

A Virtuous Woman Study Guide

A Virtuous Woman by Kaye Gibbons

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Plot Summary

A Virtuous Woman is the second novel from award-winning author Kaye Gibbons. Ruby Stokes is a woman who was raised in the safety of a loving family, who learns that the world has a dark side when she impetuously marries the first man to ask. Ruby is dragged onto the migrant workers circuit, forced to work manual labor by her lazy, abusive husband. When her husband dies unexpectedly, Ruby is faced with the choice of going home in shame or marrying a local man who has taken an interest in her. Ruby chooses marriage, settling into a good life with a man who is deeply devoted to her. A Virtuous Woman is a novel of second chances and love, a novel that will touch the heart of even the most cynical reader.

Blinking Jack Stokes has just finished the last of the food his wife stocked up in the freezer in preparation for her death. Ruby has been dead four months, and Jack still cannot get used to being alone. Ruby knew he would not fair well alone, despite the fact that he was a bachelor for a long time before he married her. Ruby was right. Jack eats nothing but cereal now that the freezer is empty, has not washed dishes in weeks and spends a great deal of his time remembering the past.

Ruby was raised by a loving family on a farm in the southern part of the state. Ruby never had to do anything for herself because her family or the housekeeper was always there to do what needed doing. Ruby was so insulated within her family she did not know that darkness existed in people. One summer, Ruby's father hires a group of migrant workers to help out on the farm. Ruby falls in love with one of the young workers and agrees to marry him when he promises her the world. Ruby believes everything this man tells her, unable to believe anyone could lie to her. However, Ruby soon learns the truth about this dark, abusive man.

Ruby's new husband drags her onto the migrant workers circuit, forcing her to work because he is too lazy to show up on time. Ruby works hard while her husband drinks, gambles and seduces other women. The migrant workers settle in the northern part of the state, and Ruby is employed by a farmer's wife as a maid. Ruby works hard trying to prepare the house for a wedding. During this time, Ruby meets Jack Stokes, a local tenant farmer who is also working at the main house in preparation for the wedding.

The same day Ruby meets Jack, she learns that her husband has been in a fight and hospitalized for his injuries. Ruby learns this less than a day after she walked in on her husband with another woman. Ruby is angry and has bought a gun with the idea that she might wound her husband in order to scare him into treating her better. Due to this anger, Ruby refuses to go to the hospital to visit her husband. Later that night, Jack comes to her cabin and informs her that her husband has died of his wounds.

Ruby has a choice to stay or to go home in shame. Ruby cannot make herself face her parents, so she stays. Ruby and Jack become friends. Less than five months later, Jack and Ruby marry. Despite the short courtship and differences in their ages, Jack and Ruby have a good marriage. The only dark spot in their lives is their inability to have



children. Due to this, Jack and Ruby devote a great deal of their time sharing in the rearing of their best friend's daughter.

After twenty years of marriage, Ruby learns she has lung cancer. Ruby begins to prepare for her death, stocking up the freezer for Jack. However, this runs out quickly, and Jack finds himself desperate for the care of a woman. Jack hires a local woman to clean and cook for him, but the woman is lazy and does not do the work Jack expects. Jack fires this woman and comes to rely on his best friend's daughter to care for him. One night Jack believes that he can feel Ruby lying beside him in their bed. Jack washes the bed sheets the next day and dresses carefully for bed, hoping Ruby will return. However, when Ruby does not return, Jack falls into a deep depression. Jack's best friend relieves this depression by giving Jack the land his family has worked for several generations, something Jack has felt should have been his all along.



Chapters 1-2

Chapters 1-2 Summary

A Virtuous Woman is the second novel from award-winning author Kaye Gibbons. Ruby Stokes is a woman who was raised in the safety of a loving family, who learns that the world has a dark side when she impetuously marries the first man to ask. Ruby is dragged onto the migrant workers circuit and forced to work manual labor by her lazy, abusive husband. When her husband dies unexpectedly, Ruby is faced with the choice of going home in shame or marrying a local man who has taken an interest in her. Ruby chooses marriage, settling into a good life with a man who is deeply devoted to her. A Virtuous Woman is a novel of second chances and love, a novel that will touch the heart of even the most cynical reader.

Blinking Jack Stokes's wife, Ruby, died of lung cancer less than four months ago. Jack has just finished the last of the food she stored in the deep freezer in preparation for her death, leaving him to fend for himself for the first time since her death. Jack is still angry with Ruby. Jack feels that Ruby would not have died if she had quit smoking one of the hundred times he had asked her to. However, Ruby was still asking for a cigarette the night she died. Before the funeral, Jack arranged Ruby's fingers so that no one would see the nicotine stains on her fingers. Jack felt those fingers were like the murder weapon on display in her coffin.

Ruby hopes to have everything organized before Thanksgiving, including having the freezer stocked. Ruby wants things to be prepared for Jack so that he does not have to think about anything the first few months after her death. After that, Ruby figures Jack will be able to fend for himself. Ruby has trouble imagining her husband as an independent man, however, because he has depended on her for so long. Ruby thinks about how they depend on each other and how Jack let her down the day she was diagnosed. Ruby was upset and asked him what he thought might happen to her. Jack tried to console her, but that was not what Ruby needed at that moment. Ruby became angry and lashed out at Jack, who was left confused because he thought he said what she needed to hear. Later, Ruby thought about her grandmother who had to be put in a nursing home toward the end of her life. Every time Ruby's grandfather would visit, he would bring news of home until one day Ruby's grandmother told him to stop. Ruby's grandmother did not want to hear about a home she more than likely would never see again. Now Ruby can understand why her grandmother was so upset. Ruby can also understand that her grandfather brought news from home out of fear of facing the fact that his wife would not be coming home again. It was a difficult situation for them both, as is the situation in which Ruby and Jack face now.



Chapters 1-2 Analysis

The first chapter takes place in the present and introduces the two main characters, Jack and Ruby. Jack is an old farmer, set in his ways, who has just lost his wife. Jack is understandably depressed, grieving over the loss of his wife. Jack is also angry. Jack believes his wife might not have died had she quit smoking years ago when he asked her to. Jack is also upset because his final memory of his wife on the night she died is of her asking for a cigarette while lying in an oxygen tent to help her breath. It is a moment that Jack sees as Ruby being selfish, something she rarely was in other aspects of their lives.

The second chapter is set in the past, several months before Ruby's death. Ruby is preparing for her death in this chapter, not for herself but for Jack. Ruby is stocking the freezer so Jack will not have to take care of himself for some time. By doing this, Ruby shows that she is not a selfish person but more concerned with her husband's welfare than her impending death. However, as Ruby continues in her reverie, she thinks about the day she was diagnosed with cancer. When Ruby asks Jack what will happen to her, he tries to console her by saying he does not believe she will die. Ruby becomes enraged because this is not what she wanted to hear. Jack is confused, unsure why Ruby is so angry. Ruby goes on to explain to the reader that at that moment she needed some reality, not empty consolation. Ruby relates the story of her grandmother's final days in a nursing home when her grandmother became angry at her husband for bringing her news of home. However, Ruby's grandfather brought the news of home because he was too frightened to face the fact that his wife would never be coming home. Everyone grieves in their own way, Ruby comes to realize, touching on one of the themes of the novel.



Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary

Jack recalls his mother, a hard woman, who was not the type to give him hugs or show affection of any kind. However, Jack's mother was a strong woman, a lot like Ruby. Jack imagines his father had to strong arm his mother into marriage, rather than courting her like star-crossed lovers. Jack was only fourteen when his mother died of food poisoning. Jack always wanted to ask his father, who was deeply religious, where God was while his mother lie dying, but he never had the courage to do it.

Everyone believes that because Ruby is kind and soft spoken that she has always had an easy life. Jack knows better. Ruby may have been raised in a secure, loving home, but the moment she could leave, she ran off with the wrong man. Ruby married a dark, abusive man, who might have killed her had he not died when he did. Jack admires Ruby for surviving that bad marriage. Jack was the one to tell Ruby her husband had died, and Jack could not have been happier because he had fallen in love with Ruby at first sight. Jack did not believe he could ever have her, since she was twenty years younger than he and of a better class. However, he was encouraged to pursue her and thought he had nothing to lose by doing it.

Jack was shocked when Ruby told him that she bought a gun once to kill her first husband after finding him in her cabin with another woman. Jack has that gun now and every time he shoots it, Ruby is reminded of her first husband. Ruby thinks if she told Jack that he would get rid of the gun, but she does not tell him. Ruby does not tell Jack because he gets so much pleasure from the gun. However, Ruby hates the sound of it and hates the memories it revives.

Chapter 3 Analysis

Jack thinks about his mother. Jack's mother was a hard woman, who he imagines being strong armed to the altar rather than romanced. Jack's mother would not bake him pies or give him hugs. Jack's mother did not show affection. However, Jack loved her dearly and missed her when she died of food poisoning when he was only fourteen. Jack compares his mother to Ruby. Ruby appears to be much different on the surface. Ruby likes to bake pies and is very affectionate with Jack. However, Jack knows that Ruby went through a difficult time in her first marriage and thinks she is as strong as his mother ever was, perhaps more so.

Jack met Ruby while she was still married and was excited when her husband died, hoping he might have a chance with her. Jack knew he was older than Ruby and perhaps out of her league, but he pursued her anyway. Jack won Ruby's heart and learned the depth of cruelty she had lived with when she was married before. This cruelty shows the depth of Ruby's strength and her ability to overcome the darkest of



obstacles—for example, Ruby bought a gun to kill her first husband. Ruby is soft and caring, but she is also able to withstand some dark moments that would cause another woman to break. Jack admires this in his wife and clearly misses her and this depth of character.



Chapter 4

Chapter 4 Summary

Ruby remembers the summer she met her first husband, John Woodrow. John Woodrow was a migrant worker her father hired to help out on the farm. Ruby thought he looked like Tab Hunter, a popular movie star, and was proud when he asked her out. Ruby thought John Woodrow was an experienced, romantic man. Ruby thinks now that this mistaken impression came from the sheltered way in which she was raised. Ruby never had to do anything for herself because her parents, her two older brothers, or Sudie Bee, the housekeeper, would do it for her. Ruby had never seen the dark side of human nature and therefore had no idea that it existed. Ruby thought nothing bad could ever happen to her. Ruby eloped with John Woodrow, never giving her parents the chance to try to change her mind. Ruby believed she would return home triumphant, like something from a movie.

John Woodrow told Ruby the only reason he was a migrant worker was because he had had a falling out with his family over an inheritance. Ruby believed this, even after witnessing the lack of morals the migrant workers displayed. The first afternoon the migrant workers were on the farm, Ruby's mother invited them into the house for their noon meal. Sudie Bee warned Ruby's mother that the workers would take advantage of her kindness, but Ruby's mother did not listen. Ruby's mother was shocked to discover the workers had broken the majority of her dishes and stopped up the sink in the wash room. From that time on, Ruby's mother made the workers eat out in the yard. This is a fact that John Woodrow would often throw up in Ruby's face, accusing her of believing herself to be better than him.

