Tambourines to Glory Study Guide

Tambourines to Glory by Langston Hughes

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Introduction

Hughes had written a musical play version of *Tambourines to Glory* in 1956, and he changed the story only slightly to create the novel. Several of the novel's thirty-six brief chapters read like a play script. The novel as a whole is noticeably without extended descriptive passages, characters' unspoken thoughts, and other qualities that often distinguish prose fiction from drama.

Author Biography

James Langston Hughes was born on February 1, 1902, in Joplin, Missouri. His unusual middle name had been the birth name of his mother, a teacher. His father was a lawyer and businessman. Hughes grew up mainly in Lawrence, Kansas, a lonely child drawn to reading and writing. His first poem, "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," was published in the June 1921 issue of the magazine *Crisis*, edited by the sociologist and political leader W. E. B. DuBois. It became one of Hughes's best-known and most anthologized poems.

After a year at Columbia University in New York, Hughes took simple jobs, traveled around the world, and continued to publish poems. He returned to the United States in 1924, already recognized as one of the most talented young African American poets in the movement known as the Harlem Renaissance. Hughes thrived in the atmosphere of Harlem, soaking up jazz and blues music, leftist politics, and racial pride. Within the next six years he would graduate from Lincoln University in Pennsylvania and publish two highly regarded collections of poems, *The Weary Blues* (1926) and *Fine Clothes to the Jew* (1927), and a novel, *Not without Laughter* (1930). Through the next twenty-five years Hughes published more poetry, some of it rather radical politically, as well as plays, short stories, essays, and a weekly newspaper column. His writing explored and celebrated the African American experience, often incorporating musical elements and themes.

Throughout this period, Hughes won writing contests and received fellowships and grants to help support his work. Although he was an important and respected writer, Hughes never enjoyed financial security until the late 1940s, when he wrote the lyrics for a successful musical theater production. For the first time, he was able to own his own home. He hoped to repeat that success in 1956 with a new play, *Tambourines to Glory*, which he rewrote and published as a novel in 1958. However, the novel did not sell well and the play lost money.

By the 1960s, with a new Civil Rights movement led by a new generation of men, African Americans regarded Hughes more highly as a historic figure than as a writer of significant new work, although he continued to publish. Hughes died of congestive heart failure on May 22, 1967, in New York City. His last poetry, about civil rights, was published after his death.

Plot Summary

Chapter 1

Tambourines to Glory is divided into thirty-six chapters, each a separate scene with its own title. The first, "Palm Sunday," is the longest at six pages, and it introduces the main characters, the setting, and the idea that triggers the plot. On a Palm Sunday in Harlem, two friends are reminiscing over their younger days when they attended church occasionally. Essie Belle Johnson and her neighbor Laura Reed both grew up in the American South, and came to New York City as young adults, specifically to the African American section called Harlem. Both are about forty, living in one-room kitchenette apartments in a run-down building, and barely getting by on welfare. Essie dreams of having enough money to bring her daughter Marietta up from Virginia to live; Laura thinks only of the next drink, the next bet on the numbers, and the next man. Playfully, they discuss opening a church and getting rich off the collection plate. As they sing a hymn they are uplifted for a moment, and Essie is moved to strengthen her relationship with God.

Chapters 2—5

The next morning, Essie tells Laura that she really intends to start a church. She believes that God will answer their prayers, and that he has already touched her life. Laura is willing, though she sees the church only as a way to get money. They agree that when the weather is warm they will buy a Bible and a tambourine and start praising on the street corner. Laura will preach, Essie will sing, and they will use the tambourine to keep time and to gather collections.

Chapters 6—8

With a tambourine from the Good Will Store, the Reed Sisters, as they call themselves, offer their first worship service at the corner of 126th Street and Lenox. The two dozen people who stop to hear them are moved enough to join in the singing, shout "Amen," and throw some change in the tambourine. On their first night of preaching, the Reed Sisters take in $11.93. Although they had agreed that the first night's collection would go toward purchasing a Bible, Laura takes out almost four dollars for liquor and a bet. Over the next several nights, Laura's habit is to preach, divide the money, and go look for a man or a drink, but Essie stays to talk with the people in the crowd. They think she can help them, and she wonders whether it is true.

Chapter 9

The church is a success. Laura tells the crowds that "since God took my hand, I have not wanted for nothing." The Sisters have been able to pay the rent and eat regular

meals. Laura urges the crowd to put money in the tambourine to help her stay on God's path, and they do. One old woman, Birdie Lee, accepts salvation and takes a turn shaking the tambourine to God's glory. She is so energetic and rhythmic that she draws in more people. Although Laura does not like sharing the spotlight, she sees that letting Birdie Lee stay with them is good for business. Like many chapters, this one is sprinkled with snatches of lyrics from the hymns sung by Essie, Laura, and Birdie Lee.

Chapters 10—13

As autumn begins, Essie, Laura, and Birdie Lee find a three-room apartment to house their church. The first convert in the new location is Chicken Crow-for-Day, a lifelong gambler, drinker and womanizer. His conversion draws others. Soon, Essie has two thousand dollars in the jar where she keeps God's money. She is still uneasy about the church. She can see that she and Laura are doing some real good in the lives of other people, and she herself feels more energetic and engaged than ever before. But she knows that for Laura it is all just a scam. Essie wonders whether they are truly serving God.

Chapters 14—15

Chapters 14 and 15 are entitled "Enter Buddy" and "Enter Marty." Buddy is Big-Eyed Buddy Lomax, who takes Laura out for a drink after services. Buddy is handsome, sophisticated, flashy and young, and Laura is flattered and excited to be seen with him. Before long, Buddy spends most nights with Laura, and has gotten her to go along with a plan to sell tap water as blessed Holy Water from the Holy Land. Marty is a white man who pulls the strings and controls the money behind Buddy's schemes. Essie and Laura will never meet him, but he will do favors for them and look for ways they can help him as well.

Chapters 16—18

Marty gets Essie and Laura an apartment on the ninth floor of a new building overlooking the park, jumping them ahead of all the people on the waiting list. Essie is more uncomfortable than ever with Buddy and Marty in the picture. She refuses to accept any of the proceeds from the holy water, so Laura uses it to buy a Cadillac. Laura is so dazzled by Buddy's skills in bed, and his new ideas for bringing in more money from the church, that she buys him a convertible, caters to his every whim, and pretends not to notice when he spends time with other women.

Chapters 19—20

Almost a year after the church began, it is the largest independent church in Harlem, and has outgrown its quarters. Marty arranges for Laura and Essie to take possession of a condemned theater that could never pass a fire inspection, and the Tambourine

Temple is born. The new church seats a thousand people, and has a marquee where Laura can enjoy seeing her name in lights. Essie has been studying the Bible and reading other religious books. She is a true believer, and she hopes that Laura will start to believe also.

Chapters 21—28

Marietta arrives to live with her mother and Laura. She is sixteen, innocent and lovely, and Buddy is attracted to her immediately. On Marietta's first day in Harlem, Laura catches Buddy kissing her. Marietta is also courted by C. J., a young guitar player from the church, who offers her less excitement but a more solid Christian relationship. Meanwhile, Marty has Laura begin a new practice of calling out "lucky texts" from the Bible, and slyly encouraging the congregation to bet on those numbers during the week. This increases the amount in the collection plate, and is good for Marty's gambling businesses. To keep suspicion off Laura and Buddy, Buddy pretends to be converted during a service, but Essie sees through him. As Laura adds a fur coat and a chauffeur to her lifestyle, she and Essie grow farther apart. Finally, Essie and Marietta move to a small house of their own in the suburbs, coming to town only for services.

Chapters 29—35

Just before a service one night, Laura notices a hundred dollars missing from her purse. She confronts Buddy, who admits without remorse that he has taken it and savagely tells her that she would be too old to hold his interest without her money. Suddenly, Buddy's infidelity and cruelty is too much, and Laura stabs him to death with Essie's pocket knife. When the body is found, Essie is suspected, and Laura joins in accusing her. In jail, Essie sings gospel songs and prays, accepting her situation as punishment for not ridding the church of Laura's corruption. Eventually Birdie Lee testifies to having witnessed the crime, and Laura confesses. Before the police take her away, she moves all her cash into the church bank account.

Chapter 36

With Laura gone, Essie, Marietta, and C. J. will lead the church in a new direction, starting a day care and other new programs to improve the lives of community members. Essie preaches and sings, praising God, and shakes the tambourine to the glory of God.

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary

This short novel tells the story of two very different black women in 1950's Harlem, of the populist church they start, and how their dissimilar views on the role of the church lead to confrontation and, eventually, to murder. Recounted in a series of short, individually titled chapters, the narrative explores themes related to the nature of spirituality, racism, and friendship.

Chapter 1 - *Palm Sunday* - Essie and Laura compare memories of the Palm Sundays, Easters, and church-going habits of their childhoods. Conversation reveals that Laura is large breasted, sexual, sensual, and fond of her liquor, and that Essie is overweight, has a beautiful singing voice, and has a sixteen-year-old daughter whom she has rarely seen but longs to live with. Laura struggles to convince Essie to do something positive with her life, saying "The Lord helps those who help themselves" and suggesting that the two of them start a church like the church a few blocks away which was started by a reformed pimp and is now making a lot of money. Laura suggests Essie can provide the music while she provides inspirational speaking, offering a demonstration of what she might say. This inspires Essie to sing a gospel song, and they persuade themselves and each other that Laura's idea could work. Essie goes on her knees and prays. Laura says amen "with her hand on her empty wine glass."

Chapter 1 Analysis

This chapter introduces and defines the essential differences between the book's two main characters, pleasure-seeking, sensual, good-time girl Laura and reserved, lonely, spiritually searching Essie. The differences between these two vividly portrayed women shape and delineate the book's central conflict, between the quests for earthly gratification and spiritual grace.

The plot arising from this conflict is put in motion by Laura's suggestion that she and Essie start a church, which Laura sees as a way of making money to fulfill her desires and Essie sees as a way of drawing closer to God. This sense of beginning, of an incident initiating action, is reinforced by the setting of this chapter on Palm Sunday, the Sunday before Easter which, according to the Bible, was the day on which Christ entered Jerusalem and set in motion the chain of events that climaxed with his Crucifixion. In this chapter Essie and Laura begin a journey of their own, and it is not a stretch to suggest that Laura ends her journey in the same way as Christ, "crucified" and murdered by earthly tensions and desires. Granted, she is destroyed by her own human failings while Christ is destroyed by the failings of others, but the essential principle is the same. In this context it's important to note that many of the chapter titles in this book, like "Palm Sunday" have dramatic or thematic significance.

The differences between the two main characters also suggest the book's central theme -the self-fueling obsession with pleasure, such as that embodied by Laura, can prevent awareness of opportunities for spiritual growth, such as those experienced by Essie and other characters. Throughout the book, this theme is developed and dramatized. Laura's ever-deepening desires for more money, more booze, and more loving from the men in her life contrast with Essie's deepening relationship with God and the spiritual. The thematic tension arising from this contrast climaxes in Chapter 25, but at this point, the differences between the two are little more than seeds planted in the fertile soil of mutual longing for a better life that will eventually blossom into murderous hatred in Laura and pitying compassion in Essie.

The final image in this chapter is extremely telling; it sums up in vivid terms Laura's essential character. The image portrays her as swearing on a wine glass the way other people, like Essie, might swear on a Bible. The difference is that Laura's "truth, whole truth, and nothing but the truth" is simultaneously drowned and betrayed by the self-absorption, self-destruction, and self-indulgence represented by the wine glass, as opposed to being supported and sustained by the self-effacement, self-sacrifice, and self-respect represented by Essie and her faith.

Chapters 2, 3, 4 and 5

Chapters 2, 3, 4 and 5 Summary

Chapter 2 - *Blue Monday* - The following morning, Laura comes to Essie in search of both coffee and some money to bet on the numbers. Essie tells her she's been thinking about the idea of starting a church, but at first Laura is too busy worrying about where she's going to get some gambling money and wine. When she realizes Essie is serious, Laura tells her they need to scrape some money together for a tambourine and a Bible, go down to a street corner, and start preaching. After she goes out to get dressed, Essie sits for a long time and imagines several things - her life as a preacher, a new life with her daughter, Marietta, and a new place to live. Her thoughts lead her to sing. Laura, on her way out to find someone to buy her some wine, encourages Essie to keep singing. Essie instead falls silent and becomes very still, entering into one of the "pauses" into which she frequently falls.

Chapter 3 - *Visions of a Rock* - Essie tells Laura she found the right Bible to use in their church - large, ornately decorated, and expensive. Laura says when she wins on her numbers they can use the money to buy it, but Essie says she's not going to start the church on profits from gambling, and says she'll take regular payments out of her welfare check. Laura accuses her of being too holy and too self righteous, and then goes out, talking about how she hopes a favorite of her many men friends will visit that night. There follows prose descriptions of Laura's attractiveness and sexuality, the small and crowded condition of the apartment building where she and Essie live, and the way that Essie can hear the children coming home from school. As she listens, Essie reflects upon her memories of her daughter, whom she hasn't seen for four years, and upon her feelings about Laura, whom she thinks lives too fast and too loose a life. As she thinks, she takes out the knife she always carries with her for protection, and cleans her nails. When she's finished, and as she's preparing rice for supper, she thinks about the fact that Laura has several "rocks" to lean on for security - men, the numbers, and liquor among them. Essie then has a vision that, from this point on, the rock in her life is going to be Jesus.

Chapter 4 - *Naturally Weak* - As she's listening to Laura argue with one of her men, and as she contemplates Laura's complicated relationships with all her men, Essie sings a gospel song about a rock upon which she can stand. Laura comes in, complaining that she's worked up an appetite with her man of the moment and that there's no meat to go with the rice. As they're eating, Laura comments that she's weak for "men, wine and something fine"

Chapter 5 - *When Sap Rises* - Some months later, it is the beginning of spring. Laura and Essie agree that when the weather is warm enough, they'll stand on the street corner and begin preaching. They argue over Laura putting a down payment on the Bible out of her winnings on the numbers, and over how much of their first day's takings should go to the Bible. Essie insists that the entire first day's take should go towards the

Bible and Laura wants to save some for some wine. Further angry conversation reveals that Essie is a few years older than Laura, and that Laura believes there are no prohibitions in the Bible for how many times, or with how many people, men and women should make love. At the conclusion of their discussion, Essie goes into another of her pauses. Narration reveals that spring came late, and it was well into June before Laura and Essie went out and started preaching, with a tambourine and a folding stool they picked up at a Good Will store. The day before they go out, Laura urges Essie to keep her knife with her, saying you can never tell when it will come in handy.

