

Gorilla, My Love



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF TONI CADE BAMBARA

Toni Cade Bambara was born Miltona Mirkin Cade in Harlem and raised by a single mother. She earned her B.A. in theater arts and English at Queens College and her M.A. in modern American fiction from City College of the City University of New York. She worked as a social worker and occupational therapist while pursuing her master's degree. Later, Bambara taught at City College, Rutgers University, and Spellman College. She took the name Bambara in 1969 after finding it in one of her great-grandmother's sketchbooks. In 1970, she published and edited *The Black Woman: An Anthology*, which consisted of writing from African American women of various class backgrounds. In 1972, she published *Gorilla, My Love*—her first short story collection. From 1973 to 1975, she visited Cuba and Vietnam to learn about women's political movements in each country. Themes of racial, gender, and class justice also featured prominently in her second collection of short stories, *The Sea Birds Are Still Alive* (1977), and in her first novel, *The Salt Eaters* (1980). The latter won the American Book Award in 1981. Bambara and her daughter relocated to Philadelphia in the 1980s, where she wrote two novels and nine screenplays. She died of colon cancer at the age of 56.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Bambara was active in the Black Arts Movement, a development in arts and culture stemming from the Black Pride Movement of the 1960s and 1970s. These activists wanted to create pride in Black American identity and focus on issues impacting African Americans in Northern urban centers, as opposed to the Southern States that civil rights activists had worked to reform during the 1960s. Bambara's stories emphasize pride in Black culture and identity through their use of dialect, oral traditions, folktales and loveable characters. She was also active in the feminist movement and a firm believer in the revolutionary power of writing. Her book *The Black Woman: An Anthology* incorporates points of view that she believed were missing from mainstream Black pride and feminist discourse. These writers not only questioned the restrictive roles forced on African American women but also discussed alternatives to the public school system, consumer education, cooperative economics, and paid tribute to heroes like Harriet Tubman.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Bambara's writing addresses themes of identity and social

justice, including race, gender, and class inequality. These themes are prevalent not only in her short story collections but also her essays, reviews, screenplays, and American Book Award-winning novel *The Salt Eaters*, which features a community gathering to heal a character recovering from a suicide attempt. She drew inspiration from the artists of the Harlem Renaissance in the 1920s as well as her contemporaries in the social justice movements of the 1960s and 1970s. She wrote a screenplay adaptation of Toni Morrison's novel *Tar Baby*, which also covers topics of race, identity, and family. Bambara was particularly influenced by the work of Langston Hughes and Zora Neale Hurston when she was young.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Gorilla, My Love
- **Where Written:** New York, N.Y.
- **When Published:** 1972
- **Literary Period:** Postmodernism
- **Genre:** Realistic Fiction
- **Setting:** New York, New York
- **Climax:** Hazel confronts her uncle for lying by reminding him that he promised to marry her when she was a little girl. He protests that he was only teasing, and she calls him a "lyin' dawg."
- **Antagonist:** Adults who betray children
- **Point of View:** First Person

EXTRA CREDIT

What's in a Name. Bambara named herself after a West African ethnic group, the Bambara, a name she found inscribed in her great-grandmother's sketchbook. She felt it represented her "accumulation of experiences."

English Major. Bambara planned to become a doctor when she first entered college, but ultimately decided to pursue her passion for arts as an English major.



PLOT SUMMARY

Hazel is sitting in the front seat during a drive with her Granddaddy, uncle Hunca Bubba, and little brother Baby Jason. Granddaddy calls her "Scout" because she is holding the map and navigating, although Hazel informs the reader that this is not her real name. She is sitting in the front because she is unnerved by the sliding motions of the **pecans** in their bags in

the back. As they drive, Hunca Bubba—who is changing his name back to Jefferson Winston Vale, much to Hazel’s dismay—gushes about the young woman he is going to marry. He shows Hazel and Baby Jason the woman’s photograph, but Hazel finds the whole conversation boring and irritating. However, she becomes fascinated by the movie theater in the background of the picture, which triggers a memory of her visit to a different theater, the Washington.

Hazel recalls going to the movies with Baby Jason and Big Brood, her other brother, to see a film called *Gorilla, My Love*. In her memory, Hazel and her siblings buy Havmore potato chips, and because Hazel loves blowing up and popping the bags to annoy the matrons. When the movie starts, Hazel realizes that the theater is playing a film about the life of Jesus—**King of Kings**—not the advertised *Gorilla, My Love*. She is furious at the adults who run the theater and has no patience for their trickery. She and the other children in the audience start yelling and running around in protest, but the theater staff sends out their most intimidating matron, whom the children refer to as Thunderbuns, and the children quiet down immediately. Seething silently, Hazel watches the film about Jesus’s life and death and thinks about how her family would save Big Brood if he were up on the cross. She imagines her Daddy calling for a ladder while her Mama and aunts hit the Romans with their pocketbooks.

After the movie ends, Hazel marches to the manager’s office with her siblings to demand their money back—though Big Brood suddenly decides he has to go to the bathroom and leaves his siblings. Hazel confronts the manager, who reminds her of a television villain. He tries to usher her out of his office but she stands firm, thinking of her Mama confronting her racist schoolteachers. The manager does not offer a refund, so Hazel swipes some of his matches and sets fire to the concession stand, which forces the theater to shut down for a whole week.

Later, Big Brood’s “big mouth” gets Hazel in trouble with their parents, but Hazel convinces Daddy not to beat her for setting fire to the theater by pointing out that he and Mama raised her to be true to her word—and “if you say *Gorilla, My Love*, you suppose to mean it.” She was simply acting out of integrity and not letting the theater “get away with nothin.” Hazel’s father puts his belt back on, and she reveals that her parents often allow her to argue her point of view and concede when she is right.

After looking at the photograph of Hunca Bubba’s girlfriend, Hazel asks him if he intends to marry this woman; he answers yes. Angry, Hazel reminds her uncle that he promised to marry her years ago. She reminds him how one day when she was babysitting and her parents got held up in a storm, he told her that she “was the cutest thing that ever walked the earth,” and how he was going to marry her once she grew up. Hunca Bubba is confused for a moment, then protests that she is “just a little

girl,” and he was “just teasin” all those years ago when he promised to marry her. This makes Hazel even more upset. Granddaddy points out that it was Hunca Bubba who promised to marry her, while the man she sees now is Jefferson Winston Vale. Feeling betrayed, Hazel starts crying, and Baby Jason joins in. She derives some comfort from his show of support and thinks about the importance of their bond in the face of traitorous adults.



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Hazel – The protagonist of the story, Hazel is a young girl who values family loyalty and integrity. She insists on being referred to by her “real” name rather than nicknames like “Precious” and “Peaches” because she feels these are demeaning and threaten her control over her identity. She is “the smartest kid P.S. 186 ever had in its whole lifetime” but, being a child, also harbors irrational fears of the dark and rats in the bucket of **pecans**. She likes causing trouble by blowing up and popping bags of potato chips in the movie theater to annoy the matrons, but she is also observant and insightful. She is particularly indignant about the uneven power dynamic between children and adults, especially when adults exploit children by lying “just cause they little and can’t take em to court.” When she realizes that she has been cheated into seeing **King of Kings**, a religious movie, rather than the advertised *Gorilla, My Love*, Hazel confronts the manager and burns down the concession stand because this seems like a just response to betrayal according to how she was raised. Family solidarity forms an important part of Hazel’s support network. She has faith in her parents to back her up when she speaks her mind, because they encourage her to act with integrity and her Mama frequently advocates for her when her teachers treat her unfairly. She harbors close relationships with everyone in her family, but she is particularly close with her uncle Hunca Bubba. She is deeply hurt when he decides to marry another woman—even though, years ago, he had (jokingly) promised to marry her when she grew up—and stop using the nickname she gave him when she was a child, viewing this as yet another example of adults betraying children.

