her.

Discussion Question 1

What is the symbolic significance of the narrator's decision to become Goth?

Discussion Question 2

How does Hawa function within this chapter? How is she similar and different to Tracey?

Discussion Question 3

How does the discovery of Jeni LeGon affect Tracey? Do you feel that it strengthens or damages her relationship to the narrator?

Vocabulary

apparition, decorously, chasm, frenetic, convulsive, euphoria, circumcised, diverged, dominion, articulated, shunting, loquacious, dissipated, utilitarian, corrugated, protocol, daubed, incandescent, zirconia, laborious, cinched, technicality, coexisted, inevitable, obscure, apathetic, outlandish, reconnaissance, lucid, diaspora, collateral, ostentatiously, remittances, dissuade, cronies, flagrantly, charismatic, plaiting

Part 5: Night and Day

Summary

In Chapter One, the narrator and her mother watched an interview in which Oprah asked Michael Jackson about the change in his skin color. Both the narrator and her mother were disappointed by Jackson's responses and turned off the television. The narrator thought that her mother was becoming more youthful and energetic—she led a group of social justice meetings with speeches. Her mother asked her to speak at one of these meetings, but the narrator refused. Her mother became enraged and criticized the narrator for her lack of ambition.

In Chapter Two, the narrator spoke with Tracey about her dance school. Later, she saw Louie with a pregnant woman and little girls and realized he had another family. Louie also set a fire in the narrator's bike shed to send an angry message to her mother.

Chapter Three returned to the narrator's adulthood, on her trip in Africa. Both she and Fern were becoming anxious that Aimee would lose interest in the charity. The narrator noticed that Lamin was attracted to Hawa and the two often had flirtatious conversations.

Chapter Four switched back to the narrator's adolescence, when Tracey was attending the dance school and the narrator was attending public school. One day, the narrator and her father encountered Tracey at a train station. She spoke exceedingly formally and the narrator's father teased her about her new tone. Later, Tracey and the narrator assisted Miss Isabel at the annual dance show, which the narrator enjoyed because it reminded her of her childhood.

Chapter Five returned to the scene in Africa. The girls' school that Aimee had funded officially opened, and the village celebrated with a traditional parade and dancing. One woman criticized the unnamed President, the country's dictatorial leader, saying that every young person who is able to leaves. Later that night, the narrator met Hawa's half-brother, who spoke perfect English and had studied and lived abroad. He told the narrator about the social structure in Africa, which was divided along class lines based on heritage.

Chapter Six returned to the narrator's adolescence immediately following the dance show she had assisted at. Miss Isabel visited the narrator's home and insinuated that Tracey had stolen three hundred pounds from the dance show. The narrator's mother revealed that Tracey had been attending youth counseling. When Miss Isabel and the narrator's mother attempted to confront Tracey's mother, she responded with extreme rage and accused Mr. Booth of sexually molesting children.

Analysis

Chapter One continues Smith's focused exploration of race within the context of childhood experiences. For the girls, Jackson's decision represents his relentless commitment to dance. Jackson recognizes that the dance world exclusively favors those who are white, and choose to accept this prejudice and integrates himself into it rather than oppose it. The girls are disappointed by this route because it represents Jackson's denial of his race in favor of personal gain.

Chapter Two continues the thematic strain of disillusionment introduced by Chapter One. The narrator's sighting of Louie reveals to her the extent of the differences between her and Tracey's family structures. Tracey is aware of the narrator's half-siblings but says nothing of her own, revealing her deep insecurities and another facet of her personality. As the more powerful in the friendship, Tracey goes to great lengths to maintain illusions of superiority. The existence of Louie's other children discounts Tracey's story that he is Michael Jackson's backup dancer, thus corroding the plausibility of her denials. This connection to Michael Jackson ties together the first and second chapters, which function as a unit.

Chapter Three illustrates that the narrator's continued willingness to overlook flaws in order to acquiesce to the power structures of her relationships. Just as the narrator does not confront Tracey about Louie's family, she does not acknowledge the growing relationship between Lamin and Aimee. This is damaging because not only is the relationship somewhat unethical, it is potentially harmful for Aimee—Lamin is motivated more out of the concrete benefits that Aimee could provide than by true romantic attraction. He feels trapped by Aimee's wealth, while Aimee feels simultaneously entitled from it.

Chapter Four reveals to the extent to which Tracey and the narrator have become alienated. At dance school, Tracey faces an entirely different set of challenges—and prejudices—than the narrator does at public school. Tracey's affected speech and manner represent her attempts at fitting into a mold which the narrator is unable to understand or even perceive. Furthermore, however, Tracey's changing attitude represents a natural process of growth and change in adolescence—the progression of discovering one's true interests and personality. While Tracey's behavior signifies a natural confusion about her identity, the narrator makes no attempt to explore her own identity in this portion of the text.

Chapter Five provides a more detailed and comprehensive description of the village which the narrator is inhabiting. The reference to an overbearing and authoritarian leader not only provides crucial context for the political and social workings of the village, it creates on a macroscopic scale what Aimee's influence produces on a microscopic level. Just as Aimee is both revered and hated, and exercises virtually absolute control over the narrator, the nation's leader operates the country according to his own objectives with minimal input from the citizens. Smith makes another large social observation in this chapter—she utilizes the character of Hawa's half-brother to

explore the concepts of class and race. Although he provides an in-depth explanation of the class distinctions in the village, detailing the different heritages that produce different strata on a social hierarchy, he believes that subtle discrimination between classes produces little real effect because the core of social conduct is equality. In contrast, he believes that while Western nations do not draw distinct boundaries between different classes—do not title their citizens according to their heritage—in reality they treat lower-class citizens with more prejudice and less empathy than Africans do. This line of thinking introduces the narrator to a different perspective not only on the two cultures as a whole, but on the education project she is engaged in.

Chapter Six abruptly returns to childhood at a point of narrative tension in the adulthood strain. This chapter reveals an extreme difference between the narrator and Tracey and serves as a climax both plot-wise and thematically. The narrator's presumed innocence and Tracey's presumed guilt reveals structural differences in their lives: the narrator herself realizes that she benefits from unspoken assumptions regarding class while Tracey is harmed by them. At the end of Chapter Six, the narrator concludes that Tracey likely was sexually assaulted, not by Mr. Booth but potentially by Louie. Even coming from a somewhat unreliable narrator, such a revelation sheds light on Tracey’s character and provides a potential motivation for many of her more rebellious actions throughout this section. Furthermore, it reveals the extent to which the narrator and Tracey lead completely separate lives despite their shared bond. It again reinforces the idea that family life plays a crucial role in dictating one’s behavior.

Discussion Question 1

What is the symbolic purpose of Lamin and Hawa's flirtation?

Discussion Question 2

How does the alternating time period structure of this chapter assist in promoting its thematic content?

Discussion Question 3

What does Chapter Six reveal about Tracey's mother as a character?

Vocabulary

peculiar, gilt, unaccredited, evangelical, schizophrenic, fallacy, schlepping, verge, nihilism, orientation, exquisite, ingenious, benign, frenetic, formality, jaggedly, fermenting, jostling, periodically, scandalized, intuition

Part 6: Day and Night

Summary

Chapter One of Part Six began with the narrator's first days at an unnamed college, where she was studying media. The narrator said that college represented many new freedoms and friends for her. She entered into her first serious relationship with a boy named Rakim, who was politically radical and considered himself a Five Percenter, one of the five percent of the population blessed with an internal God. He tried to convince the narrator of various conspiracy theories and criticized her for not behaving womanly enough. The narrator grew increasingly unhappy with the relationship and eventually broke up with Rakim by writing him a letter. The narrator recalled seeing Rakim again at graduation.

Chapter Two returned to the narrator's fifth visit to Africa, a trip she took alone to research for Aimee, who was losing interest in the charity project while becoming increasingly attracted to Lamin. The narrator had become close to Hawa and the two bonded over their lack of children.

In Chapter Three, the narrator had recently graduated from college and was struggling to find employment. Her mother had become a political activist and was in a relationship with another activist; both were writing books and featured on radio stations.

Chapter Four returned to the narrator's fifth trip in Africa. She heard a rumor that Aimee was planning on getting Lamin a visa to live full-time in New York. The narrator spent much of her time with Fern but took a day trip with Lamin to visit a memorial to a slave history museum. The narrator felt unmoved by the monument because she felt unconnected from the events that had occurred there and thought that power would always result in negative consequences.

