

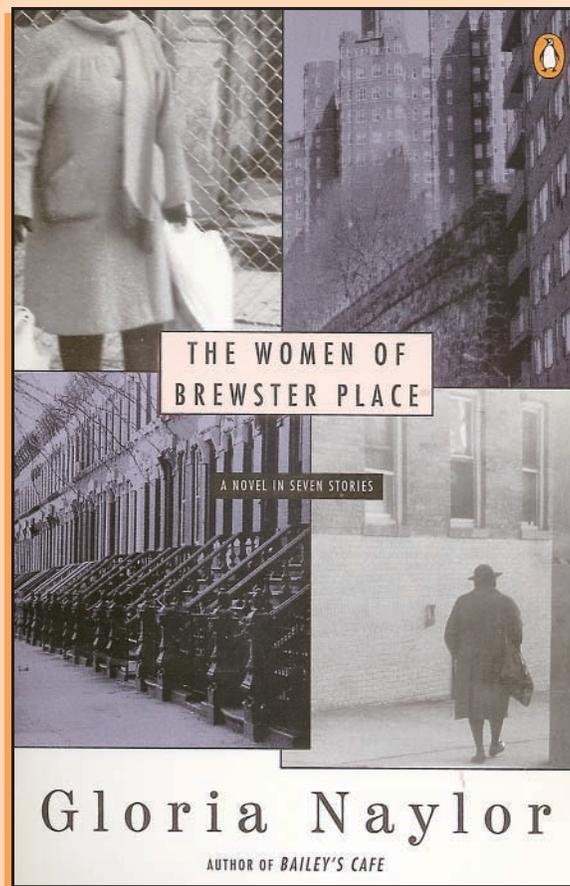


A TEACHER'S GUIDE TO THE PENGUIN EDITION OF

GLORIA NAYLOR'S

THE WOMEN OF BREWSTER PLACE

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NOTE TO THE TEACHER

The questions, exercises, and assignments on these pages are designed to guide students' reading of the literary work and to provide suggestions for exploring the implications of the story through discussions, research, and writing. Most of the items can be handled individually, but small group and whole class discussions will enhance comprehension. The Response Journal should provide students with a means, first, for recording their ideas, feelings, and concerns, and then for reflecting these thoughts in their writing assignments and class discussions. These sheets may be duplicated, but teachers should select and modify items according to the needs and abilities of their students.

INTRODUCTION

Although stories of poor people living happily together are common in American literature, poverty in the contemporary world more often creates frustration that can lead to violence and despair. Much of the literature of American minorities from the 1960s and '70s, capitalizing on those feelings of frustration, consists of protest about racial issues.

Writing in the '80s, however, Gloria Naylor, in this stunning first novel, uses an archetypal setting—a deteriorating street in a nameless city—to look beyond the racial issues, poverty, and events which cause despair. The lives of seven black women intersect in this dead-end corner of the world. Each has experienced pain—often at the hands of a man—and profound grief. But in the desolate surroundings of Brewster Place they find within themselves, as well as from each other, the strength to survive. Despite shattered dreams, their courage transcends the circumstances of their unhappy pasts and hopeless futures.

This is a story about black women nurturing one another, but it reaches everyone.

PREPARING TO READ

Suppose you were forced, through your own actions or the misfortune of your family, to move from whatever comfortable circumstances you have lived in for the last few years to the most undesirable neighborhood you can imagine. It's the only place you can still afford and the only place where you will be accepted. How would you feel about living there? How would you feel about the people around you who live there? How would you feel about yourself?

The homes of many poor black families are matriarchal—that is, they are run by women, often because they have been abandoned by men. Do some library research to find out why this has happened. Find out how many matriarchal families there are in your community. Are the men from those families irresponsible, or have there been other reasons for their leaving?

The author of this book writes: "Sometimes being a friend means mastering the art of timing. There is a time for silence. A time to let go and allow people to hurl themselves into their own destiny. And a time to prepare to pick up the pieces when it's all over." Do you agree? Would you allow your best friend to hurt himself or herself? What do you believe are the characteristics of a good friend?

