Barracoon

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF ZORA NEALE HURSTON

Born in Alabama, Zora Neale Hurston grew up in Eatonville, Florida, one of the country's only all-black towns. Her father was a sharecropper and preacher; all of her grandparents were slaves. As a teenager, Hurston was sent to a Baptist boarding school, but when her father abruptly stopped paying her tuition, she dropped out and worked in a traveling theater troupe. Eventually, Hurston received her high school diploma; she went on to attend Howard University graduated with a degree in anthropology from Barnard College, where she was the only black student. While at Barnard, Hurston worked with Franz Boas, a famous anthropologist; she traveled throughout the American South and the Caribbean, conducting anthropological research that inspired her fiction writing and produced the *Barracoon* interviews. For most of her life Hurston supported herself by working as a journalist and publishing fiction pieces in magazines, living in Florida and Harlem, where she became a noted figure of the Harlem Renaissance. However, she often suffered periods of financial hardship; during one of these times, while she was working as a maid and living in a Florida welfare home, she died of a stroke. Today, she is best known for her novel *Their Eyes are Watching God*, set in her hometown of Eatonville.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Originating in the sixteenth century and lasting until the nineteenth, the so-called Triangle Trade was a network that brought African slaves to America, where they worked on plantations to produce raw goods like sugar, tobacco, and cotton; these raw goods were then brought to European factories and turned into manufactured goods, which were then exported to the world and exchanged in Africa for more slaves. The Middle Passage, or the sea journey of kidnapped Africans to the Americas, was a particularly brutal and inhumane aspect of the slave trade. Due to overcrowding, illness, starvation, and vicious maltreatment, about two million Africans died during the Middle Passage. However, it remains one of the least-documented aspects of slavery, as most slaves who endured it were never freed or able to record their stories.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Barracoon is the most recent addition to the genre of slave narratives, literature that documents slavery from the point of view of its victims. Most slave narratives were written in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and often published by abolitionist groups in order to turn popular opinion against slavery. *The Life of Olaudah Equiano* is one of the earliest such works and, like *Barracoon*, is one of the few to include a firsthand account of the terrible Middle Passage. The most famous and influential slave narrative is *The Narrative of Frederick Douglass*, written by one of America's foremost abolitionists and black intellectuals. Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* describes the unique oppression of female slaves who are denied rights and vulnerable to sexual abuse. Zora Neale Hurston, the twentieth-century writer who recorded Cudjo's narrative, is most famous for her novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* but also wrote important essays about black identity and the Harlem Renaissance, such as *How It Feels to be Colored Me*.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Barracoon*
- **When Written:** 1927
- **Where Written:** Alabama
- **When Published:** 2018
- **Literary Period:** Modern
- **Genre:** Memoir, oral history, slave narrative
- **Setting:** West Africa and Alabama
- **Climax:** Cudjo is liberated from slavery and Africatown is founded.
- **Antagonist:** Slavery, white supremacy
- **Point of View:** First person

EXTRA CREDIT

Breaking the Law. Cudjo Lewis was one of the few Middle Passage survivors alive in the twentieth century because the international slave trade was abolished in 1807. By the 1860s, only a few slave traders—such as the man who bought Cudjo and other kidnapped members of his village—were still operating illegally and secretly.

Resting Place. Because Zora Neale Hurston was destitute when she died, her grave was unmarked and lost until Alice Walker, another writer, tracked it down and paid for a gravestone that read, "A Genius of the South/ Novelist, Folklorist/Anthropologist."

PLOT SUMMARY

Zora Neale Hurston opens the narrative with an introduction detailing her purpose in seeking out and interviewing Cudjo Lewis. She says that slavery is "the most dramatic chapter in the

story of human existence," and many people have written about it, both in support and condemnation. However, almost none of the writers are people who themselves endured slavery. As such, she's seeking out the last survivor of the infamous **Middle Passage** to hear his side of the story.

Hurston gives some background information on the men who bought Cudjo and brought him to America in 1859, decades after the international slave trade was abolished in America. Three brothers—Jim, Tim, and Burns Meaher—who own a shipyard in Alabama finance the expedition, sending Captain Bill Foster in the ship *Clotilda* to buy slaves in the West African kingdom of Dahomey. Arriving in the Gulf of Guinea, Foster meets with the prince of Dahomey and selects 130 slaves from the barracoon, or stockade. There are many people to choose from, given that the Dahomey habitually declares war on its neighbors and sells the defeated as slaves. Returning to America in seventy days, Foster covertly enters the Mobile Bay; the slaves are hidden on a plantation, and Foster burns the boat to destroy evidence of his journey. The brothers sell some of the slaves but divide the majority among themselves. However, just one year later the Civil War begins, and at its end all the slaves are freed. They band together to build a village called "Africatown," which is now known as Plateau. Cudjo Lewis still lives in this town.

When Hurston first visits Cudjo, she finds him eating breakfast on his porch; he immediately takes to her because she addresses him by his African name, Kossula. She explains that she wants to hear all his memories, and he begins to tell her about his upbringing in West Africa. His family isn't rich, but he grows up in a large compound in which the house of his grandfather is surrounded by the houses of his wives and their children. He explains local customs surrounding marriage in his village, wherein a man's first wife generally selects his subsequent wives and arranges the marriages.

Hurston begins visiting Cudjo regularly, bringing gifts like peaches to ingratiate herself with him. One afternoon, he discusses how the king of his tribe punishes wrongdoing. Every time a man is tried, all the men and boys of the village witness the proceedings. He remembers seeing a man who was planning to poison someone executed during an elaborate ceremony, during which a group of young men dance around the man and perform certain songs before cutting his head off. Another time, a man who actually did murder someone is tied to the corpse of his victim and left in the village square until he dies of exposure.

When Cudjo becomes a teenager, he begins to train as a soldier, and he's allowed to sit among the village men as they deliberate and make decisions. He's looking forward to becoming a man and is excited about the prospect of getting married. However, without warning the neighboring kingdom of Dahomey attacks his village in the night. Cudjo witnesses fierce soldiers killing elderly people who can't run; he himself is taken captive with other young and healthy villagers. For days the captives are marched towards Dahomey. Their captors carry the heads of people they've killed in the raid.

In Dahomey, Cudjo and the villagers are locked in the barracoon for three weeks. Other captives are in other barracoons, but they can't converse because they all speak different languages. Here, Cudjo sees white men for the first time. Eventually, a white man comes to the barracoon and chooses 130 people, who are taken to the ships the next day. For thirteen days, Cudjo and the others are trapped in the hold with little to eat or drink. When they're finally allowed on the deck, they are severely weakened and can't see anything but water. This hardship continues for seventy days before they arrive in Alabama. There, the kidnapped villagers have to sneak through the swamp to the Meahers' plantations in order to avoid government suspicion. Eventually, they are divided among the three brothers.

Cudjo is taken to Captain Jim's plantation. The work is very difficult, and the agricultural methods are different from the ones to which Cudjo is accustomed. Cudjo is grateful that Jim Meaher treats his slaves more humanely than his brothers, providing them with adequate clothes and shoes. He and the other recent arrivals are grief-stricken not because of the work, but because they are enslaved. For the duration of his enslavement, Cudjo works on one of Meaher's boats, which transports lumber up the river; carrying lumber on and off the boat is backbreaking work. Eventually, years after the Civil War breaks out, US soldiers reach Mobile and inform the slaves working on Meaher's boat that they are now free, and can go wherever they want.

After their liberation, all the villagers from the *Clotilda* reunite from their various plantations to deliberate on their future plans. For some time they hope to buy passage on ships back to Africa, but soon they realize that this is impossibly expensive. Then they decide that they will build a town where they can live together. The villagers choose Cudjo to approach the Meaher brother and ask for a piece of land, in exchange for all their unpaid labor. However, when Cudjo puts this request to Tim Meaher he becomes enraged and says that he treated his slaves well and "derefo' I doan owe dem nothing."

Because of this, the villagers have to save money until they have enough to buy land from the Meahers. They establish their own laws and government, choosing two men to be judges. They help each other build houses and name the village Africatown, because "we ant to go back in de Affica soil and we see we cain go." After some time, a black preacher begins visiting the villagers and eventually converts them to Christianity, after which they build themselves a church.

Still, Cudjo feels lonely without a family. He asks an Africatown woman, named Abila (or, in America, Seely) to marry him, and she agrees. They set up house together and "do all we kin to make happiness 'tween ourselves." Cudjo and Seely have six

children, whom they give both African and English names. However, as the children grow up they are ostracized by the surrounding black and white communities, who call them "ig'nant savage" and "make out dey kin to monkey." Cudjo's boys often fight with others, and over time develop a dangerous reputation.

As a teenager, Cudjo's only daughter, Seely, dies of a sudden illness. Cudjo and his wife mourn their daughter deeply. Some years later, Cudjo Jr. is shot in a dispute with a sheriff's deputy. Although Seely tends to his wounds, he dies hours later. Cudjo mourns that none of his children have ever seen Africa.

After suffering these two tragedies, Cudjo is hit by a train while doing business in Mobile. Although he recovers fairly well and his motor skills are unimpaired, he can no longer do hard labor, so the Africatown residents employ him as the church sexton. Cudjo is named as a plaintiff in a lawsuit against the railroad, but although the lawyer wins a large settlement the he absconds with the profits, running away to the North.

As if this isn't enough, Cudjo's son David is also hit by a train in Mobile and dies of the injuries. Cudjo's older son, Poe-lee, is furious and wants Cudjo to sue the railroad again, but Cudjo now feels that this is pointless. Poe-lee becomes deeply dissatisfied with life in Africatown due to the constant obstacles and discrimination his family faces. One day, he runs away and is never heard from again. By this point, Cudjo has two children left: his oldest son, Aleck, who is married and has children, and Jimmy. One day Jimmy contracts a sudden fever and dies. He and Seely feel terribly lonely living in their house without any children. After hearing this sad tale, Hurston photographs Cudjo standing in the churchyard among his children's graves.

One night, Seely wakes Cudjo up, telling him that she's been dreaming about the children. The next day, she dies suddenly; Cudjo knows that she can no longer live without her children. The next month, Aleck dies as well. Now Cudjo's only relatives are his daughter-in-law and two grandchildren. He tells the other residents of Africatown that Seely was like a loan given to him from God, and because of this he can't complain when he has to give her up.

Hurston concludes by summing up the two months she's spent interviewing Cudjo. Sometimes they pass whole afternoons eating or working in his garden, without talking about the past. She believes that they have become good friends. When she finally departs, he presents her with a gift of peaches. Hurston is sure that while Cudjo doesn't fear death, "he is full of trembling awe before the alter of the past."

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Kossula / Cudjo Lewis – The book's narrator, a West African man brought to America as a slave in 1859, and the last known survivor of the **Middle Passage**. As he recounts to Zora Neale Hurston in the 1920s, Cudjo grows up in a small West African village, nurtured by a large family network. He's a teenager looking forward to assuming the jobs of an adult man when, during a raid on his village by the neighboring kingdom of Dahomey, he is captured and sold to an American slave trader. Brought forcibly to America, Cudjo endures five years of slavery on an Alabama plantation before he is liberated by the Civil War, after which he cooperates with other ex-slaves to build a village, marries Seely, and has six children. Cudjo is a gifted storyteller with a good memory, as his evocative narration to Hurston proves. He is both defined and unbroken by the suffering he's experienced; although he speaks of his life freely and bluntly to Hurston, he sometimes stops to weep when describing particularly awful episodes. Cudjo has resigned himself to life in America, becoming a sexton and respected elder in Africatown, as well as a devoted Christian; however, he longs deeply for Africa, mourns his lost life there, and tries to keep his native culture alive as much as possible. In this sense, he represents the complex identities and cultural uncertainty experienced by victims of colonization and the slave trade. Cudjo is also a devoted husband and father, seeking to recreate his lost African family through the one he builds in America; however the death of his wife and children demonstrate the limits of security and prosperity that can be achieved by a black family in post-Civil War America. By the end of the novel, he emerges as a proud but fundamentally lonely representative of one of history's great tragedies; to Hurston, he serves as a link between African Americans striving for success and equality in a racist country and their disrupted African heritage.

Zora Neale Hurston – The book's author and one of its narrators, an intrepid anthropologist who interviews Cudjo and reports his life story. Hurston is herself a budding intellectual trying to make a name for herself, and will soon become an important figure of the Harlem Renaissance. In this regard, she seems cognizant of the potential career benefits of bringing Cudjo's story to light and sometimes behaves calculatingly towards him, bringing gifts of food in order to ingratiate herself and at one point instructing him to write a letter of thanks to the wealthy woman who is funding her anthropological research. At the same time, Hurston is sympathetic to Cudjo and deeply moved by his story, sometimes moved to tears herself and often withdrawing when she senses he's exhausted from retelling previous stories. In her faithfulness to Cudjo's dialect she evinces a deep belief that his story is inherently valuable and deserving of a place in American literature and history. By the end of the interview process, she has come to see Cudjo as more of a friend than an interview subject.

Abila / Seely – Cudjo's wife, an ex-slave brought to America on the *Clotilda* whom he meets after the founding of Africatown.

Cudjo loves Seely deeply; for him, she represents the tranquil and family-centered lifestyle that he grew up and that was lost to him during his enslavement. During their marriage Seely emerges as a sensible and capable woman; she and Cudjo enjoy an equal partnership and appear to be equally devoted parents. After all of their children die, Seely becomes ill herself and dies quickly. Cudjo concludes that although Seely wants to stay with him and is sad to think of him alone, she needs to be in heaven with her children.

Cudjo's Mother – Cudjo's mother, whom he describes briefly but fondly. Cudjo loses track of his family during the fatal raid on his village, but in the aftermath he comes to believe that his mother has been killed. Cudjo's mother's death marks the first familial catastrophe of Cudjo's life, brought on by his enslavement.

King of Dahomey – The leader of a neighboring tribe much more powerful than Cudjo's. The King derives his strength by cooperating with European slave traders and selling neighboring villagers as slaves. In Cudjo's retelling, the King declares war on his tribe on a false pretext in order to capture civilians for sale as slaves.

Gumpa – One of the Africans sold into slavery alongside Cudjo. Gumpa does not come from Cudjo's village but is actually from Dahomey and a relative of the King of Dahomey. After the Civil War, Gumpa emerges as a leader in Africatown and is appointed as a judge by the other residents.

Free George – An African-American preacher who converts Cudjo and the other residents of Africatown to Christianity, and induces them to build their own church. Free George is one of Africatown's only links to surrounding black communities, who often scorn the residents for their adherence to their native customs and refusal to assimilate into Anglo-American society.

Aleck – Cudjo's eldest son. Aleck's birth inaugurates a period of relative stability and familial happiness for Cudjo and Seely, which lasts until their children begin to die as teenagers. Aleck is the last of Cudjo's children to die; the cause of death is never specified. In this sense, Aleck's life encapsulates the period of fatherhood that is the most satisfying experience of Cudjo's life.

Poe-lee – One of Cudjo's sons. Unlike the others, he is only referred to by his African name, not his English one. After the deaths of David and Cudjo Jr., Poe-lee becomes completely disillusioned with the racial prejudice he and his family constantly experiences, and feels he will never be able to achieve a satisfying life. He eventually runs away from his family and is never seen again.

Cudjo Jr. – Cudjo's youngest son, named after his father. An energetic young man who chafes against the prejudice he experiences from the black and white communities surrounding Africatown, young Cudjo is prone to fighting and eventually killed in some sort of altercation with the sheriff's deputy. His father sees the boy's death at the hands of law enforcement as a sign of America's pervasive racial prejudice, which prevents him from attaining security and prosperity for his family despite his hard work.

Cudjo's Daughter, Seely – Cudjo's youngest child and only daughter, who is named after her mother, Seely. At the age of fifteen, the young Seely gets a fever and dies. She is the first of Cudjo's children to die, and this even marks the beginning of a period of grief and loss for Cudjo and his wife.

