

# Sing, Unburied, Sing



## INTRODUCTION

### BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF JESMYN WARD

Jesmyn Ward was born in DeLisle, a rural community in the gulf of Mississippi. A first generation college student, she studied English at Stanford University, graduating in 1999. She also gained an MA in Media Studies from Stanford. In 2000, Ward's younger brother was killed by a drunk driver. In her 2013 memoir *Men We Reaped*, Ward reflects on the lives of her younger brother and four other black men from her hometown who died young. In 2005 Ward graduated from the University of Michigan with an MFA in Creative Writing. Shortly after, Ward's family home in DeLisle flooded as a result of Hurricane Katrina, an event that had a profound impact on her writing. Ward has worked at the University of New Orleans, the University of South Alabama, Stanford, and the University of Mississippi, and is currently an associate professor of English at Tulane. She has published five books, including a collection she edited called *The Fire This Time: A New Generation Speaks about Race*, which was published in 2016. Ward is the recipient of a MacArthur "Genius" Grant and has won the National Book Award for Fiction twice: first for *Salvage the Bones* in 2011, and again for *Sing, Unburied, Sing* in 2017.

### HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Although Hurricane Katrina is not mentioned in the novel explicitly, like the book's ghosts it has a haunting effect on the story. The narrative is filled with details of intense, violent, and changeable weather, which has a strong impact on the rural community in which Jojo's family lives. More broadly, the novel is set in the context of the unfolding drug epidemic in the 20th and 21st century United States, as well as the corresponding "War on Drugs" and era of mass incarceration. Like many poor people in the South, Michael and Leonie--as well as several other characters in the novel--use drugs as a way of coping with the poverty, racism, violence, and trauma that surrounds them. Michael is locked up in Parchman, seemingly on charges of possessing and distributing crystal meth. The fact that Pop and Richie were in Parchman also highlights the connection between drug use, poverty, racism, and incarceration. Even before the War on Drugs, black people were imprisoned en masse ever since the time of slavery. The long history of racist incarceration in America is thus one of the most important contextual elements of the novel.

### RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Many African-American novels feature ghosts; the most

famous example of which is Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. Ghosts are also a particularly important feature of Southern Gothic; in this genre, ghosts often become a manifestation of the way that the present is haunted by racial violence and slavery. Octavia Butler's *Kindred*, which -- like *Beloved* -- is a neo-slave narrative, does not feature ghosts but does involve an exploration of people's connection to their ancestors, as well as an indication of how slavery and racist violence haunt the present. Similarly, Yaa Gyasi's *Homegoing* mediates on the connection between ancestors and their descendants, particularly in the context of the transatlantic slave trade and its legacy. Brit Bennett's *The Mothers*, set in a black community in California, tells the story of a young woman who, like Leonie, must navigate motherhood in the face of unbearable grief.

### KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Sing, Unburied, Sing*
- **Where Written:** DeLisle, Mississippi
- **When Published:** 2017
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary Literature, 21st century African-American Fiction
- **Genre:** Southern Gothic, Magical Realism
- **Setting:** Gulf Coast, Mississippi
- **Climax:** The end of the novel, when Kayla sees the large group of ghosts and sings to them, telling them to go home.
- **Antagonist:** Big Joseph
- **Point of View:** The story switches between three first-person narrators: Jojo, Leonie, and Richie

### EXTRA CREDIT

**Motherhood.** *Sing, Unburied, Sing* is the first novel Ward wrote after becoming a mother herself.

**Hometown Loyalty.** Ward still lives in DeLisle, the rural community in Mississippi in which she was raised.



## PLOT SUMMARY

The first chapter is told from the perspective of Jojo on his thirteenth birthday. Jojo's grandmother, Mam, is undergoing chemotherapy (a treatment for cancer), so she sleeps a lot. Jojo and his grandfather, Pop, slaughter a goat for the family to eat. Jojo's other grandfather, Big Joseph, is white, and Jojo has only met him a couple of times. Jojo's father, Michael, has many tattoos, some of which he got in prison. After they kill the goat, Pop sends Jojo back inside, saying he heard Jojo's three-year-

old sister, Kayla, crying. Jojo finds that Kayla isn't crying. Jojo explains that nowadays he calls his mother by her first name, Leonie, rather than "Mama." He recalls a time just after Mam was diagnosed with cancer, when his grandparents left him alone with Leonie. Leonie left Jojo alone, and while she was gone Pop's brother, Stag—who is "sick in the head"—walked past outside. Jojo hid in the barn with the animals and stepped on a jagged can, which caused a fight between Pop and Leonie about whether Jojo was old enough to be left alone.

Back in the present, Pop tells Jojo that he and Stag have the same dad but different mothers. When they were young, Stag would always get into trouble. Once, Stag was beaten by a white man, and later a group of white men tied up Pop and Stag and took them to a work camp called **Parchman**. One of the boys in the camp, Richie, was only twelve years old. Richie had been caught stealing food to feed his nine siblings. Pop's story is interrupted when Leonie returns with a birthday cake for Jojo. While the family **sings** happy birthday, the phone rings and Leonie answers. Jojo knows it is Michael, calling with news that he is getting out of prison this week.

The next chapter is told from Leonie's perspective. After speaking with Michael, she got extra shifts at the bar where she works, the Cold Drink. Leonie's coworker at the bar, Misty, gets high on a cocktail of drugs every night. That night, the two of them go to Misty's, where they do cocaine and talk. Leonie has a vision of her brother, Given, who appears to her whenever she is high. The next day, Leonie and Pop argue over whether she should take Jojo with her to pick Michael up from Parchman. Leonie recalls a time shortly after she got her period, when Mam revealed that certain women in their family, including Mam herself, possess a form of telepathic intuition. In the present, Leonie tells Mam that she is taking the kids to get Michael when he gets out, and Mam suggests that she bring Misty, whose boyfriend is also in Parchman. Leonie suddenly realizes that she is having visions of Given because her mother is about to die. Back in high school, Given was shot by Michael's cousin on a hunting trip.

The third chapter moves back to Jojo's perspective. Leonie, Misty, Jojo, and Kayla set off together in the car. As they drive, Jojo stares at Misty's bra strap and is filled with desire. Later, he finds a tiny leather pouch (the **gris-gris bag**) folded into his clothes, with a feather inside and a note saying "*Keep this close.*" He knows it's from Pop. Jojo recalls Pop telling him about when he was forced to work under a notorious white overseer named Kinnie Wagner at Parchman, who treated Pop like one of his dogs. Leonie stops the car at the house of a white woman (Carlotta) and her little boy. They go inside and see that the house is filled with food and other items purchased in bulk. Jojo wanders out to the shed and peeks inside, where he sees a man (Fred) cooking meth, which Jojo notes is the reason why Michael ended up in prison. Soon after, they all get back in the car and continue on their way.

The fourth chapter returns to Leonie's point of view. She explains that Michael used to work on an oil rig. One day, there was an accident on the rig, and Michael returned home traumatized. He began using meth. Now, Leonie and Misty are using the road trip to transport meth they picked up at Fred and Carlotta's house. Kayla throws up in the car, so they stop, and Leonie walks into the bushes nearby, hoping to remember which plants Mam told her could treat nausea. Leonie picks some blackberry plants, which causes her hands to bleed.

The fifth chapter returns to Jojo's perspective. He doesn't want Leonie to give Kayla the blackberry leaves, because unlike Mam or Pop, Leonie "ain't never healed nothing or grown nothing in her life." Leonie once bought Jojo a fish but wouldn't buy it any fish food, and thus it quickly died. The car pulls up to another house. Inside, Michael's lawyer, Al, is making spaghetti. Leonie cooks the blackberry leaves, mixes them with sugar, and feeds the mixture to Kayla. While the adults stay in the other room, Jojo—worried about Kayla, who has a soaring temperature—takes her into the bathroom and forces her to throw up. That night, Jojo tries to sleep, but instead remembers the next part of Pop's story about Parchman, in which Richie is whipped for accidentally breaking his hoe and Kinnie escapes.

In the morning, Jojo finds Leonie, Misty, and Al on the sofa. They clearly haven't slept. They leave Al's house and soon arrive at Parchman. When Michael comes out, he and Leonie passionately embrace. Jojo recalls the last part of the Parchman story. Richie suffered enormously from his injuries, shaking and throwing up even though the wounds didn't appear to be infected. Eventually, Richie told Pop that he was "going home." Back in the present, Michael greets Kayla, but she is tense in response. As they drive away, Kayla throws up again. In the midst of the commotion, Jojo sees a young black boy standing by his window. The boy says: "I'm going home."

Chapter 6 is told from Richie's perspective. He explains that he immediately knew Jojo is "River's child." Richie explains that "in the beginning" he found himself in a pine forest, where he had a conversation with a white snake. He flew into the sky, and remembered the moment he died with River (Pop) beside him. Richie haunted Parchman, but River was no longer there. Richie recalls an enormous white man nicknamed Hogjaw who was also placed in Parchman. He wants to tell Jojo about how River looked after him, but says nothing. No one in the car can see him except Jojo and Kayla.

Chapter 7 returns to Leonie's perspective. She and the group drive back to Al's house. Leonie tells Al that Kayla is still sick, and Al fetches some bread and ginger ale for her. In the bathroom, Leonie washes the vomit off Kayla and feels the urge to hit her. She tells Jojo to get Kayla dressed and in bed, then goes to get high and have sex with Michael in the next room. During this time, Leonie sees Given in the room with them. In the morning, they set off again on the road. Al gives them sandwiches to take, and Leonie sees that he is high again.

Leonie explains that she got pregnant shortly after she and Michael got together, when she was 17. Mam disapproved of Leonie's obsessive, deferential love for Michael. When Leonie told Mam she was pregnant, Mam replied that she'd known for two weeks. Mam asked Leonie if she wanted the baby, offering to make a tea that would terminate the pregnancy, but Leonie said she wanted to keep it. Back in the present, Michael alerts Leonie to a police car nearby. They panic, and do not have time to hide the meth they got from Al, so Leonie swallows it. The police officer informs Leonie that she was swerving, then asks her to get out of the car and show her license and insurance. The officer questions her, and without thinking Leonie tells him that they are coming from Parchman. The officer immediately handcuffs her, then Michael. Jojo gets out of the car too, and when the officer tries to handcuff him, pointing a gun at his head, Kayla runs in front of Jojo to shield him. The officer searches the car, Leonie suddenly gets high from the meth she swallowed, and Kayla throws up. Disgusted, the officer lets them go. Leonie sees Given again.

Chapter 8 is told from Jojo's perspective. He explains that when the police showed up, Richie warned: "They going to chain you," then hid on the floor. After the encounter with the police, the group stops at a gas station and Michael gives Jojo money from Leonie's purse, telling him to buy milk and charcoal, explaining that Leonie is sick and needs it for her stomach. Jojo also buys a Tootsie Pop. Michael force-feeds Leonie the milk and charcoal mixture until she violently throws up. In the car, Richie tells Jojo that he knows he tried to escape from Parchman and failed, but doesn't know how, and that he needs Jojo to find out. He explains it is the only way for him to get home. Richie says that there is still much Jojo doesn't know about the world.

Chapter 9 switches to Richie's perspective. Richie can see that Jojo is more "innocent" than Richie himself had been at thirteen. After Richie died, Parchman pulled him back. Richie explains that River used to see a prostitute in Parchman nicknamed the Sunshine Woman because she always wore yellow. One day, the Sunshine Woman told River and Richie that a black man and his wife had been lynched because a white woman lied that the man had molested her. When Jojo arrived at Parchman to pick up Michael, Richie was awoken by a voice urging him to follow Jojo to River, promising that then he would be able to go home.

Chapter 10 is told from Leonie's perspective. She reminisces about the first months she and Michael dated as teenagers. She then wakes up in the present, feeling horrific. She sleeps until they arrive back at the house, but Mam and Pop are not there. Michael insists that they go and see his parents, but he and Leonie fight about this. Leonie is holding Kayla when the car hits a wild hog. Kayla bruises her head, briefly loses consciousness, then shouts for Jojo. They arrive at Big Joseph and Maggie's house, and Joseph tells the family that Leonie,

Jojo, and Kayla aren't welcome inside. Maggie attempts to greet Jojo and Kayla, but Big Joseph gets more and more irate, eventually calling Leonie a "nigger bitch," which causes Michael to head-butt him. Big Joseph and Michael continue to fight while Leonie and the children wait in the car.

Eventually, Michael gets back in the car and they drive home, where they find Pop sitting outside. Pop urges Leonie to go inside and see Mam, who tells her it's "time... for me to go." Mam says she has tried to heal herself, but now must give up. She wants to be possessed by one last *mystère*, Maman Brigitte, "the mother of the dead." She asks Leonie to gather the necessary items for the ritual.

Chapter 11 returns to Jojo's perspective. When they arrive home, Pop tells Jojo to put Kayla to bed. Richie tries to talk to Pop, but Pop can't hear him. In the morning, Jojo wakes up to the smell of Michael cooking bacon. Michael reminds Jojo about a time when they went fishing together and Michael told Jojo about Given. He promises Jojo that he is now "here to stay." Kayla fusses and cries, and Michael hits her. Richie begs Jojo to talk to Pop for him, and although at first Jojo is resistant, eventually he agrees. Jojo goes to see Mam, and Mam admits that she has always known Leonie doesn't have "the mothering instinct" and that she won't feed Jojo. Jojo asks Mam about death, and she says she probably won't come back as a ghost because this usually only happens when death is violent.

Chapter 12 is told from Richie's perspective. In the midst of watching Jojo and his family, Richie has a vision of water, land, a community of houses and people, and the sound of a beautiful song. Richie watches Leonie walk to Given's grave and ask him to fulfil Mam's request for the *mystère*. Leonie then returns to Mam's room, falls to the floor, and says "Okay."

Chapter 13 returns to Jojo's perspective. He explains that the previous night, Richie crawled around the house and sang. Jojo hears Pop destroying a termite-infested old pen outside and goes to help him. Jojo asks Pop about Richie, and Pop explains that Richie succeeded in escaping from Parchman. Pop explains that one Sunday, a man named Blue who "wasn't right in the head" raped a woman. Richie caught Blue afterward, and the two ended up running right out of Parchman. The prison sergeant and warden, along with a gang of white men, caught them and skinned Blue alive, cutting off parts of his body. Pop was there with the dogs, and, knowing that the white men would come for Richie next, told Richie he would help him get home and stabbed him in the neck. Richie screams, and Pop tells Jojo that he has been haunted by what he did ever since. Richie disappears, and Jojo holds Pop like he holds Kayla.

Chapter 14 is told from Leonie's perspective. On coming back from collecting the cemetery stones for Mam's ritual, she sees Given in the house. Kayla is crying, and talking about "the black bird... the Black boy." They go into Mam's room, which smells like rot, and Mam says Leonie is "too late." Given is in this room too, shouting at Mam, who pleads weakly in return. Jojo enters.