During their first year of marriage, John Woodrow tells Ruby he is going to move them into town and buy a house. When Ruby asks how he plans on doing this, John Woodrow tells Ruby she is going to call her father and ask for her third of the farm now. Ruby laughs in his face. After this, things become very clear to Ruby, and she begins to fantasize about leaving her husband and returning home. However, Ruby does not want to return home and reveal the shame of her hasty marriage. A short time later, the migrant workers arrive at the home of a farmer named Hoover. Here Ruby is assigned to the main house as a maid. Ruby is to help the farmer's wife prepare the house for their daughter's wedding. It is then that Ruby meets the daughter, Tiny Fran, for the first time, a woman who is destined to be a thorn in Ruby's side for many years to come.

Chapter 4 Analysis

From Ruby's point of view, the reader gets to see the kind of childhood Ruby had and how it molded her into the person she would one day become. Ruby was sheltered as a child, growing up to believe the world was full of people like her mother and father. Ruby had no idea there were bad people in the world, who could hurt her until she met her



first husband. John Woodrow is a migrant worker, who comes to work on Ruby's father's farm one summer. Ruby thinks he is good looking and finds his unorthodox courting habits to be romantic because she has little to compare them to. Ruby agrees to marry this handsome man the first time he asks; Ruby suggests to the reader in her reflections that she agreed simply because he was the first to ask.

John Woodrow is not a nice man, the reader soon learns. Ruby relates how he and his migrant co-workers ruined her mother's dishes and clogged up a sink in their house without care to who might have to pay for the destruction. Ruby also tells the reader that John Woodrow claimed to be rich but was forced to give up his inheritance by jealous siblings. Later Ruby learns this to be untrue, but by then she has already made the impetuous decision to get married. These things characterize John Woodrow as a liar and make it clear to the reader that he most likely does not have the most honorable intentions for Ruby. These things also show how innocent and naive Ruby was before she married John Woodrow. However, Ruby clearly has grown up quickly because she begins to stand up to her new husband, as shown by her choice not to obey her husband when asked to call her father to request her inheritance early. The chapter ends with Ruby taking a position in the home of a farmer named Hoover. In this home lives a young woman named Tiny Fran, who appears to be unfriendly, and who, Ruby warns the reader, will be a problem for a long time to come. The reader is left wondering what Ruby means by this and eagerly looking forward to future chapters that reveal the answer to this question.



Chapters 5-6

Chapters 5-6 Summary

The first time Jack sees Ruby, she is standing in the Hoover's front yard under a tree. Jack is moving manure to the garden that day, doing his part to help in the wedding preparations as he is a tenant farmer, who works a piece of land on the Hoover's farm. Jack walks up to Ruby and starts talking to her, mentioning how she should not be smoking like she is. Ruby stands up to Jack, something that makes her special in his eyes.

The first day Ruby works for the Hoover's, Mrs. Hoover tries to get Tiny Fran to help her, but is unsuccessful. Ruby does not mind. Tiny Fran is loud and unpleasant, so Ruby would rather work alone anyway. Ruby does not know much about cleaning, since she was never expected to do it before but catches on quickly. After an exhausting day, Ruby returns to the cabin she shares with John Woodrow only to find him with another woman. This other woman is prancing around in Ruby's fine underwear. Ruby is so outraged by this behavior, she goes out and buys a gun. At first Ruby intends to kill John Woodrow, but later decides to only wound him so that he can see what it feels like to be the victim. However, John Woodrow never comes home that night. The next day, Ruby returns to the Hoover home, and Mrs. Hoover has her doing everything from cleaning out closets to polishing light bulbs. At lunchtime, Ruby overhears Mrs. Hoover telling her husband about Ruby and suggesting that Ruby serve at their daughter's wedding. Ruby hears this and understands that Mrs. Hoover simply likes the idea of having a white serving girl. It is an idea that makes Ruby angry.

Chapters 5-6 Analysis

From Jack's point of view, the reader is invited to see the day these two lovers met. Jack finds Ruby waiting under a tree in the Hoover's front yard. Jack walks up to and starts talking, criticizing her smoking habit, before he even knows who she is. Jack finds her attractive and when she stands up for herself against his criticism, Jack likes her that much more. Jack's version of these events allows the readers to see how Jack found Ruby to be a strong, willful, young woman from the moment they met, something that appealed to him because of his mother's strong, if unaffectionate, nature.

Ruby works for Mrs. Hoover cleaning her house. Mrs. Hoover tries to get her daughter, Tiny Fran, to help, but Tiny Fran refuses. The reader sees through this refusal that Tiny Fran is not only a spoiled and lazy young woman, but that she is also disrespectful to her mother. This disrespect toward her mother suggests that Tiny Fran is not a pleasant person and that she is self centered. Mrs. Hoover is presented as a woman who cannot control her own household, especially her daughter. When Ruby overhears Mrs. Hoover discussing the possibility of having Ruby serve at Tiny Fran's wedding, the reader sees that Mrs. Hoover is a woman who cares a great deal about what other people think and



she believes having a white serving girl will make her seem more important than she really is. Ruby dislikes this attitude, giving the reader a peek into her own sense of self worth and of racial discrimination.

Ruby goes home after the first night working for the Hoovers and finds her husband with another woman. Ruby is angered, but the reader gets the impression that this anger is more about the ruination of her fine lingerie than of her husband's infidelity. Ruby marches out and gets a gun. The reader might find it a little ironic at this point that Ruby is willing to kill her husband over the destruction of her lingerie but not over his abuse toward her. Later, Ruby decides to simply wound him in hopes that by making John Woodrow the victim for once, he will stop treating Ruby so violently. The reader finds this to be another example of Ruby's naivety and is skeptical that it will work. The reader will not be able to prove this theory, however, because John Woodrow does not return home, a fact that does not seem to worry Ruby a great deal.



Chapter 7

Chapter 7 Summary

Everyone in town knows Tiny Fran is pregnant, even though she and her parents try to keep it hidden. Lonnie Hoover, Tiny Fran's father, could send her away to have the baby or pay for an abortion. Instead, Lonnie decides to get Tiny Fran married, knowing she will more than likely get herself into trouble again at some later date. So Lonnie goes to Burr, another tenant farmer on his land and offers him a parcel of land if he will marry Tiny Fran. Burr agrees right away because owning the land he and his father have worked is a dream Burr cannot refuse. Land is all that really matters to a man.

Jack has always hoped that he would come to own the land he and his father have always worked as well. Jack thought that when Lonnie died ten years earlier from when Jack is reminiscing, Lonnie would leave the land to him in his will. After all, Jack's father died while showing off a new tractor for Lonnie's dad and his friends. Jack's father took a turn on the tractor too close to a ditch and the fancy new tractor crushed him when it fell over. Jack figures Lonnie owes it to him. However, Lonnie did not leave the land to Jack when he died. Jack thinks there are only two things a man can leave behind, and he (Jack) is going to die without either one.

Chapter 7 Analysis

Jack relates in his own point of view how Tiny Fran, the daughter of a rich farmer, ended up marrying one of her father's tenant farmers. Tiny Fran was pregnant and no one knew who the father might be. Instead of sending her off to have the baby or to have an abortion and risk another pregnancy in the future, Tiny Fran's father arranged for her to marry Burr, another tenant farmer on his land. In exchange for marrying Tiny Fran, Lonnie Hoover gave Burr the land he and his family had been working for several generations. Not only does this story introduce the relationship between Tiny Fran and her husband, Burr, but it also introduces the desire for these men to own their own land. The reader gets to see that Burr and Tiny Fran do not have a loving relationship, that the child Tiny Fran is carrying is not even Burr's. This gives the reader some insight into Burr's marriage, giving some forewarning of the tensions that will exist in this marriage in future chapters.

Land is an important theme to this novel, and that theme is introduced in this chapter. Burr is given the land he and his father have worked for several generations when he agrees to marry Tiny Fran. This is a big deal to Burr because land makes him respectable and gives him the resources he needs to make a proper life for himself and his family. It does a man no good to work someone else's land because in the end, all the respect and the profits go to the owner, not the worker. Now Burr has respect and income, which is all his father wanted and more. It is also something Jack wants as well, but he is not to get it. Jack's father gave his life working for Lonnie Hoover's father, but

even in death Lonnie does not give Jack the one thing he truly desires above all else, land.



Chapter 8

Chapter 8 Summary

For three nights, Ruby waits with her gun for John Woodrow to come home, but he does not. During this time, Ruby continues to work for the Hoovers. The thought of going home does not cross her mind because she cannot imagine returning home under the shame that clouds her life. On the third day, Ruby meets Jack. When Jack learns that Ruby is married to John Woodrow, he tells her that John Woodrow is in the hospital. There was a fight at a local bar and John Woodrow was stabbed several times. Then Jack tells Ruby she can come to his house if she needs anything. Ruby is grateful for this offer.

Ruby works all day and then returns to the migrant camp. Some of the other workers criticize Ruby for not going to the hospital, but because she has been assured that John Woodrow will survive, Ruby sees no reason to go to the hospital. Instead, Ruby goes to her cabin, where Jack finds her a few hours later. It turns out that John Woodrow had a collapsed lung and has died. Ruby cries, not for John Woodrow but because she does not know what will happen to her. Going home is still out of the question, so remaining where she is seems to be her only recourse. The only problem is she does not know how to take care of herself. Ruby does not even know how to cook.

Chapter 8 Analysis

John Woodrow, true to his character, does not return home for three days. Ruby is not worried, just anxious to confront him for allowing his friend to steal her expensive underwear. On the third day, Ruby meets Jack. The meeting is much like Jack described in a previous chapter, though Ruby seems to have a neutral reaction to Jack. Ruby likes that Jack is plainspoken and offers her any help she might need. However, Ruby does not find him physically appealing like she did John Woodrow. Perhaps this is a good thing, since finding John Woodrow appealing is what caused her trouble in the first place.

Ruby learns that John Woodrow has been injured in a bar fight. Ruby is not surprised by this news and not overly worried. Ruby does not even go to the hospital to check on her wounded husband. Ruby is criticized by the other migrant workers for this lax attitude, but she ignores them and returns home. A few hours later, Jack arrives and tells Ruby her husband is dead. The reader is not surprised that Ruby shows little grief, since her husband was so abusive toward her. Ruby's grief is centered more on herself and what might happen to her. Ruby is unprepared to be on her own. This might seem like selfishness to the outsider, but the reader sees it as part of Ruby's more practical side. Ruby is a strong woman, and it is a strong woman who can see the big picture and understand that she is in trouble since she cannot even cook, let alone make a living for

herself. How Ruby plans to deal with this is obvious, but the reader still looks forward to seeing Ruby's future play out in subsequent chapters as the plot continues to build.



