

# **Push, by Sapphire**

## **Plot Summary**

**Push** is an emotionally powerful, disturbing novel written from the perspective of a young and poor black woman whose life has been defined by sexual, emotional, and physical abuse. Precious Jones lives in Harlem, New York with her mother, who is an overweight shut-in. Precious's mother beats her and sexually molests her.

Her father is a rotating figure in her life. He does not live with the family and only stops by when he wants to have sex with Precious. He starts having sex with Precious when she is three. Her mother is right next to them the first time he has sex with Precious. She does not do anything about it. At age twelve, Precious has her first child. Four years later she has another, which gets her suspended from school. Her dad is the father of both of her children.

Precious's mom does not want her to continue her education at a special school. She wants Precious to stay home, take care of her, and follow her footsteps into a life of despair supported by public aid. Precious wants more. She starts going to the school and eventually learns to read. The school is an all girls school that caters to young, troubled women. Precious is one of seven girls who are in the school. None of the girls have basic math, reading, or writing skills. These young women are also extremely affected by horrendous life experiences that include rape, incest, molestation, physical abuse, drug use, and prostitution.

As soon as Precious starts at the new school, she changes. She starts speaking out in class and she participates in activities. She also starts to process what has happened to her. As she faces her demons, she tries to understand why she was abused and why her mother did nothing to stop it.

The school and Precious's teacher, Ms. Rain, lead Precious to a self-awakening in which she sees herself as something other than ugly, black filth. Precious wants to change her life and in many ways she does. She vows not to remain on public aid like her mother. She also vows to take better care of her son, Abdul. She follows through on this promise, despite seemingly insurmountable challenges.

Precious and the other girls find themselves in situations they did nothing to create. Unfortunately, there is not a whole lot they can do to change them. They use each other as a support system try to heal wounds created for them by others.

## **Chapter 1 Summary**

Claireece Precious Jones is sixteen years old. She should be a junior in high school, but is only in ninth grade. She was held back in second grade because she couldn't read and peed on herself. When she was twelve, she left school to give birth to her daughter, who was born with Down's

Syndrome. The baby is her father's. Precious says he has been raping her since she was in second grade.

Everyone who knows Claireece well calls her Precious. Precious starts writing her story on September 24, 1987. She is on her way to Mr. Wicher's math class. She likes Mr. Wicher even though she yelled at him on the first day of school. She calls him a "mutherfucker" when he tells her to open her book to page 122 because she does not want him or anyone else to know that she does not know what "122" looks like.

Precious sits in the back of the class, but some day she wants to be smart enough to sit in the front. Mr. Wicher likes Precious because she yells at the other kids when they get out of line. Precious says they listen to her because she weighs more than two hundred pounds and are scared of her.

On the way to Mr. Wicher's class, Mrs. Lichenstein pulls Precious into her office to talk about the fact that Precious is pregnant for the second time and she is only sixteen. Precious considers Mrs. Lichenstein a "white bitch". She does not want her interfering in her life. It takes Mrs. Lichenstein a second to realize this is Precious's second baby. She suggests having a conference with Precious's mother, but Precious cannot figure out why. Mrs. Lichenstein tells Precious she has to suspend her because she is pregnant. Precious attacks her and security is called.

Precious goes home. She can hear her mom talking to her, but she does not want her mom to know she is pregnant. Precious does not know how far along she is. She starts thinking about when she had her first baby. Her mom does not notice she is pregnant with the first kid until she is nine months pregnant. When she figures it out, she starts beating Precious, calling her a slut, asking her who she slept with. The neighbor bangs on the wall, telling Precious's mom not to kill her. The neighbor also says that everyone knows Precious is pregnant and asks Precious's mom why she doesn't know this.

Meanwhile, Precious starts getting contractions. An ambulance arrives and a nice Spanish guy, who Precious first considers a "spic", is very nice to her and encourages her to **push**. After she has the baby, Precious tries to find this man, but she can't. She considers him a "God" because he treats her better than any other man she has met.

Precious nicknames her black nurse Mrs. Butter. Mrs. Butter cannot believe Precious was born November 4, 1970 and is having her first child at age twelve. The nurse asks her lots of questions. She asks Precious how much she weighs. Precious knows she weighs more than two hundred pounds, which is as high as her home scale will go.

Precious has a hard time understanding that she had a baby. She does not know anything about sex. She knows men "gush white stuff in your booty" to make a woman pregnant. This is all she knows about sex and reproduction.

Precious's mom's name is Mary L. Johnston. Her dad's name is Carl Kenwood Jones. She tells Mrs. Butter the baby's father's name is also Carl Kenwood Jones. Mrs. Butter asks Precious if she ever had a childhood. Mrs. Butter tells Precious that her baby is intensive care. Precious refuses to tell the cops, who she calls pigs, about what happened to her.

Precious jumps back to present time. She is once again sixteen, standing at the sink in her mother's home holding a knife. She wants to stab her mom, who is yelling at her to answer the door.

Mrs. Lichenstein is at the buzzer. She wants to talk to Precious about her education. Precious's mom is worried that someone's trying to kick her off welfare. Precious does not talk to Mrs. Lichenstein until she apologizes for suspending her. Mrs. Lichenstein wants Precious to visit Ms. McKnight at the Higher Education Alternative/Each One Teach One, which is a school for troubled kids. Precious is rude to Mrs. Lichenstein, but is excited about going back to school.

Precious starts thinking about when she had her first baby again. Precious decides she does not want to hold the baby because it looks funny. The baby, Little Mongo, has Down's Syndrome. Mrs. Butter sits on the bed, holds Precious, and apologizes to her. Precious wonders how she can care about school when all she can think about is being molested and having her dad's baby when she is twelve. Mrs. Butter tells Precious she'll get through it, but Precious can't see how.

Little Mongo lives with Precious's grandmother. Three months after Precious has Little Mongo, Mary hits her with a skillet and says, "Thank you Miz Claireece Precious Jones for fucking my husband you nasty little slut".

Then Mary makes Precious cook and forces Precious to eat until she's so stuffed she cannot move. Precious nods off and her mom starts molesting her. Precious pretends she is asleep so she does not have to face the abuse.

Precious is back in the present again. She is sneaking out of her house to register at the alternative school. Mary does not want her to get an education. Precious runs out of the house, fantasizing about losing weight and living on her own. The only thing she likes about being pregnant is that men do not make lewd comments at her. She wonders if she is safe from Carl and if her second baby will be retarded.

Precious is daydreaming. She believes Mary has agreed to let Carl have sex with Precious as long as he also has sex with Mary. When Carl has sex with Precious, Precious pretends she is a girl in a music video. Carl says he is going to marry her. Carl says she likes having sex with him because she always orgasms. Precious jumps back to the present. Someone is asking her to get on a bus. They call her crazy and she runs to school.

The school has Precious's academic records, which is upsetting to Precious. However, she is happy that someone is "looking out for her". She wants to know if the file says who fathered her children, or if it mentions her weight.

The secretary tells Precious she needs a copy of her mother's budget to show she is financially eligible for the program. She also needs to take a test to see if she qualifies for the pre-G.E.D. or G.E.D. class. Precious takes the test and the woman immediately asks her if she wants to take it again. She doesn't. Precious ends up in the easiest class, which meets Monday, Wednesday, and Friday from nine a.m. to noon.

