Homegoing

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF YAA GYASI

Yaa Gyasi was born in Mampong, Ghana in 1989 to a professor and a nurse. When she was two years old, her family moved from Ghana to Ohio while her father completed his Ph.D. The family moved around to Illinois and Tennessee before settling in Alabama when Gyasi was ten years old. She was inspired to be a writer at age 17 after she read Tony Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, and she earned a B.A. in English at Stanford. After graduating, she worked at a startup in San Francisco, but did not enjoy the work and went on to earn an M.F.A. at the Iowa Writers Workshop. After graduating, she published *Homegoing*, her debut novel, at age 26. She currently lives in New York City.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Homegoing takes place over several centuries and touches on many landmark events in both Ghana and America. In Ghana, it begins in the mid-1700s, during a time in which Ghana (then known as the Gold Coast) was made up of several Akan nation-states that together made an empire. Two of these states that the book includes are the Fante and the Asante nations. The book then documents the region's trade with the British, who were the primary traders with the Gold Coast by the late nineteenth century. The British subsequently took advantage of an already existing system of taking war prisoners as slaves by the nations and bought those slaves for use in the trans-Atlantic slave trade (also known as the triangular trade). During this time, the Fantes and the Asantes maintained varying alliances with the British and with each other. In 1874, after the slave trade had largely been abolished, the British made Ghana a British Crown Colony, prompting wars between the British and the Asantes. In 1896, as is described in the book, the British overthrew the Asante king, Prempeh I, and when the Asantes rebelled against British rule in 1900, the British demanded they turn over the Golden Stool—the soul of the Asante nation and a symbol of its sovereignty. The end of the conflict resulted in the Asantes being annexed into the British Empire, but in practice they maintained their independence until Ghana as a whole gained independence in 1957. In America, the novel touches on the slavery system that resulted from the trans-Atlantic slave trade, which transported the slaves from Ghana to Britain and the United States for forced labor, primarily in the American South. This trade was outlawed in 1808, but slavery remained intact in the United States until the Civil War. The brutality of the working and living conditions for slaves caused many to attempt to escape. However, in 1850, Congress passed the Fugitive Slave Act, requiring law enforcement and citizens in free states to capture and return runaway slaves. Even after slavery was abolished, the convict lease system began during the Reconstruction era (1863-1877), which allowed private contractors to essentially purchase convicts from state or local governments, resulting in the unjust arrest of many African-American men and women. The book also touches on the Great Migration, in which 1.6 million African-Americans moved from southern rural areas to northern industrial cities between 1916 and 1930, with another 5 million moving between 1940 and 1970. This caused a new flourishing of culture in those large cities, including in 1920s New York City, which became the birthplace of the Harlem Renaissance. The novel also gestures to more contemporary topics like the War on Drugs, in which there were (and still are) major racial disparities in arrests or imprisonment for drug possession in the United States.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Gyasi was inspired by Toni Morrison's *Song of Solomon*, and connections to that work appear in its modern tracing of a family's history. *Homegoing* is also somewhat of a fictional counterpart to the work of Ta-Nehisi Coates in its exploration of the lingering effects of slavery and institutionalized racism. Other books that grapple with the American black experience during the various historical periods that Gyasi touches on in *Homegoing* include Marlon James' *The Book of Night Women*, which examines colonization and slavery in 1700s Jamaica; Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad*, which takes place in 1850 in the American South and follows one character's escape from slavery; and the works of James Baldwin (including *Sonny's Blues*), many of which take place in early twentieth-century Harlem. *Homegoing* has also been compared to Gabriel García Márquez's *100 Years of Solitude* for its sprawling documentation of a culture and a place through the lens of a family's history. In terms of modern African novels written in English that touch on some of Gyasi's themes, Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (which explores colonization's effect on the Nigerian Igbo people) stands out as a major predecessor, as well as the works of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie—particularly *Americanah*, which tells the story of a young Nigerian woman who comes to the United States to attend college.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Homegoing*
- **When Written:** 2012-2015
- **Where Written:** New York City

- **When Published:** 2016
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Historical fiction
- **Setting:** Ghana, Alabama, Harlem, Los Angeles, 1700s-2000s
- **Climax:** Marjorie and Marcus return to Ghana together
- **Point of View:** Third person; each chapter focuses on a different member of Esi and Effia's family

EXTRA CREDIT

Planting a tree. In preparation for writing *Homegoing*, Gyasi created the family tree first, then connected each member of the tree to a historical event as an outline for the novel.

An inspiring homegoing. The idea for *Homegoing* was inspired by Gyasi's own trip to the Cape Coast Castle during her sophomore year of college, where she was fascinated with the idea that people could live in luxury on the top levels while others lived in misery in the dungeons below.

PLOT SUMMARY

Effia is born on the night of a raging **fire** in Fanteland. As she grows up, her mother, Baaba, is cruel to her and abuses her, while her father, Cobbe, is kind. When Effia turns twelve, she begins to blossom into a young woman. She hopes to marry the next chief of the village, but Baaba has other plans for her. She tells Effia to hide her blood, and then contrives to have her marry a British man named James Collins who is the newly appointed governor of the Cape Coast Castle. Before Effia is married, Baaba gives her a black stone pendant—a piece of her mother. Effia and James Collins are then married and develop sincere affection for each other when she moves into the Castle. However, she quickly discovers that there are women in the dungeons being traded as slaves. Though she is horrified, she knows she cannot go back to her village, and only returns years later when she hears her father is dying. When Effia is at her father's deathbed, her brother, Fiifi, reveals that she is not actually Baaba's daughter. Her real mother, Maame, had been a house girl for Cobbe, and ran away the night Effia was born. The black stone from Baaba is really from Maame.

Meanwhile, Esi is trapped in the women's dungeon in the Cape Coast Castle. Soldiers come and go, groping the women and taking away their children. Esi was born in Asanteland to a respected warrior, Kwame Asare. The Asantes had been raiding other villages for years, capturing prisoners and taking them as slaves and servants. Her mother, Maame, took one of these prisoners as a house girl, but the girl (Abronoma) was not very skilled at housework and was often beaten. Esi felt bad for her, and agreed to send a message to her father, telling him where she was. One night, Abronoma's father and other warriors attacked the village, but Maame was too afraid to run. She gave Esi a black stone, and Esi ran away. She was quickly captured and taken to the Castle, made to walk for days with little water and food. Back in the dungeon, a soldier pulls her out and rapes her before returning her to the prison. Days later, Esi and the other women are taken onto a ship, but she loses her stone in the dungeon.

Quey, Effia's son, is back in his mother's village in order to make a deal regarding slave prices. Quey had been a lonely child, always feeling that he wasn't white or black. He made friends with a boy named Cudjo from another village, but when his father, James Collins, saw how close the two boys were, he sent Quey to school in London. Quey returned after his father's death, but still felt his father's disappointment. Quey doesn't want to participate in the slave trade but also doesn't want to be seen as weak. When his Uncle Fiifi captures Nana Yaa, the daughter of an Asante king, to strengthen their political union, Quey agrees to marry her.

Ness, Esi's daughter, is working on Thomas Allan Stockham's Alabama plantation. She doesn't speak to her fellow slaves much, as her mother had been a solid, quiet woman with a hard heart. However, Ness does find a soft spot for a young, motherless girl named Pinky, who refuses to speak. One day, the master's son tries to get Pinky to speak and threatens to beat her, but Ness stops him. As Ness awaits her punishment for speaking out, she thinks about how she ended up there. At her prior plantation, she and another slave named Sam had been married. After the birth of their son, Kojo, they tried to escape with a woman named Aku. One night, when Ness gave Kojo to Aku to hold, Ness and Sam were caught by their former master (whom they refer to as the Devil), but Aku and Kojo were able to escape. Ness had then been whipped until she couldn't stand, and Sam had been hanged. Back in the present, Ness only hopes that her son is okay.

James (Quey's son), Quey, and Nana Yaa travel to Asanteland for her father's funeral, where James meets a girl named Akosua who refuses to shake his hand because his family takes part in the slave trade. He finds her fascinating but knows that he would never be able to marry her. Still, he promises that if she waits for him, he will come back for her. When he returns to Fanteland, he is married to another woman but refuses to consummate their marriage while he plots to get back to Akosua. He fakes his death in a battle and walks back to Asanteland, where Akosua is waiting for him.

Jo (Kojo), Ness's son, works in Baltimore on ships, having escaped with Ma Aku from slavery as a baby. He and his wife, Anna, who is also free, have six children and a seventh (whom they call H) on the way. Jo is afraid of the law enforcement in the city and constantly worried that he will be re-enslaved. On the day of his daughter's wedding, the Fugitive Slave Act passes, meaning that if Jo is found out as a runaway, he can be sent back to the South to work on a plantation. One day, his

wife does not return home. He looks for her for days, to no avail, until a young boy says that he saw a white man take her into his carriage. Ten years pass, and Jo moves up to New York as more states start to secede, and the Civil War brews.

Abena, James's daughter, is twenty-five years old and still unmarried. She is in love with a man named Ohene Nyarko, who cannot marry her until the harvest is good, but they still begin an affair. When the harvests in the village continue to be bad, they blame Abena for witchcraft. Ohene travels to another city and acquires a cocoa plant, which grows well, but he promises the man he buys it from that he will marry his daughter in return. Abena, now pregnant, refuses to wait any longer for him and travels back to the heart of Asanteland to seek out the missionary church there.

Jo and Anna's son, H, was born on a plantation. His mother killed herself before he was born, so he had to be cut out of her stomach. Although he was freed after the war, he is quickly imprisoned for looking at a white woman and sold to the mining system. He works in brutal conditions for nine years before obtaining freedom again and then works in the mines as a free laborer. He joins a union, strikes for better conditions, and reunites with his woman, Ethe.

