

# **Yellow Crocus Study Guide**

## **Yellow Crocus by Laila Ibrahim**

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# Plot Summary

Yellow Crocus, written by Laila Ibrahim, is set in the mid-1800's American South. It is the story of the long-lasting relationship between a privileged white heiress Elizabeth Wainwright and a black woman named Mattie. Upon Elizabeth's birth, Mattie becomes her wet-nurse and, over time, her mammy and confidante.

The story begins as Mattie, who has recently become a mother, is brought in from the fields to nurse the newly born Elizabeth, whose mother Ann is repulsed by the thought and practice of nursing Elizabeth herself. Mattie is at first angry about being forced to leave her son Samuel down in the slave quarters, but she soon adjusts to her new life, becoming more affectionate with Elizabeth (whom Mattie calls Lisbeth) as time passes.

Over the years of her childhood, and despite the efforts of her strict, conservative mother and grandmother, Lisbeth's relationship with Mattie deepens. It reaches the point where she prefers Mattie's company to that of her flesh-and-blood family. These good times continue until Mattie gets pregnant as the result of a visit from her husband Emmanuel. She is sent back to the slave quarters. At first, Lisbeth misses Mattie fiercely. Then, she becomes absorbed into her mother's goals of a good marriage for her.

The birth of Mattie's second child re-awakens a long dormant need in both Mattie and Emmanuel. It is their need to escape their current circumstances and journey north into a better, freer life. When Emmanuel and Samuel run away, Mattie is suspected of being involved. She is beaten for information. She reveals nothing and resumes her duties, the whole time her mind preoccupied with thoughts and plans of escape. Lisbeth, meanwhile, is becoming more concerned with the preoccupations of the girls of her position – dances, dresses, and boys. Her mother repeatedly maneuvers her into encounters with Edward Cunningham, the son of the richest plantation owner in the area. However, Lisbeth finds herself more attracted to Matthew Johnson, the much poorer but much nicer son of another family.

Eventually, Mattie manages to escape with her baby. She leaves Lisbeth a memento that Lisbeth finds particularly valuable when, several years after Mattie leaves, she (Lisbeth) discovers Edward, whom she is engaged to marry, sexually assaulting one of the slaves. This makes Lisbeth realize how much she hates everything about the life she was born into and is about to marry into. So, she breaks off her engagement and marries Matthew. The couple moves North.

A year or so later, when Lisbeth is having trouble giving birth to her first child, a neighbor calls in the local midwife, who turns out to be Mattie. Mattie recognizes Lisbeth without Lisbeth recognizing her. The baby is born, and a week or so later, when about to offer payment, Lisbeth realizes Mattie's identity. After a moment of indecision, Lisbeth acts on the hope that Mattie will be glad to see her, knocking on her front door. Mattie welcomes Lisbeth into her home. The connection remained, though they were not as close as they were many years before.



# Section 1, Chapters 1 - 4

## Summary

April 14, 1837 – Young slave Mattie is taken from the slave-quarters home she shares with her infant son Samuel and grandfather Poppy to be a wet-nurse to the baby being born in Fair Oaks, the house of her white owners. After the birth, the baby (Elizabeth) is given to Mattie to breast-feed, something that Mattie can't help wishing she was doing for Samuel. Later, housekeeper Mrs. Gray shows Mattie and the baby to the nursery, gives Mattie instructions on the routine of the house and her care of the baby, and leaves them alone. Mattie explores the nursery and the small side room where she is to sleep. At one point she sees her reflection in a mirror for the first time. She sees resemblances to both her own mother and to Samuel. She also looks out a window, locates the cabin in the slave quarters where she once lived, and watches as Samuel and Poppy appear, Samuel apparently not unhappy that he's not with his mother. Mattie turns from the window, unable to watch any more. She has a moment of hatred for Elizabeth and for a moment prevents her from breathing, but has a change of heart and prays to God for guidance, support, and love for Samuel. She then falls asleep, later waking to feed Elizabeth once again.

Chapter 2 – The first part of this chapter is told from Mattie's point of view. Mrs. Gray tells her to be ready to take Elizabeth to meet her mother at two p.m., and is impatiently surprised when Mattie reveals that she doesn't know how to tell time. After Mrs. Gray explains and leaves, Mattie waits nervously, listening closely for the chime of the clock so she arrives at the right moment. As she leaves, the narrative shifts focus and is recounted from Ann's point of view, describing her nervousness at meeting both her baby and the former field hand (Mattie) who has become the baby's wet-nurse. When Mattie and Elizabeth arrive, Ann awkwardly takes the baby, Mattie respectfully telling her the right way to do it. When Elizabeth's mouth begins to search for a breast from which to feed, Ann is repulsed and hands the baby back to Mattie, who nurses Elizabeth in an action that Ann, after watching for a few moments, finds "unseemly".

Chapter 3 – Narration in this chapter returns to Mattie's point of view, as Mattie gets the opportunity to visit her family while Elizabeth is being taken care of by hers. Mattie finds Samuel and Poppy at the home of Rebecca, whom narration describes as being like Mattie's older sister. Rebecca and Poppy welcome Mattie happily, comforting her when she bursts into tears of relief at being back with her own people. As the initially nervous Samuel slowly warms to her, Mattie tells stories of life in the house, revealing that Ann is trying to have another baby (her husband wants a son) and that even if she (Mattie) is asked to be wet nurse to the new baby, she would still be happier in the slave quarters, in spite of life being better in the big house. Eventually, Samuel gets hungry and wants to go to Rebecca, who is his wet nurse in the same way that Mattie is Elizabeth's. Rebecca hands Samuel to Mattie, telling her to take Samuel to where he can't be distracted by her. Mattie returns to the cabin she once called home, sings Samuel the



same lullaby she sings to Elizabeth, and after Samuel's initial reluctance, contentedly breast feeds him.

Chapter 4 – Mattie takes the reluctant Elizabeth to visit the once-again pregnant Ann and the stern Grandmother Wainwright. As they go, Elizabeth clutches the comforting, familiar necklace of shells that Mattie wears. While Ann tries to play with Elizabeth, conversation reveals that Mattie is to become wet-nurse to the new baby and Elizabeth is to be given to another nurse. Shocked and upset, Mattie cherishes every moment of her time with Elizabeth, while being resentful that she and Elizabeth have been treated this way. Taken from Mattie and replaced in her arms by the new baby boy (Jack), Elizabeth first becomes lonely for Mattie and rejects the new wet nurse. Soon afterwards, she develops a fever. After a brief interlude in which the experience of the fever is described from the one-year-old child's point of view, narration shifts to Ann's point of view, describing how a doctor tells her that Elizabeth is dehydrated and must have liquid, or else she will die. Ann's attempts to feed the baby sugar water are met with derision from the prayerful Grandmother Wainwright, while her later attempts to breast-feed Elizabeth herself are rejected by the baby. Frustrated and desperate, Ann summons Mattie, who comforts the baby and manages to feed Elizabeth. Ann gives orders to the disapproving Mrs. Gray that Elizabeth is to be returned to Mattie's care and that Jack is to have another wet-nurse.

## Analysis

There are several important points to note about this section. The first is how the action of the novel begins almost with the very first word. Without introduction or exposition, the author places Mattie, the central character, in the middle of events and circumstances that will change and define the narrative of her life. The establishment of these foundations is the second major point to note about this section - specifically, the setting up and deepening of the close relationship between Mattie and Elizabeth, the cultural and racial realities and/or tensions that form the background context of that relationship, and the tensions that Mattie feels in trying to care for both her own child and the child that becomes very much like her own. In terms of this latter point, it's particularly important to note the irony of Samuel, Mattie's own child, rejecting her in favor of the woman who has become his wet nurse. There is, however, another irony here: where Samuel soon re-connects with his own, biological mother, Elizabeth never really connects with her mother. This is one way in which the narrative draws attention to, and develops, one of its central themes - the nature of mother and child relationships (see "Themes", and also "Homework Help").

Other notable elements in this section include the introduction of a couple of important symbols, or motifs. These include the shell necklace that Mattie wears and that the infant Elizabeth holds onto for comfort. The appearance of the necklace here foreshadows its later appearances at key points in the lives of both Mattie and Elizabeth, particularly in Chapters 7, 15, and 20. A similar motif, or repeated image / circumstance, that represents comfort and love to Elizabeth in the same way as the necklace of shells, is the lullaby that Mattie sings to her, which Mattie tells her to sing to



herself every time she's upset (Chapter 6) and which Elizabeth later sings to herself (Chapter 13) after Mattie is sent back to the slave quarters. Another motif introduced here is the image of Mattie looking out the window, which narration indicates she does almost every morning and evening, and which Lisbeth also does when Mattie is sent to live again with the slaves.

Finally, this section introduces an important technical element that recurs throughout the narrative. This is the author's choice to shift the narrative point of view between characters - that is, to move the storytelling perspective from one character to another. In this section, the most notable shift is from Mattie's point of view to that of the one year old Elizabeth which, without reproducing a one year old's perspective with literal accuracy, manages to create a sense of how that sort of character might experience a situation such as the one Elizabeth experiences. This first of several shifts in point of view gives the reader a fuller, broader perspective of how the events of the narrative effects the characters, and engages the reader in the story on multiple levels.