Chapters 2, 3, 4 and 5 Analysis

The central narrative action of this section is characterized by Essie's setting in motion the beginnings of the church. It's interesting to note that Laura has the idea, but Essie has the determination, the focus, and the sense of responsibility to make it happen. This suggests that Essie's desire for spiritual fulfillment is a deeper need than Laura's desire for sensual pleasure, making the thematically relevant point that such pleasures are shallow and fleeting, fulfilling the body but leaving the soul untouched.

Chapter 2 contains the first of Essie's "pauses," moments in which she essentially withdraws from the world. It's a defense mechanism she employs whenever she's faced with emotions, actions, situations or relationships with which she's uncomfortable and perhaps introduces a troubling question. Does Essie's faith come from the same desire to escape as her pauses, or does her deepening faith ultimately enable her to confront the realities that seem to make her uncomfortable? An answer might be found in the fact that, later in the book, when she's confronted with devastating emotions (Chapter 35), she doesn't "pause" but instead allows herself to release her grief through weeping. It seems possible that Essie's Palm Sunday-initiated journey is one of moving from using her pauses to keep from dealing with reality and her feelings, through a renewal of faith, towards being able to confront things she's never been able to face before.

There are several elements of foreshadowing in this section. Foremost is the repeated mention of Essie's knife, which plays an essential role in the play's climax. A second piece of foreshadowing occurs in Laura's reference to the "numbers" game she plays, which she continues to play herself throughout the book and which she later brings into the church that she and Essie start. A third piece of foreshadowing is the mention of Marietta, Essie's daughter, who plays an important role in the developing tensions between Laura and Buddy later in the book.

The repeated image of "the rock" is taken from the Bible and from popular Christian spirituality. A "rock" is a term commonly used to describe faith and the church, and was specifically used in the Bible to describe St. Peter, whom Christ described as "the rock" upon which he would build his church. The irony of the Biblical reference is that St. Peter betrayed Christ by denying all knowledge of, and relationship with him; in other words, the rock crumbled. In terms of *Tambourines to Glory*, it's interesting to note a central irony. The rocks upon which Laura bases her life (men, booze and money) crumble beneath her, while the rock upon which Essie bases her life (the church which

she and Laura establish) turns out to be false, held up as it is by Laura's shady dealings with Buddy and other men. Only at the end of the book after Laura has essentially been destroyed and her influence disappears from the church, can Essie's rock truly be the support she's always dreamed it to be. This, in turn, is analogous to St. Peter who finally became the true rock of the church after Christ's death and resurrection.

"Harlem" is the area of New York City that is home to a concentrated population of black people. Often referred to throughout the years as a ghetto, it was a center of both black culture and black poverty, of black hope and black despair. These contrasting connotations provide an important contextual quality for the story. There is the sense that the struggles of Essie and Laura to transcend their lives are, in fact, representative of the struggles of all black people in Harlem and perhaps of all black people in general.

In terms of chapter titles, *Blue Monday* refers to the blues, or a drop in emotional energy that might be natural after the high positive energy of a Palm Sunday. By the same token, *Sap Rises* refers to what happens in trees when spring hits comes- sap, the life's blood of a tree, flows more freely, and new life begins in the same way as new life is beginning for Essie and Laura.

Chapters 6, 7, 8, 9 and 10

Chapters 6, 7, 8, 9 and 10 Summary

Chapter 6 - *The Call* - This chapter recounts what happens the first night that Essie and Laura go out onto the street and start preaching. It begins with the conclusion of Laura's sermon and the passing of the tambourine, which quickly fills with a triumphantly large pile of money. A flashback then recounts that Essie and Laura arrived at their corner an hour later than they'd planned because Laura was busy entertaining a man in her room. Essie goes into one of her pauses while she waits, and is extremely resentful when Laura finally turns up. Laura sees how Essie feels, sings a spiritual to cheer her up, and the two of them go down to their corner. Laura begins to sing, Essie joins in, a street person gets up and starts singing as well, and soon other passers-by are joining in and giving money.

Chapter 7 - *Bible and Bonus* - In the first part of this chapter, Laura and Essie argue over what to do with their takings from the first day. Laura complains that there are too many pennies in the collection, but Essie tells her it's all the Lord's money and that it's all going to go towards paying off the Bible. Laura says she's taking her half and buying herself some wine. As she goes out, Essie reflects upon how Laura will share her wine with anyone and everyone she meets on the streets, how she's able and willing to share everything except men, and how grateful Essie should be to Laura for helping to get her moving in her life again. Narration recounts that Essie finished paying for the Bible and that the clerk at the store gave her a bonus - a wall hanging saying GOD BLESS THIS HOME. Narration also recounts that Essie prays for the preaching to be a success so she can have a nice place to bring Marietta home to, and that she sees her rock as being the street corner where she and Laura work. Finally, narration recounts the tumultuous relationship that Essie and various men have with Laura, Laura's drinking, and Laura's ambition. The chapter closes with dialogue between Laura and Essie in which Laura comments on how peaceful Essie looks when she's just sitting, and that their ministry should be just that - Essie sitting quietly and occasionally singing while Laura does the preaching. Also in this dialogue, Essie encourages Laura to read her Bible, and Laura asks where all the sections about "begat" (an archaic term for making babies) are. This can be understood to be an indication of Laura's desire to find the "sexy" parts of the Bible.

Chapter 8 - *Pointed Questions* - This chapter begins with a description of the activities of Laura and Essie's on their corner - Laura singing and preaching and talking, Essie sitting quietly, occasionally singing, and always watching the people who stop to listen to them. After they've finished for the day, Essie suggests that people are coming because they think she can help them. Laura tells her she has to help herself first, referring to the appetizing smells coming from a restaurant, some wine she wants to buy, and a shirt she wants to buy for her man. She says that if the Lord is taking care of her, she can take care of her man, and adds that Essie needs to be extra careful on her way home to make sure she doesn't get attacked because of all the money she's

carrying. Essie says she's got her knife as always, but then adds that she's worried about the way that Laura is carrying on.

Chapter 9 - *Enter Birdie Lee* - The first scene in this chapter is again Laura and Essie on their street corner, a recounting of Laura's sermon and their collection of money. As the tambourine is being passed, a small elderly woman steps forward and promises that from that night on she's giving her life to Jesus. She takes the tambourine, and sings so well that Essie and others in the crowd are moved to join in, and Laura becomes jealous. She grabs the tambourine out of Birdie Lee's hand and passes it around for the collection, which turns out to be bigger than any she and Essie have had to this point. When she sees how much money Birdie Lee brings in, Laura's resentment vanishes.

Chapter 10 - *The Fix* - One night on the corner, Laura shouts to the passers-by (gamblers, pimps and prostitutes) that they're going to throw their money away anyway, they might as well throw some of it into her tambourine. When they get home, Essie wonders how Laura can have her mind on both God and money at the same time. Laura talks at length about how there's nothing wrong with getting money from anyone, no matter who they are and what they do to get that money. She also talks about the way in which white people are always trying to manage God. When Essie talks about Jesus throwing the money changers out of the temple, Laura says that she's not a money changer, she's a money-getter. Essie comments that she foresees trouble, and goes into one of her pauses. Narration recounts that Laura was challenged by the police to produce her license for street corner preaching. She bribed both a beat officer and a plainclothes detective to pay no attention to her, and for the entire summer, she has kept a steady pattern of giving money to the police so that they will go away. Narration also recounts that Essie worries about what will happen when the cold weather hits, and that Laura makes plans to rent an empty apartment, buy some chairs and a podium, and set up a church.

Chapters 6, 7, 8, 9 and 10 Analysis

This section defines the beginnings of the church, both in terms of its spiritual work and its relationship with the world. The former is dramatized most notably through the appearance of Birdie Lee, a character who appears throughout the book and plays a vital and defining role in its narrative and thematic climax. Specifically, her commitment to Christ and his truth in this section foreshadows the role that commitment plays in Laura's downfall and in her realization of the emptiness of her life. Other ways the church's spiritual work is dramatized include narration of Essie and Laura's activities, their singing and preaching, the street people's responses to them, and Essie's comments on why she believes they're doing what they're doing.

The contrast between these spiritual elements of the story and its more worldly side is vividly portrayed, continuing to develop the central conflict established in Chapter 1. Laura's comments to Essie about wanting and needing to take care of her man, her jealousy of Birdie Lee receiving so much attention, and in particular her bribing of the police all indicate that Laura is already moving further and further away from Essie in

terms of intention and purpose. This development foreshadows further developments as Laura continues to relish the church's earthly successes and Essie continues to deepen her joy in its spiritual rewards.

The term "flashback" (Chapter 6) refers to a device in which narrative of the past interrupts narrative of the present - memory becomes action, as opposed to being spoken of or referred to. Another literary device, foreshadowing, occurs throughout this section, with the references to Essie's knife continuing to foreshadow its later role, and the reference to Laura's being unable to share men foreshadows both Laura's jealousy and resentment which will present themselves later. A third piece of foreshadowing can be found in the "God Bless This Home" plaque Essie receives which points to the moment at which she and Marietta actually do move into the home that Essie has always desired for them both.

A fourth piece of foreshadowing appears in Laura's comment about white people trying to manage God, which foreshadows the way that Buddy, who manipulates Laura, is in turn manipulated by Marty, a white man. At this point, an important piece of thematic subtext, or meaning, becomes apparent. It becomes possible to see that Laura and Essie's struggle for financial and spiritual independence respectively is also a struggle for independence from white oppression. It's interesting to note that Laura, who is much more easily influenced by Marty, via Buddy, than Essie, ends up with both her life and personal integrity destroyed, while Essie, who has remained determinedly independent of both Marty and Buddy, ends up spiritually triumphant. Here again, the book makes the thematically relevant point about the ultimate worth and transcendence of spirituality, as opposed to the negative aspects of physical pleasure which are portrayed as being racially, physically, and spiritually destructive.

The titles of the various chapters in this section are self explanatory, with the possible exception of Chapter 10. The term "fix" is commonly used as a euphemism, or polite term, for "bribe." Titling Chapter 10 "The Fix" therefore describes Laura's activities in bribing the police to not ask her for her license to preach.

Chapters 11, 12 and 13

Chapters 11, 12 and 13 Summary

Chapter 11 - *Ethiopian Eden* - This chapter documents the transformation of the first floor of an old brownstone building from an abandoned apartment into Laura and Essie's church. Narration reveals that, in response to a bribe from Laura and a promise of three months rent in advance, the landlord evicted a family from the southern United States and allowed the church to move in. Narration also recounts that Laura hired an artist to create murals of Biblical stories with a black Jesus, a black Adam and Eve resembling popular celebrities, and a serpent with eyes that sparkle like diamonds. Laura's dialogue in this section is similar to traditional dialogue ascribed to God in the Bible story in Genesis of how the world was created. Narration also recounts that Laura found the artist very attractive, and that Essie forbade any kind of sexual activity in the church, as well as that Laura wants to use some of their income to fund better places for them to live. Essie and Laura argue again over the way that their money should be spent, with Laura saying she's younger and wants better things more than Essie does, and Essie saying that Laura isn't that much younger and shouldn't want better things so much because she's doing God's work. They talk about how pretty the artist's paintings are, with Laura saying the apartment now looks like an Ethiopian Garden of Eden, and that she wants a big beautiful black man to be their minister. Essie says there will be no men ministers in their church. Laura comments that God created men and women both, and refers to the painting of Adam, saying it looks a lot like the famous boxer Joe Louis, and that he looks like "a whole lot of man."

Chapter 12 - *Dyed in the Wool* - On the first Sunday in the new church, Essie and Laura are both very happy singing and preaching with a fervor that neither had ever had before. Narration recounts how an elderly man called Chicken-Crow-For-Day jumps up in the middle of the service, proclaims himself as a dyed-in-the-wool sinner, shouts that he's been washed clean and white by the love of God, and how nobody laughs at him saying that even though he was so dark skinned. He details his sins, shouts in ecstasy, and throws his pistol and knife out the window. This leads Laura to suggest that Essie throw her knife away as well, but Essie appears not to hear. Crow-For-Day continues listing his sins, and Birdie Lee starts echoing him, both talking about how their lives have been transformed by God. Laura sings a rousing gospel hymn, and the congregation joins in with ecstatic shouts of praise.

Chapter 13 - *Likker and Loot* - This chapter consists of an argument between Laura and Essie over what they should do with the two thousand dollars they've accumulated from the money given in church. Essie wants to put it into the bank so the church has a nest egg, but Laura wants to spend it on a nicer place for them each to live. In an attempt to get Essie to change her mind, she refers to Essie's long-held dream of having a nice home for Marietta. At the same time, Essie tries to get Laura to think less about men, the way that she looks, and spending their money on earthly things like houses, "likker and loot." She says Laura should think more of the souls they're saving with their

preaching. Their conversation also reveals their differing opinions about Birdie Lee. Laura is still jealous, while Essie believes that Birdie Lee is doing their ministry good. Finally, Laura's temper snaps and she makes cutting comments about how overweight Essie is. This sends Essie into one of her pauses and Laura into a glass of Scotch and the arms of her latest man.

Chapters 11, 12 and 13 Analysis

The central image of this section, along with a definition of its core conflict, can be found in the title of Chapter 11, *Ethiopian Eden*, and in that chapter's narrative content. In the Bible, the Garden of Eden was a place of purity and joy, a faultless and sinless manifestation of God's love, creativity and grace. For Essie, this is exactly what the new church is, an opportunity to answer God's call, do his true work, and bring to reality what she believes are God-inspired dreams of a good and loving home for herself and Marietta. The Garden of Eden, however, is also a legendary place of temptation, which is what the church becomes for Laura. She sees it as providing increasing opportunities to indulge her cravings for money, booze, and ego boosting - in short, she is tempted in the way Eve was, and ultimately ends up being banished from her "paradise" as Eve was. The image of Eden, therefore, embodies and reinforces the definitions of the play's central conflict, the tension between earthly gratification and spiritual growth, and provides a thematically relevant setting as that conflict develops.

An image within the image, the serpent with the diamond eyes, occurs for the first time here and recurs on two key occasions later in the book. A second image within an image will occur later in the story. It's important to remember that in the Bible, the serpent was the tempter that led Eve to destruction. When faced with temptation, Laura's weakness in her desire for Buddy and her desire to protect herself and lie rather than fact the truth and be honest resonates in this symbolism. In other words, in the same way as the serpent in the real Eden betrays Eve, the metaphorical serpent in the Ethiopian Eden betrays Laura. It's interesting to note that Laura acts like something of a serpent, or tempter, when she tries to manipulate Essie into moving to a bigger apartment by referring to Marietta.