Chapter Five returned to the year after the narrator's graduation from college. Still unable to find a job in media studies, she worked at a pizza restaurant managed by a racist man named Bahram, who believed that Persians were superior to other ethnicities and claimed that black men could not play tennis. The narrator also had a coworker named Anwar. The three frequently watched tennis games at work, and the narrator began rooting for a black player named Bryan Shelton. When Shelton defeated a Moroccan player named Karim Alami, the narrator danced around the restaurant and Bahram claimed that Shelton could only win because he was half-white, like the narrator. Tracey, who was dancing professionally in a revival of the show Guys and Dolls, discovered that the narrator was working at the pizza restaurant and offered her a job as a stage assistant.

In Chapter Six, Aimee grew angry that the narrator's mother, who was now in Parliament, was openly criticizing the government of the African nation she was

assisting. As a result, she made the narrator fly commercial and gave her fewer important responsibilities. Fern confessed to the narrator that he was in love with her.

In Chapter Seven, the narrator had accepted the job as a stage assistant and helped dress Tracey and the other dancers. She observed an affair between Tracey and one of the male stars, and her and Tracey's friendship grew stronger again. However, when the narrator received notice that she had been accepted for an internship at YV, a popular music channel, she decided to take the show. When Tracey learned of this, she sent the narrator a letter stating that she had seen the narrator's father having sex with a black inflatable doll dressed as a golliwog, a derogatory toy.

Analysis

The structure and content of Chapter One echoes the narrator's previous attempt at gaining independence from Tracey. Upon entering high school, the narrator became Goth and attempted to rebel in an exaggerated attempt to formulate her identity. Similarly, in college she is attracted to students with more radical personalities and views. Her attraction to Rakim also reveals her mother's influence – she is accustomed to the highly political and seeks out the same fervor her mother exhibited even during her attempt to rebel against the values her childhood had established. The relationship also underscores the narrator's perpetual willingness to be led or directed by others; Rakim attempts to dictate her every action and thought, and she makes little to no attempt to counter him with her own views. Thus, Rakim becomes yet another formative influence on the narrator, whose personality at this point is composed of the remnants of others. Rakim serves as another thematic contributor to the narrator's lack of identity. He also raises questions of race and social structure, as his wild conspiracy theories reveal a deep dissatisfaction with the social structures in place around him.

The unmoored, restless energy that Rakim represents remains with the narrator after graduation. Already unsure of her own objectives or desires, she becomes increasingly dissatisfied with her life's direction due to her inability to find a job in her field. The narrator feels that college represents a suspension from the rules of reality, an extended period of freedom which she would later attain again by working for YTV. Chapter Three again raises the theme of family structure and female relationships, as the narrator's relationship with her mother is transformed by her discontent with her own life coupled with her mother's rapidly increasing success as an intellectual and activist. Although dance is not mentioned explicitly in this chapter, the narrator's anger can be related back to dance – as a teenager, the narrator was frustrated by her mother's inability to accept the physical, instinctive joy of dancing, preferring to exist solely in the realm of the mental and political. Now, the narrator feels that her mother has become justified in this exclusive focus and thus loses faith both in herself and in dance.

In contrast, Chapter Two creates a sense of independence—the narrator is in Africa alone and feels fully adapted to the customs of the country. Furthermore, her ability to empathize with Hawa demonstrates her emotional growth. Hawa herself serves as an appropriate role model for the narrator in many ways because she provides an example

of healthy independence and self-direction, something the narrator has consistently lacked throughout her adolescence and early adulthood. For the narrator, Africa now symbolizes freedom from the restrictions of her personal and work life at home. The narrator feels subsumed by a culture that had once perplexed her, representing a major success in her search for personal identity.

The narrator's employment at the pizza restaurant explores race concretely by examining a specific instance of deep racism, as well as the narrator's inward and outward reactions. Bahram is frequently and openly racist in both his words and actions, and firmly believes that Arabic people are superior to all other cultures. The narrator treats this attitude with cynical disregard but becomes increasingly frustrated by Bahram's outward attacks on her race. The tennis game becomes a symbol of the narrator's resistance to Bahram's racism – Shelton's win unequivocally exposes his prejudice. The victory reignites the narrator's childhood belief in justice and equality, symbolized by her spontaneous dancing.

Lamin and Aimee's relationship raises questions of cultural identity and belonging. In some aspects, Aimee literally attempts to abduct Lamin from his culture. Her hyper-privilege causes her to believe that their love – which is virtually one-sided – is a justifiable reason for removing Lamin from his home. The situation is complicated, however, by the fact that leaving would be beneficial for Lamin economically and even socially, as most of the capable men in his village leave. Aimee therefore represents a moral challenge for Lamin which causes him increasing emotional distress throughout the section. This illustrates Aimee's absolute power, which is a product of her extreme wealth and name recognition. It is this same power that allows Aimee to punish the narrator for her mother's actions. Aimee's success grants her many benefits, but it also creates a division between her and the rest of the world. Both her relationship with Lamin and her attitude towards the narrator are a product of her self-interest.

Chapters Five and Seven bring the narrator's friendship with Tracey back to the forefront of the novel. Dance again serves as the connecting thread between the two girls, providing a mechanism for their relationship to function again. In many ways, these chapters realize the natural progression of the characters' adolescences: Tracey has achieved success as a dancer while the narrator continues to live within her shadow and thrive off of connection with her. Similarly, the narrator's mute observation of Tracey's affair symbolizes her continued willingness to overlook her friend's flaws while making no attempt to help her. This also serves as foreshadowing for Part Seven of the novel.

Discussion Question 1

What is the symbolic purpose of Rakim's conspiracy theories?

Discussion Question 2

How does the slave museum monument function within the novel?

Discussion Question 3

How does the narrator's mother's relationship with another activist influence the narrator's perception of her mother?

Vocabulary

parochial, obscurity, incomprehensible, devotedly, numerology, hybrid, mysticism, intertribal, crenellations, microfiche, consecrated, sterilized, embattled, languished, epileptic, decoy, statuary, pergola, purgatorial, nostalgia, purdah, desolate, conceivably, decolletage, enthralled, sloughing, unprecedented, pensive, stopgap, retribution, mercenary, subsidiary, schema, provocatively, golliwog

Part 7: Late Days - Epilogue

Summary

In Chapter One, the narrator recalled her date with Daniel Kramer when she was working as an assistant. This scene occurred the night after the lunch with her mother and Miriam in Chapter Four of Part Three. The narrator and Kramer spontaneously attended a dance show and the narrator saw Tracey. She had changed her name to Tracee Le Roy, appeared elegant and had straightened her hair. Tracey and the other dancers, dressed as Africans, performed a racist show and the narrator made critical comments throughout. Kramer left her in anger and the narrator intended to speak to Tracey after the show but saw Tracey's mother waiting outside with two children and, realizing they were Tracey's, the narrator left.

In Chapter Two, the narrator was moved from the maid's quarters in New York she had lived in for ten years so that Lamin could move into Aimee's home. Fern stayed with the narrator but was still heartbroken.

In Chapter Three, the narrator returned to Africa with Lamin. The narrator met Bachir, one of Lamin's age mates who was boastful but unsuccessful in reality. The narrator felt uncomfortable and incompetent throughout the trip and learned that Hawa was engaged to an extremely religious Arabic man; Hawa had also become extremely religious.

In Chapter Four, the narrator's mother had fallen ill but refused to speak about her illness. She mentioned that Tracey had contacted her about her son's expulsion, and when she explained there was nothing she could do Tracey became irate and began sending her abusive emails several times a day.

In Chapter Five, the narrator visited Tracey, who had three children from three different fathers. The narrator ate lunch with Tracey and her children. Tracey accused the narrator and her mother of perpetuating an unjust system and slammed the door behind the narrator as she left.

In Chapter Six, Aimee decided to build a sexual health clinic but the narrator and the other employees recognized that this would be extremely controversial because sex was taboo in the village. The narrator accompanied Aimee in touring various homes in the village; in one, Aimee and the narrator held a woman's baby, who was described as beautiful and angelic. Later, the narrator went to Hawa's house and found Lamin, who the entire team of Aimee's assistants had been looking for. Lamin and Hawa's half-brother were disappointed about Hawa's marriage. The narrator also noticed rebels armed with guns, and Lamin mentioned that more and more rebels were populating the village. Later, the villagers held a celebration for Aimee and the narrator joined in their dance circle. The dancers told her that even though she was white she danced like she was black.

n Chapter Seven, the narrator discovered that Aimee had illegitimately adopted the baby they had met in the village and named her Sankofa. The narrator had a long conversation with Aimee's nanny, Estelle, about her children. The narrator later began a sexual affair with Lamin. Fern discovered the affair and was heartbroken.

In Chapter Eight, the narrator convinced Aimee to include a reference to Jeni LeGon for a photography show. While researching her, the narrator realized that LeGon was treated poorly by her racist costars, including Fred Astaire.