Akua, Abena's daughter, grows up in the missionary church, where she's made to feel like a sinner and a heathen. She leaves the church to marry Asamoah, but visions of a firewoman with two children plague her. She cannot sleep, and one night she sets their hut on fire, killing two of her daughters and scarring her infant son, Yaw.

Willie, H's daughter, marries a light-skinned boy named Robert Clifton when she is young, and the two move up to Harlem with their son, Carson. Robert has an easier time getting jobs, but he often loses them when people find out that he is not white. Willie cleans houses, but at night she works at a jazz club. While cleaning the bathroom at the club one night, she runs into Robert, who is with two of his white co-workers. Realizing that they are married, the two white men force Robert to violate Willie for their own enjoyment. Robert leaves that night, and Willie tries to restart her life with another man named Eli.

Yaw, Akua's son, teaches history at an all-boys Roman Catholic high school. He is passionate about securing Ghanaian independence and resents his mother, because her actions left him with a severe facial burn. He gets a house girl named Esther, who convinces him to go to see his mother. The two are able to reconcile as Akua explains the evil that plagues their family history and that haunted her.

Sonny (Carson's nickname) grows up resentful of Willie because she refuses to speak about Robert. He joins the Civil Rights movement and finds himself in and out of jail for marching. One day, he goes to a jazz club and becomes taken with a singer named Amani. Amani introduces him to dope, and Sonny quickly becomes addicted. His mother stops speaking to him until he resolves to get clean.

Marjorie, Yaw and Esther's daughter, is born in Ghana but grows up in Alabama. She has trouble making friends in high school because the white students think she is black, while the black students think she sounds and acts like a white girl. Thus, she spends most of her time reading and writing, and dates a white boy named Graham before his father puts an end to their relationship. She goes back to Ghana every summer to visit her grandmother Akua, with whom she is very close.

The final chapter in the novel focuses on Marcus, Sonny and Amani's son. Marcus is getting his Ph.D. in sociology from Stanford. He focuses his studies on the convict leasing system that condemned his great grandfather H, but he quickly realizes that there are many more subjects surrounding systematic oppression in America that he wants to discuss. While at Stanford, he meets Marjorie, who is also a graduate student. The two become friends, taking a trip to Birmingham together and then a trip to Ghana. In Ghana, Marcus and Marjorie are both struck by their mutual history at the Cape Coast Castle. They run into the **water** together on the beach, and Marjorie gives him the stone necklace that she inherited from her grandmother. She welcomes him home in a final act of reconciliation between the two families.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Effia – Effia is the daughter of Cobbe Otcher and Maame. Growing up in a Fante village on the Gold Coast, Effia does not know that she is Maame's daughter. She is raised by Cobbe's wife, Baaba, who is resentful of having to raise Effia and beats her often. Baaba conspires to have Effia marry the British officer James Collins even though Cobbe would prefer that Effia marry the village's future chief, Abeeku Badu. Luckily, Effia and James Collins develop a good deal of affection for each other, but Effia is remains uncomfortable with James Collins' participation in the slave trade. Still, she knows that she cannot return to her village because of Baaba's cruelty, so she stays with James Collins and has a son, Quey, with him. Effia's implicit acceptance of the slave trade and her unwitting betrayal of her half-sister Esi, who is sold from the dungeon of the castle in which Effia lives, haunts her branch of the family for seven generations. Her final descendant in the novel is Marjorie.

Esi – Esi is Maame and Big Man's daughter and Effia's half-sister. Esi grows up in an Asante village and sees how her village profits from capturing and selling slaves. She doesn't think much about it until she is captured herself by warriors from the village of one of her slaves, Abronoma. Esi is then sent to the Cape Coast Castle and is packed into the castle's dungeon with many other women, while her half-sister, Effia, lives a life of luxury upstairs. One day, Esi is raped by a British soldier and

becomes pregnant. She is then shipped to America and sold to a plantation. She and her daughter, Ness, initially work on the same plantation but are separated when Ness is sold to a plantation she calls "Hell." Esi's descendants are irrevocably altered by the effects of slavery and institutionalized racism in America. Her final descendant in the novel is Marcus.

Quey – Quey is the son of James Collins and Effia. As a biracial man, Quey doesn't feel like he fits in with any culture. He is constantly afraid of appearing weak and disappointing his father, and so he reluctantly takes up his father's business of slave trading. In addition, even though it is implied that he is attracted to men (particularly his childhood friend Cudjo), he marries a girl named Nana Yaa in order to make his father and his uncle Fiifi proud. He comes to expect the same prioritization of family above personal fulfillment from his own son, James, who is not as eager to please his father as Quey was. James goes against Quey's wishes by rejecting the slave trade altogether and living with a poor Asante girl named Akosua.

Ness – Ness is the daughter of Esi and a British soldier, who raped Esi while she was imprisoned in the Cape Coast Castle's dungeon. Soon after Esi arrives in America, Ness is born, and she spends her whole life on various plantations. She is taken away from her mother and sold to a plantation she calls "Hell," where she is forced to marry to another slave named Sam. When she becomes pregnant and has a son, Kojo, she refuses to remain on the plantation and resolves to escape its brutality. Ness and Sam are caught, and Sam is hanged, but Kojo is able to make it out alive. Ness spends the rest of her life on Thomas Allan Stockham's plantation.

James – The son of Quey and Nana Yaa, James grows disgusted by his family's participation in the slave trade and resolves to escape the same life. He runs away from the wife who had been promised to him, Amma Atta, and instead goes to live with a poor Asante girl named Akosua, with whom he has a daughter named Abena. Though his crops fail to grow—earning him the nickname "Unlucky"—he is constantly thankful that he no longer has to participate in the slave trade.

Kojo / Jo – Kojo is Sam and Ness's son. He escapes the plantation with Ma Aku as a baby, and Ma Aku brings him to freedom in the North, where she raises him as an adopted son. He then works as a free man on **boats** in Baltimore and starts a family with his wife, Anna. Even though he is a free man in a city that is relatively friendly towards black people, slavery still exists and its specter torments him. Once the Fugitive Slave Act is passed (which means that Kojo, as a runaway, can legally be sent back into slavery), Kojo develops a deep fear of law enforcement officials, avoiding them whenever possible. Right after the Fugitive Slave Act is passed, Anna wife is kidnapped, leaving Kojo a heartbroken and terrified single father to their daughter, Agnes. He never knows the son that Anna was pregnant with, H, when she was kidnapped.

Abena – Abena is James and Akosua's daughter. Abena is resentful of her father's bad luck, particularly because it means that no one wants to marry her. She is in love with Ohene Nyarko, but he will not marry her until he has a good harvest. When she becomes pregnant by him and he still refuses to marry her, she travels to the missionary church in Kumasi to raise her daughter, Akua. Once there, however, she is killed by the Missionary who tries to baptize her and accidentally drowns her.

H – H is Jo and Anna's son. After being kidnapped and sold into slavery while pregnant, Anna kills herself. H is born when his master cuts him out of Anna's stomach. H works on a plantation until he is thirteen, and after the Civil War, he is imprisoned (for supposedly staring at a white woman) and put into the convict leasing system, working in the mines in Alabama. After he is released from prison, he continues to work in the mines as a free laborer, marries a woman named Ethe whom he knew before his imprisonment, and has two children: Willie, who eventually moves up to Harlem, and Hazel.

Akua / Crazy Woman – Akua is Abena and Ohene's daughter. When Abena turned to the Church for help when Ohene would not marry her, the Missionary attempted to baptize her but drowned her by mistake. Thus, the Missionary raises Abena's daughter, Akua. Akua marries Asamoah and has three children: Abee, Ama Serwah, and Yaw. After the birth of her son, Yaw, Akua is haunted by visions of a firewoman in her sleep. In her madness, she sets **fire** to her hut, killing her two daughters and scarring her son, thus earning her the name "Crazy Woman." The villagers then send Yaw away in order to protect him, and after Akua's husband dies, she lives alone with a house girl. At the end of the novel, Yaw reconciles with her, and she grows very close to her granddaughter Marjorie.

Willie – Willie is H and Ethe's daughter. Willie grows up in Pratt City and marries Robert Clifton when she is very young. After the birth of her son Carson, Willie and Robert move up to Harlem, where Willie hopes to make it as a singer. However, she quickly realizes how difficult it is to get a job as a black woman, whereas Robert has no problem because he is a light-skinned man. Willie and Robert split up after a white man forces Robert to violate her in the bathroom of a jazz club for the white man's own enjoyment. After this traumatic event, Willie takes care of Carson alone. She then remarries a poet named Eli and has another child with him, Josephine, but Eli is unreliable and often leaves the family for months at a time. Even though Carson is resentful towards Willie because he never knows his father, Willie helps take care of Carson when he slips into drug addiction.

Yaw – Yaw is Akua and Asamoah's only son. He is resentful of his mother, whose actions have left a permanent scar on his face—in her madness, she set the family's hut on **fire**, killing Yaw's two sisters and badly burning Yaw in the process. He works as a history teacher at a boys' high school and also hopes

that Ghana will gain independence. With the help of his house girl, Esther, he eventually reconciles with his mother. He then marries Esther and has a daughter with her named Marjorie, and the three of them move to Alabama together while Yaw gets a higher degree.

Carson / Sonny – Carson is Robert Clifton and Willie's son. Carson is initially resentful of Willie because she gives him no information about his father, who split up with Willie after violating her in a jazz club bathroom to please a white man. Carson goes in and out of schools, then prisons as he joins the Civil Rights movement. At the beginning of his chapter, he works for the NAACP but becomes desperate to make a change in his life when he sees how downtrodden the people in Harlem are. He then finds a job in a jazz club and meets Amani, who introduces him to dope. He becomes an addict and has a son with Amani named Marcus before eventually getting clean.

