The Underground Railroad (novel) Study Guide

The Underground Railroad (novel) by Colson Whitehead

BOOKRAGS

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Plot Summary

The following version of this book was used to create this study guide: Whitehead, Colson. The Underground Railroad. First edition. Doubleday, 2016.

The story's main narrative, set in the Southern United States during the slavery era (the early 1800's), is introduced and occasionally interrupted by a number of short chapters that give information about the identity, situations, and stories of secondary characters. The use of the terms "colored" and "nigger" in the book and in the analysis reflects the language of the time: in other words, the terms in the book are historically appropriate, and are used throughout this analysis with the same intention of accuracy.

The book opens with the story of Ajarry, grandmother of Cora, the book's central character and protagonist. Narration describes how Ajarry took ownership of, and maintained control over, a small plot of land in the slave area of the Randall plantation in the Southern state of Georgia where she lived most of her life. Both Cora's mother Mabel and Cora herself inherited that land, and took pride in maintaining it. There is also reference to how Ajarry insisted that attempts to escape were hopeless; how Mabel made a successful escape anyway; and how Cora refused an initial invitation from fellow slave Caesar to make her own attempt.

Eventually, after a series of painful incidents on the plantation, Cora changes her mind and agrees to join Caesar in an escape attempt. Their initial night of running is interrupted first by the arrival of another slave, Lovey, who figured out what they were doing and ran to join them. Next, they have an unexpected encounter with a group of hog rustlers. The encounter turns into a fight, during which Lovey is captured and Cora kills one of the attackers.

Eventually, Cora and Caesar make it to the first stop on the underground railroad, a sub-surface train network that takes them into the first stop on their escape route: a town in South Carolina. There, Cora and Caesar are given new names and identities, and start new lives in which they become increasingly comfortable, refusing a series of opportunities to take the underground railroad even further towards the North, and freedom. Their sense of complacency and safety is shaken by the discovery that they and the other refugee slaves in the town are being used and exploited by the white citizens; and then destroyed when Ridgeway, leader of an angry group of patrollers and slave catchers, tracks them down. Cora manages to escape, taking the underground railroad to North Carolina, where she is given refuge with Martin and Ethel Wells.

Cora's time with the Wells' is spent as a prisoner in their home. Eventually, she is discovered and turned over to Ridgeway, while the Wells' are left to face the anger and violence of the community's racist citizens. Cora is then taken into Tennessee, a passenger on Ridgeway's journey to capture yet another slave before taking Cora back to the Randall plantation where, Ridgeway says, Lovey has already been severely (and fatally) punished for her escape attempt and where, he adds, an even worse fate awaits Cora.

With the help of a man with whom she happens to make eye contact on the street, Cora manages to escape, fleeing with the man (Royal) to Indiana. There, she makes a new life for herself on the farm of the Valentine family, a farm where a large number of similarly escaped slaves are making similarly new lives. Eventually, the farm is attacked by a band of slave catchers, and again Cora is taken prisoner by Ridgeway. She manages to fight her way free and propels herself along the underground railroad on a handcart. She makes it to the end of the line, where she climbs to the surface and is eventually given a ride by a colored man who is part of a caravan driving out to a new life in the West.

Chapters inserted throughout the narrative explore the lives, backgrounds, and fates of several characters in the same way as the book's first character explored Ajarry's life. These characters include Ridgeway, Ethel Wells, Caesar, and Mabel.

Section 1

Summary

Ajarry – The novel begins with reference to how Caesar, another slave, suggested to Cora that they should run away, and to how Cora said no. Cora was, narration comments, remembering her grandmother, Ajarry. Ajarry's history is described: she was taken from her African village, appraised and sold again and again and finally ended up on the plantation of the Randall family, where she spent the rest of her life. Narration also describes how all of Ajarry's children died but one - Mabel, Cora's mother. Ajarry died of a brain aneurysm in the field. Before she died, however, Ajarry had instilled in Cora a sense of the futility of trying to run away. This section concludes with a reference to how Cora changed her mind about running and said yes: "This time," narration comments, "it was her mother talking" (8).

Georgia, Part 1, pp. 10 – 21. This section begins with the announcement, dated 1820, of a reward for information relating to the disappearance of "a negro girl by the name of LIZZIE" (10). Narration then describes how work on the Randall plantation stops as usual on a Sunday afternoon for the slaves' half day off, and how that particular half-day is to be taken up with a celebration of the birthday of an elderly slave, despite the fact that no slave really knows when their birthday is.

As the celebration begins, Cora sits alone at her small plot of land, which had first been claimed by Ajarry and inherited first by Mabel and then by Cora after Mabel disappeared. Narration describes how Cora fiercely defended it as her own in spite of being sent by the white overseer to live in The Hob, the living space for slaves who had been mentally or physically damaged beyond the capacity to work. Her actions, as well as being sent to The Hob, resulted in Cora developing a gossip-fueled reputation (for things like promiscuity, violence, and witchcraft), in her being gang raped, and in her making The Hob her permanent home. This section concludes with a reference to how the slave who tried to take her land eventually ran away, and how Cora became upset when she thought of how viciously he was punished for doing so.

Georgia, Part 2, pp. 22 – 29. Narration returns to the birthday celebration, with glimpses of how Cora's interactions with the other slaves, some of whom are prejudiced against her because of where she lives, others enjoying her company. Narration also describes how the elderly slave, the oldest on the plantation, traditionally choses days at random to celebrate his birthday, days that he seems to sense need to see some release of pent up frustration in the slave community. This leads to commentary, also in narration, about Cora's age (approximately 17) and how she feels about birthdays in general. Finally, narration describes Caesar, a strong and relatively independent slave, coming to Cora and asking her to escape north with him. She refuses, also refusing to join in the dancing at Jockey's celebration.

Georgia, Part 3, pp. 29 – 34. The celebration is interrupted by the arrival of the plantation's owners James and Terrance Randall. Narration describes the differences between the two men: James distant but more lenient with his slaves; Terrance more involved but also more cruel. James asks to be entertained by the slave who could recite portions of the Constitution, and reacts angrily when he is told that that slave has been killed. Meanwhile, Terrance orders the slaves to dance, narration describing how Cora joins in, as eager as the other slaves to make a good impression. Terrance reacts furiously when one of the dancing slaves bumps him and spills a drop of wine on him, beating the boy with his cane. Cora is taken over by a feeling that she has not felt since she felt the need to defend her garden plot, and defends the boy by placing her body over his. She too is beaten, her blood spilling in the dirt.

Analysis

As the novel establishes its central character (Cora) and lays the groundwork for its plot (initiated here in Cora's responses to both Caesar's question and the beating she receives from Randall), it also introduces a key component of its narrative style. This is the moving back and forth between past and present, between what is being remembered and what is lived: a key component of the book's overall thematic interest in the power and influence of memory. Another manifestation of this theme can be seen in the vivid, evocative descriptions of what it was like to be a slave in the Southern United States at the time. The memory here is racial and cultural: the descriptions are grounded in historically accurate experiences and situations, making the book a fictionalization of fact. This aspect of the book manifests even more vividly later in the narrative, when the author adds layers of metaphor, and arguably fantasy, to his exploration of the history of the underground railroad. One other significant irony in this section: the reference to a slave who is able to recite portions of the Constitution. The reference is ironic because if ever there was a group of individuals living in the United States who were NOT allowed to live according to the strictures of the Constitution, it was those living under the yoke of slavery.

Another irony in this section is the slaves being ordered to dance, as dancing is traditionally a physical expression of joy.

Meanwhile, several important motifs make their first appearance here, many of which are also thematically relevant. Perhaps the most notable of these is Ajarry's garden which, for Cora and for the novel, is an important symbol of freedom: later, the narrative eventually reveals how ironic this symbol actually is, but that eventual irony does not diminish the image's potency, for either Cora or the reader, at this point in the story. Another important motifs include the presence of torture and violence. Finally, the advertisement at the beginning of the "Georgia" section of the book is the first of several such advertisements that appear at the beginning of each chapter that focuses on Cora and her journey.

The character of Caesar is first mentioned in this section, foreshadowing his later role in the narrative, and particularly the chapter that bears his name and reveals the

background that led him to his actions in this chapter. Also foreshadowed in this section is the idea of escape, when Cora thinks about the punishment that fell upon the slave who ran away after trying to steal her land. Finally, the reference to Mabel's disappearance foreshadows the story behind that disappearance, which will be shared in the following section.

The novel's protagonist, Cora, is presented to readers as someone feeling overwhelmed in life and, as a result, is prone to impulsive action. This is the first of several occasions throughout the narrative in which her deeply felt compulsion towards justice leads her to fear-transcending, life-changing choices. Finally, there is the reference to Cora's feelings about birthdays. The celebration of the birthday here notwithstanding, there is the sense that her attitude (that birthdays are not worth celebrating) is that when one is mostly dead (i.e. a slave regarded as something less than human), there is no reason to celebrate being alive, let alone having been born.

Discussion Question 1

How does the thematic motif of imprisonment and torture manifest in Section 1?

Discussion Question 2

What is the implication of the closing line of "Ajarry"? What does the line suggest about Mabel and what happened to her?

Discussion Question 3

What do you see as the connection between Cora's defense of her garden plot and her defense of the boy being beaten at the end of Section 1?

Vocabulary

cowrie, haggle, noxious, stymie, chattle, gunwale, simper, piteous, exponential, procurer, converge, distemper, venereal, affliction, musculature, pickaninny, glut, , acquisition, dropsy, whist, fluctuate, layabout, disparate, indigo, pliable, accumulate, calabash, predilection, hankering, cholera, appraise, gaol, precedence, impudence, crotchety, protestation, indulgence, incursion, bisect, tract, fervor, coerce, provocation, travesty, burl, recourse, abject, comport, misanthrope, acumen, proximity, induce, candor, aptitude, concoct, vantage, vacancy, lascivious, fornicate, credible, placate, nautilus (adj.), stingy, accumulation, surety, savvy, skittish, lithe, loll, mortify, rickety, caprice, attune, communal, instigator, dexterity, servitude, reverie, proportion, sumptuous, trajectory, concubine, versify, reprobate, usurpation, mediocre, diversion, forlorn, converge, insinuate

Section 2

Summary

Georgia, Part 4, pp. 35 – 48. Two weeks after the celebration, Cora continues to recover from the beatings given to her in the aftermath of her defense of the boy. Alone with her injuries, Cora tries to figure out why she did what she did, but she cannot quite define the reason. She seeks comfort by sitting by her garden plot, reflecting on how someone had to be crazy to try to escape north. “But,” narration comments, “her mother had” (40).

Narration then describes Mabel’s disappearance, placing it in the context of comments that she had been the first slave to successfully escape the Randall plantation, and of brief descriptions of the painful fates that came to those who were caught. In the aftermath of her disappearance (when Cora was about 11), Cora “got on her knees and planted anew. It was her inheritance” (42). As she recalls her mother, Cora decides it is time to get back into her garden.

Later, in the aftermath of Terrance’s visit (during which Cora becomes frightened by his acknowledgement of her), the slaves learn that James Randall has died, and that Terrance is now sole owner of the whole plantation. A slave makes an attempt to escape but is quickly captured and brought back to the plantation. As Cora and Caesar meet to make plans for their own escape, narration shifts back to the moment of Cora’s whippings, which were conducted in front of all the slaves, including the watchful Caesar. Narration also describes the public punishment and execution of the slave who tried to escape, and the address Terrance made to the slaves, in which he described the more difficult and torturous conditions under which the plantation was to be run. During his address, he walked through the crowd of slaves and squeezed Cora’s breast. This, narration suggests, was the moment at which she decided to leave.

Georgia, Part 5, pp. 49 – 61. Narration describes how two white people in Caesar’s life to this point had prepared him to run: his previous Northern owner, the kindly Mrs. Garner (who had taught him to read) and the anti-slavery Mr. Fletcher (who wanted to help escaping slaves, guiding them to the underground railroad). Narration also describes Cora’s preparations for departure (including taking her hatchet and digging up the food in the garden, the same way as her mother did) and how she and Caesar eventually leave in the middle of the night.

As they hurry through the darkness, they realize they have been followed by another slave; it is a friend of Cora’s named Lovey, who figured out what they were doing and decided to tag along. Caesar and Cora agree to take her with them. At one point when they are alone (Caesar having gone ahead to scout the route), Cora tells Lovey that she believes Caesar brought her along because she was good luck; if Mabel got away successfully, Cora says, she will too.

Later, the trio encounters a group of hog thieves, and an altercation ensues. Lovey disappears, along with most of Caesar and Cora's possessions. In defending herself, Cora relives being sexually assaulted back on the plantation. Once again she finds herself overwhelmed with strong feeling, and then she hits one of the attackers with a rock. As they carry on, they both wonder what might have happened if various things had gone differently.

Georgia, Part 6, p. 61 – 70. In the aftermath of their encounter with the hog thieves, Cora and Caesar hurry to reach the home of Mr. Fletcher. When they get there, they are told that their escape was noticed almost immediately, and that large rewards have been offered for their capture. They also learn that the man hit by Cora has not woken up, and that Cora has been labelled a murderer.

That night, Cora and Caesar are guided to the underground railroad by Mr. Fletcher, making their way to the home of the so-called station master, a Mr. Lumbly (whose barn is filled with a huge variety of chains and other means of restraint). After Cora and Caesar thank Fletcher and he says goodbye, Lumbly takes the two fleeing slaves deep beneath the earth's surface, where they discover an actual underground railroad. Lumbly explains that two trains are coming, each going to a different place that he is not able to identify but departing several hours apart. Cora and Caesar choose the first one, Cora reflecting on what Lumbly had hinted about the railroad having been constructed by slaves. The train arrives, and Cora and Caesar get on board. After a long, dark, uncomfortable journey, they arrive in South Carolina. Cora looks up at "the skyscraper" (70) and marvels at how far she has come.