## **Chapter 1 Analysis**

Precious is forced to become an adult the moment her father rapes her. Carl sees her as a sex object. Mary ignores the abuse, contributes to the abuse, and then calls Precious a slut when she finds out she's pregnant. Not only do her parents not support her, they abuse her, leaving Precious with no self image, no sense of what is right and wrong, and no childhood.

Throughout this first chapter, Precious has an extremely difficult time living in the present. She jumps from past to present, which can be confusing to the reader. This represents how confused Precious is about her life. She frequently loses her train of thought and ends up staring into space. Daydreaming or thinking about the past is how Precious copes with what is happening to her in the present. It's evident that this lack of concentration and the grandiose abuses of parental power prevent Precious from doing well in school.

Precious is internally conflicted. She listens to other people, namely her mother, tell her she's stupid, yet she believes she is smart. She also wants to leave home, but she does not know how to survive on her own. This battle between Precious's own reality and what she wants to be her reality suggests that she might be strong enough to leave her situation. Precious also shows an interest in school despite hiding her intellectual capacity by acting out against her teachers. Precious know she needs help, but doesn't know how to ask for it because no one has ever helped her.

Precious talks about being invisible, especially to white people. She wonders if all white people look like pictures. She believes that if her father actually saw her, he would not have sex with her. Precious is so alone in the world. At this point, the best thing in Precious's life is a disabled baby she does not get to see that was created through incest.

Precious identifies two people in her life as kind. The first is the ambulance driver, who helps deliver her first child. The second is Mrs. Butter, who holds her after she's had her second child. Precious mentions that she is always searching for these kind faces. Perhaps she will find them.

## **Chapter 2 Summary**

Precious thinks Farrakhan is a real man. She believes Farrakhan would say Carl rapes her because he was oppressed by white men. Carl leaves for years after he finds out about Little Mongo. Precious says she feels stupid, like Little Mongo.

Precious is almost late to her first day of school because she has been in bed for two hours, daydreaming. She shoves ham into tinfoil and runs out the door because she does not have time to stop at McDonald's for breakfast.

She thinks about kindergarten and first grade, when the kids laughed at the way she talked. Eventually, she moves to the back of the class and stops talking. She starts getting molested in second grade and starts gaining weight, giving kids another reason to make fun of her. A teacher tries to help her, but the principal tells her to focus on the kids that can learn.

On her way to school, Precious orders chicken from a fast food place and runs out the door when the girl goes in the back to get fries. In her hurry, she leaves her school supplies on the counter. She shows up to school a little bit late, but says it doesn't matter because her teacher's a "nigger" and no "niggers start on time".

Precious's teacher, Ms. Rain, welcomes her into the classroom. Precious is nervous in front of her six classmates and afraid she will pee her pants. She surprises herself by sitting in the front row.

Jo Ann, the class clown, walks in late. Precious is surprised at how well Miz Rain takes control of the situation. The girls respect her. Jo Ann has the notebook Precious left at the chicken place. Precious is surprised that Jo Ann gives it to her. Miz Rain makes the girls get in a circle, tell the class their name, where they're from, why they're there and one thing they're good at.

Rhonda is from Jamaica, but does not have an accent. Rita is pretty, a former crack addict, and a good mother. Jermaine is what Precious calls "a butch". She left the Bronx to get out of trouble. Jo Ann wants to own her own "record layer" and believes she needs to learn to read and write to get into the industry. Montenegro is a pretty Spanish girl who takes a pass on answering the questions. Precious cannot think of anything she does well. Ms. Rain encourages her and eventually she says, "cooking". This is the first time Precious has ever spoken in class.

Jo Ann says she is in the wrong place because she isn't illiterate. Ms. Rain tells her to leave and re-take the test for the more advanced class. Ms. Rain asks everyone if they are in the right class. Precious starts to cry and says yes.

Rhonda is the group leader. When the class takes a break she takes orders and goes to the store for food. She loans Precious money, which makes Precious want to cry. Ms. Rain wants the girls to write a journal every day. Precious has never written a word even though she once got an A in English. The girls go through the alphabet as a group. They help those like Jo Ann with letters they do not know. Ms. Rain tells the girls to practice over the weekend. She tells the girls they

can call her Blue, which is her first name. Then she leaves the room and tells them to come to office individually, in alphabetical order.

Precious is horrified because she doesn't know what alphabetical order is. Rhonda takes charge and helps them. When it's Precious's turn, Ms. Rain asks her to read from a book. Precious almost gets sick and then tells her she can't read it. Ms. Rain walks Precious through the letters and the words. Precious is so excited because she has read "A Day at the Beach".

Precious goes home, but can't wait to go back to school on Wednesday. Mary has not left the house in four years, not since Little Mongo was born. Mary is upset because the welfare office is removing Precious from her check because she does not go to school full time. Precious agrees to go talk to the welfare people in the morning.

Wednesday morning Precious goes to school. Ms. Rain asks who wants to go through the alphabet first. Precious jumps up, but is beaten by Rita and they recite it together. Ms. Rain has the girls write in their journals for fifteen minutes a day. They write phonetically so it is hard to read what they are saying.

Precious goes home. She writes out her alphabet, thinks about her life, and talks to her unborn baby, who she promises to teach to read.

## **Chapter 2 Analysis**

Precious is on her way to making a better life for herself. This much is clear after her first couple of days in school. Rather than shying away in the back of the class and hating herself, she asks questions. Rather than ignoring her pregnancy, she lets herself feel the baby inside her. She reads the alphabet to the baby, telling herself that even if her mother doesn't think she'll learn anything in school, she wants her baby to learn to read. She also promises not rely on welfare like her mother.

Another apparent change in Precious is that she realizes she can't ignore what has happened to her. She realizes that even though Carl says she is not a virgin when he first rapes her because she didn't bleed, she didn't deserve to be raped. She vows not to let her father do that again, even if it means she has to die.

These changes occur because she is in a supportive environment. The people she spends her days with make her see that her life is far from normal. They care about her and are shocked when they learn that she has never seen a doctor about her pregnancy. Precious is so overwhelmed by being treated kindly that she sporadically cries. She is so mistreated by her family and is completely overcome when people are nice to her.

Precious has a dream about being choked between her mother's legs, suggesting that she is starting to understand not dealing with the abuse will kill her. She understands constantly thinking about the abuse is having a negative effect on how she does in school.

At the end of the chapter, Precious looks at Harriet (Tubman) and Farrakhan on her wall and then she stares out the window at the ghetto she lives in. This foreshadows her desire to leave one world for another. Precious reads the ABCs she writes to her unborn baby. The words she uses such as "F is for Fuck" and "Z zk (zonked, mean like high)" really lets the reader into Precious's world. Every single letter depicts something violent, demeaning, vulgar, or oppressive. This is her life.

### **Chapter 3 Summary**

On January 15, 1988, Precious has her son, Abdul Jamal Louis Jones. Abdul means servant of God and Louis is for Farrakhan. Precious says her name means something valuable, but Claireece is someone else's name.

Precious tells the social worker that Little Mongo does not live with her so Mary gets kicked off aid. All Precious thinks about in the hospital is school. She doesn't let anyone know she had a birthday in November. She is not sure how she feels about the baby. She thinks he is pretty, but knows he is a product of rape.

Precious writes to Ms. Rain while she is in the hospital. She talks about being raped by Carl. Ms. Rain tells her to remember to put the date on her journals and suggests that she give Abdul up. Precious says Abdul is everything. Ms. Rain counters by saying reading and writing are everything. Precious's grandmother visits the hospital and tells her only a dog would leave a baby.

