

THE LEPER COMPOUND

Topics for discussion

1. In what ways does historical change shape the events of the novel?
2. What is the central theme of *The Leper Compound*?
3. Why has the leper compound near Ndima been chosen as a title when the place itself is confined to one chapter, and the novel is not grounded here?
4. Paula Nangle is a psychiatric nurse. How have Julia Chonongera and other nurses influenced Colleen? What impact does nursing have on the novel?
5. In "Svikiro," Colleen dreams of an accident in which the dying Miss Maenga walks away: "She acknowledges Colleen briefly before she goes." The novel ends with her dead father giving her arbitrary advice (or does it have meaning?). How has the African belief in spiritism influenced her thinking, or receptiveness, to the dead, the comatose, the dying?
6. How are Colleen's father's responses to the war, and to Sarah's emerging mental illness, similar or different?
7. Discussing Sarah's illness with Colleen in "The Last Day at Nyadzi," Vaida says, "What could you do? It was beyond your control." Are there actions the reader wishes Colleen would take with Sarah? With Hersekwe? Should she have crossed the border?
8. The Africans' unwillingness to fully include Colleen is based on a mutual mistrust that seems inevitable during a guerilla war. Give examples. Hersekwe says, "But this is what I mean, Colleen. You don't know whose side you're on." Is this a fair accusation?
9. Events, like her sister's delusions, may or may not be real. In "The Visit," she realizes "she might never know." Few things are definite. How does this tentative acceptance of an uncertain reality coincide with the states of emergency in both Rhodesia and South Africa, where the governments controlled the media?
10. Beyond Vaida's nationalism, what motivates her? Is Vaida revealing the whole truth of what happened in her confession? Does Colleen take full responsibility for the events at Mhekwe? Should she?
11. What is the significance of the corpses in The Leper Compound? How does Colleen react to death?

12. Compare the character of Malcolm to Hereseke, Len or Nick.
13. Why are movements such as 'I Live' and rebirthing so attractive to Colleen's South African friends? Colleen cannot rebirth -- why?
14. Muteness and immobility are observed by Colleen throughout the novel. In the first chapter, as she is recovering from malaria, there are "long silences when she pretended to be deaf." Why does she persistently attempt to identify with people whose communication and movement are compromised?
15. Does Colleen fear that she might develop schizophrenia like Sarah? She experiences vivid dreams after the malaria. But schizophrenia has been called a waking dream. Without sleep after Gavin's surgery, Colleen begins to hallucinate. Could she have smothered the other baby, Ramona? The incident is never reflected upon in later chapters. Although she seems to have accepted what the nurse assures her – that it is a dream, her part in the baby's death – how does she live with herself and continue to function as a mother?
16. Does Colleen accept her stepmother's role in Sarah's life?
17. Paula Nangle is the daughter of evangelical missionaries. The novel is not a memoir. Beyond Colleen's reluctance to actively participate in any movement requiring zeal, what evidence of the writer's background remains in the novel's exploration of religion?