

Core-VIII- African American Literature – (18BEN54C)
Unit-IV- MAMA DAY-GLORIA NAYLOR

- **A Brief Introduction to the author and her works**
- Born in 1950, Gloria Naylor was raised in New York by working-class parents.
- She earned her degree in English from Brooklyn College of the City University of New York in 1981.
- Her first novel, *The Women of Brewster Place*, chronicled the lives of seven different women living in an African-American community.
- The novel won an American Book Award, and she received her M.A. in African-American Studies from Yale University.
- Her master's thesis became her second novel, *Linden Hills* (1985), which used Dante's *Inferno* as a thematic and structural guide for her explication of the moral downfall of well-to-do blacks who lose touch with their racial heritage.
- The third novel, *Mama Day*, explores the experiences of African-Americans in the South America.

Acknowledgements

- I would like to acknowledge my referencing the following Internet Resources for teaching *Mama Day*.
- I profusely Thank Prof Peter Trachtenberg for his Teacher's Guide for the novel *Mama Day*.
- The site is
- <https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/120361/mama-day-by-gloria-naylor/9780679721819/teachers-guide/>
- I find this website <https://www.encyclopedia.com/arts/educational-magazines/mama-day> useful to understand the plot, character, themes, motif, symbols and their significance of the novel.
- I use these resources for **Academic Purpose Only**
- -Dr.G.Bhuvaneswari, Assistant Professor, Department of English, Government Arts College(A), Coimbatore.

Plot of the novel

- The novel is divided into two parts . Part-I and Part–II.
- It spans two worlds. One is the southern barrier island of Willow Springs, inhabited solely by the descendants of slaves, a place exempt from the laws of nature and the racist laws of man. The other world is New York City: polyglot, multi-racial, and governed by strict and seemingly heartless codes of love and survival.
- The novel juxtaposes the story of a successful African-American businessman, George, who has grown up in New York City, with no knowledge of his ancestors, with that of a young African-American woman, Cocoa, who must come to terms with her powerful ancestral legacy. Their clash and uneasy union is brought to an end when they visit Cocoa's home, Willow Springs, a magical place that holds the secrets of Cocoa's past and the key to her future.

A brief summary of Part-I

- Cocoa first sees George in New York, where they both live, and then meets him formally at a job interview, which does not go well because Cocoa must spend August in Willow Springs with her grandmother, Abigail, and her great aunt Miranda, known as Mama Day.
- Cocoa does not get the job with George's engineering firm, but on her return from Willow Springs, she sends George a note. He in turn sends her application to a client, and asks her to dinner. Their first date is disastrous, but George decides to show Cocoa what he loves about New York City.
- Meanwhile, in Willow Springs, Mama Day helps Bernice to conceive a child, and Junior Lee leaves his wife, Frances, for another woman, Ruby. Cocoa loves seeing New York with George, although their regular outings don't seem romantic to her. After George tells her about his girlfriend Shawn, Cocoa tells him she doesn't have to see him again.

Summary of Part-I

- Later the two have fallen in love, but there are still conflicts between them. Cocoa feels that George doesn't open up about his feelings. When she sees his old girlfriend in his building, she fights with him, and accepts a date with an old boyfriend.
- George waits outside the old boyfriend's apartment all night, and tells her that his mother was a prostitute and his father a john. He asks Cocoa to marry him, and they settle into their married life, but Cocoa returns to Willow Springs without him in their first August together.
- In Willow Springs ,she experiences Ruby's jealousy when she makes plans to see a concert with Junior Lee and some other friends. Cocoa fights with Miranda, but she continues to visit Willow Springs each August. George does not come to visit Willow Springs until their fourth year of marriage, after Cocoa has graduated from college and they have made plans to start a family.

