

# **Zami, a New Spelling of My Name Study Guide**

**Zami, a New Spelling of My Name by Audre Lorde**

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## Plot Summary

*Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* tells the story of Audre Lorde's passage from childhood to young adulthood. It covers many themes but focuses primarily on the close bonds she develops with women throughout her life, first with her mother and then with various lovers throughout the book. Audre grows up as a black woman and a lesbian, and in American society in the 40s, 50s, and 60s, this was a triple-threat. Her race, gender and sexuality were all rejected by her society at large; thus, much of the book functions with Audre living in a society that either ignores or rejects her and her telling tales of secret lesbian love.

The story begins with Lorde's childhood in Harlem. She is a child of black parents from the West Indies. She grows up in Catholic School but faces racism as a child, along with the handicap of being legally blind. Yet she displays strong verbal talents, particularly for writing, from an early age. As she grows up, she continues to find herself alienated. She has a young friend named Gennie who commits suicide and who was Audre's first love. In High School she joins a group of outcasts who call themselves "The Branded" and begins to write poetry. And after high school she leaves home, dates a boy named Peter who impregnates her. She has an abortion. She is very unhappy in college and moves to Connecticut to find work. There she meets her next love, Ginger. She returns to New York after her father's death. She begins a relationship with a woman named Bea, who she then leaves for reasons she does not understand. Audre moves to Mexico after saving some money. In Mexico she meets a middle-aged woman named Eudora who is a mentor and lover to Audre. She then returns to NYC and falls in love with a schizophrenic woman named Muriel, and they move in together. Audre's life begins to look up but Muriel cheats on Audre and their relationship is destroyed. After recovering she meets her final lover in the book, Afrekete, who ultimately leaves her for a "gig" in Atlanta. Audre then ends the book by meditating on all the things the women in her life, particularly her mother have taught her and speculates that her mother shared her own deep passion for the feminine soul.



# Chapters 1 - 3

## Chapters 1 - 3 Summary and Analysis

### Chapter 1

The chapter begins with reflections on the power and grace of Audre's mother. She notes that her father and mother came to the United States in 1924 and notes that her parents were able to find work despite discrimination. Audre notes the stock market crash and all the difficulties this brought upon her family. She remembers the Catholic prayers that her mother whispered and how her life as a child was filled with Grenadian song. The first chapter is largely a reflection on the character of Carriacou women, from an island in the Grenadines. These women were legendary for their love for one another. Zami is the name that expresses how Carriacou women love each other; it also represents their strength and beauty. Audre grows up longing for Carriacou and the women there. Her longing for the love of women, of their strength and beauty is a powerful theme throughout the book.

### Chapter 2

Audre begins the chapter by noticing that she is most at home taking extreme positions and how this illustrates a kind of determination that she finds natural, something she shares with her mother. Her mother was a light black color, "redbone" as it was called. But these women would never use this name for themselves out of sheer defiance. This is why Audre believes that "there have always been Black dykes around" because she identifies this sort of woman-love and determination as synonymous with black lesbianism. She begins to tell the story of her parents' trials in Harlem and how her parents respected one another as equals. She notes that sometimes she is in awe of her mother for being so different and yet at other times she is embarrassed. Her mother was imposing, yet she was private and shy. Audre mentions the only two times she ever saw her mother cry. She continues to note the terrible toll the Depression took on her family and Black people generally.

### Chapter 3

Audre is born legally blind but has to start school without glasses. Despite her nearsightedness, she learns to read before she began school, from a children's librarian, Mrs. August Baker. After Baker read her a story Audre decided she would learn to read for herself. Her mother was pleased by this development. Audre learned in particular to write her name and mentions that she was always the largest child in class. Her Catholic Nun/Teacher discouraged her from writing her name because she would not stick to writing a single letter. Her first grade teacher was Sister Mary of Perpetual Help and while she would teach black children, she seemed to do it only out of duty. She divided her class into Fairies (good kids) and Brownies (bad kids) and Audre spent most of her time as a brownie. She sat next to a boy named Alvin who harassed her, yet



she sought his approval anyway. Alvin eventually dies of tuberculosis. Alvin had kept her out of the Brownies by teaching her to understand page numbers and she read for him. But when Alvin died she went back to the Brownies. Later Sister Mary asks Audre's class to write their own sentences, but Audre's sentence is too mature for Sister Mary to believe that Audre wrote it. Audre also breaks her glasses at this time.

#### Interlude: How I Became a Poet

In this interlude, Audre describes how she became a poet. Audre did not speak until she was four and had no glasses to help her see. Very little was clear to her and her memories from those times were fuzzy. As a result, Audre grew up with a "sensual content of life" that was "masked and cryptic." She also begins to understand the world as in terms of her family and particularly her mother's unique words for various objects and actions. Audre then says: "I am a reflection of my mother's secret poetry as well as of her hidden angers." She remembers at an early age becoming curious about her mother's genitals and how she was drawn to the smell of them.