Hunca Bubba / Jefferson Winston Vale – Hazel’s uncle. Hunca Bubba is planning on getting married soon and can’t stop talking about his future wife. He is also planning on changing his name from Hunca Bubba, a nickname Hazel gave him when she was a child, back to his given name, Jefferson Winston Vale. The latter sounds much more formal and mature, and signals that he is ready to move on to a new phase in his life—one that potentially means drifting away from Hazel as he prepares to start his own family. He adores Hazel but is deeply confused when she gets upset and accuses him of breaking his promise to marry her (something he had said to her as a joke years

prior), reminding her, “you just a little girl.” Granddaddy chimes in and adds that it was Hunca Bubba who promised to marry Hazel, and now her uncle is Jefferson Winston Vale, a new man. “That was somebody else. I’m a new somebody,” he agrees. This betrayal wounds Hazel deeply because it comes from someone she loves and trusts—and, of course, she does not yet understand that she cannot actually marry her uncle. Hunca Bubba’s actions cement her belief that children like Hazel and Baby Jason must act in solidarity with each other in order to endure adults’ dishonesty.

Granddaddy – Hazel’s grandfather. He calls her “Scout” while he’s driving to remind her that she is supposed to help him with directions. He means well but is out of touch; in Hazel’s fantasy about what her family would do if Big Brood was on the cross like Jesus, Granddaddy tells everyone to “leave the boy alone, if that’s what he wants to do with his life we ain’t got nothing to say about it,” but Aunt Daisy calls him a “damn fool old man.” Hazel also recalls a real scenario when one of her relatives came home from the army missing a leg. Granddaddy’s response was “that’s life,” which infuriated all her other family members (presumably because of Granddaddy’s insensitivity). He becomes agitated at the end of the story when Hazel abandons her navigating duties because she is upset with Hunca Bubba. He tries to soothe her by calling her “Precious” and explaining that Hunca Bubba was a different person when he promised to marry her, but this only makes Hazel feel condescended and lied to.

Baby Jason – Hazel’s youngest brother. According to Granddaddy, Baby Jason is so blindly loyal to Hazel that he would follow her “into the fiery furnace” if she beckoned, highlighting the theme of family solidarity that runs throughout the story. He loves kicking the seats in the movie theater while Hazel causes trouble and putting potato chips in her hair. At the end of the story, when Hazel cries at Hunca Bubba’s betrayal, Baby Jason starts crying too. Although Jason is very young, Hazel believes he understands the importance of solidarity between children in the face of adults “turnin you round every which way so bad.”

Big Brood – Hazel’s older brother. He accompanies her and Baby Jason to the theater to see *Gorilla, My Love*, although he is apprehensive about the “my love” part of the title. He likes talking about all the “fiercesome” things the siblings are going to do—which really means all the things Hazel is going to do, as she loves causing trouble and fighting bullies. Hazel is very protective of Big Brood and stands up to the boys who steal his ball at the park. When she is forced to watch *King of Kings*, Hazel imagines how her family would react if it were Big Brood up on the cross rather than Jesus, which leads her to believe that her family members have more sense than Christ. Big Brood clearly loves Hazel, but has a bit of a cowardly streak—he conveniently has to go to the bathroom when she confronts the manager. Later, it is his “big mouth” that reveals

to Mama and Daddy that Hazel set fire to the concessions stand at the movie theater.

Thunderbuns – The “colored matron” who the movie theater sends to control particularly rowdy audiences because “she do not play. She do not smile.” She is “big and bad” and carries a flashlight “like she gonna use it on somebody.” When the children in the audience loudly rebel at being tricked into paying to see *King of Kings*, the theater staff sends in Thunderbuns, and the kids get quiet as soon as she enters the room. Hazel never reveals her given name, but her nickname is meant to indicate the fear and respect she evokes as an example of black female power. Even though Hazel is wary of other adults and the power they have over children, she seems to respect Thunderbuns.

Mama – Hazel’s mother. She “specially” won’t stand for anyone mistreating her children, according to Hazel, who imagines her hitting Romans with her pocketbook while watching *King of Kings*. Mama uses her power to “hypnotize” her children when they misbehave and to reprimand Hazel’s teachers when they treat Hazel unfairly. When Mama walks in the room, “teacher be comin undone cause she know this could be her job and her behind cause Mama got pull with the board and bad by her own self anyhow.” Mama inspires Hazel’s adoration and respect, but she also is willing to admit when her daughter is right. Hazel feels empowered to speak her mind because Mama advises her to “speak up and let the chips fall where they may. And if anybody don’t like it, tell em to come see your Mama.” She raises her daughter to act with integrity and forms an important part of her support network. She exemplifies working class black female power, and her influence is one of the main reasons Hazel has so much faith in her family’s loyalty.

Daddy – Hazel’s father. Daddy is strict but fair, and he encourages Hazel to behave with integrity. Hazel introduces him by imagining what he would do if Big Brood was up on the cross like Jesus. In her mind, Daddy is “yellin to Granddaddy to get him a ladder cause Big Brood actin the fool, his mother side of the family showin up.” Later, he decides not to hit Hazel with his belt to punish her for setting fire to the concession stand because she argues that she was acting based on his values and responding appropriately to someone who did not keep his word—“Cause if you say *Gorilla, My Love*, you suppose to mean it,” Hazel explains. Later, she feels empowered to confront Hunca Bubba for breaking his promise to her because she remembers that both her parents vowed to support her if anyone gave her a hard time for speaking her mind.

The Manager – The man in charge of the Washington movie theater is sleazy and lies to the children about the movie that is playing, advertising something called *Gorilla, My Love* while actually playing a religious movie called *King of Kings*. Hazel thinks he is a “crook” and dislikes him because “he oily and pasty at the same time, like the bad guy in the serial.” He is her prime example of betrayal, an adult “messin over kids just cause they

little and can't take em to court." He speaks condescendingly to Hazel when she demands her money back and tries to rush her out the door, but she stands firm and channels her Mama, who "ain't backin up" when she confronts teachers at Hazel's school about mistreating their students. Ultimately, the manager refuses to give Hazel and her brothers a refund, so she takes matches from his ashtray and sets fire to the movie theater concessions stand. She sees this as a logical and fair response to someone who doesn't keep his word.

Aunt Jo – Hazel's aunt, who is "the hardest head in the family" and worse than Aunt Daisy. Aunt Jo calls Hazel "Miss Muffin" when she concedes to her during an argument and wants to get her to calm down. This name comes from the time Hazel got a painful vaccine and wouldn't get off the couch cushions afterward. Hazel finds it frustrating and irritating when adults like Aunt Jo call her by childish nicknames rather than her given name.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Aunt Daisy – Hazel's aunt. While watching *King of Kings* and thinking about what her family would do if Big Brood was up on the cross, Hazel imagines her aunt helping Mama hit Romans "with they pocketbooks," emphasizing the fierce loyalty that runs throughout their family.



THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.



TRUST, SOLIDARITY, AND BETRAYAL

"Gorilla, My Love," which follows a young and independent-minded girl named Hazel, is a story about a child's sense of betrayal at the duplicity of adults. As Hazel grows up, her parents and extended family members encourage her to speak her mind and be true to her word. Trust and honesty are thus so integral to Hazel's upbringing that she becomes furious when she encounters betrayals from other adults and disconsolate when she perceives betrayal within her own family: namely, when her uncle announces that he intends to get married and go by his given name, Jefferson Winston Vale, rather than "Hunca Bubba," the nickname she gave him when she was a child. Hazel's anguish following Hunca Bubba's announcement shows betrayal is most painful when it occurs in a close relationship and destroys previously held bonds of trust and solidarity.

Hazel makes it clear early in the story that solidarity is important to her sense of self and her relationships with her

family. Her little brother, Baby Jason, is so devoted to her, "he'd follow me into the fiery furnace if I said come on." The devotion is reciprocated, and Hazel is determined to support her siblings in every scenario, even to "jump on they back and fight awhile," if bullies steal her older brother Big Brood's toy at the park. When the film at the theater depicts Jesus's suffering, Hazel notes, "My daddy wouldn't stand for nobody treatin any of us that way. My mama specially." Here, Hazel's respect and reverence for her parents' determination to stand up for their children even overshadows her respect and reverence for Jesus. She recalls her Mama using her powerful personality and "pull with the Board" to confront teachers who mistreated Hazel and "start playin the dozens behind colored folks"—that is, use racist insults. Hazel was raised with a deep sense of trust in her loved ones and takes pride in being reliable herself.

Hazel becomes angry when she realizes that she can't always trust other people, adults in particular, to stay true to their word. When she realizes that the movie theater is playing *King of Kings*, a film about Jesus's life, ministry, and death, rather than the advertised *Gorilla, My Love*, she feels "ready to kill, not cause I got anything gainst Jesus. Just that when you fixed to watch a gorilla picture you don't wanna get messed around with Sunday School stuff." After the movie, Hazel goes to the manager "who is a crook in the first place" to demand their money back, but he treats her like a child and refuses to bend to her request. Her awareness of the power dynamics between powerful adults and vulnerable children aggravates her sense of betrayal, so much so that she feels justified in setting fire to the concessions stand when the manager refuses to offer a refund. She later avoids getting a beating from her Daddy when she explains that she was just being true to how she was raised, and "if you say Gorilla, My Love, you suppose to mean it."

When Hazel senses betrayal in her own family, the sense of solidarity she treasures shatters. She becomes extremely upset when she learns her uncle, Hunca Bubba, is getting married and changing his name back to Jefferson Winston Vale, which he used before Hazel was born. Her family members do not understand her indignation about this news, because "It wasn't like Hunca Bubba had gone back on his word or anything. Just that he was thinkin bout gettin married and was usin his real name now." However, Hazel reminds Hunca Bubba that, when she was much younger, he had promised to marry her when she grew up. Her uncle meant it as a joke, but Hazel doesn't understand this—all she sees is a family member who broke his promise and, to add insult to injury, changed his name from a title he used for her benefit since she couldn't pronounce his real one. Even worse, her other family members, including Granddaddy, take his side, depriving her of the sense of solidarity they have always provided. When her uncle protests and doesn't apologize, she accuses him of being "a lyin dawg" and cries passionately. Her only consolation is that Baby Jason joins her crying out of loyalty, signifying that she can still trust

him.

Hazel feels empowered to challenge adult betrayal when she trusts her family to back her up, like in the case of her racist teachers. However, when Hunca Bubba decides to marry another woman and discards the name Hazel gave him, she feels as though the people she trusted the most have collaborated in the greatest betrayal of all. With this, the story suggests that although solidarity with one's loved ones can be a source of incredible empowerment, the loss of these bonds is a greater source of heartbreak than mistreatment from a stranger.



FAMILY

“Gorilla, My Love” examines the benefits and limitations of Hazel’s family ties. Mama, Daddy, Granddaddy, Hunca Bubba, Aunt Daisy, and Hazel

all have strong opinions and outspoken personalities, making them a collective force to be reckoned with. However, the story highlights how family can be both a help and a hindrance. Although Hazel’s intense devotion to her family values provides her with support and moral guidance, her strict adherence to their values also limits her perspective and makes it difficult for her to accept new people into the family’s fold.

Hazel’s family provides her with a strong sense of security, whether they’re giving her emotional support or backing her up in a fight. The depiction of a suffering Christ in **King of Kings** causes Hazel to reflect, “just about anybody in my family is better than this god they always talkin about.” She muses about what her family would do if her brother Big Brood were up on the cross, which in her imagination is more like being stuck in a tree than being gruesomely tortured. She imagines Daddy calling for a ladder, Mama and Aunt Daisy “jumpin on them Romans beatin them with they pocketbooks,” and Hunca Bubba “tellin them folks on they knees they better get out the way and go get some help or they goin to get trampled on.” The fantasy ends with her brother in the park and her family in the kitchen yelling and “throwin dishes,” but it gives Hazel a greater sense of security than religion. She has more faith in her family to support her in a crisis than in any religious doctrine, which makes her even more exasperated with the religious film that replaces *Gorilla, My Love*.

Hazel’s parents advise her to act and speak with integrity, and Hazel clings to the strong moral compass they’ve given her. “If anybody don’t like it,” her mother says, “tell em to come see your mama.” Hazel’s mother is always ready to advocate for her children when they face problems with racist teachers at school. “She stalk in with her hat pulled down bad and that Persian lamb coat draped back over one hip on account of she got her fist planted there so she can talk that talk which gets us all hypnotized,” Hazel recalls. Hazel’s mother is also willing to admit when Hazel is right when they are having an argument. Hazel’s father echoes this behavior when he decides not to

beat her for setting the movie theater on fire. Hazel explains she only got into trouble because she was acting out of the integrity they instilled in her: the movie theater dishonestly showed the wrong movie and the manager refused to refund her, so she took matters into her own hands. Hazel feels a sense of security knowing that her parents listen to her and raised her with strong values.

While Hazel’s family is a positive force in her life because they provide her with moral guidance and support, her unflinching devotion to her family also has some drawbacks, as she is deeply suspicious of outsiders and anyone who threatens the family dynamic. When Hunca Bubba announces his intention to marry a young woman, Hazel feels jealous of his attention and resentful that he is not keeping the joking promise he made to marry her when she was little. She believes his excitement about his future wife “aint enough to keep the mind alive” and dismisses the photo he shows her and her brother as just “some skinny woman in a countrified dress with her hand shot up to her face like she shame fore cameras.” Hazel does not register this woman as a future family member and views her with the same contempt she reserves for grownups who “think they can treat you just anyhow,” including her teachers and the cheating cinema manager. Hazel, of course, is too young to understand that she can’t marry her uncle and is thus even more infuriated when her uncle explains that he “was just teasin” about wanting to marry her. Her oversimplified views of family loyalty transform the joyous occasion of an upcoming wedding into a tragedy, and she and Baby Jason begin to cry.

Not only does Hunca Bubba’s impending marriage threaten Hazel’s faith in her support network, but it also challenges her sense of self. She has always identified as a member of a family that values integrity, and this betrayal leaves her worldview in tatters. With this, the story suggests that identifying too closely with family can actually be harmful, even if that family is usually a source of support and solidarity.