As you read this novel, pay particular attention to the changes in time. Occasionally Naylor moves ahead rapidly, but most often the changes are back in time, through the characters' memories or dreams.

As you read through the novel, stop occasionally to record your thoughts, reactions, and concerns in a Response Journal. Your journal may be a notebook or individual sheets which you clip together and keep in a folder. Include statements about the characters—what you learn about them, how they affect you—and your thoughts about the key issues and events that the book explores. Also, jot down questions you have about events and statements that you do not understand. Your Response Journal will come in handy when you discuss the novel in class, write a paper, or explore a related topic that interests you.

UNDERSTANDING THE SURFACE STORY

DAWN

1. How did Brewster Place come into existence? Of what significance is the wall, literally and symbolically?
 2. In what ways are the black residents of Brewster Place different from all previous inhabitants? Why is Brewster Place "especially fond of its colored daughters"?
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MATTIE MICHAEL

1. What kind of atmosphere does the author create in her description of the buildings and the weather on the first page of Mattie's chapter? What does this suggest about what is to follow?
2. Why doesn't Mattie's father like Butch? If Mattie is aware that "everything about Butch was like puffed air and cotton candy," why is she so attracted to him?
3. What angers Mattie's father the most about her pregnancy? How does Mattie's mother react?
4. How does Miss Eva help Mattie? What does Mattie learn about life from Miss Eva? What is Eva's ultimate gift?
5. Why does Basil turn out to be such a rotten kid? In what way has Mattie been responsible for his behavior?
6. There have been three significant men in Mattie's life. How have each of them treated her? What kind of impression must they have left on Mattie?

ETTA MAE JOHNSON

1. In the chapter about Mattie, Etta had left home for New York to find a man to take care of her. Why is she now coming to Brewster Place? Has she learned anything during her separation from Mattie?
2. What do the song lyrics throughout this chapter convey about Etta's life and attitudes?
3. What kind of game does Etta play with Reverend Woods? Why does she think she will be successful? Why isn't she?
4. How is Etta different at the end of this chapter? What help does Mattie provide?

KISWANA BROWNE

1. How does the tone of the beginning of this chapter differ from that of the beginning of the previous chapters? In what ways is it similar?
2. What are the major differences between Kiswana and her mother? How does Kiswana view her mother's wealth? In what ways is Kiswana like her mother?
3. In the end, what does Kiswana come to realize about her mother and herself?

LUCIELIA LOUISE TURNER

1. Why does Eugene stop to talk to Ben?
2. Why is Ciel's daughter so important to her?
3. Why does Eugene fight so much with Ciel? Why does Ciel have an abortion? How does this make Serena's death even harder for Ciel to bear?
4. Why does Ciel want to die? How does Mattie give life back to Ciel?

CORA LEE

1. Why are dolls so important to the young Cora Lee?
2. What are the differences between babies and baby dolls that Cora Lee learns as she gets older?
3. How does Kiswana help Cora Lee? Will the change be permanent?

THE TWO

1. Why is this chapter not called Lorraine and Theresa?
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2. Are the rumors justified? Why does Lorraine say that she can't afford to have people talking about her? Why are Tee's reactions so different from Lorraine's?
3. How do Ben and Lorraine find comfort in each other? What do they have in common?
4. Why do C.C. Baker and his companions gang-rape Lorraine? In addition to the physical damage, what does this act do to Lorraine?

THE BLOCK PARTY

1. Of what significance is the weather in this chapter? How has weather been significant throughout the novel?
2. The block party is just about to begin as the chapter ends. But before that, a block party takes place in Mattie's dream. In what way is her dream a forecast of what is to come in the real block party?
3. What is the significance of Ciel's dream within Mattie's dream? Will Ciel show up at the real block party?
4. In Mattie's dream, how does Theresa become a part of the neighborhood? What has happened to the wall?

DUSK

1. Why has Brewster Place been abandoned? Where have its people gone?
2. What happens to the spirit of the women from Brewster Place?