## Discussion Question 1

In what ways is the name of the Wainwright plantation (Fair Oaks) both metaphorically literal (in terms of the people who live there) and metaphorically ironic (in terms of what goes on there)?

## Discussion Question 2

In what ways does the reflection Mattie sees in the mirror manifest the narrative's thematic exploration of mother/daughter relationships?

## Discussion Question 3

In what ways do the events and situations in this section relate to the novel's thematic consideration of racism and the need to transcend / overcome it?

## Vocabulary

Pallet, intrusive, anticipate, lithe, silhouette, waft, threshold, contort, intricate, protrude, vigorous, disoriented, mewl, anteroom, vestige, mottled, swaddled, davenport.



## Section 2, Chapters 5 – 9

### Summary

Chapter 5, May 1839 – One year later. In the first part of the chapter, narration describes Mattie's relationship with her husband, Emmanuel – how he lives and works on a plantation three miles distant, how they met and fell in love at a dance, and how he repeatedly plans to escape his owners and take Mattie and Samuel into freedom in the North. Mattie, however, repeatedly talks him out of it, saying Samuel is too young but in reality having other reasons for wanting to stay. Narration then shifts to the point of view of Ann, watching the fretful two year old Elizabeth (anxious for Mattie's return) while listening to her husband Jonathan complain about Northern perspectives on slavery. When Mattie returns, Elizabeth's joy is suppressed by Grandmother Wainwright, but approved by Ann, whose acceptance of Elizabeth's and Mattie's relationship is accepted by Jonathan. Narration comments on Ann's secret pleasure that she is gaining a degree of control in her own home. Meanwhile, back in the nursery, Mattie teaches Elizabeth to say her bed-time prayers, adding her own prayers of gratitude for time with her family.

Chapter 6, March 1841 – Two years later. The four year old Elizabeth accidentally makes a mess at the dinner table and is yelled at by her father. The upset Elizabeth calls for Mattie, but Ann and Jonathan both tell her that she must stay at the table. Later, in the comfort of the nursery, Elizabeth tells Mattie everything that happened. Mattie tells her that every time Elizabeth misses her, she (Elizabeth) can sing their special song to herself (that is, the lullaby that Mattie sang to her in Chapter 3, and it will be like Mattie is there with her. As they sing the song together and as Elizabeth clutches the necklace of shells around Mattie's neck, Elizabeth falls asleep.

Chapter 7 – Outside in hot weather, Mattie and Elizabeth sit under a willow tree on an old quilt that Mattie reveals was made by an old slave generations ago and passed down to her. Elizabeth asks about Mattie's mother, and Mattie tells her her mother's name (Naomi) and the fact that every summer they went looking for yellow crocuses, "the first flower in spring". Elizabeth excitedly plans to go hunting for those same crocuses next spring, and Mattie agrees. As Elizabeth dozes, Mattie remembers Naomi – how she, like any slave could be, was sold by her owner when Mattie was six, and how she (Naomi) left behind a necklace of shells that, she says, was passed down to her by generations of female ancestors (see "Quote #4). Finally, Mattie decides that if she was ever to be sold, she would take Samuel and run for the north, just like Emmanuel wants to do. The final part of the chapter is told from Elizabeth's point of view as she asks the same questions about Ann's mother as she asked about Mattie's mother. Ann doesn't reveal much, but does tell her daughter that her (Ann's) mother's favorite color was blue. Elizabeth then suggests that Samuel move into the house to be with Mattie, saying that she (Elizabeth) would be happy to share her. Ann tells her firmly that Samuel will be happier where he is, and Elizabeth realizes there will be no arguing with her.



Chapter 8, Spring 1843 – This chapter is told from the point of view of Elizabeth, now referred to in narration and by Mattie as Lisbeth. One day she goes with Mattie to the slave quarters, as she's done several times before, and is surprised to find Emmanuel there. She is even more surprised to realize, as she watches Mattie have fun with her family and friends, that she (Mattie) really loves the family she has down in the quarters. Finally, she is also surprised to learn that while she and Mattie can look out of the window in the nursery to see the quarters, those who live there can't see into the house (see "Symbols / Objects – Windows"). Later that night, when Lisbeth's family is entertaining a family from a nearby plantation, an accident caused by Lisbeth gets Jack in trouble. Later, while sharing with her friend Mary Ford (see "Characters") a game she learned on her visit to the slave quarters, Lisbeth confesses what happened and says she would have liked to tell the truth about the accident, but was afraid. That night, while she's being put to bed, Lisbeth asks Mattie whether Samuel can ever join them under the willow tree one day. Mattie agrees, and quietly asks the agreeable Lisbeth whether she (Lisbeth) will help Samuel learn what she knows about numbers and letters.

Chapter 9, Spring 1845 – In this brief chapter, narration reveals that Samuel has been enjoying learning how to read from Lisbeth, and taking what he's learned back to the slave quarters, where the other slaves learn as well. They all realize the importance of learning to read because once they're eventually free (perhaps even freed by travelling on the Underground Railroad – see "Symbols / Objects") reading and writing will be essential. Mattie has also learned some letters, but only enough to spell her own name, telling Lisbeth that she (Mattie) has no need of more and that she barely has need of the ability to write her name. One day Samuel is struggling with the shape of a particular letter, and Lisbeth takes his hand to show him how to make it. Mattie reacts with sudden anger, sending Samuel back to his work in the fields and Lisbeth apologizes for making Mattie angry

## Analysis

This section is particularly notable for the number of uses of foreshadowing it includes. The first is the reference in Chapter 5 to Emmanuel's plans to escape, plans that eventually come to fruition in Chapter 11. The second is the accident that Elizabeth has at the table in Chapter 6, which foreshadows the accident she has in Chapter 8 that gets Jack into trouble. The third and fourth occur in virtually the same moment or incident - both the singing of the lullaby and Elizabeth's clutching of the shells foreshadow points later in the narrative (Chapter 15 in the case of former, Chapter 20 in the case of the latter) at which both again become sources of comfort for the troubled Lisbeth. Meanwhile, the first appearance of the willow tree in Chapter 7 foreshadows the several times throughout the narrative that happy times between Mattie, Lisbeth, and Samuel are portrayed as taking place under that tree, which comes to symbolize safety for all three of them (see "Symbols / Objects"). Perhaps more importantly, the appearance of the tree here foreshadows the appearance of another willow tree in Chapter 21, only the events under this tree have a much darker meaning (see "Section 6, Analysis").





Other foreshadowings in this section include the first reference to the color blue (see "Symbols/Objects"), the first appearance of Mary Ford (which foreshadows her appearance later in the narrative in which she is portrayed as having become Lisbeth's closest White friend), the reference to Mattie's refusal to learn any letters beyond those in her own name (which foreshadows events in Chapter 11), and the references to others in the slave quarters benefiting from Samuel's instruction in learning to read and write. Narration clearly indicates later in the novel (Chapter 11) that someone in the slave quarters has learned to read and write, and has therefore been able to forge identity papers for the escaped slaves Emmanuel and Samuel.

Perhaps the most significant piece of foreshadowing in this section is also the introduction of one of the book's most significant, and pervasive symbols. This is the yellow crocus, which comes to represent, for Elizabeth, the same sorts of values, history, tradition, and source of joy that it represents for Mattie, and has for several years. Crocuses are, in general, among the earliest flowers of spring, and as such can be seen as representing all the possibilities for new life, growth, and renewal that spring in general brings into the world.

Besides the several elements of foreshadowing, this section is notable for several other elements - in particular, the employment of a flashback, a narrative device explores the history of one of the characters (in this case, Mattie's history with her mother, itself a manifestation of one of the book's key themes - see "Themes - Mother and Child Relationships"). Flashbacks are generally used to make the events they portray more vivid and accessible to the reader - in other words, instead of having a character tell a story about the past, the author chooses to take the reader INTO that past, and into the particular moment in question. Meanwhile, the mother/child theme is also developed in the conversation between Ann and Elizabeth about Ann's mother, which paints a highly contrasted picture of the grandmother/mother/daughter dynamic than the story Mattie tells about Naomi..

Finally, another of the book's major themes is developed in this section - the portrayal of Jonathan Wainwright's feelings about the anti-slavery sentiments of the North is a clear reference to the attitudes that Mattie and other slaves have to overcome in order to achieve freedom.

## Discussion Question 1

What do you think is the metaphoric meaning behind the narration's comment that the slaves can't see into the window that Mattie, in the house, can see out of?

## Discussion Question 2

In what ways is the quilt that Mattie and Lisbeth sit on under the willow tree similar to Mattie's necklace of shells?



## Discussion Question 3

Why do you think Mattie asks Lisbeth to teach Samuel his letters?

## Vocabulary

Obligatory, audacity, abolitionist, rhetoric, bestow, romanticize, fathom (v.), canopy, bondwoman, venture (v.), evaporate, itinerant, adrenaline.