CHILDHOOD AND ADULTHOOD

Most of the narrative tension in “Gorilla, My Love” arises from conflicts between children and adults.

Hazel is skeptical—if not outright disdainful—of most adults and feels as though children must stick together to endure adults’ dishonesty and patronization. Bambara uses Hazel’s confrontations with various adults throughout the story to emphasize that although the young girl’s perspective is flawed by inexperience, she has a keen sense of justice and her indignation at being mistreated by adults is valid.

Like many children, Hazel is both intelligent and immature. She is proud of being “the smartest kid P.S. 186 ever had in its whole lifetime” but refuses to sit in the back of the truck next to the **pecans** because their movement unnerves her, “like maybe a rat in the buckets.” She sleeps with the lights on and blames her young brother, Baby Jason, for needing them at night.

Although she is very smart, she is still motivated by these irrational fears. Her immaturity manifests in her behavior towards others as well. She gets into physical fights with the bullies at the park who “take Big Brood’s Spaudeen away from him.” When she goes to the movie theater, she buys Havmore potato chips because the bags are good for “blowing up and bustin real loud,” and generally making a scene, “which I love to do, no lie.” These details establish Hazel’s childlike nature, but they do not legitimize or excuse her mistreatment from adults.

The righteousness of Hazel’s anger is established at the Washington movie theater when the children in the audience realize they have been tricked into watching **King of Kings**, a religious film, instead of the advertised *Gorilla, My Love*. Hazel, Baby Jason, Big Brood, and the other children start “yellin, booin, stompin and carryin on” and the man in the projection booth tries to drown them out by raising the volume of the movie. When a staff member ropes off the children’s section and tries to restore order, some kids start running up and down the aisles to show “it take more than some dust ole velvet rope to tie us down.” While Hazel and her siblings’ previous disruptive behavior could be chalked up to immaturity, this scene is an act of resistance against being cheated by the theater. Hazel fumes, “I get so tired grownups messin over kids just cause they little and can’t take em to court.” When the movie ends and Hazel goes to the manager’s office to try to get her money back, the man speaks to her “like I lost my mittens or wet on myself.” Hazel resents his condescension and recognizes that she and her fellow audience members have been exploited due to their age. In her view, childhood and adulthood are in a constant state of tension, where vulnerable children must resist being manipulated by adults who abuse their power.

Hazel’s confrontation with Hunca Bubba about his marriage and name change further legitimizes her sense of injustice at the way adults treat her. When Hunca Bubba affirms that he intends to marry the woman in his photograph, Hazel reminds him angrily that, when she was little, he promised to marry her when she grew up. Hunca Bubba is confused and reminds her that she is “just a little girl” and that he was “just teasin.” Hazel becomes upset because of his condescension, which is reminiscent of the way the theater manager treated her. Hunca Bubba’s joke was likely well-intended, but his dismissive comments make Hazel feel invalidated and disrespected simply for being a child. Granddaddy then calls Hazel “Precious” in an attempt to placate her, but this patronizing nickname just infuriates her more. In the end, she and Baby Jason start crying together and she feels they must stick together “what with grown-ups playin change-up and turnin you round every which way.” The fact that she and her brother are both crying emphasizes that they are equals—he idolizes her and would never treat her with such disrespect.

Bambara, it seems, wants readers to feel sympathy for Hazel despite her immaturity. Her examination of the way adults

mistreat children encourages her audience to view both groups in a more nuanced light—children are capable of wisdom and justice despite their immaturity, and adults are capable of mistreatment and wrongdoing despite their supposed maturity.



NAMES AND IDENTITY

In “Gorilla, My Love,” Bambara investigates the link between one’s name and their identity. Hazel is referred to by five alternate names throughout the story. Each time this occurs, she bristles and makes a point of noting that her “real” name isn’t actually “Scout” or “Peaches” or whatever name an adult has chosen for her, implying that she prefers to be called Hazel, and that her name is a key part of her identity. Her uncle Hunca Bubba also decides to use his “real” name, Jefferson Winston Vale, to prepare for his upcoming marriage. Ultimately, characters’ desires to choose names for themselves—and nicknames for others—represent their desires to exert control over their identities.

Hazel’s irritation at her various nicknames stems from a need to maintain control of her sense of self in the face of other people’s attempts to influence her. At the beginning of the story, Hazel’s Granddaddy calls her “Scout” as he asks her for directions, using the nickname to remind her that she is supposed to help him navigate. Hazel’s Mama calls her “Badbird” in order to calm her daughter down when “she tired arguin and know I’m right.” Her Aunt Jo says “You absolutely right, Miss Muffin,” in similar situations. Each of these names stems from an adult trying to influence her behavior in some way, and Hazel’s insistence on using her “real” name thus reads like an act of asserting her agency and individuality. When Hunca Bubba is confused about why she is so upset that he is getting married, he asks, “Watcha mean, Peaches?” and uses the nickname as an attempt to make her calm down. The condescending nickname has the opposite impact—it emphasizes Hazel’s inferior status as a child, which infuriates her.

Hunca Bubba also uses his name as a method of asserting his identity. He decides he is going to use his given name, Jefferson Winston Vale, now that he is going to be getting married soon. According to Hazel, this is not “a change up, but a change back, since Jefferson Winston Vale was the name in the first place.” He started going by Hunca Bubba when Hazel was young and she couldn’t pronounce the word “uncle.” Hazel dislikes her uncle’s given name and believes it sounds “very geographical weatherlike to me.” The use of the more formal-sounding name points to the way that Hunca Bubba is preparing to move forward into a new stage of life, one that demands maturity and responsibility. He is ready to be a husband and possibly a father, rather than just Hazel’s fun uncle. Granddaddy tries to justify this to Hazel, pointing out that it was Hunca Bubba who promised to marry her, and now he is a new person. “This here,” he says, referring to the uncle, “Jefferson Winston Vale.” This

statement greatly upsets Hazel, because the name change signifies that her uncle is shifting his focus away from their relationship and setting his sights on starting his own family. The new old name has transformed the identity of her loved one into someone she doesn't recognize.

Bambara's characters also use nicknames to assert racial and class identities, which further highlights how names reflect one's broader identity. "Gorilla, My Love" is narrated using conversational speech, which informs names like "Big Brood," "Thunderbuns," and "Granddaddy." The audience can assume that none of these are "real" or given names, but they act as shorthand for working-class black identity. Bambara was very active in the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s and saw that this perspective was lacking in literature. The use of these nicknames expresses affiliation with the black working class and presents an opportunity for these individuals and their community to assert their cultural backgrounds. For example, Hazel expresses begrudging respect for Thunderbuns, the "colored matron" who is dispatched to diffuse the chaos in the movie theater because "she do not play." Thunderbuns earns her fearsome nickname by being an example of working-class black female power, which inspires both the admiration and fear of Hazel and her friends. The children's use of the nickname not only establishes race and class, it is also an expression of pride in these identities.

Bambara's use of names in "Gorilla, My Love" suggests that identity is highly mutable and subject to interpretation. Names can be an opportunity for self-expression or an opportunity for the community to project onto the individual. Names are both a tool for character development and a crucial part of the conversational tone of the story, enabling the reader to be fully immersed in Hazel's world.



SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.



