What Looks Like Crazy on an Ordinary Day Study Guide

What Looks Like Crazy on an Ordinary Day by Pearl Cleage

BOOKRAGS

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Introduction

In an interview in *Black Issues Book Review*, Pearl Cleage reveals that the idea for *What Looks Like Crazy on an Ordinary Day* came from her desire to write about a character whose doctor informs her that she is HIV positive. Cleage was amazed at how many people she saw in denial about HIV and AIDS, so she created a character who has no choice but to deal with it. This character, Ava, not only comes to terms with her HIV-positive status, but she also finds a way to recreate and reclaim her life.

What Looks Like Crazy is Cleage's first novel. Known for her plays and essays, Cleage felt that this particular story required the novel form to explore the culture of Idlewild and the psychological workings of her characters. Idlewild is an actual city in Michigan that was established after the Civil War as an African-American community. The city was a thriving resort during the 1950s and 1960s, but then it began to decline in popularity.

Although Cleage began writing *What Looks Like Crazy* in the third person, she realized that her skills as a playwright would make a first-person point of view a natural choice. She told *Black Issues Book Review*, "As a playwright, I'm used to writing in dialogue."

When Oprah Winfrey chose the novel as one of her book club selections, sales sharply increased, and Cleage quickly reached a wider audience. In 1998, *What Looks Like Crazy* stayed on the *New York Times* bestseller list for almost ten weeks. In 2001, Cleage saw publication of a follow-up novel titled *I Wish I Had a Red Dress*.

In her first novel, *What Looks Like Crazy on an Ordinary Day* (1997), Cleage depicts the life of Ava Johnson, a modern African-American woman struggling with her HIV-positive status. When this novel was selected for talk-show host Oprah Winfrey's book club, Cleage reached a wide and diverse audience. The book stayed on the *New York Times* bestseller list for almost ten weeks in 1998, and Cleage's writing in general attracted a great deal of interest. The success of this novel led to the follow-up, *I Wish I Had a Red Dress* (2001), which takes up the story of Joyce, a character in *What Looks Like Crazy on an Ordinary Day*.

Academics, theatergoers, and readers regard Cleage as an important contemporary African-American writer and feminist. In addition to plays and novels, Cleage has written poetry and essays. She has contributed to magazines such as *Ms.* and *Essence*, and she is a cofounder and editor of the literary magazine *Catalyst*. Today, Cleage continues to write from her home in Atlanta. She is considering another follow-up to *What Looks Like Crazy on an Ordinary Day* that would continue the story of Aretha, one of the young girls in the support group Joyce leads.

Author Biography

Pearl Cleage (pronounced "cleg") was born on December 7, 1948, in Springfield, Massachusetts, to Doris and Reverend Albert B. Cleage, Jr. She was reared in Detroit, where her father's ministry allowed her to hear speakers such as Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr. Cleage graduated from high school and then went to Howard University in Washington, D.C., during the turbulent 1960s. After three years, she transferred to Spelman College in Atlanta, where she graduated in 1971 with a degree in drama.

Plot Summary

June

Ava Johnson arrives in Idlewild, her childhood hometown, for a summer-long visit with her older sister. Ava is a successful, single, African-American woman who is HIV positive. She left Atlanta because the news of her virus destroyed her social and professional lives. She plans to go to San Francisco at the end of the summer to start a new life. Her sister, Joyce, became a widow two years ago, when her husband drowned.

Eddie Jefferson, one of Joyce's close friends who also grew up in Idlewild, meets Ava at the airport. He explains that Joyce is with a girl who is having a baby, but she will be back as soon as she can. On the way home, Ava wants to stop at a liquor store. There, she and Eddie see a violent scene between a young man, Frank, and his girlfriend, who is trying to get out of the car in which she and her baby have been riding with Frank. Eddie intervenes, and they take the girl safely home.

In 1969, Cleage married Michael Lomax, a politician. The marriage lasted ten years and produced a daughter named Deignan. Cleage remarried in 1994. Her second husband, Zaron Burnett, Jr., is a writer and producing director of Just Us Theatre Company in Atlanta, Georgia, where the couple met. Cleage was the theater's first playwright-in-residence, and she and Burnett collaborated on several works after she became the artistic director in 1992. Another Atlanta theater, The Alliance Theater, is responsible for debuting some of Cleage's most notable plays. Among these is *Flyin' West* (1992), the play credited with gaining Cleage a widespread theatrical audience.

Joyce is thrilled to see her younger sister. She tells her all about the girl who just had the baby. She is a crack addict, so Joyce is concerned about the baby but hopes that things will work out for mother and child.

The next day, Joyce learns that the baby is not HIV positive, but the mother has left the hospital. Joyce wants to take care of the baby, so she and Ava go to see the baby's aunt, Mattie, for permission. Mattie lives in a crack house with her brother Frank—the same Frank that Eddie and Ava encountered the day before. They do not want the baby, so Joyce arranges to give her a temporary home.

Joyce tells Ava about the Sewing Circus, a group she formed for the unmarried teenage mothers in her church. The group's name is a twist on "sewing circle," because it meets at the same time the church's sewing circle used to meet. Originally formed to plan a nursery care rotation for Sunday mornings, the group now discusses anything relevant to the girls' lives. Joyce sees this as an opportunity to educate, empower, and guide the girls.

One morning Gerry Anderson, the reverend's wife, arrives at Joyce's house. She tells Ava that she and her husband are unhappy about some of the Sewing Circus's discussion content. Tensions come to a head later, however, when Joyce brings hot dogs and condoms to a meeting to show the girls how to use birth control.

The baby comes to live with Joyce and Ava, and they are surprised at how quiet she is. Joyce names her "Imani," which means "faith" in Swahili.

Ava and Eddie spend time together, sharing meals and talking. Although Ava is attracted to him, she decides that romance is out of the question.

July

Gerry tells Joyce that she can no longer have Sewing Circus meetings on church property. Joyce is disappointed but not altogether surprised.

Aretha, the only member of the Sewing Circus who does not have a baby, stops by to see Joyce one day but finds Ava instead. They talk about Aretha's hopes to attend Interlochen, a private arts school, on a scholarship.

Ava has her prescriptions filled at the Idlewild pharmacy. By the time she picks them up, the pharmacist has already told people, including Gerry, that Ava is HIV positive. Immediately, people start making ignorant and mean-spirited remarks. That night, Ava visits Eddie, and he tells her about his experiences in Vietnam.

Joyce has the Sewing Circus meet at her house. Despite the change in location, turnout is high. She realizes that she needs to find a larger place for their meetings.

The next night, Ava and Eddie watch the violent film *Menace II Society* together. Eddie can only watch a little bit of it, and then he tells Ava about his violent background. After Vietnam, he became part of the violent drug culture and ended up in jail for murder.

A few nights later, Ava goes to Eddie's house for dinner and tells him that she is HIV positive. He is understanding, and they acknowledge their mutual attraction. They begin their physical relationship that night, taking all the precautions necessary.

August

One of the old men in town is selling his house for only ten thousand dollars to a cash buyer, and Eddie thinks the house would be perfect for the Sewing Circus. Ava volunteers to pay the ten thousand dollars, and Joyce is thrilled. Eddie begins renovating the house, and progress is going well until Joyce receives a letter from the state discontinuing funding for her program. Gerry has sent state officials a letter with misleading information about the Sewing Circus, so Joyce must go tell her side of the story.

While Joyce is away, Ava takes care of Imani. One night, Frank and Tyrone (the Andersons' grandson who lives with them) come to the house. They park out front and have sex with Frank's girl-friend in and on their car. When Frank throws his empty beer bottle through one of Joyce's windows, they drive away. Eddie wants to "take care of" Frank and Tyrone, but Ava tells him not to do anything so drastic.

Ava and Joyce file a complaint and meet with Tyrone and Gerry at the sheriff's office. Gerry tells the sheriff that Ava lured the boys to the house to try to seduce them. The sheriff does not believe her story, and the meeting accomplishes nothing.

A few days later, Joyce insists on visiting the Andersons to try to resolve their differences. Reluctantly, Ava goes with her. Gerry is not home, so they talk to the reverend. He is very drunk and difficult to talk to, as he wavers between incoherence and praise of his wife.

Ava goes to help paint the new house, and Eddie proposes to her. Ava retreats for a few days while she processes this possible new future.

Mattie arrives at Joyce's house with a social worker, demanding that they give Imani to her. Mattie admits that Gerry put her up to this. After weighing her options, Joyce agrees to let Imani go with Mattie for the weekend. On Monday, a hearing will determine where the baby should live, and everyone but Mattie expects that the result will be for Imani to be returned to Joyce.

September

While Imani is with Mattie, Joyce and Ava sit outside the house and listen for signs that Imani needs them. Everything is relatively calm until Sunday, when they hear Imani crying. They rush to the door, but Mattie and Frank tell them to go away. Joyce waits out of sight while Ava goes to get Eddie. While Ava is gone, Joyce goes in after Imani. She hears her screaming frantically, so she enters through the back of the house. She goes in and calls the police and the hospital, and Frank threatens to shoot her in the head. Mattie convinces him that she and Frank should leave before the police arrive. Joyce then discovers that Frank has broken Imani's legs by twisting them. At the hospital, the doctors operate, put Imani in casts, and say she will be fine.

Eddie wants to find Frank and kill him because there is no way to know how far he will go next time. Ava does not try to discourage him this time.

Ava meets a woman who was a member of the Andersons' previous church in Chicago. She reveals that Reverend Anderson left Chicago amidst allegations of inappropriate sexual behavior with some of the boys in the parish. Ava also learns that Tyrone's mother died of AIDS.

Ava confronts Gerry with this information, threatens to make it public, and succeeds in running the Andersons out of town.

November

Ava calls this chapter an epilogue. She says that Imani is healing fine and the casts are off her legs. Police captured Frank and Mattie after they committed a number of robberies to support their drug habits. The church members have embraced the new pastor, Sister Judith, and her husband. Sister Judith married Ava and Eddie in a joyous celebration.

June, Chapters 1 and 2

June, Chapters 1 and 2 Summary

Ava Johnson is a single black woman whose successful business and social life have been devastated by her diagnosis as HIV positive. Originally from Idlewild, Michigan, Ava has lived in Atlanta for ten years and enjoyed the benefits of being a successful black woman in a city known for its opportunities. As a hair salon owner, Ava has moved in the circle of people who appreciate style and will pay to possess it. Unfortunately, promiscuity is one of the facets of that lifestyle; Ava dislikes this part of her life, not only for the ultimate risk of her health, but also for the less-than-satisfying string of intimate encounters that she is forced to recall.

When the revelation of her health status makes it clear that her business and personal life will no longer thrive in Atlanta, Ava sells her salon and plans to move to San Francisco, with a stop on the way to spend time with her sister, Joyce, in Michigan. Ava is pleased that Joyce sounds positive about the visit, because Joyce's mental and emotional state has been precarious since her husband's death by drowning two years before. In addition to losing her husband, Joyce has also lost her two children, and Ava and Joyce's mother had committed suicide on the evening of Joyce's wedding. Ava and Joyce were both left to wonder what had led her to such a desperate state, and to hope that, by some grace, they would escape.

June, Chapters 1 and 2 Analysis

It is easy for a reader to meet and like Ava Johnson immediately, because the story is told from the first person perspective. Ava's voice is direct and no-nonsense; she is sometimes crass, but her character is very likable because of her vulnerability and honesty. Being diagnosed HIV positive has hastened Ava's enlightenment and sense of urgency to make the most of her life, and this comes through in the tone and style created by the author. Ava's brutal honesty and frank language somehow seem appropriate coming from a character who has no time to waste on nonessential things.