Analysis

The first point to note about this section relates to Cora's reaction to her choices at the end of the previous section – specifically, her decision to protect the boy who was being beaten. As noted in analysis of that section, there is a sense of there being several possibilities for her doing what she does, possibilities that seem to narrow to a single likelihood as the narrative progresses and she displays similar reactions in similar circumstances. Interestingly, there is a sense of connection between these possibilities and the reference to Cora planting in the garden in the aftermath of Mabel's disappearance.

The telling of Mabel's story here is an important piece of foreshadowing, in that it prologues several moments later in the narrative where the depths and facets of Cora's reaction are revealed, and also the truth of what happened to Mabel (revealed in Section 10).

Later in this section, there are two important events that have repercussions throughout the remainder of the narrative. The first is Cora's response to the attack of the hog thieves. Her reaction is both an echo of her instinctive emotional response to the attack on the boy as well as a foreshadowing of other moments in the narrative when emotion overwhelms her and she takes similar violent action. Another reason Cora's response to

the hog thieves is important is that it labels her, as the narrative here suggests, a murderer; this intensifies the stakes both for her to not be caught (because the sufferings she will experience if she is will be even more severe) and for those who are pursuing her to succeed.

Meanwhile, the second key event in this section that has resonance throughout the narrative is the appearance of the underground railroad. In terms of the action of the novel, Cora's experiences on and with the railroad move the plot forward, and are also important manifestations of the book's central thematic interest in journeys to freedom. In terms of the premise of the novel, and aside from giving the book its title, the physical underground railroad is, in fact, a metaphoric representation of what the underground railroad actually was. Its appearance here is the first of its several appearances throughout the novel, making it what is called an "extended" metaphor.

There is another reference in this section to the tortures suffered by escaped slaves. While this is important foreshadowing of other tortures for other slaves in the narrative, it also shows some character growth in Cora; whereas previously, the experience of hearing about a tortured escaped slave seemed to have intimidated or frightened Cora, there is a sense that this time, she is inspired by what she hears to take action and at least try to go. This sense of inspiration is arguably echoed, or reinforced, by the description of what hangs on the wall of Lumbly's barn: aside from being a clear reference to the book's thematic interest in chains and imprisonment, there is also the sense here that the wall of chains is there as either a disguise for the entrance to the railroad, or as an inspiration for those using the railroad to hurry and leave behind their old lives – or, in fact, both.

Other important points to note in this section: a continuation of the novel's structural practice of shifting back and forth through time; the presence in the narrative of the white Mrs. Garner and Mr. Fletcher, whose compassion and respect towards Caesar are powerful contrasts to the attitudes of slave owner Terrance Randall; and the reference to Cora's beliefs about why Caesar asked her along (the truth of his reasons is revealed later in the narrative – specifically, in Caesar's chapter in Section 8).

Discussion Question 1

In what way does the power and influence of memory affect the action in Section 2?

Discussion Question 2

What do you see as the connection between Mabel's disappearance and Cora planting in her garden?

Discussion Question 3

What do you think are the benefits of the book's technique of juxtaposing past with present? What values are there in the specific juxtapositions between past and present?

Vocabulary

affliction, recuperation, hygiene, avert, livid, rambunctious, roil, consort, licentious, desultory, mulatto, poultice, relinquish, palsy, labyrinth, increment, mien, serene, vicinity, cumbersome, appraise, weevil, sardonic, lamentable, amiable, circumnavigate, scandalous, protégé, assignation, ambitious, frolic, insatiable, rankle, manumission, liquidate, coffle, vigilant, pretext, ruckus, piteous, cultivate, mesmerize, ameliorate, abhor, affront, abolitionist, veracity, temperament, inanity, contagion, fortify, enormity, comportment, nocturnal, remunerative, exertion, conspicuous, mortification, pumpernickel, prudent, abscond, trepidation, emanate, dilapidated

Section 3

Summary

Ridgeway – This chapter describes the youth and maturation of Arnold Ridgeway. Raised the son of a blacksmith, Ridgeway refused to follow in his father's footsteps, eventually becoming a patroller, or hunter of escaped slaves. Ridgeway spent much of his career in the North, capturing escaped slaves and sending them back to their masters. After the eventual death of his father, Ridgeway moved back south to take over the running of his father's business and to continue his own business of chasing and capturing slaves.

Ridgeway was called in by the Randall family in the aftermath of Cora and Caesar's escape; his failure to capture the escaped Mabel continued to haunt him. He realizes there is a spur of the underground railroad in Georgia, and he becomes determined to destroy it.

South Carolina, Part 1, 84 – 94. This chapter is prologued with another reward poster: dated 1812, this one offers a $30 reward for an 18-year-old negro girl, "likely yellow" (84).

The chapter proper begins with a description of the working situation of a young, free, "colored woman" (89) named Bessie, who works for a white family called the Andersons. Bessie takes the children up to see their father in the impressively multi-storied Griffin Building. Bessie lives in a part of town called the dormitories, where she and other "help" make their home when they are not at work. One Friday night, Bessie is told by a white supervisor that she (the supervisor) wants to talk to Bessie on the following Monday morning. Bessie agrees. Narration then reveals that "Bessie Carpenter was the name on the papers Sam gave [Cora] at the station" (90).

In flashback, narration describes Cora and Caesar's arrival at the underground railroad station in South Carolina. They were met by the friendly white station master Sam, who gave them food, a chance to clean up, and their new identities: Bessie Carpenter and Christian Markson. He also gave them directions on how to start making their new lives, taking them above ground (the station for which he is responsible is, like Lumbly's, beneath a barn) and showing them where to go, reminding them to use the imposing Griffin Building as a landmark. Narration then describes how Cora practiced drawing less attention to herself, practiced learning to read and write; and practiced enjoying sleeping in a real bed.

South Carolina, Part 2, 95 – 106. Cora (Bessie) starts taking lessons to improve her reading and writing, and strives to be patient with other newly freed slaves who struggle more than she does. She also strives to put as much of her life on the plantation as possible behind her, pushing down thoughts and memories but unable to keep herself from first seeing if she can find her mother. When nothing new is revealed, Cora comes

to realize how angry she is with Mabel for both leaving her behind and not coming after her. Narration also describes how, on the train, Cora asked Caesar why he chose her; he answered, “because I knew you could do it.” (98).

Back in the present, Cora dresses to go to a social, sponsored by the city to help the newly freed slaves get used to their new lives and environments. There, Cora and Caesar meet: narration describes Caesar’s success in his new job at a factory, and how, over the last few weeks, three trains on the underground railroad had come through, and each time, they had decided to stay. Life is getting good, and has the promise of becoming better. They have another such discussion at the social, and once again agree to stay.

On her way back to her dormitory, Cora is witness to a young woman’s panicky claim that her children are being taken away from her. Cora dismisses this as the young woman having a flashback to her days on the plantation. That night, however, Cora has difficulty sleeping.

Analysis

The story of Ridgeway, shared in this section, is perhaps one of the most significant of the chapters that focus on secondary characters, given that Ridgeway becomes the novel’s key antagonist as he continually pursues Cora. Tied into the Ridgeway story is the repeated reference to the escaped slave at the beginning of the “South Carolina” section, one of several such references throughout the narrative, with the final one (at the beginning of the chapter titled “The North”, which appears in Section 10) being the most significant.

As the South Carolina section of the novel begins, there are several points to note. The first is the appearance of the Griffin Building, which can be seen as the skyscraper referred to at the end of Section 1. The second noteworthy point is how the narrative of the opening part of the South Carolina section is structured. At first, the reader would probably be inclined to think that the novel is introducing a new character: it is not until several pages in that narration reveals that Bessie is, in fact, Cora, whose taking on of a new identity is metaphorically resonant with her taking on a new way of being – that is, of being free.

It is important to note that Caesar’s revelation of why he asked Cora to escape with him is different from what Cora told Lovey in the previous section. He seems to believe in her, and see her as a much stronger individual that she realizes. Caesar's statement foreshadows later revelations in Chapter 8 of how and why Caesar came to believe what he did. There are also some subtle hints here of his desire to have a relationship with Cora that goes beyond comradeship, but it does not seem to be going anywhere. It is not until much later in the narrative that Cora finds herself able to engage in any kind of intimate relationship with a man.

Thematic elements developed in this section include a counterpointing of the book's thematic interest in imprisonment and chains, and the power and influence of memory (which defines Cora's thoughts about her mother).

This section concludes with two key points: the decision of Cora and Caesar to not take the next train out (a decision which seems to have good reasons, but which has unfortunate consequences); and the reference to the troubled young woman, which foreshadows revelations in the following sections about the true nature of the town in which Cora and Caesar have made their new home.

Discussion Question 1

What aspects of Section 3 counter-point, or contrast, the book's overall thematic and narrative emphasis on imprisonment and chains?

Discussion Question 2

Do you think Cora is justified in being angry with Mabel? Why or why not?

Discussion Question 3

What is significant about Cora choosing to go to a social (i.e. a dance)? Consider her about similar events in Section 1.

Vocabulary

anvil, scrutinize, frivolous, imbecile, miscreant, perquisite, egregious, abscond, gargantuan, metropolis, ingenuity, mercenary, stevedore, furtive, bumpkin, stratagem, discrepancy, gratuity, rheumy, imperative (n.), iniquitous, cornice, emporium, warren, confectioner, edifice, disreputable, clientele, sapling, perimeter, partake, indulgence, proctor, exquisite, diligence, ferocious, composure, victuals, eccentric, mannerism, evident, incentive, confidante, nonchalant, rudiment, indulgent, simplicity, chastened, hygiene, provision, aptitude, adept, forbearance, configuration, verdant, portly, miscellany, chattel, monotonous, atrocity

Section 4

Summary

South Carolina, Part 3, 107 – 117. Cora (Bessie) is saddened to leave the employ of the Andersons for a new job as a “type,” or a living mannequin in a series of historical displays at the new museum. Narration describes how these displays were intended to introduce the public to parts of the world and styles of life that were new to them: “like a railroad, the museum permitted [people] to see the rest of the country beyond their small experience” (109). The scenes that Cora (and a few others) are employed to participate in evoke three aspects of African life – in Africa, on transport ships, and on the plantation. None of these, Cora soon realizes, are accurate, and as she tries to explain her reactions, the museum’s well-meaning director talks her out of them.

At the same time, a new hospital opens. Cora is surprised to see how many of the “colored” men she knows have been brought in for blood tests, and is shocked to learn that the new director of public health, Dr. Stevens, has been told to propose that “colored” women consider birth control – that is, sterilization – in order for them “to take control over [their] own destiny” (113). Cora refuses. She also becomes concerned when she learns that the young woman who had had problems at the end of the previous section had been taken to a section of the dormitories reserved for people with emotional troubles, a section that she likens to The Hob. She begins to realize just how much white people, even in South Carolina, are trying to control the experiences and stories of colored people, and becomes angry. “Stolen bodies working stolen land. It was an engine that did not stop, its hungry boiler fed with blood” (117).

South Carolina, Part 4, 118 – 131. “The night before Ridgeway put an end to South Carolina” (118), Cora visits the top of the Griffin Building, imagining that she is able to catch a glimpse of the North. She then meets Caesar at Sam’s, after meeting Sam in the street and being told to meet him that evening. Sam tells them they need to catch a train on the underground railroad soon, revealing that he has heard that the “colored” people in the town are being used as test subjects in a series of experiments ranging from sterilization and population control practices to tests on the transmissibility of syphilis. Cora realizes that the woman who was screaming about her babies in Section 3 was not remembering her life on the plantation.

Cora and Caesar make plans to leave. As they walk home, they wonder whether they were wrong to stay as long as they did. As Cora returns to work, narration describes how she got into the habit of fixing people who came past the exhibits with an intimidating “evil eye” (126), seeing them as weak links in a chain of control that she can make weaker.

That night, a conversation with her supervisor leads Cora to believe that she is close to being caught by patrollers looking for escaped slaves. Panicked, she hurries to find Caesar, but is unable to, so she goes to the saloon where Sam works. She finally gets

his attention long enough to learn that the patrollers are there and looking for both her and Caesar. Sam sends her out to his house to wait for Caesar and the train. Cora runs quickly, gets to the house safely, and waits until Sam arrives – without Caesar. Sam tells her that Ridgeway and the other patrollers are looking for her, and that she should wait underground for the train to arrive. She takes some food and a lantern, and waits. She tries to pray, but does not really know who to pray to, or what for. Cora, unlike many of the other colored people in the town, had avoided church. Suddenly, she hears noises upstairs, realizes that the place is being looted, and later that the house is on fire. There the section ends.

Analysis

The first point to note about this section of the book is its reference to Cora becoming a "type" in the museum display, a deeply ironic term in that as a "colored" woman in a southern state, let alone as an escaped slave, in her life she is nothing BUT a type, as the further action in this section makes clear. In any case, her experience as a "type," and the situation in which she has that experience (i.e. being on display as part of an exhibit portraying an idealized version of slave life), is an interpolation of an aspect of the African-American experience that is more recent than slavery.

Another example of the novel taking an event or circumstance out of recent history and placing it into the context of an earlier time and circumstance relates to the references to the experiments with syphilis and sterilization. In the latter case, sterilization of "undesirables (i.e. the mentally handicapped, the poor, the non-Caucasian) has a long history in both America and around the world. In the former case, the referent is a specific incident: the so-called Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment, which took place in the early-middle years of the 20th Century. The experiment duplicates (or rather, inspired) the experiments portrayed in the book: African-American men suffering from syphilis were told that they were being treated for the disease, but in fact were not. The ostensible idea of the experiment was to examine the effects of syphilis but, in more recent years, it has been suggested that the experiment's intention was, in fact, what is referred to here: to dominate, and perhaps reduce the numbers of, the African-American population. The significance of both these elements is threefold: on a thematic level, to portray different aspects of racism; on a historical level, to portray the ways in which African-Americans were viewed and abused; and, on a narrative level, to once again combine realism with a more fantastical narrative element. This last is the same principle behind the idea of making the historical underground railroad an ACTUAL underground railroad. Ultimately, the very clear sense of this section, as Cora becomes more and more aware of the truth at the heart of her current existence, is that the freedom she believed to be new and welcoming is, in fact, a continuing manifestation of the racist attitudes that kept her imprisoned for so long.