Precious tells Ms. Rain to remember to write the date on her letters. Ms. Rain asks Precious how long her father abused her, where Little Mongo is, and what which decision would be the best for her. Precious says she wants to be a good mother. Ms. Rain says that might mean letting the baby live with someone else. Precious says she can go on aid like her mother. Ms. Rain says she can go to college.

When Precious gets home from school, Mary tries to kill her. She accuses Precious of stealing her man and then kicking her off welfare. Precious screams at her mother, telling her she was raped. She grabs Abdul and leaves. They go to the emergency room because Precious doesn't feel well and she wants to find Mrs. Butter. She tells Mrs. Butter about being raped. Mrs. Butter leaves and the other nurses send Precious to the armory.

The armory is full of crazy women. A drug addict tells Precious to put her bag in bed with her. Precious is scared. A woman steals her blanket and Abdul coughs up throw up. Precious wakes up to someone trying to steal her shoes off her feet. All of her stuff is gone. She wonders if Mama's house is worse than being homeless.

She thinks of calling her neighbor Mrs. West, but she doesn't know her phone number. Finally, she goes to school and waits for Ms. Rain. Ms. Rain, all of the girls, and Ms. Rain's boss get on the phone to find Precious a place to stay. They find a halfway house in Queens, but Precious

doesn't want to stay there because it is too far from school. They find a place for her in a Harlem halfway house, but she has to stay that night in Langston Hughes' old house.

Precious lists the books both she and Abdul have. Precious is reading *The Color Purple* in class. She has a hard time reading it. She tells Mrs. Rain she does not like homosexuals. Mrs. Rain says she is gay, adding that homosexuals are not bad people. Homosexuals did not rape Precious.

By November 1988, Precious is settling into the halfway house. In September she wins a literacy award from the city. Abdul is nine months old and walking. Precious says he is smart.

Mary visits Precious. Little Mongo has been moved to an institution because her grandmother wasn't giving her the care she needed. Precious sees herself in Mary. Precious believes Mary smells, but now knows not to "fuck with" her. However, Precious realizes she is not Mary. She is ashamed of Mary.

Mary tells Precious that Carl has died of AIDS. Precious understands that she and Abdul could also have AIDS. Precious asks if Carl is her real dad. Mary says Carl is the only man she has been with since she was sixteen and that he has a light skinned wife. Precious asks Mary if she has AIDS. Mary says she knows she doesn't because she and Carl never did it like "faggots" like Carl and Precious did. Mary has not been tested. She tells Precious that she is welcome home.

Precious panics. Precious cannot understand why this is happening to her. She writes this in her journal. Ms. Rain tells her she loves her, is proud of her, and knows she will find a job when she leaves school. Using her journal, Precious tells Ms Rain she needs an HIV test.

Precious has HIV. She says she needs to learn more than reading and writing. Precious is now the leader of the group, but she hasn't written her life story yet, which is something every girl is required to do. Precious considers the girls her family. She does not know if a boy will ever love her, but she knows these girls see her for who she is. She wonders if her son will make fun of girls when he is older.

Rita wants Precious to join an HIV support group called "Body Positive". Jermaine tells her to fight. Precious says she does not have anything to write. Ms Rain tells her to write her life story. Precious, for the first time in her life, screams at Ms Rain. She is ashamed and tired.

Ms. Rain says, "I know you are, but you can't stop now Precious, you gotta **push**".

### **Chapter 3 Analysis**

Precious is in a constant state of confusion because of the abuse she's endured. When she has Abdul, she goes back and forth between loving him and not caring for him. She loves him because he is her son, but she doesn't want to love him because he is the product of incestuous rape. Finally she settles on loving him and later on says she can't hate Carl because he gave her the one thing she loves the most. Carl has made it impossible for her to escape him or even hate him.

As Precious becomes more educated, she starts to let go of her prejudices. Before attending Ms. Rain's class she always blamed her problems on crack heads or white people. She also made derogatory comments toward gay people. But, in this chapter, she starts to let go of these ideologies. Ms Rain tells Precious she's gay, which makes Precious see that gay people are not evil.

When Precious moves to the halfway house she feels obligated to explain that a halfway house means you are halfway between your old life and your new life. Precious starts to live her new life. This is a life without abuse. It is a life full of love and support.

Precious is aware of the positive impact her friends and Ms. Rain have on her. This camaraderie helps her feel like she has a place in the world. She understands she is not alone. Other girls, like Rita and Rhonda, have gone through equally difficult situations. Rita's dad killed her mom right in front of her eyes. Rhonda's brother raped her and when her mom found out, she kicked Rhonda out of the house. Precious thinks about these things while trying to figure out why bad things always happen to her.

At the end of the chapter, Precious yells at Ms Rain and tells everyone she's tired. She does not want to fight anymore. Ms Rain tells Precious, "but you can't stop now Precious, you gotta **push**". Ms Rain wants Precious to keep fighting. **Sapphire** presumably titled the book **Push** because it's all about trying to fight through life.

#### **Chapter 4 Summary**

It's February 1989 and Precious is depressed, living in a daze. Ms. Rain says depression is anger turned inward. Ms. Rain, Rhonda, and Jermaine all want Precious to go to counseling, but Precious doesn't understand the point of bringing up the past. Ms. Rain notices that Precious's spelling gets much worse when she's mad. They all try to prop Precious up. Precious says she only feels bad because she has been diagnosed with HIV. She feels better when she goes to church and writes in her journal.

Precious starts thinking about boys and sex. She goes between wanting to know what it would be like to be loved by a boy and just wanting to have consensual sex with a boy her age. Precious does not want Ms. Rain to see these journal entries. Precious starts writing poetry. One poem is about Harlem and how ugly, poor, black, and cold it is. She talks about how much she hates ugliness.

The girls have brought personal touches to the classroom to make it look better. Precious brings a picture of Abdul and a plant, which has already outgrown its pot. The plant is representative of how much Precious has grown. Precious wonders where she would be without school. She can tell time and says she's turning into a new person. She says she no longer cares about extensions, new clothes, or if boys love her. She cares about staying healthy, sex, and writing in her notebook.

Sometimes Precious thinks about Mary. She spends more time thinking about Carl Kentwood Jones. Little Mongo doesn't have HIV so she wonders when Carl contracted it and gave it to her. HIV makes Precious feel alone. Precious says her "clit swell up when I think Daddy". This sickens her as does the fact that she had orgasms while he was having sex with her.

Rita wants Precious to go to a group for "insect" (she means incest) survivors. Precious doesn't want to go, but wonders if the other girls also smear shit on their face, bite their fingernails and pick at their skin with razors. She thinks if she was a "pink virgin girl" her Carl wouldn't have raped her. She hates herself when she thinks of Carl.

Precious writes a touching poem to Abdul, telling him to never give up no matter how hard life gets. Ms Rain has the girls write fantasies about their lives. Precious fantasizes about having light skin, being loved by boys, and having extensions. She also wants to be a virgin. She cannot understand why Ms. Rain thinks she's pretty the way she is. She wishes she had a second chance at life, a chance that would not be left in the hands of her parents.

Precious does not trust her counselor, Ms. Weiss. She doesn't like that Ms. Weiss wants her to talk about Mary, Carl, and the abuse. Precious tells Ms. Weiss she wants a cherry Coke. When Ms Weiss leaves, she steals her file and stuffs it in her backpack. When Ms. Weiss returns, she asks Precious to share her first memory of her mother. Precious does not say anything to Ms. Weiss, but tells the reader, "I already know what I'm gonna recover, the smell of Mama's pussy in my face". Mary has been calling Precious. Precious does not want her to come to a counseling session.