June, Chapters 3, 4, 5, 6 and 7

June, Chapters 3, 4, 5, 6 and 7 Summary

Ava is met at the airport by Eddie Jefferson, a friend of Joyce's who was also the best man when Joyce and Mitch got married. Joyce had planned to meet Ava at the airport but is helping a young girl who has gone into labor. Ava acknowledges that this is very typical of Joyce's behavior; she has always been willing to help anyone who asks, especially those who seem to be less fortunate. On the way home, Ava asks Eddie to stop at a liquor store; while there, they encounter a confrontation between a young man and his girlfriend. Eddie launches into military-style moves learned in Vietnam and leaves the stunned man on the sidewalk; he then takes the girl and her baby home.

As they drive, Ava remembers how the area in Idlewild had been an entertainment and recreational haven for black people before clubs were integrated. Living on the lake enticed people from the city during summers, and there were others who stayed to make their living in the peaceful place. As she looks around her, Ava can't help but compare the prosperity of black people in those glory days to the condition of the properties and the lifestyles of the people who live there now. Ava's thoughts are validated when Eddie's truck reaches the girl's house; it looks like a shack surrounded by a yard full of trash and old cars.

By contrast, Joyce's house, which is the house where she and Ava had grown up, is overly cluttered and pampered when compared to some of the others in the depressed town. It doesn't help Ava's mood that Joyce has painted every room in some shade of blue. The color had been chosen for its supposedly calming properties, but Ava can't help but be a little depressed; she accepts Eddie's invitation to dinner at his house rather than sit in one of the blue rooms waiting for her sister to return home. Eddie's house reflects an ex-hippie, Reggae lifestyle which corresponds with the clothes and dreadlocks he wears and the easygoing grace of someone who has nothing to prove. The two spend a pleasant evening, and Ava stays to make sure that the dishes are cleaned and sanitized, not wanting to take any chances that the utensils she used could be a source of any disease.

June, Chapters 3, 4, 5, 6 and 7 Analysis

The author vividly describes the situation in Ava's hometown in order to contrast its current state with Ava's fond memories of Idlewild in earlier times. The town, which was built on an economy catering to black entertainment in the 1950's, has fallen into despair since the advent of integration and the end to blacks-only establishments. Idlewild suffers other problems as well, in the form of big-city crime and drug abuse, which have become increasingly prominent. Ava's memories of a bucolic lakeside community are shattered by the reality of societal ravages.

Time has also taken its toll on the lives of those closest to Ava, and we learn of the difficulties suffered by Joyce, Joyce and Ava's mother, Eddie and even Ava herself. Their stories are different, but the theme of success in spite of adversity is starting to emerge through the glimpses of character that the author reveals in these early chapters.

June, Chapters 8, 9 and 10

June, Chapters 8, 9 and 10 Summary

Joyce is just returning home when Eddie pulls up to the house with Ava. The sisters hug openly in their joy to see each other. Ava notes that Joyce has gained a lot of weight in the two years since Mitch died, but she rationalizes that everyone has something they lean on to keep from tumbling into despair. Since their mother's death, Joyce and Ava refer to suicide as a "tumble" because that's how a pamphlet on grief had described it, making the point that anytime there is danger of a person going over an emotional edge, any source of comfort is justified.

Joyce's life is full of comforting other people as well; she is a social worker with young black girls in the community. The group is called The Sewing Circus, not because of any domestic arts instruction, but because that was the name of a now defunct club which no longer had need of the meeting room at the church. It just makes sense to Joyce to keep the name and the meeting time the same so that they can avoid arousing suspicion about the edgy topics the young women need to discuss. Unfortunately, the church has a new minister, whose wife, Gerry Anderson, does not approve of such renegade behavior and is working to dissolve the group. Joyce is dismayed by the prospect of this happening

On Ava's first morning back home, Joyce tells her sister about the baby born the day before, the reason Joyce had been unable to meet Ava at the airport. The good news is that the child has tested negative for HIV. Unfortunately, the baby was born addicted to crack, and the young mother abandoned the child at the hospital. Joyce's attempts to place the child with the young mother's family are unsuccessful, so Joyce decides to bring the baby home and care for her.

June, Chapters 8, 9 and 10 Analysis

More is revealed about Joyce's character in these chapters, and it is clear that she is a source of comfort for members of the community as well as for Ava. In spite of Joyce's obvious reasons for despair, she rises above it and becomes a wellspring of hope for others, especially young black women who she feels she can help by showing them responsibility and independence. This is a role that is quite natural to Joyce, as she had taken on the responsibility of raising Ava when their mother committed suicide. Now Joyce's decision to bring the orphaned baby to her own home shows the depths of her compassion and may well hold unexpected lessons for Ava, whose summer plans had not included care of a newborn.

June, Chapters 11, 12 and 13

June, Chapters 11, 12 and 13 Summary

While Joyce goes to the hospital to make arrangements for the baby, Ava indulges in reverie about her life and her health status. Thinking of all the men with whom she has been intimate, and the HIV diagnosis that was the result of that lifestyle, leads Ava to believe that there should have been some shining moment, some other-worldly passion to counter the price she now has to pay. Unfortunately, though, there is not; a misspent young adulthood is all she has to show, and Ava grieves that she will never know an all-consuming love like the one that Joyce and Mitch had shared.

Ava's contemplation is broken by the arrival of Gerry Anderson, the new minister's wife, who has appeared at the door with a large envelope addressed to Joyce. Sensing the woman's judgmental predilections, Ava does not invite her in and ushers her off the porch as quickly as possible. Any contact with this woman is an opportunity for grief, and Ava wants no part of it.

Upon her return home, Joyce reveals the contents of the envelope to be pamphlets about AIDS which she had intended to share with the girls in the Sewing Circus. Apparently, Gerry had opened the envelope and determined that the contents were inappropriate for dissemination to the girls; she cautions Joyce about her choice of subject matter.

Only momentarily diverted, Joyce launches into a positive mode about the baby's arrival the next day and shows Ava all of the clothes and items she had purchased that afternoon. Joyce has named the baby girl Imani, which means "faith" in Swahili; Ava agrees that it is an appropriate choice. Buoyed by happiness, Joyce and Ava take a moonlight swim in the lake behind the house and vow to live healthier, more positive lives, not only for themselves but also for the baby who will soon be living in the house.

June, Chapters 11, 12 and 13 Analysis

In these chapters, the author drives home the senselessness of the AIDS epidemic and the ignorance and judgmental attitudes that accompany the disease. Ava's reflections on her life point to senseless, reckless behavior for which she may possibly pay the ultimate price. Not wanting to broadcast her situation, Ave does however feel that it's important to educate people on the disease and finds it particularly gratifying that Joyce takes the initiative to reach as many uneducated people as possible. Ironically, Gerry Anderson's returning the AIDS pamphlets symbolizes the ignorance and denial of many who would be in a position to help and possibly save lives. Joyce will persevere in spite of this ignorant behavior and will lead by example of compassion. Ava's presence in her home this summer is almost like the beginning of a new life for the two sisters, and their symbolic baptism in the moonlit lake will probably be a turning point for both of them.

June, Chapters 14, 15, 16 and 17

June, Chapters 14, 15, 16 and 17 Summary

Ava's summer in Idlewild is progressing slowly, allowing her to savor the delights of bright days and warm nights in the company of people who love her. Eddie visits regularly, and he and Joyce cook vegetarian meals that Ava is sure could convert the most confirmed carnivore. Joyce is not able to convince Eddie to attend church, but Ava is easily swayed and returns to the church of her girlhood. She prefers Buddhist teachings over the fire and brimstone rantings she hears in the little Baptist church that morning, but she can't help but be impressed by the new minister and his wife, whose proficiency at the pulpit and in the choir makes them seem better suited for an entertainment venue than a small church in Michigan. Just the same, Ava is moved by what she sees and hears and feels some sort of peace in spite of herself.

June, Chapters 14, 15, 16 and 17 Analysis

The author's use of time shifts is an effective technique that allows her to share Ava's thoughts without the benefit of dialogue with another character. Drifting back and forth between memories of the past and the present lets the reader gain insight into Ava's character and motivations much faster than could be accomplished otherwise. It seems particularly relevant to use this technique in these chapters. Ava is easing back into the environs of her girlhood, which make her feel more comfortable yet somehow better able to project her thoughts at the same time.

June, Chapters 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23 and 24

June, Chapters 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23 and 24 Summary

Ava dreams of walking in Eddie's garden and viewing voluptuous fruits and vegetables, until the two of them ascend like angels holding hands in their contentment. The summer is not all organic happiness, though, as Ava gets more involved in Joyce's work at the Sewing Circus. The minister's wife prohibits Joyce from sharing information about AIDS to the young women in the group, but Joyce is stalwart in her mission to educate them; she realizes the knowledge could save their lives one day. Ignoring all of the warnings, Joyce holds a meeting where she demonstrates the proper use of condoms using jumbo hot dogs. Unfortunately, the minister's wife walks in at a most inopportune moment and evicts the group amid warnings of repercussions for such inappropriate conduct in the church hall.

There is a bright spot on the sisters' horizon with the arrival of little Imani, whose wise eyes seem to hold secrets that only crack babies can know. Joyce and Ava, and even Eddie, are dedicated to bringing some joy to the child. They make plans for a happy life, even though Ava suspects that she will probably not be around for most of the occasions of the child's life.

June, Chapters 18, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23 and 24 Analysis

The author is strongly bringing to the forefront two of the issues that most affect young black girls in America at this point in time: AIDS and teen pregnancy. The minister's wife symbolizes a large part of the nation's population, including a few religious fundamentalists, who think that people bring the disease on themselves and probably deserve it as payment for immoral behavior.

Teen pregnancy is another daunting challenge for this group of girls who are trapped in the cycle of poverty, drug use and possibly HIV positive status, and the author masterfully presents the topics in a way that sheds light on the problem without the pretense of lecture.

July, Chapters 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5

July, Chapters 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5 Summary

Reverend Anderson has sent a letter to Joyce to inform her that the Sewing Circus may no longer use the church hall for its meetings due to the appalling scene witnessed by Mrs. Anderson during Joyce's lesson on condom usage. Irritated but undaunted, Joyce vows to continue the group meetings, because there has been much progress in the girls in the six months the Sewing Circus has been operating. Finding a new location is an inconvenience, but Joyce will persevere in her mission.

Imani's presence in the house is taking different tolls on the two sisters. Ava begins to be annoyed at the baby's constant whimpering to be held, while Joyce lives in fear that the birth parents will come to claim the child, to whom she is growing very attached. Meanwhile, as Ava settles into her second month back home in Idlewild, she is spending more time alone with Eddie; she wonders where their relationship could lead but continues to remain celibate in light of her HIV status.

July, Chapters 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5 Analysis

Two themes present themselves in these chapters: adversity and ignorance. Joyce is fueled by a challenge and rises to the occasion when denied access to the church facilities to conduct her meetings with the young girls. The progress made over the past six months is in jeopardy of vanishing due to the decision made by the minister, who is blind to the plight of these young women. Fortunately, the girls have Joyce to further their cause, in spite of the restrictions imposed on them by the religious leader.

July, Chapters 6, 7, 8, 9 and 10

July, Chapters 6, 7, 8, 9 and 10 Summary

One of the girls in the Sewing Circus, Aretha, stops in to see Joyce but finds Ava home alone. This girl is a particular favorite of Joyce's, because Aretha seems to have common sense in spite of the fact that she has been orphaned and alone for several years. Aretha has hopes of attending Interlochen, a private school for the arts, and is the only girl in the Sewing Circus who does not have a child of her own. Ava also sees a spark in the girl and encourages her hopes for further education; she even offers to send her off to school with a stylish new haircut.