DIGGING DEEPER

1. Throughout the novel, Brewster Place is personified as a character itself. Is the street a protagonist or an antagonist? What effect does this have on the impact of the story and on its outcome?
 2. What experiences and characteristics do the seven women characters of Brewster Place have in common? How are they different from one another? In what specific and general ways do the women support and comfort one another?
 3. When Mattie was young, was Butch responsible for seducing her, or did she want to be seduced?
 4. How solid is the logic in Butch's philosophy that life is like eating sugar cane: "You gotta know when to stop chewing..."? What are the advantages of that philosophy? What are the weaknesses of it?
 5. Mattie's son Basil doesn't stay long enough to go on trial. If he had, what do you expect would have been the outcome of that trial?
 6. Why is it so difficult for some people to accept lesbians? How might Lorraine and Theresa be treated in your home town?
 7. Dreams and memories contribute much to the substance of this book as well as to its structure. Go back through the book, starting with the second page about Mattie Michael, and locate all the places where information about past events is presented as the dreams or memories of the characters. In what ways is this a useful writing device? How might it confuse some readers? What is the significance of Mattie's dream at the end of the book?
 8. Most of the women in this novel are mistreated by men, both emotionally and physically. Why do you suppose these men treat these women this way? In what ways do women mistreat men in this novel? Are there any positive relationships between men and women in the book? In the most violent chapter of the book, Lorraine is raped repeatedly. Why, then, does she kill poor old Ben?
 9. What do you think will become of Lorraine? Will she be tried for murdering Ben? Where will she live? How will she view the world in the future? Has she gone completely insane?
 10. At the end of the book, Kiswana and some of the others hope that their block party will be successful and that their Block Association will benefit from some significant changes. What do you expect are their chances for success? On what evidence do you base your opinion?
 11. Using the Langston Hughes poem at the front of the book, discuss which (if any) characters in the novel exhibit the characteristics he describes. Who dries up? Who festers? Who becomes syrupy sweet? Who sags? Who explodes?
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12. Some readers feel that this novel, like many novels about the experiences of poor black people, is depressing and demoralizing. Others feel that its effect is uplifting and inspiring. What do you think? Cite incidents from the novel that lead you to your position.
13. As the book begins, we are told how Brewster Place had been born. Throughout the story, the street lives through the existence of its residents. In the end it is dying. What causes its demise? In what ways will it never die? Would it be better off dead?

WRITING RESPONSES

1. Analyze the roles of male characters in this book. Explain what characteristics they have in common and how they view and treat women in general. Similarly, examine the way that the women relate to the men.
2. Compare Butch and Reverend Woods in their ability to use words to sway people and to manipulate women. What do they both know about people's needs? How successful are they at what they do? How successful are women in dealing with those men?
3. If, out of necessity, you had to take a twelve-hour bus trip and sit beside one of the women from Brewster Place, which one would you choose? Explain why you made your choice and suggest some things you would probably talk about during that long journey—things which she would probably want to tell or ask you and things you might want to tell or ask her. Is there one of the seven women you would definitely not want to sit beside? Explain why.
4. Each of the major characters in this book has certain strengths and weaknesses. In other words, they are all human. Choose one of the major characters and explain how her (or his) strengths help her (or him) to come to terms with weaknesses, or how these weaknesses contribute to misfortune.
5. Gloria Naylor creates many vivid and memorable scenes by using similes to describe actions and feelings, such as: "When they had finished and stopped holding her up, her body fell over like an unstrung puppet." Write one original paragraph to describe a scene or an event—either fictional or real—in which you use two or more illustrative similes.
6. Write a poem or a monologue as if you were the eyes and the voice of Brewster Place, describing the people and sights you have known.
7. Ben receives letters from his daughter but we never know what is in them because he can't bear to read them. Write your version of what she might have said in one of her letters.
8. Write a newspaper account of the rape of Lorraine.
9. Write an obituary for Ben.
10. Mattie says she has never again heard from Basil. What do you think has happened to Basil? Write a scene in which you describe an event in Basil's life after he has run away.