Leonie arranges the ritual items on the altar, and says the litany for Maman Brigitte. Given, Jojo, and Kayla recognize one another, and then Given embraces Mam, telling her he is taking her home. Mam dies. Everyone cries except Jojo, who is furious at Leonie for summoning the gods that let Mam die. Later, Leonie tells Michael that Mam is dead and asks to go see Al so they can get high. They get in the car and drive off together.

Chapter 15 returns to Jojo's perspective. He explains that these days he sleeps in Leonie's bed. She and Michael only come back for a couple of days every two weeks. Michael and Leonie are now both very thin, and sleep on the sofa together. Jojo admits that sometimes, at night, he feels like he understands Leonie and why she has been a bad mother, but that he never has this feeling during the day. Jojo knows that he will not see Mam or Given again, but he still sees Richie, as well as countless other ghosts with different stories of violent death. Kayla, who can see the ghosts too, tells them to go home. Kayla begins to sing, and the ghosts are relieved and say "Yes." They say: "Home."



## CHARACTERS

### MAJOR CHARACTERS

**Jojo** – Jojo is the main character in the novel, which begins on his thirteenth birthday. The biracial son of Leonie and Michael, Jojo is unusually serious and mature for his age, partly because Leonie's irresponsibility means that he has effectively taken over as the parent of his three-year-old sister, Kayla. On the other hand, in some ways Jojo is like any other boy his age; for example, he is entranced by Misty, and simultaneously curious and embarrassed by the idea of sex. Jojo is intelligent but admits that he doesn't understand Leonie, with whom he has a strained and painful relationship. On the other hand, Jojo adores his grandparents; he idolizes Pop and is devastated by the death of Mam at the end of the novel. Although Jojo has a remarkably difficult life, he is shown to have certain important advantages in comparison with Richie, whose ghost appears to Jojo, urging him to help Richie communicate with Pop (who Richie calls by his first name, River). Jojo's full name is Joseph, which is ironic considering his namesake, Big Joseph, despises him and refuses to acknowledge him. Despite the trauma of being neglected by his parents and shunned by his racist white grandparents, Jojo is deeply loved by Mam and Pop, as well as Kayla. Indeed, it is this love that gives Jojo strength and protection as he navigates the harsh world around him. It also makes him more "innocent" than Richie was at Jojo's age.

**Pop (River)** – Pop is Jojo's maternal grandfather, although he was more present in Jojo's life than either of his real parents and, when the novel begins, is Jojo's only active parent. Pop is brave, strong, intelligent, and kind. He is extremely comfortable in nature--a fact reflected in his given name, "River"--and tells

Jojo about the spirit that exists in every part of the world. Pop regularly tells stories to Jojo, including the story of how he was imprisoned at **Parchman** on a false charge at the age of 15. At Parchman, Pop took the 12-year-old Richie under his wing, a fact that shows Pop has always had a caring, selfless nature. This aspect of Pop's character is ironically epitomized when Pop kills Richie to save him from being tortured and executed by the guards at Parchman. Although Pop is haunted by this act for the rest of his life, he knows that he spared Richie from a much worse fate.

**Mam** – Mam is Jojo's maternal grandmother. Like many women in her family, Mam has healing powers, psychic foresight, and the gift of being able to communicate with the spirits of dead people. She tries to pass on this knowledge to Leonie, but--as Jojo argues--Mam's instinct for healing and care is not present in her daughter. When the novel begins, Mam is very sick with cancer; after her diagnosis, she'd vowed to cure herself, but this did not happen. Even after many years of marriage Mam and Pop remain deeply in love. Her death at the end of the novel has a profound impact on everyone in the family.

**Kayla (Michaela)** – Kayla is Jojo's three-year-old sister. Leonie named her Michaela after Michael, but Leonie remains the only member of the family who calls her daughter by her full name. Kayla was born after Michael was sent to **Parchman**, and thus the moment when the family goes to pick Michael up is the first time the father and daughter ever meet. In many ways, Kayla is a normal toddler, with a sweet, bubbly personality. She adores Jojo and seems to consider him more her parent than her real parents or grandparents. At the end of the novel, it is revealed that Kayla has inherited the gift of being able to communicate with the dead.

**Leonie** – Leonie is Jojo and Kayla's mother. She is a troubled character, whose difficulties stem from a mix of trauma, structural oppression, and her own flaws. Jojo views Leonie as a neglectful, selfish, and incomprehensible mother. Their relationship is painful, and both characters can be cruel to one another. Leonie's mistreatment of her children is closely related to her drug use, which began as a result of Michael's influence and continues after he goes to prison. Indeed, Leonie's relationship with Michael is a source of both immense joy and suffering. Leonie is madly in love with Michael, so much so that she neglects her children and other responsibilities. As the novel progresses, it becomes clear that there are other reasons why Leonie fails as a mother. She is deeply traumatized by the murder of her brother, Given, who appears to her in spirit form when she gets high. Furthermore, Leonie has been profoundly impacted by the extreme racism of the society in which she lives. Although Leonie is not redeemed at the end of the novel, it is clear that her failings are not entirely her fault.

**Michael** – Michael is the father of Jojo and Kayla. He is white, and comes from a racist family. However, Michael himself is not racist, and after Michael's cousin murders Given he begins a

relationship with Leonie. Michael used to work on an oil rig, but was left unemployed after an explosion on the rig, which killed 11 of his coworkers. Unable to find another job and traumatized from the explosion, Michael begins using drugs and producing crystal meth, which eventually lands him in **Parchman**. Michael loves his children, a fact indicated by his tattoo of Jojo's name. However, he has serious shortcomings as a father, mainly due to the fact that he is too engrossed in drugs and his relationship with Leonie to pay much attention to Jojo and Kayla.

**Given** – Given is Leonie's older brother, the only son of Pop and Mam. As a senior in high school, Given was a dedicated football player, close with both his white and black teammates. Ignoring Pop's warnings about hanging out with white people, Given would go hunting with white people and one day struck up a bet with Michael's cousin about who could kill a buck first. When Given won the bet, Michael's cousin shot and killed him. Given then returns as a spirit, haunting the characters in the novel and particularly his sister Leonie. Given does not speak to Leonie, so his purpose as a ghost remains unclear. However, the fact that he appears whenever she is high suggests that Given is trying to encourage Leonie to stop engaging in self-destructive behavior and be a better mother to her children.

**Big Joseph** – Big Joseph is Michael's father, and Jojo is named after him. He is a cruel man and an ardent racist. He helps to cover up Given's murder, pretending that Michael's cousin killed Given by accident. He also calls Leonie a "nigger" and refuses to acknowledge his biracial grandchildren at all.

**Richie** – Richie is a 12-year-old boy who was imprisoned in **Parchman** with Pop. Richie had nine siblings and would steal food to feed them, which is why he was sent to prison. Small and weak, he struggled to work and relied on Pop to help protect him at the prison. Richie eventually tried to escape Parchman along with Blue, but was caught by the guards. After the guards skinned Blue alive, Pop killed Richie in order to spare him any further suffering. Richie's ghost comes back to haunt Jojo, as without knowing how he died, Richie's soul cannot rest. Eventually, Richie learns the truth and is able to find peace in the afterlife.

**Stag** – Stag is Pop's brother. As a kid, Stag was a troublemaker, and Pop believes this is because Stag felt empty inside. One day Stag got in a fight with some white men, which ended up getting both Stag and Pop imprisoned in **Parchman**. At the time the novel is set, Stag is mentally unstable, and spends his time wandering around **singing** nonsensically.

**Misty** – Misty is Leonie's friend who drives with her to **Parchman** to pick up Michael. The two women use drugs together, and seem bound mostly by their addiction, though Leonie thinks of Misty as both her "best friend" and her "only friend." Misty is white, and Leonie sometimes resents how much more easily Misty can move through the world because

of this, but the two women also bond over their respective interracial relationships, since Misty's boyfriend Bishop is black.

## MINOR CHARACTERS

**Maggie** – Maggie is Michael's mother. She is less racist than her husband and seems somewhat open to having a relationship with Leonie and her grandchildren, but ultimately does not stand up to Big Joseph.

**Michael's Cousin** – Michael's cousin is a man who, in his early thirties, made a bet while hunting with Given. When Michael's cousin lost the bet, he shot Given in a fit of racist rage. He was sent to **Parchman** for only three years after claiming the murder was a hunting accident.

**Kinnie Wagner** – Kinnie Wagner is a notorious white criminal who is in charge of the dogs at **Parchman**. He recruits Pop to help him with the dogs.

**Hogjaw** – Hogjaw is an enormous white man who was at **Parchman** during Pop's time there.

**Carlotta** – Carlotta is a white woman who makes crystal meth with her husband, Fred. Jojo witnesses her viciously beat her infant son with a baseball bat.

**Fred** – Fred is Carlotta's husband. He cooks meth and gives it to Misty and Leonie to transport on their journey.

**Al** – Al is Michael's lawyer. He is friendly and kind, but is seemingly a meth addict. He gets high with Misty and Leonie and possibly has sex with them.

**Police Officer** – The police officer stops Jojo's family after they pick up Michael from **Parchman**. He treats them with suspicion and brutality, handcuffing Jojo even though he is only thirteen.

**The Sunshine Woman** – The Sunshine Woman is a prostitute who would come to work at **Parchman**, so named because she would always wear yellow. She once told Pop about a lynching that happened in the town near Parchman.

**Maman Brigitte** – Maman Brigitte is a *mystère* (a kind of intermediary spirit in some voodoo practices) known as the "Mother of the Dead." Mam asks to be possessed by her shortly before her death.

**Blue** – Blue is an inmate in **Parchman** who Pop describes as being "not right in the head." He and Richie escape together, but are caught by the guards, who skin Blue alive.

**Bishop** – Bishop is Misty's boyfriend. He does not appear in the narrative directly, though we learn that he is black and is also imprisoned at **Parchman**.



## 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.



## FAMILY, HERITAGE, AND HOMECOMING

*Sing, Unburied, Sing* is a family saga. Although the main action of the plot takes place over only a few days, the narrative jumps back to tell stories of

Jojo's family's history that happened many years before he was born. Indeed, one of the most important ideas in the novel is the connection that exists even between family members who are not alive at the same time, such as the connection between Jojo and his dead uncle, Given. All the members of Jojo's family feel a strong sense of connection with one another. Mam and Pop's relationship to Jojo and Kayla is particularly close, but the most intense bond of all is the one between Jojo and Kayla themselves. Although Jojo is only 13, he is Kayla's main caretaker, fulfilling the role of a parent to her. At the same time, his relationship to Kayla is in many ways deeper than the bond between parent and child because they are inseparable—as Leonie observes at one point, they even sleep folded into one another—and possess a psychic connection that allows them to understand the other's thoughts without speaking.

Despite the intensity of these familial bonds, Jojo's family is also afflicted by a number of difficulties and traumas, and family connections do not always come easily to the characters as a result. Mam points out that Leonie never had “the mothering instinct,” and that this is why Mam and Pop had to essentially take over as Jojo and Kayla's parents. Leonie loves her children, but this love is distorted by her streak of selfishness, crazed devotion to Michael, and drug addiction. As a result, her feelings and behavior toward Jojo and Kayla are erratic, cold, and sometimes cruel. She resents Jojo's role as Kayla's stand-in parent and is jealous of Kayla because her older brother—unlike her own older brother, Given—is still alive. Leonie's feelings toward her children are often immature, the kinds of emotions readers are more likely to associate with children themselves rather than parents. In this sense, the novel suggests that the roles people play within their families do not necessarily correspond to their actual age. This is particularly pronounced in the case of Leonie and Jojo, who take the opposite roles within the parent-child relationship than is traditional.

Family is also significant because of its link to heritage. Throughout the novel there are reminders of Jojo's family's connection to the history of African Americans in Mississippi going back to the slavery era. This is most pronounced at the very end of the novel when Jojo and Kayla are surrounded by a large mass of ghosts, some of whom are the ghosts of enslaved people. The very fact that Jojo and Kayla are able to see these ghosts also relates to the theme of heritage, since—as Mam

explains to Leonie—certain people in their family possess the gift of psychic intuition, allowing them to see aspects of the world that are not visible to others. Although this gift sometimes skips generations or particular individuals, it has been passed down through the family lineage stretching all the way back to their African ancestors.

The novel also plays on ideas about home and homecoming, while suggesting that “home” is not necessarily a physical place but a more spiritual condition of rest and belonging. The entire premise of the family's road trip is to bring Michael home from prison, but Michael's relationship to his current “home”—Mam and Pop's house—is a troubled one, as is his relationship to his nearby childhood home, due to his conflict with his racist father. Not long after Michael comes back, he and Leonie begin regularly using drugs again and staying away from “home” for most days of the week. This emphasizes the idea that “home” can often be an elusive destination, for which people often spend their whole lives (and even afterlives) searching in vain.

The idea of homecoming is also central to Richie's character, along with the other ghosts who appear in the novel. After Richie is whipped at **Parchman**, he tells Pop that he is “going home.” However, after Richie tries to escape Parchman, he is hunted down by a lynch mob, at which point Pop kills him in order to spare him a more gruesome fate. This violent death propels Richie into a liminal (in-between) existence where he is forced to search for Pop in order to find out how he died, since only then will he be able to travel to his true home, his final resting place. Indeed, much of the novel deals with the ways in which people *resist* going home (in all senses of this phrase) even as they long to go there. Mam fights against her cancer, but eventually gives in and allows the ghost of Given to take her “home” through death. Similarly, at the end of the novel Kayla urges the ghosts to go home by **singing** to them. Although all people have an intrinsic yearning for home, life is full of forces that interrupt the homecoming journey—including prison, addiction, and memories and traumas that haunt people like ghosts.



## ANIMALS AND NATURE

In *Sing, Unburied, Sing*, the boundary between human existence and the natural world is not a strict one—and at times, it seems barely to exist at all. Jojo and his family live in a rural part of Mississippi, and Jojo is extremely comfortable in nature. Indeed, the natural world is often presented as a source of relief, comfort, and solace to the characters. The **gris-gris bag** that Pop gives Jojo contains a rock, a feather, and an animal tooth, suggesting that tokens from nature have a kind of spiritual power to protect the living. When Michael wants to bond with Jojo, he takes him fishing. When Leonie wants to cure Kayla's nausea, she uses blackberry leaves as a natural remedy. Thus, through communion with nature, the characters are reminded of their place in the

greater order of things—including the past, present, and future, and the community of the living as well as the dead.

Certain animals take on particular significance in the novel's exploration of death and the afterlife. After Richie dies, he encounters a mysterious hybrid snake-bird who tells him: "There are things you need to see." This mystical encounter emphasizes the idea of a community that includes animals and humans who are both living and dead. It could also be interpreted as a reference to West African religions that imagine gods taking on animal forms. When Kayla sees the ghost of Given, she calls him both "black bird" and "Black boy." As a ghost, Given appears to Kayla as something not quite animal and not quite human. At the very end of the novel, Jojo witnesses a large group of ghosts sitting in a tree who seem halfway between people and birds. In the afterlife, the division between animal and human is seemingly even less strong than it is in the mortal world, suggesting that the hierarchies according to which people value different forms of life are misguided.