Jermaine helps Precious read through her file. Precious is afraid the file will get her kicked off aid. The file says Precious is doing very well except for her TABE scores. She needs to get an 8.0 to get into a GED program and she has a 2.8. The file says she is capable of going to work and suggests that due to her educational limitations, she would be a good home attendant. Precious is mad that records of the sexual abuse and HIV diagnosis are in the file. She is also mad that Ms. Weiss believes Precious will be on aid forever. Precious tells Jermaine she is going to get off aid and go to college. She will never be a home attendant.

During class Precious suggests the students about workforce and education. Precious writes about not wanting to wipe old people's asses. She writes that being a home attendant will not make her any money and will prevent her from finishing school. But, she says she needs to figure out how to stay in school before Abdul's birthday. She is worried that when he turns one, she will be kicked off aid and forced out of the program.

Precious shares her entry with the class. Ms Rain points out that she "stole" the file. Precious has said she would never steal anything. Precious says that she had to steal it because Ms. Weiss is out to get her. Ms. Rain tells her to trust herself and advises Precious to find someone she trusts or she won't get the help she needs.

Precious talks about going to an "insect" class. A classmate points out that it's "incest". Ms. Rain asks Precious if she has ever had her hearing checked. Precious hasn't, but she is more interested in having glasses because she strains her eyes when she reads. Jermaine is working on her life story, but Precious has not started working on hers because she still needs to figure out what happened to her. Precious grew up thinking her insides and outsides were different and that if someone saw her insides instead of her outsides, they would love her. She tries not to cry and wonders why no one put Carl in jail after she had her first baby.

Rita takes Precious to a Survivors of Incest Anonymous meeting. Rita's wealthy boyfriend who was an addict but who now has a good job has paid to fix Rita's teeth. He is HIV positive. Rita wants to start a house for women and kids who are HIV positive. Precious writes a poem about the part of the city they go to for the meeting. It is white, clean, and attractive, completely different than Harlem. The room is full of all kinds of girls: white, black, rich, poor. Precious can't believe that this stuff happens to pretty white girls. Precious is grateful that Rita got her to the meeting before she turned into an "exploded bomb".

Precious vows not to talk, but after hearing testimony from a pretty white girl, she stands up and says she was raped by her father. Then she says, "Mama **push** my head down in her . . ." and stops talking. She does not realize she has stopped talking until someone asks if she is finished. She sits down. Precious cannot believe how many women have been raped and molested. Rita takes Precious out for coffee afterwards. Precious gets hot chocolate. She feels alive and wonders why strangers are nice to her, but a father who knew her for sixteen years was not.

Precious meets her mom for counseling. She says Mary smells funny. Ms. Weiss asks Precious to read her first memory of her mom to Mary. Precious's poem talks about Mary's fingers "picking my pussy apart". Precious decides not to read the entry.

Ms. Weiss asks Mary to talk about the abuse. Whenever she woke up and Carl was not at her side, Mary knew he was with Precious. Mary believes she was a good mother and that Precious had a good childhood. Mary says she and Carl loved Precious. However, she cannot remember which month Precious was born in. Precious reminds her it was November.

Ms. Weiss again asks Mary when the abuse started. When Precious was three, Mary breast fed Carl and gave Precious a bottle because she thought it was more sanitary for the baby. Precious can tell Ms. Weiss is horrified by this admission. One day, all three of them were in bed. Carl was on one side sucking on Mary and Precious was on the other. Then Carl stuck his finger between Precious's legs. Mary told him to stop, but he kept going, got on top of her and put his penis in her. Mary thinks Precious is a freak baby because Carl can almost get his entire penis in her. Mary claims the abuse was not her fault because she wanted to have sex with her husband. She believes that by not denying him sex, she was doing her duty.

Precious leaves the counseling session. She leaves Abdul with the house mom so she can go to a Body Positive class, which is for young women who have HIV. Miz Mom gives her money so

she can go get something to eat. Precious doesn't know why she goes to so many recovery meetings. She is not a crack addict. She does not know what she is recovering from. Abdul is not HIV positive, which makes Precious think there is a God. But then again, she wonders why some kids get good parents and others get bad ones. She takes the TABE test again and gets a 7.8.

## **Chapter 4 Analysis**

Once again the reader sees Precious struggle with conflicting emotions and belief systems. Precious is extremely curious about sex and love. She can't quite figure out how the two go together, but she wants to experience both. First she says she does not care about boys or love, but then she says she does care about sex. This confusion, especially because it is of a sexual nature, is reflective of the abuse. She was sexually abused by someone who was supposed to love her, which is confusing. But, equally confusing, is the fact that sex with her father, which she knows isn't right, felt good physically. She cannot figure out how sex and love work together.

Precious is surrounded by hatred and ugliness. She is obsessed with ugliness. The city she lives in is poor, dirty, and ugly. She also notices that it's largely black, which is a color she equates with ugliness. The black people she knows live in ugly parts of town. They are crack heads, they steal, they are rapists. The white people she sees live in the nice areas of town, they are clean and they have money. This contrast is confusing to Precious, but it makes her view the black race as ugly. It also makes her hate white people.

Precious hates crack addicts, but does not know why. Unlike her father, crack addicts have never hurt her. Precious also hated "faggots". However, she views them as the "same" as them because she has HIV, a disease that homosexuals and drug addicts are frequently exposed to.

The confusion, anger, and negative view Precious has of her life prevents Precious from being able to identify herself. She does not know where she fits in society or why she should exist. At one point, she gives insight as to why she calls herself Precious. She thinks that by naming herself Precious, her father would view her as such and stop the abuse.

Going to the incest support group is good for Precious. For the first time in her life she talks about the abuse. She also sees a room full of white women, wealthy women, old women, and young women. This helps her understand that abuse can be imposed upon anyone. Abuse does not just happen to poor, black trash, which is what Precious has considered herself. Seeing this bigger picture gives Precious hope, as evidenced by the fact that she then says she sees beauty in her son, someone she created. Going to the group stopped a bomb that was ready to explode in Precious, indicating that if she hadn't gone to the group at that moment, she would have given up and lost all hope.

Precious also confronts her mother about the abuse. This is the first time the two have talked about it. Precious cannot handle the fact that her mother watched Carl abuse her. Instead of stopping the abuse, Mary got jealous that he was with Precious instead of her. Precious realizes

her mother is mentally unstable. Precious is a mother and understands how mentally deranged a person has to be to do what her mother did.

Though painful, talking about the abuse and confronting her mother removes a huge weight from Precious's shoulders. It allows her to think more clearly, which is why she gets a much higher TABE score than she did before expressing herself. This foreshadows that she'll be able to see her life more clearly now that she's dealt with some of the abuse.

## **Chapter 5 Summary**

**Push** finishes with the class book, which includes the students' life stories. Precious opens with two poems called "everi mornin" and "mornin". In "everi mornin" she compares herself to the fictional Mary who had a little lamb. Precious says AIDS and a baby followed her to school instead of a lamb. The second poem is about doing good things for her Abdul and then leaving him in another woman's arms when she goes to school. She also refers to the small pieces of grass she sees in local parks as "green diamonds," indicating that she does see some beauty in an otherwise dark world.