EXPLORING FURTHER

1. *Sula* by Toni Morrison and *The Color Purple* by Alice Walker are two other books that explore relationships between black women. Compare the qualities of the women in either of those novels with the qualities of the women in Naylor's novel.
2. Try to locate copies of interviews with Gloria Naylor, as well as reviews of her book (from 1982 and 1983), to see what she said about the factual bases of the characters and incidents she wrote about.
3. Naylor uses a Langston Hughes poem at the front of the book. Read a few of Hughes' other poems that deal with similar themes.
4. From recent articles in journals of psychology and sociology, research the latest information about the roles of black men in relation to women and families. How realistic is Naylor's depiction of black men as violent, irresponsible, and vulnerable?
5. When young and "uppity" Etta Johnson flees from Rutherford County, there has been talk of hanging—"Black bodies swinging/ In the southern breeze/ Strange fruit hanging/ From the poplar trees." Find out how common were the hangings of Blacks in the South. For what offenses were they hanged? Who did the hanging? Have there been any recent instances of this?
6. Kiswana Browne's mother asks, "Where are all those black revolutionaries who were shouting and kicking up a lot of dust with you on that campus? Huh?" Search out the names of key black "revolutionaries" from the late '60s and early '70s, and try to find out what has happened to them.

7. Cora Lee's desire to have a baby to love is not unlike the desires of thousands of unhappy and unloved teenagers today. Locate published information about these kinds of teenagers and try to interview unwed teenage mothers in your town to determine their attitudes about motherhood.
8. Naylor uses lyrics from songs sung by Billie Holiday to illustrate themes from Etta Johnson's life. Listen to other "blues" pieces and find selections which might illustrate themes from the lives of other characters on Brewster Place.
9. Kiswana plays "the dozens" with C.C. What do you know about the unwritten rules of this game? Find out about how to play if you don't already know. "Rapping" is a newer twist on the same game. Write some rap lines that you can perform in competition with other students.
10. Sketch, paint, or use collage to create a new cover illustration for this novel, something that is totally different from the one currently in use, but which illustrates the themes or intents of the story.

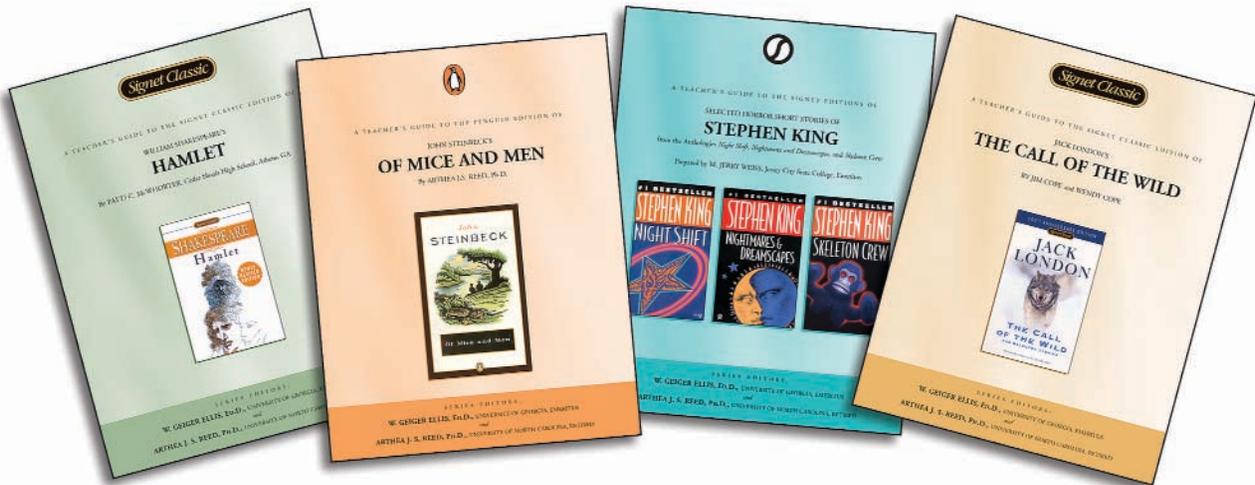
ABOUT THE AUTHOR OF THIS GUIDE

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