Marjorie – Marjorie is Yaw and Esther's daughter and the final descendant of Effia in the novel. Though born in Ghana, she grows up in Alabama and feels she doesn't fit in with either the white students or the black students at her school. She loves reading and looks up to her African-American high school English teacher, Mrs. Pinkston. She also dates a white boy named Graham before both his father and the school find out and deem their relationship inappropriate. Eventually, she meets Marcus, who is the descendant of Esi, while at graduate school at Stanford together. She helps him come to terms with his own identity when the two travel back to Ghana together.

Marcus – Marcus is Sonny and Amani's son and the final descendant of Esi in the novel. He grows up in Harlem with Sonny and his grandmother, Willie. Marcus is completing a Ph.D. in Stanford on the convict leasing system, but ultimately he finds that he wants to speak about the multiple generations of oppression that his family has faced. Eventually, he meets Marjorie, who is the descendant of Effia, and the two help each other come to terms with their history and identity when they visit Ghana together.

James Collins – James Collins is the white governor of the Cape Coast Castle at the beginning of the novel, Effia's husband, and Quey's father. He has a lot of affection for Effia but also seems haunted by seeing the women (including Esi) in the dungeons of the Castle. When he returns upstairs to Effia after seeing the imprisoned women, he has a hard time looking at her. Later in the novel, he is disappointed by his son Quey's seeming weakness.

Maame – Maame is Esi and Effia's biological mother. She had been a house girl for Cobbe Otcher when he raped her, making her pregnant with Effia. However, the night she gave birth to Effia, a **fire** raged through the Fante village, and Maame had been able to escape. She then married Big Man. She leaves each of her daughters a **black stone** to remember her by, symbolizing their heritage. The chance difference between her two daughters' fates leads to an irreversible legacy, as Esi is sold into slavery and Effia marries a British colonist named James Collins.

Baaba – Baaba is Cobbe Otcher's wife, Fiifi's mother, and Effia's adoptive mother. Resentful of having to take care of a daughter that is not her own, Baaba is extremely cruel to Effia and beats her frequently. Baaba eventually plots for Effia to marry British colonist James Collins so that she can rid herself of Effia, telling everyone that the girl is evil and cannot have children.

Cobbe Otcher – Cobbe is Effia and Fiifi's father and Baaba's husband. He is a good father to Effia, even while Baaba is cruel. However, when Cobbe is on his deathbed, Effia realizes that he had raped his house girl Maame, and that Effia is in fact Maame's daughter. She also realizes that Cobbe had shamed Baaba by making her take care of Effia.

Abeeku Badu – At the beginning of the novel, Abeeku is the next in line as chief of the Fante village where Effia, Cobbe, Baaba, and Fiifi live. Abeeku is a great warrior. Initially he hopes to marry Effia, but Baaba maliciously convinces him that Effia cannot have children. Abeeku also begins a war between the Fantes and the Asantes when he trades several Asante slaves, including Esi.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Abronoma – Abronoma, which means "Little Dove," is Maame's house girl who had been captured from another village. Esi feels bad for the girl and tries to help by sending word of Abronoma's location to her father. This kind act leads to Esi's own capture by the warriors in Abronoma's village.

Akosua – Akosua is a poor young Asante girl with whom James falls in love. When she makes him see how evil the slave trade is, James runs away from his family to live with her. Together, the two have a daughter, Abena.

Robert Clifton – Robert is Willie's first husband and Carson's father. He has very light skin, which helps him get jobs in Harlem, but which also makes it difficult for him when people assume that he is white.

Amani Zulema – Amani is a jazz singer who introduces Sonny to dope, spurring his drug addiction. Later, she and Sonny have a child together, Marcus.

Ma Aku – Ma Aku is a woman who tries to help Sam, Ness and Kojo escape their plantation. When Ma Aku is able to escape to the North with just Kojo (Sam and Ness are caught), she raises him as her own son.

The Missionary – A white missionary who accidentally kills Abena when he tries to baptize her. He raises Abena's daughter, Akua, in the church.

Ohene Nyarko – The man Abena is in love with. She has a daughter, Akua, with him, even though he refuses to marry her.

Sam – Ness's husband and Kojo's father. He works with Ness on the plantation she calls "Hell." He is hanged when they try to escape.

Nana Yaa – Quey's wife and James's mother. She is the captured daughter of an Asante king.

Amma Atta – James's first wife and the daughter of Abeeku Badu's successor.

Kwame Asare / Big Man – Esi's father and Maame's husband. Big Man is a warrior for an Asante village.

Anna – Kojo's wife and Agnes' mother who is kidnapped and sold into slavery when she is pregnant with H. She kills herself before she gives birth, and the master has to cut H out of her stomach.

Lil Joe / Joe Turner – Joecy's son who helps H by writing a letter for him. Robert and Willie stay with him when they move up to Harlem.

Cudjo Sackee – A friend of Quey who is the son of the chief of another Fante village. Quey becomes attracted to him as they grow up together, though Quey hides his desires and marries a woman.

Fiifi – Effia's half-brother and Cobbe and Baaba's son. He grows up to be a strong warrior and Abeeku's right-hand man.

Esther – Yaw's house girl, who helps him reconcile with his mother, Akua. She and Yaw eventually marry and have a daughter, Marjorie, who is Effia's last descendant in the novel.

Asamoah – Akua's husband and Yaw's father. He loses a leg in the wars with the British.

Graham – A white boy in Marjorie's class who goes on a few dates with her, until his dad and the school disapprove of their relationship.

Mrs. Pinkston – Marjorie's English teacher who holds a black cultural assembly and inspires her to write a poem about her heritage.

Edward Boahen – Yaw's friend who also teaches at the same high school.

Adwoa – Another girl in Effia's village who marries a British officer.

Tansi – Another woman who is captured by the British, whom Esi befriends.

TimTam – Another slave at Thomas Allan Stockham's planation and Pinky's father.

Pinky – A little girl who befriends Ness at Thomas Allan Stockham's plantation. She is TimTam's daughter.

Margaret – A house slave at Thomas Allan Stockham's planation.

Thomas Allan Stockham – The master of the plantation Ness works on.

The Devil – The master of the plantation that Ness and Sam work on before Ness is sold to Thomas Allan Stockham.

Eli – Willie's second husband and Josephine's father. He is a poet.

Josephine – Carson's half-sister and Willie and Eli's daughter.

Poot – A friend of Jo's who also works on **boats** in Baltimore.

Mr. Mathison – A white abolitionist in Baltimore who Anna works for and who helps Kojo.

Kofi Poku – A small child in Akua's village who takes Yaw in.

Nana Serwah – Akua's mother-in-law and Asamoah's mother.

Abee – The eldest of Akua and Asamoah's daughters.

Ama Serwah –Akua and Asamoah's youngest daughter.

Diante – Marcus's friend in grad school.

Ethe – H's wife and Willie's mother.

Joecy – A friend of H's who works in the mines. His son is Lil Joe.

Thomas – A white man who works in the mines with H.

Agnes – Jo and Anna's oldest daughter and H's sister.

Timmy – Agnes's husband.

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.

HERITAGE AND IDENTITY

Homegoing's premise explores African and African-American heritage and culture through a period of several centuries, as the book follows the descendants of Effia and Esi, two daughters of an Asante woman (from the Ashanti region of Ghana) named Maame. Each woman represents one of these two cultures, and how the disastrous consequences of European colonialism and American slavery changed and defined them. Effia marries a colonial British official named James Collins and stays on the Gold Coast (modern-day Ghana); Esi is captured and sold into slavery in America. This chance difference between their fates leads to a stark contrast in the lives of six generations of their descendants. Over the book's fourteen chapters, each of which focuses on a different descendant of these two women, Gyasi shows how cultural heritage is the crux of a person's identity as each of the characters must grapple with their place inside the culture of their parents and the society around them.

Effia and James Collins' descendants largely remain on the

Gold Coast, but their mixed heritage causes many generations to be haunted by European culture and colonization as they try to remain true to their African cultural heritage. Quey, Effia and James Collins' son, struggles with the fact that he is biracial. Although Effia has taught him her native language, Quey is schooled in England, which makes him feel as though he lives between two worlds. He takes part in his father's slave trading even though he does not approve of it because he wants to make his father proud, and he wants to be seen as strong. However, this leads to an identity crisis for many of his family members. James, Quey's son, has the opposite path. He rejects the work of his father and grandfather and aims to reclaim his African cultural heritage by faking his death in a battle and going to live in a different village that does not participate in the slave trade. Thus, his desire to stay true to his African heritage defines his morality and his identity. James's descendants continue to work to maintain their independence from the British because they feel it is necessary to reject that part of their history. James's granddaughter, Akua, is plagued by this legacy to the point that she tries to kill her own children by setting her hut on **fire** in madness. This act then leads her son and his daughter, Yaw and Marjorie, to move to the United States in an attempt to escape this rigid cycle of guilt. Yet in the United States, Marjorie sees how her blackness is defined very differently because she does not have the same cultural inheritance of African-Americans who have lived in America for generations. When she returns to Ghana at the end of the novel, she feels at home again because doesn't have to define herself against the African-American experience or white experience. Being back in Ghana makes her feel at ease because the culture is so integral to her sense of identity.

Esi's family in America is also haunted by the effects of colonialism when she is shipped to America. However, instead of trying to regain their African culture, they are forced to forge a new kind of cultural heritage because so much of it has been taken away due to slavery. Esi, who is sent on a slave **ship** to Alabama, begins a cycle in which many of her descendants are ripped away from their parents and lose any connection to their heritage. This is symbolized by Esi's loss of the **black stone** that her mother gave her. Esi's daughter, Ness, then starts to lose her mother's language. By the time Ness has her own child, Kojo, his family history is all but lost because his parents send him away with another woman to try and escape slavery when he is a baby. Kojo's son, known only as H, becomes even more removed from his culture, as Kojo's wife is kidnapped and re-enslaved when she is pregnant with H, and he never knows his father. At this point in the novel, a shift starts to happen: when H's daughter Willie moves to Harlem, she begins to see how black people in America are creating their own communities and new forms of culture through jazz and art. This culture is created less from a shared African heritage and more by a shared heritage of being black in the United States. When the novel reaches Willie's grandson, Marcus, he is deeply rooted in America and invested in learning about his own history when he pursues higher education at Stanford. However, even though his deepest roots lie in Ghana, he knows that he is as much a product of American institutions: the slave trade, sharecropping, the convict-leasing system that had ruined H's life. He sees through his studies how this collective cultural struggle has shaped his identity and the identity of those around him.