Jim Meaher – One of the brothers who financed the illegal slave-trading expedition in which Cudjo was forcibly brought to America. Cudjo spends his five years of enslavement working on Jim Meaher's plantation. Although Cudjo credits Jim Meaher for treating slaves more humanely than his brothers Tim and Burns, it's always clear that Meaher is unwilling to treat Cudjo and his brethren as humans with legitimate rights, even after the Civil War legally frees them.

Tim Meaher – One of the brothers (the others being Jim and Burns) who financed the illegal slave-trading expedition in which Cudjo was forcibly brought to America. After the Civil War, Cudjo is sent by his fellow villagers to ask Tim Meaher for a piece of land, on which they can construct their own village. Meaher angrily rebuffs this legitimate request, saying that he doesn't owe anything to people who were once his "property." His response shows the strong sense of entitlement and white supremacy that characterizes America even after the Civil War is over.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Cudjo's Grandfather – Cudjo's grandfather and the patriarch of his family. Grandfather works for the tribe's king, Akia'on.

Cudjo's Father – Cudjo's father, a prosperous but not wealthy man with three wives, of whom Cudjo's mother is the second.

Akia'on – The king of Cudjo's tribe, who presides over festivals, trials, and executions. While Cudjo has no personal interaction with the chief, he appears frequently in Cudjo's descriptions of tribal activities.

Prince of Dahomey – A relative of the King of Dahomey, who conducts business negotiations with white slave traders.

Jimmy – One of Cudjo's sons. Like his younger sister (Cudjo's daughter, Seely), he dies of a sudden fever as a young man.

David – One of Cudjo's sons. He is killed in a railroad accident in Plateau. Cudjo is never able to achieve any kind of justice for his son's death, which demonstrates the callous disregard for black life that pervades American society and from which large companies like railroad corporations benefit.

Burns Meaher – One of the brothers (the others being Jim and Tim) who financed the illegal slave-trading expedition in which Cudjo was forcibly brought to America. Mentioned in Hurston's introduction, Burns does not appear for the rest of

the book.

Captain Bill Foster – The captain of the *Clotilda*, who carries out the illegal slave-trading expedition fostered by the Meaher brothers (Tim, Jim, and Burns) in which Cudjo and his fellow villagers are forcibly brought to America.

Clarke – An Alabama lawyer who represents Cudjo in his lawsuit against the railroad company after he's crippled in a train accident. Clarke wins the suit but then absconds with the settlement money.

Ole Charlie – An elderly resident of Africatown, and one of the oldest survivors of the **Middle Passage** besides Cudjo.

TERMS

Barracoon – The title of the novel, this word refers to the open-air stockades in which captured Africans were kept before being sold into slavery and embarking on the Middle Passage. **Cudjo** spends three weeks in the barracoons in Dahomey before **Captain Foster** purchases him.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

STORYTELLING AND MEMORY

A non-fiction narrative of the last survivor of the slave trade's **Middle Passage**, *Barracoon* seems to defy genre. In part, it's a memoir and oral history narrated by the protagonist, Cudjo. However, it's also an ethnographic study recorded by author Zora Neale Hurston as part of an academic research mission. Hurston structures the book's narrative to emphasize its contradictions. Rather than erasing herself from the page, she explains the nature of her assignment, describes the interview process, and frequently supplements Cudjo's stories with editorial notes. On the other hand, she makes a point of recording Cudjo's words verbatim and in his own dialect, and she's often deeply moved as she listens to the story of his suffering. Constantly toggling between intimacy and clinical distance, Hurston emphasizes the artificiality inherent in collecting oral histories—and even in reading them—as she simultaneously allows the pathos and lyricism of Cudjo's narrative to shine through. Ultimately, the book juxtaposes the importance of storytelling in human life with the human inability to encapsulate traumatic memories through stories, written or oral.

Recording Cudjo's words and emotions faithfully and realistically, Hurston conveys her protagonist's natural gift as a storyteller and emphasizes the raw and unfiltered nature of his narrative. Cudjo speaks eloquently but without clear organization, sliding from subject to subject; rather than imposing any external structure on his narrative, Hurston encourages him to relate his story exactly how he wishes.

Hurston also records the story in the unique dialect he speaks. Interestingly, she received criticism from all sides for this decision. Feeling that it would alienate white readers, publishers refused to buy the manuscript until it was rendered in "standard" English, while contemporary black writers like Richard Wright said that by presenting Cudjo in an overly folksy manner, Hurston was pandering to racist stereotypes of black people. Now, Hurston is generally lauded for her strategy. By staying true to non-traditional speech patterns, Hurston adapts literature to accommodate Cudjo's oral history, expanding literary conventions to fit the needs of people usually marginalized by literature and allowing the reader to experience Cudjo's story exactly as he conveys it.

Moreover, Hurston often relates her reactions to the story, feeling moved to tears by descriptions of his family and at one point turning her face away because his suffering is so intense. This creates a sense of strong emotional connection between the story's teller and receiver, a feeling in which the reader can share. On the other hand, Hurston also emphasizes the academic and professional nature of her endeavor, creating a sense of distance between the reader and Cudjo's memories. Hurston is straightforward about the fact that she's visiting Cudjo as part of an assignment to collect oral histories, even mentioning the charitable organizations that are funding her work. Rather than presenting their interviews as a spontaneous interchange between friends, she describes bringing gifts of ham or fruit in order to ingratiate herself with him and induce him to talk to her. Relating his childhood in West Africa, Cudjo often refers to people or events whose historical importance Hurston explains in editorial notes. Here, she's treating the story as a subject of ethnographic study, rather than a novelistic memoir. Even as Hurston believes in the importance of collecting and preserving stories like Cudjo's, she seems to feel that her role as a collector, with an academic and artistic interest in the subject, puts some distance between her and Cudjo. She ensures that the reader feels these differences as well.

These overlapping but distinct approaches to Cudjo's narrative create a brooding meditation on the nature and role of storytelling, especially when used to commemorate historical trauma. With gravity both emotional and academic, Hurston evinces a belief in the importance and potential impact of storytelling. At the same time, by emphasizing her own presence she disrupts the immediacy of Cudjo's narrative and suggests that storytelling, especially in this context, is an inherently artificial undertaking. Thus, the reader both

experiences Cudjo's story and views it from a distance. Ultimately, Hurston's narrative style argues the importance of hearing and valuing stories and oral history, while also cautioning that hearing about a trauma does not equate to experiencing or truly understanding it.

Barracoon both relates an oral history and discusses how a reader should approach oral histories. Hurston encourages the reader to respect oral history and make room for it in the literary canon while also acknowledging its limits in conveying human memory and historical trauma.

SLAVERY AND RACISM

Barracoon tells the story of Cudjo Lewis, the last surviving victim of the **Middle Passage**, one of the most appalling aspects of the trading network that supplied the Americas with slaves. One of only a few firsthand narratives of this forced journey, *Barracoon* is clearly important because it bears witness to the historical trauma of slavery. However, Cudjo devotes remarkably little time to describing the Middle Passage or even his five years in slavery. Instead, he pays more attention to other forms of racism that he experienced before and after slavery, during his capture as a teenager and later during his adult life in America. In doing so, he approaches the institution of slavery less through its practices than its consequences. This narrative decision signals Cudjo's refusal to place slavery at the center of his life but also emphasizes slavery's ability to blight whole societies, even after its official end.

In describing his capture as a teenager, Cudjo focuses on the role of enemy tribes and their collaboration with European slave traders. Cudjo is captured as a result of internecine struggles between his tribe and a neighboring one. On the night of the raid he witnesses soldiers murdering old people and the very young. After that night, Cudjo never sees his mother or anyone from his family again; it's probable that they're all among the dead.

Although these events are brutal, they're also presented as a longstanding convention of war wherein victors enslave civilians for a period of time. For example, Cudjo casually mentions the slaves living in the familial compound where he grew up, showing that he is accustomed to the idea of slavery. Even when he's transported to the enemy kingdom of Dahomey, he's not particularly upset to be kept in the "barracoon," or slave pen. He and the young people from his village play games in the barracoon until they realize that they're going to be taken to another continent, and thus that their enslavement will be permanent and irrevocable. In this sense, the true betrayal is not Dahomey's raid on the village or capture of Cudjo, but rather their collaboration with Europeans and Americans, which contravenes the rules of warfare and makes slavery into a lifetime doom. At this point in his life, it's the tribe's behavior that Cudjo resents most.

Once transported to America, Cudjo is enslaved for five years before the Civil War frees him. Describing this time, he focuses less on the material suffering he endures than the injustice of slave owners' refusal to acknowledge his humanity. Cudjo devotes only a few paragraphs to describing his life as a slave, merely saying that the work was hard to learn and to execute at the pace required by overseers. He notes that he fared better under the slave owner Jim Meaher than his countrymen who were bought by Meaher's harsher brothers. He even appreciates that Meaher buys him new shoes.

Cudjo doesn't express any anger until an episode after the end of the Civil War, when he approaches Tim Meaher (one of the brothers who financed the slave-trading expedition that brought Cudjo to America) on behalf of a group of freed slaves from his village, asking him to give them a piece of land on which to build their own town. Meaher rebuffs this request harshly, saying that he won't "give you property on top of property"—in other words, give land to people whom he still considers chattel. For Cudjo, this dehumanizing comparison is the most wounding aspect of slavery. More broadly, Meaher's unchanged views show that slavery will outlast its official end through the extreme attitudes of racial entitlement and white supremacy it engenders.

In his postwar life as a free man, one of the most disturbing forms of racism Cudjo experiences comes from other African Americans. When Cudjo first arrives at Meaher's plantation, he says that the other slaves "makee de fun at us" because they couldn't speak English. After the war, the black community ostracizes Cudjo and his fellow villagers for retaining their West African customs; Cudjo says that "dey pick at us all de time and call us ig'nant savage," even though these recently arrived Africans are actually representatives of their heritage. This hostility is the reason that the villagers build Africatown, and it also plays a role in Cudjo's sons' inability to find work or build fulfilling lives within the wider community. In a way, this prejudice is the most tragic. It shows the extent to which white supremacy has pervaded society, taking root even amongst the people it actively oppresses, like former slaves.

Cudjo's relative lack of focus on the Middle Passage and his period of enslavement shows his refusal to place these traumas at the center of his life—even though this is the very reason Hurston has sought him out for an interview. Instead, he focuses on the legacy of racism that is most troubling to him: its ability to disrupt cohesion and goodwill within black communities themselves, both in his West African homeland and in his adopted home in Alabama.

THE AMERICAN DREAM

An important part of American ideology, the "American Dream" is the idea that the United

States is a uniquely egalitarian society in which opportunity and upward mobility are accessible to anyone who works hard. *Barracoon* is a story of American society; however, the protagonist Cudjo's life is largely a story of downward mobility. In telling his narrative, Cudjo emphasizes the abundance and tranquility of his upbringing in West Africa, comparing it to the suffering and instability he experiences as a slave and later a free man in Alabama. While the achievements of his life—founding a town that preserves his native culture, forming a happy marriage, and raising six children—are significant, Cudjo focuses on the impossibility of attaining equality or acceptance within a discriminatory American society, retaining strong emotional ties to Africa and frequently stating his wish to return. His lasting dissatisfaction with America and the downward trajectory he describes are a powerful critique of the American Dream, ultimately arguing that it is an essentially fallacious idea that attempts to justify the dominance of white men through presumptions of equity that, practically speaking, do not exist.

While the American Dream stresses the potential to improve one's life, Cudjo's life deteriorates as a result of contact with America. Cudjo nostalgically describes his childhood as taking place within a fairly ideal society. Even though his family is not wealthy (he modestly states that he's only the son of a second wife), his material and emotional needs are met by the community. As a teenager, he looks forward to being trained as a soldier and getting married. Instead, he's snatched away from his tribe and taken to America, where he endures years of slavery and a lifetime of racial discrimination—an outcome markedly worse than his expectations as a boy.

It's important that even after his liberation during the Civil War, Cudjo is not able to access the equality promised to all Americans. Notably, the American Dream often centers around the abundance of land in America and the ability of any individual to become an independent landowner; however, when Cudjo asks the brother of his former owner to give him a piece of land, Tim Meaher dismisses him instantly. His reaction, and the difficulty with which Cudjo and the villagers eventually acquire land, show that these promises apply mainly to white men, whose dream of landownership and wealth often requires slaves to come to fruition.

While Cudjo lives a remarkable life in America, his continuous longing for his homeland shows his strong sense of the limitations he faces in America and argues against the veracity of the "American Dream." As the founder of a town, sexton of a church, and father of several children, Cudjo is a distinguished member of his community. When Hurston meets him, he takes pride and satisfaction from his garden and the grandchildren who often visit.

However, even in these accomplishments he communicates his desire to return to Africa. He and his comrades only build a town after concluding it's impossible to go back to Africa; they name their village Africatown, signaling their love for their homeland and reluctance to be absorbed into a society that disenfranchises them. Cudjo gives all his children names in his native language, and is grateful and proud when Hurston addresses him by his original name, Kossula. Throughout his narrative, he constantly describes feeling homesick for Africa. At the end of the book, Hurston asks permission to take Cudjo's photograph; the elderly man takes off his shoes, saying, "I want to look lak I in Affica, 'cause dat where I want to be." This final image aligns Cudjo again with Africa and emphasizes the extent to which American society prevents his assimilation.

Cudjo's clear dissatisfaction with America and frequent evocations of Africa demonstrate that the American Dream is completely inaccessible to him, and in fact empowers other people at his expense. Rather than taking advantage of America's theoretical opportunities, Cudjo has to liberate himself from its injustices, which he does by surrounding himself with West African culture as much as possible.

CULTURAL RELATIVISM

Zora Neale Hurston's interviews with Cudjo Lewis, the last survivor of the **Middle Passage**, devotes substantial time to explaining the mores of the West African society in which Cudjo grew up. In doing so, Hurston draws on the concept of cultural relativism articulated by her mentor, the anthropologist Franz Boas. Cultural relativism is the idea that rituals and customs should be understood in the context of their particular culture, rather than evaluated by the standards of another culture. Hurston embraces cultural relativism, showing a deep interest in Cudjo's childhood and often including explanatory notes, which demonstrate that these social practices deserve academic study on their own terms, rather than in comparison to European cultures. This tactic emphasizes the value and beauty of Cudjo's culture, and combats the racist stereotypes that, at the time of Hurston's writing, constituted popular understanding of Africa and justified discrimination against African Americans. However, in his ability to incorporate both West African customs and Anglo-American ideas (like Christianity) into his worldview, it's Cudjo who truly demonstrates that cultural relativism isn't just an theoretical concept but a useful mindset that anyone can adopt.

Even though they don't have an explicit relationship to Cudjo's story of enslavement, Hurston transcribes detailed explanations of social mores in his native tribe. Cudjo explains the customs that dictate life within family compounds, as well as the rituals surrounding marriage. He also describes the varying punishments the tribe inflicts on wrongdoers and the process of judicial deliberation, which relies on strict and complex ideas of justice. When Cudjo doesn't adequately explain something, Hurston often includes an editorial note or quotation from another academic source.

Hurston's analytical approach suggests that African practices deserve rigorous study, just as European concepts do. Moreover, by helping the reader understand the customs that govern Cudjo's society she combats then-prevalent stereotypes of Africa as inherently savage, lawless, and primitive. For example, Cudjo's description of the tribe's complicated and considered approach to different crimes disproves the white supremacist notion that by clinging to their African culture Cudjo and the other villagers are showing themselves to be "ig'nant savage[s]."

While Hurston promotes cultural relativism through her narrative style, it's Cudjo who, through his behavior, proves most nonjudgmental and inclusive in his evaluation of the two cultures to which he's been exposed. This is particularly evident in his approach to religion. After being freed from slavery, Cudjo converts to Christianity and eventually works as the church sexton; however, he also retains the belief in spirits and ancestor worship with which he grew up. Rather than feeling that these practices are inherently opposed or that one disproves the other, he integrates them both into his worldview.