A variation on the pattern of foreshadowing the role of the knife appears here, as Essie refuses to get rid of it. This perhaps adds a layer of meaning to the chapter's title - not only is Crow-For-Day a "dyed in the wool" sinner, but Essie is also "dyed in the wool" when it comes to protecting herself with a knife. "Dyed in the wool" is a phrase used to describe someone stuck in their habits. Once again, the groundwork for Laura's eventual use of the knife to kill Buddy is reinforced, but what's particularly interesting at this point is a new resonance to the knife's symbolic value. By refusing to part with it, Essie is indicating that her faith is still not what she'd like it to be - she doesn't trust enough in God to protect her, so she has to rely on the knife. This reinforces the previously discussed idea that part of her journey throughout the book is a deepening of faith and trust in God, rather than in her pauses and the knife. In other words, the knife is a symbol of Essie's fear and lack of faith, earthly values which by the end of the book she's able to transcend. It's also interesting to note that this same knife is used by Laura

to kill Buddy, and in that context is a symbol of other earthly values, most notably jealousy.

Chapters 14, 15, 16, 17 and 18

Chapters 14, 15, 16, 17 and 18 Summary

Chapter 14 - *Enter Buddy* - Laura is closing up the church after services when an attractive man approaches her and introduces himself as Buddy. He and Laura talk flirtatiously, and at one point discuss that Essie is much more serious about life than Laura. They go out for a night of drinking and more flirting, with narration describing the way in which they both avoid talking about their real ages. Image within image symbolism is used again here in describing that what passes between them at the table has the energy and sparkling glint of the diamond eyes of the serpent in the Adam and Eve mural at the church.

Chapter 15 - *Enter Marty* - As they're lying in bed after a night of loving, Buddy and Laura hatch a plan to sell ordinary tap water as Holy Water from the river Jordan. Narration counterpoints the discussion with sounds from the street - as Laura says if Essie learned about the plan she'd get really upset, there is the sound of screeching tires as someone comes to a sudden, dangerous stop. Laura turns the conversation to her desire for a nice apartment, and Buddy says that Marty, a white friend of his, can help her get exactly the kind of apartment she wants without her having to give him any money. Narration in this section counterpoints the conversation with Laura's sensual thoughts about Buddy's body and her own desire for some sexy nightgowns. At one point Laura asks who Marty is. Buddy tells her Marty is the power behind the throne all over Harlem, making a pun on the use of the word "throne" to describe a toilet and saying that Marty even knows what goes on in Laura's bathroom.

Chapter 16 - *The Devil's Ham* - This chapter reveals that Essie and Laura are about to move into a new apartment. Essie is ecstatic, and is grateful no matter where it came from. Narration reveals that she's aware it came from a shady source (Marty), and tells the story of "the devil's ham," a story from slavery days. Narration recounts the story - a starving slave tells her son never to steal, but when he steals a ham from their master's stores, the slave says thanks to God even though the ham came to them as the result of an act inspired by the devil. Narration also describes Laura's growing resentment of Birdie Lee's growing popularity, Essie's growing sense of peace, and her simultaneously growing resentment of Buddy's increasing presence in Laura's life, which has manifested most recently in the Jordan Water scam described in Chapter 14. Narration reveals that Essie refuses to have anything to do with this scam, to the point where she disappears from the church to go and meditate while the bottles of water are being sold and won't allow any money from their sale to go into the church's general account. Laura takes the money and uses it to buy a new Cadillac.

Chapter 17 - *Lights Out* - Buddy tells Laura several plans that he and Marty have come up with to increase the church's income. He suggests that Laura give clues to potentially winning numbers when she announces Bible verses while preaching, having Marty help the church move into an even bigger space, and having Marty get Laura a recording

contract. He hints that he and Laura should try to manipulate Essie out of the church, but Laura refuses to listen to that idea. Language in this section repeatedly refers to the sensual contrast between the darkness of Buddy's skin and the whiteness of cigarettes and sheets. As they say amen to all the ideas, Buddy and Laura embrace each other, Buddy asks for a Cadillac for himself, he turns out the light over the bed, and they begin to make love.

Chapter 18 - *Stray Cats, Stray Dogs* - Essie and Laura argue over whether Buddy should have a greater role in both the life of their church and their home life. Essie suggests that Buddy convert and join their church. Laura says Buddy would do it if she told him to, but Essie says that the spark to convert has to come from God. She tells stories about how stray cats and dogs she took into her home when she was younger turned out to be dangerous, saying that taking in stray people is no less dangerous. Laura reminds her that their church is all about taking in stray people, giving them a new home and new hope. She also says that Buddy is going to become her business manager, tells Essie to stop picking on him, and says that Essie has been getting arrogant lately.

Chapters 14, 15, 16, 17 and 18 Analysis

This section marks a turning point in the action of the novel, as control over what happens to both Laura and the church eases into the hands Buddy and, more importantly, his white friend Marty. There are several important aspects to this shift in circumstance. The first is the symbolic value of the name "Buddy," a term for friend that has considerable ironic symbolism in that he acts in destructive, manipulative ways that no true friend ever would. Granted, Laura believes him to be her friend, but this only increases the irony.

The second important aspect of this section is the way it marks a shift in focus for Essie. From this moment on, her pauses become more frequent, signifying that she finds more and more about reality difficult to handle. Laura's increasing involvement with Buddy, and Buddy's increasing involvement in the church, including the "River Jordan" scam, are problematic for Essie. The River Jordan is symbolically important because it is the waterway into and out of the Holy Land, and is a symbol in Christianity of the flowing, cleansing power of the Holy Spirit. This means that the selling of ordinary tap water as Jordan water symbolizes the artificiality of the faith Laura in general is selling.

The third important element in this scene is in the foreshadowing of several elements - Buddy's plan to introduce the numbers racket into services at the church, his demands for a Cadillac, and the mention of Buddy's conversion. All are important elements that contribute to the plot later in the book.

The chapter titles in this section are again fairly self explanatory. The title of Chapter 17 *Lights Out* carrying additional symbolic value. In addition to referring to Buddy's actions at the end of the chapter as he and Laura prepare to make love, *Lights Out* also refers to how Laura has begun to descend into a moral and spiritual darkness that gets deeper

and more difficult to oppose as she becomes increasingly involved in the corrupt schemes planned by Buddy and Marty. The irony here is that, in descending into moral darkness, Laura is descending into whiteness, or the control of white people like Marty. This is the fourth important element of this section, as moral darkness is equated with white control over black lives and black souls. This idea is echoed in the repeated use of contrasting white and black imagery - the blackness of Buddy's body contrasted with the whiteness of the sheets, an image developed further when it's remembered that sheets are an enveloping, or wrapping up kind of thing. In this image it's clear that Buddy and Laura, in their blackness, are being swallowed up by whiteness. Their blackness is also contrasted with the whiteness of cigarettes, which in contemporary terms has resonance with cancer and death. The image evokes the idea of black people being destroyed by the cancer of white control.

A fifth important element of this section is the way that the tension between Laura and Essie increases, tension that has been building since Chapter 1 and which is fueled by Buddy for his own ends as he attempts to profit from Laura. Most importantly, this tension will continue to build throughout the book's remaining chapters.

Chapters 19 and 20

Chapters 19 and 20 Summary

Chapter 19 - *God's Marquee* - This chapter takes place a little less than a year after Essie and Laura first set up on their street corner. Buddy makes plans for the church to move into a renovated movie theatre, while Laura makes plans for the way that the church will function in its new home, including plans for where her dressing room is going to be, and for music to play an even bigger role in their services. She also refers to how Birdie Lee is going to get a new set of drums, and comments that she's always running to the bathroom in the middle of services. When Laura complains that Birdie hasn't bought any of the Jordan Water yet, Essie says that Birdie Lee knows what's true and what's not. Narration recounts how Essie and Laura moved their church into the theatre and gave it a new name, "The Reed Sister's [sic] Tambourine Temple." As the move is being completed, Buddy and Laura flirt with each other as a new scarlet curtain is hung as a backdrop for the services. They discuss Laura's new brightly colored robes and that Essie should always wear black or white, depending on whether the service of the day requires her to be serious or pure. Essie comments that she misses the old place. Buddy refers to himself as Adam and to Laura as Eve. This sends Essie into one of her pauses, from which she only emerges when Birdie Lee plays her new drums, leading Essie to come out of her pause and shout "Amen."

Chapter 20 - *Strong Branch* - Narration at the beginning of this chapter tells that Essie and Laura move into a large new apartment, that Buddy frequently spends the night there, and that his favorite thing to do is take a long hot shower in the mornings. Narration also reveals how Essie and Laura spend their evenings after they have finished services - Essie goes to her room to study the Bible and read, while Laura drinks a lot and talks. Narration also reveals that Essie does her best to avoid Laura when she gets into one of her drinking/talking moods, but it isn't always possible. On one occasion, Laura tells a long story about her childhood. First, she says that she was the illegitimate daughter of the high school principal who never allowed her mother to graduate after she got pregnant because he didn't believe school girls having babies was respectable. She then says that her mother had thirteen children, and jokes about how she wanted to get married every time she was drunk. She also talks about being interviewed and photographed for a popular magazine. She says that she's got personality just like her mother, can tell a story well just like her mother, can charm men like her mother, protect herself like her mother, and wants to stay as beautiful as her mother did. She also says that her mother would never have allowed Buddy to stick around as long and take as much control as he has. She concludes by saying that she's the only one of her mother's children to make their life into something, referring to herself as "a strong branch of a bitch." When Laura's finished, she notices Essie's fallen asleep, and drinks a toast to herself in a mirror.

Chapters 19 and 20 Analysis

Each chapter in this section focuses on a different story element. Chapter 19 focuses on moving the plot forward as Laura and Essie's church moves into its new building, and contains some new and important foreshadowing. Specifically, Laura's reference to Birdie Lee's frequent trips to the bathroom is another foreshadowing of the role Birdie plays in the book's climax, while Essie's comments that Birdie knows the truth foreshadows the moment in Chapter 34 when Birdie decides to speak the truth rather than continue to live the lie enforced upon her by Laura. Finally, Buddy's reference to himself and Laura as Adam and Eve symbolizes the way Laura is seduced by temptation, which eventually leads to both Buddy and Laura leaving Paradise in the way Adam and Eve did. Granted, Buddy is killed and Laura is arrested where Adam and Eve were merely banished, but the core principle is the same. It's interesting to note the possibility that on some level Essie might be aware of this aspect to the relationship between Laura and Buddy, an awareness that may be the reason for her latest pause. Yet another interesting piece of foreshadowing arises in the passing mention of Buddy's fondness for showers, which foreshadows poetic narration in Chapter 26 describing the circumstances in which the relationship between Buddy and Laura begins to break down.

Chapter 20, meanwhile, focuses on Laura, with the title "Strong Branch" referring symbolically to her being a "strong branch" of her family tree. The most intriguing element here is the way that the story of the relationship between Laura and her mother parallels and contrasts the relationship between Essie and her daughter Marietta, who is about to enter the story. Both relationships feature strong maternal figures who have a profound influence on the lives of their daughters, but the two sets of influences couldn't be more different. In this chapter, it becomes clear very quickly that the behavior of Laura's mother triggered Laura's own self-destructiveness and self-centeredness. In subsequent chapters it becomes equally clear that Essie's more responsible behavior triggered equally responsible behavior and attitudes in Marietta. In other words, in the contrast between the two relationships, the play's thematic statement about the relative values of spirituality and self-indulgence are dramatized from yet another perspective.

Chapters 21 and 22

Chapters 21 and 22 Summary

Chapter 21 - *Enter Marietta* - Narration reveals that after finishing high school, Essie's daughter, Marietta, moves north to be with her mother. A lengthy narration refers to what "north" meant to black people from the south - freedom to ride the bus anywhere they wanted, being able to shop in the same stores and drink sodas from the same soda fountains, and a place in which black and white young people went to school together.

At the apartment, Laura and Buddy flirt with each other while they're waiting for Essie to come back from the bus depot with Marietta. They say that business at the church is getting better now that they're moved into their new space, and discuss how Essie's getting too holy and that Buddy is the real brains behind the church's success. Buddy asks Laura for money so he can go play poker, saying that Essie has forbidden him to stay over as long as Marietta's there. He makes jokes about how Marietta has been taught about liquor and men, but Laura tells him that black girls raised in the south have been raised right. They discuss whether Marietta will be hungry when she gets to the apartment, and Buddy refers to his own hunger for a large, rare steak. Laura goes out to get dressed, Buddy puts away their liquor, and Marietta arrives. Narration describes her as tiny, delicate, and beautiful.

It's immediately clear that Buddy finds her attractive, as he speaks flatteringly and flirtatiously. When Buddy offers to take Marietta on a quick tour of the neighborhood while they're out getting steaks and other groceries for dinner, both Laura and Essie become aware of his attraction. Laura becomes jealous, and Essie becomes protective. Laura suggests that Marietta should only visit for a short time, but Essie says she wants her daughter nearby permanently, and adds that she asked a respectable young man from the church, CJ, to come by and visit. She also asks Laura to not drink so much and Laura promises to try to behave, but then reminds Essie she's not a saint. Essie says that she's trying to become a better person, reading lots of books on the subject, praying a lot, and studying the Bible. A verse she refers to sounds like a lucky verse to Laura, and while Essie is making plans for establishing a day care center in the church and doing other forms of good, Laura is imagining all the things she can do with all the money she can bring in if she plays the numbers racket as Buddy suggested. She reminds Essie that the education she wants to give Marietta will cost money. Essie says she wants to help other girls get through school, saying goodness is no good unless it's spread around. Laura suggests there are several kinds of goodness and several ways to feel the Holy Spirit, saying that sometimes when she's with Buddy she feels as close to God as when she's singing hymns. This reminds her to wonder where Buddy is and why he's taking so long.

Chapter 22 - *Steak for Dinner* - CJ arrives, and narration reveals he plays guitar alongside Birdie Lee on the drums in the church band. Buddy and Marietta return soon afterwards, and Buddy offers Marietta and CJ some beer. They both refuse, but Buddy

shames CJ into drinking, makes jokes about how his name stands for "Christ Jesus," and plays blues on the guitar as CJ tries to get to know Marietta. Conversation reveals that CJ is studying chemistry and that he wants to study the River Jordan Water to find out what makes it different from ordinary New York water. Buddy advises him to leave the water alone, and then plays the guitar so loudly that Marietta and CJ can't hear each other talk. Essie tells Buddy to be quiet and says dinner will soon be ready. As CJ goes out to wash his hands, Buddy moves closer to Marietta and attempts to seduce her. Laura comments pointedly from the doorway on how he likes his steaks rare and his women tender. When Laura accuses Marietta of not being as innocent as she looks, Marietta protests that she tried to get away but Buddy wouldn't let her. Laura tells her to get away now. As Marietta goes, Laura speaks threateningly to Buddy, saying she didn't yet know a black man who didn't bleed when he was cut. Essie calls everyone to sit down to dinner.