# Chapters 4 - 6

## Chapters 4 - 6 Summary and Analysis

### Chapter 4

Audre desires a little sister but already had two older ones, yet they seemed distant from her. This is the beginning of her desire for female companionship. She notes that she and her sisters are different shades of black. She then describes finding her first playmate at age four, which lasted for ten minutes. She was a little white girl with a red coat and reddish brown hair named Toni. She invites Audre to play with her and Audre begins to undress her. Toni seems to enjoy this. Audre also rocks her like a doll. Eventually Audre's mother finds her but doesn't realize what is going on. She then takes Audre away. Audre looked for Toni at the same place for many days.

### Chapter 5

Audre is jealous of her two older sisters because they have more privileges. She describes her homes in her early childhood. She mentions sharing a bed with her sisters and wanted to participate in their story telling that occurred only after she fell asleep. Audre has a deep need for feminine acceptance, but in her early life this goes largely unfulfilled. She is particularly enamored with the idea of making up stories. She then decides to make up her own stories, leading to her becoming a writer later in life.

### Chapter 6

Audre tells the story of her being molested by a comic-book store owner but says little about it to her sisters or parents. She describes the layout of late 1930s Harlem.



# Chapters 7 - 9

## Chapters 7 - 9 Summary and Analysis

### Chapter 7

The chapter opens with the advent of Pearl Harbor, but Audre does not understand the significance of the event. Everyone behaves differently, though, so she knows something important has changed. She recalls having to learn her blood type and saying Hail Mary's for the people who died. She notes that her mother worked the polls on election day. Her father works various additional jobs during the war. Eventually her family finds a new home.

### Chapter 8

Chapter 8 begins by describing Audre's awakening racial consciousness as she discovers what Colored means. Audre is the first black student at St. Catherine's School. She notes the stern Ann Archdeacon and the lecherous Monsignor John J. Brady. Her elementary school had taught Audre math and reading well, so she was the smartest kid in the class. Audre describes her goal of becoming class president. Her mother is against Audre drawing any attention to herself and tells her the white kids will never vote for her. Sure enough, she loses the election and is devastated. Her mother is furious that she ran at all. She notes that at age ten she was raped by a boy on a rooftop who had removed her glasses.

### Chapter 9

Chapter 9 is a brief description of how busy Audre's father was and how she helped him take care of receipts. Although they didn't speak much, these times of working together made Audre happy.



# Chapters 10 - 12

## Chapters 10 - 12 Summary and Analysis

### Chapter 10

Chapter 10 describes Audre's visit to DC, and about her first experiences with segregation. She becomes conscious of American racism for the first time. The nuns discover she cannot stay in the same hotel as the white girls. Her parents are so angry that they decide to take her to DC themselves. But even then Audre felt alienated from her country's political institutions and history.

### Chapter 11

Audre explains how much she learned to love pounding spices and cooking and the beauty of her mother's mortar. She describes her mother as hating to make souse, but Audre loved to make souse because it gave her the chance to pound Garlic. She uses the story to transition into describing her years in Hunted High School. At 15, she had just finished her first year and decides to read some books about menstruation. She is late getting her first period and is worried something is wrong with her but finally gets her period. During her first period, she comes to enjoy the her "womansmell, warm, shameful, but secretly utterly delicious." Years later she would fantasize about that moment, imagining her mother and her touching each other in "secret places." This chapter is telling the story of Audre's sexual coming of age, which begins a new period in the book - Audre as sexual, confused teenager.

### Chapter 12

Chapter 12 introduces Audre's group of outcast friends, "The Branded," those who united against "the others." They never discussed their racial difference but were aware of it. Poetry-writing became Audre's ordinary practice and her unique racial and sexual consciousness became more focused. Her relationship with her family became tense. Audre sees a school counselor and complains about her mother. The counselor then invites Audre's mother in and tells Audre's mother everything. Her mother is devastated. Later in her high school career, the counselor tells Audre that her aptitude test suggested that she should become a dental technician because she scored well on science and manual dexterity.





# Chapters 13 - 15

## Chapters 13 - 15 Summary and Analysis

### Chapter 13

In Chapter 13 we meet Gennie, another black girl in *The Branded*. Audre attempts to spend more secret time with her friends, doing all kinds of mischievous pranks. She begins to become close friends with Gennie and slowly falls in love. She also becomes interested in political radicalism, particularly communism. Also mentioned is Gennie's friend Jean, who was a dancer as Gennie was. Audre tells stories about Gennie's family. Gennie initially lived with her mother, Louisa, who had been long separated from her Philip. Louisa and Gennie didn't get along so Gennie decided to go and live with her father. But things started to go badly for Gennie as a result, in ways that Audre could not discern. Gennie begins to talk about killing herself and attempts suicide; however, she survives. But Gennie stayed out of school. In the middle of March, Gennie comes to Audre's house one night and tells her something horrible has happened at her father's house and that she cannot go back to her Mother's. She goes over to Jean's house. Audre's mother is concerned about Audre's relationship with Gennie and openly speculates in front of Audre that Gennie was being molested by her father, although she implied this fairly subtly.