However, the connection between humans and animals is not always presented in positive terms. As the book reminds readers, a recurrent motif in anti-black racist rhetoric is the comparison of black people and animals. During slavery, black people were spoken of—and treated—as having the same status as animals whose only value lay in their ability to work and create profit for their "owner." As the book shows, such thinking has continued long after the abolition of slavery. Pop explains that Stag's parents lied to the census takers to avoid being controlled and treated like "livestock" by government authorities. White people constantly insult black people by comparing them to animals, and this happens with particular viciousness during Pop's time at **Parchman**. The book is clearly opposed to such baseless and brutal racism, and at the same time it is also critical of the dismissive and cruel way in which animals themselves are treated. In this sense *Sing, Unburied, Sing* suggests that the liberation of all people—and the end of racism—depends on a renewed, newly respectful connection with the natural world.



### ILLNESS, WOUNDS, AND DEATH

Illness, wounds, and death cast a shadow over the narrative of *Sing, Unburied, Sing* from the very beginning. In the opening scene, Jojo mentions that

Mam is suffering from cancer, and then describes himself and Pop slaughtering a goat to be eaten. Immediately, this shows that while illness and injury are inherently dark, tragic phenomena, they—along with death itself—are also part of the natural cycle of life. Illness, wounds, and death are ever-present in the lives of the characters: there is no escape from them. Thus, even as the characters battle against them in different ways, it is clear that this is a battle that can never ultimately be won.

Even though illness and injury are inevitable aspects of the human condition, they are still connected to human fallibility and injustice. For example, although Kayla's initial illness occurs randomly, because of Leonie's poor parenting it is not treated and thus reaches a frighteningly severe intensity. Similarly, much of the injury that occurs in the novel is the result of racist violence and other acts of immoral cruelty. This idea is only further accentuated by all the times in which the characters collapse into fits of vomiting. Kayla vomits from her fever, and then Jojo forces her to vomit the blackberry remedy Leonie made for her. Later, Michael forces Leonie to vomit after she swallows the baggie of meth, and Richie vomits after being whipped at **Parchman**. Therefore—perhaps surprisingly, for some readers—the act of vomiting has profound thematic significance in the text. Vomiting is an act of expelling something poisonous from within the body, so the various scenes in which characters vomit can be read on a metaphorical level as well as a literal one. In the creole religious traditions that Jojo's family practices, it is believed that people can be possessed by spirits. Vomiting is thus also linked to the idea that one's body can house something evil which can only be expelled through a kind of purging—whether that is actual vomiting or a more symbolic, spiritual process. Perhaps the characters in *Sing, Unburied, Sing* are simply having physiological responses when they vomit, or perhaps they are trying to purge another type of toxin from their systems—whether that is an addiction, a trauma, or even the national legacy of slavery.

Death also plays a hugely important role in the novel. As the nearly constant presence of ghosts makes clear, the novel rejects the idea of a strict division between life and death. The "unburied" of the book's title are present throughout the narrative, even though only some of the characters are capable of seeing them. The first time a ghost appears is when Leonie sees Given while she is high. At first, Leonie dismisses it as a possible hallucination, but it soon becomes clear that Given exists not only within Leonie's consciousness, but in a real and objective way: despite being dead, he is literally present throughout the novel. Similarly, Richie is not only present but has an influence on Jojo's actions and therefore impacts the action of the story—as does Given, most dramatically when he takes Mam with him to the world of the dead.

Although the dead are present in world of the novel, there is also a strong implication that there is another realm—a "home"—to which the ghosts in the narrative are ultimately headed. After Richie dies, the snake-bird asks him if he is ready to move onto this next place, before realizing that he still has unfinished business in the mortal world. The idea of ghostly existence as a liminal (in-between) state between life and death has a long history in both spiritual and literary traditions. At the same time, the novel also rejects the idea that people's progress through the mortal world into ghostly existence and finally to death is necessarily a linear journey. Mam even tells

Jojo that all people from the past, present, and future in fact exist at the same time—but it is just not possible for mortal humans to perceive the world that way. This is supported by Richie’s statement that Jojo doesn’t understand the world yet, and particularly not the nature of time.

Overall, there are multiple distinct ideas about death, the afterlife, ghostliness, and time proposed in the novel. While these ideas remain largely mysterious and at times appear contradictory, it is clear throughout the narrative that the dead play an important role in the world of the living in multiple different ways. The dead not only form personal relationships with the living, but serve as active reminders of a painful history of violence and oppression that continues to shadow the lives of the living in both subtle and overt ways.



### FEEDING, HEALING, AND CARE

In opposition to the important themes of illness, wounds, and death, *Sing, Unburied, Sing* also deals directly with themes of feeding, healing, and care.

*Sing, Unburied, Sing* pays close attention to the daily practice of caring for others, showing this to be both a form of love and a (sometimes punishing) form of labor. The person whose care the reader witnesses the most is Jojo. Neglected by Leonie, Jojo is left to take care of Kayla’s needs, and shows a level of devotion to her that at times seems beyond the natural capacity of a thirteen-year-old boy. Although Jojo, unlike Leonie, never expresses resentment or anger toward Kayla, it is clear that the level of care he gives to Kayla at times has a negative impact on his own life. Jojo is self-sacrificial in his attentiveness to Kayla, and in this sense his love for her resembles the ideal of sacrificial maternal love more than that of a kind older brother. Because Jojo has always felt responsible for Kayla, he never got a chance to take care of himself, and it is clear that this aspect of his caring role has had a negative impact on him.

Many other characters in the novel also practice unhealthy forms of caregiving, although in almost all cases it is because they care too little or too sporadically, rather than (as in Jojo’s case) too much. Leonie cares for her children, but can also be selfish and resentful of them, causing her to be cruel even at times when she aims to be kind. Furthermore, Leonie, Michael, Misty, and Al all care for one another in different ways, yet this care is distorted by their use of drugs. This causes them to at times negatively influence each other’s lives, prioritizing getting high over actually practicing the more difficult forms of care that would allow them and their loved ones to grow healthier and happier.

One important way in which the characters practice care is through healing. Mam has inherited healing traditions from her ancestors, and has used them for purposes ranging from curing illness to inducing abortion. Jojo has a deep respect for Mam’s healing gifts, and is heartbroken to confront their limitations

when Mam acknowledges that she was not able to heal herself from cancer. Furthermore, Jojo implies that not everyone has the ability to be a healer to others. When Leonie attempts to employ one of Mam’s healing practices in order to treat Kayla’s sickness, Jojo tells her not to even try, arguing that she is not capable of healing anyone. He is so convinced of this that he forces Kayla to throw up the blackberry plant potion Leonie makes her drink, reflecting: “[Leonie] ain’t Mam. She ain’t Pop. She ain’t never healed nothing or grown nothing in her life, and she don’t know.” This suggests that even when people have good intentions, the distinction between a healing remedy and poison can be precarious, particularly when the person doing the healing is not a natural caregiver.

Throughout the book, care is also shown through food and feeding. Jojo is always hungry, a fact that serves as evidence for the neglect and lack of care he has experienced all his life. Providing food is one of the major ways in which characters care for one another in the book, but both Jojo and Leonie are careful not to accept food from certain people. Their suspicion over who is doing the feeding again emphasizes that not everyone is capable of providing healthy, positive forms of care. The link between food and poison is also underlined by the recurrence of vomiting in the novel. Vomiting highlights the fact that what can be taken as sustenance sometimes turns out to be poison, and that it is often impossible to know the difference until it is too late.



### RACE, RACISM, AND MISCEGENATION

*Sing, Unburied, Sing* takes place in a world haunted by slavery, lynching, and other extreme forms of anti-black violence. Rather than being relegated to the past, these forms of violence have a powerful impact on the present. This sense of continuity is shown through the numerous instances of violence that take place in the novel, including the murder of Given, the lynching of Blue, and the unjust imprisonment of Pop and Richie. Indeed, **Parchman** is one of the most important symbols of the continuity of anti-black violence in America. When Pop and Richie are sent there, it is a prison farm that bears a striking resemblance to the plantations of the slavery era, and although it has changed by the time Michael is sent there, the fact that it still exists traces the direct connection between slavery and the current state of mass incarceration in the United States, which even to this day is used to systematically exploit the labor of people of color.

Anti-black racism is also shown to exist in more subtle ways that don’t necessarily manifest as direct forms of violence. Big Joseph’s racist cruelty toward Leonie, Jojo, and Kayla may not be *physically* violent, but it has a devastating impact on the family, driving them apart. Racism is also subtly implicated in the other forms of devastation the family experiences. The issues of poverty, illness, premature death, drug use, police brutality, and criminal injustice cannot be separated from the

racism that still governs life in the South at the time the novel is set. Although Jojo is only thirteen, he has a keen awareness of racial prejudice and the threat that white people pose to his safety and wellbeing. This emphasizes the fact that racism is so widespread that even children have no escape from it, and are therefore robbed of a period of innocence and a childlike feeling of safety.

The novel also focuses on the theme of miscegenation (interracial love and reproduction). The passionate love between Michael and Leonie could be interpreted as an optimistic aspect of the novel, and to some extent it is. Michael defies his racist family in choosing to be with Leonie, and clearly loves her in a deep way. However, the novel is also frank about the severe limitations of seeing interracial love as a solution to the problem of racism. As the cruel prejudice of Big Joseph reveals, existing as the biracial descendants of white racists—as is true of Jojo and Kayla—can be painful and disorienting, in addition to fostering feelings of self-hatred. Big Joseph’s treatment of Jojo and Kayla is particularly stark in contrast to the loving, affirming relationship the children have with Pop and Mam. Through his maternal grandparents, Jojo builds a strong relationship to his culture, ancestry, and black identity. Meanwhile, Jojo’s white grandfather will not even let him set foot inside his house.

The fact that Jojo and Kayla are perceived as black (rather than biracial) is a result of the legacy of the “one drop rule.” This rule was a form of racial categorization developed under slavery which stated that having just one black ancestor was all that was needed to be considered black (and thus to be enslaved). Slaveholders developed this rule in order to enslave the descendants of parents of different races. In almost all cases, these acts of interracial reproduction were instances of rape, wherein a white master would rape a black enslaved woman. Once again, this casts interracial love and reproduction in a rather less hopeful light. The tragic reality is that the legacy of interracial sex in the United States is largely a legacy of sexual violence.

Leonie’s love for Michael is also complicated by her conflicted feelings about whiteness. There is clearly an extent to which Leonie feels jealously resentful of white people, and these feelings are revealed through her relationship with Misty. While it is inaccurate to say that she loves Michael only for his whiteness, it is possible that Leonie’s excessive devotion to Michael has something to do with his race. This idea is reflected by Mam when she rebukes Leonie for her obsessive love for Michael: “It ain’t healthy... All you hear, all you see, is him... You look at him like a little puppy dog.” Mam’s words highlight the fact that Leonie has internalized the idea that she is inferior to Michael. Given the intense racism of the society in which Leonie lives, her feelings of inferiority cannot be disentangled from the issue of race.



## SYMBOLS

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



### SINGING

Singing is everywhere in the world of the novel. Characters sing to one another and normal speech is often compared to song. As the book’s title indicates, singing also plays a powerful role as a symbol and metaphor. The song of the world represents the “spirit” that, according to Mam and Pop, resides in everything on Earth. This speaks both to the particular energy contained within plants and animals, and also to the spirits of the dead, those killed by acts of violence like Richie and Given who linger on Earth and haunt the living. Certain people, such as Leonie, have the gift of being able to hear the “songs” of these dead people. The phrase *Sing, Unburied, Sing* thus indicates that the spirits of dead people have their own songs to sing, and implies that these ghosts need to tell their stories to the living in order to be able to move on to the next world.

Singing also highlights the connection between humans and the animal world, as it is not just people who sing; animals such as birds do as well. Finally, singing is an important part of African-American history, as it was one way in which African culture was passed down by enslaved people and their descendants. Indeed, song traditions such as work songs and spirituals contain a blend of African and Euro-American influences, and are thus examples of the hybrid culture that is so important in the world of the novel.



### PARCHMAN

Parchman is the prison in which Pop, Stag, Richie, Bishop, and Michael are all imprisoned at different points in the novel. When Pop is sent there as a 15-year-old boy, Parchman is a working farm structured as a camp, where inmates are forced to toil in the fields all the day. This highlights the strong sense of continuity between Parchman and slavery. Indeed, this continuity is not unique to Parchman but, as Leonie reflects when Misty mentions wanting to see a “pretty courthouse,” is true of the criminal justice system in general. Slavery may have technically ended, but black people like Pop and Richie are still arbitrarily detained and forced to work in conditions that are almost indistinguishable from those under slavery. The extreme violence and brutality that characterizes life at Parchman shows how black people’s lives are treated as disposable within the highly racist world in which the characters live. Although Michael is not black, his imprisonment in Parchman highlights the pervasiveness of incarceration among poor people in Mississippi, and again emphasizes a

vicious cycle of injustice. Poverty, racism, drugs, and prison are a daily reality for all the characters in the novel, and escaping them can seem nearly impossible.



## THE GRIS-GRIS BAG

When Leonie takes Jojo with her to pick up Michael from **Parchman**, Jojo finds that one of his grandparents has secretly packed a “gris-gris” bag along with his things. Gris-gris bags are voodoo talismans used in a number of West African cultures, a tradition carried on by descendants of enslaved Africans—like Jojo’s family—in the United States. Inside Jojo’s gris-gris bag is a feather, an animal’s tooth, a rock, and a small note that says “Keep this close.” According to Pop, objects in a gris-gris bag—like everything in the world—each contain a spirit, and the particular combination of objects is thus designed to achieve a “balance of spirit” that will protect whoever carries the bag with them. The gris-gris bag represents the hybrid religious traditions practiced by Jojo’s family. It also denotes Mam and Pop’s love for Jojo and their desire to protect him through both ordinary and supernatural means.

Pop has asked Jojo to help him slaughter a goat for the family to eat. Pop slits the goat’s throat and Jojo pulls out its innards. When Pop cuts into the goat’s stomach, Jojo is overwhelmed by the horrible smell that comes out. Jojo’s disgust at the inside of the goat’s body somewhat ironically causes him to throw up, thereby recreating the process of expelling the inner contents of the body. Jojo’s description of the “smell of death” suggests that he is repulsed by the proximity of life and death contained within the goat’s corpse. The smell is disgusting not only because of its association with death but because it is coming from something so recently alive.

☞ His maman and daddy avoided them census takes, never answered their questions right, changed the number of kids they had, never registered none of their births. Said them people came around, sniffing out that information to control them, to cage them like livestock.