Chapters 21 and 22 Analysis

The previously discussed racial subtext of this book resurfaces at the beginning of Chapter 21, in which the symbolic meaning of moving north is discussed. There is, however, an important irony in this section, in that the freedom spoken of in the narration proves to be a false hope. As has been made clear in the action to this point, white people, as represented by Marty, are just as much in control in the north as they are in the south.

The dominant element in both these chapters is clearly the arrival of Marietta, and particularly her effect on Buddy. As a result of her arrival, Laura's jealousy surfaces, foreshadowing Laura's motive for murdering Buddy in Chapter 29. At this point, the writing develops one of its most obvious metaphors, the vividly portrayed comparison of Marietta with a piece of meat. The writing makes it clear that this is Buddy's attitude long before Laura makes her very pointed comment, but at the end of the chapter, the image is developed further into another piece of foreshadowing of Buddy's murder. In Laura's comment about black men bleeding when cut, the image evolves into Buddy being the piece of meat, victimized by physical violence in the same way as he's about to victimize Marietta with sexual violence.

In the midst of all this tension, the point is quietly made that Essie is continuing to pursue her goal of spiritual fulfillment and enlightenment. This is yet another aspect of the book's thematic point about the relative values of Essie's and Laura's approaches to life - the latter might be more showy and more obvious, but also reaches the goal of self indulgence much more quickly. Essie, by contrast, achieves her spiritual goals much more slowly and methodically. What the book presents here is a classic "tortoise and the hare" scenario - haste brings destruction, while patience brings triumph.

Chapters 23, 24 and 25

Chapters 23, 24 and 25 Summary

Chapter 23 - *Lucky Texts* - Narration at the beginning of this section reveals that Buddy and Laura spend less time at the apartment after Marietta arrived, and that Marietta never feels the excitement in CJ's arms that she felt in Buddy's. Narration also reveals that Marietta joins the choir, and that Laura finally implements Buddy's idea to announce gambling numbers from the stage of the church. She starts giving out numbers and Lucky Texts as part of their services, and collects a quarter for each Lucky Text from each person in the congregation. As she lists several texts, members of the congregation shout out their gratitude and Buddy shouts out that there will probably be some numbers played with those texts the next day. Essie comments that Buddy always takes things the wrong way, but Laura ignores her and introduces the new gospel choir, which comes on and sings about hope for seeing God's blazing glory. Narration comments that spending money on the Lucky Texts was worth every penny for the poor people of Harlem desperate for hope of any kind.

Chapter 24 - *Set to Ascend* - As they're preparing for services one day, Essie and Laura talk about how big the church is getting, that Laura gave Buddy a Cadillac for his birthday, that Laura wants a chauffeur, that Essie is concerned about Laura's spending habits, and how Laura thinks Essie should mind her own business. Laura then tells Essie that Marietta should be sent back south to protect her morals, hinting that she and CJ are doing things they shouldn't. Essie protests that they're good children, but Laura says they're not children at all. She dances to the rollicking gospel music filtering into the dressing room from the church, and compliments herself on how good the music is. When Essie says it's the spirit of God making the music so good, Laura comments that Essie is the true soul of the church while she, herself, is still a sinner. She then reminds Essie to fix her makeup before she goes onstage. CJ and Marietta rush in, asking permission to go out after church for hamburgers. Essie consents, Laura tells them to hurry and get ready to join the choir, and tells CJ she needs a lot of extra excitement in terms of loud "hallelujahs" and "amens." Essie says the true Holy Spirit doesn't need all that excitement, but Laura says that she does, and complains that the drums always stop just before she's about to make her entrance. Essie reminds her about Birdie Lee's weak bladder, Birdie Lee rushes down to use the toilet. Laura urges her to hurry so she can go back up and make noise for Laura's entrance, commenting that she "wants the world to know when Sister Laura Reed arrives" and that it's time to ascend.

Chapter 25 - *One Lost Lamb* - This chapter recounts that Laura convinces Buddy to convert and join the church. At one point he tells her she's being too pushy and holds a fist under her chin to make her quiet. It seems he's joking, but it's also clear he could easily become violent. Narration recounts that Laura tightly managed the evening service where Buddy was to convert, that she wept genuine tears of repentance and wished she could be as good a Christian as Essie, and that she suddenly became aware of the pain and suffering that brought people to her temple of hope. The narration

becomes poetic as Laura raises her hands and sees them as the hands of the people to whom she's preaching, hands that have pushed brooms and mops, mined coal, and cleaned outhouses. Her thoughts are interrupted by Buddy's shouts of ecstasy. Narration reveals that in that moment, Buddy wasn't sure that he was lying anymore, that he actually believed he wanted and needed and desired to be saved. The singing of Laura and the choir becomes more intense, Buddy converts, and narration reveals that the only person who doubted that his desire for Jesus was genuine was Essie. Essie witnessed Buddy's conversion and went into a long pause that lasted from that moment to after everyone in the church had gone home.

Chapters 23, 24 and 25 Analysis

Life at the church takes central focus in this section, which performs the vital purpose of steadily developing both conflict and narrative tension without a great deal of high-tension confrontations, poetic writing, or overt foreshadowing. In short, this section is fairly straightforward storytelling, moving the narrative towards its inevitable climax. The reference to Birdie Lee's weak bladder again foreshadows her appearance in that climax. Laura's implementation of the Lucky Texts illustrates how much further into the Buddy/Marty inspired darkness she's sinking. Essie's lengthy pause again suggests that when she pauses, she's avoiding confrontation with that which is making her uncomfortable.

The one unique element in this section is the development of a conscience in both Laura and Buddy, moments in which it almost becomes possible to believe they might be able to become the kind of human beings they profess to be and which Essie is striving to be. There is, in fact, the sense that Laura has a moment of transcendence, glimpsing the good that she not only could be doing but actually is doing, in spite of her actions being motivated almost entirely by greed. Later action, however, reveals that this moment of awareness is a passing thing, and a foreshadowing of Laura's later guilt-induced penitence.

The title of Chapter 25 is a Biblical reference to Christ as "the Good Shepherd," who takes care of all the lost lambs and brings them to him. It's a phrase commonly used in Christian theology and commentary to describe those, like Buddy, who confess their sins and are "saved." Meanwhile, the term "ascend" has a double meaning here - not only is Laura "ascending" the stairs to take part in church services, but the word also suggests Christ's "ascending" into heaven following His resurrection. In other words, the text here clearly portrays Laura's belief that she is doing heavenly, or godly, work, and should be perceived as such.

Chapters 26 and 27

Chapters 26 and 27 Summary

Chapter 26 - *Moon over Harlem* - Marietta and CJ sit in the moonlight in a park. CJ caresses Marietta's arms, breasts and face, trying to convince her to make love with him. Marietta tells him she won't do it, saying she's been raised to be good and that she loves him. He reacts with surprise, she convinces him it's true, he promises to respect her, she thanks him, and then he vows to beat up Buddy or any other man who tries to touch her.

Chapter 27 - *Shower* - Narration written in language rich with imagery describes the way that Buddy and Laura feel when they see each other coming out of the shower. Laura sees Buddy as hard and strong and sexy, while Buddy sees Laura as being too soft, too sweet, and about to melt like chocolate. Narration in the voice of Laura's thoughts refers to her need for him to be softer and more loving. Dialogue reveals his anger at her when she doesn't throw him a towel after a shower and his rough-edged insistence when he asks for money to go drinking.

Chapters 26 and 27 Analysis

The key element in this brief section is the contrast between the two relationships - between CJ and Marietta, and between Buddy and Laura. The former is just beginning while the latter is coming to an end. The former is characterized by respect and strength of character while the latter is characterized by lust and dissatisfaction. The former relationship moves in the direction of tenderness while the latter moves in the direction of violence. Once again, the play's central thematic contrast between human action governed by spirit and human action governed by physical desires is made poignantly and vividly clear.

The title of Chapter 26 has an interesting symbolic resonance. Given that Harlem is, in many ways, a symbol of ghettoization and despair, the image of moonlight over Harlem combines with the integrity and moral courage displayed by Marietta and eventually CJ to suggest that there is light and hope within that despair.

Chapters 28 and 29

Chapters 28 and 29 Summary

Chapter 28 - *Cross to Bear* - Narration reveals that Essie and Marietta move to a small house in the suburbs Essie rides the subway every day to get to the church, and happily forgets the smell of Laura's liquor. Narration also reveals that Laura misses Essie, that Buddy isn't around as much either, and that she both heard about and saw him with another woman. Laura overhears a conversation between the woman who does her hair and another woman about how handsome men like Buddy are always a "cross to bear," and how Essie is doing the sensible thing by moving out of the heart of the city.

Chapter 29 - *Apple of Evil* - Laura arrives for services, becomes angry when she sees Buddy's car isn't nearby, and becomes even angrier when she hears how happily and how well Birdie Lee is singing. She orders the woman in charge of her robes to take extra good care of her mink coat, saying that if prostitutes can dress well, a minister should have the same right. As Laura gets ready to go upstairs and join the services, Buddy comes in. They argue about why he's late, Buddy talks about how happy Marty is that business with the Lucky Texts is making so much money. He also says that he's upset that Essie doesn't believe he's truly converted, and mentions how happy Laura is that Essie has moved out to the country with Marietta. Laura says that sometimes she finds him disgusting, but he only laughs. He takes a case of Jordan Water upstairs, and as Laura gets dressed in her scarlet robes, Essie comes in. Laura complains about Birdie Lee is taking attention away from her and threatens to ask her to leave. Before Essie can respond, CJ and Marietta come in, apologizing for being late and talking about how they're getting married in the spring. As they go out to join the choir, Essie comments to Laura on rumors she's heard about people using the church as a numbers center, adding that some of the money they're spending on other things could go towards bringing the church up to the standard of the fire regulations. As she searches through her purse, Laura angrily talks about how dodging the regulations with Marty's help made the church's success possible. She's always wanted a good fur coat, and she says that Essie can keep wearing old clothes and keep her knife in the same old pockets if she wants, but that she, Laura, is going to look good.

Laura can't seem to find what she's looking for, explaining to Essie that she always keeps some money (the "apple of evil") in her pocketbook but can't find it. She says again that Essie should dress better in order to create a better impression, and carefully puts everything back in her purse. Becoming quietly angrier, she tells Essie to go upstairs and start her part of the service. When Essie's gone, Laura calls to the woman who helps her with the robes and tells her to get Buddy into the dressing room right away.

Chapters 28 and 29 Analysis

The beginning of this section marks the beginning of the play's climax, establishing a sense of suspense in several ways. The first is by keeping secret for a long time exactly what Laura is looking for, while the second is making clear that her patience with Buddy is coming to an end. Suspense is also developed through the passing reference to Essie's knife, Essie's reference to rumors about the numbers game, and most notably by the way Chapter 28 establishes how uncomfortable Laura is with the amount of time Buddy is spending with other women. All these elements combine to create a powerful sense of wonder about what's going to happen next - specifically, when the volatile Laura's temper is going to explode. This is a following-through of the previously discussed foreshadowing describing her jealousy, and the building tension surrounding the question of how she's going to react serve to increase the suspense even more. The writing contributes to the suspense, with the sense of building pressure reinforced by the way the writing becomes more economical.

Meanwhile, passing references to Marty reinforce the previously discussed idea that in spite of her intention to create more independence for herself, Laura is still under the control of white men. This idea is reinforced by Essie's reference to the numbers game, an indication of how Laura's control over the entire situation is slipping away from her. It's possible that Essie's comments increase the pressure Laura feels as a result of her deteriorating relationship with Buddy, adding fuel to the jealous and fearful fire that lights the diamond eyes of the serpent into murderous, lying anger.

The title of Chapter 28 refers to Christ's crucifixion - specifically, the way he was made to carry the Cross to which he was to be nailed. The term has come to imply suffering, difficulties arising from the attitudes and/or actions of other people. Its use here reinforces the previously discussed idea that Laura is on a similar journey to that of Christ - having entered into a period of celebration, as Christ did on Palm Sunday, Laura is now entering a period of suffering, as Christ did when condemned to death. Buddy is her cross to bear, making her journey towards redemption more difficult. It's interesting to note that Laura is Essie's cross to bear. Throughout the novel she has made Essie's journey towards spiritual fulfillment increasingly difficult, and in its final few sections is about to make it even more so.

The title of Chapter 29 refers to the Garden of Eden, the apple of knowledge Eve consumed after being tempted by the serpent. The symbol here is that Laura has consumed, and been consumed by, the temptation offered by Buddy and Marty's ideas for the church. In other words, Eve's apple tempted her to knowledge, while Laura's apple tempts her to money.

Chapters 30, 31 and 32

Chapters 30, 31 and 32 Summary

Chapter 30 - *Rascal of God* - Alone with her thoughts, Laura reflects on how she's caught between Essie and Buddy - one too holy, the other not holy enough. Buddy comes in, and Laura asks whether he took a hundred dollar bill out of her pocketbook. He admits he did, she accuses him of spending it on his "bitch," he tells her to watch her language, and then explains that the "bitch" is actually a talented singer whom Marty is bankrolling in the belief that she'll have a great career. Laura speaks threateningly about the singer, but when Buddy speaks crudely about how young the singer is, Laura becomes very calm, and says she's going to put her pocketbook in Essie's coat pocket to keep it safe. Narration describes how her hand lingers in the pocket as Laura wonders quietly about why it's impossible for a man to be a good man even when he's being treated like a good man. Buddy speaks threateningly to her, saying that if she wants to keep him around she's got to put more money into him, reminding her that he's as much a part of the whole operation as she is, and that he's attracting young women to the church, and that she's always going to be attracted to him. She allows him to kiss her, and without actually saying the words, narration recounts how she stabs him in the back with the knife taken from Essie's coat pocket.

At that moment, Birdie Lee, again suffering from her weak bladder, comes in to use to the toilet. She sees what Laura's done, runs into the toilet, and locks the door. Laura shouts at her to keep quiet forever about what she's seen. Birdie Lee comes back out and promises to say nothing. Laura sends her into the church, ordering her to give her a big drum roll on her entrance. After Birdie runs out, Laura retrieves her pocketbook from Essie's coat, and follows her.