### Chapter 14

Audre opens Chapter 14 with a lamentation over the things that she and Gennie never shared, including making love. Gennie took rat poison soon after the events in Chapter 13, and it slowly ate away at her until she died. Audre visited her in the hospital. Gennie was not sad about her death; in fact, she did not seem to care for Audre at all. When Gennie dies, Audre is crushed, having lost her first love. Louisa comes to Audre's house and asks her why Gennie killed herself. Audre honestly does not know but repeats to Louisa her mother's theory that Gennie's father was molesting her. This tragedy sets Audre up to guard her heart tightly and not to love again easily or permanently as she did with Gennie.

### Chapter 15

Audre graduates from high school and decides to leave her parents' house. She works at a hospital as a nurses' aide and meets a young labor activist named Peter who she starts to date. They have sex, but Audre rarely enjoys it. Later Audre and some of the *Branded* find a room where they could stay cheaply. When Audre began college, she and Peter broke up. She loses her job at the hospital and finds herself desperately poor but eventually finds a job through college. Peter calls her and stands her up for a date. A few weeks later she finds out that she is pregnant and begins a search to have an abortion. She tries various dangerous strategies but eventually finds a Hispanic woman to do the abortion for her safely and at a reasonable price. The abortion is gruesome

and leaves Audre in great pain. For a time, she is concerned that she has hemorrhaged, but after a few days, she is fine physically, although she is still jarred mentally.



# Chapters 16 - 18

## Chapters 16 - 18 Summary and Analysis

### Chapter 16

Audre finds another apartment and is still affected by her abortion. She goes to college and works a part-time job. She also starts to go to meetings of the Harlem Writers Guild. Her poems are improving.

### Chapter 17

Audre fails trigonometry and German but doesn't realize that this is because she is spending most of her time tending to the needs of the Branded. She decides to drop out of college and begins to recognize her latent lesbianism. She decides that summer that she is going to have an affair with a woman. She mentions several potential candidates, like her friend Marie. Audre transitions into a discussion of the rising McCarthyism of the time. Then Audre notes that Marie gets wrapped up with a dangerous man named Jim who she eventually marries. He eventually takes her away from the Branded.

Audre hears about a potential factory job in Stamford, Connecticut. Audre had wanted to leave New York for awhile, so she leaves and goes to the Black Community Center in Stamford to look for a job. The town is dramatically smaller than New York and slower paced. She decides to take a factory job. The state has "closed-shop," laws which require everyone to join a union. Factories responded to this by hiring blacks temporarily to work at lower rates before they were forced to raise their wages and then fired the blacks before the higher wages had to begin. Audre is lonely in town and speaks only to her memories of Gennie for long periods of time.

### Chapter 18

Audre finds a job running an x-ray machine with Keystone Electronics. The work was difficult. She meets another machine worker named Virginia who everyone called Ginger. They get to know each other well. She begins to visit Ginger at her house and Ginger finds Audre fascinating, seeing her as a kind of sophisticated city girl who knew her way around. She notes that Ginger is a bit older than she, having been married at twenty and then divorced her husband. Audre notices that Ginger is flirting with her, but dismissed this because she believed Ginger was straight. Audre is only 18 at the time. Eventually, however, the sexual tension between them becomes intense and they decide to make love. Audre is in ecstasy, and Ginger is as well. They begin to stay together at Ginger's house, making love for long periods of time late into the night. They manage to largely conceal their affair from Ginger's mother, Cora. Cora eventually realizes that they are lovers, although she is still afraid to love again after Gennie. Audre realizes that their relationship probably will not last because there is pressure on Ginger to marry a man.



# Chapters 19 - 21

## Chapters 19 - 21 Summary and Analysis

### Chapter 19

Audre's father has a stroke so she leaves for New York. She realizes she is a stranger in her old home. When returning to Stamford, Audre recognizes that she wants to be even further away from New York. Audre has lost her job due to her absence and is given a new job as an X-Ray machine technician. She quickly outstrips the other employees in ability, earning major bonuses and saving money. She is spending less time with Ginger, who is spending more time with an employee named Ada. Eventually the hospital where she worked fired her due to "cutbacks," but was probably racially motivated. Audre decides to return to New York.

### Chapter 20

Audre develops a dream to move to Mexico, and the move becomes a real plan. Audre gets a job as a clinic clerk in a health center and begins to save money. She is eager to leave the country to escape "red-baiting hysteria." She becomes involved in the Committee to Free the Rosenbergs, a husband and wife accused of spying for the Soviet Union and on trial for treason. Audre identifies with the Rosenbergs' struggle to be accepted by American society because she faced the same trouble due to her gender, race, and sexual orientation. She notes with horror the Rosenberg's electrocution in 1953. She runs into an old college friend named Bea and they mourn together the deaths of the Rosenbergs. Audre invites Bea to stay over and they make love. Audre continues to concentrate on saving for her move. She notes the difficulties meeting other lesbians. She also notes that Bea is not terribly interested in sex. Bea is more intellectually and romantically committed to Audre, but Audre wants a sexual connection. Eventually she leaves Bea and Bea is devastated. A week after her last communication with Bea she leaves for Mexico. Audre is 19.