**Related Characters:** Jojo (speaker), Pop (River)

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 17-18

### Explanation and Analysis

While Pop is cooking the goat, Jojo asks him to tell the story about Stag and Parchman. Pop explains that he and Stag have the same father, but he has other siblings with different fathers because his father died young. In this passage, Pop explains that Stag’s parents (*maman* is the French word for mother) refused to give correct information to census takers, implicitly linking the census to the legacy of slavery and racial injustice in the South. Under slavery, black people were indeed counted and categorized like “livestock,” turned into data in order to create profit for white slaveholders. Given this history, it is little wonder that Stag’s parents remain suspicious of census takers.

## Chapter 3: Jojo Quotes

☞ The only animal I saw in front of me was Pop, Pop with his straight shoulders and his tall back, his pleading eyes the only thing that spoke to me in that moment and told me what he said without words: *I love you, boy. I love you.*

**Related Characters:** Jojo (speaker), Pop (River)

**Related Themes:**   



## QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Scribner edition of *Sing, Unburied, Sing* published in 2017.

### Chapter 1: Jojo Quotes

☞ It's the smell of death, the rot coming from something just alive, something hot with blood and life. I grimace, wanting to make Kayla's stink face, the face she makes when she's angry or impatient; to everyone else, it looks like she's smelled something nasty: her green eyes squinting, her nose a mushroom, her twelve tiny toddler teeth showing through her open mouth. I want to make that face because something about scrunching up my nose and squeezing the smell away might lessen it, might cut off that stink of death. I know it's the stomach and intestines, but all I can see is Kayla's stink face and the soft eye of the goat and then I can't hold myself still and watch no more, then I'm out the door of the shed and I'm throwing up in the grass outside.

**Related Characters:** Jojo (speaker), Kayla (Michaela)

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 6

### Explanation and Analysis

**Page Number:** 61

### Explanation and Analysis

Leonie has woken Jojo and Kayla up early to begin the drive to Parchman. When Jojo hugs Pop goodbye, he holds him tight, thinking “He’s my Pop.” As they drive away, Jojo looks back at Pop and sees him as an animal. Comparing people to animals can sometimes be a demeaning gesture, but it is clear that Jojo doesn’t mean it this way. Indeed, Jojo’s framing of Pop as an animal is linked to his perception of Pop’s profound, unconditional love for him. This contradicts the assumption that animals do not feel love as humans do; indeed, it suggests that animals and humans feel the same kind of love, and that this is part of what connects them.

Jojo’s perception of Pop as an animal is also linked to the fact that Pop is expressing himself without using words. Throughout the novel there are moments in which Jojo is able to understand the thoughts of both humans and animals without hearing them spoken aloud. This disrupts the separation of humans and animals based on their different capacities for language.

## Chapter 4: Leonie Quotes

☝☝ *How you think I paid for all my trips up to Bishop? From tips? She shook her head and snorted. You better take advantage. I hear them four words over and over again when we get in the car and I watch Misty put the package in the pocket under the floorboards. You better take advantage. She said them words as though decisions have no consequences, when, of course, it’s been easier for her. The way she said it, take advantage, made me want to slap her. Her freckles, her thin pink lips, her blond hair, the stubborn milkiness of her skin; how easy had it been for her, her whole life, to make the world a friend to her?*

**Related Characters:** Leonie (speaker), Bishop, Misty

**Related Themes:** 

**Page Number:** 91

### Explanation and Analysis

On the drive up to Parchman, Misty and Leonie stop at the house of a white couple and their son to pick up meth. At the beginning of the next chapter, Leonie explains that Misty pressured her into using the trip to transport drugs. Misty notes that she was able to pay for her trips to visit Bishop in Parchman by transporting drugs on the way. In this passage, Leonie feels a burning sense of resentment toward Misty on account of Misty’s white privilege. Although both women

are poor drug users with incarcerated boyfriends, Misty’s whiteness allows her to escape the “consequences” of her actions to a far greater degree than Leonie.

In suggesting that it is easy for Misty to “make the world a friend to her,” Leonie implicitly points out that, as a black woman, the world is hostile to her. This helps to explain Leonie’s anger and cruelty. Rather than being a naturally cruel person, Leonie has been embittered by her experience of racism.

## Chapter 5: Jojo Quotes

☝☝ She ain’t Mam. She ain’t Pop. She ain’t never healed nothing or grown nothing in her life, and she don’t know.

**Related Characters:** Jojo (speaker), Pop (River), Mam, Leonie

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 107

### Explanation and Analysis

Kayla has been vomiting nonstop, and Leonie has decided to try and heal her with herbs. However, she wasn’t able to find the milkweed or wild strawberry leaves that are supposed to cure an upset stomach, so she is using blackberry leaves instead. Jojo is vehemently against Leonie’s decision to try and naturally cure Kayla. He believes that, unlike Mam and Pop, Leonie is incapable of healing or growing things. Overall, the novel supports Jojo’s view. Leonie makes an effort to care and heal the people around her several times, but these attempts—though well-intentioned—almost all backfire. In this sense, the book implies that some people are naturally more capable of providing care than others.

☝☝ I lay there until I can’t no more, and then I carry Kayla into the bathroom and stick my finger down her throat and make her throw up. She fights me, hitting at my arms, crying against my hand, sobbing but not making no words, but I do it three times, make her vomit over my hand, hot as her little body, three times, all of it red and smelling sweet, until I’m crying and she’s shrieking. I turn off the light and go back into the room and wipe her with my shirt and lay in the bed with her, scared that Leonie’s going to walk in and find all that red throw-up in the bathroom, find out I made Kayla throw up Leonie’s potion. But nobody comes.

**Related Characters:** Jojo (speaker), Leonie, Kayla (Michaela)

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 118

### Explanation and Analysis

At Al's house, Leonie has cooked up the blackberry plant, mixed it with food coloring and sugar, and made Kayla drink it. While Leonie, Misty, and Al are sitting out on the back porch, Jojo decides to make Kayla throw up the potion. The graphic description of this incident emphasizes how difficult it was for Jojo to have to force Kayla to be sick, particularly given the fact that he devotes all his time and energy to caring for her. Indeed, this passage illuminates the way in which caring for someone can sometimes require doing things that are painful or unpleasant to the person. This idea resurfaces in a more dramatic form when Pop decides to kill Richie in order to save Richie from being tortured and lynched by the Parchman guards.

“All the birds go bye,” Kayla says, and then she leans forward and rubs my face with both hands, and for a second I think she's going to tell me something amazing, some secret, something come from God Himself.

**Related Characters:** Kayla (Michaela) (speaker), Jojo

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 127

### Explanation and Analysis

Jojo, Kayla, Leonie, and Misty have finally arrived at Parchman and picked up Michael. In the parking lot, Kayla points out birds to Jojo, but Jojo can't see them. Jojo's confusion over the meaning of Kayla's words suggests that Kayla has a special kind of intuition that Jojo is not able to access. Although she is only three and cannot talk properly yet, Kayla seems to possess a profound spiritual knowledge, perhaps partly *because* she is so young. In some religious traditions, children are seen as being close to God because they have not been alive for long, and thus are close to the state of being that precedes life. It is perhaps for this reason that Jojo believes Kayla is about to tell him a secret from “God Himself.”

## Chapter 6: Richie Quotes

There had always been bad blood between dogs and Black people: they were bred adversaries--slaves running from the slobbering hounds, and then the convict man dodging them.

**Related Characters:** Richie (speaker)

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 138

### Explanation and Analysis

Richie has just found Jojo, who he immediately knows is Pop's grandson. Richie recalls his time in Parchman, noting that the white people there didn't like the fact that Pop was put in charge of the dogs. On the other hand, the arrangement was also not ideal from Richie and Pop's perspective either, as there has historically been “bad blood” between black people and dogs. This passage is another example of the way in which slavery haunts the present world of the novel. Although slavery may have been abolished, its legacy is still a very real part of society, emphasized by the similarities between Parchman and a slave plantation.

## Chapter 7: Leonie Quotes

It feels good to be mean, to speak past the baby I can't hit and let that anger touch another. The one I'm never good enough for. Never Mama for. Just Leonie, a name wrapped around the same disappointed syllables I've heard from Mama, from Pop, even from Given, my whole fucking life.

**Related Characters:** Leonie (speaker), Pop (River), Mam, Jojo, Kayla (Michaela)

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 147

### Explanation and Analysis

Having picked up Michael from Parchman, Leonie, Misty, and the kids make another stop at Al's house. Leonie puts Jojo and Kayla in the bath and scrubs Kayla hard while snapping cruelly at Jojo. This passage explores the way in which Leonie and Jojo's relationship has become a vicious cycle of disappointment, resentment, and cruelty. Both mother and son fail to live up to the expectations of the other, and resent each other for it. This encourages them to behave cruelly to one another, thereby further

disappointing the other. Of course, it is one thing for Jojo to act this way, considering he is only 13. The fact that Leonie reciprocates in the same manner highlights her own essential childishness.

☝ This is a miracle, I think, so I close my eyes and ignore Given-not-Given, who is sitting there with a sad look on his face, mouth in a soft frown, and think of Michael, real Michael, and wonder if we had another baby, if it would look more like him than Michaela. If we had another baby, we could get it right.

**Related Characters:** Leonie (speaker), Kayla (Michaela), Michael, Given

**Related Themes:**    

**Page Number:** 150

### Explanation and Analysis

At Al's house, all four adults get high and Leonie and Michael have sex. Afterward, Leonie sees Given in the room. She and Michael begin to have sex again; she hopes Given will go away but he doesn't, and thus she chooses to simply ignore him. Despite Leonie's ambivalence about motherhood, in the moment of having sex with Michael she experiences a utopian flash of feeling, imagining that if they have another baby they "could get it right."

Disturbingly, Leonie frames getting it "right" as having a baby that looks more like Michael, and thus more white than her real children. Of course, it is possible to interpret Leonie's desire for a child who looks like Michael as simply a manifestation of her deep love for him. At the same time, this passage makes clear that Leonie's wild, impassioned love for Michael is easily blurred with a love of his whiteness, which damages her relationship to herself and her children.

☝ Sometimes I think it done changed. And then I sleep and wake up, and it ain't changed none.

**Related Characters:** Richie (speaker)

**Related Themes:**    

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 171

### Explanation and Analysis

When the family gets pulled over by the police, Richie warns Jojo that "they going to chain you." After they are let go, Richie and Jojo talk about Pop and Parchman. In this passage, Richie explains that sometimes it seems as if Parchman (or the racist American justice system in general) has changed, but that in reality it hasn't actually changed. Life at Parchman may be slightly different in the present than it was in Richie's time, but the principle of arbitrary, unjust, and violent incarceration remains the same. This in turn connects Parchman and mass incarceration to the legacy of slavery. As Richie explains later in the book, time is not linear, but exists all at once. This helps illuminate the way in which Parchman remains essentially the same over decades and even centuries.

### Chapter 9: Richie Quotes

☝ I know Jojo is innocent because I can read it in the unmarked swell of him: his smooth face, ripe with baby fat; his round, full stomach; his hands and feet soft as his younger sister's. He looks even younger when he falls asleep. His baby sister has flung herself across him, and both of them slumber like young feral cats: open mouths, splayed arms and legs, exposed throats. When I was thirteen, I knew much more than him. I knew that metal shackles could grow into the skin. I knew that leather could split flesh like butter. I knew that hunger could hurt, could scoop me hollow as a gourd, and that seeing my siblings starving could hollow out a different part of me, too.

**Related Characters:** Richie (speaker), Kayla (Michaela), Jojo

**Related Themes:**     

**Page Number:** 185

### Explanation and Analysis

Richie has told Jojo that he doesn't yet understand love, and that he doesn't know anything about time. At the beginning of the next chapter, Richie watches Jojo sleep and concludes that Jojo is far more innocent than Richie himself had been at the age of 13. Although both Richie and Jojo face challenges that force them to be mature beyond their years, in this passage Richie identifies the key differences between them, which are that Jojo's life is full of love, and also that Jojo has not faced the direct racist violence and starvation that Richie has.

While it's true that Jojo is forced to take on a parental role

with Kayla, here Richie suggests that Jojo and Kayla's closeness also helps to preserve Jojo's innocence. Through his relationship to Kayla, Jojo is able to in some sense remain a child himself, shielded from the horrors of the adult world Richie describes.

☝ I didn't understand time, either, when I was young. How could I know that after I died, Parchman would pull me from the sky? How could I imagine Parchman would pull me to it and refuse to let go? And how could I conceive that Parchman was past, present, and future all at once? That the history and sentiment that carved the place out of the wilderness would show me that time is a vast ocean, and that everything is happening at once?

**Related Characters:** Richie (speaker), Kayla (Michaela), Jojo

**Related Themes:**  

**Page Number:** 186

### Explanation and Analysis

Watching Jojo sleep, Richie has reflected that Jojo is far more innocent than he himself was at 13. Yet despite this lack of innocence, there were still many things Richie did not understand about the world, such as the true nature of time. This passage explains the conception of time at work in the novel. The idea that Parchman is "past, present, and future" might seem very hopeless and dark. Most people would like to think that brutal institutions like prisons are not permanent. However, another way to interpret this statement is as an acknowledgment that suffering and injustice can never simply be confined to the past. They haunt the present and should never be forgotten or dismissed as irrelevant.

## Chapter 10: Leonie Quotes

☝ We are all sinking, and there are manta rays gliding beneath us and sharks jostling us. I am trying to keep everyone above water, even as I struggle to stay afloat. I sink below the waves and push Jojo upward so he can stay above the waves and breathe, but then Michaela sinks and I push her up, and Michael sinks so I shove him to the air as I sink and struggle, but they won't stay up: they want to sink like stones. I thrust them up toward the surface, to the fractured sky so they can live, but they keep slipping from my hands. It is so real that I can feel their sodden clothes against my palms. I am failing them. We are all drowning.

**Related Characters:** Leonie (speaker), Michael, Kayla (Michaela), Jojo

**Related Themes:**    

**Page Number:** 195

### Explanation and Analysis

After she swallows the baggie of meth and Michael helps her to vomit, Leonie falls asleep. She dreams that she is floating on a raft in the sea along with Michael, Jojo, and Kayla. Her dream is an obvious manifestation of the anxiety Leonie feels over her role as a parent and partner. In particular, Leonie feels that in attending to one member of her family, she is inherently neglecting the others, leaving them to suffer. Indeed, this reflects the idea repeated throughout the novel that Leonie's relationship with Michael gets in the way of her being a good mother to their children.

At the same time, it is possible that Leonie misperceives what would happen if she addressed the needs of her children before the needs of Michael. Jojo and Kayla are, after all, very young, and need Leonie far more than Michael needs her. Perhaps Leonie is wrong to think that if she takes care of Jojo and Kayla first, Michael will be left to drown.