Chapter 31 - *Everlasting Arm* - At the conclusion of the service, Laura offers a prayer of thanks and begins the distribution and sale of the Jordan Water. Essie leaves the service as she always has at this point, dissociating herself as always from the water's fakery. As the water is being sold Laura calls out for testimonies about how people have been saved by Christ. Birdie Lee calls out from behind the drums and begins to speak. As she does, Laura sends Marietta to fetch Essie so she can speak as well. As Birdie Lee talks about how she allowed an innocent man to go to jail for a crime committed by a man she loved, narration refers to how "a serpent with a diamond in its head whispered to Laura." Birdie finishes her story and, looking straight at Laura, sings a song about how she's going to tell the truth until the day she dies. As she sings, Marietta screams from downstairs for Laura. Laura turns the service over to Crow-For-Day and goes to see what Marietta wants. Narration reveals that if anyone had been listening closely, they'd have heard how the music wasn't able to cover up Laura's screams of pretend anguish as she accuses Essie of murdering Buddy.

Chapter 32 - *Judas in Scarlet* - Narration reveals Laura deliberately keeps herself clear of Buddy's blood as she kneels by his body, shouts for the police, and screams that

Essie killed him. It becomes clear that Laura is aware Marietta is nearby as she refers to "evidence" of Essie's guilt, particularly the blood on her robes, which Essie says got there when she picked him up to see if he was all right. Laura also mentions how much Essie hated Buddy and that she's always carried a knife. Essie reassures Marietta that everything will be all right as two policemen come in. Laura accuses Essie of murdering Buddy and sobs dramatically. The police take Essie out as music continues in the church.

Chapters 30, 31 and 32 Analysis

This chapter contains the book's climax, the killing of Buddy and Laura's framing of Essie for murder. On a technical level, the previously discussed sense of suspense develops significantly and cleverly as the writing makes it clear what Laura is doing without ever actually stating it. At the same time, all the foreshadowing of Essie's knife, Birdie Lee's weak bladder and Laura's jealousy pays off as all three elements play key roles in shaping this, the highest point of emotion, confrontation, and thematic significance. On a thematic level, Laura shows she has given in completely and utterly to earthly passions - in killing Buddy and in framing Essie for the murder, she is dominated more than ever by the emotional, the self-centered, and the self indulgent, all of which are represented and embodied by Buddy. In her act of physical and spiritual violence, she reveals how thoroughly she has been corrupted. What's interesting is that in destroying Laura, Buddy has essentially destroyed himself.

Another piece of foreshadowing followed through in this section is the reference to the diamond-eyed serpent, which up to now had been a symbol of lust and desire but which at this point represents the self-serving self-protectiveness that led Cain, son of Adam and Eve in the Bible, to deny killing his brother Abel. In other words, the serpent that betrayed Eve, betrayed her son in the same way as Laura betrays the woman who helped her, sustained her, and enabled her to have the life she always desired. Herein can be found the explanation for the title of Chapter 32, *Judas in Scarlet* - Essie is betrayed by Laura in the same way as Christ was betrayed by Judas to the authorities,

In terms of the titles of the other chapters, *Rascal of God* can be seen as referring to Buddy and Laura, both of whom have behaved like rascals with less than full honesty, responsibility or integrity. *Everlasting Arm*, meanwhile, refers to Birdie Lee's determination to tell the truth for the rest of her life. The phrase is a lyric in Crow-For-Day's song, referring to the everlasting support in the arm of God and might also be seen as the arm holding the sword of judgment over Laura's head.

Chapters 33, 34 and 35

Chapters 33, 34 and 35 Summary

Chapter 33 - *Watch With Me* - Narration reveals how Essie's faith in God sustains her in her prison cell, comparing her fear to Christ's fear in the Garden of Gethsemane the night before his crucifixion, and also comparing the way Laura denied her and their friendship to the way Christ was denied by Saint Peter. Essie's thoughts refer to her belief that she should have stood up for what she believed to be right much sooner, gotten rid of Buddy and stopped Laura from being so free and ostentatious with money. Interspersed throughout this chapter are quotes from various Easter hymns referring to Christ's pain and crucifixion.

Chapter 34 - *One of the Least* - Marietta visits Essie in prison. Essie says she never wanted Marietta to see her in a place like this, but Marietta tells her that everything is going to be all right because Birdie Lee told the police that she saw Laura kill Buddy. She tells Essie that Birdie Lee has come to see her, and has brought a lawyer. Essie says she wants to see them both, Marietta goes out to get the lawyer, and Birdie Lee comes in, referring to a Bible verse in which Christ referred to the need for generosity and recalling how generous Essie was to her when they first met. She refers to another Bible verse in which Christ comments that "inasmuch as you have done it to the least of these you have done it to me." It's clear that she sees what Essie did for her as a Christ-like act and that in testifying against Laura she's returning the favor.

Chapter 35 - *As In a Dream* - Essie reads her bible in her prison cell as Laura is brought in and locked up. Laura apologizes, confesses to killing Buddy, and asks for forgiveness. Essie tells her that in spite of everything, Laura has been her friend, and that she'll make sure Laura gets a lawyer. Laura tells her several lawyers have already called, thinking she's got money, but then says that she took all the money she had hidden away and put it into the church's account, saying she wants to appear before the judge as poor as she did on the day they started. She says she's got nothing now but Jesus. Narration reveals that Laura is locked in a cell at the far end of the corridor from Essie, and that they're so far away from each other that Laura can't hear Essie weeping bitterly.

Chapters 33, 34 and 35 Analysis

This section is rich in Biblical references that reinforce the idea that both Laura and Essie, in their individual ways, are both undergoing similar journeys to the journey undertaken by Christ. The title of Chapter 33 reinforces this idea, with its reference to a line from the Bible in which Christ, alone with his sleeping disciples on the night before the crucifixion, asks whether anyone will stay awake and "watch with him" through the night. Abandoned by everyone, even those he believed loved him most, at the moment

of his greatest need, the suggestion is that Essie is in the same situation, betrayed and abandoned by those whom she trusted and loved.

The title of Chapter 34, as mentioned in the summary, is another Biblical reference, referring to the Christ-like attribute of being generous to those less fortunate. While clearly a comment on Essie's constant compassion towards Birdie Lee, and Birdie Lee's own determination to continue being an "everlasting arm" and act with compassion towards Essie, this reference is also a foreshadowing of Essie's own compassion when it comes to Laura. It's in this moment that Essie's Christ-like journey is complete. After passing through a kind of crucifixion and death, she is resurrected into the kind of spiritual and emotional peace that she has sought for so long. As previously mentioned, it is significant that at the moment when Essie is confronted with the most intense emotion she has ever faced, her pain at what's happened to Laura, Essie doesn't go into a pause. She confronts her feelings, releasing her grief and pain and compassion for her friend in her tears.

The Christ-like aspect to Laura's journey is perhaps less apparent at this point, but it must be remembered that according to the Bible, Christ is God incarnated as human in order to experience and understand humanity in all its frailty. Laura, for her part, has had a similar experience, albeit from a different perspective. She has, throughout the book, experienced every human desire, every human indulgence, every human fear, and every human need in a similar way to how Christ experienced humanity, full blooded, emotional, and volatile. Also as previously mentioned, she is tortured and spiritually killed as a consequence of her experience of humanity in the same way as Christ was tortured and physically killed by his. This makes Laura's confession and repentance a parallel to Christ's resurrection, rising to new life in God. Thus, in the final moments of Chapter 35, both Essie and Laura complete their journeys in the way Christ completed his, all three having begun in hope, gone through hell, and emerged triumphant and transcendent.

Chapter 36

Chapter 36 Summary

Chapter 36 - *Jubilation* - This chapter begins with the words of a joyful hymn of praise to God, followed by an ecstatic prayer from Essie thanking God for all he has done and will do. Her speech reveals her plans for turning a basement room in the church into a nursery and for buying a building next door and turning it into a recreation center for teenagers. She also reveals that Marietta is going to be a youth minister while she attends school to study nursing, and that Marietta and CJ are engaged. She calls Marietta forward, and Marietta speaks humbly and with gratitude about how God has blessed her and CJ. This leads Essie into a final hymn of jubilation, urging the congregation to shake their tambourines to the glory of God.

Chapter 36 Analysis

It's interesting to note that at no point in this chapter is Laura mentioned. It's unclear, therefore, what has happened to her. Has she been executed? Imprisoned? Tried? Acquitted? While it's impossible to know, part of the book's thematic point is that it doesn't HAVE to be known. It is enough to understand that she has repented, having let go of the earthly desires represented by Buddy and Marty that destroyed her. In other words, it doesn't matter what's happened to her body because her soul, her black soul, has been saved from earthly, white corruption. Herein lies the book's ultimate thematic statement: glory in God, connection in the Holy Spirit and transcendence of earthly suffering like Jesus', all lead to joy. This is dramatized and symbolized by the way Essie comes into her own in this final chapter, living the glory of God and finally becoming able to live the kind of life and do the kind of work she's always dreamed of. This particularly manifests in the way the tambourines, and the money they collect, are used in the way she's always dreamed they could, would, and should be used. In spite of having been corrupted by Buddy and Marty and Laura, the integrity of the tambourines is restored by Essie's faith, which is itself restored when she sees the tambourines used properly fulfilling the word and work of God. In the book's final moments, it becomes clear that the tambourine is, in fact, one of its most potent symbols, representing the ultimate transcendent power of faith and God's love.

Characters

Sister Birdie Lee

Birdie Lee is a "little old lady" who is called to God during one of the Reed Sisters' street corner services. She had followed God in her younger days, but since then she "backslid, backslid, backslid." Now she has determined to stay on the path of righteousness. As is typical in this kind of service, Birdie Lee shouts out her story, or "testifies," right in the middle of Laura's preaching. She grabs the tambourine, sings a song of praise, and shakes the tambourine "so well that the whole corner started to rock and sway, feet to patting, hands to clapping." From that moment, she is a member of the church, and from that moment Laura resents her, because Laura perceives Birdie Lee as competition. Birdie Lee is a faithful member of the church, helping with the scrubbing when they move the church into the apartment, and joining in the rejoicing when Crow-for-Day is converted. In the end, her weak bladder proves Laura's undoing, when a need to rush to the toilet puts Birdie Lee in a position to witness Buddy's murder. Birdie Lee saves Essie from prison and makes up for all her past sins by promising to testify once more and tell what she saw.

C. J.

C. J. is a young Christian boy who plays guitar in the band at the Tambourine Temple. He is in his first year at City College, studying chemistry, and is sweet and polite if a little dull. When Marietta comes to Harlem, he is the natural one to court her. As the two fall in love, C. J. struggles, with Marietta's firm insistence, to keep his lust under control. By the end of the novel, the two are engaged to be married.

Chicken Crow-for-Day

Chicken Crow-for-Day□tall, thin, and aged sixty-five□is the first person converted after the Reed Sisters open their church indoors. By his own account, he has been a life-long sinner, who spent his time drinking, gambling and chasing women. Dramatically, as he announces his salvation before a crowd, he pulls a pistol and a knife out of his pockets and flings them through the window into the street. With the support of the congregation, he apparently does change his life. Crow-for-Day stays with the church as it grows, eventually earning the titles "Brother" and "Deacon."

Essie Belle Johnson

Essie Belle Johnson is an unemployed woman of about forty, living on welfare in Harlem. She came up North from Richmond, Virginia, years ago, and has been trying ever since to get together enough money to bring her daughter to live with her. Essie does not have much education or many skills, and she is passive, prone to sitting and

staring at the wall in "long, long, very long pauses," but she has a beautiful singing voice. When she and her friend Laura start to joke about starting a church as a way to raise money, Essie thinks and prays about it and makes a sincere connection with God. She and Laura do form a church, with Laura preaching and Essie singing, and they make a success of it. Even before she decided to pray, Essie lived a quiet life. She did not drink or gamble or chase men. Her only close tie was with Laura, who lived quite a different life. For five years, Essie and Laura have been neighbors and friends, sharing scraps of food and looking after each other in spite of their differences. Now that they are the Reed Sisters, partners in the church, Essie is less comfortable with Laura's sins. She prays that Laura will find God, and she scolds Laura about her behavior, but she does not try to exert any control over Laura's actions. Essie refuses to take any of the money from the phony Holy Water, but neither does she speak against the scheme.

The church grows larger and more successful, and Essie sees this as a sign that her work is blessed by God. With every hymn she sings, her faith grows deeper. She turns her energy inward, into private study of the Bible and of religious writers, and withdraws emotionally from Laura. After Buddy starts sleeping at the new apartment with Laura, and Marietta arrives, the distance between the women increases until Essie and Marietta take a small house outside Harlem. It is not until Laura kills Buddy and frames Essie for the crime that Essie realizes her passiveness has worked against God's plans for her. "I should have riz in my wrath and cleaned house," she thinks, instead of "just setting doing nothing but accepting what comes, receiving the Lord's blessing whilst the eagle foulest His nest." When Essie is released from jail and returns to the church without Laura, she is a new woman, full of energy and plans for the future.

Marietta Johnson

Marietta is Essie's daughter. She has grown up in Richmond, Virginia, in the home of her grandmother, and has not lived with her mother for more than two of her sixteen years. Essie's greatest wish has been to get enough money together to bring Marietta to live with her, and after about a year of running the church she is able to send for her. In June of the second summer, after school gets out, Marietta comes North on the Greyhound Bus, as so many people have before her. She is polite, well-mannered, fresh and pretty; to Buddy she looks like "a tiny, a well-formed, a golden-skinned, a delicate-featured, a doll-handed, a pretty-as-a-picture, a blossoming peaches-and-cream of a girl." Buddy tries to move in on Marietta on her first day in Harlem, but Essie thinks the Christian boy C. J. is a better match for her. Although she found Buddy's passion exciting, Marietta agrees. Marietta and C. J. begin a swift but chaste courtship, and by the final chapter Marietta is already planning to begin nursing studies in the fall and to marry C. J.

Buddy Lomax

"Big-Eyed" Buddy Lomax is the latest in Laura's string of young men. One night after services, Buddy walks down the church aisle and asks Laura to go out for a drink. He

takes her to the Roma Gardens, which seems very elegant to Laura, and he is handsome, "a six-foot, a tower-tall, a brownskin, a large-featured, a big-handed, handsome lighthouse-grinning chocolate boy of a man." Like Laura, he likes flashy cars and clothes, he likes to drink and gamble, and he is as charming as he is dishonest. Together the two scheme to get more money from the church through the sale of phony Holy Water and through announcing "lucky texts" from the Bible that are really coded messages for playing the numbers. Only Laura believes that Buddy really loves her and is faithful to her; others can see that he is casually sexy and sexist in his dealings with her, crudely praising her large breasts and using her for sex when there are no younger women available. To keep his favor, Laura buys Buddy new clothes and a car, and gives him cash that he spends on gambling and on entertaining other women. When Marietta comes to town, Buddy makes a play for her with Laura and Essie in the next room, and Laura sees him kissing Marietta. Soon afterwards, Buddy steals a hundred dollars from Laura's purse. She confronts him in the basement of the church, and he cruelly reminds her of the difference in their ages, and admits that he stays with her only because of her money. When he pulls her in for a kiss, Laura stabs him to death with Essie's knife.