Rita writes about the beautiful house she lived in and remembers her mom, who was a medium and read a crystal ball. Her mother was beautiful, but was killed by her father who thought she was sleeping with her clients. Rita was in the room when he shot her mother in the head. Rita's father tells Rita she is white like him and that her mother is a Puerto Rican slut. Rita's mother says Rita's father is a "brainwashed spic" because he doesn't want Rita to learn Spanish.

Rita defines life as drugs, foster care, prostitution, rape, jail, HIV, and rehab. She wants to remember her beautiful home and mother rather than everything that encompasses her life. She wonders what it would be like to live in Puerto Rico and decides the US has better health care.

Rhonda moves to the US from Jamaica after her father dies. She is twelve, but doesn't go to school because she has never been to school and her mom needs her to cook for their restaurant. Most of the money goes to pay for her brother Kimberton's clothes and books. Her mom wants him to be a doctor so she can retire.

Kimberton is a year younger than Rhonda, but when she is fourteen, he starts molesting her. Rhonda tries to tell her mom, but her mom does not listen. The abuse continues. Rhonda becomes fat and gets acne. When she is sixteen, she tells her mom that Kimberton is molesting her. Her mother says she's being fresh, says Rhonda has done something to her son, and kicks her out.

Rhonda says the first few years as a prostitute were rough, but then she got used to it. Sometimes she would see her mom. They would exchange small talk. Rhonda says her mom treated her like a daughter that ran off and got married. Kimberton becomes a dentist. When Rhonda is twenty-four, she runs into her mom who tells her Kimberton is going to court for allegedly molesting a girl while fixing her teeth. Rhonda's mom says the girl just wants some of Kimberton's money.

Rhonda won't stay in shelters because they are full of crazy people. She gets a chance to stay at the Y and get on welfare. She gets frustrated because she does not have all of the papers the welfare people need to process her claim, including a birth certificate. She finally gets some of the papers she needs. When she returns to the welfare office, the woman tells her to come back the next day. Rhonda punches her and breaks her nose.

At the Y, a woman from Trinidad tells Rhonda about a job. Rhonda starts working for an old, wealthy white bigot. The woman calls her names. Rhonda finally leaves when the woman tries to throw a bed pan at her. Rhonda gets another job working for a dying white man who makes her clean his penis and give him hand jobs. She does not like it, but at "least he pay me". She gets a room of her own, but goes back on the streets after the man dies.

While collecting cans, she sees Kimberton in the window of her mom's shop, which is for sale. He tells her that their mom is dead and buried. He tries to give Rhonda money and tells her that she "wanted it as much as I did". Rhonda eventually gets another job and meets Rita, who introduces her to their school.

Jermaine writes "Harlem Butch". She knew she was different when she was seven and put on her brother's pants. When she is seven, a boy tries to put his penis in her. At eight she sticks her tongue in Mary-Mae's mouth. When she is nine, she sticks her fingers in Mary-Mae and by ten she puts her tongue "where he tried to put it in me".

When the girls are thirteen, Mary-Mae's dad catches them fooling around in Mary-Mae's room and calls them dykes. Later he rapes Jermaine to show her the difference between men and women. He beats her too. Jermaine will not tell her mom who hurt her. Jermaine does not like telling this part of her story because it makes people think she's gay because she was raped.

Jermaine's mother becomes obsessed with religion. One night Jermaine's father takes the Bible out of his wife's hand, throws it at her, and hits her eyes. By the time she goes to the emergency room, she is blind in that eye. Jermaine says the most painful moment in her life was when people in the subway looked at her blind mother, who was preaching at them, with pity in their eyes. When Jermaine is seventeen, her mom walks in on her and Mary-Mae having sex and freaks out. Jermaine leaves and never sees Mary-Mae again. She says she loved Mary-Mae.

Jermaine moves in with her father. He makes her sleep on the floor. She can hear him masturbate at night. When he suggests that she sleep with him, she leaves. She keeps odd jobs. At nineteen, she gets raped and beaten by six men. Now Jermaine keeps a gun with her at all times. Jermaine says she could have passed her GED test months ago, but she doesn't want to leave the school.

Precious finishes the stories with an untitled poem. She talks about living in a prison. Precious says she is not free because of Mama, HIV, and Abdul. All she knows is that she does not want to be where she is. She tries to think of her smart child, her children. She remembers sayings such as "play the hand you got", or "get up off your knees". These bits of inspiration come from

her role models. However, she gets to the heart of her poem and, in a few words, states that her life is like a ticking time bomb. She has HIV. She is doomed regardless of what she does to better her life.

## **Chapter 5 Analysis**

Rita remembers her mom calling her Negrita, which means little black one. Remembering this as well as her mother's beauty and the comfort of her home is what has gotten Rita through her hardships. Rita also remembers her mom telling Rita she doesn't want to know what's in the glass ball, foreshadowing Rita's life of hardship.

Rhonda will never understand why her mother passed her over for her brother. Rhonda devoted her life to her brother's success and as a result, she gets put on the street. Rhonda comments that one thing she's learned is that you never know how someone's going to react. Instead of nurturing her and stopping the abuse, Rhonda's mom threw her out.

Rhonda dissolves the faces of the men she sleeps with. This allows her to cope with her life. Rhonda doesn't have family, but she is hopeful her life will get better. At the end of her story, she notes that this is the beginning of her life, not the end. This is the exact opposite of how Promise feels about her life. Promise ends her section with "tick tock", which means the HIV has her waiting at death's door.

Jermaine repeatedly talks about knowing who she is. She, more than the other girls, knows who she is. She knows she is gay and she is comfortable with that. However, Jermaine has spent her entire life being persecuted for being true to herself. She asks Ms. Rain if a river is wrong. She uses the river as a symbol for life, wondering if something so natural, which for her is being homosexual, can be wrong. She doesn't want to leave the school because she feels safest there.

## **Characters**

### ***Precious/Claireece Precious Jones***

Precious is a sweet, sixteen year old girl who lives in an ugly, cruel world. She has two babies by her father, who starts sexually abusing her when she is three. Her mother ignores the abuse and also sexually abuses Precious. At school she is made fun of for being fat or stupid. She frequently zones out because she has to fantasize about other things to keep from going crazy. Precious desperately wants to get out of her situation, but the only thing she knows how to do is fantasize about being somewhere else. Claireece Jones decides to call herself Precious when she is young because she believes the meaning of the word, Precious, will make her father stop sexually abusing her. The Higher Education Alternative/Each One Teach One school is exactly what Precious needs. The school helps her cope with the abuse. Coping with her life helps Precious figure out who she is. Precious has an extremely difficult time defining herself because all of her formative years have been defined by abuse. She doesn't understand what normal is. She thinks it means being white and clean. The assumption makes her hate being black, but it also forces her to hate white people. This type of conflict follows Precious throughout the novel.

Whenever she feels love, she also feels hate. Whenever she talks about a stereotype she has, something breaks it. Precious is constantly confused. She is confused about sex, which she views as negative because of the abuse. However, she also knows it feels good and it gave her Abdul, her son. She is confused by her situation. She is confused by the hard life she has dealt with. The name of the novel, "**Push**", is based on the fact that Precious has to **push** her way through life. Even when things seem to be going well, they fall apart. Precious never has a moment to breathe and enjoy her life. She always has to fight to survive.