The summer is relatively peaceful and therapeutic for Ava until the day she must go to the drug store to pick up her prescriptions, which have been phoned in from a physician in Atlanta. To her horror, Ava finds the pharmacist discussing the prescription with Gerry Anderson and some other parishioners. Of course that means that all of Idlewild will soon know about Ava's HIV positive status. Righteously outraged, Ava is further assaulted when two of the town's delinquent young men make blatantly derogatory comments about her outside the store.

Ava's composure is hard won, and the evening of Sewing Circus activities to be held at the house that night does not promise to soothe her already frayed nerves. Making her excuses by saying she needs some private time, Ava finds herself walking to Eddie's house where she is caught up short at the sight of him practicing t'ai chi in the moonlight. When he finishes, Eddie acknowledges Ava's presence and invites her in for tea and conversation, which drifts to the time Eddie served in Vietnam and the horrors he experienced there. Ava's emotions are still raw from the encounter in town that afternoon, and Eddie, sensing her distress, massages Ava's feet as they talk.

July, Chapters 6, 7, 8, 9 and 10 Analysis

The author provides much more insight into the main characters in these chapters. Gerry Anderson, the minister's wife, is the epitome of self righteous, judgmental behavior. As if her denial of the church facilities for the Sewing Circus is not narrow minded enough, the woman's cruel behavior in the pharmacy is unnecessarily cruel. Ava and Joyce both suffer because of this woman's actions yet immediately vow to rise above the situation, perhaps because of their long experience with adversity. Eddie is another study in triumphing over adversity, as he works every day to master the anger and confusion left in the wake of his service in the Vietnam War.

July, Chapters 11, 12, 13 and 14

July, Chapters 11, 12, 13 and 14 Summary

Joyce's decision to host the Sewing Circus meetings at her own home has turned out to be especially gratifying. All of the regular girls attended that first meeting in the new location, and there was a freedom in the conversation that was never experienced when the meetings were held at the church hall. It's midnight when the last girls leave the house, and Ava returns home shortly after. During the conversation about their respective evenings, Ava mentions to Joyce that Eddie had revealed that he spent ten years in jail. Joyce had been aware of the fact and refuses to divulge any more information, encouraging Ava to discuss it with Eddie personally.

During Eddie's visit to the house the next day, Ava mentions the rash of break-ins occurring lately, and Eddie says he feels sure he knows the two boys who are doing them. Ava suggests that he come over the next night to watch the movie *Menace II Society,* a film that shows the violence and futility of the lives of some young black people in today's society. Eddie is visibly moved almost to the point of rage while the movie plays, and it is in this mindset that he reveals to Ava the nature of the crimes that sent him to jail. Upon his return from Vietnam, Eddie had been angry and lost; he had fallen into street drug culture, which had ultimately led to his killing two people.

Unsure of where this conversation can lead, Eddie and Ava part company for the evening, and Ava is still sitting in the dark, quiet house when Joyce returns home from her evening out. Ava explains the evening's events, and ultimately Joyce urges Ava to acknowledge that she has feelings for Eddie and that this evening has been a powerful turning point in their relationship.

July, Chapters 11, 12, 13 and 14 Analysis

More important topics emerge in these chapters, in the form of Vietnam War-related issues, the plight of poor black boys, and the street drug culture. Eddie seems to embody all that can go wrong for a black boy growing up in America. His time in Vietnam had wounded him emotionally, leaving him confused and alienated during his re-acclimation period upon returning home. Turning to the drug scene was a relatively easy choice for someone whose purpose and self-esteem had been so severely compromised. Eddie succumbed to the lowest depths of the lifestyle and ended up committing murder, for which he paid with ten years of his life. Fortunately, Eddie had found redemption after adversity, though there is also a sense that Eddie still walks a fine line to maintain his forward focus.

July, Chapters 15, 16, 17, 18 and 19

July, Chapters 15, 16, 17, 18 and 19 Summary

A few days later, Ava is startled to see Eddie behind her car at the gas station. She has not been intentionally avoiding Eddie, but neither has she been actively seeking him out since the night he told her about his past. Glad to see each other and glad to have this awkward meeting behind them, Eddie and Ava make plans to meet that night, since Ava has expressed a need to avoid another Sewing Circus meeting at the house.

Sensing that the relationship could progress past friendship, Ava is determined to tell Eddie about her HIV positive status that night. Eddie has set quite a comfortable mood in his home, complete with glowing candles and soft music; Ava struggles to maintain her composure long enough to explain her health situation. She has no need to worry about Eddie's response, though; she feels that he looks into her eyes and soul all at the same time, as he reassures Ava that her love is well placed.

The couple tentatively makes love for the first time, and Ava is delighted by the satisfaction that comes from being touched after months of thinking that those experiences had disappeared from life forever. Declining Eddie's invitation to stay the night, Ava returns home and shares the night's experience with Joyce, who is very happy that the two people she loves most in the world have finally found the path to each other.

July, Chapters 15, 16, 17, 18 and 19 Analysis

The author very poignantly portrays the gift of acceptance and enlightenment through Ava's understanding of Eddie's criminal history and Eddie's grasp of Ava's health status. Clearly, the adversity faced by these two has provided each of them with not only a tolerance for situations that are far from perfect, but also respect for the core of the other person.

July, Chapters 20, 21, 22 and 23

July, Chapters 20, 21, 22 and 23 Summary

Ava unexpectedly awakes at six the next morning, buoyed from the intimate experience of the night before. She heads outside for her morning walk and encounters Eddie, who is also up early; the pair discusses the nature of their relationship. Ava can't help but be moved by Eddie's declaration of love and notices that even their strides are in step as they continue their walk.

Later on, Aretha arrives for the new haircut Ava had promised her a few weeks ago. Emboldened by Ava's short hairstyle, Aretha agrees to the same cut and loves the image looking back at her in the mirror. Ava feels not only the satisfaction of a job well done with the cut, but also the pride of helping this young woman's self esteem as she heads off to a new life.

The robberies continue in the small community, and Eddie arrives at Joyce's house with the news that old Johnny Mack is the most recent victim. Eddie feels sure that he knows the culprits; they live nearby, and Eddie tries to convince Joyce to get a gun for the house. Joyce never wants to believe the worst of anyone, though, and even Ava can't sway her with stories about kids under the influence of crack.

July, Chapters 20, 21, 22 and 23 Analysis

Ava's self esteem is returning full force as her relationship with Eddie grows, and the sense of guilt and remorse she had suffered for so long is washing away. As her life takes a fresh turn, Ava feels empowered to extend the positive energy by lifting the spirits of Aretha, a young black woman who Ava hopes will be better equipped to deal with the world than some others. Hope is starting to emerge as the characters reach pivotal points.

August, Chapters 1, 2 and 3

August, Chapters 1, 2 and 3 Summary

The success of the Sewing Circus meetings fuels Joyce to take the program's purpose to a higher level; with Ava's help, she develops a mission statement for the organization. The goal of the group is to help teach young black women how to take care of themselves and their children in all financial, material and spiritual matters. Ava can't help but be proud of her sister, whose compassion and initiative never lag, even in the face of adversity.

Eddie's visit to Johnny Mack reveals the old man's plan to sell the house due to the recent break in. Johnny is tired and realizes that the time has come to move into a nursing home; he is willing to sell the house for only ten thousand dollars. Joyce and Eddie can see the possibilities for the Sewing Circus immediately, and their enthusiasm is buoyed up even more when Ava offers to pay for the house outright.

Finally, Eddie and Ava are able to convince Joyce to keep a gun in the house for protection in case of a break in. Still a bit naïve as to the ways that the worst of big city life has crept into the little community, Joyce relents only when Imani's safety is brought up. There is nothing Joyce wouldn't do to protect the child, so a rifle takes up residence in Ava's room, and a little bit of security settles in again.

August, Chapters 1, 2 and 3 Analysis

The author continues to reveal social issues that plague the black youth in America. Lives of crime and drugs take the place of productive lives in communities where vices are more easily attained than employment. For the most part, Joyce's naïveté and passion for social justice continue to guide the main characters, but her love for the baby overrules everything, and she succumbs to keeping a gun in the house against her better judgment. Fortunately, Ava is in the financial position to be able to buy the house needed for Joyce's social calling, and each sister does her part in furthering a positive impact on those within their reach.

August, Chapters 4, 5, 6 and 7

August, Chapters 4, 5, 6 and 7 Summary

As soon as the house purchase transaction is completed, Eddie begins renovations to customize it for the needs of the Sewing Circus meetings. Joyce and Ava find remnants of the past in a box of old photographs left behind, and the sisters pause in memory and respect for the black people who had come to Idlewild when it had been a haven from the city and all its troubles.

Joyce's enthusiasm for the Sewing Circus progress is temporarily halted when she receives a letter from state officials announcing that the group's funding is to be terminated as a result of a report of vulgar activity received from Gerry Anderson. Unable to connect with the correct people on the phone, Joyce decides to make an overnight trip to the state capital to plead her case for the group. Ava prepares to spend a night alone with Imani for the first time; in doing so, she finds that the baby has taken up permanent residence in her heart, no matter how temporary the physical custody may be.

August, Chapters 4, 5, 6 and 7 Analysis

Time makes way for the next generation, as evidenced by Johnny Mack's move to the nursing home and the preparation for the Sewing Circus to move into his house. The old photographs show the faces of those who are only ghosts to Idlewild now, and Joyce and Ava's pleasure is tinged with a bit of regret for the passing of time and a bit of their own history as well. The future beckons though, and Joyce stays the course in her dedication to the young women who have come to rely on her maturity and guidance. Ava is re-learning love in her attachment to Imani and finds herself capable of more than she had ever dreamed possible.

August, Chapters 8, 9, 10 and 11

August, Chapters 8, 9, 10 and 11 Summary

Ava is startled awake by the sound of a car pulling into the lane. Joyce is in Lansing for her meeting the next day, and Eddie has an out of town job that will keep him away overnight, so Ava is surprised by the appearance of a car. She is able to see that the intruders are Tyrone, the minister's son; Frank; and Frank's girlfriend. The two boys proceed to have sex with the girl, and Frank throws an empty beer bottle into Joyce's front window before they speed away.

Ava's nerves are rattled, but she waits until Eddie returns to discuss what action should be taken. Eddie's offer to take care of those boys once and for all is a bit unnerving for Ava, so they wait until Joyce returns home to file a police report. The authorities can only bring malicious mischief charges against the boys, so Joyce wants a meeting with the youths to address the damage they caused.

August, Chapters 8, 9, 10 and 11 Analysis

For the first time all summer, Ava is frightened because of outside causes. It's as if the trouble she has tried to escape has followed her from Atlanta. While Eddie's offer for protection is comforting to a small degree, cooler heads prevail, and Joyce asks for the opportunity to address the boys herself. Joyce, as usual, symbolizes the compassion and understanding that is so lacking in the lives of these kids, whose futures seem dim if they don't receive some sort of positive intervention.

August, Chapters 12, 13, 14, 15 and 16

August, Chapters 12, 13, 14, 15 and 16 Summary

Ava's attraction to Eddie continues, and the pair spends quite a bit of time together renovating the house in preparation for the Sewing Circus group. Ava also accompanies Joyce to the sheriff's office for the meeting regarding the incident at Joyce's home. To Joyce's and Ava's complete dismay, Gerry Anderson accuses Ava of having seduced the boys to the house under the pretense of a youth-oriented event. The sheriff does not believe Mrs. Anderson's story, but he is compelled to hear her complaint. The group parts without any resolution.

There is a small measure of success for Joyce during this trying time, in that Aretha has called from Interlochen to tell of her academic achievements and success in finding new friends. Aretha is the one shining star in the Sewing Circus, and Joyce sees her as a beacon of hope for the other girls.