## Section 3, Chapters 10 – 12

### Summary

Chapter 10, March 1847 – Lisbeth, now almost ten years old, is angry that her reading under the willow tree is interrupted by Jack and three friends teasing one of the slaves. Samuel no longer shares that time or her lessons with her. When she goes to confront her brother and the others, Lisbeth is shocked to discover that the slave they're tormenting is Samuel. She restrains her feelings so that her brother doesn't discover her connection to Samuel. She is further shocked when Jack tells her that Samuel is to be sold. She manages to drive Jack and the boys off, and once they're gone she tries to comfort Samuel, but he's too angry and storms off. Back in the house, Lisbeth tells Mattie what she heard about her son, and later that evening, Mattie asks Ann to try and get Jonathan to sell Samuel to a nearby family. Ann says she'll try, but later reveals she's been unsuccessful. That night, Mattie and Emmanuel make plans to escape at the first sign of spring, meaning that Samuel will have to be in his new place for at least a few months.

Chapter 11 – Mattie prepares Samuel for the move to his new home, giving the clearly terrified boy a complicated set of instructions. The next day, after a night of grieved weeping, Mattie stands by her window and waves at her son as he leaves, knowing he can't see her. Her care of Lisbeth over the next week is less attentive than usual, and Lisbeth notices, her attempts to comfort Mattie meeting with gentle rebuttal. Mattie, meanwhile, becomes concerned when Samuel comes home for a visit and begs to be allowed to stay. She tells him to be patient, that they only have a few weeks more to wait. A short time later, Lisbeth excitedly tells Mattie that she's seen the first yellow crocus and that they're to have their annual celebration, but Mattie tells her that it's not a time to celebrate. Shortly afterwards, Mattie and Lisbeth learn that Samuel has run away from his new family, the Andersons, and that Mattie is to be taken to their plantation to be questioned about what she knows. Lisbeth watches her go, worried for her safety. At the Anderson plantation, Mattie is left alone for an entire day. Then, she is shown into a cabin where the wall is decorated with an intriguing painting that Mattie discovers is painted with blood – blood to which she adds her own (in the form of her name) after being beaten in an effort to get information about Samuel. Days pass, Mattie remains absent, and Lisbeth becomes increasingly worried in spite of being prepared to make a good impression on the wealthy neighbor family (the Cunninghams) who are coming to dinner. Ann tells Lisbeth to make a special effort to be charming to Edward Cunningham, the attractive and wealthy older son, but she is too interested in the adult conversation about the slaves, conversation that suggests Samuel “ran” (escaped) with his father (Emmanuel) and that someone has been teaching the slaves how to write and forge their own freedom papers. That night, Lisbeth is happy to discover that Mattie has returned, but shocked and saddened to learn of the beating. Later, wakened by nightmares of being handed a whip, Lisbeth crawls into the safety of Mattie's bed for the first time in years.



Chapter 12 – The next morning, Lisbeth wakes up next to Mattie, who is still deeply asleep. She goes down into the kitchen to get some hot water and some salve from the unexpectedly sympathetic Black cook, then takes them back upstairs and treats the nine whip-wounds on Mattie's back (see "Quote 6")

## Analysis

This section contains one of the novel's key turning points, the escape of Emmanuel and Samuel. This significance has several facets. First, it foreshadows Mattie's own escape in Chapter 15. Second, it raises the stakes for Mattie (i.e. adds to the pressure on her) in terms of making her own choice to leave. Third, it puts her in danger, a danger that is realized when she is taken to the Anderson homestead and whipped. This incident is itself significant, in that it marks the first (but not the only) time that the narrative portrays Mattie as being treated (i.e. beaten and punished, almost tortured) like the other slaves. In other words, being a house servant (which, in the culture of the time, was a mark of status and accomplishment among the slave community) was no buffer to the racism and brutality experienced by ALL slaves. This, in turn, leads to consideration of the fourth way in which this incident, and its aftermath, are significant: it provides a thematically important example of the excruciatingly painful conditions that slaves of the time were driven to extreme measures to escape (see "Themes - The Struggle to Escape Racism").

Other important elements in this section include the introduction of the Cunningham family, and particularly Edward Cunningham, which foreshadows later developments in the narrative in which Edward becomes Lisbeth's fiance. Then there is the reference to the slaves having been taught to read and write which, as noted above, is clearly a reference to the lessons that Lisbeth taught Samuel under the willow tree and which he, in turn, took back to the slave quarters. These lessons, the narrative clearly suggest, led to the creation of the forged identity papers that enabled Emmanuel and Samuel, and later Mattie and her daughter Jordan, to escape.

Finally, there is the reference to the appearance of yellow crocuses which represents the possibilities for newness of life in the spring, as such appearances / references to the flower throughout the novel repeatedly do.

## Discussion Question 1

Why do you think Samuel no longer spends time with Lisbeth?

## Discussion Question 2

Why is Mattie taken to the Anderson plantation and whipped?



## Discussion Question 3

Why is Mattie's writing of her name on the wall of the hut where she was beaten so ironic?

## Vocabulary

Conspiratorial, jeer, taunt, fitful, futile, pretense, oblivious, adjacent, facilitate, advantageous, debutante, efficiency, acrid, exuberant, lenient, callus, laconic.



## Section 4, Chapters 13 – 16

### Summary

Chapter 13 – A few months later, Mattie realizes that she's going to have a baby. She keeps the news a secret for as long as she can, knowing that when the Wainwrights find out, she'll be sent back to the slave quarters and someone else will take care of Lisbeth. Eventually, she reveals the truth – first to Elizabeth, then to Mrs. Gray. By noon, she's back in the slave quarters. The first night of Mattie's absence, Lisbeth sings to herself the lullaby that Mattie always sang to her. As time passes, Lisbeth visits Mattie in the slave quarters as much as she can, even helping her pick out possible names for the new baby. Eventually Mattie gives birth to a baby girl she names Jordan, and pledges to her newborn daughter that they will never be separated – that they will one day leave and find Emmanuel and Samuel. Lisbeth visits Mattie the day after she finds out about Jordan's birth, bringing a baby-sized quilt that she made. Mattie thanks her, and when Mattie goes back to work in the fields, Lisbeth continues to make regular visits, Jordan and Lisbeth become just as close as Mattie and Lisbeth did when Mattie moved into the house.

Chapter 14, April 1849 – “Two weeks before Lisbeth's twelfth birthday,” Ann tells her that her first official local dance will be in a month. Lisbeth becomes both nervous and excited. She gets caught up in happy plans about what to wear, particularly when the local seamstress comes with fabrics and sketches from which to choose. Lisbeth doesn't express any opinion until after her mother (who considers both social and personal factors in choosing the dress) asks her for one, and Lisbeth chooses an elegant dress in a dark blue. She immediately hurries down to the slave quarters, excitedly chattering to the worried Mattie about her plans. When she asks Mattie why she isn't more excited, Mattie explains that Jordan is unwell, leaving Lisbeth to apologize for being insensitive. She runs to the house to get some medicine. Jordan recovers, and Lisbeth goes to her first dance. She visits the still preoccupied Mattie afterwards to babble about her excitement at being at the dance. She tells Mattie about her anger that a rival for the affections of Edward Cunningham deliberately spilled punch on her dress. Lisbeth resents that she didn't get a chance to dance with Edward. Then, once again, Lisbeth realizes that she's been insensitive and asks Mattie if she knows anything about Samuel or Emmanuel. Mattie tells her it's better for them both if she (Mattie) knows nothing. She seems about to say more, but then stops herself. She questions Lisbeth about whether it's right for her (Lisbeth) to be so concerned with being beautiful and making the right marriage, adding that it's important for her (Lisbeth) to pay attention to her own heart and desires. The puzzled Lisbeth goes back to her room, leaving Mattie with Jordan.

Chapter 15 – Narration describes how, after Lisbeth leaves, Mattie makes final preparations for her escape. She gathers supplies, keeps Jordan quiet, and says goodbye to Poppy. She collects a forged freedom pass from Rebecca (whose daughter Sarah was taught her letters by Samuel, who was taught by Lisbeth). Before she goes,



Mattie gives Rebecca a shell from her necklace to give to Lisbeth. She tells Rebecca to tell Lisbeth that she (Mattie) loves her. Then, she leaves with Jordan, following the route that she and Emmanuel had planned so long ago.

The next morning, when Lisbeth discovers that Mattie is gone, she races down to the slave quarters, where she is told the truth (or as much of the truth as is possible) by Rebecca, who also gives her the shell necklace. In a fit of anger and jealousy, Lisbeth flings it into a field. Then, she realizes how important it is and searches until she finds it. That night, she manages to suppress her feelings in front of her family. The chapter concludes with a brief narration focusing on Mattie and Jordan's week long journey and their eventual arrival at a place where Mattie waits to be taken on the next phase of her journey.