Ultimately, *Homegoing* examines the many differences between the two branches of a single family tree. Even though Effia and Esi come from the same background, the differences in how their heritage has been shaped comes to define them and their descendants. While one side of the family attempts to separate itself from European culture, the other is forced to confront a lack of heritage and forge a new culture of its own. Yet, in reuniting Marcus and Marjorie (the last descendants of each branch) in Ghana at the end of the book, Gyasi provides a bit of hope for some kind of future union between African and African-American heritage. Even if their experiences have differed greatly, Marcus and Marjorie recognize that they do have an intertwined history and a shared foundation.

RACISM, SLAVERY, AND SYSTEMIC OPPRESSION

Racism plays a major role in *Homegoing* for both sides of the book's family tree, but it most strongly affects Esi's descendants as they are subjected to a series of racist institutions in America. At the beginning of the novel, racism serves as the backbone of (and one of the many justifications for) slavery in America, but when slavery is abolished, racism continues to fester. One of the main goals of the novel is to illustrate the brutal lineage of American racism, and how it becomes codified in both political and social structures like job access and the prison system.

The chapters involving Esi and her daughter, Ness, demonstrate how racism is used to justify brutal acts of violence and enslavement. Esi is captured on the heels of a battle between her village and another village that is working with the British, and she is placed in a woman's prison. There, Esi and the other women are treated as subhuman because of their race: she describes how a soldier who rapes her looks at her in disgust afterward as if "her body was his shame." This disgust is amplified in America: Esi's daughter, Ness, and the other slaves at the Stockham family's plantation are treated like objects rather than people. She is beaten and forced to "marry" another slave named Sam, being treated almost like an animal. When she and Sam are caught trying to escape this brutal treatment, she is whipped until she cannot move and forced to watch as Sam is hanged. White plantation owners view their slaves as disposable, a view based solely on skin color.

Even after slavery, racism infiltrates other American

institutions, which allows the oppression of African-Americans to continue. Kojo, Ness's son, escapes slavery, but still lives in constant fear that he and his children will be recaptured and re-enslaved as the Civil War brews in America and the Fugitive Slave Act passes. The Great Migration begins, as people feel so unsafe as to need to move north in order to continue to feel free. But before Kojo and his family can leave, his pregnant wife, Anna, is kidnapped. Their son, known only as H, also endures a version of modified slavery known as the convict-lease system. H is imprisoned for nine years for "studyin' a white woman" and is leased to work in a coal mine while carrying out his sentence, where he faces a constant fear of death or brutal beatings. His daughter, Willie, and her son, Sonny, also bear the brunt of racist systems, even after they travel north to live in Harlem. Willie's first husband, Robert, is only able to get a job because he is light-skinned, but he eventually leaves her for a white woman. Willie is left with very few job prospects as a black woman, and she eventually takes to cleaning houses. Sonny, grows up in and out of a bad school system, and eventually comes to believe that he can't make something of himself. When he works at a jazz club, he becomes addicted to heroin, forcing him even deeper into a downward spiral. Racism thus serves as a constant weight, dragging the characters down and preventing them from gaining opportunity.

At the end of the novel, Sonny's son, Marcus, is able to look back at this history and trace this thread of oppression, and how it had affected him and his family in large and small ways. Marcus is writing his Ph.D. thesis at Stanford, which had originally focused on the convict-lease system. However, Marcus feels he can't properly grapple with the convict-lease system without also exploring the consequences on the Great Migration, the cities like Harlem to which black people flocked, and the drug addictions borne in those cities like the one his father had—and also how in the present, his white peers can smoke marijuana openly every day while many of his black friends are serving five-year-sentences for the same crime. As Marcus describes how angry his research makes him, he also notes how his anger would have been used to justify the very racism that caused all of these issues in the first place. Marcus sees some of his own experiences as products of the racism that affected his family. He relates his fear of **water** to his family's having been shipped over from Ghana for the slave system. In another example, he is lost at a museum as a young boy when a white man taps at him with a cane. Without knowing why, he is immediately fearful. These examples serve as ways in which large forms of oppression have been inherited by younger generations, even if they don't necessarily know why—history still informs their thoughts and feelings.

Because *Homegoing* spans over several generations, the book is extremely effective in demonstrating the lasting legacy of racism in the United States. As characters face near-constant oppression, it becomes clear how the results of obstacles faced by one character are then passed down to that character's children. Gyasi uses this compounded sense of limitation to remind readers that even though slavery ended centuries ago, the effects of its underlying cause, racism, are still very much a part of society today.

COLONIZATION

Homegoing begins with the introduction of British colonizers on the Gold Coast (modern-day Ghana). Though colonialism plays into and is an extension of racism, the novel also shows it as a means of dividing those who have been colonized in order to benefit the white colonizers. The book argues that not only is there immense harm done to those who are enslaved and sent to America (like Esi's descendants), but also that colonization serves as a destructive force on those who are both willingly and unwillingly complicit in it (like Effia's descendants), because they are taking part in a system that devalues their culture and positions them as inferior to Europeans.

Effia and her son, Quey, become the first and most direct benefactors of the system of colonialism, and so it becomes easy for them to accept it, but later descendants realize the moral cost of enslaving others. Though the Fante village and Asante village already had a tradition of capturing others in times of war, the British arrive on the Gold Coast in order to take advantage of this system and create a brutal slave trade. Effia's mother plots to have her marry a white man in order to gain money and to strengthen the relationship between the British and the Fantes. Quey in turn is gifted with an easier life away from slavery, logging numbers so that he can pretend his work doesn't have to do with people being bought, sold, and brutalized. He had gone to school in England, where he learned English and to read and write. Yet he still feels that he doesn't belong to either race, inheriting the feeling from his father that he is inferior to his father's white family. Thus, his participation in colonization stems from a desire to please his father, which makes it even more insidious. Quey's son, James, refuses to play into this system, seeing how it made Quey feel as though he didn't belong and that he was complicit in a morally corrupt line of work. A girl in another village, Akosua, shows him how the British incite wars knowing that the losers of the war will become goods to trade. This realization indicates to James that the British believe they can arrive and take whatever or whomever they want, to the detriment of all of the people on the Gold Coast.

Even when slavery ends, the British and colonization remain. The missionaries and Christianity serve as a new way of asserting that the systems and religions of the Europeans are superior. The emphasis on Christianity appears early on. James, Effia's husband, tells her not to use a root for fertility because it is "not Christian." Anything that is associated with blackness or

native religion is viewed as evil, or lesser. Abena, James's daughter who becomes pregnant out of wedlock, seeks help from the Church. But instead of helping her, the Missionary accidentally drowns her while trying to baptize her. He then condemns her daughter, Akua, to a life of feeling that she is living in in sin and calling her a "heathen." He tells her not to go to the fetish priest even though he is Akua's only friend. Thus, colonization gives her a life of loneliness and doubt in her own culture.

The effects of colonization, like the effects of slavery, are also felt long after the British leave Ghana, because it had been so successful as a means of dividing people. At the end of the novel, Marjorie, Akua's granddaughter, grows up in Alabama. In school, other girls make fun of her accent and liken it to a British accent. She discovers that whiteness and blackness are just as much about culture in America as they are about skin color, and other students associate her heritage with a sense of superiority. Yet at the same time, in the eyes of Marjorie's white classmates, she doesn't belong either. When Marjorie begins dating a blonde boy in her class, the boy's friends and even his father constantly pull him away from Marjorie. When he tries to tell his father that Marjorie is "not like other black girls," Marjorie feels even worse. Marjorie's feelings parallel those of Quey, who felt like he didn't belong in either race six generations earlier. Thus, the history of Marjorie's family and colonization's divisions still have resonance in the present.

Just as Gyasi demonstrates the effects of racism on generations of people in America, she shows how colonization also has its own compounded effect on generations of people in Ghana. One of the things that is most insidious about colonization in the book is the fact that the British officers began families with many women on the Gold Coast (even if the officers already had families in England). This made resistance very difficult, not only because the women's lives were largely controlled by men, but then their children felt that removing themselves from involvement in the slave trade meant rebelling against their own families and fathers, as Quey and James feel. Thus, later characters are forced to come to terms with the allegiance their family once had to racist institutions. Only then can they eventually reconcile with the descendants of the characters that they betrayed, as Marjorie does with Marcus at the end of the novel when they travel back to Ghana together.

FAMILY AND PROGRESS

The connective tissue of *Homegoing*'s fourteen chapters lies in a single family tree, starting with Maame and her two daughters, Effia and Esi. Structuring the story in this way reveals the importance of family, especially the relationship between parents and children. Children in the novel allow families to continue and progress, and so for many families and parents, children provide hope for a future and a better life.

Throughout the novel, parents work so that their children might have a better life, either emotionally or in having freedoms that their parents were not afforded. Effia tries to make sure that she has a better emotional relationship with her son, Quey, because Effia's own biological mother had abandoned her, and her adoptive mother had emotionally abused her. Akua, H, and Sonny also yearn to have better emotional relationships with their children, because their parents had either died before they were born, or they remember very little of them. For H's daughter, Willie, and Sonny's son, Marcus, the strength of these relationships and the support from their parents allows them to move to better places and get better educations. Ness shows a similar resolve to give her son, Kojo, a better life, even though the both of them are enslaved. As soon as Kojo is born, she works to makes sure that they can survive and tries to escape slavery. Even though Ness does not manage to escape, Kojo is able to continue on to freedom with another woman carrying him. Thus, even if she has to make sacrifices like losing touch with her son, Ness gains hope in knowing that Kojo will grow up as a free man.