Chapters 9-10

Chapters 9-10 Summary

Jack is best man at Burr and Tiny Fran's wedding. There is no preacher because of the nature of the wedding, and Burr's parents refuse to attend as well. Jack believes rather than refusing to attend because of Tiny Fran's pregnancy, Burr's parents refuse to attend because Burr is now a property owner. Burr's father has always wanted respect and to own his own land, so Jack believes he is jealous of Burr's good fortune and this is why he boycotts his own son's wedding.

Back in the present, Ruby thinks about her life and is happy with what she sees. Ruby loves her home and her husband. Her only sadness is that she was never able to have a child. However, Burr and Tiny Fran's daughter, June, has been like a daughter to her. June visits her frequently now, always bringing her gifts. Ruby has a whole trunk full of the gifts June has given her over the years. Ruby remembers all the times she stepped in as a mother for June. Tiny Fran was never a good mother to June, going as far as to allow the girl to reach maturity without explaining menstruation to her. Ruby and Tiny Fran fought frequently over June, with Tiny Fran often accusing Ruby of brainwashing the child. Burr was always caught in the middle, trying to explain things to Tiny Fran, but having no luck.

Ruby thinks the best time she ever had was one week when she and Jack kept June. They structured their whole week around the child and were grief-stricken when Burr came to take the child home. For a short time afterward, Jack and Ruby turned their parental attentions on their dogs, but when they saw how ridiculous it all appeared, they stopped. Ruby thinks on it now and admits her memories of spending time with June are much better than those few weeks of babying the dogs.

Chapters 9-10 Analysis

Burr and Tiny Fran's wedding is a nice one, except for two things. First, there is no preacher because of Tiny Fran's obvious pregnancy. The preacher's absence speaks of the social significance of such a pregnancy at the time and in the area that the wedding took place. In that time in the deep south, such a thing was not socially acceptable. Second, the groom's parents are missing. Jack believes this has more to do with Burr coming into the property than with Tiny Fran's pregnancy. Land is important to people and it is something that Burr's father has always wanted. Jack believes Burr's father is so jealous of his own son that he refuses to attend his wedding. The actions of Burr's father might seem outrageous to a reader until they begin to recall how important land is to a man at this time and in this place. This is what makes land a theme of the novel.

Ruby is in the present again, thinking about her life overall. Ruby is content with her life except for one thing. Ruby has never been able to have a child. Ruby thinks about



June, the child of Burr and Tiny Fran. Ruby recalls spending a great deal of time with this little girl and being more of a mother to her than Tiny Fran. Ruby recalls Tiny Fran accusing her of brainwashing the child and of Tiny Fran not telling June about menstruation. These events once again characterize Tiny Fran as a selfish, self-centered woman, who cares little about those around her, including her own daughter. Ruby is struck by the irony of such a woman having a child when a woman like herself, who would be a wonderful mother, is childless. The reader is struck by this irony as well and begins to see a more tender side of Ruby and a grief, a theme of the novel, that only a mother could understand.



Chapter 11

Chapter 11 Summary

Tiny Fran leaves Burr right after June goes to college. Burr buys out her half of his property the day she leaves in hopes that she will live off that money for the rest of her life and leave him alone. Of course Tiny Fran runs out of money, and Burr finds himself sending her checks every month. However, Burr feels it is worth it to be free of Tiny Fran. Tiny Fran is an unpleasant woman, who has never cared for anyone but her son, Roland, and she made that very clear to everyone as often as possible.

Jack relates the story how one summer Burr invites him and Ruby to go with his family to the beach. Tiny Fran is unhappy that Ruby and Jack are coming along and makes the drive to the beach unpleasant with her dark mood. Tiny Fran becomes so mad at Burr at one point that she refuses to have lunch with everyone when they stop at a restaurant. When they arrive at the beach, Tiny Fran becomes angrier when she learns that Burr forgot to pack her beach chairs. Tiny Fran spends the afternoon on her own, sunning herself, while the others play with the children on the beach. At dinnertime, everyone goes back to the cabin, and Burr asks Tiny Fran what is for dinner. Tiny Fran announces she is on vacation and not cooking, to which Burr becomes annoyed and decides to take everyone out to dinner.

While Burr, Jack, and Ruby are relaxing before dinner, Tiny Fran and Roland disappear into the cabin. Ruby begins to look for June, only to find her racing out of the hallway with Tiny Fran behind her, screaming at her to give her horn to Roland. Roland then comes tearing down the hallway and knocks June to the ground. June suffers a cut to her lip that is bleeding profusely. Ruby goes to her aid while Tiny Fran is more concerned with Roland. Ruby insists that June be taken to the hospital. Tiny Fran, satisfied that Roland is fine, agrees to accompany the girl to the hospital, insisting that Ruby not go since she is not family.

Jack holds this story up as proof of what a bad mother Tiny Fran is and what a bad seed Roland is. To further support Jack's opinion of Roland, he tells how he and Ruby went out of town for a time and returned home to find the mule Jack had bought for Ruby hanging in the barn. The mule was an anniversary gift for Ruby and to find it like that broke Jack's heart. Jack knew it was Roland and he went to Burr to protest. Burr gave Jack the money to replace the mule, but Jack would always believe that Roland was pure evil.

Roland is in jail now. Roland raped a girl and then went home to bed like it was a normal night. Jack believes Roland should have been hanged for what he did to the poor girl. Tiny Fran claims it is society that made Roland the way he is. Jack disagrees. Jack believes Roland is pure evil and that having a mother like Tiny Fran only made him worse.



Chapter 11 Analysis

Burr and Tiny Fran's marriage ends when June goes off to college. The reader is not surprised by this since the reader knows that this marriage was not based on love, respect or trust, all the main ingredients of a successful marriage. From Jack's point of view, Tiny Fran is evil anyway, making everyone's lives harder by her negative attitude. Jack tells several stories about Tiny Fran and her first born, Roland, in this chapter that make both seem very unpleasant.

The reader already knows that Jack and Ruby are childless because of the previous chapter. The reader also knows that Ruby was close to June, Tiny Fran's daughter, and that she cared for the child quite often. Jack tells the story of how the two families went to the beach and Roland injured his sister. Ruby runs to the child's side to take care of her and is not reproached by Tiny Fran until Tiny Fran realizes the seriousness of her child's injuries and how her lack of concern might make her look. Tiny Fran only shows concern for June after she makes sure Roland is fine and after Ruby begins to care for the child's injuries. Tiny Fran shows herself to be opportunistic and self centered once more, as well as showing her uncharacteristic concern for her oldest child, Roland. Tiny Fran's attachment to Roland is interesting in light of her lack of concern for June and continues to be explored as the chapter continues.

Jack then relates a story about Roland that shows the depth of evil he believes lives in this boy. Roland is accused of hanging Jack's mule in his barn. Jack wants to hurt the boy, to show him the same disregard as Roland showed the mule; however, Jack is stopped. It seems this is unfortunate because a few years later Roland rapes a girl. Roland is sent to prison for this crime, while his mother screams her son's innocence and claims that society is to blame for what is wrong with Roland. Jack points back to his first story and says that Tiny Fran's overindulgent love for her son is what has caused a bad boy to become evil. This characterization of both Tiny Fran and Roland is simple, but clear to the reader. There is definitely something dark in Tiny Fran that has caused her to raise a child who would be able to rape a girl and then go home to bed as though it was a normal night out.



Chapters 12-13

Chapters 12-13 Summary

The night before, Cecil, a man from the local church, comes to Ruby and Jack's house. Cecil likes to preach the Bible to anyone who will listen. Jack often makes a game out of proving Cecil wrong. Jack's father was a devote Christian. Jack did not agree with his father's beliefs and finds people like Cecil to be hypocritical. This time Jack invites Cecil in, and Ruby knows Jack is going to tease Cecil as he has so many times before. Ruby listens from the kitchen and finds the whole thing amusing as Cecil quotes out of the Bible and Jack pretends to be enjoying the sermon, until Jack turns the table on Cecil and pretends he thinks Cecil is talking about a fictional novel rather than the Bible. Cecil then tells Jack that if Ruby wants her soul to be saved, she should read the Bible. Jack becomes enraged at the suggestion that not only is Ruby going to die, but that she is a bad person who will be condemned to suffer for all eternity. Jack throws Cecil out of the house.

It has been two weeks since Jack finished the food Ruby put in the deep freezer. Jack is eating cereal most days and is tired of it. Jack tries to make a meal he saw on a cooking show, but it does not work out. When Jack talks to Burr about his trouble, Burr suggests he hire someone to help out around the house with the cooking and cleaning. Jack agrees and goes with Burr to talk to a local woman. The woman agrees to come three times a week. The first time the woman, Mavis, comes, she spends the whole day nursing a sore knee. The second time Mavis comes, she bleaches all of Jack's work clothes. Jack fires the woman and arranges for June to come help out that weekend.

Chapters 12-13 Analysis

Jack is a good man, who was raised by a stern woman, who was not affectionate and a father who was a firm believer in the Bible. Jack admires his mother but has never seen the point in his father's religion. Jack lost his mother at a young age and God was nowhere to be seen, so he does not think there is a benevolent God. All this comes out when a Christian neighbor, doing what he thought was the right thing, comes to visit Jack. This neighbor, Cecil, preaches to Jack about the afterlife and suggests that if Ruby does not accept God as her savior, she is doomed to suffer for eternity. Jack is outraged by this because Jack believes Ruby to be a good woman. Not only this, but Jack is not ready to accept that Ruby is dying. To have a neighbor come over and tell a man in this situation that his wife is doomed is a cruel thing to do. Jack becomes outraged and throws the man out. The reader now has some insight into what Jack believes happens to a person after death, or perhaps just his refusal to believe Ruby is dying. Either way, the reader has more insight into Jack's personality.

Jack is tired of eating cereal every day, so he tries to fix a meal on his own. This does not work out well. Jack decides to hire someone to clean his house and fix his meals,



but this too does not work out. Jack has gotten to the point where he needs to start taking care of himself, a point Ruby had hoped would spur Jack to plant a garden or do other things to care for himself. Jack does not, but instead relies on Burr's daughter, June, to come clean for him. This introduces June, now grownup, into the story and sets up her entrance into the plot in the following chapters.



Chapters 14-16

Chapters 14-16 Summary

Ruby is sewing some clothes for June and thinking about Jack. Everyone in town has always been somewhat afraid of Ruby, and she believes it is because they believe she is better than Jack. Ruby thinks maybe Jack believes that, too. After her death, Jack washes his sheets because he believes he felt Ruby in the middle of the night. Before she died, Ruby would often sleep on the top of the covers, preventing Jack from rolling over. Jack was unable to roll over the night before and believes it is because Ruby came to visit. Jack decides to wash the sheets and wear his best pajamas that night in the hopes that Ruby will return. However, Jack lies awake all night and Ruby never comes.