Chapter 16 – Irritable and lonely without Mattie and Jordan, Lisbeth goes to Rebecca for news. She is saddened and surprised to find out that there has been none. She also learns that if Mattie ever comes back (as Lisbeth wants her to), Mattie will be immediately sold. Whether Mattie comes back or not, Rebecca tells Lisbeth that Mattie is gone from Lisbeth's life for good. Meanwhile, Mattie struggles to complete her journey to freedom, barely escaping from a nasty White Sheriff searching for runaway slaves. But, the help of several unknown allies of the Underground Railroad and her own preparedness and intelligence eventually get Mattie and Jordan across the Ohio River and into the North, where they are free. Problems with the next leg of the Underground Railroad force Mattie to strike out on her own, without guidance or support. In spite of almost starving, she and Jordan are eventually reunited with Emmanuel and Samuel, who have come out looking for them. The family is reunited in the free North, under their new names of Thomas (Emmanuel), James (Samuel), Georgia (Mattie), and Jennie (Jordan) Freedman.

## Analysis

The first thing to note about this section is the portrayal of the contrasted directions in which the lives of Mattie and Lisbeth are taking them - in short, Mattie moving in the direction of freedom (i.e. living by no-one's rules and/or values but her own and her family's), Lisbeth moving in the direction of more social and personal constriction. (i.e. living by the rules and/or values of her family and the community in which they live). To look at this another way, this section makes clear that Lisbeth is becoming more and more concerned about superficial things, while Mattie is becoming more and more concerned about things that might be described as what really matters.

A related point is an aspect of this section that's noteworthy on a narrative, or storytelling, level. The events of this section mark the approximate midpoint of the story, a point at which the journeys of the two characters take them in separate directions. It's not until much later in the story, almost at its conclusion, that the two characters are reunited. In fact, the end of Chapter 16 marks the last appearance of Mattie in the story until almost the end of the book: from hereon in, the narrative focuses almost entirely on Lisbeth. This shift in overall narrative focus is arguably necessary for the reunion of the



two characters at the end of the book to have what the author seems to see as its intended emotional effect.

Also in this section, several important images, symbols, and motifs reappear. These include the reference to the slaves having learned to write, which is foreshadowed throughout several previous chapters (i.e. Chapter 9) and the reference to the color blue (i.e. in the color of Lisbeth's dress) which, throughout the narrative, is associated with her mother and her mother's values (see "Symbols/Objects" and also "Part 2, Questions for Discussion"). Perhaps the most important symbol, image, or motif that's reiterated in this chapter is the shell necklace, which can be seen here, as it can throughout the narrative, as a representative of the close ties between the chain of women who give and receive it (see "Homework Help - Examine and discuss the ways ..." and also "Symbols/Objects").

Finally in this section, there is a particularly important "one-off," a character or image that appears just the one time, or under the one set of circumstances, but which nevertheless has a powerful impact on the reader. There are several of these throughout the novel, particularly in its latter half. Here, the significant "one-off" is the White Sheriff, who is easily one of the most vivid, the most racist, and one of the most distasteful creations in the entire work. He is particularly important to note because he provides a concrete, dangerous example of the obstacles Mattie and the other slaves must overcome in order to be free.

## Discussion Question 1

In what ways does Mattie's gift of the shell necklace manifest the novel's thematic consideration of mother/daughter relationships?

## Discussion Question 2

In what way does the appearance of the White Sheriff manifest and/or relate to the novel's thematic consideration of the struggle to overcome racism?

## Discussion Question 3

Why does Lisbeth throw the shell necklace into the field? And then why does she retrieve it?

## Vocabulary

Protrude, chastise, trousseau, mammy, accentuate, swatch, carpetbag, taffeta, elixir, buffoon, emphatic, excruciating, pawpaw, pockmarked, ipecac, antagonize, ague, disdain, parch, cower, relinquish.





## Section 5, Chapters 17 – 20

### Summary

Chapter 17, Spring 1851 – Two years later, and at fourteen years old, Lisbeth continues her every-morning ritual of looking out the window at the slave quarters, remembering Mattie and missing her. Later, at breakfast, she tells her mother that she's seen the first spring crocus and would like to go on a picnic with her. Her mother, however, decides instead to invite the boys and girls of the area with an eye to building up social connections. Before the picnic can happen, however, Lisbeth is upset first by Poppy's illness and then his death and funeral. Soon afterwards, she sets out with her friend Mary Ford, other young women, and several boys (including her brother Jack, Edward Cunningham, Mary's brothers Robert and Albert, and Matthew Johnson) for the picnic. On the way, Mary and Lisbeth compare their feelings for several of the boys. Lisbeth revealing that she finds Matthew the most interesting (in spite of her mother's evident dislike for him), but that she has yet to fall in love. At the picnic and after eating, the girls watch as the boys rough-house, at one point throwing stones at Poppy's grave marker. Unable to restrain her anger, Lisbeth tells them to stop. She's challenged by Edward, but Matthew quietly redirects their attention, and a crisis is averted. Later, Matthew and Lisbeth smile at each other ...

Chapter 18 – June 1856 – Lisbeth is now eighteen. As she prepares for a ball at the home of Edward Cunningham, her mother insists that Edward will be the perfect match for her – he is a gentleman, he is handsome, and he will inherit one of the largest plantations in the area. When Lisbeth asks whether he's a good man, her mother scoffs that Edward's qualities are exactly what MAKES a good man. Later, at the ball, Lisbeth engages in a conversation about books with Matthew Johnson who, she later tells Mary, is a much more interesting person than Edward will ever be. Mary, however, agrees with Lisbeth's mother – that Edward will be a much better husband than Matthew, who is poor and who will never inherit any money. Back on the dance floor with Edward, Lisbeth tries to have the same sort of conversation with him as she had with Matthew, but he fails to respond in the way Matthew did, reminding her only of how to behave when she has tea with his mother the next day.

Chapter 19 – Lisbeth chatters to Mary about her tea with Mrs. Cunningham, particularly about the quality of the food and the beauty of the house. She also says that she feels foolish at even thinking that Edward might not be a good husband and that it might not be a good idea to marry into his family. Conversation further reveals that there are rumblings of war between the Northern and Southern states, and that Matthew is planning to move north to farm in Ohio, where he has apparently become an abolitionist.

Chapter 20, April 1857 – On the morning that her engagement to Edward is to be announced, Lisbeth is irritable and nervous, but takes comfort in wearing the shell necklace that Mattie left for her under her dress. At the announcement, she is surprised



to see Matthew Johnson there, and to hear that he truly is moving to Ohio. After the announcement is made, Lisbeth is presented with a sapphire (blue) necklace. As he is tying it around her neck, Edward feels the shell beneath her dress, and reacts angrily when she explains that it's a memento from a close friend who went away. Lisbeth promises to never wear it around him again, but fingers it discreetly when conversation with Edward reveals that, while Lisbeth wants to travel to Europe, he has no interest in going any further than New York City.

## Analysis

Over the six years that pass between the beginning of Chapter 17 and the end of Chapter 20, the most significant thing that happens is the tension that develops within Lisbeth between the woman that her mother wants her to be (married into a wealthy family that embraces slavery) and the woman that Mattie raised her to be (thoughtful, intelligent, well-read, sensitive). Here it's interesting to note that this tension, this struggle, plays out in terms of her relationships with White people - the open-minded Matthew, the close-minded Edward. There are few references to slaves or to Black people in this section, but this doesn't mean that what references there are aren't potent. The conflict that arises over the mistreatment of Poppy's grave, for example, is very potent indeed. Then there is the reference to Matthew's plan to become an abolitionist, which is an indirect reference to the struggle of black slaves to be free (since that's what abolitionists were fighting for). At the same time, the references to Lisbeth's keeping Mattie's shell necklace hidden, to Edward's anger at her wearing it at all, and to the sapphire necklace being worn on top of it, also suggest that Lisbeth's sympathies with, and compassion for, the slaves and their circumstances (as represented by the shell necklace) are becoming less important to her, submerged beneath the values and activities that now seem to be taking control of her mind and heart.

This tension in Lisbeth is echoed and/or reinforced by the reference to what the narrative describes as the growing tensions between the anti-slavery North and the pro-slavery south. Here it's important to note that the novel is set less than a decade before the real-life American Civil War, in which countless lives were lost on both sides, North and South, over the battle to free the slaves. In other words, the reference to "rumblings of war" in this section foreshadows the historical event that the novel never actually describes, but which historically aware readers know is coming.

Other important elements in this section include the reference made by Lisbeth's mother to Edward's qualities as a good man, which ironically foreshadows events in the next section in which Edward reveals himself to be exactly the opposite. The confirmation that Matthew is indeed planning to move North to Ohio foreshadows Lisbeth's decision in the next section to do the same thing.



## Discussion Question 1

Why do you think Lisbeth doesn't tell Edward the whole truth about who gave her the shell necklace?

## Discussion Question 2

What do you think is the significance of Edward's determination to go no further than New York City on his honeymoon with Lisbeth?

## Discussion Question 3

What do you think Mattie might say to Lisbeth if she (Lisbeth) had the chance to reveal her feelings about Edward / Matthew to her?