Marriage also serves as a way for families to progress and gain a better standing in society, and so many of the parents try to orchestrate marriages for political gain. At the start of the novel, Baaba uses Effia as a way of strengthening the Fante village's relationship with the British by marrying her to a British officer. Similarly, Quey marrying Nana Yaa, the daughter of an Asante king, becomes a way to ensure that the Fante village will not be attacked. Quey's son James's rebellion, then, becomes particularly upsetting because he both abandons his family and marries someone who does not, in his parents' eyes, add anything to their political power.

Though the characters who live in America don't have a comparable means of using marriage for political gain, marriage still represents a means of improving their position. Willie marries Robert Clifton, a very light-skinned man who is often mistaken for white. Willie benefits from Robert's ability to get jobs that would never be open to him and from his ability to earn more money than if people thought he was black. When they eventually separate, Robert then marries a blonde white woman in order to shore up his own standing in the society, and thus marriage continues to be a means of gaining status.

Family is crucial to the characters in *Homegoing*. Because the book is filled with so much brutality and abuse, as well as many large sociopolitical concepts, family becomes instrumental in the book in demonstrating how the characters are affected on an individual and personal level. Readers can trace family connections and empathize with the sacrifices that characters make for each other, as they continue to hope that their children will live in a world filled with less injustice. For many of the characters, family becomes the only means of achieving a better life.

GENDER STEREOTYPES, SEXISM, AND VIOLENCE

The primary form of inequality explored in *Homegoing* is racial inequality, but throughout the novel, Gyasi also reveals the ways in which racism intersects with gender. For both men and women, rigid gender stereotypes become a large factor in the way that they are violently oppressed: for women, the patriarchal societies on both the Gold Coast (modern-day Ghana) and in America lead to a lack of autonomy and sexual violation; for men, assumptions of strength and anger lead to brutal working conditions and physical degradation.

From the beginning of the book, the men are expected to take on roles that require physical strength and unemotional demeanors. As a result, the types of struggles they face stem from that expectation as they are physically tormented. On the Gold Coast, society is structured in the way that men are expected to be fearsome soldiers and strong fathers. For men like Quey and James, who are the son and grandson of a British official and a Fante woman, it is assumed that they can be both emotionally and physically hardened to the social systems around them, like other men on the Gold Coast. Quey takes part in the slave trade because he worries that if he does not, he will look weak. James has the same fear, although he tries to overcome it by running away from his village, despite the knowledge that his family will judge him harshly for doing so. In America, Sam is forced to work in brutal conditions on a plantation and is treated like he is subhuman and an animal. Because of his anger at his enslavement and his refusal to surrender his culture, he is often whipped until pools of blood form at his feet. When he tries to escape with wife, Ness, he is hanged. The slave system initiates a vicious catch-22: men are expected to be strong to work, but they are also expected to submit to cruel treatment, otherwise they are killed. Two generations later, H is sentenced to prison and sold in the convict-lease system. He watches as other men bid on him like goods. H then works in the coal mines alongside other black prisoners. He is under constant threat of being crushed by the falling rock or killed if he doesn't work hard enough.

For the female characters in the book, the opposite assumption is made: the oppression of women is not in order to make them feel weak, but based on sexist assumptions of their weakness. Thus, in addition to being brutalized, women are often unable to find autonomy or jobs, instead being controlled by men and often sexually violated. From the very beginning of the novel, men control the fates of Maame and her two daughters: Maame was been raped as a house girl before escaping to her old village. Her first daughter, Effia, is married off by her father to a British officer named James Collins. Maame's other daughter, Esi, is sold by the same officer and sent to America. Before she leaves, she is subjected to terrible conditions inside the women's prison of the Cape Coast Castle. She watches as women are starved, abused, and have their babies taken away. She, like many others, is also raped by a soldier. Other characters also endure sexism: on the Gold Coast, women are largely responsible for watching over the children and cooking, and men control their fates. For example, Abena cannot marry because her father is not wealthy, and thus she is treated like an old maid and a mistress. The sexual violation continues into more contemporary time periods. In the early twentieth-century in Harlem, a white man discovers that Robert (whom he had thought was white) and Willie are married. He then forces Robert to kiss and touch her while he watches and masturbates. Even though both of them are being victimized, it is Robert who still relents to this act.

Gyasi reveals patterns in the novel of how stereotypes and bias based on gender can greatly affect characters in conjunction with race. Even by the end of the novel, Marcus describes how easy it is for him to be thought of as an angry, violent black man, and Marjorie sees how her identity as a black girl makes her unable to date a white boy in her class while the school won't even listen to her arguments. Yet even as they face these issues, Gyasi shows the progress that has been made: both of them are attending Stanford for graduate school, something that would not have been possible even one generation earlier. Although gender stereotypes persist, Gyasi suggests, progress eventually bends toward equality.

SYMBOLS

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

BLACK STONES

In *Homegoing*, the black stones that Maame gives to each of her two daughters, Effia and Esi, symbolize a person's connection to his or her heritage. Effia remains on the Gold Coast (modern-day Ghana), and her stone is passed down through seven generations of her descendants, ending with Marjorie. Esi, on the other hand, is sold into slavery, and right before she is shipped from the Gold Coast to America, she loses the stone in the women's dungeon of the Cape Coast Castle. Thus, for the characters who remain in Ghana, the stone becomes a symbol of their connection to the culture, and is also a haunting reminder of their family's participation in the slave trade. In contrast, for the characters in America, the stone symbolizes lost culture, as many of those characters become disconnected from their parents or the rest of their family and feel detached from their Ghanaian heritage due to American slavery. At the end of the novel, when the two final characters from each branch of the family, Marjorie and Marcus, unknowingly meet and travel to Ghana together, Marjorie gives Marcus the stone and welcomes him home to Ghana, thus

acknowledging his lost culture and attempting to make amends to help him to regain his connection to the country.

FIRE

Fire represents the pain that plagues the characters on the Gold Coast (modern-day Ghana) due to their family's participation in the slave trade. Many of the characters are afraid of fire or are haunted by it. For example, Maame abandons her daughter Effia in the Fante village on the night she is born because of a raging fire, catalyzing a series of events that allows Effia to remain on the Gold Coast and eventually participate in the slave trade, while her sister, Esi, is eventually sold into slavery. Later in the novel, spurred by watching a white man tied to a tree and burned, Akua dreams of a woman made of fire holding two children. This dream ties back to Maame and her two daughters, representing how the slave trade destroyed one line of the family tree and cursed the other line. In her madness, Akua sets fire to her own hut, killing two of her children and permanently scarring her son, Yaw. At the end of the novel, Marjorie (Akua's granddaughter) is also afraid of fire, but overcomes this fear with Marcus's help, while she in turn helps him overcome his fear of **water**. The inheritance of this fear of fire mirrors the guilt and pain that the family passes down to each generation due to their participation in the slave trade.

WATER AND BOATS

In *Homegoing*, water symbolizes the pain and suffering of slavery and racism, and specifically how slavery violently uproots people from their homes. This association begins when Esi is sent from the Gold Coast (modern-day Ghana) on a ship to America, and many people on the boats throw themselves into the water rather than submit to slavery. Ma Aku, Kojo, and other characters in America, water and ships become associated with the slave trade and the systems that brought them to America in the first place. At the end of the novel, Marcus is terrified of the water and refuses to learn to swim, causing him to forgo many pool parties with friends. Thus, this fear of water, passed down from generation to generation, represents how institutional racism can affect people even several generations later. In the final pages, however, there is hope for progress, as Marjorie and Marcus travel back to Ghana together. She invites him to swim in the ocean with her and welcomes him home to Ghana, helping Marcus to overcome his fear and simultaneously attempting to bridge the gap between their two families and make amends for the injustice that his family had faced.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Vintage edition of *Homegoing* published in 2017.

Part 1: Effia Quotes

He knew then that the memory of the fire that burned, then fled, would haunt him, his children, and his children's children for as long as the line continued.

Related Characters: Cobbe Otcher, Effia, Maame, Baaba

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 3

Explanation and Analysis

The novel begins with a fire that rages throughout Fanteland on the night that Effia is born, which allows her biological mother, Maame, who had been a house girl for Cobbe Otcher and Baaba, to escape. It is implied in the next chapter that Asante warriors started the fire to allow Maame to escape. The fire rages through the forest, destroying some of Cobbe's yams, and the narrator describes here how the fire would haunt him and his descendants. The harm that Cobbe had done to Maame in enslaving her and raping her is what caused the fire, symbolically linking the fire to both destruction and enslavement. The legacy of this fire, Cobbe acknowledges, will come to haunt his children and his children's children—just as the legacy of slavery and their participation in it will come to haunt several generations of the family. This haunting becomes particularly tangible when five generations later, Akua is plagued by dreams of a firewoman holding two babies, representing Maame and her two daughters, Effia and Esi. Thus, this early motif represents the inheritance of a curse on the family for its crimes.

The need to call this thing "good" and this thing "bad," this thing "white" and this thing "black," was an impulse that Effia did not understand.

Related Characters: Effia, James Collins, Adwoa

Related Themes:

Page Number: 23

Explanation and Analysis

After being married to James Collins for several months, Effia worries that she may be unable to get pregnant. Her friend in the castle, Adwoa, gives her a root to place under her bed to enhance her fertility, but when James sees the root, he calls it "black magic" and "voodoo." These descriptions serve as expressions of colonialist opinions and agendas, as James associates whiteness and Christianity with goodness, and blackness and Effia's own religious practices with evil. Of course, these descriptions are extensions of racism, and Effia here makes clear that this need to feel superior is a uniquely British mission as they feel the need to indicate that their culture and their ways are superior. Even after the British have stopped their slave trade, future chapters catalogue the way in which Christian missionaries try to further the idea that they have come to save the people on the Gold Coast from their evil religion.