PECANS

The pecans in the backseat of Hazel's family's car initially represent her childlike nature. At the beginning of the story, Hazel explains that she doesn't like sitting near the pecans during the drive because "they dusty sometime and make you cough. And they got a way of slidin around and dippin down sudden, like maybe a rat in the buckets." Although Hazel tries her best to be fierce and independent throughout the story, her fear of the nuts is immature and irrational, remind readers that for all of Hazel's wisdom and confidence, she is still a child.

Later in the story, Hazel also uses pecan-picking as an example in her argument with her parents about integrity, making them

a symbol of the importance of keeping one's word. She says she only set the movie theater concession stand on fire because the manager lied and cheated, which goes against the values she was raised with. "And if you say me and Baby Jason can go South pecan haulin with Granddaddy Vale, you better not be comin up with no stuff about the weather look uncertain or did you mop the bathroom or any other trickified business," she explains to her parents. The pecans thus symbolize Hazel's immaturity, but also her unflappable sense of justice.



KING OF KINGS

King of Kings, the Christian film the Washington movie theater plays instead of the advertised *Gorilla, My Love*, symbolizes betrayal. The film itself portrays betrayal due to its subject matter—*King of Kings* charts the life and death of Jesus Christ, who was famously betrayed by Judas, one of Jesus's own followers. The film also represents betrayal because it wasn't the one that Hazel and her siblings paid to see, and the manager of the theater further betrays them by refusing to give them a refund. Hazel is furious when she realizes the theater has cheated her out of her money, fuming, "when you fixed to watch a gorilla picture you don't wanna get messed around with Sunday School stuff. So I am mad." Hazel views the "raggedy old brown film" as a sign that adults "figure they can treat you just anyhow."



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Vintage edition of *Gorilla, My Love* published in 1992.

Gorilla, My Love Quotes

●● Not that Scout's my name. Just the name Granddaddy call whoever sittin in the navigator seat.

Related Characters: Hazel (speaker), Granddaddy

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 13

Explanation and Analysis

After Granddaddy asks Hazel for directions at the beginning of the story, addressing her as "Scout," since she's in the front seat and acting as his navigator as he drives, Hazel points out to the reader that Scout is a nickname and is not her "real" name. This passage immediately establishes

that names—given names and nicknames alike—will be central to the story. Hazel’s wish to be called by her given name, which she hints at here in her instance that Scout is not her real name, shows a desire to be taken seriously by those around her, particularly the adults. This desire is emphasized by her sitting in the front seat and being the navigator, where she has a degree of control over the route and a level of authority and responsibility, rather than at the back of her family’s vehicle with her younger brother. However, her decision to sit in the front also stems from an irrational fear of the pecans, which are sliding around in the back seat like “rats,” so this decision highlights both her desire for adult-like control and her status as a child.

Like when the big boys come up on us talkin bout Lemme a nickel. It’s me that hide the money. Or when the bad boys in the park take Big Brood’s Spaudeen way from him. It’s me that jump on they back and fight awhile. And it’s me that turns out the show if the matron get too salty.

Related Characters: Hazel (speaker), Baby Jason, Big Brood

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 14

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Hazel describes her relationship with her brothers, Baby Jason and Big Brood, as being fiercely close and protective. Hazel values her brothers’ devotion and takes pride in being the one to stand up for them. They rely on her to hide money and fight back against bullies, and in return they egg her on whenever she decides to cause mischief or create a scene. Here, Hazel demonstrates that she values loyalty and solidarity in her family relationships—particularly with her siblings—as she is quick to have her brothers’ backs and expects the same treatment in return. While this solidarity certainly has its benefits, the story will begin to complicate whether such unflinching family loyalty is entirely good.

This quote also reveals Hazel’s fearlessness, as she has no qualms about fighting boys who may be bigger and stronger than her. However, Hazel’s courage and tenacity—which make her seem much older than she actually is—are tempered by her obvious appetite for trouble, which highlights her underlying immaturity. Hazel seems to take pleasure in getting into fights and causing chaos in the movie theater, which reminds readers that she is still very

much a child despite the position of leadership she assumes among her siblings.

Grownups figure they can treat you just anyhow. Which burns me up.

Related Characters: Hazel (speaker), Baby Jason, Big Brood, The Manager

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 15

Explanation and Analysis

When Hazel realizes that she has been duped—she and her siblings paid for entry to a movie called *Gorilla, My Love*, but the theater is playing the religious film *King of Kings* instead—she stewes about adults’ penchant for dishonesty. She gestures to the steep power disparity between adults and children here by noting how adults “figure they can treat [children] just anyhow.” In other words, adults treat children poorly because they know they can get away with it. Hazel, though, emblazoned with confidence and a fighter spirit, has no intentions of being taken advantage of.

It’s important to note that Hazel’s anger upon seeing *King of Kings* doesn’t have to do with the religious nature of the film but is instead a reflection of what she considers a much bigger problem: adults deceiving and betraying children and not being held accountable for it. After all, Hazel’s feelings about Jesus range from neutral to positive throughout the story, and she notes that she’s already seen the religious film in Sunday school. So while Hazel isn’t balking at the religiosity of the film per se, she has no interest in seeing a didactic, low-budget religious film when she could be watching the epic gorilla-themed one she paid for. That the theater is blatantly playing the wrong movie—and on Easter of all days, suggesting that the film swap was planned rather than a mix-up—goes against the grain of Hazel’s value system, at the center of which is the idea that one must be true to their word.

Cause I realize that just about anybody in my family is better than this god they always talkin about. My daddy wouldn’t stand for nobody treatin any of us that way. My mama specially.

Related Characters: Hazel (speaker), Granddaddy, Hunca Bubba / Jefferson Winston Vale, Aunt Daisy, Daddy, Mama

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 16

Explanation and Analysis

After the children in the audience loudly protest the showing of *King of Kings* and Thunderbuns—the most intimidating matron at the theater—restores order, Hazel is forced to watch the film resentfully. Even though she's careful to point out that she has nothing against Jesus, she still scoffs at the story of Christ, whose suffering seems silly and pointless to her. In contrast, she elevates her parents as stronger and more powerful than God, showing her unflinching loyalty to—and even worshipful reverence for—her parents.

As she watches the film, Hazel imagines what her family members would do if Big Brood were the one up on the cross. It involves a lot of bickering and arguing amongst themselves, but they ultimately cooperate and succeed in getting him down. This fantasy establishes Hazel's family as her support network—she has more confidence in their loyalty than in any religious teachings. It also reveals that her protective attitude towards her brothers originates from her parents' protective attitudes towards their children. Her confidence in taking on bullies may also stem from her parents' support and refusal to accept anyone mistreating Hazel and her siblings. And her comment that her mother—not her father—is particularly formidable may be where Hazel gets her confidence to pick fights with boys and stand up to male authority figures like the movie theater manager. This passage ultimately highlights how families can be an important source of moral guidance—Hazel learns by her parents' example—as well as a source of emotional and even physical support.

●● And now I'm really furious cause I get so tired grownups messin over kids just cause they little and can't take em to court.

Related Characters: Hazel (speaker), The Manager

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 17

Explanation and Analysis

Once the credits roll and it becomes clear the theater had no intention of showing the movie they promised, Hazel's anger increases, determined to get a refund for herself and her brothers. Although she is a child, Hazel is fiercely intelligent and able to perceive when an injustice has occurred. She is also keenly aware of her vulnerability in the face of powerful adults and her lack of legal protections against them. This is the root of Hazel's anger—she's less upset about having to watch a religious film (“I am ready to kill, not cause I got anything gainst Jesus”) and more upset about adults deceiving children and not being held accountable for it, legally or otherwise. And though Hazel “can't take em to court,” she is determined to hold the adults at the movie theater accountable for their actions.