In Chapter Nine, Fern's jealousy caused him to tell Aimee about the affair. The narrator was immediately fired and Aimee cut off all contact with her and left her boxes on the street. The narrator was notified that her New York visa would expire in 30 days. She lived with two acquaintances named James and Darryl. Frustrated, she sent proof of Aimee's illegal adoption to gossip magazines. Public opinion turned to her side in the scandal.

In Chapter Ten, the narrator return to England and paid for Lamin's flight to join her. In Chapter 11, Lamin left the narrator's apartment because they were both uncomfortable living together. The narrator met with Fern, who informed her that Lamin was working in Birmingham. Tracey released the provocative dancing video from Lily Bingham's birthday party when the narrator and Tracey were young; this turned public opinion in the scandal against the narrator. The narrator discovered that her mother was severely ill with cancer and was in hospice.

In the Epilogue, the narrator spoke to her mother in hospice, who revealed that Tracey had continued to send her abusive emails throughout her illness. She urged the narrator to adopt Tracey's children in order to provide them with a better upbringing. On the day the narrator's mother died, the narrator went to visit Tracey and saw her on the balcony of her apartment, dancing with her children.

Analysis

Chapter One emphasizes the distinctions between Tracey and the narrator. It again refers to race, underscoring how racism has detrimentally affected Tracey's career; her struggle echoes that of Jeni LeGon, who was rejected from roles and mistreated due to her race. In response to these challenges, Tracey adapted an entirely different appearance and even changed her name, which again reinforces her connection to LeGon, whose name was also changed after it was misspelled in a gossip magazine. The narrator is distressed by Tracey's transformation because she perceives it as a betrayal of the ideals they had strived for as children. Tracey's adherence to the standards imposed by the dance world parallels Michael Jackson's skin color change; the narrator feels that both of these acts are a renouncement of the dancers' heritage, a necessary sacrifice in order to pursue dance in a heavily biased society.

Chapter Two introduces the climactic crisis of identity which the narrator faces upon the expiration of her employment. Her reference to the maid's quarters that she had lived in

for ten years, often told that she would be moved to a better situation, emphasizes the peripheral nature of her relationship to Aimee. The narrator's disposability is strongly reinforced by Aimee's decision to remove the narrator from her home in order to replace her with Lamin. For Aimee, loyalty is not a factor in her decisions—she values people only for what they can concretely provide her in the moment.

Chapter Three returns to Africa and again introduces questions of identity and culture to both the narrator and the novel as a whole. Bachir is manifestation of unresolvable conflict many young villagers face: he feels that he must be successful but also feels connected to the village, which is ostensibly a place of pure poverty and failure. Hawa also represents a crisis of identity in this chapter; her decision to get married causes the narrator to feel betrayed. It echoes Tracey's decision to change her name and hair: Hawa's marriage represents her acquiescence to the social structures of the village. She is willing to adapt to the religious and social pressures of the society in order to gain further success from it.

This concept of an irresolvable personal conflict is also applied to the narrator's home life in Chapter Four. The clash between Tracey and the narrator's mother is a manifestation of their competing influences on the narrator's life. When Tracey erratically accuses the narrator's mother of neglecting her community, she is also implicitly exposing her lack of focus on her own daughter. On a more literal level, the emails also reveal that Tracey is potentially suffering from mental illness and is descending further into a web of conspiracy, grasping for control over her life.

Chapter Five expands on the deep flaws in Tracey's life resulting from her exposure to frequent injustices and her subsequent mistrust of the system. Tracey is deeply cynical even towards her oldest friend; she is resigned to a life barren of dancing and lived in service to her children, a fate which she would have despised in adolescence. This chapter clearly demonstrates the effects of constant discrimination and pain; Tracey's willful and rebellious adolescence proved unsustainable in her bitter adulthood.

Chapter Six emphasizes the narrator's ignorance of the cultural climate in the African country. It also is one of the few textual references to the narrator's own experience with sexual assault. The narrator's attitude towards sexual assault – that it is a universal and global issue – illustrates her deeply cynical attitude, which is a product of the traumatic events that she was exposed to. Chapter Six also advances the themes in Chapter Four -- just as the narrator is disappointed by Hawa's marriage, Lamin and Hawa's half-brother similarly recognize the marriage as a loss of independence and detrimental for Hawa's emotional health.

Aimee's adoption of the baby is the pinnacle of her neocolonialism – she literally takes a person from the African nation, firmly placing her self-interest ahead of that of the country or the parents of the child. Her ability to transcend international adoption laws also underscores her power.

The narrator's affair is her attempt to break away from the powerful restrictions that Aimee has layered over her life. Both the narrator and Lamin are attempting to prove

their independence from Aimee through their affair – they substitute sexual independence for personal and emotional independence. In terms of neocolonialism, the affair is a form of rebellion. Yet the narrator is still dissatisfied by it; the act does not assist her in forming her identity separate from Aimee.

By reintroducing the symbol of Jeni LeGon in Chapter Eight, Smith reveals the extent to which the narrator has become disillusioned regarding race and social structure. Her research reveals that her idol, the pinnacle of dance success, was still treated poorly due to her race. The narrator also insinuates that her previous belief that LeGon had earned respect through her talent is indicative of a childish wish – she feels that reality is truly discriminatory and that the unjust system is ingrained into the fabric of life.

The final three chapters represent the novel's climax both in terms of content – the narrator's life changes dramatically – and in regards to the novel's most significant theme, identity. The narrator has continually struggled with her identity because of her dependence on others to establish goals and interests for her. By the end of the novel, however, the narrator has freed herself of every single influence in her life and is now given the opportunity – or forced to – come to terms with herself as an individual.

Aimee cuts off the narrator, effectively ending the decade-long period in which the narrator substituted Aimee's professional and personal success for her own. The narrator's mother died, freeing the narrator from her overbearing influence and causing the narrator to rethink her own opinion of motherhood. Yet it is Tracey – still a central figure in the narrator's life despite their lack of content, and still a key tenant of the novel – who symbolically frees the narrator from her struggle with identity. When Tracey releases the video, she is demonstrating her hatred for the narrator's success and her resentment over the shift in their relationship. But when the narrator witnesses Tracey dancing with her children, she is reminded of the primal power of dance, a power that Tracey still retains. The novel ends on a hopeful note in which dance symbolizes not just the link between the two friends, but redemption and love.

Discussion Question 1

What is the symbolic significance of the narrator's mother's time in hospice? How does hospice affect her personality?

Discussion Question 2

How do time and chronology function in this section and how does this differ from the rest of the novel?

Discussion Question 3

Why did Smith choose to consider the final chapter an epilogue despite its proximity in time to the events of the rest of the section?

Vocabulary

agog, preamble, kinetic, reconcile, ragtime, memorialized, frugality, kente, vaguest, matrix, sporadic, chinos, sacrilegious, competency, grating, surreptitiously, regurgitated, tragicomic, reams, surplus, refined, gentrification, constituent, peculiar, dissection, conspiratorial, inadvertently, adamancy, oblique, efficiently, dalasi, antiquated, untarnished, oligarchs, claustrophobic

Characters

Narrator

The unnamed narrator is the novel's protagonist. She was raised in Northwest London by her cold, intelligent and political mother and her kind but uninvolved father -- her parents divorced when she was fourteen. As a child, the narrator frequently attended tap dance lessons and became best friends with Tracey, a talented girl in her class. The two eventually drifted apart as teenagers, when the narrator attended a public school while Tracey went to a private dance academy. The narrator briefly became Goth as a teenager. In college, she entered Media Studies and entered in her first serious relationship with a boy even more political and radical than her mother. After college, the narrator struggled to find a job and was eventually hired at YTV, a popular music channel. The narrator later became a mega-famous pop star named Aimee's assistant for ten years and became subsumed by her career. As part of her job, the narrator took many trips to Africa to make plans for a girls' school that Aimee hoped to build. The narrator eventually became sexually involved with Aimee's boyfriend, an African man named Lamin, and was fired. In response, she leaked adoption papers from Aimee's adoption of an African child that violated the legal adoption process. At the novel's close, the narrator's mother died of cancer and Tracey leaked a controversial video from their childhood onto the Internet, turning public support in the scandal against the narrator.