Not having reached a satisfactory conclusion to the vandalism event at her home, Joyce insists on visiting the Reverend Anderson at home to see if their differences can be resolved. Ava accompanies Joyce, and the two sisters are completely caught off guard when they realize that the minister is drunk and in no condition to discuss anything. Rambling between incoherent statements and praise for his long suffering wife, Reverend Anderson drops to his knees in prayer, not even realizing that Joyce and Ava have left.

August, Chapters 12, 13, 14, 15 and 16 Analysis

The challenges continue to mount for Joyce, who feels that it is her mission to not only take care of those she loves, but also those who cross her path with their wayward behavior. The self-righteous behavior of Gerry Anderson, although not appropriate, has new light shed on it when it becomes clear that she must be constantly protecting her drunken husband. Mrs. Anderson's tactic of taking the offensive before anyone else can seems to have worked for her, but the minister's wife may have met her match in Joyce. The theme of rising above adversity continues to thread throughout the book, and the author reveals some of the mechanisms that people use to accomplish that feat.

August, Chapters 17, 18, 19, 20 and 21

August, Chapters 17, 18, 19, 20 and 21 Summary

Renovations on the house project are progressing well, and Ava and Eddie find themselves alone there in a rare moment of quiet. The love they share is so overwhelming that neither one can speak, until finally Eddie breaks the silence and asks Ava to marry him. A marriage proposal is something Ava never expected to hear, and she runs from the house through the woods as fast as her legs will carry her. Ava's thoughts race too, and she rehearses in her mind how she can decline the proposal; being HIV positive doesn't leave many options for planning a future, and the thought of Eddie's pity or the need for him to become a nurse to her, are things that Ava just can't abide.

Ava's emotional turmoil is sidelined temporarily by the arrival of Imani's mother, Mattie, at Joyce's house. Apparently, Gerry Anderson has told Mattie that taking back the child will also guarantee the young girl the monthly income provided by the foster care system. Overwhelmed with rage at this new situation, Joyce threatens to run away with Imani, but the social worker explains that the best thing to do is to release the baby to Mattie for the court-ordered weekend and then file legal papers immediately to gain full custody. Joyce, Eddie and Ava determine that no harm will come to Imani while in the care of Mattie and her criminal brother, Frank, and they position themselves outside of Mattie's house all weekend to keep watch.

August, Chapters 17, 18, 19, 20 and 21 Analysis

The summer has reached its climax for the main characters. Each one of them is faced with a decision that will change the course of their lives, and none of them ever expected any of it. Eddie had never expected to marry again, and Ava certainly never expected a marriage proposal. Joyce has the most urgent challenge, when Imani's welfare is threatened by Mattie's return. The author has positioned each of the characters in the way of tremendous conflict so that each may know what matters most to them, and what they are prepared to do when threat emerges.

September, Chapters 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6

September, Chapters 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6 Summary

Ava awakes to drenched bed sheets; they signal night sweats, a symptom of AIDS. Debating about whether to say anything about it, Ava reflects on her past and wonders about the future she can't claim.

Joyce is forced to turn Imani over to the authorities, and ultimately to Mattie, for the weekend. Ava senses that the only thing that will save Joyce's sanity is to have something to keep her occupied, so the two sisters get the custody paperwork together and then take up their watch in front of Mattie's house.

The weekend passes with relative calm until Sunday, when Joyce and Ava can hear Imani's cries even over the thumping of the blasting stereo. Mattie and Frank block Joyce and Ava's attempts to enter the house, and Frank threatens to shoot the gun he has directed at Joyce and Ava. The sisters leave the house, and Ava leaves to find Eddie for back up. Joyce cannot bear to hear Imani's terrified screams and breaks into the back of the house and calls the police. Threatened at gunpoint, Joyce refuses to leave the house until the ambulance and the police arrive.

In the meantime, Mattie and Frank leave the house, realizing that the police will find their crack and arrest them. Joyce is finally able to get to Imani who, to Joyce's horror, is lying face down on her blanket on the floor, both legs broken. The doctors later tell Joyce that Frank must have twisted the baby's legs until they broke and that at that point, the child must have passed out. Fortunately, there were no injuries to her head or other vital organs. The hospital grants Joyce permission to stay with Imani; her tiny legs are put in casts, but she is expected to make a full recovery.

September, Chapters 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6 Analysis

The author shows the extended hell that is associated with drug use, this time in the form of child abuse. Mattie's only interest in her own child is for the possibility of money received from the foster care system. Frank has no interest in the child who is his niece and inflicts intense cruelty on her, probably during a drug-induced state. Fortunately, Imani has people who care for her and will remove her from this cycle of abuse, but there are many children whose lives are threatened every day in this country. The author uses this scenario to point out that positive outcomes can grow from the dire, drug-related situations young people may find themselves in.

September, Chapters 7, 8, 9, 10 and 11

September, Chapters 7, 8, 9, 10 and 11 Summary

When everyone is assured that Imani is out of danger, Ava and Eddie take a few minutes to themselves to mull over the horrific events of the past weekend. There is no reason or explanation for behavior like Frank's, and there is agreement that he is the type that creates negative stereotypes associated with all black people. Eddie would like to carry out his plan from weeks before and ensure that Frank does no more damage. Ava tries to discourage him, but his anger overtakes clear thinking, and he leaves to hunt for Frank and Mattie before they have a chance to escape to Detroit or Chicago.

Ava receives a phone call that puts her in touch with a woman named Susan Hughes, who wants to share some information about the Reverend and Mrs. Anderson. Apparently, Susan had been a parishioner in the reverend's church in Chicago, where he had been driven out of the community for inappropriate behavior with young men. Ava documents the woman's story and confronts Gerry Anderson with the news. Ultimately, the Andersons are driven out of Idlewild; the reverend is committed to a mental health facility and Mrs. Anderson goes back to Chicago.

September, Chapters 7, 8, 9, 10 and 11 Analysis

The author finds one more current topic to bring into her story: that of child abuse by clergy members. At the height of the announcement of scandals permeating the Catholic Church, Cleage offers up the concept that the same illicit behavior occurs within other denominations as well. In fiction, the situation can be easily resolved and the perpetrator punished accordingly, but actual events are not so easily negotiated. Cleage also makes the case for an alternate view on the stereotypes assigned to black people by introducing people like Joyce, Ava and Eddie, whose goodness may be challenged at times but is always at the core of what they do.

November, Epilogue

November, Epilogue Summary

The summer is long over, and many things have come to fruition, the most notable being the wedding of Ava and Eddie. The casts have come off Imani's legs, and she is healing and growing. Frank and Mattie have been arrested after committing robberies to support their crack habits. The new minister, Sister Judith, is uniting the church members and fully supports Joyce's social work; the Sewing Circus is welcomed back into the fold as an official church activity.

November, Epilogue Analysis

After all the lessons and social commentary throughout the book, the author finishes with the most hopeful one of all: the fact that there are possibilities for new beginnings. The summer had brought turning points for the main characters, who eventually work through their challenges to emerge stronger and more positive, changed not only by the people and events around them but also by the inner shifts realized when people are willing to make better lives.

Characters

Gerry Anderson

Gerry Anderson is the pastor's wife. She is very involved in the church and in the lives of its members. In fact, the reverend is rarely seen, but Gerry is quite vocal and visible. Gerry is in her late fifties and is usually dressed up more than anyone else is. She wears an elaborately curled hairstyle. She sings in the choir, and her voice is impressive.

Gerry has clear ideas about what is proper and what is not, and she is unwilling to depart from these ideas. Ava characterizes Gerry as condescending, self-righteous, out of touch, and judgmental. When Gerry learns that Joyce is teaching the girls in the Sewing Circus about condom use, she forbids Joyce to meet at the church. She also treats Ava like a leper when she learns that Ava is HIV positive. Her attacks on Joyce and the Sewing Circus become increasingly cruel; she even arranges for Imani, the baby for whom Joyce is caring, to be taken away from Joyce and put into the home of crack-addicted family members. Gerry is also willing to lie to the sheriff and other public officials to get what she wants, and she sends letters to the state to try to have Joyce's funding for the Sewing Circus discontinued.

Ava learns important information about the Andersons' past. Parents of young boys in the reverend's Chicago parish accused him of inappropriate sexual behavior with their sons. The church board sent him away and warned him to avoid all contact with youth. Gerry's attempts to destroy the Sewing Circus are, at least in part, an attempt to keep young people, and the temptation they present, away from her husband. Ava also learns that Gerry and her husband are Tyrone's guardians because their daughter died of AIDS. This explains Gerry's drive to distance herself from Ava, who reminds Gerry of the pain of losing her daughter. In the end, Gerry agrees to move her family away from Idlewild.

Eddie Jefferson

Eddie Jefferson, known in his youth as "Wild Eddie," has returned to Idlewild after serving ten years in prison. When he was young, he went to Vietnam, an experience that left him angry and confused. Once he was back in the United States, he became part of the violent drug culture. As a result, he was sent to prison for murder. In prison, he learned to be introspective and spiritual. He began to meditate and to look for life lessons in his painful experiences. These practices have matured him and given him a peaceful disposition. Ava finds him extremely content and in control. Still, Eddie is protective of those he loves. He is quick to offer to kill anyone who threatens Ava, Joyce, or Imani. He believes that loving someone means being willing to protect her at any cost.

Eddie wears his hair in dreadlocks and wears simple clothes such as sandals and Eastern-inspired shirts. He is a physical person who works as a carpenter and practices martial arts. He is also a spiritual person who enjoys music, tea, and incense. He is thoughtful, sincere, and intense, and he takes time to nurture himself as well as others. Eddie was a close friend of Mitch, Joyce's deceased husband, and Eddie checks on Joyce to be sure she has everything she needs.

Perhaps because of the extreme circumstances of his past, Eddie seems fearless. He is unafraid of the violent, drug-using youth, and he is unafraid of Ava's HIV-positive status. He is never foolish or rash, but he does not allow fear to dictate his decisions in any way. His willingness to fall in love with and marry Ava is evidence that he prioritizes feelings and people over convenience and pleasantness.

Geraldine Anderson

See Gerry Anderson

Ava Johnson

The main character and narrator of the story, Ava is a single, African-American woman who is HIV positive. She has left Atlanta after ten years because her social life and business (she owned a salon) fell apart when everyone found out about her illness. She has decided to visit her older sister, Joyce, in their hometown of Idlewild, Michigan, on her way to start a new life in San Francisco.

Ava and Joyce share a special bond, and they are able to say things to one another that nobody else can say. Having helped each other through the devastating suicide of their mother, they look to each other for female companionship and guidance.

Ava is direct, sarcastic, sensitive, intelligent, open-minded, and lonely. She accepts responsibility for her disease, but she has trouble dealing with the finality of it. She is often impatient with what the game-playing people do, and she deeply resents the harsh judgments of others. She is also hesitant to get involved with Eddie because she is aware of how her illness would affect him and their relationship, as well as her emotional limitations. A basically selfless person, Ava finds herself torn between surrendering to the romance with Eddie, which she desperately wants, and stopping it before it goes far enough to hurt either one of them. Ultimately, she is able to trust him and believe in his vision for their future. This is the turning point for Ava; she shifts from pessimism to optimism.

Joyce Mitchell

Joyce is Ava's older sister. She lives in Idlewild, where she has lived her entire life. Joyce is a widow whose husband, Mitch, drowned two years prior to the events of the novel. She has had a hard time coping with her loss but, at the time of the novel, she is

beginning to reconnect with her community in meaningful ways. Joyce also lost both of her children, one in infancy and one in childhood. A churchgoer, Joyce identifies a need among the teenage mothers there and begins a weekly meeting with them. The Sewing Circus, as it comes to be called, is a forum for open discussion. It gives the girls a chance to support each other, and it gives Joyce an opportunity to provide guidance and education.