Hazel's anger here may also stem from her defensive instinct towards her brothers. The manager has become one more bully she must face down, albeit a much more powerful one given that he is an adult rather than a fellow child. She cannot physically fight him like she would the “bad boys” from the park, but she is still determined to find a way to resist. Her attitude directly contrasts with Christ's gentleness and forgiveness of his enemies in *King of Kings*—sticking up for herself and her siblings, in her mind, is far more important.

●● And cause my Mama come up there in a minute when them teachers start playin the dozens behind colored folks. She stalk in with her hat pulled down bad and that Persian lamb coat draped back over one hip on account of she got her fist planted there so she can talk that talk which gets us all hypnotized, and teacher be comin undone cause she know this could be her job and her behind cause Mama got pull with the Board and bad by her own self anyhow.

Related Characters: Hazel (speaker), Mama, The Manager

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 17

Explanation and Analysis

When Hazel goes to confront the manager after the movie, Hazel thinks about how her Mama stands up to her

teachers when they are being unfair and racist towards their black students—a brief but powerful reminder that the story is set in early 1970s New York, a time and place rife with racial discrimination. Mama has zero tolerance for anyone mistreating her children, as Hazel mentioned earlier in the story while she was watching the film (“My daddy wouldn’t stand for nobody treatin any of us that way. My mama specially”). She describes her mother as a powerful woman who is able to evoke a sense of fear in the teachers merely through her presence. Hazel’s thoughts about her Mama in this passage reinforce the fact that she views her family as her support network as well as the arrow on her moral compass, as they guide her behavior and values.

☝ My Daddy had the suspect it was me cause Big Brood got a big mouth. But I explained right quick what the whole thing was about and I figured it was even-steven. Cause if you say Gorilla, My Love, you suppose to mean it. [...] I mean even gangsters in the movies say My word is my bond. So don’t nobody get away with nothin far as I’m concerned.

Related Characters: Hazel (speaker), Big Brood, Daddy

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 17-18

Explanation and Analysis

After she sets fire to the concessions stand at the movie theater—retaliation for not getting a refund after being forced to watch *King of Kings* rather than the advertised *Gorilla, My Love*—Hazel deftly avoids punishment by appealing to her father’s ethos. She invokes her parents’ teachings about the importance of keeping one’s word, even referencing gangsters saying “My word is my bond” in movies. The title of the film that was promised, *Gorilla, My Love*, becomes her shorthand for the importance of honesty: “Cause if you say Gorilla, My Love, you suppose[d] to mean it.”

Hazel’s view that causing the fire made her “even-steven” with the cheating manager also provides insight into her sense of justice. Her idea of right and wrong is far more aligned with Old Testament “eye for an eye, tooth for a tooth” doctrine (stemming from Exodus 21-24) than with Christ’s emphasis on forgiveness in the New Testament and *King of Kings*. (In the Book of Matthew in the New

Testament, Jesus directly rejects this “eye for an eye” philosophy.) To Hazel, betrayal is a crime that requires her to stand up for herself at all costs.

☝ So Daddy put his belt back on. Cause that’s the way I was raised. Like my Mama say in one of them situations when I won’t back down, Okay Badbird, you right. Your point is well-taken. Not that Badbird my name, just what she say when she tired arguin and know I’m right.

Related Characters: Hazel (speaker), Mama, Daddy

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 18

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Hazel’s father listens to her argument as she persuades him not to punish her for setting fire to the movie theater. He seems to understand that Hazel was trying to be true to the values he taught her—even if she took things too far. She also shares an anecdote with the reader that shows her mother reacting similarly during a different argument. In the anecdote, Mama calls Hazel “Badbird” to indicate that she has won the argument and made her point, and that she should calm down now. Both of these anecdotes establish Hazel’s relationship with her parents as one built on mutual trust and respect. Hazel knows her parents don’t accept foolishness (which she reveals in her fantasy when they call Big Brood a fool for getting up on the cross), but they are also willing to listen to her and validate her point of view.

Hazel also points out to the reader once again that “Badbird”—like “Scout”—is a nickname and not her real name. Throughout the story, names emerge as a means for characters to assert control over their own identities or other people’s identities. Here, in calling Hazel “Badbird,” as she always does when she’s trying to end an argument, Mama tries to get Hazel to settle down, while Hazel attempts to retake that control over her identity by firmly telling readers that Badbird isn’t her name.

☝ “My name is Hazel. And what I mean is you said you were going to marry me when I grew up. You were going to wait. That’s what I mean, my dear Uncle Jefferson.”

Related Characters: Hazel (speaker), Hunca Bubba /

Jefferson Winston Vale

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 19

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Hazel asserts her real name out loud for the first time while reminding Hunca Bubba that he promised to marry her years ago when she was a little girl (Huna Bubba, of course, was joking, but the young Hazel doesn't understand this). When Hazel begins to argue with Hunca Bubba, he calls her "Peaches," a playful and childish nickname, and she stresses her given name in an attempt to get him to take her words and her hurt feelings seriously. She calls him "my dear Uncle Jefferson" mockingly to emphasize his falseness in changing his name and breaking his promise.

Her reminder makes the reason for her anger clear: not only did her uncle abandon the affectionate nickname she gave him, his plans to marry his girlfriend means that he also went back on his word *and* decided to bring a stranger into the family. In other words, Hunca Bubba is disrupting Hazel's sense of familial solidarity and her firmly held belief that one must be true to their word. She wants her uncle to treat her with the same respect he would use to treat another adult, which, in her view, includes considering her a viable marriage prospect. The statement highlights both her childish innocence—she does not realize that she cannot marry a family member—and her righteous anger at being betrayed by someone she once trusted.

☝ "Well, for cryin out loud, Hazel, you just a little girl. And I was just teasin."

Related Characters: Hunca Bubba / Jefferson Winston Vale (speaker), Hazel

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 19

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Hunca Bubba is confused by Hazel's outburst about his decision to get married. In his view, a joke that he made years ago does not warrant such an intense and irrational emotional reaction. As an adult, he is of course aware that he cannot marry Hazel. However, he lacks awareness of his niece's sense of integrity and how it shapes her

worldview—to Hazel, a promise is a promise. He also does not recognize her resentment of the imbalanced power dynamic between adults and children or her desire to be treated with the same respect as an adult (seen clearly just before this passage when she firmly asserts that her name is Hazel after he calls her the infantilizing nickname "Peaches"). Rather than apologizing and explaining the misunderstanding to his niece, he dismisses her for being a child. He also justifies his comments as "teasin" rather than trying to understand why they hurt her feelings, which only makes Hazel more upset with him.

☝ "Look here, Precious, it was Hunca Bubba what told you them things. This here, Jefferson Winston Vale."