Throughout the novel, the narrator struggles with the question of identity--as a person of color, as a woman, as a daughter, as a friend. She acutely senses various societal pressures, such as the expectation of motherhood, and attempts to resolve them both intellectually and emotionally. However, unable to form a full and complete perception of her own identity, the narrator feels that she has little control over the trajectory of her own life. From childhood into adulthood, the narrator allows herself to be led and directed by other women--her mother, Tracey, Aimee-- and feels lost without their presence. The narrator's final act of rebellion -- having sex with Lamin -- is her attempt to escape from the influence of not just Aimee but all of the women and even the exterior, intangible forces that have controlled her. The narrator is technically able to achieve this goal; by the novel's end, she is no longer employed by or connected to Aimee, her mother has died, and Tracey is not a presence in her life. Yet the narrator is still unsure of her identity and where she stands in the world.

The narrator also changes from a more optimistic and open-minded child into a guarded adult who perceives many of the structural flaws regarding race and class that exist in her society. Both Lamin and Tracey, two of the rare characters who gain close inner access to the narrator, promote various conspiracy theories and are convinced that the world is attempting to rob them of their power because of their race and economic status. While the narrator finds these theories ridiculous, she grows to also sense the discontent that produces them.

The first-person perspective grants the reader virtually complete access into the narrator's thought processes and personality. Her character is consistently portrayed as calm and mildly cynical, and she exhibits relatively little growth throughout the course of the novel. In many ways, her own reactions and emotions are determined by those of others around her. She serves as a filter to process the various information and thematic statements revealed by the novel.

Tracey

Tracey is the narrator's childhood best friend and an extremely talented dancer. She is raised by a white single mother in a low-income apartment while her father, Louie, raises another family in a nearby neighborhood. As a teenager, Tracey excels at a performing arts school but becomes involved in drugs. Tracey eventually becomes a professional dancer, gaining small roles in shows. She has an affair with the star of one of her early shows, Guys and Dolls. Eventually, she changes her name to Tracee Le Roy and straightens her hair. Tracey becomes increasingly paranoid about the world around her and develops multiple conspiracy theories. By the novel's conclusion, she has had three children from three different men and is no longer a dancer.

Tracey is a fiercely independent and stubborn character. She is unpredictable throughout the novel and rebels at various points because she is unsatisfied with her place in society. As a child and adolescent, many of her most rebellious acts -- such as the provocative video she films with the narrator or her decision to steal money from a dance show for her father -- are motivated out of a desire to defy her expected role in society.

Since the novel is told from the perspective of the narrator, there are many gaps in Tracey's life story left up to the reader's interpretation. However, Tracey's ambition is an extremely important concept that emerges multiple times in the novel's subtext. Tracey capitalizes on her natural talent to break away from the stagnant economic and personal cycle of her family and neighborhood. Dance serves as her escape route, allowing her to carve out a life separate from the typical demands of a more traditional job.

The novel's conclusion, however, indicates that Tracey was unable to sustain her success. She withdraws into poverty and isolation, perpetuating the chain of poverty that her mother and father had existed within. Such an ending provides support for the narrator's mother's statement that society structurally does not value the accomplishments of the black body. Tracey's talent was insufficient to break down the social barriers working against her.

One of Tracey's crucial roles is to provide context for and insight into the narrator's life. Although their childhoods mirror each other up until high school, Tracey's decisions to pursue dance and her eventual failure reveal key differences in their personalities as well as in their upbringings. Tracey's independence and her loosely united family allow her to pursue dance, while the narrator is limited to a more traditional set of options.

Finally, it is important to note that Tracey likely suffers from a severe psychological disorder. This allows Smith to explore Tracey's dissatisfaction with her life and with society in depth while still remaining within the narrator's perspective. Tracey's blog posts about conspiracy theories, as well as her relentless letter-writing campaign against the narrator's mother, reveal deep damage to her emotional functioning.

Aimee

Aimee is a manifestation of extreme privilege and power. She is a world-famous Australian pop star who became successful and wealthy at a very young age, contributing to her overall sense of power and disregard for others. She hires the narrator because she said a mildly derogatory remark, which was so unusual and inflammatory that it set the narrator apart from virtually all other's in the narrator's life. Aimee has two young children and entrusts their care to a series of nannies. She develops an interest in humanitarian work and decides to build a girls' school in an unnamed nation in Africa.

Aimee sees all problems as resolvable and utilizes her extreme wealth to smooth over all potential consequences, allowing her to live suspended above reality. While she pours effort into purely physical endeavors in an effort to appear more youthful, she puts little effort into her charitable projects and relies on the narrator and a team of other employees and assistants to accomplish her various objectives. She also has difficulty maintaining focus on her projects and relies on others to clean the aftermath of her experiments in charitable causes.

Aimee allows Smith to explore concepts of culture and neocolonialism. Aimee refuses to recognize cultural differences, seeing all distinctions in terms of personality and individual difference. Because of this, her actions in the African nation are often either useless or outright harmful. Her girls' school collapses and creates an educational gap for the boys in the village; her sexual health clinic works directly against the village's culture. Aimee's disregard for these issues is symbolic of the patronizing attitudes of neocolonizers.

Aimee also reinforces the theme of the narrator's lack of identity -- her personality echoes that of Tracey and the narrator's mother in that she influences and controls the narrator. The narrator becomes subsumed into her job to the extent that her very identity depends on her career and she fails to develop personal relationships outside of work. Aimee encourages this dependence because it makes the narrator more useful for her.

Narrator's mother

The narrator's mother is a politically oriented autodidact; at the beginning of the novel, she has just started night classes at a college and spends much of her time studying various political theory, history, and sociology texts. She feels that her husband is not involved enough in these pursuits and eventually divorces him when the narrator is a

teenager, although the two continue to live together. The narrator's mother also stresses that the narrator must become involved in intellectual pursuits as well and focus on her education. She does not understand her daughter's obsession with dance, criticizing dance as purely physical and useless due to the discrimination inherent in any accomplishments of the black body.

The narrator's mother becomes more and more involved in political causes, beginning by hosting social justice meetings in her neighborhood and eventually becoming elected as a Member of Parliament. She dates another activist but the relationship collapses after the narrator's mother publishes a book in under a year while her boyfriend struggles to complete a book he had been writing for decades. As a Member of Parliament, the narrator's mother began a relationship with a woman named Miriam, who also helps with her government duties. The narrator's mother speaks out in Parliament against the African nation that Aimee hopes to assist, causing Aimee to punish the narrator. She also receives frequent irate emails from Tracey filled with conspiracy theories. Eventually, the narrator's mother becomes ill with cancer and dies while in hospice.

The narrator has a complicated relationship with her mother -- she recognizes her many accomplishments but feels that her mother dislikes motherhood and that she is constantly battling for attention from her. The narrator's mother's coldness towards her daughter, as well as her relationship with the narrator's father, results in the narrator's later ambivalence towards motherhood. Furthermore, the narrator's mother is another competing influence on the narrator's identity -- she develops a strict plan for her daughter's life and relentlessly criticizes her for failing to follow it.

The narrator's mother is empathetic on a base level-she fights against the restrictive government of the African nation and plans community meetings. However, she focuses solely on the structural and the macroscopic, thus failing to recognize the individuality of the various people that she aims to assist. She fails to connect the abstract ideas she studies with the daily realities of her constituents.

Lamin

Lamin is a quiet, complex, and largely inscrutable character that the text reveals little about. He is a Sengalese man living in the unnamed African village and working as a schoolteacher; Aimee's team originally hires him as a guide, but Aimee becomes attracted to him and the two begin a relationship. However, Lamin is unhappy in the relationship for various reasons but largely because he is in love with Hawa, another villager. Lamin begins a sexual affair with the narrator and meets her in London to escape Aimee's influence. He later moves to Birmingham to find work.

Lamin is a morally upright character but is corrupted by the competing influences that surround him -- loyalty to his village contrasted with the opportunity for wealth and success. The conflict between his love for his home and his desire to earn more money and advance his profits has a severe emotional effect on him, corroding his once bright

and carefree attitude. Furthermore, as rebels begin to congregate in his village he depends on his relationship with Aimee even for his physical safety. Just as she subsumed the narrator into her life, Aimee exercises complete control over Lamin due to her wealth and power. Lamin and the narrator need their affair to prove their independence from this restrictive hold.

Lamin is most comfortable around his people and acts cold and formal around the narrator and even Aimee. He becomes a victim of the processes of neocolonialism that Aimee sets in motion. However, by the novel's end he has established complete independence in the same manner as the narrator.

Hawa

Hawa is an outgoing and social teacher at the community school whom the narrator stays with on her trips to Africa. For the majority of the Africa sections, Hawa represents pure vitality and satisfaction with her social and economic status. She bonds with the narrator over their shared self-determination and resistance to societal pressures, specifically their shared desire to avoid motherhood. Hawa often flirts with Lamin and the narrator insinuates that he has deep feelings for her. When Lamin secures his New York visa, Hawa gets engaged to an extremely religious Arabic man. This act symbolizes her acquiescence to the social restrictions of her culture. She allows herself to become subsumed by her religion, forfeiting her identity while the narrator simultaneously begins to gain hers.