Jack is so depressed by the fact that Ruby does not come, he decides to lie in bed all day. Jack gets a bottle of whiskey and rolls the television into his room. Jack drinks the entire bottle and lies in bed watching cartoons, forgetting that June and Burr are supposed to come over that day. When Burr walks into the house and does not find Jack, he is concerned. Burr searches Jack out. When Burr finds Jack drunk in the bedroom, he berates him because he knows Ruby would not approve. Jack becomes angry and the anger deepens when June walks in, completing his humiliation. Finally, Jack tells them what happened and why he is so depressed. June is at a loss as to what to do. Burr, however, knows the answer. Burr tells Jack that he wants to give him ownership of his land.

Chapters 14-16 Analysis

Ruby believes that everyone thinks she is too good for Jack and that on some level Jack might believe that, too. The reader sees that this is true when Jack wakes in the middle of the night believing that Ruby is beside him. Jack wants Ruby to come back, which is what any loving husband might want. However, Jack feels like he needs to dress up for this appearance to please Ruby. Ruby is a simple woman, content in her life. Jack did not need to dress up for her, but he feels that he does. This reaction shows not only Jack's deep love for Ruby but the truth that he does feel inadequate for his wife.

Jack is depressed when Ruby does not reappear. Jack drinks in the house for the first time since he married Ruby. When Burr discovers this, he berates Jack, reminding him that this is not the man Ruby knew. Jack becomes angry and feels humiliated because he knows himself that he is wrong. When Jack finally tells Burr and June what has taken place, they feel pity for him. Burr then offers Jack the land that he has worked for so many years. Land is a theme of the novel because it is so important to Jack. Jack is drawn out of his depression by this, finally believing he will have something respectable, something that he can leave behind as a mark of his humanity on the world.



Characters

Blinking Jack Stokes

Jack Stokes is a tenant farmer, who works land for the Hoover family. Jack is the child of a strong, unaffectionate woman and a Christian father. Jack's mother died when he was just fourteen, leaving him cynical of his father's faith. When his father dies in a tractor accident, Jack is further convinced that there is no God, at least not the God his father always preached about. However, these tragedies do nothing to chase Jack off the land he has worked his whole life. This land does not belong to Jack, but he feels in his heart that it should and that one day it will.

Jack Stokes meets Ruby Woodrow one morning while he is helping the Hoovers prepare the house and its grounds for their daughter's wedding. Ruby is working for Mrs. Hoover cleaning the house. Jack talks to Ruby for a few minutes and finds her to be a strong-willed woman, much like his mother. Unfortunately, Jack also learns that Ruby is married. The man Ruby is married to is one that is involved in a fight the night before. Jack knows this because Mr. Hoover was called out to deal with the incident in the middle of the night. Jack tells Ruby her husband is in the hospital because of the injuries he sustained during the fight. Later that night, Jack is forced to tell Ruby that her husband has died.

Jack thinks that Ruby is above him, but he courts her anyway. Jack finds Ruby to be a strong, gentle woman, who he thinks will make him a good wife. Jack enjoys sharing his evenings with Ruby; less than five months after they met, Jack and Ruby are married. Jack and Ruby have a strong marriage that is marred only by the fact that they cannot have children. Jack and Ruby become surrogate parents to their friend Burr's daughter, caring for her just as they might have their own child. When Ruby dies of cancer, Jack is left alone without children or land to call his own. The only thing that saves Jack from the depression of his grief is the news that Burr intends to give Jack the land he has worked his entire life.

Ruby Pitt Woodrow Stokes

Ruby was raised on a farm not unlike the Hoover farm. Ruby was sheltered by her parents and two older brothers, never expected to do more than show up for dinner. Ruby lived such a sheltered existence that she never knew the darkness that exists in the real world. When Ruby's father invites a group of migrant workers to work his farm, Ruby meets John Woodrow. Ruby finds John Woodrow's common ways romantic and exciting. When John Woodrow asks Ruby to marry him, she accepts immediately and runs away with him. However, life on the migrant worker's circuit is not what Ruby expected. The work is difficult, and John Woodrow does not make it any easier with his cruel, abusive ways.



Ruby remains with John Woodrow despite his abuse because she is too ashamed to return home. When she finds John Woodrow with another woman, Ruby thinks about killing him but then decides only to wound him. However, John Woodrow never comes home. Several days later, Ruby learns through Jack Stokes that John Woodrow has died from wounds he received during a bar fight. Ruby is grief stricken, not because of John Woodrow, but because she does not know what her future will hold. Ruby faces the future with strength, however, and begins to strike up a friendship with Jack Stokes. After only five months, Ruby and Jack are married.

The marriage is a good one, except for the fact that they never have any children. Ruby is devastated by this because she loves children. Ruby and Jack become surrogate parents to Burr's daughter, June, taking some of the edge off their grief, but not all. After twenty years of marriage, Ruby learns she is dying of cancer. Ruby prepares as best she can, more concerned for Jack than for herself. After her death, Jack struggles to get alone by himself. When Jack falls into a depression over Ruby's death, Burr gives him the land he has worked his entire life.

John Woodrow

John Woodrow is Ruby's first husband. John Woodrow is a migrant worker, who comes to work the Pitt family farm. Ruby thinks John Woodrow is handsome and falls in love despite his rough, common ways. Ruby agrees to marry John Woodrow when he asks and later decides it was because he was the first person to ask. However, Ruby soon learns that John Woodrow is not the romantic figure she thought he was. John Woodrow is cruel and violent toward Ruby, often accusing her of believing herself to be better than he. Ruby grows to hate John Woodrow and thinks often of leaving him but has no where to go. Ruby does not want to go home in shame, and she knows no one else to whom she can turn. When John Woodrow is wounded in a bar fight, Ruby does not go to the hospital. Later Ruby learns John Woodrow has died. Ruby's only concern is her own future.

Burr

Burr is another tenant farmer on the Hoover land. Burr has worked the land his whole life, just like Jack, and is surprised when Mr. Hoover comes to him, requesting that Burr marry his daughter. Mr. Hoover's daughter has gotten pregnant, and Mr. Hoover wants to marry her off, rather than choosing another avenue to rid him of this embarrassing problem. Mr. Hoover offers Burr the land he has been working his whole life. Burr jumps at the chance, despite the fact that he does not love the Hoover girl. Burr wants the land. During his years of marriage, Burr puts up with his wife, but never falls in love with her. Burr and his wife have a daughter together, as well as the illegitimate son Burr's wife has. Burr adores his daughter, but his son is a cruel, unruly child, who is the apple of his mother's eye. Burr is constantly forced to apologize to people for his son's actions and is as relieved as everyone else when the boy is put in jail for one of his many crimes.



Burr understands the importance of land to a man who has worked the land his entire life. At the end of the novel when Burr finds Jack in a terrible depression over Ruby's death, Burr offers to give Jack the land he has worked his entire life. Jack is instantly brought out of his depression by this offer, excited to finally own the soil he has toiled over since he was a small child. Burr has more than likely saved Jack's life with this offer.

Tiny Fran

Tiny Fran is the daughter of the Hoovers. Tiny Fran is an unpleasant woman who likes to push people around and cause trouble where ever she goes. As a young woman, Tiny Fran is promiscuous, finding herself pregnant without benefit of a husband. In order to save himself from embarrassment, Tiny Fran's father offers land to Burr in order to marry his daughter. Burr agrees. Tiny Fran and Burr remain married for many years, raising not only her son, Roland, but a daughter, June. Tiny Fran is an overbearing, indulgent mother to Roland but ignores June as though she were someone else's child. This leaves room for Ruby to move in and become a surrogate mother to little June. Tiny Fran resents this and resents Ruby for doing it, causing friction between the neighbors. However, Ruby is so used to Tiny Fran's unpleasantness, that she does not allow it to stop her from embracing the small child.

June

June is Tiny Fran and Burr's daughter. June is brushed aside by her mother, often ignored. Ruby is jealous that Tiny Fran could have such a beautiful daughter and not want to be a mother to her. Ruby tries to do her best by June, often inviting the girl to her home, making things for her and generally guiding her through life. June, as a result, many times confuses Ruby as her own mother. June remains close to Ruby as she grows up and as an adult often goes to visit Ruby. When June learns that Ruby is dying, she visits more frequently, often bringing gifts to Ruby. Ruby treasures every gift with all the other things June has given her over the years. After Ruby's death, June volunteers to help Jack, coming to his home to clean for him. It is during this initial visit that Jack becomes depressed, and Burr offers him the land on which he has worked his whole life.

Roland

Roland is the child Tiny Fran becomes pregnant with outside of wedlock, forcing her marriage to Burr. Tiny Fran is devoted to Roland, allowing the boy to get away with anything and everything. All the neighbors believe that Tiny Fran is too indulgent and that it will one day lead to trouble. As predicted, Roland begins getting into trouble as a teenager. One summer, Roland hangs Jack and Ruby's mule in their barn. Another time, Roland is arrested for vandalism. Then Roland rapes a young girl and outrageously



goes home to bed afterward. Roland is arrested and put in jail for this final crime. Tiny Fran publicly blames society for her son's downfall. Jack openly blames Tiny Fran.

Mr. and Mrs. Hoover

The Hoovers are a well-to-do couple, who own a large farm. The farm has several tenant farmers on it, including Jack and Burr. The couple is kind, but they are also aware of their social status in the neighborhood. Mrs. Hoover is thrilled to have Ruby working for her because she believes it looks good for her to have a white girl employed in her home. It is a status symbol that Ruby resents. When their only child, Tiny Fran, becomes pregnant, Mr. Hoover offers Burr the land his family has worked for several generations in exchange for marrying Tiny Fran. Burr readily agrees, since land ownership is everything to a man like him.

Cecil

Cecil is a neighbor of the Stokes. Cecil is a devout Christian and he often gets into arguments with Jack over the Bible. Jack loves to make Cecil look like a fool when they discuss religion. Jack does not believe in religion and is cynical about the existence of God. When Cecil comes to his home shortly after Ruby's diagnosis, Jack looks at it as a way of having a little fun at Cecil's expense. However, when Cecil declares that Ruby will suffer for all eternity if she does not accept God as her savior, Jack becomes enraged. Jack throws Cecil out of his house. Jack is not ready to accept that Ruby is dying, and the idea that someone could condemn her soul to suffer makes him deeply angry.

The Pitt Family

The Pitt family is Ruby's family. The Pitts are much like the Hoovers. They own a great deal of land that the father works himself. They also have a nice home and a housekeeper, who does all the cooking and cleaning, leaving Mrs. Pitt and Ruby free to entertain. Their household budget is tight, but allows for more luxuries than their poorer neighbors. It is this semblance of wealth that causes John Woodrow to resent Ruby after they are married and leads him to think that he might be able to get some money out of Mr. Pitt on Ruby's behalf. When Ruby refuses to help him, John Woodrow seems to become tired of his wife. It is soon after this that Ruby catches John Woodrow with another woman. After John Woodrow is dead and Ruby has married Jack, she returns home and tells her parents about her marriage to John Woodrow. They are sorry for her trouble and happy to see her content in her new marriage.



Objects/Places

Hoover Farm

Hoover Farm is the farm owned by the Hoover family, where Jack works as a tenant farmer.