The reference to Cora giving the "evil eye," as well as her belief in the good it could be doing, is a metaphoric development of the book's thematic interest in imprisonment and torture. There is the sense here that on some level, Cora is trying to break the "chains" of racism that keep her and other slaves prisoner.

This section contains two noteworthy references to trains, maintaining that motif in the book. First, there is a comparison between railroads and the museum. Second is the reference to stolen bodies and engines in the final lines of Part 3 which, in its references to boilers (which fueled the train engines of the time) and to not stopping, evokes trains charging along a railroad.

The story-within-the story of what happens to Cora in South Carolina reaches its climax in the final moments of Part 4, in which Cora manages to escape the pursuit of Ridgeway and other slave-catchers. There are several points to note here: how the truth of what happens to Caesar is not fully known (but is later revealed when Sam reappears in the story nearer to its end); how the destruction of the barn above the train station foreshadows both a similarly important, and similarly destructive fire (in Section 9) and the destruction left behind by fire in Tennessee (Section 7). In all three cases, fire has significant symbolic and metaphoric resonance with Cora's situation.

On another structural note, it is intriguing to recognize that here, as at the end of the Georgia section, narration ends on a point of intense suspense, and is about to go into another short chapter on another secondary character: this means that the reader is kept on tenterhooks, and has to wait to find out what's going to happen to Cora next. This is an effective structural technique: to not only end on a point of intense curiosity, but to delay gratifying or resolving that curiosity just a little longer.

One last point to note about this section is the passing reference to Cora's avoidance of religion and prayer. This is one of several glancing references, occurring throughout the narrative, to how Cora remains untouched by, and un-connected to, the Christian faith that seems to be a source of strength to so many slaves and, ironically, to so many slave-owners, slave-defenders, and slave-catchers. The next section of the book, taking place in North Carolina, offers an explanation for Cora's attitude even as it gives another example of how that attitude manifests in her life.

Discussion Question 1

How is the theme of imprisonment and torture developed metaphorically in Section 4?

Discussion Question 2

What are the metaphoric, or even literal, parallels between the life Cora is enacting as a "type" and the life she lived as a slave?

Discussion Question 3

What is ironic about the use of the term "railroad" in relation to what the museum is doing?

Vocabulary

auspices, apparatus, curator, cadence, flora, fauna, frigate, concession, abundant, prodigious, predecessor, initiative, precocious, habitual, recalcitrant, demeanor, plausible, venerable, disarray, imperceptible, fissure, notorious, saturnine, enumerate, tertiary, syphilis, trajectory, melancholic, emancipation, geld, ludicrous, retaliate, incorrigible, animus, subjugate, abashed, appraise, impede

Section 5

Summary

Stevens – In this brief chapter, the night-time activities of Dr. Stevens (first seen in Section 4) are revealed: he, in collaboration with an unscrupulous man named Carpenter, works as a body snatcher, retrieving (and sometimes stealing) bodies to meet the need of medical students like himself needing to study anatomy. Narration describes at some length the often criminal ways and means in which competitive body snatchers obtained bodies, and how eventually, Stevens and Carpenter stole only the bodies of “niggers,” the disappearances of which were rarely as awkward as the disappearances of white bodies. Narration also describes how Stevens considers himself non-racist, recognizing how the dissection of “negro” bodies identified them as being essentially the same as white people. “In death the negro became a human being. Only then was he the white man’s equal” (139).

North Carolina, Part 1, p. 142 – 148. Here again, the chapter begins with another wanted poster, dated 1839 and seeking “a negro girl named Martha.”

Narration of Cora’s story then resumes, describing days of being imprisoned in the dark after Sam’s house burned down and collapsed. The scheduled trains did not come, and Cora continually imagined what she believed to have been the horrible fates of both Sam and Caesar. As a result of her imaginings and worrying in what seems to be an eternal darkness (“The only way to know how long you are lost in the darkness is to be saved from it” (143)), Cora comes to believe that she is a stray, one that will never belong anywhere. Eventually, a train arrives, at first racing through the station without stopping but then returning, its driver (a young and uneducated man) coming back for the now frantic Cora. He explains that the station in Georgia has been shut down, and that his orders were to run without stopping to the next safe station. Cora climbs on board, and rides through the black tunnels on a flatcar with no sides or ceiling. At some point in the ride, she realizes that “she forgot to ask where they were headed” (148).

North Carolina, Part 2, p. 149 - 160. When Cora arrives at the next station, she is shocked and surprised to learn that she has arrived at the end of the line: the station, she is told by the driver, has been discovered and abandoned. She also learns that he is supposed to be responsible only for line maintenance and inspection, that he is not supposed to take passengers. He leaves, and she explores the station, becoming upset when she sees that any exit seems to be blocked. She is relieved, therefore, when the area’s station master, Martin Wells, discovers her, saying that he had just come by chance. Martin fetches a wagon and then takes Cora to his home, driving down what is called The Freedom Road, along which are hung the decaying bodies of escaped slaves who had been lynched. He then takes her to his home, where his angry, silent wife Ethel shows Cora into a small, secret attic room where she is to hide.

Over the next few days, Cora remains concealed and silent as family and servants (including Irish servant girl Fiona) come and go. Looking out a small window, Cora finds her attention drawn to a park across the street, which she notices is often full of people – all white people, as opposed to South Carolina, where the races mixed. A few days pass, and on a Friday, Cora watches as the citizens of the town gather for what she discovers is a weekly party that is also part lynching, Cora watches in horror as a slender young woman, referred to as an escaped slave and clearly beaten, is ridiculed and prepared for execution. Cora turns away, narration revealing that such public lynchings occur every week, and that "over the next several months, on nights when it was not too suffocating," she hid in a corner of the attic far from the window out of which she could see. "It was as far from the park, the miserable thumping heart of the town, as she could get" (160).

Analysis

The first part of this section, the chapter focusing on what might be called the extra-curricular activities of Dr. Stevens, is primarily notable for its exploration of different kinds of racism. Note the different terminologies used to describe the slaves that he has become accustomed to using, and note also the contrast between the attitude he seems to have here (that is: his attitude that "negroes" are people too) and his participation in sterilization programs, as outlined in the previous section.

In the beginnings of the chapter of the book that describes Cora's journey to, and life in, North Carolina, the narrative introduces one of its key themes: the reference to Cora being a stray. By definition, a "stray" is someone, or something in the case of an animal, that wanders away from that which is predictable, or familiar – a home, a path, a relationship. The racist white characters in the book (i.e. Ridgeway and Randall) would see Cora as the rebellious kind of stray, one that needs to be brought home and disciplined. Non-racist white characters, such as Sam and Martin Wells, would see Cora as the kind of stray that is lost, or at least needs to be protected as she tries to find her way to safety or a new path. Other escaped slaves, and other black characters who want to BE escaped slaves, might see Cora as she might see herself: as straying from that which is familiar in order to find something new, or something better – in other words, being a stray in the name of pursuing freedom. In any case, this idea – with all three of its associated implications – appears a few more times later in the narrative, and always in reference to Cora and her striking out for freedom.

Further references to fire in this section continue the symbolism of fire as evoking the destruction of imprisonment and racist attitudes.

This section includes mention of Fiona, who in future sections of the book plays a key role in the resolution of Cora's situation.

The Freedom Road that Cora is taken down, lined as it is with the tortured and mutilated bodies of those who tried to obtain freedom, as well as those who tried to help them is an example of deep irony in the novel.

The references to the park provide readers with a strong juxtaposition. The idea image of freedom is shown in the park during the day, with folks passing through, free to enjoy the air and the light and the space. In the evening, however, images of imprisonment and torture appear i the park with the lynching of a young woman.

This juxtaposition of freedom and entrapment is echoed in Cora's own situation: free only in the sense that she is not actually serving anyone or working for anyone, yet she remains a prisoner of racist attitudes, governance, and violence. Cora is also free from capture and death, but imprisoned in a hidden-away attic.

Cora's current situation echoes the experience of Harriet Jacobs, the author of one of the most famous narratives of slave life titled, Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl. Upon her escape from slavery, Jacobs found herself in an identical situation to that in which Cora finds herself, but for much longer (several years as opposed to Cora's several weeks). Here again is an example of how the author integrates actual history into a fictionalized narrative.

Discussion Question 1

How does the story of Dr. Stevens explore and develop the book's thematic consideration of different kinds of racism?

Discussion Question 2

How do you respond to the idea of Cora as a "stray"?

Discussion Question 3

The image of Cora being hidden in an attic raises unavoidable echoes of another attic dweller: the Jewish Anne Frank who, along with her family, took refuge in an attic to escape being caught by the Nazis. What other parallels can you see between the two experiences – consider the chain of circumstances that brought both Anne and Cora to the situations in which they find themselves.

Vocabulary

conducive, carouse, concoction, besotted, aspiration, derision, cadaver, disreputable, uncouth, refutation, pilfer, raucous, chicanery, bereavement, coroner, intricacy, quaint, florid, increment, grotesque, incredulous, disproportionate, turbulent, velocity, abut, succulent, tarpaulin, profane, invective, template, commotion, rendition, abstemious, travesty, exuberant, gaudy, soliloquy, auspicious, protocol, abscond

Section 6

Summary

North Carolina, Part 3, p. 161 - 172. On the Monday morning after the execution of the escaped slave, Martin allows Cora down into the lower attic where he gives her food, water, and space to walk and stretch. This becomes Cora's routine: kept in the attic during the day, while the angrily unhappy Fiona takes care of the house; and then freed for a few minutes in the evening. Every few days Cora is allowed to wash. During the times of her freedom, Martin tells Cora the recent history of North Carolina: how politicians, businessmen, and lawyers shaped the system so that there are no "niggers" in the state any more: that all the field work, in this cotton-rich part of the world, is done by poor white immigrants, Irish and Germans.

As the daily routine continues and as months pass without word from the underground railroad, Cora strives to improve her reading (which she had begun to learn in South Carolina), imagines a new life in the North (including spending time with Caesar and angrily encountering her mother), and imagines herself as a kind of rebel – that is, until reality sinks in. "An insurrection of one … scrabbling in the walls like a rat. Whether in the fields or underground or in an attic room, America remained her warden" (172).

North Carolina, Part 4, p. 173 - 188. Cora, Martin, and Ethel endure a trio of close calls: an accidental noise seems to alert Fiona to something going on in the attic, but she seems to forget; a pair of patrollers visits, but finds nothing; and two white abolitionists, found guilty of helping a couple of colored boys, are executed along with those they tried to help.

Meanwhile, Martin tells Cora how he became involved with the underground railroad. After the death of his father, with whom he had a difficult relationship, Martin discovered that his father had long been an abolitionist and had helped several slaves escape. Martin reluctantly inherited the responsibility.

Shortly after this conversation, Cora becomes ill. Martin and Ethel tell Fiona that Martin has to be quarantined, and she is let off work. Cora is brought down into the main part of the house, where she is nursed by the somewhat more kindly Ethel, who helps her improve her reading and for a while endures her questions about how slavery is referred to in the Bible before insisting that the Bible's word is infallible. In addition, Cora reads a collection of old almanacs, narration commenting on how she "adored" them "for containing the entire world" (183). Cora also spends time looking out at the park across the way, realizing that in some ways, it is no different from the plot of land she had on the Randall plantation: both are illusions of freedom, and both had been built by slaves "The only thing colored folks hadn't built was the tree. God had made that, for the town to bend to evil ends" (176).

One night, while Cora is still in bed, patrollers raid the house, capturing Martin and Ethel as well as her. Taken out onto the street, they are watched by a gathering crowd, including Fiona who, it seems, had been suspicious all along and reported them. The lead patroller gets into a confrontation with Ridgeway, who claims to have made arrangements that Cora is to be given into his custody to take back to the Randall plantation. The still weak Cora becomes increasingly fearful as she is shackled into Ridgeway's wagon, driven by a 10-year-old colored boy. As she is driven away, she catches a glimpse of Martin and Ethel, tied to the tree in the middle of the park and crying out as rocks are thrown at them by the increasingly, and excitedly, angry crowd.

Ethel – Narration describes how Ethel, as a child, fantasized about the glorious, God-rewarded way she would be a missionary to the "niggers" in Africa; how she had a close friendship with the child of the household slave; and how the friendship ended when the slave died suddenly. Narration also describes how Ethel's father made nightly visits "upstairs" to where the younger slave slept, and how that slave was eventually let go and moved across town ("everyone whispered that the child had his father's eyes" (193)). Finally, narration describes how happy Ethel was when Cora fell ill, and could be moved down into the house, herself going "upstairs" to heal and minister to her. "In the end, [Ethel] had not gone to Africa, Africa had come to her" (195). She had "a savage to call her own, at last" (196).

Analysis

One of the important aspects of this book has less to do with telling the story and more to do with what seems to be its secondary purpose of reminding contemporary readers of some actual history: specifically, the cultural, political, and economic background of slavery. Such a reminder takes place in Part 3 of the "North Carolina" section, in which Martin's history lecture reminds both his listener and the reader that there was a great deal of variation in the circumstances, motivations, and consequences of slavery. Also in this lecture are important aspects of the novel's, and history's, experience of multiple manifestations of racism.

When the narrative of Cora's story resumes, growth in her character is shown. Cora's determination to improve her reading can be seen as a thematically significant exploration of a different kind of freedom – intellectual rather than physical. Reference to Cora seeing herself as a rebel, an "insurrection of one" evokes the earlier, similarly thematically significant reference to Cora being a stray. Then, as the action of Section 3 of the North Carolina section builds to its climax, and as it continues to develop the motif of Cora's reading, it adds variations on that motif by again referring to Cora's lack of interest in the Christian religion (as opposed to the extremely, and actively, interested Ethel) and to her determination to read (here introducing a key symbol of the kind of truth Cora is truly interested in learning about – the truth found in the almanacs). Cora's feeling, described in narration, that almanacs contain the entire world is a clear contrast to how she views both the Bible (which she seems to think has a very limited view) and people like Ethel who consider the Bible the ultimate authority on what the world, and the people in it, should be.