The narrator's father

The narrator's father is not depicted in as much detail as her mother. He is portrayed as unambitious and complacent. His primary narrative function occurs when Tracey writes the narrator a letter about her father having sex with an inflatable doll. This letter corrodes the narrator's innocence and identity, altering her friendship with Tracey permanently.

Tracey's mother

Tracey's single mother provides her daughter with toys and clothes but grants her minimal supervision. Her mother's behavior suggests that Tracey's mental illness may be hereditary; she is erratic and frequently becomes enraged. Her lax parenting style contributes to Tracey's rebellious behavior throughout her adolescence. Tracey's mother is ill-equipped for motherhood, yet she continues to serve in a mothering capacity for Tracey's children.

Fern

Fern is one of the men hired to assist Aimee's charity project in Africa. He falls in love with the narrator and eventually reveals her affair with Lamin to Aimee out of jealousy, resulting in the narrator losing her job.

Louie

Louie is Tracey's father. He does not live with Tracey or her mother; at the beginning of the novel he is in jail, but he later lives with another woman and other children. Louie represents a loss of innocence for the narrator -- from her first encounter with him, when he began a vicious fight with Tracey's mother while the girls hid, the narrator is wary of Louie and recognizes the potential danger that he signifies. The narrator implies that Louie may have sexually assaulted his own daughter, representing a corruption of innocence in the severest form.

Hawa's half-brother

Hawa's half-brother was educated and worked in America. He explained the social hierarchy of the African village to the narrator, and believed that although social strata were less mobile and more explicitly defined in Africa, there was still less social inequality there than in America and England.

Lambert

Lambert, the narrator's mother's brother, lives in London in a more decrepit neighborhood than the one in which the narrator grows up in. The narrator and her father frequently visit Lambert when she is a child. He is a symbol of the cycle of poverty which the narrator's mother seeks to escape and which Tracey falls into. He echoes the narrator's father in his complacency with the world around him as well as his place in it.

Lily's mother

Lily's mother is the mother of a girl in Tracey and the narrator's dance class. She becomes uncomfortable after Tracey makes insulting racial remarks at Lily's birthday party. Later on at the same party, she walks in on Tracey and the narrator performing a provocative dance while dressed in her lingerie.

Emma

Emma is the narrator's father's daughter from a previous relationship. She attends a ballet school and is wealthier than the narrator.

John

John is the narrator's father's son from a previous relationship.

Lily Bingham

Lily Bingham, a white and wealthy girl in the narrator and Tracey's dance classes, is a foil to the narrator. Smith uses her character to explore themes of race and class in greater detail. When Lily criticizes the narrator for watching music videos with solely black dancers, she provides an introduction to the hypocrisy regarding race that the narrator frequently faces throughout her life.

Rakim

Rakim is the narrator's boyfriend in college. He is extremely radical politically and believes in various conspiracy theories. His extreme dissatisfaction with the social and racial prejudice in England manifests itself in his complicated beliefs, but he makes little concrete attempt to alter his situation. He is also prejudiced himself and is frequently sexist towards the narrator, who eventually ends the relationship.

Miss Isabel

Miss Isabel, the girls' childhood dance instructor, is largely a symbol of innocence and purity throughout the novel. However, when she immediately assumes that Tracey had stolen the money from the dance show, she reveals that she is also influenced by systemic prejudices and injustices.

Boy with Ezcema

This boy is in the narrator's elementary school class and sexually assaults her in a closet. He goes unnamed and is referred to solely by his skin condition, emphasizing the importance that the narrator attaches to skin color and appearances in general. He exhibits little to no remorse or understanding of the crime that he perpetuates, and the narrator does not mention him after elementary school.

Spaz

Spaz is the nickname for a boy in the narrator's class with a disability, likely a form of autism. He sexually assaults the narrator in a closet along with another boy in their class.

Mr. Sherman

Mr. Sherman is the narrator's elementary school teacher. He struggles to deal with Tracey's rebelliousness in the classroom.

Bahram

Bahram is the manager of a small, unprofitable pizza restaurant and the narrator's employer after she graduates from college. He is deeply racist and his comments regarding a black tennis player are some of the novel's most explicitly racial remarks.

Paul Barron

Paul Barron is a boy in the narrator's elementary school class. He is the son of a police officer. After the narrator is sexually assaulted, Tracey tells her to meet Paul Barron at the gates in order to make her leave the scene of the assault.

Zoe

Zoe is the narrator's boss at the music channel YTV. She is hard-working and self-sufficient but is limited by her cocaine addiction and hard-partying lifestyle. She feels attached to the narrator due to their shared upbringings in Northwest London, and she protects the narrator throughout her career at YTV.

Granger

Granger is Aimee's bodyguard. He is beloved by the African villagers, although they refuse to acknowledge his homosexuality because their culture does not allow it.

Miriam

Miriam is the narrator's mother's partner for several years while the narrator's mother is in Parliament. She is a soothing and levelheaded person who attempts to subtly ease tensions between the narrator and her mother.

Carrapichano

Carrapichano is an economist that Aimee hires to assist in the chairty project. He causes the narrator to realize her own ignorance of the economic and social realities of the African village.

Miss. Bradwell

Miss. Bradwell is the narrator's middle-school teacher who recognizes her reading capacity and academic potential and recommends that she take the entrance exam for a selective grammar school.

Estelle

Estelle works as nanny for Aimee's two children, Jay and Kara.

Jay

Jay is Aimee's son and older child.

Kara

Kara is Aimee's daughter and second child.

Symbols and Symbolism

Swing Time

As the novel's title and a recurring point throughout the story, the 1936 film Swing Time is a crucial symbol. It represents the girls' ultimate fantasy of success in the dance world -- it is an exuberant, old-fashioned film that celebrates the passion and power of dance. Yet what begins as an innocent obsession soon morphs into a cynical revelation of the major structural and individual flaws that hold the girls back. Swing Time stars white people and advances white dancing, shunting aside black dancers like the girls. It represents a time period when racism was widely accepted; even the lead actor, Fred Astaire, was racist. As children, the girls overlook or even fail to see this, but as adults it becomes a bitter sign of the futility of their dance dreams.

Swing Time adapts as a symbol to the changing time periods of the narrator's life that the novel explores. In the youthful sections, it is a symbol of dreams yet to be realized. In her youth, the narrator feels that she must only work hard enough to overcome obstacles both institutional and personal. As an adult, the narrator re-watches Swing Time through a different lens: she recognizes the tensions beneath the surface of the costumes and dance moves.

Swing Time is a symbol within a symbol: the title of the movie refers to the swing style of jazz music and dance. Thus, the same concepts that the movie stood for extend to dance itself. Dance becomes both a dream and an obstacle for both girls-- for the narrator, dance is her failed passion, a pursuit which she is obsessed with but lacks the talent to pursue. For Tracey, who was talented enough to dance professionally, dance represents the escape route that she failed to follow. The narrator, raised by an autodidactic, involved mother and an equally caring father, benefitted from a subtly superior upbringing and social background; Tracey, raised in an abusive single-parent household with her volatile father occasionally visiting, becomes the victim of her childhood. With its references to both the structural and the individual, Swing Time highlights the distinctions between the two main characters.

Fred Astaire

Fred Astaire is a key symbol that represents the narrator and Tracey's process of disillusionment with not only the dance world but with society as a whole. As the lead actor in Swing Time, he fulfills much of the same symbolic function, but on a more concrete level. When the narrator learns that Fred Astaire did not treat Jeni LeGon with respect, it is a specific representation of the racism that the narrator has encountered throughout her life.

Kankurang

The kankurang functions literally as a symbol in that it is a ritualistic image of adulthood; it plays a role in establishing the culture of the African village. Specifically within the context of the novel, the kankurang also represents the narrator's realization of her isolation from the village's culture. Thus, the kankurang contributes to the narrator's overall lack of identity. The chaotic, treelike appearance of the kankurang represents its vitality and energy, which the narrator had overall been lacking before her trips to Africa.

Michael Jackson

Michael Jackson functions similarly to the other dancers in the novel in that he represents a distillation of the narrator and Tracey's aspirations; in their eyes, he is a pure role model that has achieved all they hope to. Jackson is also a key symbol of the time period in which the novel is set; as an icon of the seventies and eighties, Jackson roots the novel more thoroughly in the era, a necessary function for a novel set over multiple time periods.