Joyce's drive to make a difference stems from her family environment as a child. She and Ava grew up in a house where their parents cultivated the spirit of the 1960s by planning rallies and drafting handbills with their friends. In addition, Joyce's professional background was as a state caseworker for fifteen years, working with families in the Idlewild area.

Joyce is very nurturing and maternal. The reader's first clue to her character comes when Eddie picks Ava up at the airport because Joyce has driven a woman in labor to the hospital and is staying until she delivers her baby. Joyce's decision to take care of an unwanted baby who is born addicted to crack is not surprising, given her background and her personality. Joyce names the baby Imani, which means "faith" in Swahili. She is also motherly toward Ava and the members of the Sewing Circus. An important part of Joyce's maternal nature is her fierce protectiveness of those she loves. This is evident in her reaction to having Imani taken from her for a weekend and in her fearless confrontation of an armed man high on crack who has hurt Imani.

Aretha Simmons

Aretha is the only member of the Sewing Circus who does not have a baby. She is sixteen years old, intelligent, personable, pretty, and more ambitious than the other girls are. Joyce tells Ava that she believes that Aretha has a chance of making something of her life. Aretha's parents, like Joyce and Ava's parents, were activists hoping to join a community of like-minded African Americans committed to making a difference. When Aretha was twelve, however, they both died in an auto mobile accident. One of her mother's friends agreed to take her in so she would not have to move to Detroit to live with her grandmother.

Aretha has a vision for her life that includes pursuing a better education than she can receive in Idlewild. She is thrilled at her acceptance to a summer session at Interlochen, a private arts school nearby that hosts a special all-expense-paid program during the summer. Her hard work and talent eventually earn her a scholarship.

The stories of the three main adult characters illustrate what can come out of adversity. Their stories are very different, but each person has gained wisdom and self-knowledge. This central message is a hopeful one, and it suggests that at least some of the members of the Sewing Circus will endure their hard lot in life and mature into wiser women. Cleage takes this idea a step further with Imani, the baby Joyce takes in after her mother abandons her at the hospital. Holding Imani, Ava explains:

I ran my hand over her little head again and she snuggled against me in a way that made me feel a surge of what I guess was maternal protectiveness. Imani had already kicked a drug habit cold turkey and outrun the HIV her mama was sending special delivery. She was stronger than she looked, and somehow that made me feel stronger, too.

Ignorance

What Looks Like Crazy depicts the unfortunate results of ignorance. Ava was ignorant and careless in her promiscuous youth, and she contracted a deadly disease. Once people learn that she is HIV positive, Ava finds that not only can her own ignorance hurt her but that the ignorance of others can hurt her. The fear and judgment felt and expressed by others makes her feel rejected, worthless, and alone. The same ignorance that brought about Ava's illness brings about unplanned pregnancies for the teenagers in the Sewing Circus. They, too, are careless and promiscuous, and the result for them is early motherhood. When Joyce teaches them about condoms and how to use them, they are interested because this is mostly new information. Nobody had ever taught them how to protect themselves from pregnancy. They also have no idea that they are at risk for contracting diseases such as AIDS. Ava relates that Joyce "asked them what they thought was the number one killer of young black folks all over America. They guessed homicide, drug overdose, cancer, and car accidents, in that order. When Joyce said AIDS, they thought she was kidding."

Themes

Adversity

All of the novel's main characters have endured adversity prior to the events of the story. Ava learned that she was HIV positive. Joyce suffered the loss of two children and her beloved husband. Eddie was in the military and went to Vietnam, from which he returned angry and confused. As a result, he embarked on a life of crime that ended with a ten-year prison sentence. The younger members of the Sewing Circus also have experienced adversity.

The juxtaposition of these two groups—the adults and the adolescents—reveals Cleage's message that wisdom comes from surviving adversity. At the beginning of the novel, Ava intends to visit her sister for the summer and then go on to San Francisco. What she learns about herself during her visit, however, teaches her that she cannot outrun her HIV-positive status. San Francisco may be more accepting of her, but it will not be an escape. Because of this realization, Ava stops running. Eddie was on a path of destruction and self-destruction until he went to prison, where he met an older, wiser man who told him, "You know what your problem is? You ain't slowed down long enough to see the lessons, youngblood." After serving his sentence, Eddie left prison a wiser, calmer, more focused man who felt peace. The loss of her beloved husband, Mitch, devastated Joyce. This loss came after her two children died, one in infancy from Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS) and the other by a drunk driver. After Mitch drowned, Joyce lost herself in her grief, gaining weight and detaching from society, until she felt compelled to help the young unwed mothers in her church and her community. She discovered that the surest way to help herself was to help others.

New Beginnings

Set against the uninspiring backdrop of Idlewild is the theme of new beginnings. Ava visits her sister on her way to make a new beginning for herself in San Francisco. After losing her social status in Atlanta, she is desperate to start over in a new place. What she fails to realize until late in the book is that she can make her fresh start in Idlewild. Her relationship with Eddie and her decision to marry him are very optimistic, an attitude that was foreign to her at the beginning of the book.

Joyce also makes a new beginning when she commits to the Sewing Circus. Delighted at the progress she makes with the girls, she refuses to let the group dissolve just because they can no longer meet at the church. She shifts her focus from her grief at the loss of her husband to figuring out how to continue filling a need in the community. By dedicating herself to the Sewing Circus, she redefines herself. She is no longer just Mitch's widow; she is also a leader and mentor to a group of teenage girls who need a role model. She now has a present and a future as well as a past.

Style

First-Person Narrator

The entire story is told from Ava's perspective in her own voice. Ava is direct, stubborn, and sometimes crass. The reader understands that she is not an objective narrator. For example, she immediately accepts the members of the Sewing Circus and their situations without considering that they bear responsibility for their behavior. As a promiscuous woman herself, Ava does not see the girls as examples of the dangers of promiscuity. Another narrator might perceive them as young women who lack virtue or character. Ava relates her experiences, past and present, and she is open about her feelings and attitudes. The reader really gets to know Ava because Cleage's focus is on maintaining her voice consistently throughout the novel.

The story also shows how ignorance can easily breed intolerance and harsh judgment. Ava endures the judgment of people in Atlanta and people in Idlewild when they learn that she is HIV positive. They treat their wrong ideas as facts and feel justified in treating Ava coldly. She tells that when she first learned of her status, she wrote to everyone she might have exposed to the virus. A furious woman stormed into Ava's salon, demanding that she take back the letter she sent to the woman's husband. She made a scene and slapped Ava. While the woman would have been justified to be angry that her husband had been unfaithful, instead she was angry about the letter. Ava recalls: "'All right then,' I said, 'what do you want?' 'I want you to take it back,' she said. 'Take it back?' I was really confused now. What good was that going to do?" The woman wanted to remain ignorant of the risk to her husband's health—and her own. She slapped Ava, not for sleeping with her husband but for sending a letter to inform him that he needed to see his doctor for an HIV screening. Recalling the incident, Ava remarks, "That's when I really started to understand how afraid people can be when they don't have any information."

As a narrator, Ava is cynical, sarcastic, sensitive, and self-assured. Her sarcasm is established early in the novel. Describing women on television who tell their stories of contracting AIDS, Ava remarks, "There they were, weeping and wailing and wringing their hands, wearing their prissy little Laura Ashley dresses and telling their edited-for-TV life stories."

Time Shifts

As the novel's narrator, Ava reveals her past alongside her present. These time shifts seem natural, as they occur when something in Ava's present reminds her of something in her past. This gives the reader two benefits: first, the reader is able to understand Ava's background and why she came to Idlewild to see her sister; and, second, the reader is able to see how Ava's past relates to what is happening to her at certain moments. When Eartha (Imani's crack-addicted, HIV-positive, teenage mother) leaves

the hospital and abandons the baby, Joyce is dumbfounded. Ava, however, remarks, "Homegirl's trying to walk away from that HIV. She's trying to decide if she's going to tell anyone or just keep living her life and see what happens. I used to wish I hadn't taken the test so I still wouldn't know." The result of this kind of merging of the past with the present is intimacy with the main character because the reader knows many of Ava's private memories.

Ava's recollections sometimes shift abruptly from one time period to another. In some cases, Ava breaks off her recollection to return to the present moment. This usually signifies either that the memory is becoming too painful or that the present holds something more promising than the memory. An example of this is when Ava tells the reader about a jazz musician with whom she had a serious relationship. They were involved when she found out she was HIV positive, and her expectations were terribly disappointed. As Ava tells this story, she breaks off suddenly to return to telling about the present:

When I got the results and told him, he sat there and listened to me tell it all and then he picked up his coat and his horn case and walked out the door. No *good-bye*. No *damn, baby, what we gonna do*? Nothing. One minute he was there, then he was gone. That was it.

Ava abruptly switches from this memory to telling the reader that she went with Joyce to see Eartha's sister, Mattie, about the baby. Her switch from a painful memory to an incident in the present shows that she is eager to stop thinking about the profound disappointments in her past and focus instead on what is happening in the present.

At other times, Ava embraces the present because it offers her something better than her memories offer. Realizing that she will not be around for much of Imani's life, Ava determines to be as focused on the present as possible. She writes:

So I took a deep breath like they keep saying in this meditation tape and tried to focus on being *right in this room, right in this moment*, and I actually felt better! It was amazing. I dragged that scared part of myself kicking and screaming into *the present moment* and it was so good to be there. I started grinning like an idiot.

Historical Context

HIV and AIDS in America

The U.S. Center for Disease Control (CDC) made its first official announcement regarding Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) in 1981. This brought awareness of AIDS and its precursor, Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV), to the mainstream. Because the first clusters of cases were among homosexuals, the disease was strongly characterized as a gay disease for many years. In fact, HIV/AIDS was initially known by the acronym GRID, which stood for "gay-related immune deficiency," until heterosexuals began contracting it too. During the early 1980s, the number of AIDS cases rose dramatically every year. By 1988, the CDC was aware of 86,000 cases, compared to only 225 cases reported in 1981.

Although there was a small number of victims who were considered blameless by the general public (such as recipients of blood transfusions and babies of mother with AIDS), the disease retained its social stigma for many years. Ignorance about the disease was also widespread and ingrained. In 1985, for example, a *New York Times*/CBS poll found that about half of Americans thought that AIDS was easily transmitted through casual contact. This attitude is revealed in *What Looks Like Crazy* when Ava picks up her prescriptions from the pharmacy, and the pharmacist handles her bag and her money with great care. In the same scene, Gerry Anderson tells Ava that she does not want her grandson, Tyrone, making pharmacy deliveries to Ava because he is their only grandchild. Headlines around the United States, however, often told more severe stories than Ava's story. In Queens, New York, a girl with AIDS was allowed to attend school, and parents kept twelve thousand children home in protest. Ryan White, a boy in Indiana, became a household name when he was an outcast at school and in town after contracting AIDS from a blood transfusion. In Florida, three boys in one family received tainted blood transfusions and, when they contracted the virus, someone burned their home to the ground.

While some people were hostile toward those with HIV and AIDS, others were simply indifferent to the suffering it caused. Many believed that people with AIDS had brought the disease on themselves and "deserved" it. Some religious fundamentalists claimed that the disease was divine punishment for amoral living. The government was slow to respond to the growing AIDS epidemic in terms of research and education.