Related Characters: Granddaddy (speaker), Hazel, Hunca Bubba / Jefferson Winston Vale

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 20

Explanation and Analysis

Granddaddy tries to intervene when Hazel becomes so upset with Hunca Bubba she abandons her navigational duties. Concerned about his granddaughter and even more concerned about getting lost, he explains that her uncle was a different person when he made his promise to marry her, and therefore she can't expect him to abide by his word. It is precisely the wrong thing to say, mirroring his blundering comments in Hazel's imaginary *King of Kings* fantasy when he tells the family to leave Big Brood on the cross and Aunt Daisy gives him "a taste" of her pocketbook. This comment reinforces Hazel's conviction that adults are not to be trusted and makes her understand that even the people who form the basis of her support network do not always keep their word. Hazel is angry at her uncle's injustice and dishonesty, and she also suffers a profound loss of security with this realization.

☝ And I'm losin my bearins and don't even know where to look on the map cause I can't see for cryin. And Baby Jason cryin too. Cause he is my blood brother and understands that we must stick together or be forever lost, what with grown-ups playin change-up and turnin you round every which way so bad. And don't even say they sorry.

Related Characters: Hazel (speaker), Hunca Bubba /

Jefferson Winston Vale, Baby Jason

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 20

Explanation and Analysis

After her argument with Hunca Bubba, Hazel is so upset she starts losing her “bearins” and can no longer navigate for Granddaddy. Her feelings of being emotionally lost coincide with her family getting literally lost because she is unable to use the map. Hazel attributes being lost to the behavior of adults, who behave in confusing and dishonest ways. In her mind, there is no longer any distinction between adults in her family and adults outside her

family—she believes none of them can be trusted. Her faith in her family members, which used to serve as a guiding force and support system in her life, has been dealt a serious blow. With this, the story highlights the danger in such a black-and-white vision of family solidarity. Hazel sees her family as being either with her or against her, and the smallest argument thus leaves her reeling.

Baby Jason does not understand what is happening but can see that his sister is distraught, so he begins to cry also. Hazel interprets this as a sign of solidarity from her brother, and it offers her a glimmer of hope. To Hazel, Baby Jason’s tears are an indication that at least one of her family relationships is still intact and supportive.



SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

GORILLA, MY LOVE

Hazel's uncle decides to change his name back to Jefferson Winston Vale, the given name he used before Hazel was born and gave him the nickname "Hunca Bubba." The name Jefferson Winston Vale seems "very geographical weatherlike" to Hazel, like a phrase that she might see on the map she is using to help her Granddaddy navigate during their drive. She is sitting in the front seat because sitting in the back with the **pecans**—which are shifting around like rats—makes her feel uncomfortable. Granddaddy calls her "Scout" as he asks for directions, and Hazel is quick to point out to the reader that "Scout" is not her real name.

Hunca Bubba sits in the back of the vehicle with Hazel's little brother, Baby Jason. He talks excitedly about the woman he is going to marry, a conversation that Hazel finds boring and annoying. He shows the children a picture of his future wife, and Hazel is unimpressed by the woman in her "countrified dress." However, she is intrigued by the movie theater in the background of the picture, since she loves movies.

The photograph reminds Hazel of the time she went to the Washington theater to see the movie *Gorilla, My Love* with her brothers, Baby Jason and Big Brood, because they were alone last Easter. She remembers buying bags of Havmore potato chips, which are Hazel's favorite because they have the best bags for blowing up and "bustin real loud" to annoy the theater matrons. Hazel loves causing a commotion with her brothers egging her on. She is always the one to do "fiercesome" things for the three of them, like hide their money from bullies or physically fight children who try to take Big Brood's ball at the park.

Hazel's irritation at her uncle's name change stems from his rejection of the nickname she gave him when she was very young. To her, it seems to signify a shift in their relationship and a potential weakening of family loyalty. Her irrational fear of the moving pecans, which remind her of rats, establishes her childlike perspective of the world. As a child, Hazel is subject to the power of the adults around her, and asserting her "real" name to the reader is an opportunity to exercise control over her identity.



Hazel's disdain for Hunca Bubba's future wife is revealed in her description of the "countrified dress," which is presumably inferior to styles Hazel sees in her urban surroundings. She is not excited at the prospect of incorporating this woman into her close-knit family, and regards her as an outsider. Her opinion of the photo further establishes her childish perspective—she is bored by romance due to her age and much more fascinated by the movie theater in the background.



The fact that Hazel, Big Brood, and Baby Jason were alone during Easter suggests that her older family members were working during the holiday—one of many hints peppered throughout the story that they are members of the working class. The movie theater reminds Hazel of time she spent with her brothers and emphasizes the importance her siblings and family play in her everyday life. Her memory of the potato chip bags establishes both her immature love of causing trouble and her close bond with her brothers, who like to encourage her when she makes a scene—another version of family solidarity. She feels fiercely protective of her brothers and is willing to fight others on their behalf.



When the movie starts, Hazel realizes that the theater is playing **King of Kings**, a religious film about Jesus's life and ministry, rather than the advertised *Gorilla, My Love*. She is "ready to kill," not because she dislikes Jesus, but because the theater staff members' dishonesty—promising one movie but playing another—infuriates her. She views this as a sign that adults "feel like they can treat [kids] just anyhow."

The theater's decision to play King of Kings on Easter rather than Gorilla, My Love highlights betrayal in two ways. The film itself portrays the life of Jesus, so readers can reasonably assume that the film would include Judas's betrayal of Jesus. The showing of King of Kings is also a form of betrayal—at least in Hazel's eyes—because the adults running the theater are saying one thing and doing another. Hazel's fixation on this dishonesty reveals that although she is a child, she has a keen sense of justice and understands the unfair power dynamic between children and adults.



Hazel and the other children in the theater start yelling in protest. At first they think the man in the reel booth played the wrong film by mistake, but he just turns the volume up and yells at them to "shut up." The matron tries to quiet them by roping off the children's section of the theater, but the kids just continue to yell and start racing around the theater aisles. They only quiet down when Thunderbuns—"the big and bad" "colored matron" who "do not play"—arrives, looking like she is about to hit someone with her flashlight.

Hazel and the rest of the kids in the audience do not take the theater's deception lightly. They know they do not have much power in the face of the adults who run the theater, so they try to make their voices heard the only way that is available to them—by causing chaos. They get so wild only Thunderbuns, the "colored matron" who they fear and respect, can restore order. Thunderbuns is the only adult outside of the family that Hazel respects—likely because Thunderbuns, with her confidence and combative attitude, is a lot like Hazel herself.



Hazel and the other children quiet down and watch "the simple ass picture." Hazel scoffs at the storyline, thinking, "just about anybody in my family is better than this god they always talking about." She imagines what her own family would do if Big Brood were the one up on the cross. She pictures her Mama and Daddy scolding him before jumping into action, with Daddy calling for a ladder while Mama and Aunt Daisy hit the Romans with their pocketbooks and Hunca Bubba tells onlookers to get out of the way and get help. She imagines her Granddaddy telling them to leave Big Brood alone, angering the rest of the family and causing a fight. Despite the chaos, Big Brood ends up down from the cross and playing with his friends in the park as the family continues to argue.

Hazel's fantasy about her family saving Big Brood shows that they form an important part of her support network. She believes each of her family members will help each other in times of need, even if it leads to arguments among themselves. However, Granddaddy is portrayed as more of a nuisance in this scenario, foreshadowing when he also says the wrong thing to Hazel at the end of the story. The juxtaposition of her family members' personalities with the religious narrative suggests that she places her faith in her family's loyalty rather than in religion, which gives her a sense of confidence when she confronts adversity.