The Thriller video is a key point in the narrator's childhood -- it represents a triumph of dance and the body. The video is pure excitement and represents a key step in the narrator and Tracey's aspirations. In contrast, the interview with Oprah represents a complete reversal from this success. Jackson states that he changes his skin color because he is a slave to the rhythm, which the narrator internalizes as white skin is necessary for success in the dance world. This cynical conclusion colors the narrator's future mindset and reverses the optimism of the Thriller video. These two key points -- notably both aired on major television events, emphasizing their attachment to the time period and to the culture -- represent a reversal on both Jackson's and the narrator's part.

Jeni LeGon

Jeni LeGon fulfills the same symbolic function as Fred Astaire but is more significant and more closely matched to Tracey and the narrator. Both Tracey and the narrator recognize that Jeni LeGon is the physical manifestation of what Tracey aspires to be. Yet as the narrator and Tracey mature, they also begin to recognize that the challenges LeGon faced due to her face apply to Tracey as well. LeGon was not treated with respect by other cast members; Tracey experiences a similar lack of respect throughout her life and becomes extremely resentful due to this.

Bridge Accident

The narrator spoke with her mother about an incident in which two boys were thrown from a bridge in London into the river; one died and the other lived. The narrator's mother originally told her about the incident because she was researching court cases.

It haunted the narrator because it symbolized her own relationship with Tracey; the narrator finds a steady job and moves away from her neighborhood while Tracey remains trapped in the rhythms of their childhood. The narrator feels guilty for this divergence in their paths, and the bridge accident symbolizes this guilt.

Sankofa

Sankofa is an African word which the narrator states means bird; Aimee later names her adopted child Sankofa. The word and the bird it represents are specific to African culture and Aimee makes little attempt to truly understand either. Her use of the word Sankofa for her own child symbolizes her overall appropriation of the culture. Just as Aimee inserts phrases and ideas from books she reads into her own songs, she sees no problem with adapting another culture to her personal objectives.

The President

The unnamed African nation's President also goes unnamed but is depicted as dictator with ultimate control and little regard for his citizens. He symbolizes the outside, exterior forces that so often influence the characters' lives throughout the novel. Just as the narrator's life path is influenced by her flat feet and Tracey's by her parents' decisions, the villagers are continually buffeted by factors they cannot control.

College

The narrator's college experience represents her failure to formulate her own identity. Rather than discover her own interests, the narrator becomes attached to Rakim and continues to struggle with her personal beliefs. Faced with unprecedented freedom, she grapples with the wealth of options available to her. She also continues to struggle with guilt over her upbringing, feeling that she is not as accomplished as those who were the first in their family to attend college.

Conspiracy Theories

Various conspiracy theories surface throughout the novel; both Rakim and Tracey advance theories about alternate groups who control the world and reinforce social power structures. Many of the community members in the African village also believe in the Illuminati and consider Aimee a member. These theories symbolize the characters' deep dissatisfaction with their world and an attempt to impose an order on the senseless discrimination they face. Conspiracy theories create a framework for forces like racism and classism that are largely inexplicable. Although the conspiracy theories are often far-fetched--for example, at one point Tracey argues that the world is controlled by lizards with sparkling crowns -- they are based in very real disappointments and unfair systems,

Settings

Northwest London

London is the novel's primary setting and where all of the 1980's-focused sections occur. The novel is deeply rooted in this setting and is littered with references to the cultural atmosphere at the time of the narrator's childhood and adolescence. The narrator and Tracey share a neighborhood in Northwest London that hovers on the brink of poverty.

For the narrator, Northwest London represents her upbringing and a place which she eventually becomes isolated from. As an adult, she focuses her work in New York and the wealthier parts of London -- this shift physically symbolizes the narrator's rise from the poverty of her youth. Her mother also echoes this upwards trend; at the beginning of the novel, her characters is intertwined with the setting as she devotes much of her energy to community planning and energizing, yet she becomes a member of Parliament and largely neglects her home area. As demonstrated by her letter-writing campaign, Tracey becomes extremely resentful of this fact. Unable to escape the strictures of her impoverished childhood, Tracey continues to live in Northwest London at the novel's end and perpetuate the cycle of disillusioned motherhood that both of the girls' mothers faced.

Northwest London physically connects Tracey and the narrator and provides a literal mechanism for developing their friendship. It also functions symbolically because it represents race and social class structures -- the people that inhabit their neighborhood all generally belong to the working class and their behaviors provide a model for Tracey and the narrator as they grow up.

Unspecified African nation

By basing much of the novel's texts in a developing African nation, Smith is able to explore the questions of control, class, race, and power that she raised in the adolescence sections in much more explicit depth. Smith emphasizes the African nation's lack of wealth and its political dictatorship to demonstrate how little control its inhabitants possess. She thus produces on a macroscopic level the same power imbalances that she explores through the narrator's relationships.

Smith also uses the African nation to examine the narrator's lack of identity. The narrator expects to feel at least somewhat connected to the culture of the country, but she is continually reminded of her lack of true connection to Africa. When she dances at the village celebration, she is told she dances well for a white girl -- just as her dark skin color made her feel disconnected from her British upbringing, this same Western upbringing isolates her from others of her skin color. The narrator's frequent trips to

Africa, and her eventual partial integration into the daily lives of the villagers, symbolically represent an aspect of her quest for identity.

Finally, the African nation also reinforces the theme of loyalty. Just as the narrator feels bound by pressure from her family and society, many of the characters from the African village become entangled in a personal conflict between their society's expectation for them to move away and earn money and the connection they feel for their home. Thus, the nation presents an unresolvable problem in terms of identity.

The narrator's childhood home

The narrator's home is a microcosm that Smith uses to specifically explore the narrator's family life and relationship with her mother. The narrator's flat contains many books -- often used as a measure of how much academic support a child has while growing up, which has major life implications -- yet the books are intended solely for the narrator's mother and the narrator has little interest in them. This is one example of how the narrator's flat is not intended for children, emphasizing her mother's disinterest in mothering. This concept is further reinforced by the fact that Tracey and the narrator make up stories instead of playing games at the narrator's home: the apartment emphasizes the values that the narrator's mother seeks to instill in her daughter.

Tracey's childhood home

Tracey's childhood home functions in a parallel fashion as the narrator's: it provides key insight into her family life and structure. Tracey's apartment is crammed with toys and other objects; it emphasize her family's focus on the material as well as her mother's lack of control. For the narrator, Tracey's home is an oasis from the cold formality of her own apartment. Yet the materialistic excesses of Tracey's home do little to provide Tracey with emotional support. Some of the most traumatic events of the narrator and Tracey's childhoods occur in this setting, both in the text and the subtext. For example, Louie entering the flat and breaking furniture represents a loss of innocence that occurs in Tracey's home.

New York

New York, where the narrator lives for about a decade as Aimee's assistant, simultaneously represents the realization of her aspirations and the continued hollowness of her life. The descriptions of New York are intentionally sparse compared to other descriptions throughout the novel; the character exists within New York solely to assist Aimee, and her life becomes subsumed by her work.

St. Christopher's church

St. Christopher's church is where the narrator and Tracey's childhood dance lessons are held. This setting physically unites Tracey and the narrator and serves as a shared background for them. Symbolically, it represents their innocence regarding the world of dance and society in general. When the girls again visit St. Christopher's as teenagers, Tracey steals money from it, symbolically demonstrating the corruption of her old innocence.

Themes and Motifs

Identity

The narrator's struggle to determine her identity – to reconcile the way she perceives herself with the way the exterior world perceives her – is the core theme of the novel. Throughout the book, the narrator is heavily influenced by others and attempts to discern which of these influences is most in alignment with her personal aims and opinions.

The narrator's friendship with Tracey can be viewed through the lens of identity. Tracey is crucial in establishing the narrator's early priorities and perspectives. The narrator places enormous weight on her friend's opinions, and the narrator dictates many of her choices, from the games she prefers to the career she aspires to, based off of Tracey's judgments. The narrator's obsession with dance is largely motivated by her desire to gain closer proximity to Tracey; the narrator feels that superior technical skill will allow her to connect more deeply with Tracey, whose talent isolates her. Furthermore, the narrator's most significant losses of innocence in her childhood—her discovery of her father's other children, her sexual assault in the classroom closet, her realization that Louie is dangerous—occur in close proximity to Tracey. Tracey is aware of each of these incidents and experiences the same loss of innocence; their maturation is conducted in a somewhat parallel fashion, further intertwining their identities.

The other significant influence on the narrator's development in her youth is her mother. As a powerful woman and later a politician, the narrator's mother provides a model of intellectual and personal success. Yet the narrator is repelled by this vision of her mother and feels little connection to her—unlike many, she fails to take formulate an idea of herself based off of her parents, isolating herself further.