Part 1: Esi Quotes

"Weakness is treating someone as though they belong to you. Strength is knowing that everyone belongs to themselves."

Related Characters: Maame (speaker), Esi, Kwame Asare / Big Man, Abronoma

Related Themes:

Page Number: 38

Explanation and Analysis

Maame acquires a house girl named Abronoma to help her, but when she is unable to do basic chores, Kwame Asare (also known as Big Man) beats Abronoma. Esi tries to defend her father's actions, saying that he would have appeared weak if he hadn't beaten Abronoma, but Maame snaps at Esi with this statement. The significance of Maame's retort is twofold: first, it suggests that slavery or servitude is unacceptable in any capacity, which is a radical notion on the Gold Coast at this time. Additionally, it critiques masculine ideas of strength and dominance. Esi defends her father with an idea of what traditional strength looks like, but Maame argues that weakness and strength do not have to be about physicality or appearance, but rather moral integrity. This is particularly potent coming from a woman who had been a house girl herself, in a society that is particularly harsh on women. Women are frequently treated as though they belong to someone else, forced to remain silent, and often sexually violated.

When he had finished, he looked horrified, disgusted with her. As though he were the one who had had something taken from him. As though he were the one who had been violated.

Related Characters: Esi

Related Themes:

Page Number: 48

Explanation and Analysis

After Esi is captured by some northern warriors, she is brought back to the Cape Coast Castle and forced to endure disgusting conditions in the dungeon, packed in with many other women. Perhaps the most brutal thing she endures is when a soldier pulls her out of the dungeon, takes her back to his quarters, and rapes her. His violent actions reveal how the British soldiers use sexual violence as a means of subjugation particularly for the women, taking advantage of their inability to fight back. This violence also marks a turning point in Esi's character, as she then becomes completely dejected and hopeless. She no longer wants to hear stories from her friend, she concludes that there is only pain in sex, and when she gives birth to Ness as a result of her rape, she treats her daughter stoically. The soldier's disgust also shows his racism, as Gyasi describes how *he* is the one who feels violated. Thus, even though Esi is the victim of his violence, the soldier fails to acknowledge her experience.

Part 1: Quey Quotes

Quey had wanted to cry but that desire embarrassed him. He knew that he was one of the half-caste children of the Castle, and, like the other half-caste children, he could not fully claim either half of himself, neither his father's whiteness nor his mother's blackness. Neither England nor the Gold Coast.

Related Characters: Quey, Cudjo Sackee, James Collins, Effia, Robert Clifton, Marjorie

Related Themes:

Page Number: 56

Explanation and Analysis

As Quey grows up between the Cape Coast Castle and the village, his mother and father (Effia and James Collins) fear that he is not being social enough with other children. One day, a chief from another prominent Fante village arrives with his son, Cudjo, in tow so that the two boys can play together. When Cudjo sees Quey's light skin, he remarks that they are not the same. This distress that Quey feels over his biracial identity comes to define him, as he does not feel fully connected to either piece of his heritage, as he describes in this passage. These feelings represent a very personally difficult result of colonization, because Quey spends the rest of his life trying to be more like his British father, even if it means participating in a morally corrupt slave trade. This is a distress that several other characters feel in the novel, particularly Robert Clifton and Marjorie at the end of the book, both of whom have to reckon with the fact that they feel like they live in between two cultures.

"This was how they lived there, in the bush: Eat or be eaten. Capture or be captured. Marry for protection. Quey would never go to Cudjo's village. He would not be weak. He was in the business of slavery, and sacrifices had to be made.

Related Characters: Quey, Cudjo Sackee, Fiifi, Nana Yaa, James Collins, Effia

Related Themes:

Page Number: 69

Explanation and Analysis

Quey is sent to his mother Effia's old village on behalf of the British in order to help shore up their alliance and continue their trading practices. However when he gets to the village, his uncle Fiifi proposes an alternate plan: that Quey should inherit all that Fiifi has built in the village, and marry the captured daughter of an Asante king, Nana Yaa, in order to provide the village with protection as they continue their participation in the slave trade. Quey agrees, which is significant for several reasons. First, he still wants to please his father, James Collins, even though he has since passed away, by continuing the "family business" of the slave trade. In addition, Quey had been attracted to his friend Cudjo when they were kids, but this decision to marry a woman provides Quey with a way of avoiding those feelings and rising to expectations of masculinity in the village. Lastly, his marriage and his inheritance of Fiifi's work would reflect an improvement in his family's social standing in the village—previously, Effia had been looked down upon because of her marriage to a British soldier instead of a Fante chief.

Additionally, it is worth noting the way in which Quey's language reflects his schooling in London and the fact that he still feels halfway between England and the Gold Coast, culturally. He calls the people on the Gold Coast "they" instead of "we," and he also talks about their culture in a way that reflects stereotypes that the British have with phrases like "in the bush" and "eat or be eaten."

Part 1: Ness Quotes

"I did it," Ness says. She has spent the night hidden in the left corner of the room, watching this man she's been told is her husband become the animal he's been told that he is.

Related Characters: Ness (speaker), Sam, The Devil, Marcus

Related Themes:

Page Number: 80

Explanation and Analysis

At the plantation Ness refers to as "Hell," she is married off to another slave named Sam, a large, muscular man who doesn't speak any English. One night in a fury, Sam destroys the slave quarters, and when the master of the plantation ("the Devil") comes to investigate, Ness lies and says that she did it, for which she is brutally whipped. Ness's description here comes to show the injustice of the slave system and specifically the cruelty of the way in which white plantation owners view and treat male slaves. The master treats Sam like an animal by whipping, beating, and essentially "mating" him. In this passage, Ness watches how Sam becomes angrier and angrier in response to this treatment and starts to fulfill those expectations of animalistic brutality. In the final chapter, Marcus describes the same idea: how the poor treatment of black men makes them angry, and that anger is then used to justify further poor treatment in a self-fulfilling prophesy.

Part 1: James Quotes

"There's more at stake here than just slavery, my brother. It's a question of who will own the land, the people, the power. You cannot stick a knife in a goat and then say, Now I will remove my knife slowly, so let things be easy and clean, let there be no mess. There will always be blood."

Related Characters: Quey (speaker), James, Nana Yaa

Related Themes:

Page Number: 93

Explanation and Analysis

As Quey, James, and Nana Yaa travel back to Nana Yaa's village, they stay for a night at the hut of an old friend of Quey's named David. David, Quey, and James discuss whether the British will abolish slavery soon, but Quey elaborates here that the British are now more interested in taking control of the land than in slavery. This explanation demonstrates the aggression of the British towards not only the people they are selling, but also now towards even the people that they have been working alongside in the effort to colonize the Gold Coast. Quey argues also that slavery and colonization are also two sides of the same coin, as they both can represent the knife in Quey's metaphor. It is also worth noting how Quey's language has changed since becoming reintegrated into Effia's village, because he uses language in the same way that Fiifi tells an earlier story about birds: his metaphor is informed by experiences in the village and is a means of storytelling. This serves as an example of how one's culture shapes the way one thinks and acts.

"That was my father and grandfather's work. It is not mine." He didn't add that because of their work, he didn't have to work, but instead could live off the family name and power.

Related Characters: James (speaker), James Collins, Quey, Akosua, Amma Atta

Related Themes:

Page Number: 103

Explanation and Analysis

James marries Amma while remaining loyal to Akosua, a poor girl in another village, and so he comes up with many different excuses so that he doesn't have to consummate his marriage with Amma. In response, she tells him to go to Mampanyin, an apothecary in the village. Mampanyin criticizes James for his participation in the slave trade, but he responds that he does not take part in the slave trade. However, Gyasi also makes a point of noting the information that James holds back: the privilege that he enjoys in his life because his father and grandfather took part in an immoral system. James thus inherits the legacy of a family who participated in the slave trade, and he and his descendants are cursed for many generations because of it. This mirrors the experience of the characters in America; even though many of them were not slaves, their lives have been permanently altered by the fact that their forbearers were once slaves and continue to face that racism.

Part 1: Kojo Quotes

He loved the look of those boats, loved that his hands helped build and maintain them, but Ma Aku always said it was bad juju, him and all the other freed Negroes working on ships. She said there was something evil about them building up the things that had brought them to America in the first place, the very things that had tried to drag them under.

Related Characters: Kojo / Jo, Ma Aku, Anna

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 111

Explanation and Analysis

The beginning of Jo's chapter finds him working on boats in Baltimore's harbor, having successfully escaped slavery as a baby. Ma Aku tells him why she believes it's not right for him to be working on boats, seeing as boats are what brought them to America and transported them to slavery. In this chapter and in others, boats (and particularly water) gain this association with slavery and how they served as a means of separating a person from their heritage. At first Jo enjoys working on the boats, perhaps because his ability to work on them is due to the fact that he is a free man, and due to the fact that he doesn't personally remember slavery and did not fully feel its oppression (he escaped as a baby with the help of Ma Aku). However, after his pregnant wife, Anna, is kidnapped and presumably sold into slavery, Kojo can no longer go near a boat, recognizing the oppression that the boats represented to him and other black people, and finally acknowledging that he cannot fully escape the history of that oppression.

He would never truly know who his people were, and who their people were before them, and if there were stories to be heard about where he had come from, he would never hear them.

Related Characters: Kojo / Jo, Ma Aku, Sam, Ness, Anna, Esi

Related Themes:

Page Number: 130

Explanation and Analysis

When Jo's wife, Anna, is kidnapped, he goes back to their home and lies in bed with his adopted mother, Ma Aku. She comforts him in the way she had when he was a boy, crying for his parents, Sam and Ness, whom he would never know, and the people and culture before them that he would not inherit. This is particularly devastating to consider when thinking about Esi, who only two generations earlier, enjoyed asking her friend Tansi about the history of the kente cloth, for example. Jo becomes the first (but certainly not the last) character in America who loses connection to his parents, and therefore his connection to the Gold Coast. Thus, one of the lasting legacies of slavery is an entire people who have been severed from their heritage, family, and culture. However, Kojo still has Ma Aku (who was also from the Gold Coast) to help bridge this gap, and the connection he bears through his name. Unlike Kojo, Kojo's son H loses the ties to his parents entirely (only retaining the placeholder name they gave him) when he is forced back into slavery as a baby.