For example, at one point he tells Hurston that he's thankful to be "on prayin' groun' and in a Bible country." For Hurston, this reads as a worrying endorsement of American over African culture, and she asks if Cudjo had "a God back in Africa." He then explains that in Africa he worshiped a God called Alahua, but "we doan know God got a Son." Although Cudjo has somewhat conflated two religious systems, he shows his ability to judge each culture on its own terms, rather than by the other's. Then, when Hurston asks to photograph him at the end of the interview, Cudjo dresses in an American suit but leaves off his shoes, according to African tradition. This final image provides the best representation of Cudjo's authentic self because it incorporates the influences of both American and West African culture.

Rather than trying to fit African cultural practices within a European or American framework, Hurston asserts the inherent value of these customs. Building on the theoretical groundwork she lays, Cudjo shows how refraining from judging one culture by another's metrics allows one to cultivate a more nuanced and multifaceted worldview. Both interviewer and interviewee use cultural relativism to counter racist narratives that privilege European societies over African ones.

FAMILY

In *Barracoon*, Cudjo Lewis describes being torn away from his family in West Africa and eventually forming a new family in Alabama after his enslavement ends. In Cudjo's narrative, family quickly emerges as the most central aspect of life. In Africa, it's the foundation of a strong and vibrant society; in America, it helps Cudjo heal after years of suffering as a slave. At the same time, Cudjo loses both his families, the first in a raid by a rival tribe and the second to a series of largely preventable accidents and illnesses. By the end of the book, Cudjo emerges as the sole survivor of both clans. His lonely situation is symptomatic of the racist social order in which he lives, demonstrating that one of slavery's biggest legacies is the irrevocable fracturing of family networks.

Cudjo's descriptions of his West African upbringing center around large and tightly knit families. He himself grows up in a large family, among many children. He sees his position within his family as integral to his self-conception. When Hurston tries to cut him short during an anecdote about his grandfather, he says that "I cain telle you 'bout de son before I tellee you 'bout de father." In this sense, it's family that gives Cudjo's life existential meaning. Although his tribe is generally patriarchal and polygamous, the women have a surprising amount of autonomy. According to Cudjo, the process of choosing additional wives for husbands and arranging marriages between children—two of the most important aspects in family life—is entirely adjudicated by women. The women's power to make decisions is an indicator of the family's overall strength and cohesion. During the raid on his village, Cudjo is appalled most by the murder of the elderly and the almost certain knowledge that his mother has been killed during the violence. For him, captivity is less important than the fracturing of family networks that have been central to him.

When Cudjo eventually rebuilds his life in America, family becomes central there as well. Cudjo's first sense of happiness and security comes when he marries Seely, another survivor of the **Middle Passage**. Cudjo describes his feelings for Seely in simple but emphatic terms, saying "She a good woman and I love her all de time." Here too strong family connections coincide with female autonomy. Cudjo and Seely decide to marry after a frank and equitable discussion, and his descriptions of their marriage evoke an equal partnership between strong characters. This equitable dynamic is largely what maintains the family's strength throughout successive misfortunes.

Cudjo and Seely have six children in quick succession and Cudjo proves a devoted father, saying "I love my chillum so much! I try so hard be good to our chillum." While Cudjo derives some comfort from being surrounded by fellow Africans and building Africatown, it's clear that his children are the central happiness of his life. However, all six of the children eventually die. Most of the deaths stem from preventable causes like illness or accidents that might have been avoided if residents of Africatown had access to public services or better jobs. The children's deaths show how racial discrimination threatens and ultimately destroys the family unit. In this sense, the demise of Cudjo's family in America is directly linked to the death of his family in West Africa.

While Cudjo is fairly reticent about the actual Middle Passage,

he dwells extensively on the importance of family and the misfortunes that break apart his family in both Africa and America. For him, the legacy of the Middle Passage and slavery as a whole is most evident in its repercussions to black families.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

BOATS AND THE MIDDLE PASSAGE

One of the first things enslaved people experience after being kidnapped, the Middle Passage symbolizes the horror of the slave trade. Packed into shelf-like bunks into the hold, victims suffered overcrowding, terrible hygienic conditions, illness, and mistreatment; fatalities during the Middle Passage are estimated at about 15%, and Cudjo's memories of the experience are so awful that he can barely discuss them. Besides physical suffering, the Middle Passage is the site of psychological trauma. Crammed below the decks, enslaved people are treated explicitly like objects, to be traded for other property on arrival in America. In the introduction, Hurston calls it "the first leg of their journey from humanity to cattle." In this sense, the Middle Passage enacts the policy of dehumanization and white supremacy on which the institution of slavery rests.

Moreover, the Middle Passage represents the conflict between cultures that will dominate the rest of Cudjo's life. While he is on the ship, Cudjo is suspended between Africa and America, belonging to neither; his old life is gone completely, but in America he will be denied rights and treated as a piece of property. Similarly, after gaining his freedom, Cudjo adopts certain aspects of Western culture (such as Christianity and the English language), but he still preserves his native traditions any way he can. Return to West Africa is impossible, but it's also impossible for Cudjo to feel accepted and at home in a society that discriminates against him at every turn. Thus, the Middle Passage is a foretaste of the cultural alienation and marginalization that persists long after slavery is officially ended.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Amistad edition of *Barracoon* published in 2018.

Introduction Quotes

❝ All these words from the seller, but not one word from the sold. The Kings and Captains whose words moved ships. But not one word from the cargo. The thoughts of the "black ivory," the "coin of Africa," had no market value. Africa's ambassadors to the New World have come and worked and died, and left their spoor, but no recorded thought.

Related Characters: Zora Neale Hurston (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 6

Explanation and Analysis

In this lyrical introduction to her work, Zora Neale Hurston explains the precise historical niche she hopes to fill by interviewing Cudjo Lewis. She points out that while a variety of opinions about slavery exist, the narratives surrounding this history are almost always controlled by people who did not experience it as victims. However, there's more to this project than simply a desire to record all sides of the story. It's notable that in this paragraph Hurston describes African slaves as inanimate objects, using phrases like "black ivory" and "coin of Africa." In her view, the process of dehumanization which turns them from people into things with "market value" depends in part on the inability of Africans to express their own thoughts and stories, and the refusal of society to hear them. In this sense, the storytelling process is not just about balancing the historical record but combatting the pernicious belief that slaves and their descendants are somehow less than human.

Chapter 1 Quotes

❝ Thankee Jesus! Somebody come ast about Cudjo! I want tellee somebody who I is, so maybe dey go in de Afficky soil some day and callee my name and somebody dere say, "Yeah, I know Kossula." I want you everwhere you go to tell everybody whut Cudjo say, and how come I in Americky soil since de 1859 and never see my people no mo'.

Related Characters: Kossula / Cudjo Lewis (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 19

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, just after Hurston's arrival in Plateau, Cudjo

expresses his willingness to tell his story. While Hurston sees the interviews as an opportunity to correct historical wrongs and help build a new academic tradition, Cudjo's reasons for undertaking the project are much more personal. At least in this moment, Cudjo believes that telling his story can help him reconnect with his lost homeland and family – although he can't go back to Africa, perhaps the story of his life can make it there. This hopeful outburst points out both the possibilities and limits of storytelling. As Cudjo hopes, his story does help readers understand the past and relate to the suffering of his life. At the same time, given how old Cudjo is and how long he's been away from home, it's unlikely that anyone who knew him is left to hear his story. Cudjo wants this project to bring him back to a world that is likely gone forever, no matter how faithfully he remembers it.

❝ In de Affica soil I cain tellee you 'bout de son before I tellee you 'bout de father; and derefore, you unnerstand me, I cain talk about de man who is father (*et te*) till I tellee you bout de man who he father to him, (*et, te, te*, grandfather) now, dass right ain' it?

Related Characters: Kossula / Cudjo Lewis (speaker), Cudjo's Grandfather, Cudjo's Father

Related Themes:

Page Number: 21

Explanation and Analysis

In their first days together, Hurston asks Cudjo to tell her about his childhood in Africa, and Cudjo gives a detailed explanation of the lives and professions of his father and grandfather. Feeling that this isn't important to the story she came to hear—that of the Middle Passage and his subsequent enslavement—Hurston tries to curtail his rambling, but he says he can't even begin to tell his own story before she knows about his predecessors. Clearly, Cudjo's position within his family and relationship to his ancestors is critical to his conception of himself; his assertion that this is the case for everyone in "de Affica soil" suggests that this emphasis on family is a key tenet of his tribe's culture. Cudjo's existential reliance on his family makes his brutal capture, and their probable deaths, even more tragic, and his longing for strong family networks will resurface later in his marriage with Seely. By recording these seemingly off-topic cultural recollections, Hurston is encouraging readers to treat African customs with respect, rather than dismissing or generalizing them; she also characterizes her subject not primarily as a slave but as a man of dignity grounded in a large and proud family.

Chapter 2 Quotes

❝ But people watch until he die too. How long it take? Sometime he die next day. Sometime two or three days. He doan live long. People kin stand de smell of de horse, de cow and udder beasts, but no man kin stand de smell in his nostrils of a rotten man.

Related Characters: Kossula / Cudjo Lewis (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 32

Explanation and Analysis

In Chapter Two, Cudjo talks about the role of Akia'on, the king, and the manner in which the tribe addresses crime. Many punishments—such as the one he describes here, in which a murderer is tied to his victim and left to die—are very harsh, but it's important that the men of the village and the king deliberate together, and everyone is involved in keeping the community safe and fair. The logical and just laws which Cudjo describes as governing his tribe contrast starkly with the laws he experiences in America, which allow and promote racial discrimination even after slavery has come to an official end. In episodes like this, Hurston combats notions of European cultural supremacy by demonstrating the existence of non-Western cultures with complex and praiseworthy mores. At the same time, she's questioning the widespread idea that America is a uniquely egalitarian "land of opportunity," suggesting that these qualities don't hold true for people like Cudjo.

Chapter 4 Quotes

❝ I tellee you whut I know about de juju [...] Cudjo doan know. Now, dat's right. I doan make out I know whut go on wid de grown folks. When I come away from Afficky I only a boy 19 year old. I have one initiation. A boy must go through many initiations before he become a man.

Related Characters: Kossula / Cudjo Lewis (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 41

Explanation and Analysis

As Cudjo continues to tell Hurston about his life as a child in West Africa, she asks him about "juju," meaning the spiritual rituals performed by tribal elders. Cudjo is generally very mild-mannered, but here his tone seems to sharpen a bit as he admits he doesn't know anything about it. This admission contrasts with the excitement he's voiced throughout the chapter about growing up and being fully initiated into the tribe. Cudjo has emphasized feeling grounded and included in the tribe, but here he has to acknowledge the distance from his culture that has characterized most of his life. Even though tribal culture remains one of the most important aspects of his life, he's never able to achieve the inclusion that he wished for. This cultural dislocation emerges as one of the consequences of slavery which can never truly be ameliorated.

Chapter 6 Quotes

❝ Oh Lor', I so shame! We come in de 'Merica soil naked and de people say we naked savage. Dey say we doan wear no clothes. Dey doan know de Many-costs snatch our clothes 'way from us.

Related Characters: Kossula / Cudjo Lewis (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 55

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Cudjo describes the chaotic and terrifying experience of being formally "sold" to Captain Foster and boarding the *Clotilda*. Cudjo and the other captives from his village are conveyed out to the ships by men from the Kroo tribe (Cudjo refers to them as Many-costs). This moment shows how slavery depends on fragmentation between different tribal groups: the Dahomans capture slaves from surrounding tribes, but also rely on the Kroos to carry out their grunt work. Through moments like these, Hurston pushes back against the tendency to lump all African nations together in a homogenous bloc.

Moreover, Cudjo shows how the conditions of slavery create and perpetuate the stereotypes that enable this institution. Of course, Cudjo and the other villagers wear clothes; they only look like "naked savages" when they arrive in America because of the trauma and inhumanity of capture and the Middle Passage. However, it's the assumption that Africans are inherently "savage" that encourages Europeans and Americans to dehumanize them and continue to enslave them.

❝ We lookee and lookee and lookee and lookee and we doan see nothin' but water. Where we come from we doan know. Where we goin, we doan know.

Related Characters: Kossula / Cudjo Lewis (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 55

Explanation and Analysis

In this chapter, Cudjo relates his terrible recollections of the Middle Passage. The captives are imprisoned in the hold for almost two weeks, until the boat has made it into open water. Then, finally, they are allowed onto the deck, where the crew has to help them walk because their limbs are so stiff. Cudjo dwells not on the physical hardships he's experiencing, but on the fact that he doesn't know where he is or where he's going—all around him, all he can see is water. While he's describing his material situation, he's hinting at the emotional and psychological dislocation epitomized in the Middle Passage. In just a few weeks, he's transformed from an independent young man in a vibrant and loving culture to a slave with no agency, no country, and no idea where he's going. Cudjo will grapple with these contradictions of the rest of his life, but they emerge most starkly now, when the ship reflects them in its physical movement away from Cudjo's old life towards the new one.

Chapter 7 Quotes

❝ When we at de plantation on Sunday we so glad we ain' gottee no work to do. So we dance lak in de Afficky soil. De American colored folks, you unnerstand me, dey say we savage an den de laugh at us […] Free George, he come to us and tell us not to dance on Sunday. Den he tell us whut Sunday is. We doan know whut is is before […] Den we doan dance no mo' on de Sunday.

Related Characters: Kossula / Cudjo Lewis (speaker), Free George

Related Themes:

Page Number: 62

Explanation and Analysis

During his five years of enslavement on Jim Meaher's plantation, Cudjo has to do grueling work almost every day of the week—only on Sundays can he reunite with the other villagers with whom he endured the Middle Passage and remember their shared homeland through traditional dance. Importantly, in this moment it's not white Americans but fellow slaves that deride his culture and call him "savage." This troubling episode shows that white supremacy has become prevalent even among the people it actively oppresses; it's tragic to see that these slaves have been so cut off from their own heritage they can no longer appreciate it. Although Cudjo listens to Free George (a free man and preacher), stops dancing on Sundays, and eventually adopts Christianity, he and the other residents of Africatown make great efforts to preserve their culture. However, although this gives them deep emotional satisfaction, it will eventually lead to ostracism and hostility not only from white Americans but from the surrounding black communities as well.

Chapter 8 Quotes

❝ Cap'n jump on his feet and say, 'Fool do you think I goin' give you property on top of property? I tookee good keer my slaves in slavery and derefo' I doan owe dem nothing? You doan belong to me now, why must I give you my lan'?'

Related Characters: Kossula / Cudjo Lewis (speaker), Tim Meaher

Related Themes:

Page Number: 67

Explanation and Analysis

After being liberated from slavery during the Civil War, Cudjo and the other villagers from the *Clotilda* reunite and deliberate on what to do next. Eventually, they agree that they will build their own town, where they can live and govern themselves. Feeling that it's only fair for the Meaher brothers to give them some land, after all the unpaid work they've done, they send Cudjo to approach Tim Meaher; however, the former slave-owner reacts violently, saying that since he's already lost part of his "property" (the former slaves) he's not going to give them more "property" (land). This passage shows how completely unwilling the Meahers are to view black people as humans with equal rights. Meaher also displays a massive sense of entitlement here; even though the law has (finally) affirmed that slavery is immoral, he resents the government and the war rather than questioning his own actions.

Most importantly, this passage highlights the different opportunities America presents to people like Cudjo and people like the Meahers. The Meahers were able to acquire land without issue and to import slaves to work it, even when this was illegal. Even after the war, they still own many businesses, some of which are run by former slaves. On the other hand, it proves very difficult for Cudjo and the others to acquire land, because they have to buy it from the Meahers. Even after they build Africatown, they never attain prosperity or security like their former employers. Here, Hurston and Cudjo suggest that the American dream functions to the benefit of white men like the Meahers and at the expense of vulnerable people like Cudjo.