Pitt Farm

Ruby's family farm is the Pitt Farm.

Deep Freezer

Before Ruby dies, she fills up the deep freezer so that Jack will not have to worry about meals for several months after her death.

Sewing

Ruby sews together several outfits for June to wear on a cruise in the weeks before her death.

Cigarettes

Ruby smokes, a habit that Jack tries to get her to stop many times over the course of their marriage. Jack believes it is the cigarettes that kill Ruby. The last time Jack sees Ruby alive, she asks for a cigarette.

Pony Barn

Jack finds Ruby's mule hanging in the pony barn when they return from vacation. Jack knows Roland did it, and this is confirmed by Burr.

Pistol

Ruby buys a pistol to shoot John Woodrow, but John Woodrow never comes home. Later, when Ruby marries Jack, she gives the gun to him to use for target practice.

Jack's Work Clothes

Jack hires a woman to clean his house, and she bleaches his work clothes.



Chicken

Jack tries to cook a chicken and garlic recipe from a television show but it does not come out right.

Tractor

Jack's dad dies when the new tractor he is driving tips over into a ditch.

Pies

Ruby likes to bake pies, something that Jack feels makes her more feminine than his mother, who never baked a pie in his memory.

Lingerie

Ruby takes her fancy lingerie with her when she runs away with John Woodrow, keeping it hidden in the bottom of her suitcase. When Ruby walks in on John Woodrow and his new lover, the girl is wearing her fancy lingerie.



Social Sensitivity

In her second novel, following her poignant debut work *Ellen Foster* (1987), Kaye Gibbons reinforces her adeptness at portraying the contrasting and often unexpected social awareness and ineptitude of humanity. Her depiction of the marriage of Ruby Pitt Woodrow and Blinking Jack Ernest Stokes reveals the unbreakable connections between people and exposes universal social issues that concern people from different socioeconomic backgrounds. Although some characters may be pretentious, Gibbons's fictional world is not the venue of southern belles. The daughter of land owners in rural Georgia, near fictional Shelbourne, Ruby first marries a migrant worker, then a tenant farmer. She initially chooses to marry beneath her social class because of a misguided notion of romantic love based on movies she has seen and cravings for travel and adventure. Mistreated and scorned, the widowed Ruby discovers love and happiness with salt-of-the-earth Jack and realizes that the ordinary, banal activities essential to sustain life also nurture her marriage.

Such insight is lost on narcissistic, demanding, sensual Tiny Fran Hoover, also a member of the middle-class gentry, who marries a tenant farmer because she is pregnant with a child fathered by an unnamed (perhaps unknown) man. Her father, Lonnie Hoover, wants the baby to be born legitimate and not bring shame to the family, hinting how important honor and other people's opinions are in that community.

While Tiny Fran's husband, Burr (Gibbons does not clarify if he had been intimate with Tiny Fran prior to their marriage), manipulates these circumstances to become a land owner and rise in the social hierarchy, Jack refuses to exploit and benefit from Ruby's family's assets, even discouraging her from securing her inheritance so that he can become a landowner. Instead, he patiently hopes to be rewarded for his services with land from his landlord, Lonnie Hoover.

Ruby alerts readers that her father is an upstanding citizen because he is a county commissioner and a member of the Ruritans, a rural service and social club. Her mother has a housekeeper, Sudie Bee, and an attractive home with fine furnishings and belongings. The family uses cloth napkins at every meal. Although Ruby is not slated to become a debutante or a socialite, she expects to attend a Presbyterian college to study piano and marry a young man from her social class. She values self-respect and virtue. Ruby is accustomed to some luxuries, both material and in the form of free dom to use her time as she pleases. She attends movies, indulges in daydreams, and goes on annual shopping trips to the state capitol for school clothes and milkshakes.

The Pitt home is always clean and neat. She describes her childish self as a doll that was delicately cared for and admits to having been spoiled by her parents and two brothers, whom she claims even cut her meat for her. Ruby clarifies that she does not blame her parents for her poor choice concerning her first marriage, which irreversibly diverted her from her original life course, but declares that if they had let her attain some autonomy to reinforce her feelings of self-respect and self-confidence that she might not have been victimized by John Woodrow.



Social class and snobbery are further examined when a group of migrant workers arrives at the Pitts' home. Ruby comments that her father valued his farm land above most things but that if he had known what would happen to her, he would have burned the crops. Ruby and her mother are innocents when the migrant workers begin to pick tobacco in extra acreage Mr. Pitt has bought. His usual work crew is unable to harvest this land in addition to their tasks, and Mr. Pitt respects their right to reasonable working conditions and expectations.

Labor concerns are presented mostly through the viewpoint of employers rather than workers, with the exception of Ruby's domestic service for the Hoovers. According to Ruby, the Pitts treat Sudie Bee and her husband Lester kindly and do not take advantage of their servile status unlike Frances and Tiny Fran Hoover's disdain for Ruby and delight in having a white maid.

Her comment offers insight into the subtle racism of the community toward blacks and Hispanics. Although he finds migrant workers distasteful and unreliable, Mr. Pitt hires these nomadic employees as a necessary business transaction. Money often seems to be the source of class conflict, with those that lack funds believing people they consider wealthy should be punished for their riches.

Etiquette and manners are valued by some characters concerned with social propriety. Mrs. Pitt and Ruby ask Sudie Bee to prepare lunch for the migrant workers, and, either out of generosity or in an effort not to act elitist and hurt anyone's feelings, Ruby's trusting and naive mother suggests that Sudie Bee use the family's best dinnerware. The realistic Sudie Bee protests, but Mrs. Pitt insists. When the workers come onto the porch to eat, Mrs. Pitt invites them into the house to clean up because she is repulsed by their filthiness. She, like many women, believes that cleanliness is equated with goodness, and she proudly watches the workers wash away dirt and grime, an act which she considers a baptism of civility. Within minutes, however, the house is trashed and plates are broken, foreshadowing how Ruby will later be callously tossed aside. Mrs. Pitt, who is so refined that she waters her African violets with a syringe, is shell-shocked by how she has been treated.

She goes to bed, refusing to come down again as long as the workers are eating.

Sudie Bee fixes less fanciful fare for the remaining meals served outside, and Ruby philosophically comments about the absence of common courtesy, "We saw what people who don't care can do to people who do care about things."

How characters respect others' emotions and expressions of love reveals their own strengths and flaws. The institution of marriage is regarded differently by the characters. Ruby seeks security and someone who will take care of her. She wants romance, love, and fidelity. Her first husband, John Woodrow, views marriage as a means to gain property—land, items, and Ruby—as well as a way to advance socially. He does not consider marriage a sacred commitment and dishonors Ruby and the church and government which authorize such pairings. Burr also marries to attain social mobility, and his wife, Tiny Fran, participates in the charade to appease her father.



Jack marries out of a sense of duty to provide for Ruby and fulfill his need for companionship. They honor the vows of "till death do us part." Ruby stays with John Woodrow until she is widowed, and Jack retains his love for Ruby throughout their marriage and even during his turn as a widower. In a conversation prior to her diagnosis, Ruby tells Jack, "'I'm going to love you to pieces, love you to death,'" hinting of her life-long commitment and premature demise.

Social problems presented in *A Virtuous Woman* include greed, poverty, juvenile delinquency, and deception. Characters mistreat each other in attempts to secure property or appropriate time for the victims to perform distasteful chores. Gibbons, an orphan who grew up poor, appropriates details from her past to create empathetic poor characters such as Jack whom readers admire because of his frugality and his recognition that people are more valuable than possessions. Jack's poverty is not problematic for his community. On the other hand, Gibbons also creates unscrupulous poor characters such as the young girl that John Woodrow seduces, who wears and steals Ruby's fine lingerie. Her theft suggests that the teenager will victimize other people in the community, perhaps, ironically, even John Woodrow. Roland, Tiny Fran's son, epitomizes extreme juvenile delinquency. He terrorizes the community, killing livestock and raping women. These crimes broach the issues of sexual violence and animal cruelty. While some characters are deceptive by telling white lies, such as Ruby concealing her feelings because she knows that Jack cannot handle them or saying she is a researcher traveling with the migrants because she is embarrassed by her social decline, others are blatant liars who purposefully deceive people, such as John misleading Ruby and convincing her to elope and leave her family and home for little in return.

Sexism dominates in Gibbons's fictional patriarchal society, and women are treated according to the social awareness of males.

Although Jack and Burr are members of the lower class, they were raised to respect other people and view women as being worthy of kindness. Other lower-class men, like John Woodrow, only consider women as unequal servants to perform men's bidding and serve them sexually. John callously rips off the virginal Ruby's lacy clothes from her carefully powdered body on their wedding night. He criticizes and verbally attacks her by calling her a "bitch" when she does not cooperate with him according to his warped expectations. Even though women are needed for procreation, many male characters do not value them or their children, often abandoning and failing to support them financially, causing further social problems for the community. Although characters are not introspective, readers might be prompted to question whether women should be self-sacrificing, as the passage in *Proverbs* suggests, or seek self-actualization.

Ruby's cancer raises the social issue of health care accessibility and quality, concerns that Gibbons would be astutely aware of because she is manic depressive. Ruby's self-care for her terminal disease contrasts with the hospice movement which became popular in the late twentieth century when health care for critically-ill people was assigned to someone unrelated who tended the patient in his or her home. Although neighboring farmers are growing tobacco, no one questions their accountability for



contributing to substances known to cause lung cancer. Nor are cigarette companies discussed in the book either as the buyer of raw tobacco or dispenser of toxic agents.

The tobacco industry is not blamed or held responsible for consumers' health woes.

Support groups for addictions and unhealthy habits, such as Jack's alcoholism, are not addressed although that problem is probably prevalent among the population.

Characters are enablers abetting co-dependence in their partners and children (Frances Hoover's relationship with Tiny Fran is one example; although Jack criticizes Ruby for smoking when he first meets her, he does little to stop her from continuing that habit). In addition to disease, characters suffer wounds during crimes or in fights at public places, such as when John Woodrow is knifed at a bar. Ruby's purchase of a weapon to protect herself from John Woodrow touches on gun control issues. John's mortal stab wound symbolizes how many characters are careless with their lives and those of others, disregarding themselves and everyone as valueless and without individual qualities that might affect society positively. It also represents how evil penetrates society and smothers or atrophies lives. The lack of most characters' social conscience symbolizes their inability to be fully conscious of other people's concerns and civil rights and to value their humanity.



Techniques

Gibbons presents Ruby's and Jack's stories through alternating chapters of firstperson narration which explain their lives from the perspective of different times and from varying points of view. Her novel explores why events happen instead of focusing on plot development, as the narrators shift from explanations of their childhood and young adult years then their experiences as adults. Sometimes this seems like a continuous loop of thoughts that can be stopped and examined at any point. Most of Gibbons's books are reminiscent of oral histories, such as those collected by 1930s Works Progress Administration employees. This novel begins with the widower Jack describing Ruby's final days before her death from the perspective of four months later. Then the ailing Ruby joins the narrative, describing how she is preparing meals for Jack to eat after her demise.