In the 1990s, education improved the public's understanding of the disease and helped qualm fears. Announcements by respected athletes with HIV positive status (such as Magic Johnson and Greg Louganis) helped remove the stigma to a certain extent. The generous and vocal support of celebrities brought a sense of urgency to the search for better treatments and a cure. In 1993, Tom Hanks and Denzel Washington starred in *Philadelphia*, a film about a gay attorney who loses his job when his firm learns that he has AIDS. Hanks won an Academy Award for his portrayal of the main character. As the 1990s progressed, AIDS became a part of American culture. Awareness and prevention

education expanded, and research continued to improve treatments. Still, perceptions of and reactions to the disease are mixed, and many people with HIV-positive status endure social discrimination.

While HIV and AIDS are a challenge to all of American society, they affect African Americans disproportionately. African Americans make up approximately 14 percent of the American population but comprise 41 percent of all AIDS cases. Of all the women who die of AIDS, fully half of them are African American. Among newly diagnosed women, 64 percent are black, 18 percent are white, and 18 percent are Hispanic. Incidence among black women, especially in the South, rose throughout the 1990s. While some women contract the disease from intravenous drug use, another major factor is heterosexual sex.

Teen Pregnancy and Other Problems

In 1997, when *What Looks Like Crazy* was published, American teenagers faced problems that had been much less common in the generations before them. These issues included teenage pregnancy, drug abuse, violence, and living in single-parent homes. During the 1990s, about one million teenage girls (10 percent of the total U.S. population of girls between the ages of fifteen and nineteen) became pregnant every year. In 1998, almost 13 percent of all births in the United States were to teenage mothers. Teenage pregnancy rates are higher than those in many other developed countries, and the problem cost the United States seven billion dollars in 1999. Some social commentators assert that teen pregnancy creates a cycle: many girls who become pregnant come from single-parent homes, and then they become single parents. In 1994, almost ten million single mothers were heading households; twenty-five million children were being reared without fathers; and 42 percent of those children had never seen their fathers' houses. In 1998, 26 percent of families with children were headed by single parents, and 42 percent of those single parents had never been married.

Drug abuse was another major issue among teenagers in the 1990s. Nearly 10 percent of adolescents between the ages of twelve and seventeen used illegal drugs in 1998. Most of these teenagers used marijuana, but close to two million admitted to using cocaine and/or inhalants. Although use of drugs such as marijuana, cocaine, and heroin declined through the 1990s, use of "designer" drugs such as ecstasy rose dramatically. Not surprisingly, teenagers who are under the influence of drugs may become violent or sexually uninhibited, both of which often lead to long-term consequences.

Critical Overview

Although Cleage already enjoyed success as a playwright and essayist, in 1997 she ventured into novel writing with *What Looks Like Crazy*. Critics generally deemed her work in fiction as accomplished as her previous work in other forms. *What Looks Like Crazy* earned the acclaim of reviewers for its irreverent tone, relevant social issues, and well-developed characters.

A *Publishers Weekly* reviewer notes that "first-time novelist Cleage, without succumbing to didacticism, delivers a work of intelligence and integrity." The reviewer applauds Cleage for skillfully addressing so many issues that young African-American men and women face, including teenage motherhood, AIDS, drug abuse, unemployment, and inadequate sex education. Vanessa Bush of *Booklist* describes the novel as "riveting," adding that this "funny, irreverent, and hopeful novel is stunningly real and evocative." In *People Weekly*, Laura Jamison writes that the plot developments surrounding the quarrels with the local church can be "a little contrived and overblown." Still, the reviewer finds the book "uplifting" for its central message that a person's fallibility makes him or her lovable, a message Jamison claims is "delivered with a deft and joyful touch."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

Bussey holds a master's degree in interdisciplinary studies and a bachelor's degree in English literature. She is an independent writer specializing in literature. In the following essay, Bussey explores the significance of Ava's revisiting her childhood hometown of Idlewild.

In *What Looks Like Crazy on an Ordinary Day*, Cleage introduces the reader to Ava, a woman whose HIV-positive status ruined her social and professional life in Atlanta. Deciding to start a new life, she chooses San Francisco as her new home but first wants to visit her older sister, Ava, in Idlewild, Michigan, for the summer. Ava and Joyce grew up in Idlewild, and Ava's reaction to the declining resort town is similar to that of most people who revisit their childhood hometowns. She is struck by the changes, but she is also surprised at the things that have not changed and the people who still live there or who have returned to live there again after some time away. What Ava does not know when she first arrives is that she too is returning for more than just a visit.

Ava comments that in the early days of Idlewild, the town was full of idle men and wild women. Once a popular resort town, Idlewild is now declining and no longer draws tourists. Ava's impression is that the town is stagnating, and there is little evidence of its exciting past. Still, the town's name is fitting; the youth in the town are both idle and wild. With the exception of Aretha, they seem to lack ambition or vision; they do not even have the attitude shared by so many teenagers of being eager to get out of their hometown and see other parts of the world. They expect to stay right where they are and do not even consider other possibilities. The youth are also wild; their lives revolve around sex, drugs, alcohol, and violence.

From Ava's perspective, the frequency of teenage pregnancy and crack use in Idlewild is unexpected. She is stunned because she thought that these problems would be out of her life once she left the big city of Atlanta. Instead, she finds them as commonplace in Idlewild as they are in Atlanta and, probably, San Francisco. Although she may have expected to enjoy a break from urban ills, she learns that these ills are universal. Because she has seen the problems of the urban youth in Atlanta, she quickly recognizes the same defiant attitudes in some of the young men in Idlewild. Commenting on Tyrone, Reverend Anderson's grandson, and his friend Frank, Ava observes:

I felt sorry for them. I'd seen boys in my Atlanta neighborhood grow into swaggering young men who were suddenly scary until you looked into their still baby faces and realized who they used to be, but I also knew how dangerous they were. I'd seen Frank hit that girl like he didn't care if he broke every bone in her face. I'd seen Tyrone smoking dope right behind his grandmother's back. It was tempting but foolhardy to focus on their vulnerability instead of your own.

Realizing that social ills are everywhere is an important part of Ava's learning that she cannot outrun her HIV-positive status. The same devastation and discrimination she

experienced in Atlanta, where she contracted it, will follow her to Idlewild and to San Francisco, where she expects to start a new life. At one point, Ava remarks, "I felt like I was back in Atlanta listening to people talking in tongues, trying not say *HIV*."

Idlewild was once a resort town, a place where people went to escape temporarily the demands of their everyday lives. Tourists came to Idlewild for respite, just as Ava does. She expects to take a break from worrying about her life and its new demands, but she finds that she must still confront her uncertain future and the regrets of her past. In this light, it is appropriate that Idlewild is no longer the haven from the city that it once was; it cannot offer Ava a place to leave her problems behind. Late in the story, she confides that the problem with knowing the truth deep down is that it makes it hard to pretend. She adds that, ever since she arrived in Idlewild, she has been trying to pretend that "this place is so far away from the scene of the crime that the consequences can't catch me."

Ava and Idlewild have three important similarities. The first is that they are seemingly on the decline yet still have much to offer. The second is that their histories demonstrate what is temporary and what is permanent. And the third is that they reflect major social issues of the 1990s. Anyone visiting Idlewild can see that it is a town in decline. Its exciting past contrasts sharply with its troubled present. Although it is no longer a resort town and social problems are a growing issue, it is still rich in history and potential. While some of its residents represent the worst of society, there are also people who represent the best of human nature. In these ways, Idlewild mirrors Ava. She is in decline, waiting for the inevitable destruction of her health and quality of life, but she is still engaged in life and working to improve herself and her community. She has the wisdom and perspective she lacked in her younger years, so she too is rich in history and potential. As a woman who is HIV positive, she embodies a major social problem, but through her loyalty, generosity, and humor she also embodies the resilience and strength of the human spirit. Idlewild is not all good and not all bad, so Ava is not in a position either to give up on it or to declare it perfect. Instead, she is compelled to participate in it, attaching herself to what is good and promising about it and working to repair what is destructive and frightening about it. The more she learns to deal with her HIV-positive status, the more she responds to herself the same way she responds to the town.

The second similarity between Idlewild and Ava is that they illustrate the passing fun of temporary excitement and the stability of lasting character. Idlewild was once a thriving resort town for African Americans. It was rich with entertainment, nightlife, and interesting visitors. Now these elements are gone, but they were never really a fundamental part of the town. Touring entertainers came and went, the nightlife came alive only when the sun went down, and the interesting visitors finished their stays and returned to their homes. What was always constant about Idlewild was its population of permanent residents. Families like the one in which Joyce and Ava were reared, and notable people like "Wild Eddie" Jefferson, stayed in Idlewild throughout every season. For Ava, the things in her life that were fleeting, such as parties, one-night stands, and alcohol, are now gone. But the permanent fixtures, like her intelligence, wit, perseverance, and family, are still available to her. Idlewild and Ava illustrate the

temporary nature of flashy, exciting chapters in the lives of towns and people, and they also show the lasting value of stable, caring people and strong character.

Third, Idlewild and Ava represent important social ills of the 1990s. Ava is surprised to see the same problems in Idlewild that she saw in the urban landscape of Atlanta: teenage pregnancy, domestic abuse, crack addiction, alcoholism, illiteracy, and sexual abuse. Throughout the story, she comments on the blurring line between urban and rural communities' problems. Just as Idlewild represents various social problems of the 1990s, Ava represents one of the most frightening new realities of the time. As a woman who is HIV positive, she serves as a constant reminder to those around her that AIDS is not a disease that attacks only male homosexuals and intravenous drug users. Cleage creates a character who reminds readers that everyone is potentially vulnerable.

Despite Ava's intention to pass through Idlewild and then move on to San Francisco, she finds the new life she desires in Idlewild. The town she was so eager to leave when she was a young woman becomes the perfect place to marry and live out the rest of her life. It is to Ava's credit that although Idlewild is not where she thought she would find happiness, she is open enough to recognize the opportunity for happiness when it presents itself in the forms of Joyce, Eddie, Imani, and the Sewing Circus. When Eddie and Joyce decide that they can buy an old house and renovate it for the Sewing Circus, Ava shares their excitement. She wants to be a part of it, and she says, "San Francisco seemed more and more like somebody else's dream." She adds:

I felt more alive here than I had for years. I had my sister, the lover of my dreams, a role as part of a long-term project that excited me, and a big-eyed, baldheaded baby girl to take on my morning walks. I was meditating morning and evening, walking three miles a day, and I hadn't had anything stronger than a glass of wine with dinner in a month. It was my *choice* that had brought me back here, and for the first time, it really felt like home.

As if affirming Ava's decision to stay in Idlewild and forget her dreams of San Francisco, the new pastor (a woman named Sister Judith) and her husband come to Idlewild *from* San Francisco. Ava asks her, "Why would anybody leave a city like San Francisco to come to Idlewild?" Sister Judith reminds Ava that she herself left Atlanta to come to Idlewild and asks her, "Then what are you doing here?" Ava tells the reader, "*Watching the sun rise*, I wanted to say. *Walking in the woods. Falling in love. Raising a child. Helping my sister. Protecting my family. Living my life*. 'Planning my wedding,' is what I said." To Ava's surprise, she finds a kinship with Idlewild, and she finds her future within its community. She has no need to see what awaits her in San Francisco or anywhere else. Idlewild mirrors her, suits her, embraces her. It is home, after all.

Source: Jennifer Bussey, Critical Essay on *What Looks Like Crazy on an Ordinary Day*, in *Novels for Students*, The Gale Group, 2003.

Critical Essay #2

Hart has degrees in English literature and creative writing and focuses her writing on literary themes. In this essay, Hart compares the three main characters' various uses of religion and spirituality and the specific goals they hope to attain through their beliefs and practices.