The narrator's dependence on exterior forces to determine her own identity continues into adulthood. Tracey's power within the childhood friendship is symbolically amplified by the narrator's career as Aimee's assistant. Aimee, a wealthy and mega-famous pop star, utilizes the extreme power imbalance between her and the narrator to gain total control over the narrator's life. As a result, the narrator becomes subsumed into her job and bases all of her actions off of Aimee, refusing to even form personal relationships in case others are using her to gain access to Aimee.

It is not just individuals but larger, abstract forces which result in the narrator's struggle for identity. Her mixed race presents further challenges; she encounters various instances of racism both implicit and explicit throughout the novel. For example, one of her employers refers to her as a half-winner because she is half-white. The narrator rarely outwardly reacts to these racist events, but they contribute to her internal cynicism. She also struggles with her identity as a woman—she is sexually assaulted as a child and never comes to terms with her own sexuality, preferring a more isolated life.

Motherhood and Family

Much of the novel's text focuses on family life and structure; Smith explores the consequences that family relationships hold for the personal life paths of each member. By examining both the narrator's and Tracey's family lives in depth, Smith emphasizes the subtle differences in their family's makeups that lead to vastly different life outcomes.

Although the narrator's parents divorce when she is an adolescent, both parents are present in her life and both are invested in her future. Her mother in particular provides her with a clear life plan and objectives to aim for; her father is supportive and remains close to her despite the divorce. This relatively stable life benefits the narrator by providing her with clear objectives and support. Tracey's family, in contrast, is far less stable – her single mother is incapable of responsible motherhood and her father is not present in her life, dividing his time between jail and his other family. These conditions breed an independent and restless spirit into Tracey. One can argue that these family conditions are predictors of the two's eventual adulthoods—the narrator attains steady employment while Tracey fades into obscurity.

Smith focuses in particular on the differences between the girls' mothers and the implications of these differences. For example, Tracey's mother encourages her to pursue dance while the narrator's mother demands that her daughter focuses on more intellectual pursuits. These different priorities have significant consequences for both girls – if Tracey was not allowed to pursue dance, her life outcome may have been wildly different. The dichotomy between the parenting styles of the two mothers also produces different adolescences; the narrator's mother insists on picking her daughter up from parties while Tracey's mother is not even aware of her daughter's overdose.

Notably, however, the narrator scorns motherhood and insists that she will never have a family, reinforcing this statement by committing herself solely to her career. Tracey, however, becomes a mother to three children. Thematically, Smith argues that motherhood is transformative and helps define the characters. Tracey is bound to her children and gives up her passion for them, while the narrator remains rootless. The novel's closing image, of Tracey dancing with her children, emphasizes the significance of motherhood as a defining factor in one's life.

Loyalty

The novel explores the complexities of friendships and how childhood friendships distort and adapt over time in response to the changing identities of the friends. Although the narrator and Tracey end the novel virtually as strangers, they still acknowledge the intense connection between them due to their shared backgrounds. Smith utilizes the childhood sections to emphasize the lasting effect that formative events during adolescent have on children long after they have entered adulthood.

The narrator is deeply affected by Tracey releasing the video of the two dancing provocatively as children; she ruminates particularly on Tracey's comment that the world would know who she was. As critical as this statement is, it again reaffirms the narrator's identity by referencing her actions as a child. The release of the video is an important thematic moment in the novel; it creates a clear path from friendship to enmity, while continuing to reinforce the subtle complexities of the relationship. The narrator does not resent Tracey for releasing the video—her fascination about her former friend remains as strong as ever. The same power structures that had governed the two characters in their youths continued to affect them even at this pivotal moment.

Loyalty is also a recurring thread throughout the novel; the narrator feels bound to her community and to her friends. She frequently feels an amorphous sense of guilt about her own successes and her path in life. This is demonstrated most clearly by her decision to fail the entrance exam, but also emerges in other sections of the novel, such as when she attends college. For the narrator, loyalty entails ensuring equal opportunities between one and one's friend or community. This view is reinforced by her mother and Tracey but opposed by Aimee, who lacks a sense of loyalty and considers all of her success individual. Smith argues that loyalty can become a burden when taken to too extreme of an extent.

Dance

Dance functions as a recurring motif that informs much of the novel's plot and thematic content. Even the title, Swing Time, is a reference to a film about dance and a jazz dance style. Dance provides an initial link between Tracey and the narrator, serving as a common interest and a mechanism to unite the two friends. Ironically, however, it also divides them: the gap between their abilities prevents them from truly matching each other's level of commitment, and establishes Tracey's superior power in the relationship. Furthermore, dance adapts to the tone of the novel and reinforces its focus at various points. It symbolizes celebration and passion – such as when the narrator dances around the pizza restaurant or at the village's traditional celebration – and it also represents more subtle emotions like regret and hope, such as when Tracey dances with her children on the balcony. The dance icons that the two girls idolize represent both their aspirations and regrets as well; their favorite dancers were limited by their race. These figures are woven throughout the novel, emphasizing the theme of systemic racism.

Neocolonialism and Race

Aimee can be viewed as a neocolonialist—she uses her wealth and influence to accomplish her objectives in the unnamed African nation largely without considering the implications of her actions on the inhabitants of the village. Her privileged attitude causes her to treat the lives of the villagers with shocking levity, prioritizing her personal objectives – and her somewhat forced relationship with Lamin – over the lives of the people whom she claims to help.

Meanwhile, the narrator struggles to connect with her own heritage. Her mother is Jamaican, not African, yet the narrator expects to feel somewhat connected to the African village. When she lacks this connection, she feels even further isolated from her racial heritage. Her experience regarding race is relative – in England, she is considered black or of mixed race, while in Africa she is considered white. The narrator faces multiple instances of racism throughout the novel, as does Tracey; both come to recognize the racism inherent in the dance world and in society as a whole. Tracey and Rakim's perception of racism, for example, results in their frequent and complicated conspiracy theories. By demonstrating frequent instances of racism, Smith argues that the collective effect of even insidiously racist acts results in an unfair and biased social structure, preventing Tracey and the narrator from achieving their objectives.

Styles

Point of View

Swing Time represents Smith's inaugural use of the first-person perspective. The unnamed protagonist provides her personal experiences and opinions throughout the novel, ruminating on both her childhood and her time working as an assistant for the pop star Aimee. The narrative is delivered in a memoir format, with the narrator stating that she is attempting to unpack and analyze the events of her life in order to understand it. This point of view is essential in advancing in the novel's theme regarding identity -- the novel itself represents the narrator's final attempt to understand herself by examining the events of her life.

Furthermore, the first-person point of view allows the reader insight into the narrator's thought processes and reactions, which helps fulfill the bildungsroman format of the novel. By presenting her reaction to many formative events, the narrator creates a comprehensive picture of her personal experience and life story. However, the first-person narration also produces limitations and concerns about reliability. The entire novel is based on the narrator's personal opinions and biases, calling the credibility of her story into question.

Language and Meaning

Smith aims to provide the reader with detailed insight into the narrator's mind and life; her language choice reinforces this theme. The text largely consists of ruminative, stream-of-consciousness style reflections on the narrator's part, which allows the reader to understand both the narrator's opinions and her personality. The language choice reveals the narrator's particular inclinations as well as her intelligence: Smith utilizes elevated diction throughout the novel while remaining within the memoir-style context of the book. The narrator's frequent digressions as well as her observations are conveyed with the same language choice, creating a uniform mood throughout the novel.

For the majority of the novel, the tone is reflective and lyrical, almost elegiac. This tone is consistent with the story's content and objectives: since the novel is conceptualized as a memoir by the narrator following the expiration of her job, she conveys her sense of confusion and loss through her language choices. At times, however, the tone becomes rich and joyous, reflecting the narrator's capacity for experiencing purely emotive aspects of life, such as dance. The tone does remain consistent across the separate time periods that the novel covers, which creates greater unity within the novel and again reinforces the sense of a memoir.

The most important facet of the novel's language is its sharply observant quality. The narrator describes various events from both adulthood and childhood in vivid, rich language which elevates the emotional impact of each scene. By creating richly

imaginary scenes, Smith draws the reader into the physical and emotional world of the novel, imbuing some of the novel's more unbelievable events with deep realism. Smith's ability to make acute social observations about concepts as large as class and race and as small as manners and dance technique creates a comprehensive and analytic novel. Her language reinforces the novel's capacity to make social judgments; in fact, the novel as a whole adheres to the literature standard of making judgments about the world rather than simply describing it.