Chapters shift from the dying Ruby remarking on her life with and without Jack and the mournful Jack missing Ruby and recalling his loneliness before he met her and the domestic and emotional fulfillment that she gave him. Ruby's half of the book consists mostly of her memories triggered by the gun shots she hears when Jack is outside, foreshadowing her anticipated but thwarted confrontation with John Woodrow.

She seems to speak directly to readers because she questions if her reasoning regarding her life decisions seems logical. These chapters seem almost confessional, as if the characters were confiding in a journal or to a close friend. Readers, however, realize that such activities would not be consistent with the Stokes' way of life. On the surface, neither main character is introspective, especially regarding their daily interactions with others. Plus, they have few intimate friends whom they would trust with their feelings.

Jack dismisses educated town people who think too much, and he is embarrassed and unable to divulge his grief when Burr and June find him drunk, clad in pajamas, and watching cartoons in sheets perfumed with Ruby's powder. Although she comes from a middle-class family that might be able to afford counseling and recognize its merits, Ruby would not indulge in therapy because it would make Jack uncomfortable.

She and Jack resist help from the church.

The erratic mood conveyed by shifting between Jack's and Ruby's perspectives shows their scattered thoughts during the limbo period when Ruby reevaluates her life, justifying her decisions, while waiting to die, and Jack strives to accept her death, unsure of what he should do to comfort her or himself. External voices are revealed only in the final chapter, a mixture of first- and third-person narrative, which critics have complained distracts from the novel's continuity. Suddenly, Ruby and Jack are no longer confiding in readers. Other characters, specifically Burr and June, who have only been mentioned by Jack and Ruby in their narratives, now impose their opinions, symbolizing their intrusion and interference with Jack's self-designed grieving process.



Some critics label this sudden narrative change as confusing and incongruent with the rest of the book. In *Belles Lettres: A Review of Books by Women*, Deanna D'Errico comments, "Technique suddenly looms over the tale, and it is difficult to view the scene without fretting over the strings that are showing." Susan Heeger, a Los Angeles Times Book Review critic, complains, "Too often, lacking a conflict of its own, the story wanders off to peek in at the neighbors." She considers this chapter to be inconsistent because "Pages are spent on the meanness of peripheral folk, whose main *raison d'être* is to show up Jack's and Ruby's saintliness and to raise the question of why bad things happen to good people."

Reviewers, however, praise Gibbons's overall technique, especially her effective use of southern idioms that convincingly give voice to her rural Georgia characters.

Her language is rhythmic, artfully placed to create poetic prose. The accented dialogue seems authentic and not contrived or demeaningly stereotypical. She skillfully uses literary motifs such as trees representing shelter and the cycle of life. Through her use of details and figurative language, Gibbons immerses readers into a setting of realism. They can feel the heat of the humid tobacco fields and the despair of the migrant workers and the itch of ringworm.

Sensory images suggest the coldness of death, both the winter demises of Ruby and Jack's mother—who could not be immediately buried because of a freak snowstorm, thus delaying closure for Jack and creating later difficulty for him to cope with Ruby's death—and the frozen bundles entombed in the deep freeze. The smelly diaper and unwashed bodies of the teenage girl and baby that invade Ruby's home represent the stain that Ruby feels has permeated her life and tarnished her future. Her fears of being stigmatized are something her husband's lover lacks the conscience to consider. Although Gibbons does not describe the wasting effects of Ruby's cancerous lungs on her body, she clearly shows the metaphorical dispersion of disease within Ruby's and Jack's home and community as they passively accept fate and resignedly wait for death of body and spirit instead of proactively combating their situation.



Themes

Grief

This novel begins a few months after Ruby has died. Jack Stokes has just finished eating the food Ruby has stored away for him and is beginning to wonder what he will do for meals from that point on. Jack is so fixated on the problem that it keeps him from missing his wife too much. It does not, however, keep the memories at bay. Jack recalls his wife, beginning with the day he met her and moving through until the last time he saw her before her death. Jack remembers her with fondness and a little anger. Jack remembers how Ruby asked for a cigarette just hours before she passed away and how he felt obliged to hide her tobacco-stained fingers before the funeral. These things fill Jack with anger and keep him distracted from missing his wife. Anger is a healthy part of the grieving process.

Jack's anger does not last long, however. One night Jack believes that he feels Ruby lying beside him in bed. Jack becomes excited and decides to be better prepared for the next time Ruby comes to him. Jack washes the sheets, powders them with Ruby's favorite scents and then dresses for bed in his new shoes. Jack wants to make an impression on Ruby, to make her proud of him. When Jack goes to bed that night, he cannot sleep. Instead, Jack lies awake almost all night waiting for Ruby to come to him. Ruby never comes. Jack is heartbroken. Jack falls into a depression and decides to do something he never would have done when Ruby was alive. Jack drinks in the house. Burr comes over with June and finds Jack drunk in the bedroom. After berating Jack for drinking in the house, Burr gets Jack to reveal why he has done such an uncharacteristic thing. Burr then offers Jack the land he has worked his entire life. Jack is so happy over the idea of getting his land that he comes out of his depression.

Everyone grieves in their own way. For Jack, grief came first in anger, then depression and finally acceptance. For Ruby, it was different. Ruby was angry at first, just like Jack, but not at the disease that was killing her, but at the man who tried to comfort her. Later, Ruby accepted her fate more easily than Jack could, making preparations for her husband so he would not go hungry the first few months after her death. Ruby tried to make her own death easier on her husband because that was the type of woman she was. Ruby's grief was different, but she did grieve, making grief a major theme of the novel.

Additionally, the couple feel much grief when they are unable to have children, something that both Jack and Ruby wanted very much. They channel this grief constructively by becoming very involved in the upbringing of their neighbor's daughter, June.



Land Ownership

Land ownership is an important theme in this novel because several of the characters consider the ownership of land a way to win respect and as a way to make a living for their families. Jack has lived and worked on the same parcel of land his entire life. Before Jack, his father worked the same land; however, the land did not belong to them. Jack and his father work the land for the land owner, receiving only a small amount of money for their work. Jack watches as his father dies trying to please the land owner and believes that this sacrifice will one day win him the right to the land. However, when the owner dies and does not leave the land to Jack in his will, Jack begins to believe he will never have the one thing he deeply desires. Jack is left a widow at the passing of his wife, is childless and believes that his time on earth has been all but useless without something to leave behind. When Burr offers to give him his land, Jack is drawn out of a deep depression and finds hope in life once more.

Burr is also a tenant farmer like Jack. Also like Jack, Burr has worked the land all his life, as did his father before him. Burr's father has always wanted respect and felt as though he never got it. When Burr was given the land in exchange for marrying Tiny Fran Hoover, Burr's father is so jealous he does not attend the wedding. Burr embraces his new land, knowing it will bring him respectability and financial security. Burr raises a family there and is able to send his young daughter to college, something he might not have been able to do without the land. Land has changed everything for Burr. Burr uses his good fortune to help Jack, possibly saving his life. That is why land ownership is a major theme of the novel.

Respect

Most marriages are based on love, trust and respect. Ruby marries John Woodrow because he is the first man to ask. This marriage is not based on love, trust or respect, but on a desire to have excitement in her life. Ruby thinks that if she marries John Woodrow, she will see a world beyond what she has known in her sheltered life. Ruby gets exactly what she wanted, but it is not as fun as she had hoped. John Woodrow is cruel and abusive, calling Ruby names, beating her and finally breaking their vows of fidelity. Ruby quickly comes to hate John Woodrow, but there is little she can do to change her situation. Ruby cannot go home and she cannot stay where she is. When John Woodrow dies, Ruby finds herself alone and unable to care for herself. Less than five months later, Ruby marries Jack. It is a marriage based not on love or trust, but on respect. Ruby respects Jack for who he is and what he can give her. Jack respects Ruby for her strength of character and her need to be taken care of. It is this mutual respect that is the basis of a twenty-year marriage.

Respect also comes into play in other relationships in the novel. Jack and Burr have a strong friendship, despite a mutual dislike of Burr's wife, Tiny Fran. Jack feels as though Burr is like a son to him and tries to be a good friend. Even when Roland, Burr's stepson, kills Jack's mule, Jack stands behind Burr and remains his friend. This respect



within their friendship leads Burr to offer Jack ownership of the land he has worked his entire life. The land gives Jack the ultimate respect that he has desired all his life. Land is very important to Jack because it symbolizes strength and security. Jack feels that with ownership of this land, he can finally leave his mark on the world. Jack feels his immortality and is comforted by land ownership. This is an ultimate form of respect that Jack craves and that is what makes it a theme of the novel.

Significant Topics

The power and resiliency of love is the primary theme of *A Virtuous Woman*. Ruby is able to love even after being horribly abused and scorned. Jack trusts love despite his history of repelling women and lacking an affectionate companion. Other characters display differing forms of love, whether in the form of parental love for offspring or companionable love for friends.

Love prevails over sinister attempts to kill it, such as John Woodrow savoring his destruction of Ruby's romantic beliefs. Devotion to loved ones is a theme in Gibbons's novel, whether it appears in the form of Ruby preparing meals for Jack to consume after her death or Jack visiting Ruby as she wastes away underneath the hospital oxygen tent. Gibbons shows that love never dies but is present spiritually in the form of warm feelings and memories even when the physical sources of love have been removed. As shown by Ruby and Jack, true love is not the flamboyant, passionate scenes in Hollywood movies but rather the everyday caring, trust, and comfort that are enduring. Ruby acknowledges that she heard no bells signaling that Jack would be her love interest but suggests that the quiet represents the tranquility they found together. She says that people want to love and to be loved but that they should be careful not to let neediness and shallow infatuation blind them and cause them to select their partners unwisely.

Virtue is one of the main characters' most prized qualities and is a recurring theme throughout the book. Ruby is the virtuous woman described in Proverbs, and Jack is her virtuous husband. Ruby epitomizes virtue by accepting her position in society and not resisting the subservient role of women as expected in her community. Jack displays virtue by assisting Ruby during her marital crisis and not taking advantage of her vulnerability; his consistent kindnesses to her, such as buying candy to surprise her, accentuate his virtuosity. Despite social labels, he is a gentleman, perhaps more so than monied Lonnie Hoover who spends more time in the field than in his home. If Jack's behavior is described as chivalrous, Ruby is the woman he places on a pedestal and serves with emotional generosity and courtesy. She, in turn, sacrifices her interests to take care of Jack and June, their surrogate daughter.

Like the proverbial virtuous woman who busies herself with wool and flax, Ruby uses her hands industriously to perform housework and earn a living. Suffering is a theme that is related to being virtuous, such as when Ruby cooks for John Woodrow even after he has assaulted her. Ruby seems noble, which is another aspect of virtue, by not complaining to others about her illness.