The climax of the North Carolina section involves the return of Cora's primary antagonist (Ridgeway) due Fiona's betrayal. The implication of what happens to Martin and Ethel Wells as a result of Fiona's betrayal is made all the more horrifically engaging because the narrative leaves room for the reader's imagination. Here again, a section ends with a question – what is going to happen to Cora now? – that propels the reader through the next interjected, transitional chapter and into the next phase of Cora's story.

Regarding that transitional chapter, the brief sketch of the young, religiously and conservatively idealistic Ethel Wells is almost poignant in its sense of futility, pain, and wrong-headedness. There is a glinting sense of tragedy in how the separation between Ethel and her childhood friend is described; and a more strongly glinting sense of repulsion in the carefully discreet, but nevertheless vividly clear, suggestions of what Ethel's father is doing with the servant girl when he goes "upstairs." Then there is the powerful connection between the use of the word "upstairs" in that context and its use in the context of the Ethel – Cora relationship. Finally, there is the use of the term "savage", yet another racism-defined term that, like "colored" and "nigger" encapsulates the attitudes of privileged whites towards those whom they enslaved.

Discussion Question 1

How does Section 6 explore the book's thematic interest in the power and influence of memory?

Discussion Question 2

Earlier in the novel, narration refers to the implications of the underground railroad having been built by slaves. How do those implications, the meaning of what the slaves did in that context, contrast and/or relate to the implications of what the slaves did for the park here? What do you think is the author's intent by setting up this parallel?

Discussion Question 3

What are the parallels, ironic and actual, between what happens when Ethel's father goes "upstairs" and when Ethel herself goes "upstairs" to see Cora? How are the two actions similar? How are they different?

Vocabulary

untenable, parity, retribution, insurgent, requisite, proselytize, cede, tributary, repulsive, amalgamation, quadroon, dingy, expertise, putrefy, carrion, seditious, nemesis, diligence, askance, imbibe, cavort, clamber, rumination, vulgarity, solstice, desultory, ravening, hoar, complicity, wizened, intransigence, meander, luminous, chattel, complacent, delirium, quarantine, convulsion, abstain, dubious, scourge, infraction, almanac, obsolete, vignette, parody, asafetida, demeanor, jostle, grandiose, piteous,

schooner, woodcut, wend, duplicitous, emissary, parable, remnant, fratricide, comport, conception, tedium, congeal, barbaric, pretext, livid, primeval

Section 7

Summary

Tennessee, Part 1, pp. 198 – 212. This section begins with another quote from a reward poster, dated only May 17th and for a 16-year-old mulatto girl named Peggy.

In the chapter proper, narration describes how Cora, in a wagon driven by Ridgeway, learns to tolerate another captured escapee (Jasper) who is, annoyingly, always-singing. Also in the wagon: Ridgeway's assistant Boseman (who wears a necklace of human ears, taken from an Indian tracker) and Homer, the colored driver who, Ridgeway reveals in conversation with Cora is actually free but knows he is much more likely to stay alive if he stays with Ridgeway.

As the wagon and its passengers pass through Tennessee, Cora notices that much of the land has been burned. As the journey continues, Cora and the others learn there was a large fire that destroyed the area and its homesteads. Cora also learns that Lovey was captured, tortured, and killed; that Fletcher was investigated (because of his connections with Caesar) and probably also killed; and that Ridgeway (who always refers to a slave, captured or otherwise, as "it") is on his way to Missouri to capture another slave. It is quicker, he says, to take Cora with him and then drop her off at the Randall place on the way back. Ridgeway adds that Terrance Randall has already set up the gallows for her punishment. Four days into the ride, Ridgeway gets tired of Jasper's constant singing, and Boseman shoots him on his orders.

Tennessee, Part 2, pp. 213 - 228. After passing out of the part of Tennessee ravaged by fire, Cora and the others move through an area of blossoming new growth. They then arrive at a town quarantined as a result of an outbreak of yellow fever. Determined to avoid catching the disease, Ridgeway orders that the group take a detour, Cora coming to believe that "Tennessee was cursed" (215).

Eventually, they arrive at a town that the fever had not infected. Cora is left alone chained in the wagon for a while, but is freed temporarily when Homer brings her a new dress and shoes, bought for her by Ridgeway. She tries to get Homer to tell her why he stays, but he does not (or cannot) answer. Later, Ridgeway walks her through town to get some dinner, Cora catching the eye of a colored man who nods when he sees her. "To see chains on another person and be glad they are not your own – such was the good fortune permitted colored people, defined by how much worse it could be any moment" (218).

At dinner, Ridgeway goads Cora with talk of Caesar (who, Ridgeway says, was captured and killed in South Carolina by townspeople there); with talk of her mother (with whom, he says, he is angry for escaping into freedom in Canada); with talk of the man she killed; and with talk of America's Manifest Destiny. This, he says, means that America and those who run it are taking the power and dominance that is their right. He

sees both escapee slave and slave catcher as doing their part to fulfill that destiny. As she uses the toilet, Ridgeway supervising from outside, Cora wonders if maybe he is right – “and maybe he was just a man talking to an outhouse door, waiting for someone to wipe her ass” (223).

When Ridgeway and Cora return to the wagon, they find Homer and a drunken Boseman, newly shaved but unhappy about failing with a prostitute. That night, Boseman attempts to have sex with Cora, who lets him get started: she imagines that if he unshackles her enough to do the deed, she can try to get away. Boseman is interrupted by Ridgeway, who beats him. The beating is interrupted by three “colored men,” including the one who looked at Cora earlier. They draw weapons on the group, saying they want Cora to travel with them. As Ridgeway tries to scheme his way out of the conversation, Homer erupts into violence and there is a brawl: Boseman is shot, Homer and one of the other men disappear, and Cora attempts to strangle Ridgeway (“her scream came from deep inside her, a train whistle echoing in a tunnel” 226)). Ridgeway is eventually subdued and shackled to the wagon. The other colored men invite Cora to come along with them, and before she leaves, she kicks Ridgeway three times in the face.

Analysis

At this point in the story, in the aftermath of Cora’s escape from North Carolina and as this section of the story begins (in a setting of burnt land that is clearly intended to echo, metaphorically, the destruction of a life, dreams, possibilities, and freedom), it is important to consider how the novel develops its theme and plot related to journeys to freedom. The first point of this consideration: how much of Cora’s journey to this point has been chosen, and how much has been forced? The first phase of her escape – from Georgia to South Carolina – was arguably the most chosen of all the phases of her journey, but even then there is the sense that she was forced into making it by the intensification of the danger in her circumstances. The next step of her journey – from South to North Carolina – was a choice, yes, but one forced because of circumstances. The step following, from North Carolina to Tennessee – was not a choice by any stretch of the imagination. Ultimately, while her journey started out as one she wanted to take, the underlying sense so far is that she did not really have a choice but to go where her journey takes her. This point is important to keep in mind as the Tennessee phase of her journey draws to its close at the end of this section: the point at which Cora is in a situation to make the freest, unforced choice she has the chance to make to this point in the story, and arguably throughout the entire book. .

Other important points to note include the introduction of some important new characters: Homer (the young colored man whose odd relationship with Ridgeway seems grounded in some unusual mind-sets and values); the rough-edged Boseman (whose violence is barely repressed, and who comes across as something of a leashed attack dog); and the man on the street, who turns out to be Cora’s rescuer and, in the following sections, becomes something even more. The most important character in this

section, however, almost more important than Cora in terms of overall function, is Ridgeway.

Ridgeway's appearance in this section is important for several reasons. It is the first time that the narrative shows him in actual relationship and proximity to Cora, the woman he has been pursuing. It vividly portrays a particularly perverse sort of racism (Ridgeway's constantly referring to slaves as "it"); and it provides another opportunity for a history lesson. In this case, Ridgeway's comments about "manifest destiny" sum up one of the key rationalizations for slavery, for racism, and for white dominance of the country that has underpinned the development of America since its earliest beginnigs. These comments come in the context of one of the narrative's most puzzling developments: why in the world would racist slave catcher Ridgeway take prisoner Cora out to dinner? One can almost understand and accept that he would want to walk her through town in chains: the goal is obviously her humiliation. But why treat her to a dinner? And why talk to her in language and tone that, at times, comes across as respectful and compassionate? Yes he tells her humiliating and hurtful things, but for much of his conversation, the tone of what he says is actually relatively civil. What might he be trying to do? What might the author be trying to do? Beyond the humiliation question, there seems to be little or no explanation – unless the whole thing is a set up for that unarguably devastating comment at the evening's end: "maybe he was just a man talking to an outhouse door, waiting for someone to wipe her ass" (223). This comment vividly shows not only Cora's contempt for the man speaking to her, but arguably the author's contempt, and what the author may even assume to be the reader's contempt.

In any case, after starting with such a powerful image of desolation, an image that echoes the inner desolation of protagonist Cora, the chapter closes with yet another cliffhanger, but one with a much more positive feel to it than any of the other cliffhangers to this stage of the story. And here, the point must be made that one cannot help but think that if this narrative were a film, the moment when Cora kicks Ridgeway in the face would elicit a hearty cheer from the audience.

Discussion Question 1

How does the presence of fire in Section 7 - or, more specifically, its aftermath - develop the novel's thematic explorations of imprisonment and torture?

Discussion Question 2

The description of the fight at the end of Section 7 includes a reference to a scream coming from "deep inside" Cora. Which experiences of hers from earlier in the narrative does this comment echo? What are the connections, literal and metaphoric, between those moments and this one?

Discussion Question 3

The description of the fight also includes a reference to the quality of Cora's scream – specifically, its resemblance to a train whistle in a tunnel. What is the metaphoric value of this reference? How do the implications and qualities of a tunnel reflect Cora's experience? What other experiences and metaphors do the references to a train evoke?

Vocabulary

broker, manacle, fetter, glower, imbue, fastidious, affinity, utterance, truism, feral, disreputable, meticulous, tannery, revulsion, ardent, environ, rhetoric, contusion, inconsolable, inscrutable, enviable, pretentious, beguiling, relinquish, conspiracy, blight, fortify, robust, exuberant, jaundice, petulant, cursive, comeuppance, arbitrary, adamant, concede, insolence, devious

Section 8

Summary

Caesar – The narrative flashes back to the events of Section 1: the birthday celebration, the dance, and the beating. This time, the story is told from the point of view of Caesar: his admiration of Cora, and his growing belief that the only way he can escape safely is with her help. “She was a stray through and through, so far off the path it was like she’d already run from the place long ago” (235). Narration describes his anger at “the old white bitch” (Mrs. Garner) for misleading him about the possibilities for freedom; and his gratitude to Mr. Fletcher for encouraging him. He reads the book that Fletcher gave him (Gulliver’s Travels), “the white man in the book … [roving] from peril to peril, each new island a new predicament to solve before he could return home” (235). The chapter concludes with a restatement of his conviction that “with Cora, he’d find the way home” (235).

Indiana, Part 1, pp. 238 – 252. This section begins with a quoted reward for the return of escaped slave Sukey.

The chapter proper then begins with Cora’s struggling to do well in her lessons at the Valentine farm, where she has arrived in the aftermath of the events in Tennessee. Narration describes her friendship with the mother and daughter with whom she stays; her growing, but reluctant, affection for Royal (the man who led her rescue); and her repeated efforts to find out, from the other refugee slaves, if there is any news of Mabel. Again, she hears that her mother may have gone to Canada.

Narration then shifts to a day of festivities on the Valentine farm: a hog roast, a speech from Valentine’s sophisticated wife, and a presentation from a visiting poet. Cora finds it hard to focus: Royal and some of his friends are late getting back from a mission for the underground railroad. As she listens to the poet, Cora (who does not enjoy poetry) finds herself wondering at how wonderful the Valentine farm is, and at how she came to be part of that wonderfulness, even though she still has difficulty trusting it, particularly since she let herself trust too soon in South Carolina. As the music starts, in the aftermath of the poetry, Cora leaves the festivities. She finds Royal waiting for her and worries about the bruises on his face, but he says he is fine. As they sit on the porch of the building where Cora is staying, Royal gives her a present: a new almanac. Narration comments that Cora had “never been the first person to open a book” (252).

Indiana, Part 2, pp. 238 – 253. Cora struggles to find a place on the Valentine farm to fit her work skills, narration commenting that it became difficult for her because of being reminded of the fearful ways of working on the Randall Plantation. In the aftermath of a speech by the charismatic Elijah Lander (one of several speakers who comes regularly to the Valentine farm), Royal takes the uneasy Cora on a buggy ride, eventually ending up at what seems to be an abandoned station on the underground railroad, a station that Cora thinks is the end of the line. Going down to the tracks and seeing the decrepit

nature of the station reminds Cora of the Tennessee station in the aftermath of her being rescued from Ridgeway and Boseman.

Narration then flashes back to that night, describing how Royal and his allies chained Ridgeway tightly and left the dying Boseman. Royal his his allies then took Cora to the station blindfolded, to protect the place's secrecy. The station was beautifully and luxuriously decorated. Narration also describes the train journey, with Cora sleeping on comfortable seats and, when she was awake, learning the history of Valentine (the pale, passable son of a white man and a colored woman) and the farm (which, as Valentine inherited it and got older, became more and more of a refuge for slaves fleeing oppression). Back in the present, Cora becomes more convinced than ever that she has arrived at where she is going to stay, and Royal tells her that she is an essential part of the railroad's story.

Analysis

In the section devoted to analysis of, and commentary on, the character of Caesar, there are several important things to note. The first is its thematically central reference to Cora being a stray, the implication here being that for Caesar, it is her independence, courage, and strength that not only made her a stray and not only keeps her one (i.e. on some inner level, free from the oppression that surrounds her on the plantation): they are qualities he believes he needs to have with him if he is to succeed in his escape attempt. All this, in turn, reinforces the novel's thematic contention that being a stray is a good, and often necessary, thing. The second point to note about the Caesar chapter (for lack of a better term) is the bitterness and betrayal he feels towards those who had helped him. The third point to note is the reference to Gulliver's Travels, a famous work of fiction that, in many structural ways, both echoes and inspires the structure, and to a degree the content, of this work.