❝ Den we make laws how to behave ourselves. When anyone do wrong we make him 'pear befo' de judges and dey tellee him he got to stop doin' lak dat 'cause it doan look nice. We doan want nobody to steal, neither gittee drunk neither hurtee nobody [...] When we speak to a man whut do wrong de nexy time he do dat, we whip him.

Related Characters: Kossula / Cudjo Lewis (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 68

Explanation and Analysis

When the villagers finally save up enough money, they buy a piece of land from the Meahers, build a small town, and name it Africatown. As Cudjo explains here, within the town they are free to govern themselves, and so they appoint judges to police wrongdoing. The justice system he describes here mirrors the manner of adjudicating crimes with which the villagers grew up in Africa. This is one of the first moments in which Africatown emerges as a site of preservation for African culture and a substitute for Africa itself. It's important that only within Africatown is Cudjo treated fairly and justly by the law—he's already been legally enslaved, and later in the novel he will have disastrous encounters with law enforcement. Cudjo and his fellow Africans can only access the "American Dream" of equality and security within a town that consciously mimics a non-American society.

> We call our village Affican Town. We say dat 'cause we want to go back in de Affica soil and we see we cain go. Derefo' we make de Affica where dey fetch us. Gumpa say, 'My folks sell me and yo folks (Americans) buy me.' We here and we got to stay.

Related Characters: Kossula / Cudjo Lewis (speaker), Gumpa

Related Themes:

Page Number: 68

Explanation and Analysis

At the end of Chapter Eight, Cudjo expresses his feelings about the founding of Africatown. On one hand, the town is a triumph—just a few years after being enslaved, the villagers have formed a cohesive community, scraped together the money to buy land, and built a town that will provide them relative safety from the racist culture by which they are surrounded. Slavery has attempted to obliterate their culture, but they will be able to preserve many important traditions within Africatown.

Despite all this, Cudjo and Gumpa take on a somewhat mournful tone when reflecting. For Cudjo, the building of Africatown is a final reminder that he will never go back to his actual homeland; for Gumpa, it recalls that his own people sold him into slavery. By their own reckoning, Africatown is both an enormous accomplishment in the context of post-Civil War Alabama, and a pale imitation of the life Cudjo and his fellows grew up expecting.

Chapter 9 Quotes

> We doan know nothin' 'bout dey have license over here in dis place. So den we gittee married by de license, but I doan love my wife no mo' wid de license than I love her befo' de license. She a good woman and I love her all de time.

Related Characters: Kossula / Cudjo Lewis (speaker), Abila / Seely

Related Themes:

Page Number: 72

Explanation and Analysis

Even after building Africatown, Cudjo feels lonely because he doesn't have a family. He asks another African woman, Seely, to be his wife, and after discussing the matter they agree to be married and start living together. This personal agreement is all the formality required in West Africa, but when the couple converts to Christianity they're instructed to get a license and be formally married. Cudjo complies, but he asserts touchingly here that "I doan love my wife no mo' wid the license" than before it. In the years after his enslavement ends Cudjo adopts many Anglo-American customs—most importantly, Christianity—and accepts their dictates without much argument. However, even as he seems to assimilate into the dominant society it's clear that he's still most emotionally connected to the customs of his homeland. Hurston emphasizes that it's only these customs that draw strong emotional responses from him and his family, giving vibrancy and value to African culture, rather than dismissing it as inferior to the European tradition.

> All de time de chillum growin' de American folks de picks at dem and tell de Afficky people dey kill folks and eatee de meat. Dey callee my chillum ig'nant savage and make out dey kin to monkey.

Related Characters: Kossula / Cudjo Lewis (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 73

Explanation and Analysis

When he marries Seely and begins to have children with her, Cudjo inaugurates a period of great happiness in his life. He takes great pride in being a father and does the best he can to provide for his children. However, as the children grow up they experience great hostility for living in a place where African culture is valued, rather than disowned. The vicious stereotypes, like the idea that the children are "kin to monkey," emphasizes the prevalence of racism and cultural ignorance in the society—exactly the things Hurston combats by including extensive and respectful depictions of African culture in the narrative. Although Cudjo doesn't specify exactly who is saying these things, in other moments he says that surrounding black communities despise Africatown residents as "ig'nant savages," showing the ability of white supremacy to take root even in marginalized communities. At this point, Cudjo realizes that being a good parent and building a safe place for his children to live is not enough to guarantee them safety or acceptance. From this point onward, the narrative will focus on the children's inability to succeed in America as a result of their race and culture.

> Dat de first time in de Americky soil dat death find where my door is. But we from cross de water know dat he come in de ship with us.

Related Characters: Kossula / Cudjo Lewis (speaker), Abila / Seely, Cudjo's Daughter, Seely

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 74

Explanation and Analysis

As a teenager, Cudjo's daughter Seely gets a fever and dies suddenly. This is a devastating event for her parents, who mourn her for years. It's also a turning point for Cudjo's family, which until now has been moderately prosperous and deeply happy, but will continue to decline until all the children are dead. Personifying the idea of death, Cudjo describes it as having come "in de ship with us"; he associates death with the Middle Passage and slavery. In the years after the Civil War, Cudjo focuses on building a new life and putting aside these injustices. When his daughter dies, however, they resurface in his mind. Linking Seely's death to the Middle Passage, Cudjo suggests that even though his children were never slaves, their fates are part of slavery's legacy of racism and discrimination. Even though Cudjo thought he'd triumphed over slavery by building a new family, it's clear that social conditions in America don't allow families like his to thrive.

> Dey sing, 'Shall We Meet Beyond De River.' I been a member of de church a long time now, and I know de words of de song wid my mouth, but my heart it doan know dat. Derefo' I sing inside me, 'O todo ah wah n-law yah-lee, owrran k-nee ra ra k-nee ro ro.'

Related Characters: Kossula / Cudjo Lewis (speaker), Abila / Seely, Cudjo's Daughter, Seely

Related Themes:

Page Number: 74

Explanation and Analysis

After young Seely dies, her parents have a Christian funeral and bury her body in the churchyard. Recalling that in his childhood dead people were buried inside the house, Cudjo worries that she will be lonely in the churchyard. Similarly, although he's familiar with Christian hymns by now, he feels most compelled by the memory of a traditional mourning song from his youth. Even though Cudjo has accepted Christianity and all its customs, it's his native traditions that are most comforting to him in times of need like this. It's important that Cudjo becomes more ambivalent about Christian practices and more fondly reminiscent of African ones as more of his children die. At first, he saw Christianity as a way of fitting into this new country and possibly even gaining acceptance. Now, as he sees acceptance isn't possible no matter what his religion is, he begins to mourn the lost possibility of life in Africa, where his children might have thrived. In this sense, moments like these don't just show the value of Cudjo's native culture but also his disillusionment with American society.

> It only nine year since my girl die. Look like I still hear de bell toll for her, when it toll again for my [Cudjo]. My po' Affican boy dat doan never see Afficky soil.

Related Characters: Kossula / Cudjo Lewis (speaker), Cudjo Jr.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 76

Explanation and Analysis

Directly after telling of young Seely's fate, Cudjo relates that his youngest son, also named Cudjo, was killed in an altercation with a sheriff's deputy. Cudjo has prefaced this by saying that his boys frequently got in brawls, but explains that they did so because people from other towns were so racist and hostile to them. Mourning for his "po' Affican boy," Cudjo implicitly meditates on the twin injustices young Cudjo suffered during his life, and which led to his death. Because of slavery, young Cudjo is prevented from living a fulfilling life on "Afficky soil," where he would be protected by his tribe and appreciated by his culture. On the other hand, it's also impossible for him to live happily in America because of the hostility he encounters as an "Affican boy." Slavery and its legacy of racism destroy the continuity of tribal life in Africa without providing anything to replace it.

Of course, it's clear that these circumstances apply to Cudjo as well, but he rarely comments on the injustices that have occurred in his own life. His preoccupation with the fates of his children shows his character as a good father and emphasizes the tragedy of living in a society where one cannot even ensure the basic safety of one's own children.

Chapter 10 Quotes

I tell her come and drop de beans while I hill dem up […] After a while she say, 'Cudjo you doan need me drop no beans. You cain work 'thout no woman 'round you. You bringee me here for company.'

I say, 'Thass right.'

Related Characters: Kossula / Cudjo Lewis (speaker), Abila / Seely

Related Themes:

Page Number: 78

Explanation and Analysis

In this scene, Cudjo is performing some routine gardening tasks—sowing the yearly crop of beans—and asks Seely to assist him. After some time, she realizes he doesn't really need her help, but just wants her to be around him. This is a deeply touching moment, showing a marriage bond that remains strong and loving even in the face of constant hardship and after the deaths of two children. However, just a few paragraphs later Cudjo will be hit by a train in Plateau and become crippled; he will attempt to sue the railroad, but his lawyer will steal the small settlement he wins. In this context, the passage is an implicit comparison between the love and cohesion that exists within Cudjo's family and the violence and injustice that awaits them in the outside world. Cudjo will use such comparisons in multiple instances, such as when he describes the genial family dinner that precedes his son David's sudden death. The family is a source of comfort and strength to Cudjo, but moments like these emphasize its ultimate vulnerability against the flawed society by which it is surrounded.

Chapter 11 Quotes

Poe-lee very mad. He say de deputy kill his baby brother. Den de train kill David. He want to do something. But I ain' hold no malice. De Bible say not. Poe-lee say in Afficky soil it ain' lak in de Americky. He ain' been in de Afficky, you unnerstand me, but he hear what we tellee him and he think dat better dan where he at.

Related Characters: Kossula / Cudjo Lewis (speaker), Cudjo Jr., David, Poe-lee

Related Themes:

Page Number: 87

Explanation and Analysis

After David's sudden death in a railroad accident, Poe-lee finds it hard to grapple with the many misfortunes that have befallen his family. While Cudjo usually takes a resigned attitude toward matters like this, Poe-lee becomes more enraged with everything that happens, from young Cudjo's death to his father's incapacitation by the railroad. Moments like this show that living in a racist society isn't just a matter of material hardship; for Poe-lee, the constant hostility his family experiences causes a kind of existential crisis and eventually leads to his abandonment of the family.

It's also interesting that Poe-lee is both inspired and demoralized by his parents' stories of Africa. He's happy to know that the possibility of a better life exists, but it also makes his existing circumstances seem even more intolerable. Like his brother young Cudjo, Poe-lee is forever marked by his African heritage even though he's never experienced Africa personally. His constant comments about his family's native land are also a testament to the powers and limits of storytelling. Stories of Africa encourage him not to accept the status quo of his life, but they ultimately can't deliver the kind of life he wants.

Maybe de kill my boy. It a hidden mystery. So many de folks dey hate my boy 'cause he lak his brothers. Dey doan let nobody 'buse dem lak dey dogs. Maybe he in Afficky soil lak somebody say.

Related Characters: Kossula / Cudjo Lewis (speaker), Poe-lee

Related Themes:

Page Number: 88

Explanation and Analysis

After telling Hurston that Poe-lee wandered away one day and never came back, Cudjo wonders what became of him. It's possible, and indeed likely, that he was killed in an altercation like his younger brother; even though Cudjo is afraid of this thought, he's proud of his sons dignified behavior and refusal to suffer offense. Cudjo also fantasizes that his son has somehow made it to Africa, as he never could. It's important that Cudjo can only imagine bad outcomes—namely, death—if Poe-lee has stayed in America. The only happy life he can envision for his son involves returning to his homeland. This is a severe indictment of American society and refutation of the idea that America

offers opportunity and prospects to everyone. Rather than the conventional image of immigrants arriving in hopes of a better life, Cudjo conjures the thought of his son migrating away from America in order to escape its serious flaws.

❝ When he came out I saw that he had put on his best suit but removed his shoes. "I want to look lak I in Affica, 'cause dat where I want to be," he explained.

He also asked to be photographed in the cemetery among the graves of his family.

Related Characters: Zora Neale Hurston (speaker), Kossula / Cudjo Lewis

Related Themes:

Page Number: 89

Explanation and Analysis

In Chapter Eleven, Cudjo finishes telling Hurston about the deaths of his children and wife and concludes his narrative. She asks permission to take his picture (which appears on the cover of the book). Cudjo has never been photographed before, and while he dresses in "his best suit" he also takes off his shoes. In his sartorial choices, Cudjo is expressing the clash of cultures which has shaped his life and his character. The suit is reminiscent of the many ways in which he's assimilated to American society—speaking English, converting to Christianity, working to build and maintain a town. However, his bare feet show his deep connection to his homeland, which hasn't faded despite the many decades he's spent in America. Even though Cudjo has made a life in America he makes clear that his primary longing is still for Africa by saying that "dat where I want to be."

Asking to be photographed in the graveyard, Cudjo asserts his fundamental connection to his family, even after their deaths. He also implicitly makes the point that, as an elderly man, the things he cares most about—his homeland, his wife, and his children—are all distant from him. Although Cudjo has overcome incredible obstacles, the end of his life is characterized by loneliness and distance.

Chapter 12 Quotes

❝ I had spent two months with Kossula, who is called Cudjo, trying to find the answers to my questions. Some days we ate great quantities of clingstone peaches and talked [...] At other times neither was possible, he just chased me away. He wanted to work in his garden or fix his fences. He couldn't be bothered.

Related Characters: Zora Neale Hurston (speaker), Kossula / Cudjo Lewis

Related Themes:

Page Number: 93

Explanation and Analysis

In Chapter Twelve, Hurston sums up her interactions with Cudjo and prepares to depart Alabama for good. Calling him both Kossula and Cudjo here, she suggests that she's gotten to know African and American aspects of her subjects, creating a sense of intimacy and friendship. While at the beginning of the narrative she often emphasized her efforts to ingratiate herself with Cudjo and elicit information—bringing him gifts and trying to steer the conversation—now she creates an image of two friends sharing stories in a spontaneous, unforced manner. This shift in their personal dynamic argues the ability of storytelling and oral history to create empathy and even friendship between relative strangers. Hurston is often ambivalent about her ability to fully process and understand the suffering of Cudjo's life; this ambivalence naturally extends to the reader, who interacts with Cudjo's story at an even greater distance. However, in this moment of conclusion she evinces a great deal of faith in and satisfaction from the process of telling and listening to stories.

❝ When I crossed the bridge, I know he went back to his porch; to his house full of thoughts. To his memories of fat girls with ringing golden bracelets, his drums that speak the minds of men, to palm-nut cakes and bull-roarers, to his parables.

Related Characters: Zora Neale Hurston (speaker), Kossula / Cudjo Lewis

Related Themes:

Page Number: 94

Explanation and Analysis

Hurston's writing is usually matter-of-fact and even brisk, but as she drives away from Cudjo's house forever she indulges in some speculation on the nature of his "thoughts." Hurston characterizes Cudjo as full of memories of Africa, and the memories she draws on now are those that elevate his culture and heritage, rather than recalling his captivity and enslavement. In Hurston's mind, these memories help

to counteract the loneliness of old age; while there's no family living in his house, it's "full of thoughts" to keep him company. Moreover, the process of retelling his memories helps him make sense of everything that's happened to him; referencing "his parables," Hurston recalls the moral fables he makes up for the other Africatown residents in order to explain tragic events like his wife's death. However, no matter how positive these memories are, Hurston still conjures up a lonely aura; even as she exalts Cudjo's memories, she hints at their inability to recreate or compensate for the life he has lost.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

INTRODUCTION

Zora Neale Hurston begins her introduction, which gives some background information on Cudjo's story, by declaring that "the African Slave trade is the most dramatic chapter in the story of human existence." While many people have written about slavery, supporting and condemning it, few former slaves have had their say. In particular, almost no one who lived through the **Middle Passage** has been able to tell their story. Now, there's only one survivor of that journey alive, a man named Cudjo Lewis who lives in Plateau, Alabama.

As she opens her work, Hurston contrasts it to the previous literary discussion of slavery, and establishes herself as the voice of the enslaved, rather than the enslavers. The idea of storytelling as an essential method of preserving memory, especially the memories of traumatized people, will be a fundamental preoccupation throughout the book.