Marty

Marty is the white man behind Buddy's schemes, the man who can pull strings and get things done. He is able to get an apartment for Essie and Laura, putting them ahead of people who have been waiting longer. He arranges for them to take possession of the fire-trap theater with no inspections or licenses. Later, when his illegal numbers operation is doing poorly in Harlem, he improves his business by having Laura announce "lucky texts" during church services, encouraging the congregation to bet on the numbers in Bible verses. Marty is never seen or heard from directly in the novel□all of his communications come through Buddy.

Laura Reed

Laura Reed is Essie Belle Johnson's best friend, another woman from the South now living on welfare in Harlem. She is a little younger than Essie, with a good figure and a taste for life. She likes to drink and to gamble, and she has a string of men who pass through her life but do not stay. Laura does not really seem happy with her fast life, sharing her money and her body with men so that she will not be alone, but she does not dare slow down. When the women come up with the idea of starting a church, it is just a money-making idea for Laura. Her mother and her bootlegging stepfather did not raise her to be religious, and she does not believe in God now. But she sees no harm in taking money from those who do believe, if they are willing to give it, and she soon finds that the faithful are indeed willing to put their coins in the tambourine for a chance to be closer to God. After the first street corner service, when the women collect $11.93, Laura goes back on her promise to put all of the money toward a Bible; she takes out $3.93 for her "earthly needs"□some liquor and a bet.

The two women run the church as partners, although their motivations and their methods are as different as they could be. Laura is an effective preacher, but she does not mean anything she says from the pulpit. She uses her share of the money from the collections for gambling, clothes, high-priced liquor, a fur coat, a Cadillac, a chauffeur, and presents for Buddy, while Essie sets hers aside for the Lord's work. Laura is eager to help Buddy by selling fake Holy Water and calling out the numbers of "lucky texts" to support the gamblers. She enjoys seeing her name in lights on the new church marquee, and has a wardrobe of shiny robes to wear while she is preaching. She loves having Buddy in her bed, and tries to believe she can trust him. Greedy for more money, she sees only Essie and Buddy standing in her way: "One's *too* honest, and the other one ain't honest enough." Laura murders Buddy and tries to frame Essie for the crime. In the end, she is in jail, alone again, out of money, and still wanting a drink.

Themes

Faith and Religion

The central tension in *Tambourines to Glory* is between Essie, who sincerely believes in God and wants to help people find peace through faith, and Laura, who sees the church simply as a way to get money. The difference originates in their childhood: Essie's mother insisted Essie attend church every week when she was a girl, but Laura "seldom went . . . and never regular." Although neither woman has been to church in years, Essie has happy memories, especially of the music. And when the two are joking about starting a church and Laura sings, "Precious Lord, take my hand, lead me on," she starts to mean it. From the first, Essie and Laura expect different things from the church, and each finds what she is looking for. As the narrator explains, "Playing and singing and talking were the only things about their corner that interested Laura, but these were the least that interested Essie." Essie wants to help the people who stop to hear them; Laura wants to help only herself. Essie finds a new engagement with her own life□a community, and a way to bring her daughter to live with her. Laura gets money, a fur coat, a Cadillac, and a handsome young man.

The question that repeatedly troubles Essie is one of the central questions of the novel: "Is we doing right?" Is the Tambourine Temple a force for good, although it originated as a scam? Does it matter that Laura's motives, at least, are impure? The fact is, the church really is helping people change their lives. Chicken Crow-for-Day does stop his "Sniffing after women, tailing after sin, gambling on green tables," and Birdie Lee gives up drinking. Essie finds the energy to get off her chair and shake off her lethargy. Marietta and C. J.. will have a safe and comfortable□if a little dull□life together. And the Tambourine Temple, with Laura out of the picture, is going to open a day care center, a clubhouse, and a playground. Amused as he was by charlatan preachers who made themselves wealthy, Hughes could not ignore the contributions the churches made to their communities, and the changes a faith in God made in people's lives. Ultimately, perhaps it does not matter whether the preacher is sincere or even whether God really exists, especially for people with so little else to believe in. As the narrator explains about one of the Reed Sisters' songs, "For many there living in the tenements of Harlem, to believe in such wonder was worth every penny the tambourines collected."

But in the end, Good triumphs over Evil. Laura and Buddy are punished for their faithlessness. Buddy loses his life. Laura loses her self-respect, her freedom, her Cadillac, and her partnership and friendship with Essie. Although Laura also gives up all of her cash, putting it into the bank in the church's name before her arrest, by the end of the novel Laura has still not turned from her wicked ways. Her final two lines are "I have nothing now, Essie, but Jesus□since He comes free" and "Maybe somebody'll buy me a drink." Essie accepts her hours in jail and her suffering as penalty for her gravest error: failing to drive Laura and Buddy from the church. As she says, "Religion has got no business being made into a gyp game."

Ghetto Life

Just as *Tambourines to Glory* is a humorous but largely accurate portrayal of the storefront churches of Harlem in the middle of the twentieth century, it also illuminates other aspects of lower-class Harlem life. One of the great contributions of Hughes and other writers of the Harlem Renaissance was that their work portrayed the daily lives of African Americans, realistically and respectfully, in ways that American literature had not done previously. The lives of the lower class were especially invisible to the reading public. While many knew about the Harlem Renaissance, about the intellectual life of Harlem, and about the exciting night life available to wealthier whites and blacks, the underclass was nearly invisible. Hughes knew that Laura and Essie and Buddy and Birdie Lee were not the people who would buy his novel; his intention was to tell their stories to people who knew only one side of Harlem.

The building where Essie and Laura live is a large apartment building with "a courtyard full of beer cans and sacks of garbage." The building has been carved up into a surprising number of tiny "kitchenette" units, each with a gas burner and a sink. Essie and Laura, who dream of one day having a two- or three-room apartment, have welfare as their only source of income, but everyone else who lives on their floor has a job. Laura has held several jobs in the past, but has not been able to hold one very long. The available work does not pay well, since it has not enabled even the working residents to find better housing. The women are often hungry. Even Essie, who does not waste money on gambling or alcohol, often has no more than rice to eat if Laura cannot contribute a bit of meat or vegetables to the pot.

Almost all of the characters in the novel and in the neighborhood are African American, but there are white man behind the scenes making profits. (It has been estimated that in 1929, eighty percent of Harlem's businesses were owned by whites.) Laura urges passers-by to put some of their money in the tambourine rather than giving it to "the paddys [Irishmen] that owns these Harlem guzzle joints," or, in other words, "instead of it all going right to the white man." White police officers, apartment managers, and fire inspectors will take bribes to overlook violations or grant favors. The mysterious Marty, another white man, is in charge of the numbers racket in the neighborhood. Men like Buddy can earn a decent living working for the gambling or sex trades, but all assume and accept that white men are in charge.

This Harlem is populated with "pimps and gamblers and whores," and although she has never had any trouble, Essie carries a knife for protection. But there is also the young artist who paints beautiful murals on the church walls, and C. J., who attends college and plays the guitar. Hughes is not presenting Harlem as bad or dangerous, but as a place pulsing with life of all sorts, with "Auto horns . . . honking, taxis flying by, arc lights blinking, people passing up and down the street, restaurants and bars full." Even for the poor it is an exciting, teeming city□"Mighty magnet of the colored race . . . Harlem, a chocolate ice cream cone in New York's white napkin."

Style

Scenic Method

Tambourines to Glory is a short novel□barely one hundred pages in the *Collected Works of Langston Hughes* edition□yet it is divided into thirty-six chapters, several just over a page long. Most of the chapters are self-contained, small glimpses into brief moments in the lives of the characters. Chapter 1, for example, is six pages long and takes about fifteen minutes to read (if one sings along with the characters); it describes a conversation that would last about fifteen minutes in "real life." The only background information, after a two-sentence exposition that identifies the day as Palm Sunday, is provided by the characters as they speak to each other. Throughout the novel, there is little explanation or reflection from the narrator, only the briefest description of settings, and no extended internal monologues. Sixteen chapters begin abruptly with one of the characters speaking or singing; twenty-two end this way. A few chapters begin with brief tag lines that identify the passing of time ("The next morning," "The winter prospered them," "When June came"), but changes in Essie's and Laura's fortunes and behavior are communicated directly by their speaking or their actions.

The novelist Henry James (1843—1916) frequently structured his novels this way, and Hughes may have been inspired by his work. More likely, the structure of *Tambourines to Glory* arises from the fact that it was a play before it was a novel. Although the play version comprises only thirteen scenes, the novel echoes the play's reliance on foregrounded speech and action, rather than on reflection or exposition, to carry the plot and theme forward.

Foreshadowing

Foreshadowing is a device used by authors to suggest or prepare for something that is going to happen later. *Tambourines to Glory* uses foreshadowing to set up Laura's killing of Buddy, so that when it happens it feels like a natural outcome of what has come before, instead of a sudden unconnected idea that has sprung into the author's mind. In Chapter 3, Hughes makes the first mention of Essie's knife, "a long pearl-handled knife" with "a little button on its side" that releases a "thin sharp blade." Essie uses the knife to clean her fingernails, and returns it to her coat pocket, where she keeps it for protection. As the narrator confirms, there is really no other reason for Essie to carry this knife, and the scene of Essie cleaning her fingernails has no particular purpose in the action of the novel, other than to introduce the idea of the knife.

Throughout the rest of the novel, there are occasional references to the knife in the pocket, or to the fact that, although Laura buys a new fur coat, Essie is content with her heavy old black one. In Chapter 29, just before Laura kills Buddy, Laura and Essie quarrel over Laura's fur coat. Laura says, "You keep on wearing your old rags if you want to, with that same old Lenox Avenue knife of yours in that ragged pocket. What are

you protecting?" With the knife in Essie's pocket fresh in the reader's mind, Hughes is able to make the murder scene move swiftly, without interrupting it to explain what Laura is taking out of Essie's coat. Although some of the early references to the knife are worked in somewhat awkwardly, the excitement and drama Hughes achieves in the climactic scene through foreshadowing make up for that awkwardness.

Dialect and Diction

An important element that adds to the liveliness of *Tambourines to Glory* is Hughes's use of various African American urban dialects of the 1950s. Contemporary reviewers of the work almost universally praised Hughes's success at capturing the sounds of real speech. The novel, having originated as a play, contains a great deal of dialogue (Chapters 1 and 15, for example, are almost entirely conversations between two characters, with little exposition or description), and each character's way of speaking reflects something of her background or personality. Essie and Laura retain a trace of the South in their informal speech, as when Essie says, "Somehow I kinder like to keep my head clear," and Laura replies, "Woman, you sound right simple." Their speech is full of colorful metaphors, such as the many ways Laura describes her various lovers ("Old racoon," "chocolate boy with the coconut eyes," "my king-size Hershey bar"). And it is by their grammar and by their pronunciation of "likker" and "lemme" and "gonna," as much as by their clothing and their living situations, that Hughes flags them as members of the socioeconomic underclass.

As Essie begins to study the Bible, she begins to drop phrases from it into her speech. When Laura is preaching, she speaks with a distinct rhythm and repetition: "Turn! I say turn! Turn your steps toward God this evening, join up with us, and stand up for Jesus on this corner. . . . Talk, speak, shout, declare your determination. Who will stand up and testify for Him?" Buddy's speech marks him as a young man who knows the latest style, when he calls Laura "baby" or "sugar" or "kiddo," when he talks about money as "a few Abe Lincolns and some tens" or "fifty simoleons" and when he describes that "sharp little chick" Marietta as "stacked, solid, neat-all-reet, copasetic, baby!" Marietta, newly arrived from the South, speaks in a way that is slightly more formal, more quiet, more shy than the others' speech patterns.

Hughes was primarily a poet, and he had spent decades developing his instinct for the sound of language. Additionally, he had written the play form of the story first, so many of the lines spoken by the characters were crafted to be said aloud. None of the differences in speech are pointed out by the narrator or commented upon by the characters. Just as he trusts the reader to somehow hear the lyrics of the hymns sung throughout the novel, Hughes trusts the reader to hear and interpret the different ways of speaking.

Historical Context

The Great Migration

Between about 1890 and 1930, some two-and-a-half million African Americans moved from the American South to cities in the North, in what came to be called the Great Migration. Although the slaves had been freed, there were still few opportunities in the South for good jobs and property ownership, because the economy in the South was faltering, and because Jim Crow laws in the South increasingly made life difficult for African Americans. Legally and culturally, African Americans could be and were denied the vote, employment, housing, and other basic needs. In the large cities of the North, especially along the East Coast, factories needed workers. The largest migration occurred during World War I and afterward, when factories needed workers to replace those who had gone to fight, European immigration was low, and there was an increased need for the manufacture of certain wartime goods. More than a half million African Americans, like the *Tambourines to Glory* characters Essie Belle Johnson and Laura Reed, left their homes in the South and came North. Though they typically received only the lowest, unskilled jobs, and although they earned less than white employees doing the same work, many of these African American migrants still found greater opportunity than they had left behind in the South. But families like Essie's were common. Adults frequently left children behind with relatives, hoping that in a few months or years they would earn enough to bring their children North with them. For single women, especially, this dream was in many cases never realized, as hoped-for jobs did not materialize.

In New York City, as in other cities and as with other immigrant groups, African Americans congregated in one section. Harlem, on the northern end of the island of Manhattan, became a magnet for migrating African Americans. It then grew into a center for African American thought and culture in the 1920s and 1930s. The mingling of rural Southern people and Northern people used to big cities, and the interplay of their various artistic, social, and religious traditions, produced a rich and lively new culture. The movement known as the Harlem Renaissance fed Langston Hughes and other important writers, musicians and artists, who for the first time portrayed urban black life realistically and sympathetically.

The Storefront Church

A direct result of the Great Migration was the creation in Harlem and other Northern cities of a large number of "storefront" churches. Most of the African Americans who came to Harlem were from small rural towns where they were well-known, and where their church membership gave them a standing in the community that their working lives did not. Coming to large cities, they found large impersonal churches with hundreds of members, preachers who led a different kind of service than they were used to, and different kinds of music. Additionally, these churches tended not to be located in the very

poorest neighborhoods, where new immigrants settled. Some immigrants delighted in the size and the prestige of the modern urban churches, but many felt lost and unwelcome.