Meanwhile, and as the Indiana section of the novel begins, thematic and narrative focus turns to Cora's experiences of freedom. She now has physical freedom associated with life on the farm; emotional freedom associated with having both friendships and a budding romantic relationship (i.e. with Royal); and, perhaps most significantly, intellectual freedom associated with her continuing to learn to read. This latter seems to be most important to and for Cora, and is perhaps similarly important for the book as a whole, given that its climax is defined by the fiery destruction of the Valentine farm's library, which literally and metaphorically symbolizes the apparent destruction of Cora's hopes, as well as the power of racism.

Other important elements in the first part of the Indiana section include another reference to the hypothesized end of Mabel's journey (the truth of which is revealed in Section 10); the tentative beginnings of the Royal / Cora relationship (which climaxes in the following section); and the touching reference to Cora being the first to open a book, a comment that reinforces references earlier in the section, and in the novel, to the relationship between books and freedom.

The second part of the Indiana section is notable for its detailed explanation of what happened on the night Royal rescued Cora from Ridgeway (here again, the narrative deploys the technique of moving back and forth between past and present); for its introduction of the character of Elijah Lander (who plays a significant role in the climax of this part of the book); and the reference to Cora's belief that in arriving at the Valentine farm, she has arrived at the place she is going to stay. There are clear, ironic echoes here of similar earlier feelings, echoes that can be seen as foreshadowing the tragic, violent events in the following section that make up the book's climax.

Discussion Question 1

How does Section 8, both structurally and narratively (i.e. in terms of events and story) explore the theme of the power and influence of memory?

Discussion Question 2

Do you believe Caesar is right to be bitter and angry about the influences that Mrs. Garner and Mr. Fletcher had on his life? Or is he reacting more to the reality of life on the plantation and not to the reality of himself, as encouraged by them?

Discussion Question 3

What is significant about the reference to Cora being given an almanac? What aspect of her journey does this echo? How do the implications of this gift reinforce other aspects of Section 8 relating to books and reading?

Vocabulary

jubilant, venison, brevity, efficiency, fornicate, conspicuous, interloper, peculiarity, reprieve, impel, spacious, sarsaparilla, perseverance, abscond, milliner, diversion, partake, concoction, adjacent, countenance (v.), abomination, imperious, gregarious, prodigious, derision, expedition, dissemination, charisma, manifold (adj.), prestigious, primeval, sedition, promulgate, orthodoxy, imperil, effigy, placid, demeanor, imperturbable, concoction, amalgamation, piebald, forlorn, ramshackle, threshold, terminus, skulk, exploit, enigmatic, impediment, inaugural, liaison, paramour, abate, prominent

Section 9

Summary

Indiana, Part 3, pp. 268 – 278. Cora is cheered by a passing visit from Sam, traveling the railroad as part of his journey out west. He describes how he fled South Carolina in the aftermath of the search for Caesar and Cora; how Caesar was captured and killed; and how Terrance Randall had died.

Royal and Cora then discuss the fact that Cora is now free. It is likely, Royal says, that whoever inherits the farm from Randall will not be as obsessed with her as Randall was. Sam leaves after participating in the Valentine farm's fall festival (in which some of the activities are led by Mingo, a leader in the small community eager to put an end to working with the railroad). Afterwards, Cora spends some time in the library built for the refugees by Valentine's wife. The stories Cora finds there are "the stories of all the colored people she had never known, the stories of black people yet to be born, the foundations of their triumphs" (274).

One night, Cora is met in the library by Valentine. They talk about the future, and the possibility of everyone on the farm moving either north or west, where freedom is more available and less resented. They also talk about an upcoming community meeting that will discuss the same issue. Conversation ends with Cora asking the obviously aging, tiring Valentine why he did what he did: he says he had to, because the white people would not. After he goes, Cora goes back to reading.

Indiana, Part 4, p. 279 – 288. This section begins with references to how the community meeting is attacked and broken up. Narration then flashes back to the night before the meeting, when Cora allowed Royal into the privacy of her room for the first and only time; and how they touched on plans to go to Canada. Narration then describes the meeting, which opens with Valentine speaking about his hopes for the future, based on the decisions of the past. His speech is followed by one from Mingo, who advocates passionately for closing the farm to any more refugee slaves: he argues that having such people there puts everyone in danger because of the desires of slave catchers, and surrounding farmers, to send such escapees back where they came from. He also refers to the inadvisability of harming murderers, a comment he aims at Cora. When it is his turn, Lander speaks about the necessity of keeping both the farm and the railroad going. In the middle of his speech, an attack from white slave-catchers and farmers begins. Lander and Royal are both killed, and Cora is grabbed, in the light of the burning library, by Ridgeway and Homer.

Analysis

Before the narrative gets to the climax of the Indiana section (i.e. the attack by Ridgeway, the capturing of Cora, and the burning of the library), there are a few other

significant moments. First is the return of Sam, a character whose trustworthiness, courage, and ability to survive seems to be close to unparalleled in terms of those with whom Cora develops a relationship. Then there is Royal's comment about Cora being free as a result of Randall's death, which is deeply ironic, given that the farm is surrounded by racist whites who want to see ALL the refugees on the farm sent back "to where they belong." Finally, there is the portrait of the conflict between the uncomfortably practical Mingo and the idealistic Lander.

The most significant, pre-attack development in this section has to do with the relationship between Cora and learning, which deepens as a result of two things. The first is the building of the library, which gives her an opportunity to learn more about the experiences of her entire culture. This is an experience which, it could be argued, relates directly to one of the secondary functions of the book as a whole: to keep the slave-oriented history of the community of African-Americans in the United States alive in cultural memory. The second deepening of the Cora/learning relationship occurs as a result of her unexpectedly frank and intimate conversation with the quietly inspiring Valentine: here again, there is the sense that the character (Valentine) is not only speaking for himself, but for the author. All this makes the previously foreshadowed attack, and the specific reference to the burning of the library in that attack, even more powerful and poignant.

At the conclusion of the Indiana section, the author once again deploys the narrative technique of ending on a moment of powerful and climactic suspense, here enhanced with the somewhat surprising return of Ridgeway and Homer. The violence of these characters is even more vividly apparent as a result of its juxtaposition with the implied intimacy of the Cora / Royal relationship, arguably the first experience of being sensitively, tenderly, and lovingly touched by a man that Cora has ever had.

Discussion Question 1

How does Cora's interest in the library relate to the book's thematic interest in journeys to freedom?

Discussion Question 2

In the difference of opinion between Mingo and Lander, whose opinion do you think is most valid, and why?

Discussion Question 3

Royal and Cora's idea about traveling to Canada is an echo of the experience of which character referred to earlier? How is the reference therefore ironic?

Vocabulary

cleave, garrulous, suffice, hunker, pretext, insinuate, sordid, dissipation, penchant, pariah, treatise, artisan, liable, rectify, eloquent, uppity, adjacent, epithet, precarious, longevity, foment, attune, abscond, fortify, lectern, patriarch, benefactor, grievous

Section 10

Summary

Mabel – This brief chapter begins with a comment on Mabel's thoughts about Cora, the comment followed by a description of her life on the Randall plantation (including her passing relationship with Cora's father) and her sudden decision to leave. Narration describes her journey, her pausing to eat some of the food she took from Ajarry's garden ("The most valuable land in all of Georgia" 294)), her contemplations of her mother's strength – and her decision to go back, based on her feeling of hopelessness, and of love for her daughter. She starts to head back, but is bitten by a poisonous snake and dies, laying herself down "onto a bed of soft moss [that] felt right" (295).

The North – This final section begins with another wanted ad: for "a slave girl called Cora … possibly answering to the name Bessie [and] last seen in Indiana … she has stopped running. Reward remains unclaimed. SHE WAS NEVER PROPERTY" (298). In the aftermath of the attack, Cora is forced to lead the taunting Ridgeway and Homer to the station. As Ridgeway climbs down to the track, Cora attacks him, wounding him enough that she can get away, leaving him with the strangely attentive Homer.

Cora works the handcar on the tracks with all her might, eventually making her way through the darkness of the tunnel towards an unknown future, able to contemplate the wonders of what the railroad's creators had accomplished: "The up-top world must be so ordinary compared to the miracle beneath, the miracle you made with your sweat and blood. The secret triumph you keep in your heart" (304). Eventually, she becomes too tired to keep working the handcar and walks, her hand on the walls of the tunnel. "Her fingers danced over valleys, rivers, the peaks of mountains, the contours of a new nation hidden beneath the old" (304). She weeps for Royal, narration describing how, the night before the meeting, they made love. Eventually, Cora emerges into light and air and openness, not really knowing where she is but glad to be there. She finds her way to a road, where she is eventually taken into a wagon driven by an elderly colored man, who offers her food and tells her that he and his companions are heading west. As Cora eats and travels, she wonders "where he escaped from, how bad it was, and how far he traveled before he put it behind him" (306). There, the book ends.

Analysis

In the first part of this section, the narrative answers the long-lingering question of what happened to Mabel. The revelation not only of her early death, but of her decision to return renders a great deal of what has gone before, in terms of Mabel, ironic: not only the growing bitterness and obsession of Ridgeway, but more importantly, all of Cora's own bitterness and anger. What is particularly interesting about Mabel's story is that her decision can be perceived in one of two ways: as that of a loving parent (i.e. trying to return to her daughter) or as that of a brainwashed slave (i.e. without the courage or the

will to escape). The point must be made that they are not mutually exclusive: as motivations, they are probably inextricably intertwined.

The final part of the book, The North, opens with what might be considered the climax of the prologues: all the wanted slave advertisements that have introduced each of the book's main sections have arguably led to this one, which takes the conventions of the wanted poster (i.e. that the person being sought is a criminal) and turns them right around, suggesting that the escaped slaves referred to in the other posters are, like Cora, in fact freedom fighters, independent-minded and courageous strays in their own right and in their own way. Then the narrative moves quickly and clearly into the details of Cora's escape: her out-thinking and out-fighting of Ridgeway and Homer; her out-lasting fatigue and darkness as she makes her way to true freedom; and her release of powerful emotion (i.e. her grief for Royal) that does not have anything to do with fending off an attack. All of this combines to make this moment of escape, this stage of her journey into freedom, absolutely hers: although it starts as many others did (i.e. with Cora being forced into a situation) she quickly and thoroughly digs into herself and her own resources. Note that this time, she has no one to help her: no Caesar, no Royal, no station master. The power of this multi-layered moment of independence is reinforced by the power of the poetic language referring to the miracle of the tunnel's construction and the references to the new nation beneath the old, both of which have significant metaphoric implications.

The book concludes with final evocations of several themes: Cora has finally realized the goal of her journey to freedom; she has finally realized the value of being a stray for so long, and may in fact no longer feel the need to be a stray. She is finally free of physical chains, and the chains of racism. In her thoughts about the driver she rides with, however, there are indications that she, and those like her, may never be free of the psychological chains that imprisoned them for so long: in this comment, narration also evokes and refers to the theme of the power of memory, in Cora's wondering of what the driver remembers, and how (whether?) he put it behind him. It could be argued that in this final line, the narrative evokes not only Cora's experience, and not only the experience of the entire community of slaves she represents: it also evokes the collective, historical experience of the entire non-Caucasian community in North America. It is not too much of a stretch to see, in this comment, echoes of not only the historical treatment of Native American and Asian cultures, but also echoes of contemporary Muslim experiences. It might not even be too much of a stretch to suggest that the comment can refer to Caucasian collective memory as well: how far, the comment could even be suggesting, will America, and perhaps even the world, have to travel before the suffering caused by racism can be transcended – never forgotten, but left behind?

Discussion Question 1

How does the story of Mabel relate to the book's thematic exploration of the power of chains, imprisonment, and torture?

Discussion Question 2

What are the metaphoric implications of the means of Mabel's death? How might her reasons for returning be considered as similarly poisonous to the venom of the snake?

Discussion Question 3

What are the metaphoric values of the two poetic comments in Section 10: the reference to the tunnel's construction, and the reference to the new nation?

Vocabulary

affliction, dissuade, mayhem, relinquish, degenerate, impassive

Characters

Cora

Cora is the book's central character and protagonist. Developments in the story's plot, themes, representations of history, and emotional resonance are all defined by her values, choices, and experiences. As the story begins, she is somewhere in her mid-to-late teens: the narrative suggests that no slave knows for certain when his or her birthday actually is, and Cora is no exception. By the end of the narrative, there has been no explicitly defined passage of time, but there are indications that weeks, if not months have passed. The narrative does not have the feeling of a year or more having gone by, so it is not likely that she is as much as a year older: but if one measurement of age relates to what a person has lived through, by the time the story reaches its conclusion, Cora may still be a teenager, but she has lived a lifetime.

A particularly interesting aspect of the book is the sense that while Cora is the book's main character, she is more than a little enigmatic, or mysterious. Narrative focus is almost entirely on her, but narrative text does not spend a great deal of time exploring her every thought, every feeling, every intuition or indecision. There are powerfully vivid evocations of strong feelings at moments of intense confrontation, primarily moments in which she interacts, often violently, with those determined to keep her a slave. In contrast, there is a similarly under-written but powerfully significant contrast to this is a moment late in the narrative, in which what seems to be her first act of sexual and emotional intimacy with a man is briefly described, but with the same quality of sudden, almost unexpected emotional intensity. Moments like these aside, for the most part Cora's day-to-day thoughts and emotional processes remain mysterious: the author tends to keep her from the reader as Cora tends to keep herself from those around her – unless the reader looks closely at some of the book's subtler moments.

Such moments include that which takes place at the end of Cora's conversation with Valentine in the library. In its simple, understated reference to Cora going back to her reading, narration clearly, if subtly, reinforces what has been a similarly understated, but essential, aspect of her character: her determination to better herself mentally and intellectually, not just in terms of her physical existence (i.e. where and how she is living). Here is a clear variation on the book's thematic exploration of the journey towards freedom – freedom of the mind, juxtaposed with freedom of the body, both sorts of freedom defining Cora's journey throughout the book.