**Mary L. Johnston:** Precious's mother is a delusional, abusive, worthless parent. She allows the man she calls her husband to continuously rape Precious. She actually sits next to him when he first rapes Precious and does nothing about it. She eventually tells a counselor that she thought Precious was a freak baby because her father was almost able to get his entire penis inside of her. Mary talks about the details of the abuse with a straight face, proving she's not right in the head. When Precious has her second child at sixteen, Mary beats her with a frying pan and accuses her of stealing her husband. Mary also pretends she does not notice Precious was pregnant for nine months. Mary uses both of Precious's children to increase her welfare aid. She does nothing to help raise the children or comfort her daughter, who has birthed two children, thanks to incest. Mary never shows any remorse for what happened to Precious. She views Precious as a threat to a life she never had with her "husband". When she talks to the counselor, she paints a picture of Precious having a wonderful childhood. She largely bases her parenting skills on the way she dressed Precious rather than on how she treated her.

**Carl Kenwood James:** Carl Kenwood James is Precious's father and the father of her children. His role in the novel is peripheral in the sense that his interaction with the characters does not occur on a daily basis. The reader sees Carl Kenwood James through Precious's eyes. He starts raping her when she is a small child. He stops for a few years after Precious has her first child by him. She is twelve. At that point, Carl Kenwood James leaves the area for a little while, presumably because he feels some sort of remorse for what he has done. When he returns, he gets her pregnant again. Carl Kenwood James's abuse causes all of the problems in Precious's life, but she never gets to confront him about it.

**Ms. Rain/Miz Rain:** Ms. Rain is the head teacher at the Higher Education Alternative/Each One Teach One school. She is a powerful, educated, intelligent black woman who has devoted her life to helping troubled young women. Ms. Rain runs a strict classroom, but cares deeply for the girls. She has to be tough because if she isn't, the girls will not respect her. Ms. Rain teaches the girls to read and write so they can take their GED tests. The girls she gets are so far behind in school that she has to teach them the ABCs before she can teach them to read. Even though none of the girls can really write, Ms. Rain has them write in a journal every day to the best of their ability. This technique is more about getting the girls to talk about what's happened in their lives than it is about basic reading and writing skills. Ms. Rain acts as a role model for Precious. Precious looks to her for advice. When Ms. Rain gives it, she tries to steer Precious away from

the self-defeating mentality of her life situation. Precious does not always agree with Ms. Rain, but she respects her opinion. Ms. Rain is the closest thing to a mother figure that most of the girls have ever had. Ms. Rain's full name is Blue Rain. She was born in California and encourages the girls to call her whatever they want. She does this to get them to see her as a peer. Precious goes back and forth between referring to Ms. Rain as Miz Rain and Ms. Rain. It appears that Precious uses Miz Rain most often when she is angry or identifying Miz Rain as a black woman. The Miz Rain reference is much more casual and lacks the respect of the Ms. Rain reference.

**Abdul:** Abdul is Precious and Carl Kenwood James's son. He is their second child and is indicative of everything that is wrong in Precious's life. Precious grapples with loving him since he is a product of incest. However, Precious also looks at him as a blessing. She reads to him, watches his diet, and looks out for his well being. Abdul Jamal Louis Jones was born January 15, 1988 in Harlem Hospital. Precious gives him what she considers to be a long, strong name so he will turn out to be a strong black man. She calls him Abdul for short.

**Mr. Wicher:** Mr. Wicher is Precious's math teacher at I.S. 146. He encourages Precious by telling her she is good with numbers.

**Sondra Lichenstein:** Sondra Lichenstein is the teacher who gets Precious suspended from school for having a baby. She is also the woman who leads Precious to the Higher Education Alternative/Each One Teach One school.

**Ms. McKnight:** Ms. McKnight is another teacher at Higher Education Alternative/Each One Teach One. She does not play a large role in the novel like Ms. Rain.

**Farrakhan:** Louis Farrakhan is an American, black Islamic leader. He has been criticized by many for being a racist and homophobe. Precious looks up to him. She does not know much about him, but believes he is a strong black man. His picture is above her bed.

**Little Mongo:** Little Mongo is what Precious calls her daughter. She calls Little Mongo by this name because the baby has Down Syndrome, which is sometimes referred to as mongoloid disease. Little Mongo lives with her grandmother and is eventually transferred to a home for disabled children. Precious has Little Mongo when she is twelve.

**Jo Ann:** Jo Ann is the class clown at Higher Education Alternative/Each One Teach One. She is also the first person to ask Precious about her pregnancy and suggest that she get pre-natal care. Jo Ann wants her own record label and is in denial about her educational situation.

**Rhonda Patrice Johnson:** Rhonda Patrice Johnson is a light skinned girl that also goes to the Higher Education Alternative/Each One Teach One school. She was born in Jamaica and moves to the US after her father died. She ends up at the school after years of being a prostitute. She gets into prostitution after her mother kicks her out. Her mother does this because she blames Rhonda for her younger brother Kimberton, raping her for two years.

**Rita Romero:** Rita Romero is a light Spanish girl who goes to the Higher Education Alternative/Each One Teach One school. Her father kills her mother in front of her eyes, which lands her in the foster system. From there she turns into a crack addict. Rita is very supportive of Precious and takes her to self-help groups.

**Jermaine:** Jermaine is a lesbian that left home after her religious mother caught her having sex with a girlfriend. Jermaine is a very good writer and writes a story about her life called "Harlem Butch". She has also been raped several times by men.

**Consuelo Montenegro:** Consuelo Montenegro is a pretty Spanish girl at the Higher Education Alternative/Each One Teach One school.

**Harriet Tubman:** Harriet Tubman is a well known black abolitionist. Precious puts a photo of her on her bedroom wall after she learns about slavery.

**Mrs. Butter:** Mrs. Butter is a kind, mulatto nurse at Harlem Hospital who takes care of Precious when she has both babies. Her real name is Lenore Harrison, but Precious calls her Mrs. Butter because she thinks her skin is the color of butter.

**Alice Walker:** Alice Walker is the author of the book, *The Color Purple*. Precious loves this book because it talks about surviving in the world as a black woman. Precious adds Alice Walker's photo to her bedroom wall.

**Ms. Weiss:** Ms. Weiss is a white counselor that tries to help Precious. Precious views her as threatening because she is white and because she writes records of what Precious says. Ms. Weiss is present when Precious confronts her mother about the abuse.

**Miz Mom:** Miz Mom is the woman in charge at the halfway house who looks after Precious and Abdul.

## Objects/Places

I.S. 146

The I.S. 146 on 134th Street between Lenox Avenue and Adam Clayton Powell Jr. Blvd is where Precious goes to high school. She should be a junior, but she is in ninth grade.

### **444 Lenox Avenue**

Precious and her mother, Mary, live at 444 Lenox Avenue in Harlem, New York.

### **Harlem Hospital**

Harlem Hospital is where Abdul and Little Mongo are born. This is also where Precious meets Mrs. Butter.

### **Higher Education Alternative/Each One Teach One**

The Higher Education Alternative/Each One Teach One school is the alternative school Precious goes to after being suspended from I.S. 146. The school is located on the 19th floor of the Hotel Theresa on 125th Street.

### **150th and St. Nicholas Avenue**

Precious's grandmother and Little Mongo live at 150th and St. Nicholas Avenue in Harlem, New York.

### **The Armory**

The Armory is a shelter that two nurses send Precious to after she runs away from Mary's house. The Armory is filthy and full of drug addicts and crazy people.

### **Langston Hughes's House**

Langston Hughes's House is where Precious stays before she gets placed in the Advancement House.

### **Advancement House**

The Advancement House is a halfway house Precious and Abdul move to after they run away from Mary's house.