In What Looks Like Crazy on an Ordinary Day, Pearl Cleage creates three main characters who share a common reliance on a religious, or a spiritual, practice. They each use their own individualized philosophy and ritual to help them overcome tragedies. Despite the fact that the characters' beliefs vary as widely as their motives for observing such practices, Cleage implies that it is through such spiritual practices that the characters confront their challenges and realize an inner peace. Upon discovering this sense of tranquility, the characters are then able to step out of the blindness of their personal suffering and feel compassion for the suffering of others.

The protagonist of this novel, Ava, has many challenges to face, and most of them center around her bout with AIDS. Ava also suffers from alcoholism. In the beginning of the story, she has sold her beauty shop and is leaving Atlanta in search of a new home in a new city, which she hopes will accept her as she is. As the story opens, she has little thought of changing her lifestyle and has resigned herself to an early death. Thoughts about the spiritual side of life, such as praying, would almost be an insult to God, since she has ignored everything religious throughout most of her adulthood. She quit trying to pray because she had figured out that she was just "hedging" her bets. If she was smart enough to come to that conclusion, she believes that "God must know it, too" and probably would not grant her wishes and might even decide that she "needed to be taught a lesson for trying to [bullsh——] him in the first place." With these beliefs in mind, Ava focuses on the physical elements of life and consumes large quantities of alcohol in an attempt to forget that she is dying.

The only remnants of a religious belief that Ava retains are based on her childhood memories of Christianity in the Baptist Church. Her view of religion is that of a powerful figurehead, or god, who exists outside of her and is in control of her life. This spiritual being judges her actions and sends rewards or punishments her way, depending on the decisions she makes on how to live her life. Since she has denied her early Baptist upbringing and has not acquired any spiritual practice to replace it, she is left with only a physical approach to life. In other words, Ava identifies herself only through her body. She says that the reason she is heading for San Francisco is that she believes that that city is progressive enough to accept her on her physical terms: "I wanted to be someplace where I could be my black, female, sexual, HIV-positive self." Because of her inability to see beyond the physical definitions of herself, Ava finds her only sense of relief in dulling her thoughts with large quantities of alcohol. When she is drunk, her thoughts cloud over, removing her, somewhat, from her fears. The most that she gains in her inebriated state is enough distance to temporarily become sarcastic about her condition. However, as soon as the alcohol wears off, she is right back where she started. Only now, she also has a hangover to deal with.

Not until Ava renews her friendship with Eddie, a Vietnam veteran and ex-con who has found solace in a more Eastern approach to spirituality, does Ava find some peace of mind. Through Eddie, Ava learns to meditate and to focus on the present moment through the practice of Tai Chi. In general, this Eastern form of spirituality appeals to the psychology of an individual. Through an understanding of how one's own thoughts influence one's actions, people who practice some Eastern spiritual rituals, such as Tai Chi, believe that the godhead dwells within oneself. By stilling one's thoughts, a person can cultivate an inner peace, which allows a more direct communication with the spiritual aspects of life.

It is through Tai Chi that Ava learns to live in the present moment and to face her fears of death. She does not embrace the Eastern philosophy fully, but rather she mixes the Eastern beliefs with her own Western understanding of religion. She uses Tai Chi to reawaken her sense of spirituality, thus giving her a reason to stop numbing herself with alcohol. Once she begins to cleanse herself of her destructive nature, she becomes more compassionate with the people around her. She takes an interest in her sister's community actions. She opens up her heart to the baby that her sister is trying to adopt. She also allows herself to imagine the possibilities of falling in love with Eddie, rather than simply enjoying the thrills of their sexual relationship. Through the characterization of Ava, Cleage states that it is impossible to run away, or hide, from life's challenges. The best path, Cleage implies, is to confront one's fears. For Ava, this confrontation requires that she use a mixture of beliefs that combine a trust in oneself as well as a faith in a god-figure, whom she describes as a man who reminds her of her grandfather: "tall and tan and like he's been working too hard."

Eddie's story is in many ways similar to Ava's, although the circumstances differ. During his involvement in the Vietnam War, Eddie was taught to kill and was forced to exist in a world of horrid atrocities. "I saw the worst things you can see human beings do to each other," Eddie tells Ava. Upon returning home, he felt lost. He says: "By the time I got back to the world, I was a *bad* man." For Eddie, like Ava, the spiritual dimension in life had disappeared. He had faced death—both his as well as his victims—and he did not like what he had seen. In an attempt to rid himself of those memories, he too had turned to drugs and sex. He thought that these things would numb him. Instead, they put him in such a desensitized state that he thought nothing of murdering again.

Not until Eddie spends time in jail does he allow all the memories of Vietnam to flood back into his consciousness. When they do, he says they first made him angry. He was angry about having gone to Vietnam, angry about what he was taught to do while he was there, and angry that his subsequent actions, once he returned home, landed him in jail. Fortunately, while in prison, Eddie meets a man who reminds him to slow down and think, not just about what has happened to him but also about the lessons he has learned from all his experiences. It is at this point that Eddie turns to Tai Chi to help him process all the emotions that are stirred by his memories. The ritual of Tai Chi enhances the concept of slowing down, as those who practice it learn to move in very small, concentrated patterns with a full awareness of every muscle that is involved in every little step. With a well-sustained practice, the slow, ritualistic movements become a form

of meditation, which helps Eddie to slow down his thoughts, to better understand and accept them, and then to comprehend the lessons behind them.

It is through meditation that Eddie begins to realize his self-destructive nature. His reawakening to the spiritual aspects of life allows him to understand that the fast-paced city life he had been living was counterproductive to his need to be reflective, to learn the lessons of his previous experiences. So, he moves away from Detroit and reestablishes himself in his hometown of Idlewild. He gives up alcohol and replaces it with herbal teas. He changes his diet to one that is more nurturing and continues his Tai Chi practice.

Eddie knows better than to believe that all his problems are behind him, however. When Ava asks if he has learned all his lessons, he replies: "I'm working on it." He understands that his anger will always be there, just as Ava's HIV-positive status will never go away. Reawakening to spirituality, Cleage states through Eddie, is not some magical pill that one can take to relieve all the pain and rid oneself of all misery. Rather, it is a process. It is a way of coming to terms with life's problems and challenges. Eddie implies that he was not raised in a Christian belief system, so his belief in the Eastern philosophy is more concentrated than Ava's. By focusing on the concept of intentional living—eating the most nutritional foods, meditating to be aware of his thoughts, staying conscious of the present moment—Eddie is able to control his anger and forgive himself for the deaths he has caused. In learning to accept his flaws, to forgive himself, and to learn the lessons of his experiences, Eddie, too, opens up to the community. He is sympathetic to the older folks who are having trouble adjusting to the changing culture that surrounds them, and he is extremely protective of the women around him, willing to risk his own life to protect them.

Ava's sister, Joyce, has a very different list of problems. She also has slightly different ways of dealing with them than Ava and Eddie. Joyce's problems are those of tragedies that have been sent her way without her being an active participant in them. There was nothing that she did other than love her children and her husband and later have to witness their deaths. Her challenge is to accept the losses she has had to suffer through and move on. However, Joyce, too, at first tries to numb herself. Her agent of choice is not drugs or sex. Rather, Joyce turns to food to find solace. When Ava confronts her sister's weight problem, Joyce responds: "I had a couple of months when all that stood between me and taking a tumble was a bowl of Jamoca Almond fudge and some homemade Toll House cookies." Joyce's reference to "tumble" suggests the way that her mother dealt with her father's death. Joyce's mother had committed suicide. To keep herself from falling into that depressive state, Joyce appeases her mourning with sweets. On a psychological level, she might also have seen the extra weight that she gained as a padding that might help to protect her from any more emotional tragedies. Although Joyce's choice of food, on a social scale, might be more easily approved of, it nonetheless falls into the same category as Ava's and Eddie's addictions. Joyce used food to hide behind because she had lost a sense of the spiritual.

It did not take her very long, however, to reunite herself with the church of her childhood. After her husband's death, Joyce started attending services on Sundays, and

as Ava explained it, "I think she wanted to pray and she was too self-conscious to do it at home." Whether that was the reason for her return, Joyce admits that her purpose was twofold. Her reacquaintance with the Baptist church was more than a spiritual quest. Joyce, like her sister, believed in a mixture of various philosophies. She was the product of several 1960s concepts, such as those purported by New Age and feminist movements. She was also familiar with many Eastern philosophies and practices. When she had a need to make contact with spirituality, she sought out books on Buddhism, yoga, and meditation. She was also comfortable with creating a godhead figure who might just as well be feminine as masculine. Although she had been struck with tragedies and had temporarily lost sight of the spiritual dimension, she knew, as she later tells her sister, that life was "not just the physical stuff."

Once Joyce regains her equilibrium, her first movement toward recreating her life is to seek out the members in her community who most need her help. She finds them through her church and uses the church as a meeting place until she can find a more liberating one. It is through Joyce's character that Cleage demonstrates the power of helping others in order to heal oneself.

There are many different ways, Cleage seems to imply, to find misery in this life, whether or not one is looking for it. However, there are just as many ways to find one's way through it. In developing these particular characters, Cleage demonstrates that it is not the religious, or spiritual, practice that is important but rather that one finds some way to keep the spiritual and physical balanced.

Source: Joyce Hart, Critical Essay on *What Looks Like Crazy on an Ordinary Day*, in *Novels for Students*, The Gale Group, 2003.

Critical Essay #3

Aubrey holds a Ph.D. in English and has published many articles on twentieth-century literature. In this essay, Aubrey argues that, although the novel is full of love and compassion and offers a positive approach to solving social problems, the author's didactic purpose makes her characters less effective and real than they might otherwise be.

What Looks Like Crazy on an Ordinary Day was selected in 1998 for the Oprah Winfrey Book Club, which boosted its sales enormously and brought it attention that might otherwise have been placed elsewhere. There is a certain kind of book that catches Winfrey's eye. Such books often feature women, usually minorities, facing up to difficult, dangerous lives, courageously overcoming obstacles through a sense of solidarity with other women and establishing their independence. A dose of New Age spirituality about taking control of one's life and finding the core of truth within oneself does not go amiss either. Given the talk show host's persona, Cleage's first novel and Oprah's Book Club were a perfect fit. *What Looks Like Crazy on an Ordinary Day*, for all its literary qualities, is a self-help book. It points the way to how to live a productive, useful, happy life, especially for women. It is also a book with a social conscience. It highlights social problems such as AIDS, domestic violence, and the devastation caused by cocaine addiction. In that grim context, it shows women empowering themselves, making better choices about life, and tackling problems themselves when institutional structures (in this case, the local Baptist church) fail them. In fact, when Joyce, the social activist who thinks there is a solution for every problem, writes her statement of purpose for the Sewing Circus, it comes close to the message of the book as a whole: "To create and nurture women who are strong, mentally, physically; free of shackles, both internal and external. . . women who . . . choose their lovers based on mutual respect, emotional honesty and sexual responsibility."

So it is that Ava Johnson, although carrying the weight of being HIV positive, succeeds in making a complete turnaround in her life, both physically and mentally. She is the perfect New Age heroine, the ideal example for everyone who writes or reads those ubiquitous articles in women's magazines that outline a seven (or eight or nine or ten) point program for physical/mental/spiritual well-being. She begins an exercise program, regularly walking three miles a day; she starts to learn Tai Chi from Eddie; she meditates twice a day; she and Joyce begin referring, in fashionable New Age feminist style, to "Mother/Father God"; she eats better and virtually eliminates her consumption of alcohol (giving up caffeine, however, proves too big a hurdle). Ava also learns to value what she has and to appreciate the present moment rather than dwelling on the past or worrying about the future. Going back to her roots in Idlewood, she finds that home can be more than simply the place you come from.