Ajarry

Ajarry is the first of several characters whose importance to the narrative manifests in two ways - as an element of Cora's story, and as the focus of an individual chapter. In Ajarry's case, she is Cora's grandmother, born in Africa, kidnapped and sold into slavery

in America, moved from owner to owner, and eventually settled on the Randall plantation, which proved to be her home for the rest of her life.

Ajarry is portrayed as being strong willed and independent, traits she passed on to her daughter Mabel and granddaughter Cora. Ajarry also passed on a small plot of land amidst the cluster of ramshackle buildings within which she and the other slaves made their home. That plot of land, for Ajarry and for the two women directly descended from her, marked a kind of freedom, independence, and identity that otherwise would be denied them. Interestingly, Ajarry is also referred to as suggesting to Cora, even when the latter was very young, that to attempt to run away was futile. This is in clear contrast to the desires and actions of both her daughter and granddaughter, who experienced freedom in ways Ajarry never could and never did.

Ridgeway

Ridgeway is the second character in the book to function in two ways - in Cora's story, and in an independent chapter of his own. His primary function in Cora's story is as her principal antagonist: a professional slave catcher, on one level he is simply trying to do his job by pursuing her, catching her, and bringing her back to the Randall plantation. On another level, however, his pursuit (and his violent cruelty) are more personal, as he was the slave catcher sent after Mabel when she fled the Randall plantation, but never managed to catch her. This makes Ridgeway all the more determined to succeed in catching Cora, and also makes him more angry, resentful, and cruel towards her. He eventually meets his end when Cora fights her way free of him, leaving him fatally wounded in an abandoned station of the underground railroad.

Stevens

Dr. Stevens is the third character in the book to function as part of Cora's story, as well as the protagonist of his own chapter. The white Stevens is a seemingly well-intentioned doctor in the community in South Carolina where Cora first takes refuge after her escape from the Randall plantation. Initially, she likes him and feels comfortable with him: he treats her with relative care during her first ever medical exam. Even then, though, she feels uneasy when he proposes that she join an experimental sterilization program for the escaped slaves. Later, that discomfort increases when Cora learns that Stevens is one of the leaders of a program in which white political and medical authorities treat the escaped slaves as guinea pigs in a number of scientific experiments. Her encounters with Stevens (who, narration reveals, is also a grave robber) are part of the experiences that lead Cora (and the reader) to an understanding of just how there are / were different sorts of racism at work in America.

Ethel

The stern Ethel Wells is another character who both plays a role in the main narrative and has a chapter devoted to her. In Ethel's case, that chapter explores her family

history (in which her father had regular sexual relations with the young female slave who had once been Ethel's best friend); reveals her intense Christian faith, and concurrent desire to be a missionary. Ethel believes that when Cora comes to stay with her and her husband, Ethel finally has a "savage" she can truly minister to, and save. In the main narrative, Ethel is angrily reluctant to provide shelter for Cora, but does so anyway, albeit with a bad grace. The narrative does not explicitly say so, but there is the clear implication that Ethel dies as a race traitor in the aftermath of Cora being discovered.

Caesar

Caesar is perhaps the most narratively important of all the secondary characters who have a role in both the main story and in the a chapter of their own. Caesar, like Cora, is a slave on the Randall plantation. Unlike Cora, though, Caesar has a history of being a free man, but was taken into custody by slavers in the aftermath of the death of his seemingly open-minded white mistress.

Caesar persuades Cora to run away with him, and manages to make it safely to the first stop on the underground railroad that the two of them reach. There are hints that he harbors some kind of romantic feeling for Cora, but there are also hints that Cora is very clear that she wants nothing of that sort in their relationship. Both Caesar and Cora become comfortable and complacent in South Carolina, feeling like they are safe and welcome when, in fact, and as they discover, they are not. Caesar disappears in the wake of a slave-catcher attack (led by Ridgeway), with the narrative eventually revealing that he was, in fact, killed.

Mabel

Mabel is Cora's mother, and the last of several characters to play a duel role in the narrative - as part of Cora's story, and as the central character in her own story, which, interestingly, appears close to the end of Cora's story / journey. Up to that point, Mabel has been portrayed as having successfully escaped, and perceived as having abandoned her resentful daughter in order to do so. The chapter in which she is the central character, however, reveals that she barely got away from the Randall plantation when she realized that it would probably be better for her, and for her daughter, for her to go back. The irony is that she is bitten and killed by a poisonous snake as she starts to return: therefore, the narrative portrays her as being neither the successful escapee that so many people think she is, nor the abandoning mother that Cora bitterly believes her to have been.

(Georgia) Lovey

Lovey is another slave on the Randall plantation. She figures out what Cora and Caesar are doing, and follows them on their escape. She is recaptured, and the narrative

eventually realized that she was tortured and killed for having even tried to run away. Lovey is portrayed as being emotional, sensitive, and somewhat unintelligent.

The Randall Family

The Randall family owns the plantation where Cora, Caesar, and many other characters are slaves. The original owner, Mr. Randall, died before the story begins, leaving the place in the control of his two sons, the evil and controlling Terrance, and the more compassionate and open-minded James. Upon James' death, control of the plantation passes to Terrance, whose running of the place proves to be as sadistic as the slaves had feared. He becomes obsessed with the idea of Cora being returned and tortured, but dies (as the result of living a dissolute life) before he can see it happen.

Mrs. Garner, Mr. Fletcher

These two characters, both white, are well-intentioned allies of escaped slave Caesar. The elderly Mrs. Garner once owned him, giving him an education, a trade, and a sense of self-worth; Mr. Fletcher bought some of the things Caesar made and told him about the underground railroad. Mrs. Garner dies before the story begins: the story of what happened to her estate is also the story of how the once-free Caesar came to be a slave. Mr. Fletcher presumably dies when his role in the establishment and function of the underground railroad is discovered, and ended, by Ridgeway.

Lumbly

Lumbly is the white station master at the Georgia stop of the underground railroad, the stop where Cora and Caesar begin their journey to freedom. He is a strong silent type, committed to the cause without being over-intense about it.

(South Carolina) Sam

Sam is the friendly, talkative station master at the South Carolina stop of the underground railroad. He supplies Cora and Caesar with their new identities, and helps them start their new lives. He approaches them with news of when trains will be coming through, offering them opportunities to continue their journey that they refuse - with unfortunate consequences. Sam tells them when the slave catchers are drawing close, helps Cora escape, and tries to do the same for Caesar, but is unsuccessful. Cora has one more encounter with Sam late in the narrative: when he stops off at the Valentine farm in Indiana, where Cora has ended up. At that point, he tells her what has happened in the various places that she has left behind, and that he is tired of the struggle and is moving to freedom in the West.

(North Carolina) Martin Wells

Martin is the husband of Ethel Wells, and the white station master at the North Carolina stop of the underground railroad. He is a reluctant station master (a clear contrast to the other two encountered by Cora), having inherited the responsibility from his abolitionist father. Martin is friendlier towards Cora than Ethel, but still fears what might happen to him and his wife if they are caught sheltering an escaped slave. His fears come true when Fiona reports Martin and Ethel to the authorities: Martin and his wife are both presumably killed when the truth is revealed.

Fiona

Fiona is the spiteful Irish servant of Martin and Ethel Wells. Initially, she seems to have no suspicions of Cora's presence in the Wells home, but the narrative eventually reveals that she has wondered about something going on all along, eventually betraying the Wells' to the authorities. She is portrayed as reveling viciously in her new-found notoriety, in the success of her plan, and in the reward she receives from Ridgeway for her role in helping him capture Cora.

(Tennessee) Homer

Homer is the "colored" servant and assistant to slave catcher Ridgeway. Portrayed as being somewhat strange in behavior and perspective, he is described as being freed, but as choosing to work with Ridgeway because he knows he will be safer. He defends Ridgeway during the attack that frees Cora, and also supports Ridgeway on his attack on the colony of escaped slaves in Indiana that defines the book's climax.

Boseman

Boseman is the second of Ridgeway's "associates" in his slave-catching enterprise. White, violent, and uncouth, his attempted sexual assault on Cora is the context and trigger for the attack that eventually frees her, an attack in which Boseman dies.

Royal

Royal, a "colored" man whom Cora first sees on the streets of the Tennessee town to which she is taken by Ridgeway, is also the leader of the team of escaped slaves that rescues her. Later in the narrative, after he takes Cora to the refuge for escaped slaves in Indiana, he continues his activities working for the underground railroad and saving others. He and Cora develop a kind of emotional intimacy that Cora had never experienced before, an intimacy that leads them to Cora's first ever consensual sexual encounter - one that she actually enjoys. Royal is killed by the Ridgeway-led raid on the Valentine farm / refuge.

(Indiana) Valentine

Valentine is the landowner who runs the large, busy farm where Cora and several other escaped slaves take refuge. Elderly, intelligent, and "colored" but able to pass as white, Valentine is a wise, fatherly, mentor figure to Cora and the other escaped slaves who live on his property. He is killed in the Ridgeway-led raid on the farm.

Elijah Lander

The intellectual, poetic-spoken Elijah is a frequent visitor to the Valentine farm, and is given frequent opportunities to speak to the escaped slaves who live there about the possibilities for freedom not only in the North, but in the South as well. Inspiring and passionate, articulate and somewhat eccentric, Elijah is killed in the raid on the farm.

Mingo

Escaped slave Mingo also lives on the Valentine farm, but has a different perspective on its existence than either of its other two influences, Valentine and Lander. For Mingo, the farm's practice of accepting escaped slaves as residents puts the entire community in danger from slave catchers and angry, resentful whites. His advocacy for the closing of the farm's gates to any more escaped slaves (particularly those, like Cora, that he sees as being "murderers"), divides the community, and is a key part of the gathering that takes place on the night of the raid. There are references in narration, in fact, to the possibility that Mingo informed the angry white community around the farm about the meeting, in the hopes that an attack would prove his point about how dangerous it was / is to be there, and to harbor escaped slaves.

Symbols and Symbolism

The Underground Railroad

In North American history, the underground railroad is the name given to a loosely affiliated network of homes and other safe places that aided in the movement of escaped slaves from the American South to the North, and at times into Canada. The historical railroad was not an actual railroad: it was just a chain of stopping points, or stations, along the way. The novel turns that metaphorical railroad into a literal one, positing the creation of a series of tunnels, tracks, and railway cars that actually provided physical transportation for escaping slaves. This is an entirely fictitious creation: in historical fact, there was no such literal railroad. Both the history and fictionalized railroad, however, have symbolic meaning in common: to the escaping slave, and to those that helped them, the railroad meant / means freedom.

Almanacs

An almanac is a collection of weather forecasts, suggested planting dates for farmers, and occasionally anecdotes or stories. Published annually, many almanacs become a kind of bible for those involved in the agricultural industry, and at times even for those who rely on such industries. The term "bible" is deliberately chosen here, because almanacs appear throughout the novel not only as Cora's favorite form of reading, but because she favors the truths found in almanacs over the truths she is told to find in the Bible. Almanacs, for her, represent not only information, but also joy, freedom (i.e. slaves are not supposed to be able to read), and connection with what she believes to be truths about life and existence.

Fire

Throughout the narrative, fire and its after-effects are representative of the destructive side of racist attitudes. Stations on the underground railroad are burned down; the Valentine farm in Indiana, a populous refuge for escaped slaves, is likely burned down; and after she has been captured by slave catcher Ridgeway, Cora travels through an area of Tennessee that has been destroyed by fire. For further consideration of this aspect of her journey, see "The Burned Lands" below.

Ajarry's Garden

Cora's grandmother Ajarry carved out, and protected, a small plot of land in the slave quarters of the Randall plantation where she was kept. It was, for her, a symbol of at least a small amount of independence and freedom. Both Cora's mother Mabel and Cora herself viewed it as such, with Cora at one point resorting to violence in order to defend it. As the result of her actions, part of her punishment is being banished from the

land, but she still considers it to be hers. Its presence and meaning is an inspiration for her to eventually leave in search of true, complete freedom.

(Georgia) The Hob

The Hob is the name given to the dormitory on the Randall plantation where rebellious or unproductive slaves are sent to live. The living conditions there are even worse than in the regular slave quarters, and those who live there (the narrative suggests that they are mostly women) deteriorate quickly, both psychologically and physically. Cora is sent to live in The Hob in the aftermath of her violent attack on the slave who tried to take over Ajarry's garden (see above). The intolerability of the living circumstances there is another reason why Cora is driven to make the dangerous attempt to leave the plantation.

Caesar's Book

In Section 8 of the novel, the narrative flashes back to the events and time frame of Section 1 - specifically, the life lived on the Randall plantation by Caesar and Cora. At a point relatively late in the novel, something is revealed that increases the reader's understanding of what happened at the beginning: this is the revelation not only that Caesar can read, but that he owns a book - Gulliver's Travels, the story of one man's journey through a series of strange lands. For Caesar, the book represents inspiration and possibility: for the reader, the book represents insight into a character that had, up to this point, been more than a little enigmatic.

(South Carolina) The Griffin Building

For Cora, the tall and imposing Griffin building, where her first employer works and where she receives her first proper medical examination, represents the accomplishments and success that are possible with freedom. It represents power; it represents hope; and it represents possibility.

The Museum of Natural Wonders

This museum, established by well-intentioned white citizens in the South Carolina town where she has her first taste of freedom, contains a series of exhibits that purports to sympathetically, and accurately, portray the experiences of Africans brought to America. Cora gets a job there as a kind of living mannequin, enacting elements of the lives being portrayed. At first she enjoys her job, but realizes that her work, and the museum as a whole, are in fact a component of a white plan to continue subjugating and controlling the "colored" people not only of South Carolina, but of America.

(North Carolina) The Freedom Road

After escaping from South Carolina, Cora makes her way to North Carolina, where she is met by Martin Wells, the station master for the underground railroad. As he takes her to refuge in his home, he drives her down what is called The Freedom Road, which is lined by a series of scaffolds and trees from which are hung the tortured, mutilated, and dead bodies of escaping slaves and those who helped them. In short, The Freedom Road is the deeply ironic name for a journey-way that is, in fact, a warning about the ultimate imprisonment: death, for those who would challenge the ways of the land.