A brief summary of Part- II

- Mama Day is preparing for George's visit when she realizes that Ruby is trying to use magic against Cocoa.
- In a foreshadowing of George's death, George and Cocoa both have dreams about him drowning. George explores the island, meeting many of the inhabitants, including Dr. Buzzard.
- George talks about moving to Willow Springs, but Cocoa is undecided. Miranda realizes that a hurricane is coming, and George and Cocoa have a terrible fight when George sees that she's wearing makeup foundation that is too dark for her. At the party in their honour, George rebuffs Cocoa's attempt to speak to him.
- Junior Lee makes a pass at Cocoa, and Ruby witnesses it. When Cocoa comes to see Ruby, she braids nightshade into Cocoa's hair.
- George and Cocoa do not reconcile until the hurricane comes, and destroys the bridge to the mainland. kills Bernice and Ambush's son, Little Caesar.
- Cocoa is very ill, and George is frustrated by his inability to leave Willow Springs and get medical help for her. Mama Day realizes that Ruby has poisoned Cocoa and cuts off Cocoa's braids. George gathers with the people of Willow Springs to "stand forth" for Little Caesar, and everyone says what Little Caesar was doing when they first saw him and what he'll be doing when they see him again.

A brief summary of Part-II

- Miranda uses magic to make lightning strike Ruby's house, burning it to the ground, but Cocoa gets sicker and sicker, and begins to hallucinate, while George is frantic and frustrated by his inability to help her. When Miranda remembers the broken-hearted men of her past, she realizes that she needs George's help to rescue Cocoa.
- George's plan to row across the Sound is thwarted by the townspeople, who know he won't be able to make it across. Abigail tells George to meet Mama Day at the "other place," the family homestead, and Dr. Buzzard tells George to work with the islanders, who also want Cocoa to recover.
- George does not believe in Miranda's magic, but he sees how ill Cocoa is, and he tries to obey Miranda, who has told him to go to the chicken house and bring back whatever he finds there. But George does not realize that Mama Day means his own two hands, and after tearing apart the chicken house, George's weak heart gives out, and he dies.
- Cocoa feels that her life is over, and she spends three months on Willow Springs recovering from her illness and grieving. Cocoa decides not to return to New York. Eventually Cocoa remarries and moves to Charleston, where she names her second son after George. Abigail has died, and the story ends with Miranda eating her "last August 21st honeydew," foreshadowing the death of Mama Day as well.

List of characters

- George Andrews-Engineer from New York who marries Cocoa
- Grace Day- Cocoa's mother
- John-Paul Day- Father of Mama Day and Abigail Day
- Mama Day – The title character who acquired the name for her service as a midwife for the people of the island.
- Ophelia Day- Mother of Mama Day
- Peace Day - Mama Day's Younger sister
- Ambush Duvall- Resident of Willow Springs
- Bernice Duvall- Wife of Ambush Duvall
- Charles Duvall- Son of Ambush Duvall
- Mrs. Jackson- George's teacher at the Wallace P.Andrews shelter for Boys.
- Junior Lee – Ruby's husband who cheats her
- Reema's Boy – Resident of Willow Springs and becomes an outsider after his education
- Ruby- Resident of Willow Springs, one who cause spell on Cocoa Day
- Brian Smithfield – Medical doctor from the mainland.
- Bascombe Wade – Norwegian slave owner
- Sapphira Wade – wife of Bascombe Wade, great grandmother of Mama Day.

Themes, Settings and Narrators

- **Themes**
- Supernatural occurrences as a part of hoodoo religion
- Redemption through tradition
- The importance of cultural heritage
- Magical Realism
- Miracle of love

- **Setting:** The first part of the book takes place in New York and Willow Springs
- The Second Part takes place entirely in Willow Springs.

- **Narrators**
- George and Cocoa – First person narrators
- Mama Day- Second person narrator.
- The novel has multiple narrators.

Study Questions

- Who was Sapphira Wade?
- What is the significance of the year 1823?
- What role does it play in the legend of Sapphira Wade?
- How has it crept into the popular speech of present-day Willow Springs?
- How are Mama and Abigail Day related to Sapphira?
- What peculiar geographical circumstance has kept Willow Springs the sole property of the descendants of slaves?
- How do George and Cocoa meet?
- Why does Cocoa seem so wary of men and so cynical about people in general?
- What terms does she use to describe other African-Americans, whites, Asians, and Jews?
- What is George's later comment about this habit?
- Where—and how—was George brought up?
- How has his upbringing shaped his view of the world?
- What is Cocoa's given name?
- Whom is she named after?