## Chapter 11: Jojo Quotes

☝ *I actually cried*, Michael told the water. He seemed ashamed to say that, but he went on anyway. How the dolphins were dying off, how whole pods of them washed up on the beaches in Florida, in Louisiana, in Alabama and Mississippi: oil-burnt, sick with lesions, hollowed out from the insides. And then Michael said something I'll never forget: *Some scientists for BP said this didn't have nothing to do with the oil, that sometimes this what happens to animals: they die for unexpected reasons. Sometimes a lot of them. Sometimes all at once.* And then Michael looked at me and said: *And when that scientist said that, I thought about humans. Because humans is animals.* And the way he looked at me that night told me he wasn't just thinking about any humans; he was thinking about me.

**Related Characters:** Jojo, Michael (speaker)

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 226

### Explanation and Analysis

Back at home, Michael makes bacon for Kayla and Jojo's

breakfast and reminisces about the time he and Jojo went fishing together. Jojo recalls that, during that trip, Michael opened up about the explosion on the oil rig and its aftermath. This passage is one of the rare glimpses the reader is afforded into Michael's perspective. It reveals that he can be (perhaps surprisingly) sensitive and loving to Jojo. Clearly, Michael has been traumatized by his time on the rig, forced to acknowledge the fragility of human life. Ironically, this has led him to behave in a reckless, neglectful manner through his drug abuse.

☞ I ain't never have the talent for it. Seeing the dead. I could read people, read the future or the past in they bodies. Know what was wrong or needed by their songs: in the plants, in the animals, too. But never saw the dead. Wanted it so bad after Given died--

**Related Characters:** Mam (speaker), Given

**Related Themes:**    

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 237

### Explanation and Analysis

Jojo has asked Mam where she will go after she dies and if she will become a ghost. Mam has assured him she probably won't become a ghost because she did not have a violent death. She asks Jojo if he's ever seen a ghost, and Jojo lies, saying that he hasn't. In this passage Mam explains that her special gifts do not extend to the ability to see the dead. Instead, Mam's capabilities are focused on care and healing--with life rather than death. Mam's words reassert the idea that plants, people, animals, the living and the dead are all united, with this unity symbolized by song. However, this fundamental unity does not mean that everyone can access other beings. For example, Mam cannot see Given after he dies even though she desperately wants to.

## Chapter 13: Jojo Quotes

☞ He ran so fast. Sometimes I had to follow him by sound. Him talking to hisself the whole time. Not hisself. His mama. Telling her he was coming home. That he wanted her to sing for him. *Sing for your son*, he said. *Sing*.

**Related Characters:** Richie (speaker), Blue

**Related Themes:**  

**Related Symbols:** 

**Page Number:** 252

### Explanation and Analysis

At Richie's insistence, Jojo has asked Pop to tell the story of Richie's death. As Pop tells the story, Richie chimes in, explaining how he escaped Parchman along with a mentally unstable inmate named Blue. Before fleeing, Blue raped one of the female inmates. In this passage Richie describes running with Blue and hearing Blue speaking aloud to his mother. This detail humanizes Blue, reminding us that while he may be a rapist, he is still a person like any other, with the same fundamental desires to be united with his mother and hear her sing. Indeed, the mention of singing is significant, as throughout the novel singing represents the fundamental unity of all living things.

☞ I said: *It's going to be all right, Richie*. He said. I heeled the dogs. Held out my hands to him, right side out. Moved slow. Soothed him. Said: *We gone get you out of this. We gone get you away from here*. Touched his arm: he was burning up. *I'm going home, Riv?* he asked. I squatted down next to him, the dogs steady yipping, and I looked at him. He had baby hair on the edge of his scalp, Jojo. Little fine hair he'd had since he sucked at his mama's tit. *Yes, Richie. I'm a take you home*, I said. And then I took the shank I kept in my boot and I punched it one time into his neck. In the big vein on his right side. Held him till the blood stopped spurting. Him looking at me, mouth open. A child. Tears and snot all over his face. Shocked and scared, until he was still.

**Related Characters:** Richie, Pop (River) (speaker), Jojo

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 255

### Explanation and Analysis

Pop is telling Jojo the story of what happened when Richie tried to escape Parchman. Pop and the guards from Parchman searched for Blue and Richie and eventually found them, at which point the guards cut off pieces of Blue's body and skinned him alive. Knowing they would do the same to Richie when given the chance, Pop decided to kill Richie himself so as to spare him any further fear and suffering. This heart-rending passage returns to the idea

that sometimes the most loving thing to do for someone can actually be an act of harm. In this sense, this passage is associated with the scenes in which Jojo forces Kayla to throw up and Michael does the same to Leonie.

This passage also plays on the double meaning of “home” that occurs throughout the novel. Richie escapes Parchman hoping to go home to his family and the house he grew up in. However, when he and Blue are caught, there is no longer any chance of that happening. Instead, Pop promises Richie that he will send him “home” in a different sense—to the afterlife, where Richie will one day get to be part of the “song” that unites all beings. In this way, Pop’s act of murder is an act of love.

☛ I washed my hands every day, Jojo. But that damn blood ain't never come out. Hold my hands up to my face, I can smell it under my skin. Smelled it when the warden and sergeant came up on us, the dogs yipping and licking blood from their muzzles. They'd torn his throat out, hamstringed him. Smelled it when the warden told me I'd done good. Smelled it the day they let me out on account I'd led the dogs that caught and killed Richie. Smelled it when I finally found his mama after weeks of searching, just so I could tell her Richie was dead and she could look at me with a stone face and shut the door on me.

**Related Characters:** Pop (River) (speaker), Richie, Jojo

**Related Themes:**   

**Page Number:** 255

### Explanation and Analysis

Pop has told Jojo the story about what happened when Richie escaped Parchman. Eventually Richie and Blue were tracked down, and the guards from Parchman cut off parts of Blue’s body and skinned him alive. In order to spare Richie the same fate, Pop stabbed him. In this passage Pop describes the torment of guilt that has followed him ever since he killed Richie. Even though Pop seems to feel assured that he did the right thing, the visceral memory of stabbing Richie—symbolized by the smell of blood—has

haunted him ever since. Pop’s guilt is linked to the fact that he was able to leave Parchman because of Richie’s death, and also to the more general fact that, while he was able to return home and carry on with the rest of his life, Richie never saw his mother or his home again.

## Chapter 15: Jojo Quotes

☛ And the branches are full. They are full with ghosts, two or three, all the way up to the top, to the feathered leaves. There are women and men and boys and girls. Some of them near to babies. They crouch, looking at me. Black and brown and the closest near baby, smoke white. None of them reveal their deaths, but I see it in their eyes, their great black eyes. They perch like birds, but look as people. They speak with their eyes: *He raped me and suffocated me until I died I put my hands up and he shot me eight times she locked me in the shed and starved me to death while I listened to my babies playing with her in the yard they came in my cell in the middle of the night and they hung me they found I could read and they dragged me out to the barn and gouged my eyes before they beat me*

**Related Characters:** Jojo (speaker)

**Related Themes:**    

**Page Number:** 279

### Explanation and Analysis

Jojo explains that, contrary to both of their expectations, Richie was not able to move on and “go home” after learning about how he died from Pop. Instead, Richie remains a ghost on earth. At the very end of the novel, Jojo describes a large group of ghosts who sit like birds on the tree in his backyard. These ghosts are almost all black people who had violent, brutal deaths, and this emphasizes the way in which the South and America in general is haunted by the legacy of slavery and extreme racist violence. Not only does this brutality exist in the present, but the spirits of its victims literally haunt the world of the novel, pleading for living humans like Jojo to acknowledge their suffering.



## 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.

## CHAPTER 1: JOJO

It is Jojo's 13th birthday, and his grandfather, Pop, has asked him to help him kill a goat. As Jojo's narrative begins, his sister Kayla is still asleep, as is Jojo's grandmother, Mam, who is undergoing chemotherapy for cancer. Jojo and Pop go outside to the shed and Pop unties the "unlucky" goat. Jojo tells the reader that his other grandfather, Big Joseph, is white. Jojo lives with Pop and has only met Big Joseph twice. Big Joseph is the father of Jojo's father, Michael, who is in prison. Back in the narrative, Pop tackles the goat and slits its throat and stomach; he tells Jojo to pull its insides out. Jojo dumps the goat's skin into a bucket. When Pop cuts the goat's stomach open it emits a terrible smell, and Jojo runs out of the shed to vomit.

After Jojo vomits, Pop tells him that he heard Kayla crying, so Jojo goes back inside, but he finds that Kayla is still asleep. Jojo then recalls happier times in his childhood, when he still called Leonie "Mama" and Michael "Pop," before Leonie started using drugs. Jojo explains that Michael was imprisoned three years ago, before Kayla was born. He returns to the shed, where he and Pop witness two goats mating. Jojo thinks about his parents' relationship, which is passionate and tumultuous.

Jojo remembers a time after Mam was first diagnosed with cancer, when Pop left him alone with Leonie, who then drove away herself. Jojo heard Pop's brother, Stag, walking past and singing. According to Mam, Stag is "sick in the head". Frightened, Jojo went outside with the animals, where he stepped on a jagged can lid and screamed. When Pop came back he pulled the lid out and shouted at Leonie for leaving Jojo alone. That was when Jojo first called Leonie by her first name.

*The opening of the novel, which is told from Jojo's perspective, introduces the characters and setting in a somewhat scattered way, and presents some of the racial dynamics of the family. It also immediately introduces the motif of vomiting. Jojo is accustomed to being around animals, as he lives in a rural area, but he is still disgusted by the visceral experience of the goat's slaughtered body. Note the similarity between the two bodily processes described here: Jojo pulls the insides of the goat out, which causes him to vomit--another way in which the inside of the body becomes external.*



*Pop's protection of Jojo is not always visible to Jojo himself, in part because he is only 13. Although we can't be sure, it seems obvious that Pop didn't actually hear Kayla crying, but sent Jojo back inside because it was clear he couldn't handle this stage of slaughtering the goat. However, Pop pretends otherwise so as not to embarrass Jojo. Note that the mating goats make Jojo think of Leonie and Michael, in an early example of the complex relationship between animals/nature and humanity in the novel.*



*In this recollection, the emotional "wound" created by Leonie's neglect of Jojo is symbolized by the physical wound Jojo receives when he steps on the can lid. Throughout the novel, physical ailments often represent the characters' internal emotional trauma. The fact that Jojo now calls Leonie by her first name shows how distant they are emotionally, and how Jojo has been forced at a young age to like an adult and peer to his mother, rather than a child.*



Back in the present, Jojo asks Pop to tell him about **Parchman**. Pop explains that he and Stag had the same father, who died young. When they were kids, Stag was fun-loving and rebellious; Pop thinks this is because Stag felt “dead inside.” One day when Pop was 15, Stag got into a fight with some white men at a bar. The white men beat Stag, then followed him home, tied up Stag and Pop, and drove them to Parchman. Pop recalls that the youngest person at Parchman then was Richie. At this point Kayla wakes up. Jojo gives her some juice and she asks him to sing to her. After Jojo is done singing, he takes out a playset for Kayla and asks Pop to keep telling the story.

Pop explains that Richie was 12 years old, and had been sent to **Parchman** for stealing food, as had many of the other inmates. Parchman didn’t seem like a prison at first, because it was structured as a camp with open fields. In reality, Parchman was controlled by inmate guards called “trusty shooters” and a sergeant who was descended from a “long line of overseers.” Stag was convicted of assault, and Pop of harboring a fugitive. The brothers were put into separate camps and forced to work the cotton field from sunrise to sunset in sweltering heat. When Richie arrived, he was crying silently. He later explained that he had nine younger siblings and stole food to feed them.

Jojo confesses that he does not understand his mother, and notes that Leonie hates the fact that the rest of the family call Kayla “Kayla,” rather than Michaela, because she named her after Michael. Leonie arrives at the house—she has bought a cake for Jojo’s birthday. She explains that the store didn’t have any birthday cakes, and Jojo realizes she’s bought a baby shower cake. The family **sings** “Happy Birthday,” but it is really only Leonie singing; Kayla doesn’t know the song, Mam is too sick to sing, and Pop only mouths the words. The phone rings, and Leonie answers it. Jojo realizes it is Michael, telling her that he is coming home from prison.

*Like many grandfathers and grandsons, Pop and Jojo bond over Pop’s stories of his past. However, the story Pop tells is notably dark, indicating that the world they live in is harsh and violent. Jojo may only be 13, but when Pop was just two years older he was sent to prison for no reason other than racism. Even given Jojo’s own experience of racism, family problems, and drug abuse, he has a sheltered life compared to Pop.*



*Parchman represents the profound racial injustice that continues to shape life in the South, highlighting how this injustice is a close continuation of slavery. At only 12 years old, Richie is imprisoned simply because his family is too poor to afford food. Meanwhile, the labor that inmates are forced to do at Parchman is almost indistinguishable from slavery.*



*Leonie’s failure to buy the correct cake is a small instance revealing the larger issue of her deficiencies as a mother. The fact that she buys a baby shower cake specifically is also significant. During a baby shower, everyone congratulates and celebrates the mother-to-be, and there is a sense of hope for the arrival of the new child. In buying the cake, it is as if Leonie (perhaps unconsciously) wishes to return to this moment—before she had children at all.*



## CHAPTER 2: LEONIE

After Leonie (who narrates this chapter) gets off the phone with Michael, she goes to work an extra shift at the Cold Drink, a nearby bar. When the shift is over she goes back to the trailer where her friend and colleague Misty lives. The two women snort cocaine and Misty asks if Leonie is happy that Michael is coming home. Leonie had been thrilled at first, but later Jojo's look of disappointment when she was leaving had reminded her of her failings as a mother, and she feels sad. Every time Leonie gets high, she sees a vision of her older brother, Given. This time Misty notices her staring. Misty (who is white) has black boyfriend named Bishop, and this fact helped the two women to bond quickly. That evening, Leonie feels like Misty is her "best friend" and her "only friend." Misty says she can tell Leonie is seeing things; Leonie denies it, but Misty knows she's lying. Misty says it isn't normal to hallucinate on cocaine.

The next day Leonie and Pop argue about Leonie bringing the kids to pick Michael up from **Parchman**. When Leonie got her period for the first time, Mam told her that some women in their family have the gift of supernatural intuition. This gift helps them to take care of the people around them. In her youth, Mam would help women give birth, nurse the sick, and prepare **gris-gris bags** to protect people, even though few seek her help in her old age. In those days Mam had always told Leonie to pray to "the Mothers." She said she thought Leonie might be able to "hear what the world **sings**."

Leonie throws Jojo's day-old birthday cake in the trash. Pop says Leonie has to tell Mam if she's going to take the kids to pick up Michael. When Leonie tells her, Mam asks if Misty is coming too. Misty's boyfriend Bishop is also in **Parchman**, so she and Leonie usually drive up to visit them together. Mam tells Leonie: "You love who you love. You do what you want." Leonie realizes Mam is dying.