The Park

Across from the home of Martin and Ethel Wells, where Cora is kept a free prisoner in their attic, there is a park which seems to be a place where the citizens of the town can experience and celebrate a kind of freedom, but which, Cora comes to see and understand, is actually a place where those same citizens celebrate the torture and imprisonment of escaped slaves. She also comes to realize that those citizens are, in fact, imprisoned by old beliefs, meaning that the openness of the park is an ironic one, at the least.

(Tennessee) The Burned Lands

As noted above, fire and its after effects are powerful symbols of the suffering imposed on "coloreds", and on those who would help them be free, by those whose attitudes towards non-whites are grounded in prejudice and violence. When Cora is captured by the slave catcher Ridgeway, she is transported through Tennessee. There is a clear metaphoric connection here between Cora's physical and emotional state (i.e. returned to the physical and emotional chains of slavery) and the total destruction of the land through which she is being transported.

(Indiana) The Valentine Farm

After being rescued from Ridgeway by Royal, an operative of the underground railroad, Cora is taken to the more northern state of Indiana, and begins the next phase of her life at the home-farm of a man named Valentine, and his wife. For Cora, for the other escaped slaves who live there, and for those who resent the fact that there is even such a thing as an escaped slave, the farm represents openness, freedom, and safety. For Cora and the other slaves this is, of course, a positive thing: for those who resent any kind of freedom for any kind of non-white, this is a bad thing, and triggers the desire to destroy the farm and those who live there.

The Valentine Library

While Cora is living and working on the Valentine farm, its owners decide to move their collection of books and other reading material into a separate building, so they can have a little more privacy in their home. The library is, for Cora, an opportunity to develop her mind and spirit, her inner sense of freedom, even more than the few books she'd had an opportunity to read previously. For Valentine himself, the library is one of the more important gifts he has to offer those to whom he has given refuge. For those who resent the farms existence, the library represents much the same thing: hence, it becomes one of the central targets of those who attack the farm and set fire to much of it. One of the final images associated with Cora's escape is that of the fire burning, its symbolic meaning (freedom) coming to an end in the same moment as her own literal freedom.

Settings

America

The United States of America, with its centuries-long history of tensions between races (i.e. Caucasian and non-Caucasian) is the broad strokes setting for the novel. It takes place at a time when the states of the union were in the early stages of race-defined divisions that would eventually lead to civil war in the early-to-mid 1860's.

The Early 1800's

This is the period of time in which the novel is set. It is a period where the slave trade, and the building of the American economy on that trade, was close to, or at, its peak. It is also the period when divisions between the Northern states (in which slavery was rejected) and the Southern (in which slavery was regarded as not only essential, but morally and Biblically correct) started to become more and more apparent.

Georgia

Georgia is the first of several southern states in which the main action of the story is set. The Randall plantation, where Cora and her ancestors were enslaved, is based there. Georgia is the setting for Cora's first journey on the underground railroad, which takes her to the second of the narrative's key southern states.

South Carolina

After leaving Georgia, Cora is taken to the seemingly much more welcoming South Carolina, where she is given a new identity, a new life, and a new sense of freedom. Eventually, however, it all turns out to be an illusion, and she is forced to flee potential capture and make another escape, this time to another Southern state.

North Carolina

Following a journey on the underground railroad that takes her out of South Carolina, Cora finds herself in that state's Northern neighbor. There, she is given refuge by Martin and Ethel Wells, who conceal her in their attic until they can uncover an opportunity to put her back on the underground railroad. That opportunity never comes: Cora and the Wells' are betrayed to the authorities, and Cora is captured.

Tennessee

Tennessee is the setting for the section of the narrative that describes Cora's experiences in the aftermath of being captured in North Carolina. This setting has a particularly vivid metaphoric connection to the experiences of the book's central character: see "Symbols and Symbolism: The Burned Lands".

Indiana

Eventually, after being rescued from the control of Ridgeway and being taken out of Tennessee, Cora is taken to a farm in Indiana, the setting for the book's climax. There, she has an experience of freedom unlike that which she has ever had before, and has an experience of racially-defined violence also unlike that which she has had before. Again, she is forced to make a violent escape.

The North

The novel's final main setting is glimpsed only briefly, but is arguably its most significant. The exact part of The North into which Cora emerges after fleeing Indiana is not named, but there is a clear sense that she has finally reached her goal: The North is the setting for Cora's ultimate realization of true freedom - or at least its potential.

Themes and Motifs

Journeys to Freedom

Cora's physical journey from enslavement to liberty is the primary example of the book's main theme of a journey to freedom; Cora's journey is physical, emotional, and mental.

Each stage of that journey – on foot, via train and wagon, simultaneously running away and running toward – takes her closer to the realization of true freedom. Here it is important to note that for almost all of the book, what Cora thinks is freedom is, in fact, an illusion. This is true of the small, limited freedom (associated with what she thinks of as her plot of land) that she feels on the Randall plantation; of her movement forward into what looks like freedom but which is, in fact, almost as limited as the overt slavery she left behind in South Carolina; of her movement into a freedom in North Carolina that looks a lot like imprisonment; and of her eventual move to Indiana into the closest thing to true freedom that she has ever known. Only when she emerges from the darkness of the last trip she takes on the underground railroad into the light of an unknown part of the world does Cora encounter the possibilities associated with true liberty – that is, The North.

There are also other aspects of Cora's journey to freedom that are experienced more inwardly than outwardly, transformations that relate to her mind, heart, and spirit while, at the same time, shaping and being shaped by transformations triggered by her physical journey. Throughout the book, as she feels herself becoming physically more free (even if that freedom is an illusion), her determination to read and improve her mind leads her to become more intellectually free. That experience of freedom begins in South Carolina, where she is taught to read; continues in North Carolina, where the suffering of her physical imprisonment is eased somewhat by the opportunity to continue to strengthen her reading; and then in Indiana, she spends as much time as she can in the library on the Valentine farm where she has taken refuge.

Also in Indiana, when she feels more physically and intellectually free than ever, Cora becomes psychologically and emotionally free enough to fully engage in sexual and emotional intimacy with a man for the first time. Finally, her ongoing, and repeated, resistance to the limited teachings of Christianity and the Bible make her spiritually free to find her own experiences of faith, of spirit-defined compassion, and of joy.

All of these images and experiences of freedom, illusory or otherwise, are intensified as the result of their juxtaposition with their contrasting opposite – another of the book's central themes and motifs, images and experiences of chains, imprisonment, and torture.

Chains, Imprisonment, and Torture

The novel's explorations of confinement and suffering are physical, mental, and metaphorical.

The most obvious of these explorations are the frequent, chilling references to actual physical chains, shackles, and instruments of torture. One of the most vivid, and deeply ironic, of these is the description of how the walls of the barn of station master Lumbly are covered with such things, probably there as camouflage to protect and hide the entrance to the underground railroad beneath the barn floor, and quite possibly left behind by slaves who used the barn as a conduit for escape. There are similar evocations of physical torture and suffering throughout the book, from descriptions of the means of restraining captured slaves in the back of Ridgeway's wagon to the frighteningly, chillingly brief sketching of the sufferings of captured escapee Lovey back at the Randall plantation, to the less physically painful, but no less confining, imprisonment Cora experiences while hiding out with the Wells' in North Carolina.

Here it is important to note that all these manifestations of physical imprisonment are essentially external representations of the moral, financial, and psychological (inner) imprisonment experienced by Cora and other slaves, escapees or those still on the plantation. They are taught by action, words, and attitudes from the time they are born that they are inferior, that they are meant to be poor, and that they are lesser human beings. As such, Cora and other slaves determined to escape their lot also have to break free of the psychological restraints placed on them by the constant re-indoctrination of these fundamental principles of their existence. Cora and a few others manage to succeed, but it is not easy: many fail. A key example of this is Mabel, whose decision to return to the Randall plantation after only a few hours of freedom is partially defined by her longing for her daughter, but more significantly defined by her belief that she cannot exist apart from everything that has defined her life to this point.

Both the physical and psychological chains within which Cora and the other slaves live their lives, or are expected to live their lives, are forged within the fires of racism, manifestations of which form the third major theme, or motif, at work in the novel.

Manifestations of Racism

Various forms of chaining, imprisonment, and torture are only the most overt manifestations of the novel's thematically essential portrait of different aspects of racism. The presence and perceived necessity of physical chains, of economically-forged chains that keep the slaves as the work force fueling the engine of the American economy of the time, and of morality-forged chains that all kept slaves subjugated and controlled have, in the novel as in history, their fundamental basis in the belief that the African race (or any non-Caucasian race, for that matter) is essentially, intrinsically, inescapably inferior. This attitude, held by the majority of the white characters in the book, manifests on a continuum: from the consistent, repeated references by slave catcher Ridgeway throughout the book to individual slaves as "it," through to the well-

intentioned but ultimately patronizing view, held by Dr. Stevens in South Carolina, of escaped slaves as potential medical subjects. Then there's the Christianity-defined belief, held by Emma Wells in North Carolina, that the African "savages" can only be rescued from their savagery by the teachings of the Bible, a perspective that foreshadows the views of whites in Indiana, led by Ridgeway, who react with murderous violence to the prospect of a community of "coloreds" learning, working together, having agricultural and economic success, and developing the potential to become independent.

All these manifestations of racism, overt and otherwise, can be seen as primary obstacles for escaping slaves like Cora to overcome as they attempt their journeys towards freedom: both literal chains and the chains of racist attitude. What makes this aspect of the story and its themes even more of an obstacle is the fact that these attitudes do not only exist in the present, as the slaves are making their attempts: they also exist in memory, in the past, and have in many ways defined the lives of both slave and captor for generations. This sense of inheritance, in both racism and its effects, is a manifestation of the book's fourth central theme: its exploration of the role of memory and history in defining action.

The Influences of Memory and the Past

Many of Cora's actions throughout the narrative are motivated and/or triggered by one kind of memory or another. Her initial decision to refuse Caesar's invitation to escape, for example, emerges as a result of Cora's memories of how important the small piece of land was to the women that she inherited it from, her mother and grandmother. When she changes her mind and goes with him, her desperation to not get caught is influenced by her memory of how cruelly she and other slaves were treated, both when they escaped and when they stayed.

Similar patterns of relationship between memory and action continue throughout the narrative, playing a defining role in the action and in the structure of the novel as a whole: there are frequent instances in which the action of a chapter is halted for a moment while the narrative describes an incident in the characters' past, the idea being that while memory may not play an active, conscious role in choice and decision (as it does in the examples identified above) it can, and often does, play a sub-conscious role.

Cora is not the only character whose actions are defined by memory. The actions of other characters, ranging from principal characters like Caesar to relatively minor characters like Emma Wells, are all portrayed as having their roots in experiences in the past that the characters may or may not consciously recall, but which have had a profound effect on who they are in the present.

In the bigger picture of the novel's identity and function, there is the strong sense that one of its core elements is a sense, or experience, of cultural and/or racial memory – specifically, the long memory of American society of the slave era, of the atrocities

perpetrated upon sentient human beings at the time, and, perhaps most importantly, the memory of the African-American community of those same atrocities. It could be argued that, while it is still a work of fiction, and one with a somewhat fantastical element (the physical underground railroad), the book is inescapably grounded in an actual historical context, making its very present-day existence a reflection of a past that, in the bigger scheme of things, was not really all that long ago.

Being a “Stray”

Cora’s journey would not have taken place if it were not for her sense of herself as a stray – that is, someone who lives life away from, or outside of, the boundaries of what has been defined as appropriate, necessary, or true. This idea, this theme, is referred to only a few times, and relatively late in the narrative. It is the last reference, in the chapter about Caesar’s decision to leave the Randall plantation (in Section 8) that is the most telling, and the most relevant. It is important to remember that his thought that “she was a stray through and through, so far off the path it was like she’d already run from the place long ago” (235) is based on what he knows of Cora from their time as slaves on the plantation, and without actually having spent much time with her. In other words, he gets this impression from who she seems to be when she is young; when she is physically and mentally enslaved; and before she has any sense at all of what actual freedom might be. Stray meaning what it does, there is a sense that Cora, on a deep, deep intuitive level, knows what it means to feel free without knowing how it feels to BE free. Imagine this quote at the beginning of the story, placed in relation to the chronological order of events: there and then, it becomes possible to see it as a defining element of everything in her life that follows.

This sense of Cora being a stray, not being bound by rules or conventions or traditions, carries on throughout the narrative. It fuels her experience of traveling towards freedom; it fuels her raw, visceral, emotional reactions to assault and attempted repression (everything from the attempt to take over her patch of land on the plantation to the attempt to recapture her to her escape from Ridgeway at the book’s climax); and, in general, it fuels and defines her intention to live her life on her own terms. It is the source of her, and the book’s experience and exploration of freedom, for that too is something else that defines the experience of being a stray: an experience of moving, deliberately or otherwise, away from that which has been confining, restrictive, or destructive.

Styles

Point of View

Primarily, the story is told from the third person limited point of view – from the perspective of, and focusing on the experiences of, protagonist Cora. In general, this means that the perspectives, intentions, and actions of the other characters are viewed, or portrayed, in the same way as she would view, portray, or interpret them. It is important to note that even though the main story is told from Cora's point of view, the narrative does not go too deeply into her inner life. There is not a great deal of explanation or exploration, of what she thinks, feels, or imagines. Much of what the reader learns about Cora comes through glimpses, albeit extremely vivid ones, of her psychological, emotional, or spiritual life. She is, nevertheless, a powerfully engaging and affecting protagonist.

Meanwhile, there are frequent shifts into the experiences, history, and point of view of other characters; in fact, the novel starts in just such a place, telling the story of Cora's grandmother, Ajarry. Other, similarly short chapters interrupt the action at key, suspenseful points, often going back in time to offer background, explanation, or insight in relation to characters that Cora encounters, minor characters like Stevens and Ethel Wells, and more significant characters like Mabel and Caesar. These shifts in point of view broaden the book's narrative and thematic scope, giving its exploration of both story and theme additional information, perspectives, and meaning.