She quietly continues her daily responsibilities and spares Jack the extent of the mental horrors she experiences. She is tolerant, compassionate, and forgiving. Ruby relies on herself, not others, to survive. She refuses to indulge in self pity, and like the closing lines of the passage from Proverbs, "Strength and dignity are her clothing;/ And she laugheth at the time to come."

The acceptance of fate is another prominent theme in this novel. Ruby recognizes that she alone made the decision to marry John Woodrow and is prepared to suffer for her poor choice, calmly accepting her barrenness and cancer as conditions resulting from her mistake. She unquestionably embraces Jack as her destiny when he introduces himself and becomes part of her life.

Both Ruby and Jack view her impending death as inevitable. They do not try to seek special, state-of-the-art medical care to combat her cancer or add days to her life. Instead of receiving intensive chemotherapy to kill the malignant cells which ravage her body, Ruby uses her time to prepare meals to nourish and strengthen Jack's surviving body. She accepts suffering and horror as part of her existence. The couple's reactions to Ruby's disease expose their tragic flaw: they refuse to face reality completely and respond proactively. They seem to succumb to momentary confusion and despair and believe that they cannot shape destiny and control their lives.

Sickness and injury are prevailing themes in *A Virtuous Woman*. Characters seem almost self-destructive, choosing risky, unhealthy lifestyles. Ruby realizes that smoking is dangerous but justifies her addiction as her only vice. Smoking symbolizes John Woodrow's oppression of Ruby even after his death. He provoked her to begin smoking and continues to smother her by giving her an unspecified disease that rendered her infertile (Ruby and Jack long to have children) and a habit which squelches the purity of her life. Ruby's lung cancer and barrenness are symbolic of her not being able to breathe and sustain life; she is so hooked on nicotine that even on her deathbed she demands a cigarette, and Jack at first mistakes her gesture as her blowing a kiss before realizing that tobacco is Ruby's primary interest. Solitude is a theme related to illness. Ruby feels alone as she copes with her terminal disease, foreshadowing Jack's loneliness.

Land is an important theme. Characters equate land with life because it validates their existence as an owner or worker. The landless strive to acquire territory of their own. Jack laments, "Land and children, they're the only things in this world that'll carry on for you, and here I am, going to my grave without either one." Land is closely tied with the theme of family, and women are often seen as property much like acreage. The Hoover family has owned their property for a century, and Lonnie Hoover devotes his energy to this farm. People sacrifice to attain and keep land; Lonnie disregards his family's needs in favor of their farm. Like most characters in this novel, he does not closely examine his behavior or effect on others but carefully tends his land. Lonnie is also careless toward his employees. When Jack's father is killed in a tractor accident on the Hoover farm, Jack assumes that the Hoovers might compensate him for his loss and service with land, but he is denied land, emphasizing his landlord's feelings of superiority over his



powerless tenants, and only secures the plot where his house stands as a gift from Burr, the empathetic former tenant farmer and Hoover in-law, after Ruby's death.

Changes and transitions in life are also significant themes. The characters' decisions and choices initiate conflict and plot development. Sometimes choices are disappointing, such as Ruby's immersion in the migrant worker culture which forces her to become someone she dislikes. Other decisions are joyful, like Ruby's and Jack's marriage. Another theme is how the ordinary is seemingly unremarkable but reveals complexities. For example, Jack is not handsome, but he demonstrates deeper love than Ruby imagined was possible. Often, facades mask people's true character. Ruby trusts John because he is movie-star handsome, but his personality is not attractive. Ruby is beautiful both physically and spiritually.

Spirituality is an underlying theme as characters explain their religious beliefs, especially concerning what happens to souls after death and the possibility of an afterlife. At times, the narrative seems like a religious testimony or confessional, as the characters, although admittedly not believers in traditional religions, attempt to purge self-perceived sins and be beatified for their good works. Jack's confrontations with the evangelist Cecil Spangler, whom he ridicules as "Saint Cecil," are how he releases his anger over Ruby's cancer. When Spangler promises that Jack and Ruby will be reunited in heaven if they profess their faith in front of the Ephesus Baptist Church congregation, Ruby and Jack respond rabidly.

Spangler has pressed a nerve by suggesting that they have rejected religion, an institution revered in the Deep South.

Ruby and Jack consider their religious beliefs to be intense, personal and not for public dissection. Ruby confides that she does not consider religion comforting because she does not believe in a Supreme Maker and wants to "stay amazed at how it [the world] all happens." Her philosophy underscores the way she lives her life without a plan. Ruby says that she is as upset at the idea of dying as is Cecil and will miss interacting with Jack the most. She thinks that she will be a spirit and exist with her parents and grandparents near their loved ones and not be confined to heaven, where Jack cannot see her until his death. This insight foreshadows Jack's sensing of Ruby's ghost. He enjoys tormenting Spangler and disproving his statements. Their fight about hell and heaven and banishment of Cecil from the Stokes' house precedes the chapter where Jack suffers a living hell without Ruby.

Despair is always present in *A Virtuous Woman*. The characters seem to have failed lives and are used up by the demands of their jobs, families, and society. Contrasting themes sustain the book's storytelling and characterization. Pride versus humility, the elite versus peasants, and rural versus urban illuminate social relationships. The external world presents many dangers and benefits, such as agricultural science and technology, which can help increase yields and profits but can inflict injuries and lower demand for workers. Private versus public life is explored in the scrutiny and openness of the country people Gibbons depicts. Ruby's reliance on movies to direct her life shows the contradictions of dreams versus reality.

Style

Point of View

The novel is told in the first person point of view through the eyes of two separate narrators. Jack begins the novel four months after Ruby's death. Jack recalls Ruby's illness and her funeral, as well as specific moments of their lives together. In alternating chapters, Ruby narrates the novel several months before her death. Ruby also recalls important moments in her life, including her first marriage and significant times during her marriage to Jack. Each chapter plays off the one before, continuing the narration as though Jack and Ruby are in the same room together attempting to tell the same story to a visitor.

The point of view of this novel works well because it is the first person, so it gives the reader a sense of intimacy with the two narrating characters. The reader is drawn in by Jack in the first few sentences of the novel as he describes how his wife prepared and left meals in the freezer for him before her death. The reader can feel the love this woman must have had for her husband to do this in the midst of a terrible disease and despite his anger at her for allowing herself to get sick. The reader is then drawn to Ruby as she talks about Jack. The reader can feel Ruby's love for her husband as she talks about the preparations she has made for him. Jack suggests Ruby is selfish for dying the way she did, but the reader can see between the lines and knows that Jack and Ruby had a rare love for one another that will continue on despite her death. It is through the first person point of view that allows this intimacy to be revealed and this is why the point of view works.

Setting

The novel is set in a southern state, possibly Georgia, though no specific town or state is ever mentioned. The time period is also never specifically stated. However, the reader gets the impression that the novel takes place between the fifties or sixties and the eighties. The majority of the novel takes place on Hoover farm, a large farm where Jack Stokes works several acres for the owners. It is here that Ruby and Jack make their home and where they live for more than twenty years of marriage. At the beginning of the novel, the home is clean and secure, a warm, inviting place that is clearly a home filled with love. However, as the novel continues, the home begins to show wear and tear. There are dishes in the sink and dust piling up on the furniture. Jack attempts to have something done about this, but the woman he hires turns out to be lazy and inappropriate for the task. This deterioration of the home is symbolic of Jack's state of mind, showing the reader how grief is beginning to grab hold of him and refusing to let go.

The setting of this novel is skimmed over as though the writer did not feel it was important to the overall plot. The location and time are never really explained or



discussed. There are certain clues to the time and location, but specifics are not used. This suggests that the writer felt a deeper discussion of location would have disturbed the flow of the novel. The setting of the house where Jack and Ruby lived is important as it does play a symbolic role in the overall plot. However, it, too, is never fully described and is left largely to the reader's imagination. While there is a good argument to keeping the setting to a minimum, there are times when a reader likes to have a clear picture of where the characters are before they begin to care why the characters are there and what it means in the overall plot. This setting lacks in details, but works when it comes to symbolism.

Language and Meaning

The language of this novel is plain, simple English. When Ruby is narrating the text, the language is clearly educated and concise. When Jack is the narrator, the language becomes less educated and begins to include dialogue that is filled with rough grammar and sentence structure. The language does not include foreign phrases and is often easy for the reader to follow. However, when some of the less-educated characters speak, there tends to be many grammatical errors that break up the text and make some of the sections hard to read.

The language in the novel is used to add to the characterization of each narrating character. By changing the way language is used by who is narrating the chapter, the writer makes a clear distinction between characters and their level of education. This is a clever way of showing the reader how different Ruby and Jack are. However, there are times when this technique makes the text difficult to read and can hamper the flow of the plot. The reader will have to reread certain passages at times in order to clarify the intended meaning.

Structure

The novel is written in sixteen chapters. The first fourteen chapters alternate between narrating characters, beginning with Jack and ending with Ruby. The final chapter jumps from Jack's mind to that of his neighbor Burr, then to Burr's daughter June. The final chapter is different from the other chapters as it does include the thoughts and feelings of two characters that up to this point had only been given life by the recollections of the two main characters, Jack and Ruby.

The novel is told almost entirely in flashbacks. There are few chapters that take place in the present. The rest of the chapters are structured so that they are stories being told in the present about things that have happened years before. The plot follows the courtship of Ruby and Jack, continuing through pertinent moments in their married life. Finally the plot ends in the present, where the reader finds Jack struggling to deal with life without his beloved wife of twenty plus years. There is only one plot line without any additional subplots. The structure is simple, but the plot is designed in such a way that

there can be small amounts of confusion as to the time line. Overall, however, the plot is structurally sound and tells a complete story.