### Chapter 21

Audre finds her way to Mexico City and loves the culture. She knows little Spanish but improves with time. Racial attitudes are different in Mexico, and most people are darkly colored. For the first time in her life, Audre feels recognized. She meets up with a friend of a friend, Frieda, who helps her get situated with a home and classes at Ciudad Universitaria. She finds a home in Cuernavaca, outside of Mexico City, which has become a haven for political and spiritual refugees. Many of the women there are lesbians. She meets Eudora, a woman in her late forties, with whom she spends much time.



# Chapters 22 - 24

## Chapters 22 - 24 Summary and Analysis

### Chapter 22

Chapter 22 opens with Audre meeting Eudora, a gray-haired woman called La Periodista. She's an alcoholic and "the most fascinating woman [Audre] had ever met." She was the first woman to attend the University of Texas and had worked in news her whole life. She had a love named Karen, and they jointly owned a bookstore in Mexico, the "more liberal" forties. But the store was lost for many reasons. Eudora also had breast cancer. Audre begins to spend as much time as she can with Eudora, and they share their life stories with one another. Audre and Eudora are attracted to one another and find each other beautiful. Finally Audre tells Eudora that she wants to sleep with her. They make love passionately. Over time, Eudora teaches Audre much about Mexican history. And they keep their relationship a secret.

In the coming Spring, McCarthy is censured and the Supreme Court desegregates schools. Times are changing and many of the Americans in Cuernavaca wonder if they can go home. Audre is encouraged that her country is becoming more just. Audre and Eudora make love twice more, and Audre makes plans to go to Guatemala, although it becomes clear that Eudora will not be accompanying her. Eudora and La Señora begin to feud over the bookstore. Eudora and Audre go their separate ways. Audre ultimately decides to return to New York.

### Chapter 23

Audre is lonely, young, black and gay. She finds other women like this only rarely. She briefly catalogues the few girls she knows: Diane, Felicia, and Flee. She becomes close to a group of lesbians who try to create a mutual support network for women. Audre expresses her frustration that white feminists who have the same idea twenty years later claim it for their own. She also discusses how many of her white feminist friends thought that her experience was one with theirs, but she emphasized the extra oppression with which she dealt. Later Audre is nearly raped and gets away only by giving away jewelry. This was one of the only men Audre had interacted with who was decisively stronger than she and the experience functioned as a "consciousness-raiser." She tells a story of some Jewish friends who didn't recognize her as black, arguing that her blackness made her at least partly invisible.

### Chapter 24

Chapter 24 begins the affair with Muriel who also worked at Keystone. She's white, Italian and schizophrenic. They share in a bar about their past lesbian loves one night. Audre notes that Muriel is even more vulnerable than Audre. They begin to fall in love and Audre finds a job at the hospital through a woman named Mrs. Goodrich. She



learns to type a bit better and rebels against her boss. Muriel and Audre correspond - Muriel is a beautiful writer. Audre wants to take care of Muriel and make the world work for her. After a long night at their mutual friend Rhea's, they go to bed together. The next morning they continue their discussion of their first loves. They make love all day, over and over again. Audre was sure she had found her soul mate. Audre calls in sick and Mrs. Goodrich fires her.



# Chapters 25 - 27

## Chapters 25 - 27 Summary and Analysis

### Chapter 25

Audre admits her affair with Muriel to her straight friend Rhea, who envies their relationship. Her relationship with a man, Art, has recently ended. Muriel and Audre begin to imagine life together permanently. Audre also notes her subtle ostracism from even progressive communities.

### Interlude: The Last of My Childhood Nightmares

This brief chapter recounts a childhood nightmare that involves Audre's feelings of estrangement from those she loves. This is an enduring theme in the book - rejection and feelings of being on the outside looking in.

### Chapter 26

Audre finds a job as a library clerk in the New York Public Library system. She is happy to be reading again. Muriel and Audre consider moving in together. Muriel talks about how she feels her electroshock treatments stole part of her forever. Audre swears to protect her in the future. Audre and Muriel vow to love one another forever. They consider leaving New York but decide to stay. Audre discusses her group of lesbian friends. Only Felicia is black, and Audre feels that only she understands their unique position, that even Muriel often doesn't understand. This brings out the theme of being alienated even from the alienated and marginalized groups in society. Audre's blackness was the only thing that separated her from Muriel. Black females faced oppression every day; whereas, white lesbians often did not. The chapter ends with a meditation on Muriel and Audre's love and how it affects Audre's heart.

### Chapter 27

The chapter begins happily. Life is meaningful with Muriel in Audre's life. In June of 1955, a friend Lynn comes to live with them. Her husband had died in a truck accident, and Lynn feels responsible. A complication arises when both Muriel and Audre realize they are attracted to Lynn. They consider a three-some which at the time was so unheard of as to border on the outlandish. They have the threesome and are pleased with it. From time to time Muriel will sleep with Lynn or Audre will or Audre and Muriel will sleep together. They organize separate love-making sessions. Lynn eventually shocks both Audre and Muriel by stealing their money and leaving the area.



# Chapters 28 - 30

## Chapters 28 - 30 Summary and Analysis

### Chapter 28

Muriel and Audre continue spending a great amount of time together, separating only for holidays. Audre has trouble finding a job. One day, Audre reads something Muriel wrote and discovers that Muriel is threatened by Audre's accomplishments over the year. Muriel did not see Audre's accomplishments as her own which created more separateness between them.