## Vocabulary

Adequate, entomb, sullen, demure, inconsequential, corset, capacity, veranda, converse, demeanor, replenish, damask, secede, constriction, familiarize, impeccable, agitate, premarital, celebrant, acquiesce.



## Section 6, Chapters 21 – 24

### Summary

Chapter 21, April 1858 – A few months before the wedding, Lisbeth attends a gathering at White Pines. Sent in search of Edward, she makes her way through the plantation's yard and gardens, finding a beautiful willow tree much like the one she has at home (see "Quote 10"). She hears a sound and follows it to its source, discovering to her shock and disgust that Edward is physically forcing himself on a young female field hand. Lisbeth screams at him and runs off, but Edward catches her, insisting that she listen to his explanation. He tells her that white men, all men, have that kind of relationship with field hands. Where, he asks, does she think that pale-brown "house niggers" come from? Numb and shocked, Lisbeth lets him lead her back to the house, now aware of some unpleasant realities, including the likelihood that the lighter-skinned house servants in her own home came from a similar situation involving her beloved father.

Chapter 22 – Traumatized by her experience, Lisbeth stays in her room for several days, realizing that her maid has the same color eyes as her brother Jack. She grasps the shell necklace left by Mattie for comfort and prays for guidance. That night, she has a dream in which she imagines Jordan, as a grown young woman, being led away by Edward as Mattie screams. When Lisbeth wakes up, she realizes the truth of why Mattie left (see "Quote 11"). After a long day and night of contemplation, realizes that she cannot marry Edward. Aware that she would be giving up everything in her life, she then attempts to figure out what she could do next. She decides to try "the best, though still unlikely, possibility."

Chapter 23 – Lisbeth goes to see Matthew Johnson, who is happily surprised to see her. She asks him two questions – one, whether he's ever had "relations" with any of the slaves (surprised, he answers that he hasn't), and whether he would consider taking her to Ohio with him as his wife. She reveals what she has come to understand about life on the plantation and says that she can no longer agree with her parents, who have insisted all her life that they are doing nothing but good in the lives of their slaves. Matthew warns her that life in the North will be nothing like she is used to, but she says she's ready to go, adding that she is of age and can marry of her own free will, providing she has her birth certificate. Matthew formally asks for her hand, and she formally accepts. That night, she sneaks into her father's study and finds her birth certificate, alongside a family tree that indicates that the house slave Emily is either her half-sister or her cousin.

Chapter 24 – Repeatedly reminding herself that "this is the correct path," Lisbeth takes particular care getting dressed and doing her hair for what only she and Matthew know is their wedding day. Lying to her parents, she goes to Matthew's farm, and the two of them ride into town, making plans about their life together in Ohio. Once they are married, Lisbeth returns Matthew to his home and then travels to White Pines, where



she gathers her courage and tells an increasingly angry Edward that she is not marrying him. As she leaves, his temper explodes, and he throws the gifts that she has brought back to him at her. Lisbeth then goes to Fair Oaks, where she tells her parents that she is now married to Matthew. Her father is angry and her mother is very upset, but Lisbeth stands her ground, going upstairs to gather her belongings. Over the course of the day, her mother tries to change her mind, her father attempts to bribe Matthew to leave, and a sheriff investigates her father's accusations that Matthew has forced Lisbeth to marry. Lisbeth and Matthew continue to stand their ground, eventually leaving to spend their wedding night at Matthew's home, where his parents (who insist that they be called Mother and Father Johnson) welcome her warmly. That night, after nervously undressing, Lisbeth welcomes the equally nervous Matthew into what was once his bed and is now hers too, experiencing sexual intercourse for the first time and being treated lovingly by Matthew. Relieved, happy, and excited, she weeps in his arms.

## Analysis

Narrative momentum builds quite rapidly and intensely in this section, as the story builds towards its climax. Specifically, it's important to note how quickly events move in this section - over the course of a week, Lisbeth first discovers a painful truth not only about her fiancé, and not only about her father, but about her entire life and the world in which she lives. She then makes radical decisions about her life and how she wants to live it. She proposes to an unsuitable but loving man (which women in that society almost never did), marries that man, virtually divorces herself from her fiancé and her family, moves in with a new family, and engages in her first sexual experience - again, all within a week. The one week time frame is particularly significant in consideration of Lisbeth's character and identity. She realizes important truths about her world and how she wants to live in that world. Her haste in making such extreme decisions indicates how suddenly and decisively she is connecting with the best parts of herself. Those are the parts that Mattie repeatedly urged her to stay connected to throughout the narrative.

All that said, it's important to note that several of the key triggers for Lisbeth's positive reconnection with herself are actually negative. She had discovered Edward forcing himself on the field hand and the of her mother's acceptance of similar behavior in Lisbeth's father. Perhaps, the most hurtful discovery was that of her likely relationship with Emily. The pain of all these negative discoveries is arguably cancelled out, however, by the discovery that she and Matthew have a great deal more in common than a love of books - a great deal more than she had ever realized before. This like-mindedness is further represented in the narrative by the positive sexual encounter they have on their wedding night. Theirs is a union of body, mind, and spirit.

It's important to note, however, that this section does not contain the novel's climax. The climax is defined as a work's highest point of emotional intensity, of confrontation with the piece's central narrative and/or thematic truth. In the case of this book, while the scenes in this section are certainly intense, they are merely paving the way for the even deeper intensity to come at the point of the book's true climax, which is the reunion between Mattie and Lisbeth.



## Discussion Question 1

Discuss the differences between Lisbeth's biological father/mother and Father/Mother Johnson. In particular, discuss the reasons why they, their way of life, and their values might make her feel more at home than she does with her own family.

## Discussion Question 2

Why do you think the names of Lisbeth's wet-nurse and husband are so similar? Consider the narrative's symbolic references to their personalities, their actions, and their feelings for Lisbeth.

## Discussion Question 3

Given what the narrative reveals about the relationships between slave owners and their slaves, how is it possible that Emily could be either Lisbeth's sister or her cousin?

## Vocabulary

Vigorous, protocol, glamorous, undaunted, acrid, despicable, berate, impulsive, traumatize, indecipherable, emancipation, comportment, incredulous.



## Section 7, Chapters 25 – 27, Epilogue

### Summary

Chapter 25, July 24 1858 – This short chapter consists of a letter written by Lisbeth in response to a letter apparently sent to her by Mary Ford. Lisbeth recognizes the suffering she has caused her family and acknowledges that Mary doesn't understand her decision, but she is glad that Mary has forgiven her enough to write. Lisbeth speaks of life in Ohio, including descriptions of her and Matthew's home. She hints that she's expecting a baby.

Chapter 26, February 1859 – When it comes time for Lisbeth's baby to be born, she convinces Matthew to wait patiently for the labor pains to reach just the right intensity before calling the neighboring farmer's wife. When the neighbor arrives, however, she notices that the birth is not going well, and fetches the midwife, who turns out to be Mattie. Narration briefly describes Mattie's happy, prosperous life, her occasional worries about her son, her pride in her daughter, and her gratitude to Lisbeth for helping to make their education possible. Back in the present, when Mattie arrives at the Johnson house, she recognizes Lisbeth and, after a while, also remembers Matthew. Mattie helps Lisbeth through the increasingly difficult birth. Eventually, a baby boy is born. When she asks Matthew what name he wants to give his son, she is surprised to learn that he wants to give him the name Samuel, the name of his grandfather. As the two discuss children (see "Quote #12"), narration reveals how much Mattie has been wondering what happened to Lisbeth and how grateful she is that Lisbeth (who, she sees, still wears the shell necklace) married such a good man. A few days later, while talking with Matthew, Lisbeth reveals that Samuel was the name of her wet nurse's son, that she loved her wet-nurse/mammy (Mattie) more than her own mother, that she dreamed of Mattie while having the baby, and that she is determined to breast feed her own son because she doesn't want her son to feel that way about his mother. She also reveals her intention to take payment (four chickens) to the midwife, whom she doesn't know was Mattie.

Chapter 27 – A few weeks later, Lisbeth and Matthew, along with baby Samuel, take the payment of chickens to Mattie's farm. On the way, Lisbeth sees the first crocus of spring. She tells Matthew how the crocus came to be so important to her. Lisbeth reads a letter she just received from her mother, congratulating her on the birth of the baby and refusing an invitation to visit. She issued an invitation of her own to Lisbeth and the baby. After Lisbeth has finished sharing the letter, Matthew asks whether Lisbeth regrets her decision. Lisbeth answers firmly that she doesn't. When they arrive at Mattie's farm, Lisbeth recognizes her and Jordan, who is helping her mother put clothes on the laundry line. She realizes that Mattie helped her at Samuel's birth and that there is the possibility that she (Mattie) would think that meeting her is dangerous because Mattie is an escaped slave. Lisbeth debates whether to continue with her planned visit. Eventually, she decides to continue on with her plans. She goes to the house and knocks on the door. She is welcomed into Mattie's arms.