In his senior year of high school, Leonie's brother Given was a dedicated football player who was friends with both his white and black teammates. One day he went hunting with his white teammates, even though Pop warned him against it. Given bet Michael's cousin that he could kill a buck with a bow before Michael's cousin could hit one with a rifle. Given won the bet, and Michael's cousin shot Given and killed him. Later Michael's uncle slapped his son for this, saying, "This ain't the old days." Big Joseph called the police and told them it was a hunting accident. Michael's cousin was sentenced to three years in **Parchman**. Mam now plants a tree every year on the anniversary of Given's death.

*The second chapter is told from Leonie's point of view, as the novel frequently switches perspective. Leonie's relationships with the people around her are all tainted in one way or another. She is separated from Michael because he is incarcerated, and it is already clear that her relationship with Michael is somehow at odds with her ability to be a good mother. The fact that Misty is both her "best friend" and her "only friend" points to Leonie's isolation, which--given the comment about Misty's boyfriend being black--could in part be due to racism. Furthermore, Leonie and Misty's friendship seems to primarily revolve around their mutual drug use.*



*This passage introduces the oppositional differences between Mam and Leonie. Mam has special capabilities that allow her to heal and care for people, a gift she links back to a community of women when she tells Leonie to pray to "the Mothers." Leonie, meanwhile, seems to have inherited neither this special gift nor even a "normal" maternal instinct.*



*Mam seemingly accepts Leonie's decisions because she is too weak to fight and because she knows she is not going to be around for much longer. She sees that Leonie's decisions are destructive, but chooses not to fight her on it.*



*Given's tragic death emphasizes the extent to which the world of the novel is shaped by profound racism. The fact that Michael's uncle told his son "This ain't the old days" is a reminder that in the past, white people could hurt and kill black people with little consequence--yet Michael's cousin's three-year sentence at Parchman suggests that perhaps the "old days" aren't yet over.*



Mam explains that some women with the “gift” can see dead people, but that Mam can only dream of seeing Given again. Leonie saw him for the first time three years ago, after doing a line of cocaine. At the time, she was at a party and was pregnant with Kayla. Given tried to speak to her, but she couldn’t hear him. Leonie didn’t tell Mam that she’d seen him.

Leonie drives up to leave a note at Michael’s parents’ house to say she is going to pick Michael up. After Michael’s cousin had killed Given, Michael spoke to Leonie for the first time. He came up to her in school, apologized for what his cousin did, and asked if she wanted to go fishing with him. She agreed. While they sat fishing together, Michael implied that his father was racist and wouldn’t want the two of them to be spending time together. Back in the present, Leonie gets to Michael’s parents’ house and sees Big Joseph out mowing the lawn. Leonie turns the car around and, as she drives away, gives Big Joseph the finger.

### CHAPTER 3: JOJO

The next morning Leonie wakes Jojo and Kayla early and hurries them out the door. Misty is already waiting in the car. Jojo hugs Pop goodbye. They drive for a while, and Jojo stares at Misty. They stop for gas; Leonie gives Jojo money and tells him to pay for gas and buy her a coke. Jojo asks for one himself, but Leonie just tells him to bring her change. Back in the car, Jojo catches Misty’s eye in the mirror and she winks at him. Mam taught Jojo about sex when he was eleven. Jojo was painfully embarrassed, but Mam forced him to pay attention. After having the “sex talk” with Mam, Jojo asked Pop to tell him more of the **Parchman** story. Pop describes the agony of working in the field all day, saying it was like “being made into an animal.”

Back in the present, Jojo discovers a **gris-gris bag** that has been placed alongside the things he packed for the journey. Inside is a white feather, an animal tooth, a small rock, and a piece of paper that reads: “Keep this close.” It could be either Mam or Pop’s handwriting. Jojo starts thinking about **Parchman** again. Pop describes Parchman as “mass murder.” He once told Jojo that there was “spirit in everything” and that gris-gris bags help to achieve “a balance of spirit.” Pop explains that Richie was small and weak, which made it difficult to work the fields, so Pop tried to do some of Richie’s work for him.

*Leonie’s ability to see Given but not hear him highlights her disconnection from the world around her. Although she is a daughter, mother, partner, and friend, the troubled nature of Leonie’s relationships leaves her isolated.*



*Depending on how you see it, Michael and Leonie’s relationship is either dark and disturbing or hopeful and romantic. The fact that they get together immediately after Michael’s cousin murders Given suggests that their relationship is a form of healing after an act of hatred. However, the reality is that the couple are then still left facing the brutal racism of Michael’s family.*



*Leonie’s request for a coke for herself emphasizes her failings as a mother; she feeds herself before her children, and doesn’t seem to care about Jojo’s needs. As a result of Leonie’s neglect, it was left to Mam and Pop to do the work of raising Jojo, including things like teaching him about sex. In many ways Jojo is still innocent; at the same time, he has been forced to grow up quickly due to his mother’s neglect.*



*Just as Mam taught Jojo about sex, Pop teaches Jojo about the spiritual workings of the world. The gris-gris bag is a symbol of Jojo’s grandparents’ care for and harmony with the world around them. This is all the more significant in light of the challenges both Mam and Pop face. In spite of Pop’s traumatic past and Mam’s current battles with cancer, they still manage to love and care for Jojo.*



One day while Pop and Richie were doing laundry, Kinnie Wagner rode past. Kinnie was a notorious white man who was put in charge of the prison's dogs even though he'd previously escaped **Parchman** and been brought back. One of the black men holding the dogs tripped and fell, and Kinnie asked Pop to take over. From that point on, Pop rode with Kinnie, the other men, and the dogs, sometimes traveling deep into the forest to catch runaways.

Back in the car, Misty tells Leonie that she has to stop to see some friends for a minute before getting back on the road. They pull up to a house with a little white boy sitting outside. Misty tells Leonie to honk, and a white woman (Carlotta) steps outside. Misty gets out and hugs her. Inside, Kayla says "hi" to the little boy, but he looks at her "like she's his dog." Misty asks Carlotta how business is going, and if she's still "got" her. The woman assures her that she does, and that her husband, Fred, won't be long.

The little boy starts playing Grand Theft Auto, crashes his car, and punches the TV until it cracks. Carlotta shouts from the other room, but he picks up a baseball bat and smashes the TV. Carlotta rushes in, picks him up, and beats him with the bat. When she is done, the boy curls up crying. Jojo runs outside to pee. He sees a shed with a white man sitting inside. The man is working with buckets, beakers, and tubes; Jojo recognizes the smell from when Michael lived with them and realizes that he is cooking meth. Jojo goes back inside the house, and they leave soon after. Misty takes a plastic bag with them into the car.

## CHAPTER 4: LEONIE

Leonie reveals that Misty encouraged her to transport drugs on their trip to **Parchman**. Misty pointed out that it would pay for the trip and allow Leonie and Michael to get a place of their own. Even though Leonie agreed, she resents how easy it has been for Misty to break the law without consequence. Before Michael went to prison he'd worked on an oil rig that blew up. Eleven of the men Michael worked with died in the accident, and when he came home he started using drugs. Misty tells Leonie that the first time she transported drugs she was nervous, too, but that as time has gone on it's gotten easier.

*Pop's special connection with animals gave him an advantage while at Parchman, as he was able to escape the back-breaking work in the cotton fields in order to ride with Kinnie. On the other hand, catching runaways is a particularly brutal and traumatic form of work.*



*Racism is so deeply ingrained in the world of the novel that even white four-year-olds exhibit signs of it. Just as Pop and the other black inmates in Parchman were treated like animals, so is Kayla treated like an animal by the little white boy who she has only just met.*



*Jojo's world is characterized by brutality. There is a clear connection between the violence of the video game, the little boy's act of violence in smashing the TV, and his mother's violent beating of him as punishment. However, there is also a subtler connection to the man cooking meth outside, which Jojo notes is the reason why Michael was sent to prison. Like more direct forms of violence, poverty, drug abuse, and incarceration have a wounding effect.*



*Leonie and Misty lead very similar lives, but Misty has escaped much of Leonie's suffering simply due to the fact that she is white. Although Leonie feels close to Misty, the comparative ease with which Misty moves through the world becomes a block in their relationship. Leonie cannot help but feel jealous and resentful of Misty, thereby once again creating a sense of disconnection between the friends.*



Leonie looks at Jojo in the backseat and thinks that he looks like Given, but more serious. Misty wants to drive past a courthouse that is apparently beautiful, but Leonie refuses. To her, the justice system is nothing but death and brutality. Later on the drive, Leonie realizes that Kayla is sick—she is crying and coughing, and eventually vomits. Jojo unbuckles her and cradles her in his arms. Leonie feels guilty and resentful that Jojo is more like a parent to Kayla than she is. They stop at a gas station, and Leonie buys Powerade. She tries to get Kayla to drink it but can't, and eventually has to hand her over to Jojo. As soon as Kayla drinks she vomits again. Periodically, Leonie tells Jojo to make Kayla drink, and each time she throws up once more.

They stop at another gas station and Leonie tries to buy nausea medicine for children, but the store doesn't stock any. When Leonie was young, Mam taught her how to use plants for healing purposes, but even at the time Leonie struggled to remember the specifics. Now, Leonie remembers that milkweed could help Kayla, and begins to search for it in the grass by the gas station. When Mam first found out she had cancer, she announced that she would cure it herself, but this ultimately did not work. Leonie knows she can use wild strawberry leaves instead of milkweed, but she can only find wild blackberries. She rips out the plants, unable to remember which part of them she is supposed to use.

## CHAPTER 5: JOJO

Jojo can see that Kayla needs to eat something and that she is suffering from intense stomach pain. He doesn't want Leonie to feed her the blackberry leaves. When Jojo was younger, Leonie bought him a betta fish, but when the sample of fish food ran out she didn't buy anymore even though Jojo kept asking her. Eventually, the fish died. In the present, Jojo tells Kayla a story about a rabbit to make her feel better, and in the middle of it realizes that she has fallen asleep. Jojo feels that Kayla is "her most animal self" at this moment. Eventually, they stop at another house and are welcomed in by the man inside, who is cooking spaghetti. Jojo feels desperately hungry.

*Here the motif of vomiting reappears in the text, and it is now Kayla, rather than Jojo, who is the sufferer. Kayla's illness is something of a mystery. It has no obvious cause and because Kayla is so young, none of the characters can ask her what might have caused it. Kayla's suffering is completely confusing to Leonie, whose attempts to care for her (by buying her Powerade) backfire. Jojo also doesn't know what is wrong with Kayla but he, unlike Leonie, is able to care for her based on instinct.*



*The novel is clear in suggesting that Mam's healing abilities are real and can have a tangible effect on the world. However, they do have limits, as shown by the fact that Mam is not able to cure her own cancer. Mam's natural form of healing also requires a special skill and nature in the person who practices it. The problem is not just that Leonie does not remember the specifics of which plants to use, but that she lacks the caring instincts that the other members of her family all possess.*



*Animals play a variety of different thematic roles in this passage. Leonie's inability to help Jojo care for his fish re-emphasizes her selfish and uncaring instinct. This is again contrasted with Jojo, whose story about the rabbit is a form of care for Kayla. Jojo's statement that Kayla is "her most animal self" indicates that there is something mysterious and frightening about animality. The similarity between humans and animals is a reminder of human mortality.*



The man, Al, is friendly and polite, and Jojo likes him already, although he notices that he smells a little strange. The adults listen to music and drink wine while Jojo sits with Kayla asleep on him. The meth Misty picked up from Fred and Carlotta falls out of her bag, and Al picks it up. Jojo learns that Al is Michael's lawyer, and seemingly Bishop's as well. Leonie cooks the blackberry plant and mixes it with food coloring and sugar. She tries to feed it to Kayla; at first Kayla resists, but she eventually gives in. Misty advises that Kayla is probably carsick and just needs to sleep it off. The adults go into the kitchen and then out to the back porch. While they are gone, Jojo forces Kayla to throw up.

Jojo tries to fall asleep, but can't stop thinking. When he was younger, he wanted a dog, but Pop could never keep dogs after his time in **Parchman**. In Parchman, Pop had tried to get Richie put to work on the dogs, too, but it didn't happen. Richie was once whipped for accidentally breaking his hoe, was forced to work with the wounds still bleeding and infected on his back. Kinnie Wagner eventually escaped Parchman. Pop was on the search team that went out to look for him, but the dogs were too attached to Kinnie to hunt for him.

In the morning (in the present narrative), Jojo notices that the adults haven't slept. They leave Al's house and get back in the car to continue their journey. Before long, they are at **Parchman** and suddenly reunited with Michael, who embraces Leonie before anyone else. In the parking lot, Michael and Leonie kiss passionately while Kayla points out birds to Jojo. However, Jojo can't see any. Jojo recalls Pop telling him that after Richie was whipped, he remained feverish, telling Pop that he dreamed of eating dirt. He then told Pop: "I'm going home." Kayla tells Jojo that the birds "go bye," then tells him that her stomach hurts.

Michael greets the kids, introducing himself to Kayla, and Jojo feels tense. Back in the car, Leonie takes out sandwiches that she must have made at Al's, and Jojo eats his so fast that he gets the hiccups. He thinks about Richie's dreams about eating dirt. Kayla still has a fever; Leonie says she looks better and that the blackberry must have helped, but Jojo knows she is lying. Suddenly Kayla throws up, and at that moment Jojo sees a skinny boy appear at the side of the car. Kayla points at him and shouts, "the bird," and the boy says: "I'm going home."

*Leonie tries to care for Kayla, but is too absorbed in her own needs and desires to do it properly. The fact that the adults go off to take drugs in the other room is a bad omen for Kayla's healing. Leonie's indulgence in meth highlights her destructiveness; her drug use, which could easily lead to illness and death, seems incompatible with the task of healing and caring for Kayla. Ironically, it is only by forcing Kayla to be sick that Jojo is able to care for her, suggesting that seemingly harmful acts can sometimes be necessary for healing.*



*Although it gave him an advantage in the short term, Pop's time working with the dogs in Parchman ultimately had a harmful effect, damaging Pop's otherwise harmonious relationship with animals. The story about Richie being whipped is another reminder of the strong similarities between life at Parchman and life under slavery.*



*The pain and trauma of being whipped seems to have had a transformative effect on Richie. Whereas before he attempted to survive life in Parchman, after being whipped he was determined to go home. Indeed, Pop's tale of Richie's delirium and confusing speech are directly reminiscent of Kayla, who—after being sick—begins talking about birds that Jojo can't see. The connection between these stories evokes a unity between past and present.*



*The contrast between the sandwiches and Kayla's repeated vomiting suggests that the family's efforts to heal together are doomed. Even though they are now reunited, everything is not as it should be. The boy who appears to Jojo and Kayla seems to be Richie. His claim to be going home connects him with the family's present journey back home from Parchman.*



## CHAPTER 6: RICHIE

Richie knows immediately that Jojo is River's (Pop's) child. He can tell from the way that Jojo tries to protect Kayla. Just after Richie died, he woke in a pine forest and found that "walking was like swimming." A white creature resembling a snake and a bird approached him and asked if he wanted to leave this place, to go "up and away... and around." Richie flew through the sky, following the snake-bird. He thought of River, who he sees as both his "big brother" and his "father." Richie wants to tell Jojo all his stories, but knows that he can't.

