

Grant Wiggins - The protagonist and narrator of the novel, an elementary school teacher in his mid-twenties. Grant is intelligent and willful, but also somewhat hypocritical and depressed. A life spent in a segregated, racist community has made him bitter. He has no faith in himself, his society, or his church. He does not believe anything will ever change and thinks escape is the only option. He fears committing himself to a fight he cannot win. This defeatist attitude makes him shun responsibility, and he resents Tante Lou and Miss Emma for forcing him to help Jefferson. Over the course of the novel, however, he learns to accept responsibility for his own life, for his relations with other people, and for his role as an educator and agent of change in his needy community.

Jefferson - A sincere, sensitive, young black man of below-average intelligence. When his lawyer calls him a "hog," Jefferson takes the insult to heart and begins to consider himself powerless in the white-dominated society. He becomes sullen and withdrawn, accepting a living death and therefore becoming a dark symbol of his oppressed people. Grant attempts to heal Jefferson's pain. He believes that Jefferson can stop symbolizing the troubles of the black community and start symbolizing positive change.

Tante Lou - Grant's aunt, and a deeply religious woman. Tante Lou resents Grant's cynical atheism, perhaps because she feels it reflects badly on the way she raised him. Tante Lou took in Grant when his parents moved away and became a mother figure to him. Although she lives a troubled life under a harsh, racist system, she finds freedom for her soul in the church, her family, her dignity, and her pride.

Miss Emma - Jefferson's godmother. Miss Emma possesses great faith in God. After hearing Jefferson's lawyer call Jefferson a hog, she becomes obsessed with ensuring that Jefferson dies "like a man." Miss Emma expresses her emotions freely and demonstrates her strength and resolve during Jefferson's trial and incarceration.

Reverend Ambrose - The fiery, self-righteous leader of the black quarter's religious community, and Grant's primary foil in the novel. Reverend Ambrose believes that true faith in God shields the believer against oppression. Ambrose believes that Grant is foolish for forsaking his religion and that Grant will have a sinful influence on Jefferson. Jefferson connects only with Grant, and the Reverend cannot convince Grant to attempt to save Jefferson's soul. In his conversations with Grant, the Reverend reveals his belief that lying is a necessary component of survival, especially for Southern blacks struggling to live.

Vivian - Grant's beautiful, loving, and intelligent girlfriend. Vivian is a schoolteacher at the black Catholic school in Bayonne. She is married and has two children, but is in the process of divorcing her husband. She wants to hide her relationship with Grant for fear her husband will use it to justify taking the children away from her. She distrusts Grant because, in his self-centered way, he pressures her to forsake her community.

Mr. Antoine - Grant's primary school teacher and predecessor as the quarter's schoolteacher. Antoine dies before the events in the novel begin, but his influence on Grant is felt throughout the novel. His defeated, resentful cynicism contributed to Grant's bitterness.

Sheriff Guidry - An authoritarian man who runs the prison in Bayonne. Guidry resents anyone who trespasses on his domain, especially blacks like Grant and Miss Emma. He provides blacks with a modicum of freedom and opportunity while maintaining an overarching, white authoritarian superstructure.

Paul - The sheriff's deputy at the Bayonne jail, he is the only white in the novel who truly sympathizes with the black struggle in the South.

Henri Pichot - A stubborn white man with a sense of duty, he owns the plantation where Grant spent his childhood. Pichot is not a bad man, but he enjoys his position of power in the quarter. He cherishes the status quo because it allows him to feel superior to people. Like many of his white peers, he causes harm simply by his unwillingness to change.

Mr. Joseph Morgan - The white superintendent of schools. Like Pichot, Dr. Joseph knowingly maintains the status quo: black oppression under a fundamentally racist system. A hypocrite, Mr. Joseph presents a façade of benevolence, but he actually believes that although black children should receive a small amount of religious and patriotic education, they should primarily work the fields as farm hands.