### Chapter 29

The chapter opens with a discussion of the subtle social norms within the New York lesbian scene, about her flirtations, which must be subtle, and how many lesbians are into dominance/submission relationships, while others think that these lesbians are reproducing the standard patriarchal patterns of oppression. She notes that gay bars come in and out of existence annually and that much of her life at the time takes place in these gay bars. She notes how hard life can be in her position. As she says, "It was hard enough to be Black, to be Black and female, to be Black, female, and gay. To be Black, female, gay and out of the closet in a white environment ... was considered by many Black lesbians to be simply suicidal." She notes that despite this, black lesbians had a kind of camaraderie calling themselves "sistah outsiders."

### Chapter 30

Muriel never looks for work and seems to be falling into a depression or state of psychosis. One night they run into an old friend, Jill. Muriel later runs into an ex-varsity star in her high school named Toni. Toni is a registered nurse in Hunter College nursing program. She is also a lesbian. Toni and Muriel begin to develop a sexual attraction to one another and Muriel asks Audre if she can sleep with her. Audre is jealous but permits it. This appears to make Muriel happy. Sometimes Toni would stay over as well. One night Audre hears Jill and Muriel making love, but Audre is devastated because of a tense past history with Jill. Her relationship with Muriel begins to fall apart as a result. Audre is furious, so furious she wants to kill. She ends up burning her hand with boiling water, subconsciously mutilating herself out of her pain. Muriel and Audre never speak of the Jill incident, and Jill leaves their lives. Muriel decides to have an affair with a woman named Joan, in part while Audre was working. Audre is further crushed and Muriel spends her time at Nicky and Joan's apartment. The relationship between Audre and Muriel is over, although it takes Audre a while to acknowledge it. Her grief was "wild." Muriel begins to fall into a deep psychosis, moving slowly out of her and Audre's apartment. Audre begins to go to bars alone and one day finds Muriel, devastated after Joan left her. Muriel goes home for Christmas but never truly returned. She signs into a



state hospital unit where Toni was helping run an experimental program for schizophrenics.



# Chapter 31 and Epilogue

## Chapter 31 and Epilogue Summary and Analysis

### Chapter 31

As Audre is recovering from the breakup with Muriel, she encounters a woman named Kitty through a mutual friend Gerri. Kitty and Audre knew each other while Audre was still with Muriel. They met in a bar. Kitty's real name is Afrekete. She's black and a singer, and Audre found her very attractive. They dance together at a bar where they met. Kitty and Audre meet again during Audre's recovery. Audre is still suffering and Kitty comforts her. After getting to know each other a bit, Kitty asks Audre to spend the night and they make love. Their love making feels so natural that Audre wonders if she wasn't meant for it. Kitty continues to pursue her singing career as they spend time together. Kitty, oddly, lives close to Gennie's grandmother's house. Over time Audre and Kitty drift apart a bit. Audre goes to visit Kitty after a few weeks and later receives a note from Kitty saying that she had left New York for Atlanta to pursue a singing gig and to visit her mother and daughter. She never saw Kitty again but the relationship left its marks on her.

### Epilogue

"Every women I have ever loved has left her print upon me" Audre begins. The epilogue is a meditation on the value of loving the women as she did, of her being drawn to share her life, love and body with women. She begins to think of her life as a "bridge and field of women," which the inhabitants of Carriacou call "Zami, a Carriacou name for women who work together as friends and lovers." She feels the love for strong women in her blood and reflects on her feeling that her true home is Carriacou, the land of strong, proud independent women. And she ends with a final meditation on a legend in Carriacou:

"There is it said that the desire to lie with other women is a drive from the mother's blood."

This brings the book full circle. Audre has speculated that her mother, too, loved women as she did and that she drew her feminine desires from her mother. Audre sees her life as originating in feminine, black power and extending that power and love throughout her life experiences, connecting meaningfully with other such women if only briefly over a life.



# Characters

## Audre Lorde

Audre is the author or main character of the book. The book follows Audre from early childhood to adulthood, cataloguing her development and her relationships with women specifically. Audre is naturally creative, head strong, defiant, private and emotionally vulnerable. Her creativity comes out throughout the book, in her poetic writings and her attraction to the written word. She is headstrong, refusing to despair in a culture that despises her and speaking out against oppression when she can and living freely elsewhere when speaking out will do no good. She is defiant as well, because she ultimately refuses to be defined by those around her and stands out even among other lesbians and feminists as someone with her own, unique perspective. She consistently insists that she has something to contribute that no other has the same perspective. She is also private, particularly after Gennie's death and is resistant to opening her heart to others, including women. And while she does love from time to time, there is a kind of boundary she sets in her heart that always divides her from even her lovers. This is to hide her emotional vulnerability, which springs from an eternal desire to be emotionally close to and loved by other women, not only as friends but as lovers and sexual partners.