Hazel starts yelling, “We want our money back,” and the other children quickly join in. When the credits roll and it becomes clear they have been swindled, she goes to see the manager, “who is a crook in the first place for lyin out there sayin Gorilla, My Love playin,” though Big Brood suddenly ducks out to go to the bathroom. She knocks on the door of the “pasty” manager’s office and is infuriated by his condescending tone, “like he disgusted when he get to the door and see only a little kid there.” Hazel knows she is the smartest student in her class—she believes even the teachers who don’t like her would agree. She has conflicts with several of them because she won’t sing “them Southern songs” and because Mama confronts them if they are racist to their students.

Hazel walks into the manager’s office, sits down, and demands a refund for herself and her brothers. He tries to get her to leave, even though she is sitting, “which shows him for the fool he is.” Hazel thinks about how her teachers behave similarly whenever Mama goes in to confront them for their inappropriate behavior, and how they quickly realize she is “like a stone on that spot and ain’t backin up.” However, the manager still refuses to give Hazel a refund. Grabbing the matches from his ashtray, Hazel leaves and sets fire to the candy stand on her way out. The theater has to close for a week.

Hazel’s parents find out about the fire—she suspects Big Brood is the culprit because of his “big mouth.” Before they can discipline her, Hazel argues that she was just behaving based on the values they instilled in her—namely, the importance of keeping one’s word, because “if you say Gorilla, My Love, you suppose[d] to mean it.” Her argument persuades Daddy to “put his belt back on.”

Hazel has no qualms about expressing her fury at the manager’s betrayal, showcasing her sense of justice and willingness to take matters into her own hands. When she gets to the manager’s office and sees his reaction to her presence, she is even more enraged—not only has he cheated her out of her money, he is now treating her with condescension and disdain because she is a child. The story implies that there is possibly an element of racism at play as well, since the manager is white (she describes him as “pasty”) and Hazel is black, and she conflates this experience with that of her mother standing up to the racist teachers at school. Despite being treated so poorly, Hazel’s self-confidence doesn’t waver—she knows she’s smart and thus worthy of listening to and respecting. Her comment about school reveals that she gets into trouble not because she can’t keep up intellectually but because she refuses to participate in activities that promote racist Southern ideology.



Hazel confronts the manager by channeling her Mama, who always stands her ground when facing Hazel’s teachers and fighting injustice. Her imitation of her mother’s behavior shows how deeply she has internalized the values her family raised her with. Her decision to set fire to the concession stand is extreme but consistent with her perspective of right and wrong and her striving for justice. Barbara’s decision to have Hazel retaliate this way may also connect to the author’s activity in the Black Power movement of the 1970s, which called for taking more radical steps towards racial justice than the peaceful protests of the 1960s Civil Rights era.



Hazel suspects Big Brood of telling her parents about the fire—and implies that he’s perhaps ratted her out in the past, given her instance that he has a “big mouth”—which complicates her belief in family solidarity. However, Daddy’s decision to not punish Hazel for the fire reinforces her sense of security. In putting his belt back on, Daddy shows that he is willing to listen to his daughter when she argues her perspective and acts on the honesty and integrity he helped instill in her.



Hazel reveals that her family members frequently listen to her when she argues her point of view. Mama always says “Okay, Badbird,” when she concedes to her daughter, which, as Hazel points out to the reader, is not her name. Her Aunt Jo calls her “Miss Muffin,” another nickname, when trying to concede during their arguments. Hazel also believes that “Hunca Bubba [has] gone back on his word” by changing his name, but her family does not see her point of view.

When Hazel's family members yield to her during arguments, they use cutesy nicknames like “Badbird” and “Miss Muffin” to signify that she has been heard and should try to calm down and lighten up. Hazel's decision to point out to the reader that these are not her real names shows that she is somewhat uncomfortable when adults don't use her given name—it represents an attempt to influence her behavior and override her own feelings. Their lack of support when she claims Hunca Bubba has broken a promise by changing his name represents a turning point in the story, as she begins to feel as though she can no longer rely on their loyalty in the face of a crisis.



Back in the navigator seat, Hazel decides to confront Hunca Bubba about his decision. She feels confident about doing so because her Mama taught her to speak her mind “and let the chips fall where they may,” something Daddy also voiced support for in the past.

Hazel's decision to confront Hunca Bubba is informed by the sense of security and empowerment her family's value system has instilled in her. At the same time, her anger stems from the fact that her uncle, who used to represent this same security, seems ready to distance himself from her by changing his name and bringing a stranger into the family fold. Even worse, no one else in her family seems to understand her anger or perceive this injustice. Her faith in the adults who have supported her throughout her life clashes with her growing awareness of adults' willingness to betray or lie to children.



Hazel asks Hunca Bubba if he plans on marrying the woman in the photograph. When he says yes, she asks him if he remembers the time he had to babysit her when she was little because her parents got held up by a storm. He says yes again and mentions how cute she was. Granddaddy asks her for directions and calls her “Scout,” but she ignores him. Hazel then asks Hunca Bubba if he remembers what he said to her that day. “Whatcha mean, Peaches?” he asks. Firmly reminding him that her name is Hazel, not Peaches, Hazel informs her uncle that he promised to marry *her* when she grew up. She is upset and raises her voice.

Hazel makes it clear that she is angry, but Hunca Bubba and Granddaddy continue to use childish nicknames that make her feel ignored and her feelings minimized. Granddaddy's use of “Scout” implies that whatever she is saying is not as important as giving directions, and Hunca Bubba's “Peaches” reinforces the idea that she is a child and therefore worthy of dismissal. “Peaches” is the last straw, and Hazel asserts her real name out loud for the first time in the story as a way of taking control of the conversation and demanding to be treated with respect. Although she doesn't realize that she can't marry her uncle and why that would be wrong, she understands enough to know when adults are treating her with condescension.



Hunca Bubba is confused about why Hazel is so upset. He protests that she is “just a little girl” and that he was just joking around when he promised to marry her. Granddaddy tries to convince her that Hunca Bubba was a different person when he made this promise, and now he is a new man named Jefferson Winston Vale. Her uncle affirms this, and Hazel calls him “a lvin dawg.” She begins to cry so hard she can no longer see the map. Baby Jason begins to cry when he sees his older sister cry. Hazel thinks about how she and her brother “must stick together or be forever lost” in the midst of adults’ treachery.

Rather than apologizing, Hunca Bubba reminds Hazel that she is a child and explains that he was teasing her. This is doubly offensive for Hazel, as Hunca Bubba’s comment about “teasin” suggests that his words hold no weight (going against the grain of Hazel’s unflinching belief that one must stay true to their word at all costs), while his comment that Hazel is “just a little girl” belittles her and affirms the power disparity between adults and children that she so despises. Even though this whole argument—which dissolves into tears—reminds readers that Hazel really is a child still, Bambara emphasizes that Hazel’s anger at being vulnerable to adults’ whims is legitimate and something to be sensitive to.





HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

MLA

Panzer, Sophie. "Gorilla, My Love." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 25 Nov 2019. Web. 21 Apr 2020.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Panzer, Sophie. "Gorilla, My Love." LitCharts LLC, November 25, 2019. Retrieved April 21, 2020. <https://www.litcharts.com/lit/gorilla-my-love>.

To cite any of the quotes from *Gorilla, My Love* covered in the Quotes section of this LitChart:

MLA

Bambara, Toni Cade. *Gorilla, My Love*. Vintage. 1992.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Bambara, Toni Cade. *Gorilla, My Love*. New York: Vintage. 1992.