Hurston first meets Cudjo in 1927, when her mentor, the anthropologist Franz Boas, dispatches her to record his experience of the **Middle Passage** for publication in a magazine about African American history. She supplements her interviews with research in archives, such as those held by the Mobile Historical Society.

Showing that her work is grounded in research (and even name-dropping a famous anthropologist!) Hurston emphasizes that African American history merits rigorous academic treatment; it's not something that can be stereotyped or dismissed as "primitive."


In 1859, three brothers—Jim, Tim, and Burns Meaher—and a captain named Bill Foster colluded to launch an illegal but profitable slave-trading expedition. Captain Foster, owner of the swift ship the *Clotilda*, secretly leaves Mobile for the port of Dahomey in West Africa. While he stops for repairs at the Cape Verde Islands, his crew mutinies; Foster promises to increase their wages, but never actually does so.

It's important to note that this expedition takes place so much later than the 1807 abolition of international slave trade. From their first appearance, the Meaher brothers exude an attitude of racism and racial entitlement that they feel puts them above the law. The fact that they go unpunished shows how unconcerned the American justice system is with upholding its own limited guarantees of security to African Americans.

Eventually, he arrives at Dahomey, a kingdom known for trading slaves. Foster meets with the Prince of Dahomey and is impressed with the large palace and evident wealth. Trying to impress Foster, the Prince tells him to select any member of his court as a gift; he chooses a relative of the Prince, a man named Gumpa, who is the only Dahoman man transported to America on the *Clotilda*.

For Cudjo, one of the bitterest aspects of enslavement is the fact that it's perpetrated in part by other Africans. Cudjo will frequently emphasize the brutality and heartlessness of his Dahoman captors during his own narrative.

After this ceremonial visit, Foster goes to the barracoons, which are overflowing with captives awaiting sale. Historically, European powers have tried to incite different tribes against each other in order to generate a supply of captives, but the King of Dahomey has made slave-trading his explicit business and raids his neighbors every year in order to capture people to sell. Still, the King claims that he only makes war when a neighboring kingdom has insulted him. In this way, "whole nations" are "exterminated" by the slave trade.

The King of Dahomey is trying to justify his practice of capturing and selling slaves by controlling the narrative that surrounds it, placing his deeds in the context of legitimate war rather than illegitimate raids. His behavior demonstrates the importance of reclaiming more truthful narratives—exactly what Hurston is doing by recording and publishing the story of Cudjo's life.

When Captain Foster arrives, the yearly wars have just concluded, so the barracoons are full. He chooses 130 slaves, both men and women. They are loaded onto his ship by Kroo men, members of another tribe. When most of the slaves are aboard, Foster sees all the Dahoman ships in the harbor display black flags, and realizes that they are planning on recapturing the slaves and holding them for ransom. However, because the *Clotilda* is such a fast ship, he's able to get away.

The distinctions between the Kroo, the Dahomans, and members of Cudjo's own tribe suggest that slave trading depends on sharp tribal divisions and animosities. At the same time, by making sure to record these distinctions Hurston is pushing back against the contemporary habit of lumping all Africans together instead of taking time to understand the complex differences between tribes and nations.

After thirteen days, Foster allows the slaves to come onto the deck for exercise. They are cramped and ill from being unable to move around. When Foster finally reaches America, he places all the slaves back in the hold in order to avoid detection. The ship hides in the Mobile Bay until word can be sent to the Meaher brothers, who arrive with a tugboat to tow the *Clotilda* to a safe location. When he receives the message, Jim Meaher goes to the local church, where the tugboat pilot is attending services and calls him away.

Evidently, neither Jim Meaher nor the tugboat pilot see no contradictions between strong religious faith and the practice of enslaving fellow humans. While Cudjo is a devoted Christian and feels empowered by religion, here Hurston steps back from his position to remind the reader that Christianity was also used to promote and justify slavery.

That night, the tugboat tows the *Clotilda* up a tributary of the Mobile River to a secluded island. There, the slaves are transferred onto a steam boat (ironically, named after Chief Justice Taney, who spearheaded the *Dred Scott* Supreme Court Decision) and taken to another plantation. Captain Foster sets fire to the *Clotilda* but later regrets this decision, as it was an expensive and useful ship.

In the "Dred Scott" decision, the Supreme Court—generally considered a beacon of justice and equality—ruled that slaves and their descendants could not be American citizens. This coincidence foreshadows Cudjo's later experiences in American, when the country's legendary equality will prove illusory for him.

The slaves are kept hidden on the plantation for eleven days, after which they are given clothes and transported to Burns Meaher's planation. In order to avoid detection, they have to spend every day hiding in the swamp while the Meahers secretly communicate with other slave-owners who are interested in purchasing them. After a few sales, most of the slaves are divided between the Meaher brothers and Captain Foster.

While Hurston lays out the facts, Cudjo will relay the horror of his first days in slavery much more evocatively. While both portrayals of this event are important, the authenticity and emotional weight Cudjo adds underscore Hurston's opening assertion that firsthand accounts of slavery fill a unique gap in historical knowledge.

Only a year later, the Civil War breaks out. In 1861, the Meaher brothers are fined for illegally bringing slaves into the country. After the Civil War, the Africans of the *Clotilda* build a village and name it Africatown; it's now known as Plateau, "but still it's dominant tone is African."

The name of the town shows that while Cudjo and his fellows become committed to building a life in America, they will still do everything possible to retain their African roots.

Having done her research, Hurston sets out to find Cudjo, a man who calls himself "the tree of two woods." He is the only person left on the planet who has experienced a life in Africa, captivity and enslavement, as well as life as a free man in America. Hurston wants to know how he conceives of his experiences, and how "a pagan [lives] with a Christian God."

Hurston's last remark, describing Cudjo as a "pagan," sounds somewhat odd, but it emphasizes the clash between African and European culture—embodied in the two different religious traditions—that shapes Cudjo's character and life.

CHAPTER 1

It's summer when Hurston first arrives at Cudjo's house. She knows he's at home because his gate is unlocked; he latches it with a wooden peg "of African invention." Climbing up to the porch, she finds him eating breakfast alongside another man and addresses him by his African name, Kossula. Cudjo is so touched that she knows this name that he tears up, telling her it's "jus' lak I in de Affica soil."

Even though Cudjo's life is by now firmly rooted in America, so much of it is clearly rooted in his West African childhood. Cudjo's longing to be addressed by his native name shows how slavery robbed him not only of his freedom but of his heritage.

Cudjo explains that the other man is a caretaker who has been staying with him during a recent illness. However, he seems to be healthy and cheerful now; his garden is planted, and he has several fruit trees growing well. Hurston explains that she has come to talk to him, but Cudjo says he doesn't care why she's come; he likes to have company because he is often very lonely. For a while, he ignores Hurston and sits in quiet abstraction.

In seeking out Cudjo, Hurston is on an academic mission—these interviews will help her contribute to a body of historical knowledge which she values and has studied deeply. For Cudjo, this project is of less philosophical than personal importance—it's a time for him to reflect and gain closure on some of the most traumatic aspects of his life.

After a while, Cudjo returns his attention to her, saying that sometimes he can't help crying from loneliness. Hurston asks how he is feeling, and he responds that "I thank God I on praying groun' and in a Bible country." Taken aback, Hurston asks if he had "a God back in Africa." She sees that he looks very anguished and starts to feel guilty that she has "come to worry this captive in a strange land."

It becomes clear that Cudjo doesn't always express himself the way Hurston expects—for example, she's surprised to see him voicing what seems like explicit approval of America. One of the most interesting aspects of Cudjo's story is his complex cultural heritage, which defies categorization.

Eventually, Cudjo clarifies his previous statement. He says that in Africa his people always believed in the existence of God, but called him Alahua. Because they didn't have the Bible, they never knew that God also has a son, and they didn't know any Biblical stories like the one of Adam and Eve. He says that his people "ain' ignant – we jes doan know." He asks if that's all Hurston wants to know.

For Cudjo, African and Anglo-American religions—and, in a larger sense, cultures—aren't inherently opposed to each other but rather are part of the same larger scheme. Rather than judging each culture against the other, Cudjo integrates both into his overarching worldview.

Hurston responds that she wants to know many things, from Cudjo's captivity to his life as a free man. Cudjo cries again, thanking God that finally someone has come to tell his story. He wants his life to be known, so that one day someone will be able to go to Africa and tell his countrymen about his life. He says that he "can't talkee plain," but he will tell his entire story as clearly as possible.

For Cudjo, telling his story is an opportunity to reconnect to his heritage—even if the possibility of it ever reaching people who once knew him in Africa is painfully slim. In this sense, storytelling is a way to overcome the community fracturing caused by slavery.

Cudjo says that his real name is Kossula. When he arrived in America, his master Jim Meaher was unable to pronounce his name. Cudjo asks him, "Well, I yo' property?" When Meaher responds that he is, he shortens his own name to Cudjo.

For Cudjo, the discovery that he is now "property" coincides with the acquisition of an "American" name. Throughout the narrative, such transitions from Africa to America are usually marked by a loss of freedom, opportunity, or well-being.

Cudjo begins to explain his origins in West Africa. His family doesn't have "ivory by de door," meaning they aren't rich or of royal blood. He wants to be clear on this, in case someone ever goes to Africa and claims that Kossula comes from a rich and important family. His grandfather is an officer for the tribe's king, Akia'on, and follows him around rather than living at home.

In describing his family's position within the tribal society, Cudjo gives detail and vibrancy to his life in West Africa, rather than dismissing it as the preliminary to his life in America.

Worried that Cudjo is getting distracted, Hurston interrupts that she wants to hear about his life, not his grandfather's. With an expression of "scornful pity," Cudjo says he can't "tellee you 'bout de son before I tellee you bout de father" and his grandfather. His grandfather, he continues, has a large compound with several wives and children. In his village, the husband's house is always in the center of the compound, surrounding by the houses of his wives.

It's very important that Cudjo conceives of himself primarily in relation to his family. His sense of the importance of family networks to individual character makes the sudden loss of his family even more wrenching, and means that in America he will have to build not only a new family but a new sense of self.

Cudjo explains that it wasn't his grandfather's idea to marry so many women. Rather, according to local tradition the wives themselves select subsequent wives. Typically, a wife approaches a young girl she has in mind and makes the case for her husband, telling of all his good qualities. If the girl agrees, the wife speaks to her parents and, if both parties are satisfied, the girl goes to the wife's compound. The husband must then pay the father a certain amount, depending on the physical beauty, social position, and previous marital status of the girl.

Cudjo's tribe is obviously very patriarchal—families are centered around the husband, and polygamy is common. However, even within these systems women seem to exercise a good deal of decision-making power. Examples like this complicate stereotypes about tribal society and suggest that strong families must include and value strong women.


When the new wife arrives at her husband's compound, she lives with the old wife in order to learn the household tasks and how to take care of the husband. When she's ready, the husband builds her own house, marking the occasion by killing a cow and hosting a celebration for the whole village. In Cudjo's grandfather's compound, this happens many times.

In moments like this, Hurston records cultural information about Cudjo's tribe that doesn't have direct bearing on his enslavement. In doing so, she's suggesting that African cultures are worthy of study and research in and of themselves.

Generally, all the wives cook food for their husband. After he eats, the husband goes to sleep, fanned and massaged by the younger wives. Other people guard the compound so that nobody wakes him up. Sometimes a young slave boy in the compound makes too much noise and is taken to Grandfather for a scolding. Grandfather threatens to sell the young boy to the Portuguese, but while other men sometimes actually do this to their slaves, Grandfather never does.

Cudjo's casual mention of slaves living in the compound demonstrates that slavery would have been a normal part of village life and tribal warfare. However, it was not necessarily and irrevocable state, unlike shipping slaves to the Americas. In this sense, it's not slavery within Africa but cooperation with European and American slave traders that breaches tribal custom and inspires Cudjo's anger.

Once, tragedy strikes the chief of the village; his newest wife dies while she is still living with another wife and learning the ways of the household. When he receives the news, the chief shouts and cries, saying that he paid a lot of money for her and has never even slept with her.

This passage is somewhat troubling, since it suggests that the young wife's only value to her husband is the sexual satisfaction she might have provided. This scene is antithetical to the deep and loving bond Cudjo will later form with his own wife.

Finishing this anecdote, Cudjo looks across his thriving garden to his daughter-in-law's house. Hurston feels that he has forgotten she is there. Eventually, he tells the man sitting beside him to get him some cold water. Smoking his pipe in silence for some time, he tells Hurston to go away and come back later. He's too tired to talk now. She leaves him sitting among the mosquitos that populate the house's porch.

Although the interview process generally draws Hurston and Cudjo closer together and allows them to become friends, sometimes storytelling just emphasizes the distance between the one who possesses memories and the one who can only listen to them.

CHAPTER 2

The next time Hurston visits Cudjo, she brings a basket of peaches. Cudjo's great-granddaughters arrive at the same time, and he gives them each some peaches and sends them off to play. He tells Hurston that the reason he grows sugarcane in his garden is so that he always has something sweet to give the girls when they visit. That day Cudjo shows Hurston his entire garden, but doesn't say anything about himself.

Cudjo's affection for the young girls recalls his deep sense of familial connection during his own childhood. In his life in America, Cudjo has preserved his African values as much as possible and tried to rebuild the things he lost forever during enslavement.

Coming another day, Hurston brings a bottle of insect repellant. This time, Cudjo is eager to talk to her, and he resumes his story where he left off, by talking about the situations with which his grandfather was faced as an officer of the king, Akia'on. He says that, customarily, any man who kills a leopard must bring it to the king, who takes the animal's poisonous whiskers as well as some organs, which are used to make medicine. If anyone kills the leopard and takes the whiskers for himself, it's understood that he wants to poison someone.

At the time of Hurston's writing it was common and acceptable to dismiss African cultures as primitive and undeveloped—in fact, this was used as a justification for enslaving Africans. By giving detailed accounts of this tribe's methods for dealing with all kinds of communal issues, Hurston characterizes it as complex and sophisticated, with social systems that are just as valuable as any European counterpart.

One day, a man kills a leopard, covers its head and ties its body to a pole, and carries it to Akia'on. When the king looks at the leopard's face, he sees that it is missing its whiskers. The king and the chiefs interrogate the man as to how he killed the leopard and where the whiskers are, but the man claims to know nothing, and says he doesn't want to kill anyone. However, when the chiefs search the man they find that he's carrying the hairs hidden on his person.

The emphasis on controlling the poisonous substance and minimizing danger to the tribe shows the deeply communal orientation of the society, and Akia'on's sense of obligation to protect those he leads. By contrast, when Cudjo is brought to Dahomey as a captive he will see that the kingdom's leaders view their prerogative as enriching themselves at the expense of others.

All day Akia'on and the chiefs talk about the case, and the next day they find the man guilty of attempted poisoning and sentence him to execution. The man is imprisoned and left until the next festival day, when executions normally take place. On that day, the man is brought to a "place of sacrifice" where the king and all the chiefs are assembled. The drums start beating and three executioners perform a traditional dance, singing about their duty to "kill him who would kill the innocent."

Cudjo's descriptions of his childhood often emphasize the tribe's justice system, which he characterizes as harsh but fair. Cudjo sees the laws of his homeland as guarantors of safety and prosperity, while the laws of America never protect him from harm and often expose him to discrimination and prejudice.

When Akia'on gives a signal, one of the executioners chops off the man's head. His body is buried, but his head is displayed alongside the heads of other criminals.

The image of the heads on display is harsh, but for Cudjo it represents a clear and logical system of justice governing behavior within the tribe.

The king only adjudicates major crimes like murder, leaving minor issues like adultery to the local chiefs. Cudjo says that "everything be done open here," meaning that every crime is addressed in the presence of the entire community.

The openness of deliberations in the tribe contrasts with the murky and unsatisfactory nature of American court proceedings in which Cudjo is involved when he sues the railroad.