## Linda, Mother

Linda is Audre's mother and a major figure in the book. She is actually present in the first half of the book but her shadow extends over Audre's life even after Audre's left home. Audre begins life as she remembers it in awe of her mother's strength, power, grit and determination. Linda is Grenadan and is related to the people of Carriacou, a group of women who are legendary for their strength and mutual support for one another. Audre desires to draw this strength and noble quality from her mother, describing the manifestations of her mother's power throughout her childhood. Linda is stern and strong-willed, prepared to live in a racist society with her husband and never willing to accept anything but the best for her children, including their education. Linda is also often harsh with Audre, particularly when it comes to getting too close to white people. Linda is deeply suspicious of white people due to the deep racism characteristic of American society at the time. As Audre enters her teenage years, she fights with her mother constantly, and when she is seventeen leaves home. But the influence of Audre's mother extends throughout the book in Audre's unending search for a source of feminine power to draw from, a need that apparently had not been met by her own mother. Audre's feminine hunger, Audre comes to believe, is derived from her mother who Audre suspects was also a lesbian.



## Phyllis and Helen

Audre's older sisters, who play a relatively small role in the story. They often exclude Audre from their activities because they say she is too young. Audre largely feels rejected by her sisters, and this probably contributes to her hunger for the strength of other women.

## Audre's Father

Audre's father was a strong man, but he worked often and did not spend much time at home. As a result, Audre's relationship with him was a distant one, although they do share moments of intimacy from time to time.

## The Branded

The Branded is the name of a group of "outcast" smart kids at Audre's high school. They were Audre's close friends and their bonds extended past high school, when many of them rented an apartment together. The Branded help to form Audre's identity as a creator and maintainer of communities of the marginalized. She often played a motherly role to various younger members of The Branded.

## Maxine

Audre has several close friends in high school, and Maxine is one of them. She is also Jewish.

## Gennie

Audre's best friend in high school, whose real name is Genevieve. She is a dancer who lives a troubled life. She lives with Louisa, her mother, initially, but when her father Philip reenters her life she decides to live with him. She then drops into a deep depression. Linda suspects Philip is raping her. She and Audre become inseparable and she tells Audre that she intends to commit suicide. After a failed attempt, Gennie succeeds. Audre is crushed and has trouble loving again because of the pain she (Audre) suffered.

## Louisa, Philip, Ella

Louisa is Gennie's mother and Philip is her father. Louisa and Gennie do not get along well in Gennie's teenage years, so she decides to live with her father. But Philip apparently is molesting her, which sends her into a deep depression. Ella is Philip's second wife and Gennie's stepmother.



## Peter

Audre's only boyfriend, a white man that she meets at a youth labor group. She dates him for awhile and is largely unconnected to him. They eventually break up, but she discovers she is pregnant. She then gets an abortion, which is difficult for her physically and emotionally.

## Ginger

Ginger is initially a fellow employee at the factory in Stamford where Audre works. Over time and much flirting, they decide to make love and ultimately become lovers. They drift apart over time and Audre returns to NYC.

## Bea

Audre's next lover, a white girl in NYC who is interested in lesbianism more for its romantic and intellectual value than for sex. She and Audre are never terribly close, and Audre eventually leaves Bea when Audre goes to Mexico.

## Eudora

A nearly fifty-year-old expatriate lesbian who Audre meets in Mexico. They begin a brief love affair before Eudora's alcoholism and feud with a Mexican woman cause her to stay in Mexico rather than travel with Audre. Audre, due to improving political conditions in the United States, decides to return to NYC.

## Muriel

One of Audre's most important loves, Muriel is a schizophrenic Italian woman. For a time Muriel and Audre believe they are soul mates and have powerful love-making sessions. But over time Audre's work and Muriel's mental disorder pulls them apart, along with a mutual sexual relationship with their temporary roommate Lynn. Eventually Muriel leaves Audre for another woman after a brief adultery incident with one of Audre's ex-friends. Muriel ends up in a hospital program for schizophrenics and Audre moves on over time.

## Lynn

Audre and Muriel's roommate with whom they have a threesome. Over time, they take turns having sex with Lynn, but the relationship doesn't work out and creates distance between Muriel and Audre. Once the door is open to sex with other women, their relationship quickly deteriorates, though Lynn inexplicably left them and stole most of their valued belongings and savings.



## Sistah Outsiders

The Sistah Outsiders are a group of black lesbians of which Audre is a member. The group never meets but instead consists of loners, black lesbians who feel that they are marginalized even by their white lesbian friends.

## Kitty

Also known as Afrekete, she is a singer Audre meets through a mutual friend. She is the last lover mentioned in the book and helps Audre recover from Muriel. They have a brief, happy relationship but drift apart. A few weeks after Audre last saw Kitty, Kitty went to Atlanta to see her mother and daughter and take up a singing position.



## Objects/Places

### Harlem

A common home for black people in New York City. This is where Audre grew up.

### New York City

Audre's on again, off again home. She lives in various apartments around the city after leaving home.

### Washington D.C.

She visits D.C. from time to time, but largely finds it an alienating experience due to the racism there.

### Stamford, Connecticut

A small town where Audre finds a factory job and meets Ginger.

### Cuernavaca, Mexico

A haven for political dissidents from the United States. Audre finds her way there and meets Eudora, a much older woman with whom she develops a relationship. This area in Mexico is very tolerant and people for the most part mind their own business.