Study Questions Part-I

- What is Mama Day's given name?
- How do Mama Day and Abigail greet each other?
- What is the origin of this custom?
- In what ways does it sum up the rest of their relationship?
- In what way have the Day women been unlucky?
- What was Cocoa like as a baby?
- In what ways did her behaviour then foreshadow her character as an adult?
- Who is Dr. Buzzard?
- How does he make his living?
- Describe his relationship with Mama Day.
- Who is George's girlfriend when he meets Cocoa?
- What is the state of their relationship?
- How does Cocoa sum up the respective roles her grandmother and great-aunt played in her upbringing?
- Why does she believe that she "would have been ruined for any fit company" if she'd been raised by Abigail alone?

Study Questions

- What happened to Ruby's first husband? What does this story tell us about her character?
- What is the reason for Bernice's illness?
- How does Mama Day go about diagnosing her?
- How would you describe the kind of medicine she practices?
- Why are authorities on the mainland reluctant to meddle in the affairs of Willow Springs?
- What kind of help does Frances request from Mama Day? Why does she refuse?
- What is the meaning of the expression "working roots"?
- Why did Abigail name her first child Peace?
- Why did Mama Day beg her not to do this?
- What does she mean when she thinks, "[Abigail] only lost one of her babies to Mother, I lost them all"
- On what pretext do George and Cocoa go on seeing each other?
- Why is Cocoa so surprised by George?
- How does Cocoa's language change in the course of this and later sections?
- What do those changes indicate about the change in her feelings for George?
- How does George change as he draws closer to Cocoa?
- What crucial thing do George and Cocoa have in common?

Study Questions

- What is Candle Walk?
- What holiday does it replace on Willow Springs?
- What are its supposed origins and how has the story of those origins changed over the generations?
- How does Miranda sum up Cocoa's character?
- What do we learn about Ruby, Frances, and Junior Lee?
- Why has Frances gone mad?
- How has Bernice changed?
- What gift do she and Ambush bring Abigail and Miranda?
- How do the sisters react to it?
- What is "the other place"?
- Why does Abigail refuse to go there?
- Why does Miranda start to weep while on her way to the other place?
- Who was the man who died of a broken heart?
- The more deeply Cocoa falls in love with George, the angrier she becomes at him. Why is this so?
- What great disappointments have taken place in George's life?
- How do these disappointments affect his behaviour toward Cocoa?

Study Questions

- What three events are causing talk among Willow Springs' inhabitants?
- How are they related?
- What words of George's have given Mama Day such a high opinion of him?
- What significance does she see in them?
- What transpires between Mama Day and Bernice at the other place?
- How does George see Cocoa when he watches her sleeping beside him? Compare his impressions of his wife to the previous section's description of the entranced Bernice.
- What aspect of George's character causes Cocoa the greatest difficulty? What are the eventual consequences of this flaw?
- How has Bernice changed since the preceding section?
- Whose voices do we hear when Miranda and her great-niece visit the cemetery?
- In what ways have different Day women broken their men's hearts?
- Why does Miranda send Bernice, Dr. Buzzard, and Junior Lee away before Cocoa can join them?
- Why is Bernice so angry when people call her son "Chick"? Why might she be so protective of him?
- How do Cocoa and George eventually make peace?
- What lesson has she learned from her great-aunt and grandmother?
- What is the meaning of the sentence, "Any summer we crossed over that bridge would be the summer we crossed over"?
- What figurative or symbolic meanings are suggested by the phrase "crossing over"?