Epilogue – First person narration, written in Lisbeth’s voice, describes how circumstances prevented Mattie and her from becoming as close as she (Lisbeth) would have liked. However, Lisbeth always left a Christmas package for Mattie and her family. Lisbeth describes the last time she saw Mattie. Lisbeth and her son Samuel, who was seven, were in the general store. Samuel had reported to Mattie that he’d spotted the first yellow crocus. He told Mattie (as a child will tell the nearest adult) about his family’s tradition of having a picnic to celebrate its arrival. Mattie told Samuel that her family has the same tradition. In spite of Lisbeth’s desire to run and embrace the woman whom she says had given her so much, she and Mattie only looked at each other and smiled.

## Analysis

A brief Chapter 25 gives a degree of exposition about changes in Lisbeth's life since she and Matthew moved to Ohio. The narrative moves into its climax in Chapter 26 with the reunion of Mattie and Lisbeth during the birth of Lisbeth's baby. Anticipation of a reunion has been building since Lisbeth and Matthew moved to Ohio where Mattie is also living. Ohio is a big state, and the fact that the two women end up in such close geographical proximity is a bit of a coincidence, perhaps a contrivance. It serves the narrative's theme of connections well.

Other loose ends that are effectively tied up here, if not resolved, include the reference to Ann's invitation, which suggests Lisbeth's "exile" from her family is not going to be as permanent as she expected it to be. Of course, there is the reunion of Mattie and Lisbeth in Mattie's home. Here it's particularly interesting to note that the author, with apparent deliberation, chooses to not include the scene of the reunion in the story.

In the epilogue, the narrative point of view shifts for the first time since the prologue. The final scene is told from Lisbeth's first person voice. The inclusion of the motif of the yellow crocus represents hope and new beginnings more so than at any other point in the novel. There is a final image of Lisbeth and Mattie as two mature women with their own families and their own independent lives. In spite of being willing to embrace, they are unable to do so. The image might be disappointing; however, a key theme in the novel is that affection, connection, and love don't have to be overtly expressed to be significant or deeply felt. The love these women share between them is alive and strong. No hug is necessary for the feelings to be welcome, healing, and true.

## Discussion Question 1

Why do you think the author chose to not include the scene of Lisbeth's reunion with Mattie at Mattie's home?

## Discussion Question 2

Discuss what happened after Lisbeth went into Mattie's house. What do you think they did? What do you think they said to each other?





## Discussion Question 3

Why do you think Mattie and Lisbeth felt that it was inappropriate for them to speak to / acknowledge each other in the store?

## Vocabulary

Observant, attentive, vestige, onslaught, perineum, incremental, forthright, entice, fallow.



# Characters

## Mattie

Mattie is one of the story's two central characters. As the story begins, Mattie is a field slave, tending the crops of the large, wealthy plantation that owns her. As a new mother, she is taken from her daily routine to become a house servant – specifically, the wet-nurse to the plantation owner's newborn daughter Lisbeth. Initially, she is resentful that she is being forced to give her milk and her time to a white child instead of her own; however, over time, Mattie finds herself also giving her love to that white child, while still keeping her own child and the rest of her family in her heart. When Mattie has a second child of her own, she realizes that she wouldn't be a good mother if she allowed that child to be raised in the same environment in which she was raised. She decides to escape, leaving her beloved Lisbeth behind. Mattie's escape attempt is successful, and she moves into a life of freedom. Later, she reconnects with Lisbeth only by coincidence. Mattie, now a midwife, is called to assist in the difficult delivery of the baby of a white woman, who turns out to be Lisbeth. The two women realize their past history separately. Though they eventually reunite, both women continue pursuing separate lives.

Over the course of the narrative, Mattie is portrayed as having strong ties to both her family of the past and her family of the present. She has a strong sense of compassion, of courage, and of faith, calling on God for help at several difficult times in her life. At first, she is subservient and respectful to the white people who “own” her; but, she eventually realizes that their cruelties and selfishness will make life harder and full of suffering for her new baby. Although it means causing pain to the young woman (Lisbeth) who has become like her own child, Mattie does what she needs to do for her flesh and blood son. Upon her escape, she takes the name “Georgia Freedman.”

## Lisbeth Wainwright

Lisbeth is the novel's second main character. Her protective, conservative parents name her Elizabeth, but she is called Lisbeth by Mattie. Though she accepts being called Elizabeth by her parents, when she comes of age and forms her own views about herself and the privileged, slave-torturing environment in which she lives, she reverts to calling herself Lisbeth. She asks that her eventual husband and new family address her as Lisbeth, too.

Lisbeth is arguably an exceptional young woman. Like most children of privilege at the time, Lisbeth's wealthy parents entrust her care to someone else, usually a Black slave. As Lisbeth grows older, she develops a close friendship with her nurse and with other children on the plantation, despite the fact that they too are Black. However, unlike many of her peers who follow in the racist footsteps of their wealthy parents, Lisbeth develops empathy for the Black members of her “family.” Lisbeth comes to regard the



plantation's slaves as human beings who are worthy of both respect and affection. It is for these reasons that Lisbeth refuses to honor the marriage commitment (to the son of another wealthy plantation owner) made for her by her parents and instead honor her own heart and conscience by marrying Matthew (see below) whose feelings about slavery are like her own. In some ways as strong willed and as compassionate as Mattie, the slave who raised her, Lisbeth struggles to find a way to reconcile both sides of her affections. She discovers it's simply not possible. She chooses to be led by her conscience when she chooses her path in life.

## **Mattie's Family**

Mattie's biological family includes her frail grandfather Poppy, her idealistic husband Emmanuel (who is owned by a nearby plantation and who visits Mattie only irregularly), her son Samuel (who becomes a friend to the young Lisbeth and who is taught to read by her), and her daughter Jordan (who, shortly after her birth, becomes the reason why Mattie finally decides to make her escape to freedom).

## **Naomi**

Naomi is Mattie's mother. Naomi was sold to another family when Mattie was very young. Before her departure, she gave Mattie a gift of a necklace of shells. For Mattie, the necklace is an important tie between herself, her mother, and all the generations of women who have gone before them and worn it. This, in turn, lends particular significance to Mattie's decision to give a shell from the necklace to Lisbeth.

## **Rebecca**

Rebecca is another field slave on the same plantation as Mattie. Rebecca is like a big sister, friend, and confidante to Mattie. Before Mattie escapes, it is Rebecca whom she trusts to give the small fragment of the shell necklace to Lisbeth.

## **Ann and Jonathan Wainwright**

Ann and Jonathan Wainwright are Lisbeth's conservative, traditional parents. When Lisbeth is born, Ann finds it impossibly distasteful to breastfeed. She is more than happy to hand over the care of her daughter to Mattie. Later, as Lisbeth ages, Ann becomes more and more focused on taking the social advantages of Lisbeth's beauty and attractiveness. Overall, she is occasionally affectionate, but mostly cold and distant. Lisbeth's father appears in the narrative less often. He does so at key points when his violent racism and desperation to control Lisbeth's life come to the forefront.



## The Wainwright Family

Other members of the Wainwright family include Lisbeth's favored younger brother Jack and Grandmother Wainwright. Jack is spoiled and selfish. He is just as racist as his father. Grandmother Wainwright is imperious, cold, and controlling.

### Mrs. Gray

Mrs. Gray is the Wainwright family's white housekeeper. Though not well developed as a character, she has an important role to play in both Mattie's life and the narrative. It is she who gives Mattie much of the information she needs in order to function in the house, and it is she who conveys the orders of Mr. and Mrs. Wainwright to her.

### Emily

Emily is a lighter-skinned house slave in the Wainwright home. Quiet and subservient, sometimes sullen, she performs a variety of functions. Sometimes, she assists Mattie in taking care of Lisbeth. When Mattie goes down to the slave quarters to visit her family, Emily takes care of Lisbeth. When Mattie escapes, Emily replaces her.

Later in the narrative, Lisbeth is shocked and saddened to discover that Emily is a relative, perhaps even a half-sister, fathered by an illicit relationship between Emily's mother and, perhaps, Lisbeth's father.

## The Ford Family (Mary, Robert, Albert)

The Ford family lives on and runs a nearby plantation. Mary Ford is Lisbeth's best friend, while her two brothers are friends with Lisbeth's brother Jack.

### Edward Cunningham

Edward is the eldest son and heir of the Cunningham family, the wealthiest plantation owners in the area. Edward is considered by many in the area (including Lisbeth's ambitious mother) to be the best potential husband for any of the girls around. Over time, he and Lisbeth end up engaged. However, when Lisbeth discovers that he is a cruel racist just like her father and most of the other men in the region, she breaks off the engagement and chooses to marry someone else.

### Matthew Johnson

Matthew Johnson is the son of a less wealthy family than the Wainwrights, Cunninghams, and Fords. Sensitive, respectful, intelligent, and educated, Matthew is everything that Lisbeth says she wants in a man who loves her. Yet, he is not what she



wants in a husband – that is, money and status like Edward Cunningham. When she realizes, however, just how much she doesn't want to marry Edward, she decides to marry Matthew. After they move to the North to get away from slavery, she gives birth to a daughter.

## **Mother and Father Johnson**

Matthew's parents appear very briefly in the narrative, but they play an important part in affirming Lisbeth's choices to marry their son and to embrace the stance against slavery which the entire Johnson family lives by.