Ava is undoubtedly an attractive heroine. Her informal, chatty, confessional, diary-like narration has considerable verve and panache. She is resilient and able to learn. She has an innate decency and a sense of humor that carries her through the most difficult situations—and it is hard to imagine a more difficult situation than being diagnosed HIV

positive, which, despite the recent advances in drug therapy, remains a slow death sentence for almost all of its victims.

However, there is an odd paradox about Ava's narration of her story. It is considerably wittier, earthy, irreverent, and entertaining in the early part of the novel, when she is at the height of her alienation from herself and her situation, than it is by the end. At the beginning, when she travels to Michigan and has to get used to living again in Idlewood, there is a gritty edge to her personality, as seen in her frequent use of street-slang, her self-confessions, her defiance, and her refusal to sugarcoat her situation or to lie to herself. All this sounds completely authentic; Ava has a genuine voice of her own. But, as her relationships with Joyce and Eddie deepen and she comes to terms with her situation, valuing the good that is in her life, she softens. She loses that street-smart edge to her language and becomes more bland and predictable. No doubt Cleage softened Ava on purpose, but the result is unfortunate. Instead of the heroine becoming progressively more interesting as the novel unfolds, she becomes considerably less so as she learns to do and say all the "politically correct" and "spiritually correct" things that her creator, who understandably wants to use her to convey a positive social message, requires her to say and do. The result is that Ava loses a quality that few people in real life ever do: the capacity to surprise or startle us.

I read those articles all the time and I look at the things they recommend and I usually am not doing a single thing on the list. I *consider* doing them all the time, but I rationalize not starting to work on them immediately by thinking how they'd be so *easy* to do if I ever really wanted to do them. This is bulls, of course, since every one of them would require a major redirecting of energy and since I'm already so guilt-ridden about not having done this stuff a long time ago, I could never just take one at a time. I'd have to tackle the whole righteous group simultaneously, or not at all.

This will surely be familiar to any woman who has been unpleasantly reminded by *Glamour*, *Cosmopolitan*, or any number of other women's magazines of the vast gap between what her life is and what it might be if she were not so lazy—and then decided to do nothing about it. And, how much more interesting, in style and sentiment, are Ava's comments here than her later dutiful remarks about how much better she feels when she finally musters the will to put some of the anti-stress practices into effect!

This is not an unfamiliar problem in literature, since vice, despair, unhappiness, and other negative states of mind are often easier to portray than their opposites. Darkness appears to make more of an impact than light, which is why Dante's *Inferno* is more widely read than his *Paradiso* and why William Blake's *Songs of Experience* are more complex and interesting than his *Songs of Innocence*. Virtue, although undoubtedly good for us, does not always make the most compelling reading.

This slide into virtue (if one may put it that outrageous way) is noticeable in other aspects of Ava's use of language. At first, she peppers her narrative with a commonly used vulgar term that even in these permissive times the *New York Times* refuses to print, referring to it instead as a "barnyard epithet." When, late in the novel, Ava has to find a word for a bodily function for which the barnyard epithet would be the literally

correct, if vulgar, choice, she opts instead for the dainty euphemism "call of nature." One suspects that the Ava who waited at the airport in the first chapter of the novel would not be caught dead using such a mealy-mouthed phrase.

In spite of these observations, Ava remains for the most part a genuinely complex and believable character. Such cannot be said, however, of the principal male character, Eddie Jefferson. He may strike many readers as simply too good to be true. In spite of his wild past, he does not appear to have a single flaw. His lifestyle, for example, is beyond reproach. He does not drink or eat meat (he once raised rabbits with the intention of eating them but could not bring himself to kill them); he meditates twice a day; he practices Tai Chi; he grows much of his own food (organic, of course); and he has a habit of showing up on Joyce's doorstep with fresh bread and a smile. He is unfailingly sensitive, wise, tactful, understanding, and protective. He is at home with his emotions; he does not waste words and is often content with silence. Physically, he moves like a dancer, and in Ava's eyes there is a mystical quality about his presence: "There was something really *quiet* about Eddie. I don't mean just not talking. Something about him that was *still*." When Ava describes Eddie physically, she comes within a whisker of sounding like a character from a Harlequin romance novel. Watching him exercising while stripped to the waist, for example, she observes: "Eddie's body was more muscular than I had thought.... I was surprised at the power in his chest and back."

Given that there are no chinks in Eddie's perfection—even his pick-up truck is so clean and polished that Ava can see her reflection in the passenger door—it may come as no surprise to the reader to find a hint that this bearded, long-haired wise-man looks the way Jesus Christ himself might have looked. The hint is repeated when Joyce reports having seen a child in the hospital with a T-shirt bearing the slogan, "Jesus Was a Black Man." Wisely, Cleage refrains from pushing this allusion any further, which would have strained credulity beyond its proper limits.

It is not unusual for an author, in her eagerness to create a positive character who carries the special qualities and virtues that she wishes the story to convey, to fall into a trap such as this. Barbara Kingsolver, in *Animal Dreams* (1990), another book that often appears in the high school curriculum, cannot avoid it either. *Animal Dreams* has a certain amount in common with *What Looks Like Crazy on an Ordinary Day*. In both, the female protagonist (Codi in *Animal Dreams*; Ava in Cleage's novel) returns to the town in which she grew up, much changed from the person she was when she left it. In both novels, the protagonist meets up with a man whom she had known before and who chose to remain living in his hometown. (In *Animal Dreams*, this is Loyd Peregrina.) In both cases, too, the man concerned was a notorious womanizer known also for his anti-social behavior, but he has reformed and calmed down. It takes a while for the protagonists to realize that these men are now very different from what they might have been expected to become, given their wild youth. (This tactic also has the advantage of creating a surprise for the reader too.) Both men are also representatives of a certain kind of spiritual wisdom. Loyd embodies the wisdom of the Native-American tradition; Eddie has come to a not dissimilar perspective partly through his own introspection and partly through a knowledge of Buddhism. The problem in *Animal Dreams* is that

Kingsolver strives to get her spiritual message across. Like Eddie, Loyd is far too perfect; the author's urge to instruct has won out over her instincts as a writer to create multi-dimensional, realistic characters.

Such criticism of *What Looks Like Crazy on an Ordinary Day* may seem harsh. In spite of its faults, this is a novel that is full of compassion and understanding. It makes a valiant attempt to chart a path beyond the depressing realities of many people's lives today: AIDS, domestic violence, drug addiction, and the breakdown of community. Cleage's promotion of AIDS awareness and "safe sex" is laudable, and she makes the emphatic point that a diagnosis of HIV positive does not of itself mean that a person must give up sex entirely. Some sex educators, however, might quarrel with the impression the novel gives that as long as condoms are used during sexual activity, there is no need to fear the transmission of disease. Most experts would agree that this is not a foolproof way to avoid contracting AIDS or any other sexual disease. That caveat aside, the humor with which Cleage deals with the matter is irresistible. The brief comic scene in which the entire Sewing Circus watches as Joyce uses a jumbo hot dog to demonstrate how to use a condom is worthy of John Irving, a master of this kind of irreverent humor.

For all these positives, Cleage deserves credit. Her novel says a large "yes" to life; it refuses to take refuge in fashionable pessimism or nihilism in the name of entertainment. This is shown vividly in the incident when Eddie reacts negatively to the movie that Ava, in a misguided attempt to keep him informed about popular culture, shows him. The movie shows violence as routine. Killing a human being is presented as of no more consequence than swatting a fly. As Eddie puts it, "They're training people to look at this for fun." In that swipe at contemporary Hollywood entertainment, and in many other respects, *What Looks Like Crazy on an Ordinary Day* reaches into the darkness and brings in some badly needed light.

Source: Bryan Aubrey, Critical Essay on *What Looks Like Crazy on an Ordinary Day*, in *Novels for Students*, The Gale Group, 2003.

Topics for Further Study

Research the current status of treatment for AIDS. What treatments are most effective, and how expensive are they? What is the prognosis for a person diagnosed with AIDS in the United States today? How long, on average, will that person live, and what will his or her life be like?

Read Cleage's play *Flyin' West*. Write an essay in which you explore some similarities and differences in the two works.

Discuss the various religious views of the characters and how these views shape each character's attitudes and actions.

The resort town of Idlewild is an actual place in Michigan. Do some research to learn about its history. How did it get started as a resort town, what kinds of people lived there and visited there, and why did the town decline? Then discuss why you think Cleage chose to set her story there.

Write an additional epilogue to the story, telling what Ava, Joyce, Eddie, and Imani are doing ten years after the novel ends. Keep in mind everything that you have learned about the characters and what their approximate ages will be in ten years.

What Do I Read Next?

Jeannie Brewer's *A Crack in Forever* (1996) is the story of how a new romance between a medical student, Eric Moro, and a textbook illustrator, Alexandra Taylor, is put to the test when Eric learns that he has AIDS. Together, they tackle issues of mortality, regret, and family relationships.

Cleage's *I Wish I Had a Red Dress* (2001) is a follow-up to *What Looks Like Crazy*. The novel features Joyce as she continues her work with the Sewing Circus, finds a love prospect, and explores the conflicting views of men as threatening and protective.

Cleage's *Flyin' West* (1992) is one of her best-known plays. Set in 1898, it is the story of a group of black women forging new lives for themselves in the American West. Readers will find striking similarities between these turn-of-the-century women and the 1990s women portrayed in *What Looks Like Crazy*.

Edited by Laura K. Egendorf and Jennifer Hurley, *Teens at Risk* (1998) provides opposing viewpoints in its exploration of various issues related to at-risk teenagers. Topics include violence, divorce, and peer pressure.

In *Street Soldier: One Man's Struggle to Save a Generation, One Life at a Time* (2000), Joseph Marshall and Lonnie Wheeler tell how Marshall and a man named Jack Jacqua started the Omega Boys Club in San Francisco as a means to save troubled boys from the harsh life of inner-city streets. Critics applaud this book for its exaltation of activism, mentoring, and optimism.

Further Study

Royster, Jacqueline Jones, *Traces of a Stream: Literacy and Social Change among African-American Women*, Pittsburgh Series in Composition, Literacy, and Culture, University of Pittsburgh Press, 2000.

Royster adopts an interdisciplinary view of rhetoric and social change in this study of the important role played by highly literate African-American women in the late twentieth century. She demonstrates that these women have been able to affect social and political change through speech, books, and periodicals.

Spelman College Museum of Fine Art, *Bearing Witness: Contemporary Works by African American Women Artists*, Vol. 1, Rizzoli International, 1996.

This volume captures the art on display during the title exhibition. Various media were included in the exhibit, and twenty-five notable artists contributed work. The photos of the art are complemented by relevant essays written by such prominent African-American women as Cleage and Maya Angelou.

Stine, Gerald J., *AIDS Update 2002*, Prentice Hall, 2001.

Stine presents a comprehensive overview of AIDS in contemporary society. He addresses its history and its social importance along with the latest medical and biological information available.

Walker, Lewis, and Benjamin C. Wilson, *Black Eden: The Idlewild Community*, Michigan State University Press, 2002.

Walker and Wilson explore the history of Idlewild, including its origins, its status during the civil rights era, its history of entertainment, and efforts to revitalize it. The authors include a selection of primary documents to enhance the book's historical value.

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Jamison, Laura, Review of *What Looks Like Crazy on an Ordinary Day*, in *People Weekly*, Vol. 49, No. 4, February 2, 1998, p. 30.

Kingsolver, Barbara, *Animal Dreams*, HarperCollins, 1990.

Review of *What Looks Like Crazy on an Ordinary Day*, in *Publishers Weekly*, Vol. 244, No. 46, November 10, 1997, pp. 56-57.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

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

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

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

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

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

Selection Criteria

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

How Each Entry Is Organized

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

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

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

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

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

Other Features

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

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

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

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

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

Citing Novels for Students

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

We Welcome Your Suggestions

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

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