Richie notes that even though there is a bad history between black people and dogs, River was at ease with all animals, and the dogs behaved well for him. This was not true for Richie. Things got worse when the enormous white man nicknamed Hogjaw returned to **Parchman**. Hogjaw was a "killer" who had escaped Parchman once but was brought back. Richie wants to tell Jojo how River tried to save him "again and again." But Richie doesn't say anything; he decides to wait.

## CHAPTER 7: LEONIE

Jojo won't let go of Kayla; both children sit in the car covered in vomit. Leonie can tell that something has happened to Jojo, though she doesn't know what. They return to Al's house, and Michael thanks Al for everything he has done to help him. Al replies that it's his job and that he is "well compensated" for it. Leonie puts Kayla and Jojo's clothes in Al's washing machine and scrubs Kayla off in the bathtub, knowing that she is being too rough. Leonie wants to slap Kayla, who is wriggling, but knows that if she starts she won't be able to stop, so she leaves the room and slams the door behind her. She goes into the living room with Al, Misty, and Michael, and they all get high.

Michael and Leonie have sex, which Leonie describes as a transcendent, sacred experience. After they are finished, Leonie sees Given sitting in the room, but she tries to ignore him. She expects Given to disappear, but as she and Michael start having sex again Given stays in the room. Given shakes his head. Eventually, he disappears and Leonie returns to focus on Michael. Later, Leonie gazes at her children, who are sleeping folded into each other "as one." She wakes them up and they all get back in the car.

*For the first time we are given a point of view other than Leonie and Jojo, as Richie narrates this chapter. Just as Pop is more of a father to Jojo than a grandfather, so too did he have a parent-son relationship with Richie (though they were not biologically related at all). This emphasizes the idea that family is not created through biology, but instead is made through the act of care. At the same time, these connections can be severed by violence and death, leaving people lost and yearning for one another.*



*The bad history between black people and dogs emerges from the time of slavery. During this era, white people would use dogs to track runaways and to torture and kill enslaved people. This brutal legacy continued through the use of dogs by the police and lynch mobs.*



*Leonie is filled with anger at the world, and it is easy to take out that anger on her children, who are small and vulnerable. The fact that Leonie stops herself from hitting Kayla and instead leaves the room indicates that she does want to be a good mother and doesn't actually hate her children, but her own suffering is so overwhelming that she is incapable of managing it. She must isolate herself from her children in order to avoid harming them. Ironically, this isolation is of course itself a form of harm.*



*Leonie and Michael's relationship is passionate, but not caring or healing in the way of other loving relationships in the novel. Instead, their union is all-consuming, out of control, and ultimately destructive. Although Leonie feels a kind of drug-like euphoria in Michael's presence, her relationship with him further isolates her from the rest of the world, including the children they have together.*



Leonie got pregnant with Jojo when she was seventeen, a year after she and Michael got together. Ever since then the children have been “between” them, and they are only able to return to their former state by getting high. When Leonie was a teenager Mam told her that she was too obsessed with Michael and that she behaved like a “puppy dog” around him. When Leonie told Mam she was pregnant, Mam said she’d known for weeks. Mam offered to give Leonie an herbal abortion, but Leonie said she wanted the baby. Leonie reflects that if she’d answered differently, she and Michael might have moved to California together, a dream they’d discussed before the birth of Jojo.

Leonie falls asleep in the car and wakes up to Michael shaking her, telling her that the police are behind them. They quickly swap places, as Michael does not have a driver’s license. They desperately look for a baggie of meth Al gave them when they left. Leonie finds it and, panicking, swallows it whole. They pull over and the police officer tells Leonie to step out of the car with her license and insurance, asking if she realizes she was swerving. The officer questions her, and as soon as Leonie admits that they are coming from **Parchman** he handcuffs her. Shortly after he handcuffs Misty, too, and tries to do the same with Jojo.

When Jojo reaches into his pocket, the officer pulls a gun on him. Kayla wraps herself in front of Jojo to protect him. The officer searches the vehicle, and as he does so Leonie gets suddenly and violently high. Given appears, and Kayla vomits again. The officer finds nothing but Jojo’s **gris-gris bag**, which he hands back to Jojo rudely. He takes off the cuffs and tells them to go home. They drive away with Leonie doubled-over, delirious and moaning.

## CHAPTER 8: JOJO

When the police pull them over, Richie (who is sitting on the floor of the car) tells Jojo: “They going to chain you.” The officer tells Jojo to get out of the car, and Richie says “I told you,” and then curls up in a ball. As the officer shouts at Jojo, all Jojo can think about is Kayla, panicking at the prospect of the officer shooting her accidentally. As soon as the officer lets them go, Richie begins talking to Jojo. He asks if Pop told Jojo about him, and Jojo says Pop did. Richie tells Jojo that he looks like Pop.

*The fact that Leonie became pregnant with Jojo at only 17 suggests that she, like Jojo, was compelled to assume the duties of a parent before she was ready to do so. Yet whereas Jojo has hardly experienced a life outside of his responsibility for Kayla, Leonie yearns to return to her life with Michael before the children were born. Her plan of going to California with Michael, while perhaps not entirely realistic, represents the possibilities that immediately disappeared when she became a mother to Jojo.*



*This scene demonstrates the everyday violence that poor people in Mississippi—and particularly black people—are subjected to without cause. Despite Leonie swallowing the meth bag and thus hiding all evidence, she is still handcuffed as soon as the police officer learns that they are coming from Parchman, even though picking up Michael and taking him home is entirely legal. Indeed, this kind of arbitrary brutality is reminiscent of Pop’s story about being taken to Parchman when he was 15.*



*The officer is so preoccupied with Jojo and the gris-gris bag that he doesn’t notice the fact that Leonie becomes deliriously high while he is searching the car. This highlights the irrationality of police brutality, which so often targets innocent people for no reason other than the fact that they might seem strange or different.*



*Richie’s warning to Jojo that the police officer will handcuff him probably comes from Richie’s own experiences of systemic racism at a young age, and the word “chain” being linked to police handcuffs again connects mass incarceration to slavery. Richie seems both knowledgeable and ignorant about Jojo and his family—for example, he doesn’t know if Pop has ever told Jojo about him, indicating that Richie knows nothing about Pop’s life since Parchman.*



After two hours of driving, the group stops at a gas station. Leonie is still bent over, and Michael gives Jojo money to buy milk and charcoal for Leonie's stomach. At first Jojo refuses, and Michael almost hits him; however, Jojo eventually agrees. When Jojo returns with the milk and charcoal, Michael sends him back once more to get a tool so Michael can smash up the charcoal into a powder. Jojo buys a gauge and a Tootsie Pop for himself. When he gets back in the car, Kayla starts shouting "Candy, candy!" and Jojo silently urges her to be quiet. Michael mixes the milk and charcoal, which lets out a strong smell of Sulphur. While the focus is on Leonie, Jojo gives Kayla the Tootsie Pop. Michael forces the mixture down Leonie's throat and she vomits.

Richie asks if Leonie is Jojo's mother, and Jojo replies "No." Richie says that he knows he (Richie) tried to escape **Parchman** and that he didn't make it, but that he doesn't know how he died and needs to find out. Pop has never told Jojo the story of what happened after Richie escaped; Jojo knows that Pop doesn't want to think about it. Richie tells Jojo that there are things he doesn't know, such as the fact that home isn't a place, but about "whether the earth open up to you." Richie says he is looking for a "song," and that he (Richie) is going to be part of it. Jojo asks what else he doesn't know, and Richie says he doesn't yet know about love or time.

## CHAPTER 9: RICHIE

Richie can see that Jojo is "innocent." When Richie was his age, he knew more about the world than Jojo. Now that Richie is dead, he falls asleep and wakes up at different points in time; sometimes in the present and sometimes in the past, even before the arrival of white settlers. Luckily, Richie never wakes up in the time he and River were at **Parchman**. Back then, River "had a woman," a prostitute nicknamed the Sunshine Woman because she wore yellow. River said he liked her but didn't love her. Richie recalls a time when the Sunshine Woman told him and River about a man who was lynched because he didn't step aside when a white woman passed him on the sidewalk. The mob tortured and killed the man and his wife. River had told the Sunshine Woman that Richie was too young to hear that.

Before Richie was sent to **Parchman**, he and his siblings had once found the remains of a man who had been lynched. After the Sunshine Woman told him that story, Richie decided to try and escape the prison and flee north. Richie came to understand what love and home meant through his relationship with River. When Jojo and his family arrived at Parchman, Richie heard the white snake-bird telling him to follow Jojo back to River. Richie agreed, saying: "I'm coming home."

Once again, the motif of vomiting appears. In this case, Leonie must vomit in order to be rid of the possibly fatal dosage of meth she swallowed in order to avoid being prosecuted by the police. Just as Jojo forced Kayla to vomit up the (potentially harmful) herbal potion that Leonie fed her, Michael forces Leonie to vomit in order to remove some of the drugs from her system. In both cases, forcing a traumatic experience on someone ends up being the only way in which to save them from a more horrific fate.



This passage emphasizes that Richie and Jojo possess different kinds of knowledge, each holding a kind of knowledge that the other seeks. Richie needs to learn what happened when he tried to escape Parchman, whereas Jojo is in need of a much more general, abstract form of wisdom about the world around him. Although both boys have had relatively little life experience, they have the potential to help one another gain the knowledge they need.



This passage reveals that Pop did everything he could to keep Richie innocent in spite of the horrific conditions the two of them were living in. Despite the violence that they witnessed every day at Parchman, Pop still objected to the Sunshine Woman telling Richie about a local lynching. This shows that Pop refused to give up on Richie or cease hoping for him to have a better future. The fact that Jojo appears "innocent" to Richie also suggests that Pop was at least partially able to shield Jojo from the horrors of the world—in a way he couldn't with Richie. Finally, this passage illuminates the nature of time as it exists in the world of the novel. Time seems to be eternal and circular, rather than linear, such that past and future events are always happening simultaneously with the present.



This passage establishes a parallel between Richie's decision to flee Parchman and his desire, as a ghost, to go "home." Is there a connection between the home Richie sought as he was running away from Parchman and the final resting place he seeks as a ghost? Richie's idea of home seems to orbit around Pop, and thus it is unclear where he was headed when he originally fled Parchman.



## CHAPTER 10: LEONIE

Leonie wakes up in immense pain, yet with a feeling of relief because she is with Michael. He explains that he fed her milk and charcoal and that she vomited a lot. Leonie goes back to sleep, and dreams that she is in a sinking raft with Michael, Jojo, and Kayla, trying to keep them afloat. When she awakes again, Michael suggests that they drop the kids off at Mam and Pop's house and go get something to eat. Leonie feels irrationally disappointed, fantasizing about her and Michael living in an apartment of their own. Kayla kicks Leonie's seat, saying "Ony"—her version of Leonie—despite Leonie urging her to say "Mama." Eventually, Leonie slaps Kayla hard, feeling jealous that Kayla still "has all her brothers."

They arrive back home to find Mam and Pop gone, and Michael decides to drive them over to visit his parents. Leonie feels anxious and protests, but Michael insists that it's important they go. Leonie knows that she and the kids are the reason why Michael's parents never came to visit him in **Parchman**. On the way, they drop off Misty, who is still annoyed about all the vomit she's been exposed to on the journey. Leonie takes Kayla onto her lap and gives her a peppermint. Just at that moment, a wild hog runs out into the road; Michael swerves and Kayla goes flying. Leonie picks Kayla up and sees that she has an enormous bruise on her forehead. Kayla screams.

Reluctantly, Leonie gives Kayla back to Jojo, unable to look at either of them. They drive to Michael's parents' house in silence. Big Joseph answers the door and hugs Michael. Michael's mother Maggie joins them, suggesting that they come inside to eat, but Big Joseph says they've already eaten and that "they ain't welcome in this house." Maggie insists, and asks to be introduced to Jojo and Kayla. She is polite, but not friendly. Kayla doesn't say anything, and Big Joseph remarks that he knew the kids would be rude because they were raised by Leonie. Joseph goes on to say the children are "bad blood," and Maggie doesn't say anything. Eventually, Big Joseph explodes, calling Leonie a "nigger bitch."

Michael head-butts Big Joseph and they begin to wrestle one another. Leonie feels panicked but also strangely amused, thinking that whole thing is "ridiculous" and "stupid." Maggie tries unsuccessfully to intervene, and Leonie suddenly grabs her children's hands and marches them out of the house. They get in the car and wait until Michael comes crashing out, with Maggie following close behind. They talk; Michael is crying. Leonie knows she should leave but she stays and watches Maggie embrace Michael. Eventually Michael gets in the car and they drive away.

*Leonie's dream about drowning highlights the sense of panic and helplessness she feels in simply trying to survive each day. Although she can seem like a selfish and careless mother, her dream suggests that the problem is not that she is insensitive to the needs of her family but rather that she feels that the needs of each of her family members conflict with one another. As a result, when Leonie supports one family member she feels that she is leaving others to "drown."*



*Once again, the act of being a good parent is represented through feeding, and Leonie's attempt to mother Kayla is thus symbolized by the peppermint. However, the appearance of the wild hog and subsequent swerving of the car quickly turns this act of love into an (accidental) act of wounding. The bump on Kayla's forehead, like her vomiting, is a physical manifestation of the emotional pain caused by having a neglectful and incompetent parent.*



*Michael's return to his parents' house is the most disturbing instance of "homecoming" in the novel. Although Big Joseph and Maggie seem to genuinely love their son, this love is overridden by the strength of Big Joseph's racial hatred. Big Joseph's comment about "bad blood" indicates his fury at the idea of his own white family line being "tainted" by miscegenation. Again, this hatred is so strong that it prevents him from even acknowledging the existence of his grandchildren.*



*Leonie's reaction of amusement may seem strange, given that Michael and Big Joseph are in considerable physical danger and that she and the kids are facing a brutally cruel level of racism. However, her feelings indicate that racism can sometimes gain power through being treated as a serious (and thus valid) way of thinking. Leonie cannot help but acknowledge the absurdity of racism even if this means finding Michael's family conflict "ridiculous."*



They arrive home to find Pop sitting on the porch. As they get out of the car, Leonie notices that Michael is a little hesitant. Pop tells Leonie that she should go and see Mam. Inside, Leonie is relieved to find that Mam is still breathing; she gives Mam some water and feels guilty about having been gone. Mam tells Leonie: "It's time... for me to go." Mam says she did all she could, and tried to open herself up to the *mystère* (a kind of intermediary spirit in some forms of Voodoo), but that her body would not let them in. There is one last *mystère* that Mam wants to be possessed by: Maman Brigitte, the mother of the dead. Leonie asks if they can summon a healing *mystère* instead, and Mam sighs that she didn't teach Leonie enough and now she doesn't understand.