For example, Cudjo remembers a case where one man has murdered another with a spear. The man is arrested and carried to the marketplace, while messengers summon Akia'on to come and deliberate on the case. In the meantime, the elders coat the dead man with a special paste so his body doesn't decompose before the king examines him. Everyone in the village keeps vigil over the dead man by night, eating and drinking.

Even though the king presides over murder trials like this, the entire community is involved, as their vigil clearly shows. In Cudjo's childhood, justice depends on the whole community and protects the whole community; by contrast, in America justice seems inaccessible to Cudjo and other African Americans.

When Akia'on finally arrives, the local chief kills some livestock in his honor and the trial begins. Both the dead man and the murderer are placed in the market, where everyone can see them. Asked why he killed the man, the murderer replies that "de man work juju against him" and caused the death of his child. The king reprimands him, saying that he should have come to the chiefs rather than handling matters himself. After all, there are laws to punish people who "work juju."

Akia'on emphasizes that there's no need or excuse for taking the law into one's own hands, because there are rules to govern every situation. By contrast, in America Cudjo will find that he and his family have no recourse to the law when a sheriff's deputy murders his son without punishment.

All day, the chiefs ask the murderer questions. Cudjo notes that, unlike in America, Africans can't use insanity as a defense in criminal trials. Eventually, the king pronounces that the man is guilty and sentences him to execution. Just as before, the drums begin to beat and the executioner dances around the murderer and touches the man's neck three times, whereupon other men grab the murderer and tie him face-to-face to the dead man.

In moments of comparison like this, Cudjo merely emphasizes the difference between African and American culture, rather than pronouncing judgment on either one. In this sense, he embodies the principle of cultural relativism that Hurston advances in her writing.

Cudjo explains that when the executioner touched the man, he declared him dead in the eyes of the community, even though he isn't physically dead yet. The chiefs leave the man tied directly to the corpse, while everyone goes about their business. Sometimes, if the culprit is very strong, he might be able to walk a short distance with the body, but more often he lies in the market square until he dies. If he asks anyone for water or help, the people don't listen to him, saying "How can a dead man want to be loose?" Usually, the murderer doesn't live long; Cudjo says grimly that "no man kin stand de smell in his nostrils of a rotten man."

Explicitly, Cudjo is saying that the murderer can't live long amid the stench of death. More figuratively, he's explaining that the policies of the tribe are so strict because no one wants to live among a morally "rotten" man. The community's deadly serious approach to justice contrasts to Cudjo's experience in America, where even after liberation he will have to live among men like the Meaher brothers, who have committed grave moral offenses without punishment.

CHAPTER 3

Another important episode in Cudjo's childhood is the death of his grandfather. Cudjo doesn't remember why his grandfather died, but he knows that he went to his compound for a funeral ceremony. In his grandfather's village, people are buried right away so that evil spirits can't harm them. Usually, a person is buried beneath the floor of his own house, so that his family can continue living with him even after his death. Throughout the night, the first wife sits near a symbolic coffin, receives guests, and cries.

This burial practice suggests the family's deep desire to stay together even after death. When members of his own family die in America, Cudjo assents to the prevailing custom of burying them in a churchyard, but he always feels that they will be lonely. Even though he adopts Christian practices, his values are still rooted in his upbringing.

When Cudjo arrives with his father, all the wives remove their veils to greet him. The first wife cries loudly, saying that "only yesterday he was worried about his wives and chillum and here he lies today in need of nothing." Cudjo's father weeps as well, and then they all sit around the coffin, receiving gifts from other visitors. The wives sing traditional songs in praise of the grandfather's personality and in commemoration of his death. They will be in mourning for two years, during one of which they cannot wash their face.

Cudjo relates—and Hurston records—the complex rituals surrounding grief and mourning. This conveys the sense that African customs are just as thoughtful and developed as those in Europe and America, and represent human feelings that are just as deep—pushing back against arguments that African culture is "primitive" and its people undeveloped.

Hurston notes that Cudjo now has "that remote look in his eyes," and she knows that he's done talking for the day. She says politely that she will leave him alone for a while, and Cudjo tells her to come back next week, after he's cut the grass in his garden. Before she leaves, he gives her some peaches from his tree.

Hurston often ends a chapter by remarking that Cudjo seems emotionally distant from her. Storytelling can increase interpersonal understanding, but it also emphasizes the differences in personal experience.

CHAPTER 4

Hurston stays away for a week, worrying the whole time that Cudjo won't see her again. In order to make her visits more appealing, she brings two hams and a watermelon when she next comes to his house. Before they begin the interview, they share part of the watermelon and Cudjo shows her around the Old Landmark Baptist Church, where he works as the sexton.

Describing the gifts that she brings in order to induce Cudjo to talk to her, Hurston makes clear that she's on an academic assignment—the interviews are not a spontaneous conversation between friends. In moments like this, she emphasizes the inherent artificiality in the process of gathering oral histories.

Cudjo begins to explain more about his own family. His father, who was not wealthy, had three wives. The second of the wives is Cudjo's mother. Cudjo says modestly that he won't ever pretend he's the son of the first wife. Cudjo is his mother's second out of six children, but his father has twelve additional children by his other wives.

Again, Cudjo conceives of himself primarily in relation to his siblings, as well as through his mother's position among the other wives in his family.

Hurston asks Cudjo if any women are infertile, but Cudjo says if anyone has trouble conceiving, they visit an elder who prescribes them a special tea, after which they are able to get pregnant. This works in almost all cases.

While Cudjo's recollection of the women's childbearing abilities may not seem entirely realistic, it conveys the sense that family is of paramount importance to everyone in the tribe.

Cudjo spends his time in the compound, playing with all the other children. They compete in running and wrestling, and they hunt for coconuts and bananas. When their mothers want them to calm down, they call them into the house and tell them stories about the animals, who used to talk like people. Hurston expresses interest in these stories, but Cudjo says he will tell them another time.

Although it often seems that Cudjo is rambling, in fact he decides when to digress and when to keep to his point. Moments like this show the reader how naturally gifted he is at crafting stories, even when his narrative doesn't align neatly with established literary forms.

When Cudjo is a teenager, the chief declares that all the boys over fourteen should assemble before him. Cudjo is very excited because he wants to joint he army. However, boys like him have to undergo a lot of training before this happens. He learns how to walk silently, track animals, hunt, use a bow and arrow, and make a campsite. Cudjo is glad that he's becoming a man, like his older brothers.

Within his family and his tribe, Cudjo has a clear sense of his trajectory—like his older brothers, he will take satisfaction in becoming a soldier and an adult man. In America, no such upward trajectory towards a respected status in the community is evident to him.

Cudjo also learns to sing war drums, chanting with the other boys that "if we are crossed we shall tear down the nation who defies us." However, Cudjo notes that Akia'on doesn't actually want to start a war. He wants his army to be strong so that no one else attacks them. For four or five years, Cudjo continues his training as a soldier, becoming strong and competent.

Cudjo's description of Akia'on's peaceful tendencies contrasts with the bloodthirstiness he sees in the Dahoman king's slave raids; this creates the sense that Dahomey is contravening the accepted rules governing behavior between tribes.

Hurston asks Cudjo about the practice of juju, which he's mentioned before. Seeming "reluctant," Cudjo says he doesn't know anything about this—it's only grown men and elders who know about juju, and he was taken away at the age of nineteen, before he was fully initiated into the culture as a man.

Hurston's question reminds Cudjo that he never actually lived out his life in the tribe as he hoped, which is probably why he's reluctant to address it.

Cudjo continues that one day, in the market place, he notices a pretty girl and follows her a while without speaking, as is the local custom. An older man observes this and visits Cudjo's father, saying that he's growing up and it's time to have a banquet to celebrate his transition to manhood. Cudjo visits the initiation house where the men play special instruments the women are not allowed to hear (it's thought that if they do, they will die). Cudjo is allowed to share the ceremonial meal, but he has to stay silent and listen to show respect to his elders. He's reminded that "all men are still fathers to you." He's given a peacock feather to wear, which symbolizes his initiation into the world of adult men.

At this point, Cudjo's life is characterized by opportunity and promise. He knows that he will become accepted among the men and that he'll soon start a family with a wife. This sense of security in the future contrasts starkly with life in America, where Cudjo is always subject to instability and curtailed opportunities. Cudjo's childhood is far more reminiscent of the "American Dream" of opportunity and upward mobility than his life as a slave or free man in Alabama.

CHAPTER 5

Cudjo is very happy at this stage of his life and looking forward to being invited to the men's councils. He sees a girl whom he would like to marry one day, and his parents say that they will ask for her when he is a little older.

For Cudjo, marriage is another moment of continuity with his family, since his parents will be so involved in his choice.

One day, three men from the neighboring kingdom of Dahomey arrive in the market, asking to talk to Akia'on. They warn the king how strong and powerful Dahomey is and demand that the king pay half his crops in tribute. The king says that the crops belong to his people and he refuses to give them. He points out that the king of Dahomey has plenty of land, which he would have time to cultivate if he wasn't always sending his soldiers to hunt for slaves.

Again, Akia'on shows that the Dahoman king's slave-trading practices are not an extension of but a break with African traditions. The unnatural nature of his practices is shown through the abandonment of the land. Throughout the next chapters, Cudjo will focus on the role of tribes like Dahomey, who cooperate with slave traders, in destroying his community and causing his enslavement.

Cudjo says that a traitor from his kingdom, who was previously banished for unrelated crimes, goes to Dahomey and tells the king what tactics he should use to attack Cudjo's village. The Dahoman army marches all night and arrives at the village while everyone is sleeping.

Despite the tribe's complex system of justice, it is essentially vulnerable before the brute force mustered by the Dahomans.

The Dahoman army breaks down the enormous gates surrounding the village. Leaping up, Cudjo sees soldiers holding French guns swarming the compound. There are female soldiers, as well, who catch people and decapitate them with large knives. Cudjo sees old people killed in front of their houses while trying to run away. Some soldiers cut off villagers' jawbones before they are even dead.

For the last chapters, Cudjo has been extolling the privileged position of elders in the community, and his own hope to attain such a position. Seeing old people so brutally treated shows the end of such possibilities for Cudjo and the demise of these communal values generally.

Cudjo runs from gate to gate, but finds that each is surrounded by enemy soldiers. At the last one, the Dahoman soldiers grab him and tie up his wrists. He pleads with them to let him go and find his mother, but they act as if they can't hear.

Pretending they can't understand him, the Dahomans are creating a stark emotional distance between themselves and their captives. In this sense, they are aligned with slave traders more than fellow Africans.

When the soldiers find Akia'on, they take him to the king of Dahomey, who is waiting in the bush outside the village. Akia'on asks why the Dahomans don't fight him in the daytime, "lak men." The King of Dahomey announces his intention to parade Akia'on around his own city as a captive, but Akia'on says that he would rather die a king on his own territory than be a slave. The King of Dahomey gives a signal and a soldier beheads Akia'on.

Here, Akia'on's strong sense of honor and tradition contrasts with the King of Dahomey's treacherous tactics and abandonment of tribal solidarity in favor of material riches. For Cudjo, the king's death marks the end of his tranquil and protected existence within his tribe.

Seeing the king dead, Cudjo tries to run away, but the soldiers catch him and tie him in a line with the other young villagers. He cries and calls out for his mother; he doesn't know where she is, and he doesn't see any of his family among the captives. All day he and the other captives march through the bush, while the king of Dahomey is carried in a hammock. The soldiers are carrying the heads of people they killed in battle, to be displayed at home as trophies.

It's terrible to know that Cudjo will never learn anything about the fates of his family members. Although Cudjo has rarely dwelt specifically on his mother, his longing for her and the uncertainty of her fate represent the total collapse of family that enslavement entails and explains the inability to gain closure after such a trauma.

The march continues for a few days. Every time they approach a village, it displays a white flag, meaning that the leaders will give food and gifts to the Dahomans in order to stave off attack. By this time, the severed heads are beginning to rot and smell. Cudjo is anguished to see the bodies of people he knows treated this way. Eventually, the march halts several days so that the soldiers can smoke the heads and preserve them.

Although Cudjo has seen brutal things before—such as the heads of criminals mounted on sticks—this is especially appalling to him because it contravenes norms of behavior, representing not a system of justice but the abandonment of any such systems.

Cudjo stops talking, and Hurston says it feels that he's no longer with her but "squatting about that fire in Dahomey." To her, his face looks like "a horror mask" and it seems as if his anguish has rendered him unable to talk. She leaves quietly.

Here, it seems that storytelling is almost able to recreate the past; describing Cudjo's total absorption in this trauma, Hurston signals the ability of oral histories to contribute greatly to the body of historical knowledge.

CHAPTER 6

The next Saturday, Hurston visits Cudjo but he doesn't have time to talk to her, saying that he has to clean the church before Sunday. Hurston helps him with some chores and returns on Monday, after the Sabbath services are over.

Storytelling is more of a natural and unhurried process for Cudjo than for Hurston. He won't allow her to conduct interviews on any kind of fixed schedule, which emphasizes the genuine and authentic aspects of his endeavor.

On Monday, Hurston returns. She tells him about "the nice white lady in New York who was interested in him," and Cudjo asks her to write the woman a letter thanking her on his behalf. Cudjo says that if it interests this woman, he will tell Hurston more about his time in captivity.

Hurston's project was being funded by a benefactor interested in African American history, and this passage is a transparent attempt to flatter her. Hurston is truly committed to the project, but moments like this show the logistical and financial concerns to which she must pay attention as well.

When they arrive at Dahomey, Cudjo sees the king's house; it looks as if it is made of bones. People come out to meet the raiding party carrying white skulls on sticks, and the soldiers march in with their new heads on sticks. The captives are placed in the barracoon, or stockade, without much to eat.

Cudjo's first entrance into the barracoon is his first real moment of enslavement. The previous chapters marked the end of his childhood, while this moment shows the end of his freedom.

After a few days, the captives are marched to Wydah, a slave port on the coast. They're kept in another barracoon for three weeks; they can see **ships** in the ocean, but the view is obstructed by other buildings. Here, Cudjo sees white men for the first time; in his village, he has only ever heard legends of such people. The captives also see other slaves in neighboring barracoons. They try to communicate with them, but each nation has its own language.

The inability to communicate with other slaves shows the differences among African tribes. Hurston usually emphasizes such differences in order to combat American stereotypes that all Africans are the same, but here it's clear that tribal differences also prevent people from coming together to combat the slave trade.

Cudjo says that he and the other villagers are "not so sad now." Because they are young, they play games and take turns climbing the fence of the barracoon to peer outside. After three weeks, a white man comes into the barracoon and inspects each captive carefully. He selects 130 captives, choosing an equal number of men and women. After he leaves, the Dahomans bring them a large meal, saying that they are going to be taken away soon. Everyone cries, because they are full of grief for their lost homes and don't want to be separated.

The image of the young people playing in the stockade is compelling and tragic—it reminds the reader that at this point Cudjo has no idea of the enormous system in which he's trapped. It also emphasizes the extreme youth of the villagers who are going to suffer so much in America, and will have to mature quickly in order to overcome the obstacles they will face.

The Dahomans return to tie the selected captives in lines and lead them to the beach. The white slave trader (Captain Foster) is carried to the **ship** in a hammock and the captives follow, wading in the water. Men from the Kroo tribe (a nation that works as servants to the Dahomans) load the captives into small boats. In the confusion, Cudjo is almost left on the shore, but he sees his friend on the boat and doesn't want to be separated, so he shouts until the Kroo men take him too.

In this passage, Cudjo almost escapes transport to the Americas but seems to board the ship from his own volition. Especially since his family is now gone, the importance of staying close to the people he knows is paramount to him, even though it ends any hope of staying in Africa.

When they reach the **ships**, the Kroos rob them of their clothes. Cudjo says he is ashamed, because he doesn't want to arrive wherever he is going as a "naked savage." He says that when he gets to America, the people there assume that Africans don't wear any clothes.

This passage shows how slavery both depends on and creates racist stereotypes. Because of the inhumane treatment to which captives are subject before and during the Middle Passage, Americans assume that they are "savages" and thus acceptable to enslave.