Quotes

"She hasn't been dead four months and I've already eaten to the bottom of the deep freeze. I even ate the green peas. Used to I wouldn't turn my hand over for green peas." Chapter 1, pg. 1

"I did lean over in the coffin though and fix her fingers so the nicotine stains wouldn't show. Ruby had the creamiest soft skin and I hated to have brown spots ruin her for people. Suppose you went to view somebody who'd died being shot or stabbed somewhere so you'd notice. Don't you know they'd fill in with some kind of spackle and smooth it over to match him? Sure they would! Same thing only different with Ruby's two ashy-smelling fingers." Chapter 1, pg. 2

"So a man, especially one like my grandfather, will see things coming apart and all he can do is rush to it, rush to it and hide the broken, chipped off, wrong piece. He'll slip it under something to pretend, or hope to pretend, it's not there, not one bit different from when a child hides a special toy he's broken." Chapter 2, pg. 11

"But Ruby always said that my talking loud wouldn't make people listen to me any better than if I talked regular. She said people will usually decide by looking at you if they think what you have to say's worth a hoot. And she told me you can't change that because you can't change people and that's that and you have to just go on and do the best you can with it. I think that's a damn shame in this world." Chapter 3, pg. 20

"Sometimes I feel like everything started with Ruby." Chapter 5, pg. 44

"Land and children, they're the only things in this world that'll carry on for you, and here I am, going to my grave without either one." Chapter 7, pg. 61

"The woman told the story like it was a privilege for the man's wife to pick at his lips. And I know they also thought I'd be doing the wifely thing to sit by John Woodrow and swab his wounds just because, all because he was my man. I'd nurse Jack all day and all night, but that's a different story." Chapter 8, pg. 69

"When it rains it pours! Sometimes things happen and they pile up on you so fast you don't know if you'll ever settle back down, catch up again." Chapter 12, pg. 109

"I'm sick of being by myself, sick of myself, sick all the way around of looking around and not seeing a damn thing but the four walls and my old ugly self looking back out of dirty, smeared up mirrors. Ruby'd be ashamed." Chapter 13, pg. 121

"The quiet kind of love is better than the other, lasted longer, been better to us. Oh, it's no crime to want and need somebody to love and to be loved by and to go and do what you need to do to have that, but it's certainly a pity when you want it so badly you'll let it



be anybody."
Chapter 14, pg. 137

"And I'll tell you, having your dead wife haint you can really tip your day off to a fine start." Chapter 15, pg. 143

"He wants to give that to you. It could belong to you, you know how you've wanted this place, don't be proud now, you take it, you take it and work it with the time that's left to you. Ruby'd say to take it, do it and be glad for it, it that's what you want, otherwise leave it alone, but you know you want it. I want her more, but do I refuse one because I can't have the other? NO, I don't think so. And it won't replace her, I know that. I'll just have something of my own, keep me from going out of here the way I came in. I will have it. I think I will. And now, let me try to live." Chapter 16, pg. 158

Adaptations

The only known adaptation of *A Virtuous Woman* is an abridged version on audio tape which was narrated by Terry Beaver and released in December 1997, soon after the novel was selected for inclusion in Oprah's Book Club. The book was reprinted in paperback with an emblem on the cover designating that it had been chosen by Oprah Winfrey for discussion on television. Securing places on the New York Times best-seller list, Gibbons's books became popular among mainstream viewers and she became a literary celebrity. Although no movies have been produced of this novel so far, Gibbon's first book, *Ellen Foster*, was adapted to film as an Hallmark Hall of Fame movie which featured Julie Harris and Jena Malone and was aired on CBS on December 14, 1997.

Key Questions

A *Virtuous Woman* explores the relationship of two people who are polar opposites but who fulfill emotional needs for each other. A terminal illness tests and reinforces their devotion and commitment, demonstrating that love and marriage are bolstered by private bonds undefined by socioeconomic labels, age, and public expectations.

1. Discuss the significance of injuries and illness, especially those that result in death, to the book's tone and plot development. Compare how the physical suffering of men and women are depicted. Contrast the description and purpose of physical and mental pain.

2. How believable are the narratives? What seems authentic, and what seems contrived? What factors might motivate the characters to omit or embellish facts?

Is Jack's self-analysis plausible? How is his statement that town people think too much incongruent with his antagonistic debates with Cecil and examination of his history with Ruby and feelings toward her?

3. Compare Roland's and John's abusive behavior toward Ruby. Are there patterns of John's crimes that Roland repeats or mimics?

4. Was Burr's gift of land to Jack patronizing or sincere? Why is land so important to the characters? What do trees represent in this book?

5. Both Ruby and Roland experienced privileged childhoods. Why do you think their actions as young adults differed? How are they similar?

6. Discuss how June fulfills Ruby's original plans, such as attending college. In what ways does June limit herself because of her relationship with Ruby, Jack, and her parents? Describe how she is Ruby's and Jack's surrogate child and how animals also fill the Stokes' childless void.

7. Explain the significance of movies to the plot development and literary style of this book.

8. Analyze the cold imagery in this book, specifically the snow that fell when Jack's mother died and Ruby's use of a deep freeze to nourish Jack after her death.

9. Examine Tiny Fran's, Sudie Bee's, Ruby's, and Mavis Washington's attitudes toward domestic chores. How does culture and race influence their point of view and work habits? Discuss the role of etiquette and manners to achieve characterization.

10. How realistically does Kaye Gibbons portray migrant laborers in the United States? Is her depiction stereotyped?

What complaints might migrant workers have about conditions and their employers?



Topics for Discussion

Why does Ruby marry John Woodrow? What would have happened had she not married John Woodrow? How would her life be different? How would it be the same? Would she have married Jack Stokes? Why or why not?

Why does Ruby marry Jack Stokes? Do you believe it was a love match? How is Ruby's marriage to Jack Stokes different from her marriage to John Woodrow? How is it the same? Is Ruby happy in her marriage to Jack Stokes?

Who is Burr? Why does Burr agree to marry Tiny Fran? Why does Burr allow Ruby and Jack to help raise his daughter, June? What is Burr's relationship to Jack? How is this relationship similar to Jack's relationship to Ruby?

Discuss Tiny Fran. Why is Tiny Fran so disliked by all the other characters? Does Tiny Fran deserve the treatment she receives throughout the novel? Why does Tiny Fran marry Burr? Do Tiny Fran and Burr have a good marriage? How is their marriage different from Jack and Ruby's? How is it the same?

Discuss land ownership. Why is owning land so important to Jack? Why does Burr offer to give Jack his land? Why does this offer bring Jack out of his depression? Does Jack value the land more than he values Ruby? Why or why not?

Discuss respect. What does a person do to earn respect? How is respect taken away? Why do people need to be respected? Does land ownership give a person respect? How? How does having land compare to having children? Why does Jack compare the two? Is Jack right?

Discuss grief. What are the stages of grief? How many of these stages does Jack go through? What about Ruby? Does Ruby truly grieve before she dies? What does Ruby grieve? At what moment does each character reach acceptance?

Literary Precedents

Gibbons's writing is based on the southern gothic foundation. Horror and mystery are intermixed with themes of kinship and loyalty. Gibbons skillfully utilizes language, situations, details, archetypes, and imagery which identify her work as the literary descendant of earlier works exploring the bizarre and universal nature of regional people and places. The southern gothic genre is frequently set in rustic, isolated areas and incorporates humor to alleviate the intensity of grotesque occurrences and imagery.

Good and evil are intrinsic in everyone and everything, and people's attitudes toward fate and destiny often seem defeatist. Characters sometimes represent extremes of size, have exaggerated features, or exhibit physical deformities, or they ignore expected gender and racial roles, acting independently from society, such as Mavis Washington's careless housekeeping. Women tend to be resourceful and invulnerable, withstanding assaults to their spirits, character, and body. Moments of gentleness are interspersed with cruelties, such as Ruth's trusting mule being hung. Gibbons's fiction includes both stereotypical and eccentric characters to achieve readers' recognition of place and circumstances. Gibbons perpetuates a tradition established by earlytwentieth century southern writers to scrutinize social patterns, customs, and expectations firmly rooted in the Deep South to determine the truth concealed by long-held myths perpetuated to justify social injustices and retain lost power.

Reviewers often compare *A Virtuous Woman* to William Faulkner's *As I Lay Dying* (1930), in which the Bundren family travels across Mississippi to bury their matriarch Addie. Jack's reliance on Ruby's post-death presence in the form of frozen food might also be compared to the morbid situation depicted in Faulkner's short story "A Rose for Emily." Gibbons's fiction is also described as having characteristics similar to Lillian Hellman's plays. Other southern writers who established a gothic legacy for Gibbons's novel include Walker Percy and Peter Taylor, whose *A Summons to Memphis* (1986) is reminiscent of Jack's and Ruby's vigil awaiting her inevitable death.

Erskine Caldwell's *Tobacco Road* (1932) portrayed the hardscrabble, rural Georgia world where Ruby and Jack, like Caldwell's protagonists the Lesters (perhaps inspiring Studie Bee's husband's name), struggled to survive and make sense of their place within the community. The plight of migrant workers was depicted in John Updike's classic novel, *Of Mice and Men* (1937). The interaction of southern women with both men and women and their nurturing of and paradoxical subordination and disobedience to patriarchal systems was astutely examined in books by Eudora Welty, Carson McCullers, Gail Godwin, Shirley Ann Grau, and Flannery O'Connor prior to publication of Gibbons's novels.



Related Titles

Gibbons's first novel, *Ellen Foster* (1985), earned her critical acclaim. The *San Francisco Chronicle* called it "a perfect little gem."

Loosely based on her experiences as an orphan after her manic-depressive mother committed suicide and father drank himself to death, this book demonstrates the resilience of women, a theme found in all of Gibbons's work, when the protagonist survives traumatic ordeals to achieve autonomy from her abusers. Considered a feminist *The Catcher in the Rye*, *Ellen Foster* was a best seller, won the Academy of Arts and Letters' Sue Kaufman Award for First Fiction, and has been included in educational curricula at the high school and college levels.

A Virtuous Woman explored similar themes of love and belonging and was critically received as a superb second novel. Gibbons's depiction of southern people, especially women, was acclaimed as authentic and insightful. Her writing style was praised for its lyric qualities which convey precisely and concisely through eloquent prose the book's plot and characterizations. Gibbons returned to the south as the setting for her following books which continued to present her exacting standards for literature and expanded upon her themes of the importance of land and ownership of property, both land and people.

A Cure for Dreams chronicled Lottie O'Cadhain's frustrations with her inattentive husband who was obsessed with his farm, like Jack longs for land of his own, and her daughter Betty who, like Ruby, was careless with her choices concerning love.

Margaret, the narrator of *Charms for the Easy Life* (1993), told about her strong grandmother Charlie Kate Birch who was the community midwife, nurturing women like Ruby took care of June and Jack. Unlike Ruby, Charlie Kate distrusts men and makes smarter choices regarding relationships.

Sights Unseen (1995) focused on manic depression, elaborating the theme of illness and health in Gibbons's books. Sharing personality traits with Ruby, the protagonist Hattie is self-sacrificing, forgiving, and trusting of her sick mother, Hattie. On the Occasion of *My Last Afternoon* (1998) departed from Gibbons's contemporary novels by focusing on an historical account. Virginia plantation owner daughter Emma Garnet Tate Lowell and her slave Clarice, though, withstand similar abuses as Gibbons's other heroines encounter. Gibbons stated that she wrote this Civil War-era novel to counter myths that dismiss women, African Americans, and the South as being weak.

Several books explore similar themes, characters, and symbolism as depicted in *A Virtuous Woman*. Bobbie Ann Mason's *Spence + Lila* (1988) explores the relationship of a rural southern couple who cope with the wife's hospitalization for cancer treatment.

Clyde Edgerton's *Raney* (1985) describes a young southern woman's adjustment to marriage. Jane Smiley's *A Thousand Acres* (1991) depicts the sacrifices women make



for men and land. Other writers who address southern women and their romantic relationships include Vicki Covington, Lee Smith, Ellen Gilchrist, and Anne Rivers Siddons. Judy Troy and Anne Tyler present characters living bleak lives in barren places and who accept their fates with minimal effort to seek alternatives or external assistance. To supplement Gibbons's text, readers can consult James Agee's and Walker Evans's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men* (1941) for photographs of tenant farmers and the rural south.



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