In terms of thematic point of view, the book anchors its narrative in the fundamental perspective that slavery is evil, destructive not only of individual body and spirit but also the body and spirit of an entire community of people – slaves imported from Africa, born into different cultures and ways of life in another part of the world, and viewed by the culture into which they were sold as sub-human. There is a sense here that the stories of individuals are also the stories of their community – Cora's freedom, and Caesar and Lovey's torturous deaths, are the contrasting sides of the colored / negro / black / African-American experience as the disposable labor upon which the American Dream was built.

Language and Meaning

For the most part, the language of the book is accessible and engaging. Its vocabulary is expansive but not intimidating, while its descriptions, particularly of the tortures suffered by the slaves, are vivid and evocative without being gory: the latter are all the more powerful for being somewhat underwritten – that is, leaving much to the imagination.

While there are shifts in point of view that go into the minds and experiences of other characters, these explorations are not set down in individualized voices: the author's

style does not really shift when the point of view shifts. The book's use of language and writing style is effective in simultaneously keeping much of what goes on with Cora quite secret while, at the same time, offering powerful and often shocking insights into the depths and ferocity of her feelings, drives, and desires.

One of the most noteworthy elements about the book's use of language, and development of meaning, is its use of racial epithets and slang. The word "nigger" appears frequently, as does the word "colored." The word "negro" is also present, but appears less frequently. All three are viewed, in current thinking, as inappropriately racist in origin and connotation, but here all three are used appropriately and within the context of attitudes and language usage of the time – in other words, it was the way people of both races talked about those who are now referred to as "African-American" or "black." Perhaps even more powerfully evocative of the time, and more specifically of the prevalent attitudes towards black people in general and slaves in particular, is the language that comes out of the mouth of slave catcher Ridgeway. He never fails to refer to a slave, escaped or otherwise, as "it" – never he, never she, always "it". This is perhaps the ultimate example in the book of how the white culture of the time viewed those it had enslaved – as things without individual identities as people. Meanwhile, the use of all these terms can be seen as a manifestation of the book's thematic interest in chains and imprisonment: words such as "nigger," "colored," and "it," in this context, can be seen as being just as confining, in their way, as shackles around the ankle, wrist, or neck.

Structure

The book's overall structure is one of its more intriguing narrative elements. The main narrative – that is, the story of Cora and her journey to freedom – takes primary focus, but is interrupted at key points by interjections of narrative focusing on other characters, interruptions that leave the reader in suspense about what is going to happen to Cora next. Perhaps the most vivid example of this occurs in the aftermath of events in the book's second to last Cora-related chapter (Indiana). That chapter ends with Cora being dragged away from the destruction of the farm that became her home, leaving the reader to imagine the worst for her. At that moment, the narrative then interjects the story of Cora's mother Mabel, leaving the reader hanging and curious about what is going to happen to Cora. Here it is interesting to note that the content of the Mabel chapter describes her failure to escape to freedom, and her death: there is the sense, given what has just gone before, that what is to come after might just portray Cora's own failure and death.

Another noteworthy point about the book's structure relates to a reference made in the interjection focusing on Caesar on his reading, and becoming inspired by, the book Gulliver's Travels. The book is the story of a man who, among other things, journeys through a series of strange new lands and discovers truths about his home society. There are both structural and thematic echoes of that book in this one: Cora's journeys through various Southern states can be seen as paralleling journeys made by Gulliver through various fantastical countries, while Gulliver's discoveries of different cultures

are echoed in Cora's discoveries of the cultures of the different states. Some of those latter cultures are more defined by the views and perspectives of individuals than by those of government or culture. Her experiences of safety and peace in Indiana, for example, are the result of her coming into the "culture" of the Valentine farm, an oasis of civility and racial dignity surrounded by a hateful desert of racism. But there is an important distinction to note here: Gulliver's Travels is, at heart, a comic (but pointed) satire, an exaggeration of cultural and societal elements its author intended to critique. Underground Railroad, by contrast, is not satire: it is, for the most part, a pointed and all-too-vividly real portrait of history (the exception, of course, is the portrait of the underground railroad as an actual, physical object).

Quotes

Each thing had a value and as the value changed, everything else changed also … in America the quirk was that people were things. Best to cut your losses on an old man who won't survive a trip across the ocean. A young buck from strong tribal stock got customers into a froth. A slave girl squeezing out pups was like a mint, money that bred money. If you were a thing – a cart or a horse or a slave – your value determined your possibilities. [Ajarry] minded her place."
-- Narration (Section 1 - Ajarry)

Importance: In this quote, narration sums an essential element of the experience of being a slave in America at the time in which the story is set (the early 1800's): a slave was less than human, and more replaceable than an object. This is the kind of psychological chaining from which Cora and other escaping slaves made desperate efforts to flee.

What did you get for that, for knowing the day you were born into the white man's world? It didn't seem like the thing to remember. More like to forget.
-- Narration (Section 1 – Georgia, Part 2)

Importance: This quote sums up Cora's feelings about birthdays - and arguably, about having been born at all. The attitude is a reflection of the misery in which she and other slaves spend most of their lives: why celebrate being born if life is only suffering?

…Michael's former master was fascinated by the abilities of South American parrots and reasoned that if a bird could be taught limericks, a slave might be taught to remember as well. Merely glancing at the size of the skulls told you that a nigger possessed a bigger brain than a bird."
-- Narration (Section 1 – Georgia, Part 3)

Importance: This quote, made in reference to Michael, a slave who could quote large sections of the U.S. Constitution, illustrates the culturally persuasive attitude towards "niggers." Note how the use of the culturally appropriate term gives the seemingly broad minded idea a feeling of the true attitude behind the people who are offering the idea.

At some point during the show everyone had to turn away, if only for a moment, as they considered the slave's pain and the day sooner or later when it would be their turn at the foul end of the lash. That was you up there even when it was not. But Caesar did not flinch. He didn't seek her eyes but looked at something beyond her, something great and difficult to make out."
-- Narration (Section 2 – Georgia, Part 4)

Importance: This quote, made in reference to Caesar's reaction to the beatings suffered by Cora in the aftermath of her attempt to protect another slave, foreshadows Caesar's later-explained determination to have her as his companion on his escape.

Their fear called after them even if no-one else did. They had six hours until their disappearance was discovered and another one or two before the posses reached where they were now. But fear was already in pursuit, as it had been every day on the plantation, and it matched their pace.
-- Narration (Section 2 – Georgia, Part 5)

Importance: This quote refers to the way fear was something that slaves like Cora and Caesar lived with every day of their lives, and how on some level, the fear of being caught and punished for trying to escape was not really much different, or even much more intense.

How many hands had it required to make this place? And the tunnels beyond, wherever and how far they led? She thought of the [cotton] picking, how it raced down the furrows at harvest, the African bodies working as one, as fast as their strength permitted … but not one of them could be prideful of their labor. It had been stolen from them. Bled from them. The tunnel, the tracks, the desperate souls who found salvation in the coordination of its stations and timetables – this was a marvel to be proud of. She wondered if those who had built this thing had received their proper reward.
-- Narration (Section 2 - Georgia, Part 6.)

Importance: This quote marks the first point in the book that Cora makes the connection between the existence of the tunnels and the fact that they were carved out by slaves - or, more specifically, by the people they were designed and constructed to save. The image here is of slaves helping themselves, and of their work finally being put to a use that benefits them, and not their white owners.

Having tasted freedom’s bounty, it was incomprehensible to Cora that Mabel had abandoned her to that hell. A child. Her company would have made the escape more difficult, but Cora hadn’t been a baby. If she could pick cotton, she could run …
-- Narration (Section 3 - South Carolina, Part 2)

Importance: This quote reveals, in fairly clear terms, Cora's resentful bitterness of having been, as she sees it, abandoned by her mother. The irony is that later in the narrative, the truth is revealed about Mabel's "desertion" of her daughter, a truth that suggests that Cora ultimately has no real reason to be so angry with her mother.

… nobody wanted to speak on the true disposition of the world. And no one wanted to hear it. Certainly not the white monsters on the other side of the exhibit at that very moment, pushing their greasy snouts against the window, sneering and hooting. Truth was a changing display in a shop window, manipulated by hands when you weren’t looking, alluring and ever out of reach.
-- Narration (Section 4 - South Carolina, Part 3)

Importance: This quote is part of the narrative description of how Cora moves from being contently occupied in the exhibit towards being angry, resentful, and aware that what is professed to be a passing on of information is intended to be a perpetuation of stereotypes and racist attitudes.

The weak link – she liked the ring of it. To seek the imperfection in the chain that keeps you in bondage. Taken individually, the link was not much. But in concert with its fellows, a mighty iron that subjugated millions despite its weakness … if she kept at it, chipping away at weak links wherever she found them, it might add up to something."
-- Narration (Section 4 – South Carolina, Part 3)

Importance: This quote contains a particularly interesting, and thematically relevant, metaphor. The concept of "link" in this quote refers to chains, and more specifically the sort of chains that kept slaves like Cora in what was believed to be their place. The concept of the weakest link, therefore, can be seen as referring to the weakest link not in a physical chain, but the "chain" of racism-defined dominance and control under which Cora and the other slaves constantly, and consistently, suffer.

Did it bother the Irish and Germans to do nigger work, or did the surety of wages erase dishonor? Penniless whites took over the rows from penniless blacks, except at the end of the week the whites were no longer penniless. Unlike their darker brethren, they could pay off their contracts with their salaries and start a new chapter."
-- Narration (Section 6 - North Carolina, Part 3)

Importance: This quote is significant on several levels. On one, it suggests that the economic and political powers that drove the establishment and continuation of slavery were so willing to gain money and power that they seemed willing to virtually enslave anyone whose work could gain them that money and power. On another level, it indirectly explains the bitterness and resentment that fuels Fiona's determination to betray the slave-harboring Martin and Ethel Wells to the slave-seeking authorities.

Initially, [Cora] assigned the devastation of Tennessee … to justice. The whites got what they deserved. For enslaving her people, for massacring another race, for stealing the very land itself. Let them burn by flame or fever, let the destruction started here rove acre by acre until the dead have been revenged.
-- Narration (Section 7 - Tennessee, Part 2)

Importance: The devastation caused by recent fires raging through the state of Tennessee is given one interpretation by Cora: in the bigger picture of the book as a whole, the devastation left behind by the fires is evocative of the devastation of the soul experienced by Cora and other slaves.

I prefer the American spirit, the one that called us from the Old World to the New, to conquer and build and civilize. And destroy that what needs to be destroyed. To lift up the lesser races. If not lift up, subjugate. And if not subjugate, exterminate. Our destiny by divine prescription – the American imperative.
-- Ridgeway (Section 7 - Tennessee, Part 2)

Importance: This quote from white, racist slave catcher Ridgeway, made during his unlikely extended conversation with Cora, sums up the cultural, economic, and political attitude at the heart of racism in the book, and arguably of racism in the real-world history of America. This is the belief, held and acted upon by the white people in power,

that the country's destiny is great and inevitable, and that as white people, their destiny is similar and tied to that of the country.

I'm what the botanists call a hybrid … a mixture of two different families. In flowers, such a concoction pleases the eye. When that amalgamation takes its shape in flesh and blood, some take great offense. In this room we recognize it for what it is – a new beauty come into the world, and it is in bloom all around us.
-- Elijah Lander (Section 8 – Indiana, Part 2)

Importance: Elijah Lander's poetic self-description can be seen as echoing, or mirroring, Cora's emerging sense of her own identity. She too is a hybrid, or a mixture - not of two different families, but of two different lives, and experiences: the life of a slave, and the life of a free-person, the latter making the former more meaningful; the former making the latter more painful.

The underground railroad is bigger than its operators – it's all of you, too. The small spurs, the big trunk lines. We have the newest locomotives and the obsolete engines, and we have handcars like that one. It goes everywhere, to places we know and those we don't. We got this tunnel right here, running beneath us, and no one knows where it leads. If we keep the railroad running, and none of us can figure it out, maybe you can.
-- Royal (Section 8 – Indiana, Part 2)

Importance: This inspiration quote comes from Royal, the escaped slave who, in turn, helped Cora escape from Ridgeway. The quote suggests that, in Royal's mind at least, Cora is - or has the potential to become - as important to the railroad, and to the community of ex-slaves, as they have been to her. There is also the sense that he is encouraging her to believe she has more to offer the world than she ever believed possible.

Work needn't be suffering, it could unite folks … a beautiful soul like Caesar could be anything he wanted here, all of them could be: own a spread, be a schoolteacher, fight for colored rights. Even be a poet. In her Georgia misery she had pictured freedom, and it had not looked like this. Freedom was a community laboring for something lovely and rare."
-- Narration (Section 8 - Indiana, Part 3, pp. 268)

Importance: In this quote, "she" refers to Cora, while the whole quote reveals how she is discovering a new way to interpret and experience freedom, ironically enough at the point in the story when it is once again about to be taken from her.

The first and last things [Mabel] gave to her daughter were apologies. Cora slept in her stomach, the size of a fist, when Mabel apologized for what she was bringing her into. Cora slept next to her in the loft, ten years later, when Mabel apologized for making her a stray. Cora didn't hear either one."
-- Narration (Section 10 – Mabel)

Importance: The quote here illuminates just how much love and compassion Mabel

had for her daughter, again ironically given how much Cora resents her for leaving her behind; and even more ironically, given that later in this chapter, the truth about just how Cora made Mabel a stray is revealed.

Why had she put Royal off for so long? She thought they had time enough. Another thing that might have been, snipped at the roots as if by one of Dr. Stevens' surgical blades. She let the farm convince her the world is other than what it will always be. He must have known she loved him even if she hadn't told him. He had to."
-- Narration (Section 10 – The North)

Importance: This quote is primarily notable for its revelation of tender, softer, affectionate or loving feeling in Cora: the flashes of feeling that the narrative has revealed to this point have been defined primarily by anger, rage, or fear.