Study Questions

- What does Clarissa find underneath the trailer? What is its significance?
- What are George's first impressions of Abigail and Miranda? Why does he feel envious?
- What similar dreams do George and Cocoa have on the same night?
- How do these dreams foreshadow events later in the book?
- What secret is Bernice keeping from her husband?
- Why do men on Willow Springs keep playing poker with Dr. Buzzard, even though they know he always wins?
- How does George end up beating Dr. Buzzard at poker?
- What is Dr. Buzzard's response?
- What does George's determination—and his method of winning—suggest about his character?
- What premonition does Cocoa have when she takes George to her family cemetery?
- What events in her family history might be responsible for her fears?

Study Questions - Part-II

- What provokes the fight between George and Cocoa on pages 233-35? What are its consequences?
- On what pretext does Ruby lure Cocoa to her house? What does she do to her there?
- How would you describe the language Naylor uses to describe the storm on pages 249-51?
- What is the source of the sections printed in italics?
- How does the storm's movement parallel the "middle passage" that brought African slaves to the New World?
- Why does the narrator refer to the storm as "the workings of Woman"?
- What damage does the storm cause?
- Why does Bernice return to the other place? Why does Mama Day turn her away?
- What are the symptoms of Cocoa's illness? At what point does it become clear that her malady is not natural?
- What measures does Miranda take to save her great-niece? Why are her efforts inadequate?
- How does George try to save Cocoa? How are his efforts thwarted?
- What indications do we receive that George's plan would be useless even if he were able to carry it out?
- Why is George at first unwilling to accept Mama Day's help?

Study Questions- Part-II

- What eventually changes George's mind?
- Describe the "standing forth" ceremony at Charles Duvall's funeral.
- Why do the mourners address the dead child as though he were still alive?
- What does this ceremony suggest about the nature of life and death?
- How does Miranda avenge herself on Ruby?
- Whom does she encounter at the other place?
- What does she learn while waiting for George?
- What does Mama Day instruct George to do?
- What mistake does he make in carrying out her instructions?
- What are the consequences of this error?
- How does George's death fulfill the destiny of the Days?

Discussion Questions

- On page 10 we are told that people on Willow Springs know the story of Sapphira Wade "without a single living soul really telling a word." How can a community know its history if that history remains untold? What distinction does this book make between spoken and unspoken truth? Which kind of wisdom does it value more highly?
- In what way is *Mama Day* a book about people's perceptions and misperceptions—not only of each other, but of reality itself?
- *Mama Day* possesses a number of powers that might be called supernatural: she knows the secrets of people she sees on television; she can turn flowers into butterflies and cure a woman's infertility by magic. Yet she also describes what she does as "mother-wit disguised with hocus pocus" (97) and maintains that "she ain't never tried to get over nature" (262). How can both of these things be true? How does *Mama Day* view her powers? Compare her "magic" to the magic practiced by Ruby and Dr. Buzzard.

Discussion Questions

- On page 61 George observes, "My city was a network of small towns." What does he mean by this? How does George's New York compare to Willow Springs? In what ways is *Mama Day* a book about small towns and their inhabitants and histories?
- The sections of *Mama Day* that are set in Willow Springs contain a great deal of gossip. What sorts of information does the gossip of Willow Springs impart? What does gossip tell us about the community in which it circulates? In what ways is *Mama Day* a book about "the oral tradition"—about the kind of knowledge that is not imparted by books but by people's gossip, stories, and folklore?
- George and Cocoa fall in love reluctantly. And, even after they fall in love, they often seem to punish each other for it. Contrast their fear of emotional connection with the attitudes of Miranda and Abigail, who, like George and Cocoa, have suffered because of love. In addition, the two sisters know a secret that George and Cocoa do not: that each of the preceding Day women has broken the heart of the man who loved her. How does Naylor develop the theme of love—between man and woman, mother and child, grandmother and granddaughter, and sister and sister—in this book? What connections does she draw between love and heartbreak?

Resources for further study

- <https://www.encyclopedia.com/arts/educational-magazines/mama-day>.
- <https://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/120361/mama-day-by-gloria-naylor/9780679721819/teachers-guide/>