### Hunter High School

Audre's high school, a place she hates except for her group of friends there, The Branded.

### Grenada

The country of origin for Audre's parents.

### Carriacou

A small Grenadine island with several thousand residents. The island women there are rumored to be strong and mutually supportive. Audre considers these her people and



sees her mother as one of their rank. The book title derives from a Carriacou name for strong women that love and support one another.

## **Glasses**

Audre was born legally blind and her glasses enabled her to see. Much of the early part of the book involves Audre's glasses enabling her to see the world as it really is.

## **Catholic School**

Audre goes to Catholic elementary and Jr high school. She is a Catholic for awhile as a child and teenager.

## **Audre's Apartment**

Audre and the Branded rent an apartment where they live as they wish.

## **Female Genitalia**

An odd object, to be sure, but Audre is intensely focused on it, often diverging from the story line to describe her experiences with them on other women and how she draws strength and ecstasy from encountering them.

## **Schizophrenia**

Muriel is afflicted with this disorder, and it prevents her from maintaining stable relationships.

## **Girl Bars**

There are many secret gay bars in New York City but they rarely stay open for long. New ones spring up and Audre spends much of her time in them.

## **Poems**

Audre writes many poems in her early life. They give expression to many of her emotions and loves.

## **Muriel's Poems**

Muriel is also a poet, but she decides to burn them all during a psychotic phase.





# Themes

## Lesbianism

Audre is a lesbian and later in life becomes a major lesbian contributor to the feminist movement. Her lesbianism is a major theme of the book because all her lovers are women and her concerns in the book are about the nature of her love for femininity and women generally. Her lesbianism appears to derive from her admiration for and draw towards the feminine strength of her mother. Audre has a continuous drive to find feminine power in other women, not just through friendship, but through romantic and erotic relationships. She often describes her arousal at the possibility of sex with another woman and of the mixing of their feminine elements. She even begins the book by saying that she desires both to enter women and to be entered by them, "to leave and to be left" and "to be hot and hard and soft all at the same time in the cause of our loving." Audre desires to become one with other women from a masculine and feminine perspective, to consume the female essence in romantic and erotic attachment.

Her lesbianism plays out in other ways as well. She cannot be open about her lesbianism which leaves her feeling isolated from others, even white lesbians. Black lesbians live in a world of their own, Audre often argues. Lesbianism is not merely about her connection to womanhood but about her estrangement from others.

## Racism and Marginalization

Audre is born in 1934 and grows up during the Depression and World War II. After WWII ends, she comes of age. Much of the book occurs during the 50s. This was not a great time for tolerance in the United States. Many citizens were fighting to maintain segregation, police communists, and marginalize and dominate independent women. Of course, homosexuality at the time was considered such an abomination that it did not even need to be repressed directly. But Audre grows up as a black, female, homosexual. She is thrice rejected by her society. She sees American society as male-dominated, white-dominated and straight-dominated and she sees these forms of oppression even among her lesbian feminist friends. Many lesbians become interested in dominance/submission relationships, but Audre and others see this as simply bringing patriarchal forms of domination into the lesbian community. She also faces an inevitable chasm of emotional separation between her and whites, even white feminists. She sometimes emphasizes the uniqueness of her experience as a "thrice rejected" member of American society. Her white feminist and white lesbian friends often cannot recognize the importance of this difference. Audre also discusses the impact of racism on her family and the opportunities she was denied as a result of it, not only in school but afterwards in the job market. She rejoices when the Supreme Court desegregates the schools.

## Relationship to Mother

The relationship between Audre and her mother comes up time and time again throughout the book. Linda, Audre's mother, is present in the first half of the book but her shadow extends over Audre's life even after she's left home. Audre begins life as she remembers it in awe of her mother's strength, power, grit, and determination. Linda is Grenadan and is related to the people of Carriacou, a group of women who are legendary for their strength and mutual support for one another. Audre desires to draw this strength and noble quality from her mother, describing the manifestations of her mother's power throughout her childhood. Linda is stern and strong-willed, prepared to live in a racist society with her husband and never willing to accept anything but the best for her children, including their education. Linda is also often harsh with Audre, particularly when it comes to getting too close to white people. Linda is deeply suspicious of white people due to the deep racism characteristic of American society at the time. As Audre enters her teenage years, she fights with her mother constantly and when she is seventeen leaves home. But the influence of Audre's mother extends throughout the book in Audre's unending search for a source of feminine power to draw from, a need that apparently had not been met by her own mother. Audre's feminine hunger, she comes to believe, derives from her mother who she suspects was also a lesbian. Her relationship to her mother then seems to symbolize her deep yearning for feminine completeness coupled with her occasional alienation from it.



# Style

## Perspective

Audre is the author and main character of the book. The book tracks Audre from early childhood to adulthood, cataloguing her development generally and her relationships with women specifically. Audre is naturally creative, headstrong, defiant, private and emotionally vulnerable. Her creativity comes out throughout the book, in her poetic writings and her attraction to the written word. She is headstrong, refusing to despair in a culture that despises her. She speaks out against oppression when she can and lives freely elsewhere when speaking out will do no good. She is defiant as well, because she ultimately refuses to be defined by those around her and stands out even among other lesbians and feminists as someone with her own, unique perspective that she consistently insists has something to contribute that no other perspective has.