# Symbols and Symbolism

## Fair Oaks, White Pines

Fair Oaks is the name of the plantation where Lisbeth lives and where Mattie is a slave. It is a mid-size plantation. White Pines, on the other hand, is the name of a plantation near Fair Oaks. Larger and wealthier, it represents both competition and inspiration to the owners of other plantations in the area, including Fair Oaks. The names of both plantations can be seen as symbolic of the social and economic hierarchies of plantation life.

## Mattie's Mirror

Early in the narrative, when Mattie first moves into the nursery at Fair Oaks, she sees a reflection of herself for the first time in an old mirror. In that reflection, Mattie sees a resemblance to her mother Naomi and to her grandfather, Poppy.

## Mattie's Necklace of Shells

Throughout the narrative, Mattie wears a necklace of shells that was passed down to her by her mother, who had acquired it from a line of maternal ancestors. Mattie wears it as a source of comfort and strength. The necklace is symbolic of the narrative's thematic focus on mother/daughter relationships and the concept of inheritances.

## Willow Trees

Two willow trees play important roles in the narrative. Situated on the lawn of Fair Oaks, the first tree is a safe place for Mattie and Lisbeth. Also, Samuel, Mattie's son, learns to read and write in the shade of its leaves. Under the second willow tree, which is on the lawn of White Pines, Lisbeth's sense of safety and refuge in her fiancé's family is shattered when she discovers the sexual assault of a black slave.

## Lisbeth's Shell Necklace

When Mattie is about to make her escape from Fair Oaks, she takes one of the shells off her necklace, puts it on a string, and asks that it be given to Lisbeth. Lisbeth treasures the necklace in her younger years, then puts it aside in her teen years. In later years, she comes to realize both its literal and symbolic value. She uses it as a kind of talisman or token of strength in difficult confrontations. For both women, it symbolizes the love, strength, and courage of the women who raised them.



## Lisbeth's Sapphire Necklace

Edward Cunningham gives Lisbeth a valuable sapphire necklace as an engagement present. On one level, it represents both their betrothal and the life of wealth and privilege into which Lisbeth is marrying. On another level, the fact that she puts it on over the shell necklace represents Lisbeth's temporary adoption of a new way of life.

## The Color Blue

Several times throughout the narrative, including the engagement present of the blue sapphire necklace, the color blue appears as an important symbol. It is associated with Lisbeth's mother and Lisbeth's ball gown.

## Yellow Crocuses

Yellow crocuses are symbols of spring and new life for Mattie and Lisbeth.

## Windows

Several times throughout the book, narration shows characters looking out windows. In particular, Mattie and Lisbeth look out the window in the nursery to watch for people and activity in the slaves' quarters. In that respect, windows can be seen as representing a view into what is longed for and missed. From the reverse point of view of the slaves in the quarters looking up, the windows symbolize their lowly status as a servant. They are only able to see the wealthy world through a window that separates the classes.

## The Underground Railroad

The Underground Railroad actually existed in history. It was the name given to the network of houses and/or other safe sites through which escaping slaves were moved as they ran from lives of servitude in the Southern United States toward freedom in the North. Helped by both sympathetic Whites and other freed Blacks, the slaves traveling the railroad endured significant hardships, but the reward at the end of the journey was great.

# Settings

## The American South

The novel's main physical setting is in the South of the United States of America. For much of its history, this particular part of the country embraced slavery as part of its social, economic, moral, and political systems. The novel's action is a portrait of different sorts of rebellion (unspoken/internal, subversive, personal) against that system.

## The Mid-1800's

In terms of time, the novel is set in the twenty or so years before the American Civil War. At several points late in the narrative, the book refers to the tensions in America building toward the war.

## Ohio

Mattie and her family want to escape to Ohio, which is located in the northern part of the United States. Ohio was free of slavery. Later in the narrative, as Lisbeth and her husband Matthew seek freedom of their own, they too travel to Ohio. It is there that Lisbeth is reunited with the now-free Mattie.



# Themes and Motifs

## Relationships between Mothers and Children

The relationship between a mother and her child is one of the novel's central themes. In the narrative, there are different types of mother/child relationships. The biological connection, in which the child is actually born of the mother exists between Naomi / Mattie, Mattie / Samuel, Mattie / Jordan, and Ann / Lisbeth. There is also a non-biological relationship, in which the child is not born to the woman who fulfills the role of "mother." The Mattie / Lisbeth relationship is the most notable example of this kind of relationship.

The narrative suggests that Lisbeth is mothered in the most important ways of affection, support, faith, compassion, and courage by Mattie, her non-biological mother. It also suggests that Ann, the mother who gave birth to Lisbeth, mothers her in the superficial, morally corrupt ways of the culture in which Lisbeth is being raised. For instance Ann grooms Lisbeth in terms of manners, social advancement, the importance of money, and the need to turn a blind eye to the failings of men, both sexual and moral. Granted, these aspects of life were all important for a young White girl who was living in the early South to know. However, the novel's central thematic contention seems to relate that the only knowledge that really matters is the knowledge that Mattie gives Lisbeth, the knowledge from which Lisbeth grows into the woman she wants to be, as opposed to the woman her mother would like her to become.

The third way in which the narrative develops the mother/child theme is in its suggestion that the relationship is transcendent of physical circumstances. These include death (Mattie is close with her mother even when the latter is dead and only a memory), time and distance (the closeness between Mattie and Lisbeth is still present even when they are physically separated for long periods), and, perhaps most importantly, race and/or social status. This is perhaps the most significant exploration of the theme – that good mother / child relationships, the value of them, can transcend the imposed roadblocks of social, racial, and economic inequality.

## The Struggle to Overcome Racism

The novel's consideration of the struggle to overcome racism plays out on a number of levels. An important example is Mattie's struggle to free herself and her family from the sufferings that the corrupt systems of the novel's setting (see "Settings") imposed upon them. Those sufferings included beatings, separation from family, being sold at a whim, sexual assault, verbal abuse, and death on the whim of the Whites in power. The novel portrays the day to day struggles against racism as being mostly in the mind, the heart, and the spirit of Mattie and the other slaves as they try to hold onto the connections with



themselves, their families, and their histories. In Mattie's case, this involves the ritual of looking out the window every day at the slave quarters for a glimpse of her son and continuing to wear the necklace that her mother gave her. Those quiet internal struggles eventually grew into a struggle that had to be expressed in the external action of escaping. Escaping was a dangerous action that wasn't successful as often as it should have been. However, the novel's portrait of Mattie and her family's new life following their escape indicates that the struggle for freedom was worth it.

The second way in which the novel's theme of racism plays out is in the story of Lisbeth and her transformation from being the daughter of a White plantation owner who embraced slavery to being an abolitionist who opposed its principles and practices. Lisbeth's struggle is defined by her driving need to overcome the racism in herself and in the system in which she was born and lives. It is this struggle, no less significant in terms of the novel's action and thematic contentions, that arguably gives it its ultimate power. While people like Mattie can transcend the worst of the world by relying on the best of themselves, it's similarly noteworthy that people like Lisbeth can transcend the worst of themselves. By doing so, they discover the best of the world.

## The Transcendent Power of Love

If something is transcendent, it goes beyond a particular set of circumstances. In *Yellow Crocus*, connections between mother and child are transcendent of several time, space, race, and status. The transcendence is driven by love as shown between Mattie and Naomi, Mattie and Lisbeth, and Mattie and Jordan. There is also the love of Lisbeth and Matthew, which enables them both to rise above the more distasteful and uncomfortable aspects of slavery in the South and escape to a more affirming existence with each other in the North.

On an even deeper level, this theme can be seen as manifesting in the determination of Mattie, Emmanuel, and the other slaves to escape to the North. Their love of freedom enables, fuels, and drives their overcoming of suffering and hardship, both on the plantation and during escape.

In spite of being occasionally detoured into going along with her parents' plans for her, Lisbeth strives to transcend the rules and circumstances of the world into which she was born. She only succeeds once she connects her love for Mattie with a more transcendent, encompassing love and compassion for the slaves.



# Styles

## Point of View

An engaging technical elements of the narrative is its shift between different points of view. Written in the third person, past tense, the perspective shifts back and forth between the various characters at various times. In the early chapters, the story is told almost entirely from Mattie's point of view. Then, for about a page and a half in Chapter 4 (the section in which Lisbeth is suffering from a fever and dehydration), the narrative is written from the perspective of a one-year-old. The shift isn't complete because a child that age does not have the vocabulary, sense of sentence structure, or skill to communicate in the way the author has represented. But, the author does manage to communicate the limited, purely emotional, barely articulate experiences and sensations of that one-year-old, to the point where the reader gets a glimmer of understanding of what it might be like to be that age in that situation. Several times throughout the narrative the author does the same thing, but with different characters – Ann, Mattie, and Lisbeth being the most notable. It's interesting to note here that rarely, if ever, does the author write from the perspective / point of view of any of the male characters, a point that seems fitting and appropriate given that the book's focus is on primarily female relationships – there are exceptions, but the vast majority of the narrative is taken up with female characters. In any case, the overall effect from this point of view is to create a sense of collage, or kaleidoscope, perhaps even a quilt, with points of view and perspective placed up against each other and stitched together to create a sense of a whole experience and perspective that ultimately becomes more than the sum of its parts.