Onboard the **ship**, the crew makes everyone lie down in the dark hold. Everyone stays there for thirteen days, with little food and water. On the thirteenth day, the captives are brought onto the deck, but they are so weakened that they can't walk unaided. The crew walks each person around the deck until they recover the use of their limbs. In every direction, all Cudjo can see is water. He has no idea where he is going.

The Middle Passage symbolizes the inherent brutality of slavery—shown here in the captives' inability to walk after so much confinement. It also emphasizes the emotional and cultural dislocation that slavery causes; Cudjo expresses this idea here by saying he has no sense of place or direction during the journey.

Cudjo suffers greatly onboard the *Clotilda*. He's very scared by the constant noise and motion of the **ship**, which pitches up and down even when the water is calm. The journey lasts for seventy days, until the water changes color and they approach some islands. No one has died on the journey, and Cudjo says that Captain Foster is "a good man" who doesn't abuse anyone.

Even though his experience of the Middle Passage is the reason for his interview, Cudjo devotes only a few passages to describing it. For him, the worst experiences are the most difficult to discuss; his brevity expresses the ultimate inability of storytelling to encapsulate or provide closure for traumatic memories.

For the next day, everyone has to stay in the hold and be quiet, so that the government doesn't discover the **ship** is carrying slaves. At night, the ship moves again; Cudjo later learns that it is towed up the river to the island where the Meahers are waiting. When the slaves disembark, they are given some clothes and taken further up the river, where they hide in the swamp. By the time they arrive at Burns Meaher's plantation, they have been bitten badly by the swarming mosquitos.

According to its ideology, America promise a fresh start and new opportunity to each arrival, but Cudjo enters the country as illegal contraband. For him, this moment marks the end of opportunity and while it's the beginning of a new phase of his life, it's certainly not a positive one.

At the plantation, the slaves are divided up into small groups. After losing their home and enduring the **Middle Passage**, they are distraught to be separated once again. Everyone cries and sings a traditional song of mourning. Cudjo doesn't know if he can withstand this grief; when he thinks about his mother, he feels he might die.

Cudjo's invocation of his mother and feelings of insuperable grief suggest that he sees separation from his countrymen as worse than the physical suffering of the Middle Passage. Even in this moment of trauma, the villagers affirm their dignity and their culture by singing the traditional song.

Cudjo stops speaking and tells Hurston he's tired of talking, and that she has to go home. He spends so much time talking to her, he's been neglecting his garden. He says he'll send his grandson to let her know when she can come again.

While telling his story is an opportunity for Cudjo to reflect on and process his life, at times the task is strenuous and exhausting. His remarks now suggest that oral history allows both tellers and listeners to engage with the emotional impact of historical events.

CHAPTER 7

Cudjo is part of the group of slaves claimed by Jim Meaher. He travels to Meaher's plantation, where he and the others live under Meaher's house, which is constructed on stilts. They are given some blankets, but it's still too cold.

The fact that Cudjo and the others don't even have an adequate shelter in which to live demonstrates the dehumanizing conditions of slavery.

Now the slaves have to learn their new tasks and the new ways of farming; for example, they've never seen livestock used with plows. The work is grueling, and Burns and Tim Meaher are often cruel to their slaves, forcing them to work especially long hours under violent overseers. Cudjo has never worked this hard, but he says "we doan grieve 'bout dat. We cry 'cause we slave."

For Cudjo, the physical demands of slavery are less upsetting than the moral and emotional implications. Here, he's characterizing slavery as unnatural and antithetical to his being, pushing back against contemporary arguments that it was normal and acceptable to enslave Africans.

At night, the villagers mourn their lost freedom and their country. Everyone here seems strange, and it's hard to even talk to the other slaves because they don't speak English. Sometimes the slaves born in America make fun of them.

This is the first taste of the divisions between people born in Africa, like Cudjo, and black people who have lived in America their entire lives. Cudjo will experience prejudice from these black communities as well as white Americans.

Jim Meaher is kinder towards his slaves than his brothers. For example, he sees that Cudjo's shoes are in pieces and gets him another pair. Cudjo has to work hard, but not as much as if he were on one of the other plantations.

Cudjo's lenient attitude towards Jim Meaher is somewhat troubling, given that this man is responsible for his captivity. However, it demonstrates his determination to acknowledge the humanity in everyone—an attribute that sets him apart from the men who enslave him.

Cudjo suddenly exclaims out loud, saying he's so thankful that he's free now. The slaves never have enough clothes and bedding, and even the women have to work hard in the field. Cudjo himself usually works on Jim Meaher's boat, which carries freight and lumber from Mobile to Montgomery. Every time the boat stops he has to transport things on and off, and he barely gets any sleep because the boat leaks and they have to pump water out of it.

The American Dream promises opportunity and social mobility to everyone who is willing to work hard. Here, Cudjo and the others are compelled to do grueling work, but they don't benefit at all. Moments like this imply that the tenets of the American Dream only apply to specific demographics.

Every time the boat stops, the overseer stands at the gangplank with his whip and yells at the slaves to move faster, lashing them with the whip if he thinks they are working too slowly or haven't taken a large enough load. Cudjo woefully exclaims, "Oh, Lor'," remembering that he endured this life for five and a half years. He still remembers all the landings on the boat's route, and he recites them all for Hurston. Even though he hasn't been to most of these places since 1865, he thinks he will never forget.

In the context of this storytelling project, Cudjo's memory usually emerges as an asset, helping him preserve precious memories from his youth. Here, however, it seems as if he would rather forget about the cruelties of enslavement, but is unable to put it behind him. His ability to remember thus prolongs his trauma.

The Civil War begins (in 1861) but the slaves don't know what is happening at first; all they know is that "de white folks runnee up and down." Eventually they hear rumors that people in the North are fighting to free them, and Cudjo becomes hopeful even though he's not completely sure that this is the purpose of the war.

Here, Cudjo emphasizes his feelings of distance from even the most important events of American history. Throughout his life, his sense of exclusion and racism is such that he can't feel truly invested in the American narrative.


Union soldiers reach Fort Morgan in the Mobile Bay and establish a blockade, so little coffee or foodstuffs reach the village. To keep his slaves from starving, Jim Meaher allows them to kill some of his hogs, saying that "de hogs dey his and we his, and he doan wantee no dead folks."

While Cudjo portrays this as evidence of Jim Meaher's relatively generous character, praising him for keeping his slaves from starving merely shows how appallingly low the standard of conduct for slave owners is.

On Sundays, the slaves don't have to work, so they dance the traditional dances of their homelands. The American slaves laugh at them, saying that they are "savage." However, a black preacher and ex-slave called Free George visits the plantation and talks to the villagers, explaining the Christian importance of Sunday and telling them they should observe the Sabbath. After this, the villagers stop dancing on Sundays.

While Cudjo respects Free George and soon becomes a Christian himself, the prevalence of Anglo-American religion over the preservation of African culture is a sad moment. In his own later life, Cudjo proves adept at practicing Christianity without sacrificing the traditions of his native land.

Cudjo describes the moment he's officially freed, on April 12th, 1865. He's working on the boat as usual when Union soldiers approach and tell the slaves they can't stay on the boat anymore, saying "you doan b'long to nobody no mo'." They ask the soldiers where they should go, but the soldiers just tell them to go wherever they want to.

Even though the Union soldiers have liberated the slaves, they show little concern and do little to create a path forward for these traumatized and impoverished people. This moment implies although slavery took place primarily in the South, the North is also deeply implicated in this tragedy and its aftermath.

The slaves don't have anything in which to carry their belongings, so they pack small bundles. Still, they have to sleep in the slave quarters until they figure out where to go and what to do. These questions don't bother Cudjo; he's just happy to be free again.

While Cudjo says he doesn't care about his lack of material resources given his freedom, he will eventually learn that the official end of enslavement isn't enough to create stability and security for him and his family.


CHAPTER 8

In celebration, the villagers make a drum and perform songs from their homeland. All of the villagers brought over on the **Clotilda** gather from the various plantations to be together. They don't want to stay with the people that used to own them, but they don't know where to go. Some of the villagers have gotten married and had children. Everyone wants to build houses and create a safe village, but they can't do so without any land.

For Cudjo, the Middle Passage represents the end of his life within his family and tribe. However, as the villagers reunite, their shared trauma on the Clotilda cements their bonds and inspires them to create a community to replace the one they originally lost.


The villagers decide to work and save up money to buy passage back to Africa. The men tell the women not to spend their money on "fine clothes," and the women reply that the men had better not do so either. However, no matter how hard they work it seems impossible to get enough money for the expensive journey.

It's cruel and ironic that while the Meaher brothers brought human cargo from Africa without much trouble, it's impossible for Cudjo to repeat the journey. Right now, America is not so much a destination as a trap.

The villagers must think about what to do, and they decide to appoint someone as the ruler, so that they can deliberate communally as they once did in Africa. They appoint Gumpa as leader because he is a relative of the king of Dahomey and a nobleman in their native land. No one resents his Dahoman heritage, because he was sold into slavery just like everyone else.

Even though the Dahomans attempted to elevate themselves over other tribes by capturing and trading slaves, they've only achieved this high status within West Africa; in America, a Dahoman nobleman is as vulnerable as any other black person. This passage juxtaposes the power of Dahomey over neighboring tribes with their own exploitation by white slave traders.

After deliberating, the villagers decide that it's only fair for the Meahers to give them some land for their village, after all the time they've worked without pay. The villagers appoint Cudjo to approach the brothers, because he "always talkee good."

The villagers' selection of Cudjo to speak for them suggests that he's always been known for his ability to craft a compelling narrative, and emphasizes the role of storytelling in advocating for a community's rights.

At this time, Cudjo is working in a mill operated by Tim Meaher, and one day the man sits down next to a tree Cudjo is chopping. Cudjo knows now is the time to speak up for his countrymen, and he feels the importance of his task so much that he almost cries. Tim Meaher asks why he looks so sad, and Cudjo says that "I grieve for my home." Meaher counters that he has "a good home" now, but Cudjo says even if he owned the entire river, the railroad, and all the land around, he wouldn't want it because it's not his native land. He says that since the Meahers brought them to America as slaves, he should give them a piece of land where they can build their homes.

Here, Cudjo is saying that even if he fulfilled the American Dream by attaining land and prosperity, he would rather be in Africa; he both emphasizes the lack of opportunity available to him in America and questions the fundamental validity of the idea of America as a uniquely desirable place to live. Cudjo's ideas of fairness and justice derive from the clear laws of his tribe, but the next passage will show that such ideals are not extended to African Americans.


Jumping up, Tim Meaher explodes, calling Cudjo a "fool" and says that he's not going to "give you property on top of property." He says that he took good care of his slaves, and he doesn't owe them anything now that they've been taken away from him.

Even though Cudjo is no longer technically a slave, Meaher makes clear that he still considers him "property" and not deserving of treatment accorded to an equal. Episodes like this emphasize the long legacy of slavery on African Americans.

Cudjo reports Meaher's words to Gumpa and the others. They decide that now they must pool their money to buy land. Eventually, they purchase a piece of land from the Meahers, who "doan take off one five cent from de price for us."

Cudjo starkly communicates the horrible irony of paying money to people who once enslaved him; rather than providing new opportunity, life in American forces Cudjo to cooperate with his exploiters.

Gumpa is named as the leader of the town, and two other men are appointed as judges. The villagers decide on certain rules to govern themselves, and if anyone breaks the rules the judges issue a reprimand. For example, if a man is often drunk the others speak to him, and if he doesn't break the habit they whip him.

To combat the lack of legal protection and equality they experience in America, Cudjo and the others create laws based on the systems with which they grew up. Here, African values are aligned with fairness while American law connotes injustice.



Everyone helps to build each others' houses on the land. At first, Cudjo doesn't build one for himself, because he doesn't have a wife. They name the village Africatown. Even though they know they'll never go back to Africa, they have decided to "make de Affica where dey fetch us."

Cudjo makes an equivalence between a home and a wife, showing that to him the material security of a house is nothing without the emotional security of a family.

Much of the surrounding black community ostracizes the residents of Africatown, calling them "ig'nant savage." However, Free George visits the village often, encouraging to adopt Christianity. The villagers don't want to worship with the other people that make fun of them, so they build their own church, which is still standing today. Concluding his story thus, Cudjo sends Hurston away for the day.

The hostility of the surrounding black communities is the most troubling to Cudjo, since it comes from people who share his heritage. Their dismissal of Africatown residents as "savages" shows how much they have internalized racism and constructs of white cultural supremacy.


CHAPTER 9

The next day, Hurston drives Cudjo to the bay to eat crabs. On the way, he begins to talk about his marriage. After the founding of Africatown, he begins to notice a woman "from cross de water," originally named Abila but now called Seely. He's not married yet, and almost everyone else in the town has a family.

Here, Hurston collapses the distance between the everyday activity she and Cudjo are performing and his memories about Seely. In this sense, she's suggesting how important oral history is to living and understanding one's present-day life.

Cudjo approaches Seely and says that he wants to marry her because "I ain't got nobody." Seely asks him if he'll be able to take care of her, and he says that he will treat her well and not beat her. Having agreed upon the matter privately, they begin to live together and "do all we kin to make happiness 'tween ourselves," without any kind of wedding.

Cudjo and Seely's discussion is straightforward and touching. It's clear that they share the same values and the same yearning to center themselves within a strong family network. It's important to realize that their marital bond is independent of the formalities imposed by American culture.


Sometime afterward, Cudjo and Seely convert to Christianity officially. In the church, they are told that it's not "right" to live together without an official marriage and license. Cudjo and Seely have a formal wedding, but Cudjo says he doesn't "love my wife no mo' wid de license than I love her befo' de license…I love her all de time."

Even though Cudjo and Seely accept that they must do the "right" thing, Cudjo still holds onto the value of African cultures by saying that the wedding license is irrelevant to his actual feelings about his wife.


Cudjo and Seely have six children, five sons and one daughter. They are very happy during this time, but it makes Cudjo sad to think about it now, because he's very lonely. They give each child an English name for common use and an African name just "like we was in de Afficky soil." Cudjo also adopts a surname at this time, according to American tradition. He wants to use his father's name, O-lo-loo-ay, but it's "too crooked" for America so he goes by Cudjo Lewis. Cudjo's children are named Aleck, Jimmy, Poe-lee, David, Cudjo Jr., and Seely Jr.

Cudjo's chosen surname, an Americanized version of his father's name, reflects his desire to assimilate into the culture around him while staying faithful to his African roots. He bequeaths this desire to his children by making sure they have African names as well. However, while his faithfulness to African culture will give him moral and emotional strength it will actually make his children vulnerable to discrimination.


As the children grow up, American-born residents of surrounding town make fun of them, telling them that "de Afficky people dey kill folks and eatee the meat." They say that they children are "kin to monkey." Because of this, the boys often get into fights, often beating other men. People visit the house and tell Cudjo that his boys are trouble and might one day kill someone. Cudjo responds that, just like rattlesnakes in the woods, his sons only harm people who antagonize them.

Cudjo's children seem to suffer a particularly intense form of racism, because they are not only black but also deeply rooted in African culture. When it comes from fellow black people, this racism is especially disturbing to Cudjo. It's also important to note that it's exactly this kind of pernicious stereotype that Hurston combats through rigorous and respectful descriptions of actual African customs.

However, Cudjo's explanations don't change the hostility towards his sons. People tell him that his boys "ain no Christian" and that they are savages. It seems that because people perceive his family as savages, they think "we ain' gottee no feelings to git hurtee." The residents of Africatown do everything possible to raise their children well. They build a school house so that their children won't be ignorant.

Even though Cudjo does make a good faith effort to conform to American cultural expectations, his children are excluded from and actively dehumanized by mainstream society. Although they have worked hard, America's opportunity and equality remains inaccessible to them.