Her perspective is primarily that of the woman I've just described. Although her vulnerability and emotions come across much more clearly in her work, Audre still exudes a defiant and creative perspective on life. She is a true individualist, working out her own life on her own terms despite that the vast majority of society rejects everything that she is. She also expresses her feelings clearly and without shame, shocking for a young black woman of her time. Thus she has the perspective of a proud black lesbian, proud in a world that hates her.

## Tone

The tone of the book is closely associated with Audre's perspective. Audre, again, is naturally creative, head strong, defiant and emotionally vulnerable. Thus the book takes on the tone of someone who has both unusual strengths but great vulnerabilities. She speaks of the evils of her world not as something that destroys her but that are merely isolating and obstacles to be overcome. The tone is soft and loving when it comes to the women in her life. She describes her memories of love and love-making fondly and describes her lovers in detail. She is sometimes irrevocably drawn to some of these women, almost compulsively attracted to them physically and spiritually. This comes across clearly in her writing. The tone of the book is also made richer by the inclusion of poetry throughout the book. Audre often wrote poems to describe some feature of her life and their interspersions in the text gives the reader a window into the soul of one who is strong on the outside but lonely and desperate for love on the inside.

Audre's tone also has a touch of wistfulness. She seems to long to be part of a different society, in a different time, with different norms altogether. She's a political radical trying to remake the world, and this seems in keeping with her desire to find acceptance. She rejoices in being visible in Mexico and has a taste of what life might be like with a society that did not reject her as American society did.

## Structure

The structure of this book is complex. It is divided into 31 chapters with a prologue and epilogue and several interludes. The book begins with Audre's childhood and tracks her growth throughout the book. The years range perhaps from 1938 to 1959, but it's not clear when the story actually begins. We see Audre as a young child, as a pre-teen, teen and young adult. The first half of the book Audre is with her family, and the book details her various experiences with early womanhood: interacting with her mother, loving her mother, fighting with her mother, fighting with her sisters, making female friends, falling in love with Gennie, suffering after Gennie's suicide and so on. The second half of the book catalogues Audre's near aimless wandering and the love affairs she has along the way. Interspersed throughout the book, however, are various flashbacks to other periods of time in her life; poems are strewn intermittently throughout chapters, among other things. Sometimes Audre pauses and gives some dramatic take on a related issue in italics. Other times she simply pauses and tells a separate story, like "How I became a poet." The book has a stream of consciousness feel, although it is much more structured than that. For the most part, it is chronological and develops smoothly, but there are bumps along the way.



## Quotes

"I have always wanted to be both man and woman, to incorporate the strongest and richest parts of my mother and father within/into me - to share valleys and mountains upon my body the way the earth does in hills and peaks." (7)

"I have often wondered why the farthest-out position always feels right to me." (15)

"If you can't change reality, change your perceptions of it." (18)

"I want to read." (23)

"I am a reflection of my mother's secret poetry as well as of her hidden angers." (32)

"Right then and there, before anybody else woke up, I decided to make up a story of my own." (48)

"I lie beside my sister in the darkness, who pass me in the street unacknowledged and unadmitted." (58)

"But in high school, my real sisters were strangers; my teachers were racists; and my friends were that color I was never supposed to trust." (81)

"It was in high school that I came to believe that I was different from my white classmates, not because I was Black, but because I was me." (82)

"I soon discovered that if you kept your mouth shut, people are apt to believe you know everything, and they begin to feel freer and freer to tell you anything, anxious to show that they know something, too." (129)

"Are you or have you ever been a member of the Communist Party?" (149)

"I want to sleep with you." (166)

"And in that moment, as in the first night when I held her, I felt myself pass beyond childhood, a woman connecting with other women in an intricate, complex, and ever-widening network of exchanging strengths." (175)

"What I didn't realize was how much harder I had to try merely to stay alive, or rather, to stay human. How much stronger a person I became in that trying." (181)

"Any world which did not have a place for me loving women was not a world in which I wanted to live, nor one which I could fight for." (197)

"In those warm places of survival, love was another name for control, however openly given." (214)



"And I remember Afrekete, who came out of a dream to me always being hard and real as the fire hairs along the underedge of my navel. She brought me live things from the bush, and from her famr set out in cocoyams and cassava ..." (249)

"Zami. A Carriacou name for women who work together as friends and lovers." (255)

"There it is said that the desire to lie with other women is a drive from the mother's blood." (256)



## Topics for Discussion

What is the connection between Audre's relationship with her mother and her lesbianism?

How would you describe the connection between being black, female and a lesbian in 1950s America?

Was Audre right to think that her experience as a black lesbian was different from the experiences of her white lesbian friends? Or is it better to think of them as sharing common experiences?

Why did Audre leave home? Why didn't she go back?

Why does Audre drift away from her lovers so often? What keeps her from making a relationship last?

What is the nature of Audre's draw to femininity? Is she trying to complete something she lacks in herself? Or is she simply a lesbian?

What is Audre's connection to Carriacou? How does the legend of Carriacou play into the major themes of the book?