Part 1: Abena Quotes

❝ An unmarried twenty-five-year-old woman was unheard of, in her village or any other on this continent or the next. But there were only a few men in her village, and none of them wanted to take a chance with Unlucky's daughter.

Related Characters: Abena, James

Related Themes:

Page Number: 133

Explanation and Analysis

The start of Abena's chapter introduces the main conflict in her life: the fact that she cannot find a husband. Even four generations after Effia and Esi, there are still very rigid gender expectations placed on women, as, at twenty-five, Abena is considered to be very old to be unmarried. Furthermore, the tragedy of Abena's life is that she is doomed to be single because of her father's misfortune—she inherits the family curse from him, and as a result, no one wants to marry her. Even though her childhood friend Ohene is in love with her, he still cannot marry her because he is unable to afford the bride price. Thus, while James had hoped that his daughter might have a better life than he did (namely because she would not be plagued by James's involvement in the slave trade), Abena is still punished for the choices her father had made.

Part 2: H Quotes

❝ Mm-hmm. See, that's what I thought. You was young. Slavery ain't nothin' but a dot in your eye, huh? If nobody tell you, I'ma tell you. War may be over but it ain't ended.

Related Characters: H

Related Themes:

Page Number: 158

Explanation and Analysis

At the beginning of H's chapter, he is arrested for looking at a white woman; in jail, his cellmate comments that it looked like H was walking around proud and free and asks how old H was when the war ended. When H says that he was about thirteen, the man explains in this quote that the war may be over, but that doesn't mean the issues underlying it immediately went away. This passage comes at a turning point in the novel, particularly for the characters in America: though they now have the ability to be free from slavery, that doesn't mean that they are free from racism and systemic oppression. In this chapter alone, H still has to deal with an unjust legal system when he is unfairly imprisoned and then sold for nine years to work at a mine through the convict leasing system. Most of the other people who work in the mines are also former slaves, demonstrating how this system is essentially slavery under a different name, using different racist excuses to justify throwing black people in jail.

Part 2: Akua Quotes

❝ In her dreams the fire was shaped like a woman holding two babies to her heart. The firewoman would carry these two little girls with her all the way to the woods of the Inland and then the babies would vanish, and the firewoman's sadness would send orange and red and hints of blue swarming every tree and every bush in sight.

Related Characters: Akua / Crazy Woman , Maame, Effia,

Esi

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 177

Explanation and Analysis

Akua's chapter begins with her having nightmares, following an incident in which a British tourist had been burned by the villagers. Her dreams, as described here, bear a striking similarity to circumstances at the beginning of the novel, in which Maame lost both of her daughters: she lost Effia when she escaped from the Fante village because of the fire that swept through the woods, and she lost Esi in another fire in the Asante village. This nightmare haunts Akua because those two sisters were separated, and Effia (Akua's great-great-great grandmother) and her family benefitted from the destructive force of the slave trade, at the expense of Esi and her descendants. The fact that this dream haunts Akua, even though she doesn't fully understand it, makes the argument that members of a family can inherit the consequences of their predecessors' actions, as Akua does when she sets her hut on fire.

"You are a sinner and a heathen," he said. Akua nodded. The teachers had told them this before. "Your mother had no husband when she came here to me, pregnant, begging for help. I helped her because that is what God would have wanted me to do. But she was a sinner and a heathen, like you."

Related Characters: The Missionary (speaker), Akua / Crazy Woman , Abena, Ohene Nyarko

Related Themes:

Page Number: 183

Explanation and Analysis

When Ohene Nyarko would not marry Abena, even though she was pregnant with his child (Akua), Abena went to the missionary church in Kumasi to seek help in having her baby. Akua had then been raised in the church, and this exchange between Akua and the Missionary demonstrates that underneath the church's message of love, the Missionary had ulterior motives. After the British stopped the slave trade, many remained in order to colonize the Gold Coast—and the missionaries were no exception. Under the guise of wanting to spread Christianity, the missionaries were then able to take control of the land and, in many ways, the culture. Here, the Missionary's racially and religiously charged language of "heathen" implies that not only is he trying to spread Christian values, but alongside it an ideology of cultural superiority. Akua, knowing no other culture, goes along with his teachings until she realizes how harmful they have been to her understanding of her own cultural heritage.

Later, the deception of the Missionary is also revealed; even though Abena had gone to the church for help, she did not intend to become Christian, and when the Missionary tried to baptize her, he accidentally drowned her (though it's unclear if it really was an accident). His colonialist agenda and ideology therefore were so harmful that it literally killed a person whom he was trying to convert.

Part 2: Willie Quotes

How she could put his skin to good use, be less cautious if she were him. If she could, she would put her voice in his body, in his skin.

Related Characters: Willie, Robert Clifton, Carson / Sonny

Related Themes:

Page Number: 210

Explanation and Analysis

Willie and her husband, Robert, move up to Harlem together with their son Carson (later known as Sonny). However, as they walk around, searching for a job, they quickly realize that Robert would do a lot better if he went out alone—he is so light skinned that people assume he is white, until they see he has a black wife. Robert is timid when he tries to find a job using this advantage, afraid of what might happen if he is found out. Meanwhile, Willie, who has a hard time getting a job at a jazz club because of her very dark skin, envies Robert for his skin color. This dynamic serves as another extension of internalized racism in the society, as Robert is rewarded for adopting markers of white culture and for pushing away his African-American heritage. When Willie also sees in the jazz club that they are hiring men with darker skin, but only light-skinned women, she sees how there is also bias against her because of her gender, in addition to her skin color.

Part 2: Yaw Quotes

"This is the problem of history. We cannot know that which we were not there to see and hear and experience for ourselves. We must rely upon the words of others [...] We believe the one who has the power. He is the one who gets to write the story."

Related Characters: Yaw (speaker), Esi, Ness

Related Themes:

Page Number: 226

Explanation and Analysis

Yaw grows up to be a history teacher at a school, and at the same time he is writing a book that argues in favor of Ghanaian independence from the British. He begins each year of lessons by explaining to the students that history is storytelling, because people in the present day can only rely on the stories of those who won history's conflicts. This relates to the characters in the novel who were descended from slaves, because the powerlessness of people like Ness and Esi meant that their stories became lost even to their children. Yaw's lesson in this passage also hints at Gyasi's overarching aim for the book: even though it is a fictional story, *Homegoing* attempts to illuminate the lives of those who were powerless, oppressed, and voiceless, so that readers might have a fuller view of history.

"What I know now my son: Evil begets evil. It grows. It transmutes, so that sometimes you cannot see that the evil in the world began as the evil in your own home. I'm sorry you have suffered."

Related Characters: Akua / Crazy Woman (speaker), Yaw, Marjorie, Marcus

Related Themes:

Page Number: 242

Explanation and Analysis

As an adult, Yaw returns to his childhood village in order to see his estranged mother, Akua, again. When the two reunite, Akua apologizes to Yaw for burning down their hut when he was a baby, killing his two sisters and scarring his face permanently. In this passage, Akua acknowledges how she and Yaw had been affected by (and in fact cursed by) her family's participation in the slave trade several generations earlier, and also how that evil has manifested itself in a legacy of racism in the world. As a direct result of the family's actions, the slave trade with the British was able to flourish on the Gold Coast, and many generations of people were then enslaved and brutalized. However, even though Akua is able to reconcile with her son, the family still carries that evil until Marjorie is able to connect with Marcus in the final chapter, helping to make amends between their two families.

Part 2: Sonny Quotes

He was mad at her because he didn't have a father, and she was mad at him because he'd become as absent as his own.

Related Characters: Carson / Sonny, Willie, Robert Clifton

Related Themes:

Page Number: 245

Explanation and Analysis

At the start of Sonny's chapter, his mother, Willie, bails him out of jail after he has been arrested in a Civil Rights march. She tells him that he needs to spend less time in jail and more time with his children, prompting more anger between the two of them. Willie and Sonny have a difficult relationship because Willie didn't like to talk about Sonny's father, Robert. This sparked a great deal of animosity between the two of them, because Sonny finds it difficult to fully understand his own identity without knowing what had happened between his mother and his father. Willie, on the other hand, is frustrated with Sonny because she had always hoped that he would grow up to be a better man than his father had been. In reality, however, Sonny seems to be just as stagnant. All of this occurs on a backdrop of inequality and segregation experienced by African-Americans in New York and all around the country during this time period. This inequality—lacking equal job opportunities, lacking equal education, lacking stability, and experiencing police brutality—all presses down on Sonny in a way that soon sends him into a downward spiral of drug addiction.

"We can't go back to something we ain't never been to in the first place. It ain't ours anymore. This is." She swept her hand in front of her, as though she were trying to catch all of Harlem in it, all of New York, all of America.

Related Characters: Amani Zulema (speaker), Carson /

Sonny

Related Themes:

Page Number: 255

Explanation and Analysis

When Sonny starts to work in a jazz club, he meets a jazz singer named Amani Zulemi. Amani explains that her name means "harmony" in Swahili, but that she isn't into the "Back to Africa" movement like Sonny is. Amani's explanation elaborates on one of the main projects of the book: demonstrating how the slave trade permanently altered an entire people's connection to their heritage. While the characters on the Gold Coast still maintained their language, their history, and their stories, many people who had been brought over by slave ships lost their parents, and subsequently their heritage. Amani also points out, however, how African-Americans subsequently created their own form of heritage and culture: through places like Harlem where predominantly African-American communities sprung up, and art forms like jazz. Even though America still has institutionalized racism in its laws and in its society (which is what prompts Sonny to want to leave it), it has also become their only home.