## Language and Meaning

Along with shifts in point of view go relevant shifts in language and meaning. Specifically, when the story is being told from a particular character's perspective the ideas, sensations, and experiences are all described in words that define that point of view. This principle and practice are referred to above in terms of the brief section portraying events and experiences from the perspective of one-year-old Elizabeth, but is also true of the sections narrated from other perspectives – in particular, those of Mattie and Elizabeth's mother, Ann. The overall effect of these shifts of language ties in with the overall effect of the above mentioned shifts in point of view, in that both techniques create a clear sense of the individual identities and experiences of each character.

Another way language is used to particular effect is in the dialogue, which seems to have been carefully shaped to reflect the identity, education, and perspectives of the person speaking. The dialogue of the slaves, for example (i.e. Mattie, Poppy, Emily, Rebecca, etc.), has the feel of being spoken by someone for whom education has been a rare thing. In a similar way, the dialogue and topics of conversation for the White characters is also shaped and/or defined to reflect their identities and perspectives. This



plays out to particular effect in Chapter 19, in which Lisbeth, who is going through a phase of trying to be everything her socially conscious mother and friends want her to be, chatters in the overly refined, materialistic ways of the people around her. Ultimately, the point about the dialogue is this: in a narrative in which status plays a key function, and in a world setting in which that status is defined, at least in part, by education and articulateness, shaping the dialogue in this way is an effective, appropriate, and evocative way.

## Structure

In general, the narrative unfolds in a straightforward, linear way. Event A leads to Event B, leads to Event C, and so on. It's important to note, however, that even within this straightforward overall structure, there are significant gaps in time, sometimes as long as several years, as the author moves both story and reader along from significant point to significant point, sometimes across years. While there is sometimes the sense that more information about the lives of the characters between those points might be useful and/or engaging, there is also the sense that the author is using this structural format to keep the reader's focus / attention on the most significant moments and experiences in the lives of the characters. These large gaps of time in the story of the characters also enable the author to get to what seems to be her primary narrative point (the experiences leading to Lisbeth's rejection of her family's, and her culture's, perspectives on racism and marriage) more quickly.

The one exception to this overall structural shape appears in Chapter 7, in which Mattie's memories of her mother Naomi are integrated as a flashback – that is, a narrative step back in time to the point at which the action being described actually took place. In this case, the narrative “flashes back” to the time when Mattie was eight and Naomi was sold to another plantation, as slaves could be at that time and in that place. The flashback is short, and included within the context of Mattie speaking to Lisbeth about her (Mattie's) history, so it's a relatively smooth, well-integrated diversion from the narrative. In other words, it doesn't seem to interrupt the work's overall structural flow at all.



## Quotes

Mattie was never truly mine. That knowledge must have filled me as quickly and surely as the milk from her breasts ... along with the comfort of her came the fear that I would lose her someday.

-- Narration (Lisbeth) (Prologue)

**Importance:** This quote, from the first paragraph in the narrative, indicates and defines the central relationship that anchors the action of the book.

Every time someone called her ma'am, Ann Wainwright felt like a fraud ... as Mrs. Jonathan Wainwright, she was the mistress of the house, in theory. But she was hardly involved in the running of the plantation: Mrs. Gray handled day-to-day-matters, and her mother-in-law was loath to relinquish her role as hostess of Fair Oaks".

-- Narration (Chapter 2)

**Importance:** This quote offers insight into Ann's mind in the moments before she actually holds her daughter for the first time and at the very beginning of her relationship with Mattie.

Sometimes [Elizabeth] ate, sometimes she slept, but mostly she waited for her Mattie to come back. And then she got hot. The heat came and did not go away ... Elizabeth was tired and did not want to do anything but sleep. She reamed. She dreamed of her red ball and a toe. She dreamed of brown eyes and a rocking chair. She dreamed of sweet milk and shells to hold onto.

-- Narration (Chapter 4)

**Importance:** This quote is significant for two main reasons. First, it manifests the author's intention to write about important moments in the characters' lives from their individual perspectives – in this case, the perspective of the one year old Elizabeth. Second, it portrays Elizabeth's experience of having the fever that brings her close to death and back to Mattie.

Our forbears were quite clear on the matter: slaves are only three-fifths of a man. They are not entitled to the same rights as Christians ... only someone who has never actually lived with a Negro could romanticize their capacities so. Without slavery they would all be starving heathens ... [Channing] does not understand all that we provide for the Negroes: basic security for life.

-- Jonathan Wainwright (Chapter 5)

**Importance:** In this quote, the author puts the Southern philosophy towards slavery in the mouth of one of her central characters, the slave-owner (and Mattie's owner) Jonathan Wainwright. The quote summarizes the psychological and social circumstances in which slaves like Mattie lived their lives.



'You keep this safe till I come back. This came from my mama who got it from her mama, all the way back. I gonna keep one. You always gonna be connected through these shells, not jus' to me, but to all the womenfolk that came before us. We are strong women, Mattie. You one of us, so you strong too.'

-- Naomi (Mattie's Mother) (Chapter 7)

**Importance:** Naomi's words to her daughter embody the book's theme of the transcendent power of a mother's relationship with her child and its capacity to cross time and place. It is also an example of how the idea of different kinds of inheritances threads through the book.

Despite her care, Lisbeth broke open the scabs in some places. Bright red blood stood in contrast to the dark brown crust, pale white finger, and coffee brown back. When all the wounds were covered, Lisbeth had blood on her hands. As she stood to examine her work, she wiped it into the fabric of her dress.

-- Narration (Chapter 12)

**Importance:** Lisbeth's sensitivity to Mattie's pain is clearly portrayed here, with her empathy visually expressed through the wiping of Mattie's blood onto her (Lisbeth's) dress. Metaphorically, she is making Mattie's pain her own.

'Remember how I always have my mama's love in my heart? Well, you gonna always have my love in your heart to guide you. You smart and you strong and you have a good heart, Lisbeth. You gonna be all right.

-- Mattie (Chapter 13)

**Importance:** Mattie's reassurances to Lisbeth awaken echoes of the story of Naomi's departure from Mattie's life in Chapter 7 and the story of the importance of the necklace of shells.

Though it was the middle of the night, she moved more deeply into the forest searching for a cave marked by a faint charcoal star. After finding it, she settled in and waited for what was to come next.

-- Narration (Chapter 15)

**Importance:** This quote marks the simultaneous end of one phase of Mattie's escape and the beginning of another.

'Says here this Mattie has herself a pickanninny, but I suppose you might have killed it just so's you could get clean away. Ain't that right? No telling what a nigger will do to her own young. Don't have the same motherly feelings as a lady, now, do you?

-- The White Sheriff (Chapter 16)

**Importance:** This quote functions on several levels – to indicate the danger Mattie is in from the White slave hunter, to reinforce the narrative's emphasis on white prejudice, and also on a deeply ironic level, given the various manifestations of motherhood



throughout the book (see “Homework Help Questions – Contrast the various portraits of motherhood ...”)

In the back garden Lisbeth noticed a particularly grand willow tree, larger even than her favorite at Fair Oaks ... soon she would be able to come here whenever she wished ... someday she would bring her own daughter under these branches to take naps, learn to read, and share stories.

-- Narration (Chapter 21)

**Importance:** The narrative further develops the theme of traditions passed between generations of mothers and children as Lisbeth imagines creating the same sort of happy memories for her daughter as Mattie (an important mother figure) created for her.

Lisbeth knew with absolute certainty that if Mattie had stayed, someday it would have been Jordan lying on the ground under a White man ... it was devastating to think about, but Lisbeth allowed herself to consider life at Fair Oaks from Mattie’s perspective. She finally understood that Mattie had left to protect Jordan.

-- Narration (Chapter 21)

**Importance:** After the painful discovery of one of the more unsettling aspects of her privileged life, Lisbeth comes to realize at least some of the difficulties and sufferings Mattie and others like her experienced while living the life of a slave.

‘I fully anticipated your parents’ behavior. Everyone in this valley is afraid of the changes that are coming. This way of life is going to be over soon. I have no interest in fighting to preserve it. And I am very glad you will be with me rather than staying here.

-- Matthew (Chapter 24)

**Importance:** With this quote, both Matthew and the narrative as a whole acknowledge the impending changes brought about by the American Civil War – specifically, the end of slavery as an institution.

‘It sure is somethin’ how much you love your children. It look me by surprise with the first one. Thought I knew what I was getting’ into for the next, but I gave my heart to each one I brung to my breast.

-- Mattie (Chapter 26)

**Importance:** When Mattie speaks these words to Matthew in the aftermath of the birth of Lisbeth’s baby, the reader can see that she is referring not only to Samuel, but to Lisbeth herself. Lisbeth was also a baby she “brung to her breast” and loved.