To meet their spiritual needs, African Americans began to form loosely organized churches in local neighborhoods, often led by semi-literate preachers (with or without any ministerial training), holding meetings on street corners or in abandoned or condemned stores or houses. These churches were Christian, but typically not affiliated with any major denomination. Preachers spoke in stark terms about heaven and hell, about sin and redemption, and led the singing of spirituals and old folk songs that the rural congregation knew. Members of the congregation felt free to shout out or start a song, as they had done at home. During the 1920s, nearly two-thirds of the churches in Harlem were of the storefront variety. Only a few eventually outgrew their storefront locations and moved to larger venues, or built permanent structures. Because new churches were forming all the time, whenever a new mass of uneducated poor people moved into a neighborhood, it was relatively easy for charlatans to establish churches for the sole purpose of making money. Like Essie and Laura, they may have had no experience and questionable motives; also like Essie and Laura, they may have done some real good in peoples' lives.

Gospel Music

The music called "gospel music" was a particular form created and perfected by African Americans during the 1920s, a fusion of the blues and old-style Christian hymns. This music was frequently sung in urban churches, giving a new city edge to the traditional hymns that people had been singing down South. The song that Essie and Laura sing in Chapter 1, for example, "Precious Lord, Take My Hand," was a popular song in this tradition, written by Thomas A. Dorsey. Hughes loved this kind of music, wrote reviews and columns about it, and incorporated it into several plays and into this novel. Over the years, gospel music remained an important part of worship, but also became a style of music for commercial entertainment. Flashily dressed singers performed gospel music in theaters and clubs. Hughes noticed with amusement that many gospel singers were more interested in money than in the Lord. And many of them did make good money.

In Chapter 10, Laura comments that, "These gospel songs is about the only thing the white folks ain't latched onto yet. But they will, as soon as they find out there's dough in 'em." She mentions Mahalia Jackson (c. 1911—1972), a famous gospel singer with a remarkable voice. Jackson herself had become a commercial success, equally well-known among black and white people through radio and television appearances, but her faith would not allow her to sing hymns in nightclubs. (Laura quotes her in Chapter 21: "You know what Mahalia Jackson says: 'The church will be here when the night clubs are gone.'") Instead, Jackson sang a concert in New York's Carnegie Hall and other respectable venues, and released record albums, thus helping make gospel music available to a larger and more diverse audience without compromising her convictions.

Critical Overview

Compared with the poetry, little critical attention has been paid to Hughes's prose, and the novel *Tambourines to Glory* has yet to receive serious critical analysis. In fact, several reference works completely overlook *Tambourines to Glory*, listing *Not without Laughter* (1930) as Hughes's only novel. But, because of Hughes's importance, the novel was widely, if not always favorably, reviewed upon publication in the most important periodicals of the day.

Most critics admired the novel's humor and liveliness, and were captivated by the author's obvious affection for his characters. In the *Saturday Review*, Richard Gehman wrote that the novel "develops with a natural, effortless simplicity and an unassuming authority," and that it "is full of vitality, earthiness, joy, unashamed religious feeling, and humorous perspective." Arna Bontemps, in a review for the *New York Herald Tribune*, called the writing "as ribald, as effortless, and on the surface as artless as a folk ballad," and commented on the "fondness and humor" with which Hughes created his characters. Reviewers were nearly universal in feeling that even though Essie and Laura and Buddy made mistakes and caused some mischief, it was impossible in the end not to like them.

Even the most favorable reviews considered the novel only a slight work. Critics who found weaknesses in the novel generally faulted the plot itself, especially the violent ending. In the *New York Times Book Review*, Gilbert Millstein acknowledged "the consistently high quality of Hughes's production over the years," but described *Tambourines to Glory* as a "minor effort . . . with an industriously contrived climax." LeRoi Jones (now Amiri Baraka), himself a well-regarded African American writer, was much harsher in his *Jazz Review* article, describing the novel's "horribly inept plot."

For readers of all colors in the 1950s, novels by African American writers or featuring African American characters were something of a novelty. A few of the reviews by white writers are interesting now, more than fifty years after they were written, because of the dated language and ideas they express, even as they praise *Tambourines to Glory*. Marion Turner Clarke, for example, writing in the *Baltimore Evening Sun*, admired the novel as "rough and unvarnished but pulsing with the life of a vigorous race." Marty Sullivan, in the *Fort Wayne News Sentinel*, called the novel a "blessed exception" to a trend toward didacticism in novels with African American characters, and also finds it "a fine look into the colorful, earthy and endlessly inventive Negro speech."

When *Tambourines to Glory* was reissued in 2001 in Volume 4 of *The Collected Works of Langston Hughes*, critics again had an opportunity to consider the long-neglected novel, which had gone out of print. Reviewing the volume for the *Journal of Modern Literature*, Roland L. Williams Jr. finds more to praise in Hughes's intentions "to honor and hearten blacks" than he does in the actual writing. Still, he admires the novel's presentation of an important period in history, and assures readers that "they will come to dig the roots and branches of black music."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2

Critical Essay #1

Bily teaches English at Adrian College in Adrian, Michigan. In this essay, Bily examines Hughes's novel and an earlier poem through a Marxist lens.

Essie Belle Johnson, one of the main characters of Langston Hughes's novel *Tambourines to Glory*, is numb. Her only goal since she arrived in the North has been to get enough money for a two- or three-room apartment so she can bring her daughter to live with her. After more than a dozen years, however, she has only a one-room kitchenette in the Rabbit Warren, a building of tiny one-room units housing as many as three or four people each. The view out her window is of "a courtyard full of beer cans and sacks of garbage." There is no child care for these crowded families; children coming home from school entertain themselves until their parents come home from work. But paying rent on this awful place takes most of Essie's monthly check, so that she has a hard time getting food. She and Laura pool their resources when they can, but in Chapter 4 they have nothing but a pot of rice for dinner, as neither of them can come up with a bit of meat or even some gravy for flavoring. Essie spends a lot of her time sitting, her mind "kind of empty" in one of her "long, long, very long pauses." Essie has given up on trying to find a good job, and lives off welfare, but it was not always this way. She tells her friend Laura Reed, "It ain't easy to get ahold of money. I've tried. Lord knows I've tried to get ahead." As a poor, African American, overweight, under-educated woman in the 1950s, Essie does not have much chance of improving her situation. She is resigned to her fate.

Laura has more energy, but she does not see herself as a contributor, or even a potential contributor, to society. Her relief investigator wonders why she cannot hold a job, but Laura thinks of the welfare check as "white folks' money" and sees no reason why she should work for it if she can get the same amount without working. She has dreams of accumulating cars and furs, but she has no vision of herself doing satisfying or important work. Like Essie, Laura does not have many options. Her most marketable asset is her body□the curvy figure and large breasts with which she can attract a man. Once her beauty is gone, she will have no way to escape her situation. Essie and Laura are the only two people on their floor who do not have jobs to go to, but their lack of industriousness is obviously not the only reason they do not have decent housing□apparently, even many hard-working people cannot find anything better than the "Rabbit Warren." As Laura reminds Essie, no one can get an apartment in Harlem "unless you got enough money to pay under the table."

Essie and Laura, ground down by their poverty, are sad at times, and they dream of better days, but they are never angry. Why not? In a wealthy industrialized nation that produces millionaires and mansions, why should there be people who cannot earn a fair wage and live in a decent home? Essie believes she simply "was borned to bad luck." Where did she get the idea that she cannot change her life?

In the nineteenth century, the philosopher and economist Karl Marx asked similar questions. He wondered why poor people around the world□who outnumber wealthy

people by far—did not join together in revolution to make their lives better. Why would thousands of factory workers settle for low wages when a few corporate heads were earning millions from the labor of the many? Capitalist societies, Marx argued, drove people to compete with each other instead of helping each other, and to seek out material goods that are not useful except as signs of status, instead of using surplus money to support others who need it. In the *Communist Manifesto* (1848), he and economist Friedrich Engels predicted that eventually the working classes would seize control, abolish private property, and distribute wealth evenly and fairly.

According to Marxist theory, lower-class people are trained to accept belief systems, called ideologies, that keep them apart from each other and kept them in the lower class. Why do relatively low-income Americans fight against relatively low-income Iraqis, instead of joining together to seize wealth from the people who control it? Because they have accepted an ideology called nationalism that teaches them that their primary loyalty is to their country, not to others in their social class. Why do many poor people accept their poverty instead of challenging the system that keeps them poor? Because they have accepted another ideology—religion—that teaches them that God is in control, and that their reward will come later, when they reach Heaven. In a work called *Critique of the Hegelian Philosophy of Right* (1844), Marx famously called religion the "opiate of the masses." He meant that religion worked like the drug opium, keeping all who used it calm and unquestioning.

Marx's ideas were argued about and expanded on over the next century, and formed the basis for the socialist government of the former Soviet Union. Hughes considered and reconsidered these ideas throughout his long writing career, and often explored the connections between racism and class conflict in his work. In the 1930s, much of Hughes's writing took a strident political tone, as in his 1932 poem "Goodbye Christ," published in the labor journal *The Negro Worker*. In this poem, perhaps his most controversial, the speaker tells Jesus Christ that although "You did all right in your day, I reckon," he has outlasted his usefulness and should exit the stage. They have "sold [Jesus] to too many," and "ain't no good no more." In this period, Hughes was more outraged than amused by those he saw as phony preachers using religion to become wealthy or famous. He believed they were complicit in keeping poor believers poor and quiet. The poem's speaker lists several specific offenders:

And please take Saint Ghandi [sic] with you when you go

And Saint Pope Pius

And Saint Aimee McPherson

And big black Saint Becton

Of the Consecrated Dime.

The poem suggests a replacement for Jesus, "a new guy with no religion at all": "Marx Communist Lenin Peasant Stalin Worker ME."

These first four historical figures were examples for Hughes of how ideology can be misused. Mohandas Gandhi, the leader in the 1930s and 1940s of the independence movement in India, organized nonviolent acts of civil disobedience by Indian peasants. Pope Pius XI, head of the Roman Catholic Church from 1922 to 1939, opposed labor movements and communism. Aimee Semple McPherson, an evangelical preacher in the 1920s, founded the Church of the Four Square Gospel and became a millionaire before financial and sexual scandals eroded her following. And George Wilson Becton was the founder of a church in Harlem, the World's Gospel Feast, which asked members for donations of "consecrated dimes." By linking these four, the angry speaker of *Goodbye Christ* presents them as equally harmful.

Some twenty-five years later, Hughes's ideas about religion and Marxism had undergone change. He came to admire Gandhi and supported his efforts in the early 1940s, and he became less admiring of Stalin and the Soviet Union. But even though Hughes's answers were becoming more moderate, he could still be seen wrestling with some of the old questions. In *Tambourines to Glory*, Laura refers to two of the names on Hughes's list when she and Essie first think about starting a church: "Remember Elder Becton? Remember that white woman back in depression days, Aimee Semple McPherson, what put herself on some wings and opened up a temple and made a million dollars?" By 1958, when both Becton and Semple were long dead, Hughes's opinion of their sanctity had not changed, but he was able now to treat their deceptions with humor instead of pure anger. For Laura, of course, Becton and McPherson are good examples□of how to fleece poor believers.

Marxist theory would say that *Tambourines to Glory* presents a society that has unevenly distributed its material goods and the means to acquire them. In the beginning, Laura and Essie have so accepted their lower-class status that they do not try very hard to move up. Later, Essie and Laura and Buddy improve their status through varying degrees of underhandedness, but there simply are not many other options open to them. For example, no matter how successful they become, they could never get an apartment without the support of Marty, "The fixer, the man behind the men *behind* the men." The economic system is not set up to fairly distribute housing.

Laura demonstrates Marx's idea that a capitalist economy teaches people to value the wrong things. Laura does not care about helping the members of her church. Capitalism teaches competitiveness, a "me first" way of dealing with other people. As Laura says to Essie, who wants to stay after services and talk to the people, "You've done helped yourself. You might *can* help them. . . . but why bother?" Laura has no qualms about taking nickels and dimes from people who can scarcely afford to give them. She does not want a more just world, or a better life for everyone□she wants a fur coat, a Cadillac, and a chauffeur. None of these things has what Marxists call a "use value"; that is, they do not have any real purpose. A worn black coat is just as warm as a fur, and a smaller car (or the bus) would get Laura where she needed to go. Essie's plain black robes serve her just as well as Essie's colorful satin robes with contrasting trim. The things Laura has been trained to want have only "sign value," or the power to impress other people. Laura's wasteful spending is an example of conspicuous consumption.

Essie demonstrates some qualities that Marxists would admire. She is not greedy or competitive. She thinks that "maybe that is the way to help ourselves by helping others." She never takes ownership of the money she takes in from the church, but thinks of it as God's, and she lends it freely to Birdie Lee when Birdie Lee needs to get a tooth pulled. Essie will not take any of the profit from the fake Holy Water. But Essie does not challenge the way things are. She does not wonder why God would set up a system that dooms millions of people to starvation while others feast. She does not encourage her followers to take political action to try to change the structure of society. What would happen if the thousand members of the Tambourine Temple spent an hour a week converging on City Hall, or the White House, instead of gathering to sing and pray? Essie accepts basic inequalities, and uses her resources to make small improvements within the existing structures.

Hughes never gave up on his idea that some form of a socialist economy would be more just than capitalism. Ultimately, *Tambourines to Glory* condemns the unequal distribution of power, material goods and hope that capitalism fosters. But what Hughes acknowledges in *Tambourines to Glory* is that, while religion may in fact be an "opiate for the masses," the churches often do work that no other institution will do. With Laura out of the picture, Essie will use the Tambourine Temple's money to provide day care for working mothers, a clubhouse, and a playground. Marietta will help care for the sick. True, in a just society, day care and health care would already exist for everyone who needed it. But in the meantime, in an unjust capitalist society, a church whose leader has a social conscience can stand as an oasis of equality and compassion.

Source: Cynthia Bily, Critical Essay on *Tambourines to Glory*, in *Novels for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2005.