Structure

The novel is divided into seven sections traversing the narrator's childhood and adult life. The sections are titled according to chronology and time related words (Day and Night, Late and Early) and the narrator interweaves chapters from both time periods within each section. The novel's frequent alternations between the near and far past emphasize the effects of various childhood events on Tracey and the narrator's adult lives. Rather than proceed chronologically from childhood or in reverse chronology from adulthood, Smith interchanges these time periods to blur the line between youth and adulthood, strongly emphasizing their interrelation.

Quotes

This is what I understood by it: that for Astaire the person in the film was not especially connected with him. And I took this to heart, or rather, it echoed a feeling I already had, mainly that it important to treat oneself as a kind of stranger, to remain unattached and unprejudiced in your own case. I thought you needed to think like that to achieve anything in this world. Yes, I thought that was a very elegant attitude."
-- The Narrator (Part Two, Chapter Seven)

Importance: In this quote, the narrator projects her own lack of identity onto her idol, Fred Astaire, thus cementing her attitude. The narrator is alienated from herself and states that she wishes to consider herself a stranger; she feels that this alienation is something to aspire to, as demonstrated by Astaire's dancing. For the narrator, dance is another mechanism to prevent herself from coming to terms with her identity: at various times throughout the novel, dance functions as a distraction and as a false goal. The narrator becomes entranced with dance for the insight that it provides into Tracey's life, thus entangling her sole passion with that of another person. It is unclear whether the narrator truly loves dance or not, because of her lack of understanding of herself. This quote explicitly links dance and identity.

That's not the point. People come from somewhere, they have roots--you've let this woman pull yours right out of the ground. You don't live anywhere, you don't have anything, you're constantly on a plane. How long can you live like that? I don't think she even wants you to be happy. Because then you might leave her. And then where would she be?"
-- The narrator's mother (Part Three, Chapter Four)

Importance: This quote serves a dual purpose: it provides key insight into the narrator's relationship with Aimee and with her mother. The mother's critical attitude towards her daughter has extended from childhood admonishments to severe criticisms of her entire life direction; this quote is one example of the many subtle ways in which the narrator's mother perpetually seeks to influence her daughter. Furthermore, the quote does reveal context about the narrator's relationship with Aimee -- it is even more consuming than her friendship with Tracey. Echoing her decisions in childhood, the narrator has intertwined her life with another's.

I was completely unreachable, for the first time in years. It gave me an unexpected but not unpleasant sense of stillness, of being outside of time: it reminded me somehow of childhood.
-- The Narrator (Part Four, Chapter Three)

Importance: This quote introduces the concept of technology and time into the novel. Much of the novel is rooted in details regarding time periods -- both the 1980s and 2000's chronological sections include frequent cultural and social references. This quote reveals the symbolic significance of the time period: the narrator's access to technology facilitates her extreme commitment to Aimee, resulting in codependency.

And when the two sums of money I was looking for finally appeared in their adjacent windows all I did was sit and stare at them for a long time. In the comparison, as it turned out, Aimee came out a little ahead. And just like that the GDP of an entire country could fit into a single person, like one Russian doll into another.
-- The Narator (Part Four, Chapter Three)

Importance: This quote reinforces Aimee's extreme wealth in a stark manner, forcefully reminding the reader of her primary source of power: throughout the novel, wealth is equated with control. Additionally, the quote provides further evidence that Aimee is behaving in a necolonialist manner. Neocolonizers, typically businesses or nations, utilize their monetary and political power to exercise influence over other nations. As a billionaire, Aimee holds enough power to not only control the course of the narrator's life but to influence the path of an entire nation.

And then there were all the outrageous historical cases I heard of at my mother's knee, tales of the furiously talented woman--and these were all women, in my mother's telling--women who might have run faster than a speeding train, if they had been free to do so, but for whom, born in the wrong time, in the wrong place, all stops were closed ,who were never even permitted to enter the station. And wasn't I so much freer than any of them--born in England, in modern times--not to mention so much lighter, so much straighter of nose, so much less likely to be mistaken for the ver essence of Blackness itself? What could possibly stop me traveling on?
-- The Narrator (Part Four, Chapter Nine)

Importance: This quote is part of the narrator's thought process when she decides to purposely fail her examinations. extremely significant because it represents an implosion of the outside forces of race and class onto the narrator's life. Prior to this quote, the narrator recognizes exterior factors in her life only subtly, by relating anecdotes with little direct commentary. In this quote, the narrator adapts the complex issues of race and gender into a metaphor about a train. The narrator feels guilty that she benefits from so many social structures that were not in place for other women or even from her own father, who comes from poverty. The narrator begins to see the entrance examination as a mechanism of racism, classicism, and sexism; a device used to control demographic groups. This thought process represents the narrator's extreme but largely unsaid dissatisfaction with social structures.

No one is more ingenious than the poor, wherever you find them. When you are poor every stage has to be thought through. Wealth is the opposite. With wealth you get to be thoughtless.
-- Fern (Part Five, Chapter Three)

Importance: This quote provides another perspective on wealth and a possible motivation for Aimee's behaviors. In fact, most of the character's in the novel adhere to this description -- the wealthier characters hold less regard for the consequences of their actions.

But my point is, the people here are still able to say: 'Of course, a jongo is different from me but I do not have contempt for him.' Under God's eye we have our difference but also our basic equality. In New York I saw low-class people treated in a way I never imagined possible. With total contempt.
-- Hawa's brother (Part Five, Chapter Five)

Importance: This quote illustrates a core difference between African and America social structure. Hawa's brother argues that, although Africans have a more direct and explicit system of set social classes, the prejudices each class possesses toward the others are far fewer than those in America. While America argues that it is socially mobile and does not have set classes—do not title their citizens according to their heritage—they do not conduct themselves with the same base level of empathy and equality that the Africans do.

I waited for whatever cathartic feeling people hope to experience in such places, but I couldn't make myself believe the pain of my tribe was uniquely gathered here, in this place, the pain was too obviously everywhere, this just happened to be where they'd placed the monument.
-- The Narrator (Part Six, Chapter One)

Importance: This quote reveals the narrator's acute awareness of the exterior forces that have influenced her life. Although she does not identify with the prisoners at the monument, she feels that the pain they have experienced is a universal consequence of power in any form. By generalizing the concept of group pain, the narrator emphasizes her cynical attitude towards power structures of any form.

I'd imagined, for example, a whole narrative of friendship and respect between LeGon and the people she worked with, the dancers and the directors, or I'd wanted to believe that friendship and respect could have existed, in the same spirit of childish optimism that makes a little girl want to believe her parents are deeply in love.
-- The Narrator (chapter 427)

Importance: This quote represents the narrator's deep loss of innocence since childhood and her cynical outlook on major themes like race and family structure. The narrator feels that it was impossible for LeGon to be treated in an empathetic and non-racist manner due to the ingrained prejudices of the time period. Significantly, she does not directly criticize this revelation but appears to have accepted ti as fact. In a similar manner, she feels deep resignation over her parents' divorce. Rather than fight against the injustices of society, she has internalized them.

Some people can be bought, some people can smile in the face of other people they do not love, just to gain advantage. But I am not like you.
-- Hawa (Part Seven, Chapter Three)

Importance: This quote, spoken by Hawa, is addressed to both Lamin and the narrator. Both of these characters allow themselves to be controlled by Aimee's wealth and power, representing their respect, or at least acknowledgement, of her power and

privilege. Hawa, however, echoes Tracey because she would rather live independently than acquiesce to a system of other's power, no matter the material gain involved.

From where I stood it was a pose that collapsed many periods in her life into one: mother and lover, big sister, best friend, superstar and diplomat, billionaire and street kid, foolish girl and woman of substance. But why should she get to take everything, have everything, do everything, be everyone, in all places, at all times?
-- The Narrator (Part Six, Chapter Six)

Importance: This quote is a rumination on Aimee's extensive power. The narrator, having already dedicated a decade of her life to Aimee, feels resentful of the space that Aimee occupies compared to hers. Aimee is such a multifaceted, controlling and energetic person that she has completely subsumed the narrator into her life.

But personally I didn't think Aimee was wrong: I remembered my own classrooms, dance classes, playgrounds, youth groups, birthday parties, hen nights, I remember there was always a girl with a secret, with something furtive an broken in her, and walking through the village with Aimee, entering people's homes, shaking their hands, accepting their food and drink, being hugged by their children, I often thought I saw her again, this girl who lives everywhere and at all times in history, who is sweeping the yard or pouring out tea or carrying somebody else's baby on her hip and looking over at you with a secret she can't tell.
-- The Narrator (Part Seven, Chapter Six)

Importance: This quote implicitly references the narrator's own sexual assault and again reinforces her deeply cynical attitude towards society. The narrator feels that women are continually oppressed and this oppression manifests itself universally across all times and places.