Even though Cudjo loves his children deeply and does everything possible to help them, as a teenager Cudjo's daughter Seely gets sick with a fever. Despite receiving medical attention, she dies. Cudjo's wife Seely is distraught, and although Cudjo tries to comfort her, he too is overwhelmed with grief. This is the first time that "death find where my door is" in America, but he knows that death "come in de **ship** wid us" from Africa.

This is one of the only times that Cudjo mentions the Clotilda or the Middle Passage after he arrives in America. It shows that, for him, the Middle Passage remains associated with life's most traumatic experiences, specifically the loss of treasured family members.

According to Christian tradition, young Seely has a funeral in the church and is buried in a coffin. Everyone gathers and sings an American hymn. Although Cudjo knows the words "wid my mouth," in his heart he is singing a traditional mourning song from his homeland. He feels that his daughter must be very lonely in the churchyard, instead of at home.

Although Cudjo has adopted the practices of Christianity, he's still more compelled by the funeral customs of his homeland. His mournful nostalgia for Africa now suggests the thought that Seely could have had a better life there.

Nine years later, a deputy sheriff kills Cudjo Jr. Cudjo is suspicious that this man isn't even a law enforcement officer, because he doesn't arrest his son "like a man" but hides in a butcher wagon in order to shoot young Cudjo in the town. Cudjo takes a bullet in the throat, and his parents rush him home and lay him in the bed. Cudjo hates to see his son struggling for breath, and wishes he could die in his place. Seely stands by the bed, crying and encouraging her son not go give up hope, but after two days Cudjo dies.

This part of the narrative touches, although briefly and vaguely, on the history of troubled interactions between African Americans and law enforcement. For Cudjo, this tragic episode is another indication that institutions put in place to protect Americans not only do not serve him, but actively malign his family.

The man who killed young Cudjo jr. is now the pastor of a church in Plateau. Cudjo tries to forgive him, but he feels that, as a Christian, the man should come to him and beg his forgiveness. He mourns that his "po' Affican boy [...] doan never see Afficky soil."

Here, Cudjo highlights the paradox implicit in the fact that while his son has never enjoyed life in Africa, he's still discriminated against and eventually killed because he is an "Affican boy."

CHAPTER 10

Cudjo can't take any action against the man who kills his son, both because the man is a deputy sheriff and because he has recently been involved in a railroad accident.

Although this incident seems unrelated, it's actually connected to the death of young Cudjo in that it describes another unjust interaction with the law.

On the morning of the accident, Cudjo decides to plant beans in his garden. He asks Seely to come and help him, instructing her to drop the seeds while he covers them with dirt. After some time, she says that he doesn't actually need her to help, he just wants her company. He acknowledges that she's right.

This small, seemingly unrelated incident highlights the lasting bonds of love and respect between Cudjo and Seely—one of the few sources of happiness in a life usually marked by suffering.

They don't have enough seeds at home, so Cudjo decides to take his horse into Mobile to buy more. He asks Seely for some money and she gives him three dollars, more than he needs. He asks why she's given so much, and she tells him to spend what's necessary and bring home the rest. She knows he's not going to do anything bad with the money.

Cudjo and Seely's relationship is based on deep trust, as her remark about the money shows. In this sense, it's antithetical to the family's relationship with the outside world, which is generally based in hostility and fear.

After completing the errand, Cudjo turns toward home. However, just as he's crossing the railroad track a train appears and hits his buggy. Cudjo is thrown onto the ground. Some bystanders take him to the doctor, and a white woman helps him get home and visits him later. She's outraged by the accident and says the railroad has no right to rush through the town without ringing a bell or sounding a whistle. She visits the railroad company, but officials dismiss her complaints.

The strange woman's kindness is a welcome contrast to the racism Cudjo usually experiences outside the Africatown community. At the same time, her belief that the railroad company must and will answer for its actions contrasts with Cudjo's experience that in America, people can and do harm him without consequence.

The woman suggests Cudjo hire a lawyer and sue the company. Cudjo visits a lawyer named Clarke in Mobile, telling him that if he sues the railroad on his behalf they can split the settlement. The lawyer mounts a lawsuit, arguing that Cudjo is crippled and unable to work, and that the railroad should pay him $5,000. Cudjo himself has to testify in court and display his scars.

Here, it seems that Cudjo will actually be able to get justice. Although a settlement from the railroad company is small compensation for the many wrongs he has suffered, it would signal that the protections of American law extend to him, too.

After testifying, Cudjo is exhausted, so he goes to the market, planning to buy some meat and go home to Seely. His son David, who has stayed in the courthouse, comes to find him and announces that the railroad has given him $650. He can go to the lawyer's office the next day and collect the money.

Cudjo's eagerness to get away from the proceedings shows his lack of faith in the legal system, and preference to insulate himself within his family. Instead, it's his sons like David who are more concerned with achieving formal justice.

Cudjo sends David to collect the money, but Clarke tells him he doesn't have it yet. For weeks Cudjo keeps asking the lawyer for his money, but he keeps stalling. That year an epidemic of yellow fever strikes Mobile, and the lawyer flees from the city with his family; however, he gets sick and dies on the way.

While the law seems to be on Cudjo's side this time, he's still vulnerable to exploitation by his unscrupulous lawyer. This outcome is very far from the strange woman's conception of an orderly and fair system of justice.


Cudjo never finds out where his settlement money went. He's also still astonished and grateful that he wasn't killed in the train crash. Now that he can no longer do physical labor, the people of Africatown appoint him as the church sexton.

Cudjo's response to the failure of his lawsuit is to root himself even deeper in the community. Africatown's sense of solidarity and faithfulness to African norms helps its residents maintain strength in the face of consistent racism from the outside world.

CHAPTER 11

At the bay, some friends of Cudjo's catch many crabs, which they all share. On the way home, Hurston buys some melons and leaves them with Cudjo. He tells her to come back the next day and share the remaining crabs. He likes her company.

Exchanges like this show that Hurston and Cudjo are starting to enjoy a genuine friendship, instead of the formal relationship between an interviewer and her subject.

The next day, Cudjo tells her about the fates of his other children. One Easter Sunday, Cudjo and his family are preparing for a big dinner. David asks Seely for some food, but his mother says he's not getting anything to eat before his father. David urges Cudjo to finish chopping the wood so that they can all have dinner. After eating dinner, David bathes and starts to put on his clean clothes. Cudjo scolds him for wearing an undershirt without anything on top, saying that he shouldn't appear like that in front of his mother. David laughs good-naturedly. He says that he will go into Mobile and collect the family's laundry so that he will have clean clothes.

Cudjo foregrounds the tragedy that is about to occur in this scene of quotidian family affairs. Even though he's lost two children, the family is still grounded in shared rules, like the importance of eating together and wearing clean clothes; although they suffer discrimination, they're able to maintain a dignified and fulfilling way of life. Their happiness and tranquility now makes the pointlessness of the death that's about to occur even more stark and troubling.


David leaves, and after a while Cudjo hears some people approaching the house. He assumes that David has brought a friend home, but in fact it's two other men who tell Cudjo that David is dead in Plateau. In shock, Cudjo argues that David is in Mobile, not Plateau; the men tell him that the railroad has killed him in Plateau.

Cudjo is usually stoic in the face of tragedy, but here he's so unable to cope with the loss of his son that he won't even acknowledge the fact.


Cudjo rushes into the town, hoping that in fact it's not David who has been killed. At the railroad track, he sees a man's body without a head. He refuses to believe that it's David and says that "dis none of my son." However, some other men bring the head from the other side of the train track, but he still won't acknowledge the terrible reality.

In retelling this event, Cudjo speaks as if he still believes his son is alive. In this sense, storytelling forces Cudjo to live through the painful illusions of the past another time.

As the sexton of the church, Cudjo usually tolls the bell for the dead, but he won't do so now or let anyone else. The men convey the body to Cudjo's house on a window shutter; Cudjo hopes that David will come home from Mobile soon "so de people stop sayin' dat my son on the shutter." When they arrive at the house, Seely screams and faints. Cudjo looks at the head again and finally realizes that this is David. He opens his son's shirt and feels his wounds. Then he tells the men to toll the bell.

Just as with his daughter Seely's death, funeral customs are extremely important to Cudjo. However, while they signal the finality of his son's death here, they don't provide any kind of emotional comfort.

Seely falls to the floor weeping and screaming; Cudjo is so overwhelmed that he runs into the forest. Some men who had crossed the ocean on the **Clotilda** seek him out and bring him home, telling him that Seely has calmed down.

It's implicit here that the shared experience of suffering on the Clotilda equips the men to comfort each other in the midst of tragedies in America.

Another man arranges David's body so that it's not obvious he's been decapitated. The next day, all the townspeople come to the house for a viewing, and David is buried. Cudjo says that it's as if "all de family hurry to leave and go sleep on de hill," or the graveyard.

Just as Cudjo often expresses a wish to be back in Africa, he feels that his children don't want to live in America either. This contributes to the sense that America is a hostile environment for his family.

Poe-lee is particularly upset by his brother David's death. He wants Cudjo to sue the railroad company again, but Cudjo points out that it didn't work before and that he doesn't "know de white folks law" well enough to try again. Poe-lee is outraged by the misfortunes that have overcome the family and the inability to achieve any justice. He starts to talk often of Africa, saying that things must be better than in America.

While Cudjo usually resigns himself to the injustices that befall him, Poe-Lee wants to take action. However, there are no institutions in place to help him and all he can do is daydream. Here, his parents' stories are a powerful agent of his restlessness and refusal to accept his dismal fate as a black man in Alabama.

Cudjo and Seely try to talk to Poe-lee and persuade him to be satisfied with his life, but to no avail. He's been ostracized and bullied by African Americans as a child, and now that he's an adult his brother is dead and his father is crippled. Cudjo says that Poe-lee "doan laugh no mo'." After some time, he goes out fishing one day and never returns. Cudjo believes he has run away for good.

While Cudjo and Seely have generally been able to find fulfillment within their family, this doesn't work well for Poe-lee, who is more concerned with the larger pattern of racism than trying to mitigate its effects on those around him.

After telling about this, Cudjo pauses for a long time and cries a little before resuming his narrative. He says that he can't help it, because he misses his sons so much. He still wonders if Poe-lee has been killed. So many people hate Cudjo's sons because "de doan let nobody 'buse dem lak dey dogs." He hopes that Poe-lee has somehow made it to Africa, but he will never know.

It's important that best future Cudjo can imagine for his son is a return to Africa. This reinforces his sense that it's impossible for him and his family to live a good life in America.

Cudjo tries to be especially kind to Seely, who is distraught by the loss of her children. Still, she's taken to crying all the time. Only one son, Jimmy, lives at home now; Cudjo's other remaining son, Aleck, has gotten married and built a house next door.

Usually, Cudjo talks about feelings he and Seely share, but here he seems to view his wife from a distance. Perhaps the loss of the children leads to a change in their marital dynamic as well.

When the family is still mourning David's death and Poe-lee's disappearance, Jimmy comes home sick one day. A few days later, he dies while holding Cudjo's hand. Cudjo says that his children are "lonesome for one 'nother," and would rather "sleep together in de graveyard" than be alive.

Even in their deaths, Cudjo is still fundamentally convinced of his family's love for each other and desire to stay together at all costs.

After they bury Jimmy, Cudjo and Seely are alone in their house, which was once so full. They know that they can't have any more children and they can't bring back the dead, so they try to be good company to each other. Seely helps Cudjo perform his tasks as church sexton.

Although Cudjo and Seely still love each other deeply, the bleakness of their life now is a sad contrast to the beginning of their union when they were able to "make happiness" for each other, rather than just cheering each other up.


At the end of this session, Hurston asks permission to take Cudjo's photograph. Three days later, she comes back with a camera. Cudjo is interested to see what he looks like. He dresses in his best suit but takes off his shoes, explaining that "I want to look lak I in Affica, 'cause dat where I want to be." At Cudjo's suggestion, Hurston photographs him in the cemetery near his family's graves.

Cudjo's combination of the American suit and African absence of footwear is emblematic of his fusion of African and American cultural values. At the same time, it's understandably clear that Cudjo's nostalgic longing for Africa is stronger than any positive feelings for America.


CHAPTER 12

Cudjo brings his narrative to a close by saying that one night, Seely wakes up suddenly and tells him that she's been dreaming about the children and that they are cold. It's a chilly night, and Cudjo remembers sadly that when their children were young, Seely often checked on them throughout the night to make sure they had enough blankets. The next day Seely asks to visit the church and Cudjo watches her walk from one child's grave to the other, "lak she cover dem up wid mo' quilts."

The contrast between the maternal care and familial happiness Cudjo recollects, and the loneliness and grief of his life currently, is tragic to read. Even after Cudjo has escaped slavery, his family life deteriorates from relative stability to loss and sadness.

The next week Seely dies, although she's never shown any signs of illness. Seely doesn't want to leave Cudjo, and she cries at the thought of his loneliness; but she needs to be wherever her children are. Remembering his wife's death, Cudjo cries out. He says that "de wife she de eyes to de man's soul," and that he can't "see" anymore without his wife.

Not only does Cudjo miss Seely, he feels that a part of his own being has died. Just as his family in Africa was once central to his self-conception, his bond with Seely now feels essential to his character.


The month after that, Cudjo's one remaining son, Aleck, dies as well. Now he's in the same state as when he arrived in America: his only family left is his daughter-in-law and grandchildren. He tells her to "stay in de compound," and he will leave his land to her after his death.

Cudjo's use of the word "compound" to describe his house and land shows that he has tried to recreate the lifestyle of his childhood as much as possible in America.


One day, Ole Charlie, the oldest man from Africa still living in the town, visits Cudjo with some others and asks Cudjo to "make us a parable." Cudjo addresses the group, telling them to suppose Ole Charlie was walking to church with a parasol and left it for safekeeping at Cudjo's door, knowing he can pick it up later. Cudjo likes the parasol, and asks the group if it's right to keep it. They all say that he cannot, because it belongs to Charlie. Cudjo says that the parasol is like Seely, who belongs to God and was only left "by my door" for a certain time.

The fact that other people come to Cudjo for parables and advice affirms his respected position in the community. Moreover, telling stories like this helps Cudjo make sense of Seely's death and keep up his own spirits for the rest of his life. It's clear that storytelling is a central part of Cudjo's life, not just something he does for Hurston's benefit.

Another time, the group comes and asks for another story. Cudjo tells them that he and his wife are riding to Mount Vernon on the train, but Seely gets off early, at Plateau; she tells her husband that even though she doesn't want to leave him, she knows she has to get off here. When she's gone, the conductor comes to Cudjo and asks where he wants to stop. Cudjo tells the group he's still traveling towards Mount Vernon, and when he gets there he "no talk to you no more."

Cudjo's story conjures a kind of fatalism here—he can't control where he or anyone else gets off the "train" but has to accept whatever happens. Cudjo takes this resigned stance towards most of the traumas that occur in his life; framing his worldview through stories allows him to emphasize his own stoicism, rather than the enormity of the misfortunes he's endured.

By this time, Hurston has spent two months with Cudjo. Some days they eat a lot of fruit without talking about anything. Some days they talk without eating. Some days he won't speak to her at all, but generally she feels that they are good friends. Hurston is very sad when she finally bids Cudjo farewell, taking some peaches from his garden for her journey.

Initially, Hurston emphasized the artificiality of her interactions with Cudjo, but here their friendship seems very genuine. Throughout the work, Hurston points out the way storytelling can simultaneously bring people together and highlight their differences.

Leaving Cudjo's house, Hurston turns back to see him standing at the edge of his land. Driving on the highway, she imagines Cudjo returning to his porch and his memories of beautiful African girls, the drums of his homeland, and the parables he tells. Hurston feels that Cudjo is unafraid to die, because in spite of years as a Christian, "he is too deeply a pagan to fear death." However, she knows that he is respectful and humble "before the altar of the past."

In the final paragraph, Hurston emphasizes the enduring strength of Cudjo's bond with his homeland, and the role of memory and storytelling in preserving it. Telling his story doesn't make Cudjo any happier, but it does help him make sense of the past and gives him strength to contemplate what lies ahead for him.

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