Critical Essay #2

Hart is a freelance writer and author of several books. In this essay, Hart examines the significance of the metaphor of the tambourine in Hughes's Tambourines to Glory*.*

In Langston Hughes's *Tambourines to Glory*, the tambourine is used as a major metaphor in the story. The metaphor starts with the realization of the double use of the tambourine. First, the musical instrument is used as an inexpensive and simple accompaniment to street-corner singing, a way to help attract a crowd and keep that crowd involved. But once the crowd is roused, the tambourine then takes on a different meaning as it is turned upside down and passed around much like a beggar's bowl, into which donations are dropped and then carried away. This is the beginning of the metaphor, but it goes a lot deeper when one realizes the similarities between the tambourine's two different sides and the two main female characters of this story.

Essie and Laura are women on the edge. They live in tight quarters on a tight budget. And when a brilliant idea about an easy way of making money crosses Laura's mind, she quickly convinces Essie that it could be their ticket out of poverty. "Say, Essie, why don't you and me start a church." Essie can sing and Laura knows how to preach. What more could they need? And with this, the two women, whom Hughes patiently describes as two different sides of a similar coin, set off to convert their neighborhood. Their motives may have been somewhat related to each other at the beginning of their venture but as the story develops, it is their expanding differences that stretch them far apart, inevitably forcing their connection to snap.

Essie is a pious woman, innocent and full of love. And when she sings, people stop to listen and eventually join in. Essie is the musical side of the tambourine. Her rhythm is smooth and steady. And the songs she sings are soothing and uplifting. She makes the people around her want to forget their troubles, turn their hearts to God, and believe. Sinners repent, and the psychologically wounded begin to heal. As musical as Essie is, she is like the tambourine in another way too. She needs to be played. She sits all day, alone in her apartment, doing nothing to better herself. She is lonesome but does nothing to ease that pain. She misses her daughter, but does not work toward bringing her child to her. She just sits in a corner and collects dust. Without Laura prompting her, like someone gently beating a hand against the skin of the tambourine, no one would hear Essie's music. Nothing new would happen in Essie's life. Someone needs to pick her up, turn her around, and pump the music out of her.

Laura is the motivator. "You God's handmaiden," Essie tells Laura, "even if you do not always act like a holy maiden do." But Laura is also the open, cupped hand. No matter what she does, she is always asking someone to help her. It is not that she is incapable of taking care of herself, but she is better at prompting others to nourish her. She eats at Essie's house. She sleeps with men who buy her presents. And when she begins to preach, it is not redemption of lost souls that she is seeking. She preaches to make people believe that in giving her money they will be saved. Laura is manipulative and uncaring and hollow. Whereas Essie is open and honest, Laura always has a scheme.

Laura is the tambourine turned on its head. People look at the tambourine, and they see an instrument of music, so they do not question the emptiness of the "bowl" formed by the underside of the tambourine. They listen to Laura and think they are hearing the music of God talking to them. In gratitude for inspiring them, they dig into their pockets when Laura passes through the crowd with her concave tambourine, and they do their best to fill it up. At first, only nickels and dimes drop into the tambourine. But as time goes by, that tambourine's appetite increases. The more Laura gets, the more she wants. There is one big difference, however, between a real tambourine and Laura. Whereas the real tambourine has a finite capacity, Laura's greed is endless.

The title of Hughes's novel uses the plural form of the word *tambourine* despite the fact that the main characters of this story own only one tambourine. They start out with one tambourine and one bible. So why does Hughes use the plural form? What other tambourine is he referring to? Maybe he uses the concept of more than one tambourine to exemplify the differences in the two main characters, anticipating the eventual split between Essie and Laura at the end of the novel. And if this is so, then his meaning of *glory* more than likely reflects two different definitions.

Essie is one type of tambourine, and because her tambourine differs from Laura's, the version of glory that she represents is most likely defined in different terms. Glory for Essie implies beauty and grandeur. And Essie does exemplify both. Her beauty reigns best when one looks inside of her. She gets caught up with Laura's ideas of starting a church not for the money but rather for the peace of mind, the inspiration, and the passion of doing good works. She does not deny herself the rewards of her trade, but she puts aside most of it with an eye to sharing the benefits with those who need it the most. "This is the Lord's money," Essie tells Laura. And as the narrator relates: "Essie did not think it [the money] belonged to her. Essie thought it ought to go in some way to the works of God." She uses the money to enhance the church, enlarging it so more people can come. She wants to add a nursery or pre-school and a medical clinic. Essie's glory is the beneficial side of pride□a confidence that she can do good.

Laura's glory is something else. It is more along the lines of credit and fame. She could care less about anyone else's pain or conversion, unless, of course, it means more profit. She buys sparkling things that make her stand out in a crowd, boasting that she has done well for herself. She takes on a young, flashy lover for the same reason. Laura's glory is all wrapped up in her pride. Hers is a superficial glory. It does not feed her soul, but rather threatens to destroy her.

Laura's jealousy and greed have taken control of her. "I wish Essie would get holy enough or lazy enough or something to quit my Temple," Laura thinks to herself near the end of the story. "All they [the congregation] have to do is see her up there, and they feel happy." Essie is getting in the way of Laura's money-making scheme: "But look at the money I would make without her." These sentiments that come out of Laura sum up Hughes's intent for writing this novel. The empty tambourine, the one turned upside down, will always be empty, no matter how many times it is filled up with coins. The instrument was made to create music not to collect funds. Just as, in Hughes's vision, the instrument of the mind, body, and soul was made to create goodness and

compassion. Essie's dreams were answered, and the answers fulfilled her. She wanted to do something worthwhile with her life. She also wanted the means of bringing her daughter back to her. She took advantage of Laura's ideas and impetus to manifest her dreams. And she was duly rewarded. But she never stopped making music. She enjoyed singing, but the singing was not an end in itself. The singing was an expression of her love and compassion for the people around her. In helping others, she helped herself.

Laura, on the other hand, represents for Hughes all the things that are wrong in a community. Laura is a charlatan and a leech. She has an insatiable hunger for material things. Her goals are ambiguous, and therefore she can never reach them. She wants money, but how much money will ever be enough? Even Laura refers to money as the "apple of evil," at one point, as if she recognizes to some degree that money will eventually be the cause of her being kicked out of paradise. But she does not pay any attention to her own thoughts. Instead, she tells Essie to don the fancy white robe Laura has bought for her. "Just being robed in goodness," she tells Essie, "is not enough for the type of folks we attract. They like color, glitter, something to look at." But of course, Laura is dead wrong. Her values are all mixed up. The riches that the congregation is looking for has very little to do with money and glitter. But Laura lives too close to the surface to understand that. She flits from thought to thought without taking the time to meditate on any one of them. She complains that all that Essie does is sit, exhibiting a passiveness for which Laura is incapable. While Essie sits, Laura schemes. And it is during this quiet time that Essie reaches something so deep inside of her that it connects her to all the people who come to the church. Essie touches the essence of humanity, and it makes her real. So when she sings with that tambourine in her hand, the people not only hear the music, they also feel it.

At the climax, Laura puts on her scarlet robe. And as she stabs her boyfriend in the back, Hughes writes: "Her scarlet robe swept upward like velvet wings." Then he adds: "Laura's fists went up into the air and their fingers opened like two frightening claws." Through these two descriptive phrases, should any reader be left that does not quite grasp what Laura has become, Hughes creates the image of a fallen angel. After her hideous crime, Laura ascends to the altar, and the Tambourine Choir (yes, the tambourines are now multiplied) joins her in a song that contains the lines: "I'm going to lay down my soul / At the foot of the cross, / Yes, and tell my Jesus / Just what sin has cost . . ." This is Laura's last assault on the church she has helped to create. For she sings words that have, for her, no meaning. She has just killed a man and is about to send her best friend to jail for the crime. She is an empty tambourine, indeed.

Then, in the final chapters, one of the congregation saves Essie's life, just as Essie had saved hers. "Oh, if I had just brought my tambourine," Birdie Lee says at the prison, "I would shake it here in jail to God's glory, to you, Sister Essie, who by your goodness lifted me up out of the muck and mire of Harlem and put my feet on the rock of grace." And that, by Hughes's account, is what the tambourine is really meant for. It is to be played for God's glory, a glory that he uses Essie to elucidate. The final song that Hughes ends this novel with begins: "If you've got a tambourine, / Shake it to the glory of God!" And that is just what Essie did.

Source: Joyce Hart, Critical Essay on *Tambourines to Glory*, in *Novels for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2005.

Adaptations

The novel *Tambourines to Glory* was adapted by Hughes from his own musical play of the same title, with songs by Jobe Huntley. It was produced in New York in 1963, and is available in *Five Plays by Langston Hughes*, Indiana University Press, 1963.

Music from the play was recorded in 1958 on *Tambourines to Glory: Gospel Songs by Langston Hughes and Jobe Huntley*, performed by the Porter Singers. The original recording was Folkways album FG 03538. Still in the Folkways archives, it can be ordered as a custom CD from Smithsonian Folkways Recordings.

Topics for Further Study

Research the career of the gospel singer Mahalia Jackson. In what ways is she a role model for Essie? What does Laura admire about her?

How important is race to *Tambourines to Glory*? How would the story be different if all of the characters were white, or Latino, or if people of different ethnic groups lived in the neighborhood?

Why does the trick with the Holy Water from the Jordan River work? People living in Harlem must know that these two women would have no way of actually obtaining water from Jordan. What makes them believe the words on the bottles?

In what ways are the challenges faced by Essie and Laura, living in New York City after growing up in the South, like those faced by any other immigrants (for example, like people who came to New York from Puerto Rico or from China)? In what ways are they different?

Research the economic opportunities for under-educated poor people today. What kinds of jobs are available for people with a high school or less level of education? What kinds of financial aid are available for higher education? What kinds of housing are available for someone working a minimum-wage job? What industries and businesses are located in big cities? Are poor people better off today than they were in 1958?

Would *Tambourines to Glory* make a good movie? What changes in the story would have to be made in order to make the story appealing to today's audiences? Who would you cast in the leading roles?

Compare and Contrast

1950s: African Americans are still moving from the rural South to big cities in the North, hoping for good jobs and equal opportunity. Segregation, racism and a weak economy hinder many of their efforts.

2000s: The Great Migration is over, and is reversing. Since the 1960s, many African Americans, especially from the middle class, have left the North and moved to large cities in the South.

1950s: Harlem is in economic decline as middle-class African Americans move out, leaving only the poor behind. Half of all housing units are unsound.

2000s: Harlem is gradually being gentrified as middle- and upper-class African Americans return. They are buying and fixing up formerly run-down homes, causing housing prices to rise dramatically. Former President Bill Clinton opens an office in Harlem, and wealthy black business owners are opening businesses there.

1950s: Public schools in the South are segregated, by law and by custom. Many black students attend all-black schools, even after a 1954 Supreme Court decision rules that separate schools are inherently unequal.

2000s: Public schools across the United States are by law open to all students regardless of race or creed, but schools in many large cities are segregated by socioeconomic class because middle-class families have left the cities or can afford to send their children to private schools.

1950s: Public transportation in the Northern United States is more integrated than in the Southern states. After 1955, interstate trains and buses are forbidden by law to segregate their passengers. Boycotts in Montgomery, Alabama, and Tallahassee, Florida, force the integration of local public transportation in 1956.

2000s: Interstate bus travel tends to be segregated by socioeconomic class, with only poorer people and young people choosing bus travel. Within New York City, public buses, subways, and commuter trains are used by a wide variety of people from different races, religions, and social classes.

What Do I Read Next?

The first volume of Hughes's autobiography, *The Big Sea* (1940), covers approximately the first thirty years of his life, including his early encounters with salvation and African American churches.

Hughes is best known as a poet, and *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes* (1994), running more than seven hundred pages, shows the depth and range of his poetic talents. The poem "Tambourines" is similar to the song Essie sings at the end of the novel.

Tambourines to Glory has sometimes been compared to *Elmer Gantry* (1927), a novel by Sinclair Lewis about a phony preacher who comes to lead a large church in the Midwest. The tone of Lewis's novel is somber and judgmental, without Hughes's humor and musicality.

One Way to Heaven (1931), by Countee Cullen, another novel about life in Harlem, examines the tensions between lower-class and middle-class African American society.

All God's Chillun Got Wings (1924) is a play about racial prejudice in Harlem. Written by Eugene O'Neill, a white playwright, the play shows the struggles facing a white woman who marries a black man.

Canaan Land: A Religious History of African Americans (2001), by Albert J. Raboteau, describes urban storefront churches and how they grew out of the "Great Migration," while providing a context within the larger story of religious tradition.

Further Study

Emanuel, James, *Langston Hughes*, Twayne, 1967.

The first book-length study of Hughes and his work, this volume offers a solid introduction to the writer's major themes, although it focuses on the poetry more than on the prose and mentions *Tambourines to Glory* only in passing. It includes a chronology of important dates and an annotated bibliography.

Hughes, Langston, and Milton Meltzer, *A Pictorial History of the Negro in America*, Crown, 1956.

Hughes wrote the text to accompany an extensive collection of photographs, cartoons, graphic art, and other illustrations accumulated by Meltzer. The book is arranged chronologically, beginning with the slave trade, and includes several illustrations from Harlem and the Harlem Renaissance.

Miller, R. Baxter, *Langston Hughes and Gwendolyn Brooks: A Reference Guide*, G. K. Hall, 1978.

The half of this book concerning Hughes includes a critical overview that covers responses to all of Hughes's writings, as well as a comprehensive annotated listing of major reviews and criticism published between 1924 and 1977.

Ostrom, Hans, *A Langston Hughes Encyclopedia*, Greenwood Press, 2002.

Ostrom explains that each entry in this alphabetically arranged work is intended for a general reader with no particular knowledge about Hughes or the times in which he lived. Included are entries for individual works, as well as for broader topics such as "Harlem" and "religion."

Rampersad, Arnold, *The Life of Langston Hughes*, 2 vols., Oxford University Press, 1986—1988.

This sweeping and thorough two-volume work is the definitive biography of Langston Hughes. It is also an insightful look at the first three-quarters of the twentieth century. Hughes's fascination with music is a thread that carries through the biography. Hughes's working and re-working the material that became *Tambourines to Glory* in both novel and play forms is detailed in the second volume.

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Millstein, Gilbert, Review of *Tambourines to Glory*, in *Langston Hughes: Critical Perspectives Past and Present*, edited by Henry Louis Gates Jr. and K. A. Appiah, Amistad Press, 1993, p. 39; originally published in the *New York Times Book Review*, November 23, 1958, p. 51.

Sullivan, Marty, "'Folk Tale' of Harlem is Praised," in *Fort Wayne News Sentinel*, November 22, 1958, p. 4.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Novels for Students (NfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, NfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of NfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of NfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in NfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by NfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

NfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Novels for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Novels for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Novels for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from NfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from NfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of NfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of NfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Novels for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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