Mam asks Leonie to gather rocks from the cemetery, cotton, cornmeal, and rum. Leonie cries and asks if Pop can do it instead, but Mam says that because she brought Leonie into the world, Leonie should help take her out. Mam falls asleep and Leonie leaves the room, walking past photographs of Given and past Kayla, who has fallen asleep while eating a cracker. Suddenly, Leonie can feel Mam in the next room, and it is like Mam's pain is a fire inside her chest.

## CHAPTER 11: JOJO

When Jojo arrives back home and sees Pop again, it takes a concerted effort for him not to cry. Pop tells Jojo to put Kayla to bed, saying "we'll talk about it tomorrow." Once Kayla is asleep, Jojo sees Richie looking at Pop, his eyes full of hope. Richie tries to get Pop's attention, but Pop can't hear him. Pop asks if Jojo found the **gris-gris bag**, explaining that it was the only way he could send some part of himself with them, considering that Mam was sick and Pop could never go back to **Parchman**. Richie tells Pop he sees his face every day, "like the sun," but again Pop doesn't hear. Richie says that Pop was the only daddy he ever had, adding: "I need to know why you left me."

In the morning, Kayla wakes Jojo up, saying "eat-eat." Michael is cooking bacon in the kitchen, wearing one of Jojo's t-shirts. Michael asks Jojo if he remembers when they went fishing together, and says they will do more of that kind of thing now that Michael is home. Jojo recalls that Michael opened up about the explosion on the oil rig during that fishing trip. Michael also admitted that it was his cousin who killed Given. Michael serves up the bacon, but it is burnt, and Kayla falls to the floor shrieking. Michael bends down and slaps her. Jojo picks her up and takes her outside to the backyard.

*Due to her spiritual beliefs and understanding of the world, Mam does not seem to fear death. Instead, she is prepared for it, and has decided to embrace death on her own terms. Leonie's resistance to helping Mam prepare for death is arguably a sign of her immaturity and lack of spiritual connection to the world, which Mam indicates when she laments that she hasn't taught Leonie enough. On the other hand, Leonie's reluctance could simply be a sign of her love for Mam and unwillingness to lose her.*



*This passage suggests that facing the death of a parent creates a kind of role reversal in which the child takes on the parental role. Leonie resists this reversal, wanting Pop to help in the preparation for Mam's death. This suggests that even though Leonie is a parent herself, she has really remained in the position of being a child.*



*Richie's love for Pop is deeply tragic. While Pop's life is focused on caring for Jojo and Kayla, Richie remains completely devoted to and reliant on Pop. Richie's comment that Pop's face is "like the sun" to him suggests that he needs Pop as much as a person needs light, warmth, and nourishment. Yet Pop is not even aware of Richie's presence, and is incapable of seeing him.*



*The beginning of this scene is full of hope. It seems as if there may finally be a chance for the family to become whole, loving, and happy, and again this state of love is represented through feeding. However, this optimistic moment doesn't last long. When Michael burns the bacon, it symbolizes the fact that he, like Leonie, is not capable of being a loving parent. This is confirmed when he hits Kayla, an event linked to Kayla's injury in the car.*



Outside, Richie asks why Pop can't hear him, and Jojo admits he doesn't know. Richie insists that Jojo gets Pop to tell him the story of how Richie died, because that is the only way Richie can go home. Jojo resists, as he knows that Pop doesn't want to tell the story. Eventually, Jojo agrees. He takes Kayla back inside and makes them peanut butter and jelly sandwiches. He brings water to Mam and tells her that Michael hit Kayla. Mam sighs and says that Leonie "ain't got the mothering instinct." Jojo says that Leonie hates him, but Mam replies that she doesn't—she loves him, but her love for Michael "gets in the way."

Jojo wants to tell Mam about Richie, but instead he asks her where she will go when she dies. Mam replies that "it's like walking through a door." Jojo asks if Mam will be a ghost, and Mam replies that she probably won't be. Usually people only become ghosts when they have "bad," violent deaths. Mam assures Jojo that even though she won't be a ghost she'll still be present, on the other side of the door, and that she'll be with Given, Pop's parents, and her own parents. Mam tells him that time isn't a "straight line," and that everyone--dead and living--exists at the same time.

Mam asks if Jojo has ever seen a ghost, and Jojo replies he hasn't. Mam admits that she does not have the ability to see ghosts, even though she inherited other psychic powers. Richie then starts **singing** and Mam can hear it, though she doesn't know what it is. Mam says it's possible Jojo might have "the vision," and asks if there's something outside. Jojo lies again, telling her no.

## CHAPTER 12: RICHIE

Richie watches River make Jojo and Kayla breakfast, and take them outside to pick berries. Richie begs Jojo to tell him what the berries taste like, but Jojo ignores him. Richie is so jealous of Jojo's family that he can hardly bear to look at them. He lies down in the dirt under the house and **sings**. While Richie is singing, he sees water and land dotted with trees and houses and people. The people are all singing too, but Richie can't hear a single word. Then the vision disappears, and Richie is alone again.

*Once again, Jojo exhibits the characteristics of both a child and a parent. He is fiercely protective of Pop, to the point that he resists asking Pop to tell the story about Richie's death even if this means they will continue to be haunted by Richie. Making the peanut butter and jelly sandwiches also shows that Jojo is a more capable parent to Kayla than Michael or Leonie. However, Jojo's question about Leonie hating him serves as a reminder that he is still only a child.*



*This passage provides a useful explanation of the understanding of death at work in the novel. It also sheds light on Richie's earlier comment that Jojo doesn't know anything about time. Once again, it's shown that in the world of the novel, time is circular and eternal rather than linear. This then connects to the importance of ghosts and the dead, as no one ever truly dies in the sense of leaving time behind (as they would if time were linear).*



*It may seem strange that Jojo lies to Mam at this moment, particularly given that she is on the brink of death. Mam appears to suspect that Jojo has inherited the gift of psychic intuition. Jojo's refusal to admit that he has this gift then perhaps indicates that he is frightened of his own abilities.*



*This passage explores the positive and negative sides of family. On one hand, Jojo's family is a source of love, support, care, and happiness. On the other hand, Richie's exclusion from this family serves as a reminder that families are inherently exclusive. By their nature, they cannot include everyone, and this leaves Richie feeling isolated and heartbroken.*



Richie sees Leonie tell Michael that she has something to do, and for a second he sees Given, but, just as suddenly, Given is gone. Richie watches Leonie walk to Given's grave and ask him if he would gather the things Mam has requested. She begins to cry and admits: "Maybe I'm too selfish." Eventually, Leonie gathers the rocks and walks back with them, crying. Back at home, Richie sees Mam look at Leonie "with so much understanding and love that I hear the **song** again." The snake-bird flies in and sits on the windowsill.

*Despite Leonie's inner turmoil and sadness, this scene is an optimistic one. Mam loves Leonie so much that it seems to cancel out all of Leonie's flaws. The connection between this deep, unconditional form of love and the song that Richie hears suggests that the song may represent the connection of all people, living and dead, and indeed perhaps of every part of the world.*



## CHAPTER 13: JOJO

Jojo could hear Richie when he was lying in the dirt and **singing**. In the morning, Jojo helps Pop destroy an animal pen that has been eaten up by termites. While they work, Jojo asks to hear the end of Richie's story. Pop explains that Richie successfully escaped, but didn't make it home. It started when an inmate nicknamed Blue, who was "not right in the head," dragged off one of the female inmates and raped her. The woman was the sergeant's wife's favorite inmate, and knowing this Blue decided to escape. At this point Richie butts in and explains that he found Blue and the female inmate, and that Blue threatened to beat Richie up if he told. He then beckoned Richie to come and run away with him, and Richie agreed.

*The fact that Richie and Pop end up telling the story of Richie's escape together suggests that there is a kind of harmony between them more powerful than the division caused by Richie's death. Pop may not be aware of Richie's haunting presence, but their ability to tell a story together shows that they can still operate as a team, just as they did back in Parchman. It is also a reminder of the fact that no singular version of a story is complete by itself; a story is only whole when told from multiple perspectives.*



Pop was sent to track the runaways, he says. Richie adds that while they were running, Blue talked aloud to his mother, telling her he was coming home and urging her to **sing** for him. On the way, they ran into a white girl who Blue tried to rape, but Richie stopped him. The girl told her father, and from that point all the white people in the area joined the lookout for Blue and Richie, ready to lynch them. Eventually, the men from **Parchman** found them. They cut off pieces of Blue's body and skinned him alive. Pop knew they were going to do the same to Richie, so he took him to one side and promised him that everything was going to be all right, and that he was going to take Richie home. He then got out a shank and stabbed Richie in the neck.

*The portrayal of Blue is an important--if perhaps uncomfortable--reminder of the shared humanity of all people. Blue inflicts horrific pain on others, raping one woman and attempting to rape another. However, like Richie and all the other characters in the novel, he has a family and an abiding desire to go "home." Furthermore, Blue's wish to be sung to by his mother speaks to the inclusion of all living things in the "song" of existence. As Richie's earlier words indicate, the desire to go home seems to represent the desire to be included in this song.*



Richie begins to scream. Pop explains that it wasn't long before the dogs smelled blood and started ripping apart Richie's body. As Pop says this, Richie screams more and the animals around them squeal and bark and stamp. Pop then admits he could smell Richie's blood for the rest of his life. The smell drove him so crazy that at times he couldn't speak. Jojo holds Pop, comforting him. Richie goes blacker and blacker and then disappears, and all the animals **sing**: "Thank you thank you thank you."

*The chorus of animals again emphasizes the interconnectedness of all living things. The animals seem to understand and be invested in Richie's story, and at the end of the scene they sing on his behalf. This emphasizes the idea of all living things being joined together by song.*



## CHAPTER 14: LEONIE

After bringing Mam the rocks from the cemetery, Leonie goes to find Given. She sees him and he shakes his head at her. Leonie knows that Given can hear something, but she doesn't know what. Given is bleeding from his neck and chest, the places where he was shot, and is being pulled outside by an unseen force. Leonie feels angry at him for being dead, for being unable to speak, and wishes he was alive so she could kick him. Given shakes his head once more and disappears.

Kayla is crying, and keeps repeating “the black bird, the black boy.” Leonie thinks she must still be half-dreaming, and tells her to go back to sleep. Kayla shouts that the boy wants Mam. Leonie opens the door and shows Kayla that Mam is still lying in bed. Mam's room smells like her body has been turned inside out. Mam says she could hear “him,” and that although she's never seen a ghost, sometimes she hears them. The boy she could hear is vengeful, she says, but still young and in need of love. He wants to see his mother. Given is then in the room again, and Leonie feels frightened. Given repeats: “Not your mother.” Leonie gathers up the items Mam asked her to gather, and Mam asks her to say the litany.

Jojo and Pop run in, and Leonie says the litany, asking Maman Brigitte to accept their offerings. Jojo tells someone that he got what he came for, and Given joins in: “You heard my nephew. Go, Richie.” Leonie cannot see Richie, only Given. Jojo and Given see each other, and they nod, recognizing each other. Given smiles and says, “Nephew.” Given embraces Mam, saying he has come for her, and Mam goes still. Everyone cries, except Jojo, who accuses Leonie of saying the words that took Mam away. Pop assures Jojo that Mam needed to die, and Leonie sobs that she didn't want to, but that she did it because Mam needed her to. Leonie then lunges at Jojo and Kayla, feeling full of rage, and rushes out of the room.

Later, Michael finds Leonie on the porch. She tells him that Mam is dead and that she wants to go to Al's. She wants to get high and see Given again, even though she knows he won't come anymore. Michael says they need to stay for the kids, but Leonie insists that she “can't be a mother right now,” so they get in the car. Michael says they are just going for a ride, but Leonie knows she will be able to persuade him to go to Al's. They hold hands and drive away.

*Like a child, Leonie expresses her pain and trauma through rage (and frequently through physical aggression). Of course, it is not the case that Leonie actually hates Given for being dead, just as she doesn't hate Jojo even though she behaves in a cruel and selfish way toward him. As this passage makes clear, Leonie's cruelty is a manifestation of her grief and pain.*



*Because Leonie isn't able to see Richie, it is unclear exactly what is happening in this scene. We can deduce that Richie is the “black boy” Kayla is talking about (and also perhaps the “black bird”). However, Leonie's partial vision obscures the reality of why Richie wants to see Mam and what he is trying to do. We only have access to Richie's actions through the reactions of other characters, such as Given's statement that Mam is “not your mother,” which implies that Given feels like Richie is somehow intruding into his family.*



*Mam's death is simultaneously a moment of healing and one of trauma. On one hand, this scene allows Jojo to see Given for the first time; Given's smile and acknowledgment of Jojo speaks to the bond that has always existed between them despite the fact that Given died before Jojo was born. At the same time, this moment of resolution is interrupted by Jojo's resentment of Leonie and Leonie's subsequent anger. The book refuses to end on an untainted note of healing, suggesting that some wounds remain open.*



*Whereas the rest of the family confronts Mam's death head on, Leonie cannot bear to do this, and instead chooses to escape through drugs and her relationship with Michael. It is unclear whether Leonie will ever be able to change her behavior or if she will continue to abdicate her role as a mother forever.*



## CHAPTER 15: JOJO

Time has passed, and Leonie and Michael only come home to stay for a couple of days in each week. They are both “fish-thin,” and sleep on the sofa together. Sometimes Jojo hears Pop talking to Mam at night, calling her by her first name, Philomène. Sometimes at night Jojo thinks he understands Leonie, but he never has this feeling during the day. Jojo can hear animals and plants speaking, and sometimes he still sees Richie. Richie says he thought he would be able to cross over and go home once he knew how he died. He says he hears “the **song**” that he wants to be part of, but he can’t get to it. He says there are many other ghosts waiting. Jojo sees them too, and can see their violent, terrible deaths in their eyes.

Jojo finds Pop, who is holding Kayla. Kayla asks to be put down, and she walks toward the ghosts. Jojo tries to stop her, but she goes anyway. She tells the ghosts: “Go home.” They don’t go, but just stand there swaying. Kayla starts **singing**, and the ghosts start to cry. Kayla waves her arms, and the ghosts smile, and say: “Yes.” Jojo picks her up and she whispers “shhh.” The ghosts repeat: “Home.”

*In some ways, the end of the novel seems to have not departed very far from the beginning, and this perhaps speaks to the idea of time not moving in a linear fashion but existing all at once. Leonie and Michael are using drugs again, and Richie has still not been able to go “home” to the next part of the afterlife. At the same time, there are also signs of change, perhaps the most important of which is Jojo’s admission that he sometimes feels he understands Leonie—a sign of his increasing maturity.*



*As a young child, Kayla seems to have a special connection with the ghosts. She is not afraid of them and knows how to make them smile. Although there is no clear resolution at the end of the novel, there is a sense of optimism that the ghosts may eventually be able to get home, and that a new generation with a strong connection to the past (like Kayla with her gift) can hope for something better as well.*





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