### **Survivors of Incest Anonymous**

Survivors of Incest Anonymous is a self-help class for women who have been victims of rape and incest. Precious goes here with Rita.

### **Body Positive Class**

The Body Positive Class is a support group for women who have HIV.

## **Posters**

Precious puts three posters on the wall above her bed of black leaders who she looks up to. These posters include Louis Farrakhan, Alice Walker, and Harriet Tubman.

## **Themes**

### **Survival**

Most people have life goals. Some want to be doctors, others want to be lawyers. Some want to be a good mother. Precious's only life goal, at least at the beginning of the novel, is to survive. She does not have the luxury to set any academic, professional, or personal goals. She does not even have time to worry about the fact that she cannot see the blackboard or hear what the teacher is saying. Precious just needs to figure out how she is going to get through her day.

This novel gives readers insight into what it is like to be raised as a poor, black object in a world of hopelessness and despair. Precious is thrown into survival mode when she is three and Carl first rapes her. From that point on, her life revolves around not falling apart. She does this by fantasizing about being anywhere other than where she is. This prevents her from paying attention in school, which ultimately results in her falling dramatically behind in school.

When Precious goes to Higher Education Alternative/Each One Teach One school, she has a chance to focus on something other than survival. She is finally in an environment where she might be able to learn. However, soon after she starts school, she has Abdul and runs away from home. This tosses Precious back into survival mode where her main focus returns to keeping herself and now her son alive.

When Precious and Abdul find the halfway house and settle in, it appears that Precious might have a chance to get ahead. At this point she is doing well in school and adjusting to life with her son. She even appears optimistic, making goals for her future and telling Ms. Rain that she wants to get off of aid and go to college. Unfortunately, it is at this point that Precious learns she has HIV. Rather than focusing on her goals, Precious once again has to focus on just staying alive.

Precious's experience is indicative of the mentality in Harlem, which is survival. Survival is so prevalent that a young woman who is doing all she can to better herself cannot get ahead because life keeps bringing her down. The other girls in the novel have a similar experience. Every time it seems like they are going to get ahead, life pulls them back down.

### **Sexual Abuse**

The focal point of *Push* is sexual abuse. Sexual abuse is a prevalent theme in the lives of the main character and all of the other girls who attend the Higher Education Alternative/Each One Teach One school. Sexual abuse is not the only hardship these girls have gone through, but it is the one that has the most impact on them and ties them together. Rampant sexual abuse gives

these girls a warped view of sex, prevents them from focusing on other things, and gives them low self esteem.

Each girl is sexually abused before she is fourteen, allowing sexual abuse to set the foundation of their lives. The sexual abuse gives each of the girls a warped view of sex. Precious hates sex because her only experience with it is being raped by her father. Precious tries everything she can to stop the abuse, including gaining weight and changing her name. Since Precious is constantly preoccupied with making herself appear as unattractive as possible to her father, she does not get to spend any time getting to know herself. As a result, she has extremely low self esteem and spends her time fantasizing about being someone else.

When Precious escapes her mother and goes to the Higher Education Alternative/Each One Teach One, she finally has a chance to escape the abuse. However, because she has not confronted Mary or Carl about the abuse, it continues to be the only thing she can think about. The memory of thirteen years of sexual abuse greatly prohibits Precious from getting to know herself. It also prevents her from moving forward in her life.

The minds of the other girls at the Higher Education Alternative/Each One Teach One school are also clouded by sexual abuse. For these girls, the effects of sexual abuse do not stop at the abuse itself. The effects extended into drug use, which was used to cope with the abuse. It also extended to prostitution, which Rhonda was forced into after being sexually abused by her brother.

## **Ignorance**

Ignorance is a theme that ties prejudice, sexual abuse, and the Harlem culture together. Precious is surrounded by grossly uneducated people. Her mother is so ignorant that she does not even want her daughter to go to school. In fact, Mary protests when Precious gets admitted to the Higher Education Alternative/Each One Teach One school. Mary has no education, which allows her to be content with the fact that she has no life goals and lives on aid. Mary's ignorance also allows her to brush aside Carl's abusive nature. Mary ignorantly stands aside while Carl abuses Precious. Her mind is so warped she even convinces herself that the abuse is okay and starts abusing Precious herself.

Precious is uneducated, but she is also ignorant. Part of this is because of the abuse and part of it is because of her upbringing. The abuse prevents her from speaking out against the molestation. Her upbringing prevents her from getting a formal education. It also breeds prejudice in Precious. Precious looks up to Louis Farrakhan, who she believes to be a strong black man. Later, she learns through Ms. Rain that many people believe him to be a bigot. His beliefs have been fueling racial hatred in Precious. Her environment has contributed to this hatred.

Precious and her peers are envious of white people, but they also hate them. Precious immediately dislikes any white people she encounters even though the only white people in the

novel help rather than hurt Precious. She has been taught to hate white people without having a good reason for doing so. In the beginning of the novel, she talks about the black man being oppressed. This angers her, but she does not even learn about slavery and oppression until she goes to the Higher Education Alternative/Each One Teach One school.

The reader watches Precious as she tries to grapple with her prejudices. She does not like homosexuals, but when she learns Ms. Rain is one, it challenges this belief system. Not all of Precious's prejudicial statements are fueled by ignorance. Some of them are made out of anger. Precious is extremely angry about what happened to her, but does not always know exactly where to direct that anger. As a result, she just chooses a scapegoat, such as white people, and lets her hatred simmer.

## **Style**

### **Point of View**

The point of view in *Push* is first person. The reader sees the entire book through the eyes of its main character, Precious. Precious is writing her life story as a way to help her cope with the sexual abuse she has endured her entire life. The novel must be written from her point of view in order for the reader to fully understand the impact a life of sexual abuse has on Precious. Precious writes in detail about the abuse, using the slang terms she grew up with to describe body parts and sex acts. These raw descriptions paint a very ugly view of sex, which is indicative of the ugliness that's infiltrated Precious's life. This makes the reader feel as if they are witnessing the abuse. Precious's language is extremely disturbing. Reading about the abuse as told by someone else would not be nearly as disturbing because a second person account could not possibly be as descriptive and real as a first person account.

Writing in first person also allows the reader to see the process Precious goes through to deal with the abuse. Precious explains the emotions and confusion she experiences while trying to grapple with the fact that her father has abused her since she was three. The reader first experiences the confusion Precious feels at the beginning of the book. Rather than moving from event to event, Precious jumps around, making it difficult to understand what is actually happening and what has already happened. As the book progresses and Precious starts to deal with her past, her writing becomes more fluid. The frequency with which she jumps from event to event also decreases.

### **Setting**

The novel is set in Harlem, New York in the 1980s. Harlem is a dirty, poor, black area of the city. Prostitutes, crack heads and drug dealers are regular fixtures on the street. Green grass, nice parks, and friendly people are not. Precious notices that most of the people who get on the bus in the morning to go to work are women. Men are absent from the picture, both from the workforce and from child rearing. Precious lives in an extremely cold place.

Harlem is not just a place, it's a culture where men do not stick around, women are left to raise children, and most people are content to live off of welfare. No one around Precious does

anything to better themselves. They sit around and wait for their welfare checks to come in. Precious is not encouraged to go to school or learn. Precious is held back by a mother who does not care about her as well as a culture that is completely uninspiring.

The setting has a dramatic effect on Precious's view of herself and world. Everything around Precious is literally and figuratively ugly. She is black. She lives around black people who have nothing and do nothing. Precious feels worthless because she is part of this culture, but she also wants more for herself.

During the novel, Precious sees a different setting that she wants to be a part of but also resents. When she watches TV or goes to across the city to wealthier neighborhoods, she sees white people, beautiful things, and prosperity. Precious wants to be a part of this culture. In fact, while Carl abuses her, she fantasizes about being a virginal, pretty white girl. Precious likes the way the white neighborhoods look. She associates them with goodness and purity. She believes that if she were white, Carl would not abuse her. This thought process also brings Precious to resent white people. She cannot understand why white people have beautiful lives full of opportunity and she does not.

### **Language and Meaning**

The language in the novel is written in the black vernacular. Precious is an uneducated teenager who has been raised by an uneducated mother. She lives in a culture that does not value proper English. Precious writes in slang. She does not know how to put words together correctly, frequently misspelling words and misusing punctuation.

The language used in the novel is indicative of the uneducated culture Precious grows up in. The way Precious talks exposes her own ignorance. As the novel progresses, Precious's spelling and sentence structure become more coherent; however, she never deviates from using slang. Precious always uses slang when talking about sex or anything associated with sex. This indicates that she has never been taught to respect her body or her sexuality. In Harlem, body parts and sexual experiences are just another thing.

The only proper English used in the entire novel is spoken by educated people like Ms. Rain and Mrs. Butter. The contrast between the way Precious speaks and the way these two speak represents the difference in their lives. This contrast demonstrates the difference between an educated and uneducated culture. When white people speak to Precious using proper English, she feels threatened by them. When black people do it, she says they're denying their blackness. However, once she gets to know them, she looks up to them.

When Precious gets extremely upset, like when she is talking in detail about the abuse, her spelling gets worse. This lets the reader see why Precious had such trouble in regular school. Every time she tries to think about school work, she thinks about the abuse, which washes out her capacity to learn.

## **Structure**

This novel is comprised of five different chapters. The chapters are long and none of them have names. Not naming the chapters demonstrates that to Precious, this is just her life. Each chapter is full of facts and is no different from the one before. Therefore, the chapters do not deserve individual names. Precious writes what she feels as she is feeling it. This is also why the story line jumps around.

After the fifth chapter, there is an unmarked section. This section includes the personal stories as written by Jermaine, Rhonda, and Rita. Precious also contributes to this section with three poems. Precious does not write a complete personal history at the end because the book is her personal history. Perhaps the author chose not to label this last section based on the fact that Precious's story finishes at chapter five. The final section gives insight into the other girls.

This novel is very simple from a writing standpoint and does not include any subplots. The entire plot revolves around Precious trying to deal with her terrible life experiences. Though the novel is easy to read from a structural standpoint, it is hard to read from an emotional standpoint. Precious experiences extremely brutal, graphic sexual abuse and she talks about it frequently. Her frankness is extremely disturbing and uncomfortable for the reader.

The name of the novel, *Push*, suggests that the only thing Precious can focus on is survival. Every day Precious has to push through life. She never gets a chance to relax, her life is too tough. Every time it seems like she might get a break, something else happens. The most disturbing aspect of this is that she is not the only young woman in Harlem merely pushing through her life.

## **Quotes**

"Sure you can do anything when you talking or writing, it's not like living when you can only do what you doing." Chap. 1, p. 3

"I'm gonna break through or somebody gonna break through to me - I'm gonna learn, catch up, be normal, change my seat to the front of the class." Chap. 1, p. 7

"It's something about being a nigger ain't color." Chap. 1, p. 11

"A lot of black people with nurse cap or big car or light skin same as me but don't know it." Chap. 1, p. 11

"I hate crack addicts. They give the race a bad name." Chap 1, p. 14

"The tesses paint a picture of me an' my muver — my whole family, we more than dumb, we invisible." Chap. 1, p. 30

"I know who they say I am — vampire sucking the system's blood. Ugly black grease to be wipe away, punish, kilt, changed, finded a job for." Chap. 1, p. 31

"An' for the first time in my life I sits down in the front row (which is good 'cause I never could see the board from the back). Chap. 2, p. 40

"I ain' got no education even tho' I not miss a day of school." Chap. 2, p. 57

"I don't fuck boyz but I'm pregnant." Chap. 2, p. 57

"I HATE myself when I feel good." Chap. 2, p. 58

"So much pain, shame - I never feel the loneliness." Chap. 2, p. 62

"Now since I sit in the circle I realize all my life, all my life I been outside of the circle." Chap. 2, p. 62

"First you steal my husband! Then you get me cut off Welfare!" Chap. 3, p. 74

"Ms Rain say homos not who rape me, not homos who let me sit up not learn for sixteen years, not homos who sell crack fuck Harlem." Chap. 3, p. 81

"They tell her, You is 1/2way between the life you had and the life you want to have." Chap. 3, p. 84

"No matter how fly my braids is, how I grease my skin, scalp, no matter how my jew'ries, this is my mother." Chap. 3, p. 85

"One thing I say about Farrakhan and Alice Walker they help me like being black." Chap. 3, p. 96

"Is life like a hammer to beat me down?" Chap. 3, p. 96

"I know I ain' the only one that got it, even though that's how it feels. But I'm probably the only one get it from they daddy." Chap. 4, p. 111

"How is something a memory if you never forgit?" Chap. 4, p. 112

"I would wish for in my fantasy a second chance. Since my first chance to Mama and Daddy." Chap. 4, p. 115

"But you can't get all hung up on details when you trying to survive." Chap. 5, p. 124

"Before I was snatched out of the air like a butterfly, wings torn off me." Chap. 5, no page number

### **Topics for Discussion**

Explain the Harlem culture Precious grows up in and the effect it has on her life. Do you think she would have the same prejudices she has concerning white people, crack heads, and gay people if she grew up in Harlem but was not abused by her father? Why or why not?

Discuss Mary's role in the abuse. Why does she allow Precious to be abused and why does she contribute to the abuse? What kind of effect does the abuse have on Precious's educational experience?

Race and prejudice play a large role in this novel. Discuss how Precious perceives white people, black people, and "niggers". Explain how white people perceive her. What has the most effect on Precious's prejudice? Sex? Upbringing? History? Ignorance?

Precious is seventeen by the end of the novel. In her short time on earth she has been raped, beaten, had two children by her father, and sexually molested by her mother. How has she survived? Explain why she has not given up.

Precious uses words most people don't use to describe sex and sex acts. Describe how she talks about sex. Why does she talk about it this way? Given her illness and history of sexual abuse, is it possible for her to ever view sex in a healthy way? Why or why not?

Precious never speaks in class until she goes to the Higher Education Alternative/Each One Teach One school. Why does she speak up in class immediately? What does this say about the difference between her first school and the Higher Education Alternative/Each One Teach One school?

Why does Ms. Rain make the girls write in journals even though they cannot really read or write? What kind of impact does the journal writing have on Precious and the other girls?

Precious talks about being all alone. At what point in the novel does this feeling dissolve? Who makes her feel less alone and how does this impact her healing process?

Precious has been abused since she was three, yet she stays in her home and endures the abuse for thirteen years. Why does it take Precious so long to leave her house? What role does other's kindness play in this decision?

Talk about the emotional, physical, and psychological trauma the young women in the book have suffered as a result of sexual abuse. Is it possible to recover from these experiences? Explain which character coped with their hardships the best and why you think they made more progress than the others.