Part 2: Marjorie Quotes

Her father had told her that the necklace was a part of their family history and she was to never take it off, never give it away. Now it reflected the ocean water before them, gold waves shimmering in the black stone.

Related Characters: Marjorie, Akua / Crazy Woman , Yaw, Effia, Maame

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 267

Explanation and Analysis

When Marjorie is about to start high school, she goes to visit her grandmother, Akua, in Ghana, and the two go swimming in the water near the Cape Coast Castle. Akua comments that she has the stone that her father, Yaw, had given her just a year earlier, deeming her old enough to take care of it. Yaw's instructions to Marjorie highlight its importance to their family and its representation of their heritage, as it has now been handed down seven generations, all the way back to Maame and Effia—in the same way that Marjorie and her family has retained their Ghanaian heritage, even though they have moved to America. It is also symbolic that Marjorie is swimming in water with her grandmother as they discuss her inheritance of the black stone, because for Esi and her descendants, the water is what separated them from their heritage. Yaw's demand that Marjorie never take it off and never give it away is also what makes Marjorie's gesture at the end, when she gives the stone to Marcus, particularly meaningful, because she recognizes him as a member of her own family, even if they have very different histories.

As a last defense, Marjorie had heard him tell the principal that she was "not like other black girls." And, somehow, that had been worse. She had already given him up.

Related Characters: Marjorie, Graham

Related Themes:

Page Number: 280

Explanation and Analysis

Marjorie starts to date a white boy in her class named Graham, but he is unable to take her to prom because his father disapproves of their relationship and the school deems it inappropriate. Graham's argument that Marjorie is "not like other black girls" because she is Ghanaian makes her feel worse, because it plays into racist stereotypes of her black female classmates. Marjorie already feels as though she doesn't fit in, and so recognizing that she does not share the same cultural markers as the other black girls in the school makes her feel like even more of an outsider. Additionally, Graham's statement supports the same social expectations that made Robert Clifton's fate so tragic: the fact that Marjorie is better than other black girls because she is Ghanaian rather than American echoes colonialist ideology. Additionally, it seems that because of her race and her gender, Marjorie is unable to speak for herself to the principal, and instead must let Graham argue for her.

Part 2: Marcus Quotes

And if he slammed the book down, then everyone in the room would stare and all they would see would be his skin and his anger, and they'd think they knew something about him, and it would be the same something that had justified putting his great-grandpa H in prison, only it would be different too, less obvious than it once was.

Related Characters: Marcus, H

Related Themes:

Page Number: 289-290

Explanation and Analysis

Marcus is getting his Ph.D. at Stanford, and he describes how originally he wanted to focus his work on the convict leasing system that had stolen years from his great-grandfather H's life. However, as he embarked on the project, he found himself getting increasingly angry about the systemic oppression that black people had faced before and since then. The stereotypes of black men fed into that oppression (as it had, for example, led to the brutal beating and eventual hanging of Sam, or to H's imprisonment in the first place), and Marcus points out that those stereotypes still shape people's opinions today. Even though the racism is less explicit and less codified, people still associate his skin color and his anger. So even though Marcus did not experience those prejudicial systems himself, he still feels the remnants of those systems even in the opinions of some of the students around him.

How could he explain to Marjorie that he wasn't supposed to be here? Alive. Free. That the fact that he had been born, that he wasn't in a jail cell somewhere, was not by dint of his pulling himself up by the bootstraps, not by hard work or belief in the American Dream, but by mere chance.

Related Characters: Marcus, Marjorie, Effia, Esi

Related Themes:

Page Number: 296

Explanation and Analysis

When Marcus and Marjorie meet in grad school at Stanford, they quickly become friends, and she accompanies him on a trip to Pratt City in order to help with his research. However, he quickly realizes that he wants his research to capture more than one time and place; he wants it to show how much these various systems of oppression have affected nearly every African-American person. In a way, this aim is similar to Gyasi's own project, as she tries to show the scope of time and the various ways in which Marcus could have had a very different life—for example, if Kojo had been unable to escape slavery like his parents, or if Sonny hadn't been able to get clean from his heroin addiction. Yet at the same time, Gyasi also makes clear in tracking the family tree that Marcus's fate was also due to the chance misfortune of Esi's capture and that she was sold to the British, while her sister, Effia, married a British officer. He could just as easily have the same heritage that Marjorie does, but instead he and his family had been bogged down by the legacy of slavery and have inherited a much different history.

"Here," Marjorie said. "Have it." She lifted the stone from her neck, and placed it around Marcus's. "Welcome home."

Related Characters: Marjorie (speaker), Marcus

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 300

Explanation and Analysis

In the final pages of the novel, Marjorie and Marcus travel back to Ghana together and visit the Cape Coast Castle. On the beach, Marcus is forced to face his fear of water as Marjorie leads him into the ocean. Once he gets there, Marjorie welcomes him home and gives him her stone necklace. This gesture is highly symbolic, as the necklace is representative of Ghanaian heritage. Marjorie's family has been able to pass it down for seven generations, while Marcus's branch of the family tree lost its stone when Esi was taken from the dungeon of the Cape Coast Castle and sold into slavery. By returning the necklace to Marcus, Marjorie acknowledges their shared origins, even if they have had drastically different histories that have then led them to the beach in Ghana. This reconciliation between the two families serves as a small way of trying to make amends and bridge the gap between their experiences. Gyasi seems to acknowledge that no one can right the injustices that have occurred due to the slave trade, but that there is some hope for a future world in which Marjorie can also find a home both in Ghana and in the United States, and in which Marcus is able to reconnect to a heritage that he

once 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.

PART 1: EFFIA

The night Effia is born, a **fire** is raging through the woods in Fanteland. It moves through the forest for days, wrecking everything in its path. Effia's father, Cobbe Otcher, leaves Effia with his first wife, Baaba, to survey his yams, which have been damaged. He is haunted by the sight of the fire, and tells Baaba never to speak of what happened that day.

The beginning of the novel introduces the recurring motif of fire. Here and throughout the book, fire represents destruction and the pain of slavery that Effia and her descendants ultimately support at the expense of Effia's half-sister, Esi.

The villagers say that Effia had been born of that **fire**, and that was why Baaba had no milk. Effia is nursed by another of Cobbe's wives, but she bites the woman until the woman is too afraid to feed her. Effia then grows thin and screams all day. Baaba dreams of leaving the baby in the dark forest, but Cobbe commands Baaba to love the girl.

Effia is said to be born of that fire because, as is ultimately revealed, she is actually the daughter of Cobbe's servant Maame, whom he had raped. Thus, even before Effia and her son become officially involved in the slave trade, she is already a product of a society that allows and perpetuates slavery.

Effia grows older. When Effia is three, Baaba has a son named Fiifi. The first day that Effia holds Fiifi, she accidentally drops him. Fiifi is undisturbed by this, but Baaba beats Effia with her stirring stick, leaving hot stew burning into her flesh. When Baaba finishes, Effia is covered with sores, screaming and crying.

Family is vital to the characters in Homegoing. *Baaba's bad treatment of Effia, in contrast to the tender way she treats Fiifi, highlights the importance of being related by blood, as Effia is not Baaba's biological daughter.*

When Cobbe comes home and discovers what happened, he and Baaba fight into the night, and he beats her for the cruel way she treated Effia. This begins a cycle: Baaba beats Effia; Cobbe beats Baaba.

While Baaba treats Effia poorly, Cobbe protects her because she is in fact biologically related to him. This cycle of beating also demonstrates how women experience violence at the hands of both women and men.

When Effia turns twelve, she begins to blossom into a young woman. The men of the village wait for her to begin her menstrual cycle so that they can ask Cobbe for her hand in marriage. The family starts to receive gifts from the men.

The gifts and attitudes of the men reveal the key role of the women in society and for individual families: to be married off for a good price and to have children.

In 1775, one of the village girls named Adwoa Aidoo becomes the first to receive a proposal from a British soldier. The first time the soldier visits the village, Adwoa's mother asks Effia's parents to show him around the village. Effia tags along.

Here, Gyasi introduces the most insidious form of colonization on the part of the British: marrying women from the village so that their political ties to the British become familial ties as well.

When Effia meets the soldier, she hides behind Cobbe's leg, as she has never seen a white man before. Cobbe and Baaba show him their compound, explaining that each wife has her own hut that she shares with her children. The man's eyes grow wide, finally understanding that the huts are where they live.

The family structure is extremely male-centric. The men have more freedom in their marriages by being able to move wherever they want within the compound and marry several women, while the women are limited to a single hut and a single man.


A few weeks later, the officer returns to pay his respects to Adwoa's mother. Effia and the other villagers gather to see the goods that he has brought: fifteen pounds for the bride price, fabric, millet, gold, and iron.

Adwoa's marriage demonstrates why such arrangements with the British can be economically beneficial for the village. However, the villagers cannot yet see the immediate harms of colonization.

Cobbe then pulls Effia aside, explaining that the white men bring those goods to trade with the village, and that there will be more like him to take away the village's daughters. Cobbe tells Effia that he has bigger plans for her, however, and that she will not marry a white man. Baaba scowls at this, though Cobbe does not see her.

Cobbe's statement highlights the importance of marriage as a political tool for the Fantes. Rather than wanting Effia to marry for love or even for money, Cobbe hopes that Effia will marry for power in the village. Baaba's scowl suggests that she disagrees with this plan, foreshadowing her later involvement in Effia's marriage.

Effia hopes that she will be married to Abeeku Badu, who is next in line to be the village chief. He had visited their compound four times in the previous month, and later that week, he and Effia are to share a meal together.

Abeeku's status as chief implies that Effia (and perhaps other young people in the village) recognizes the importance of marrying for power or status.

Abeeku brings a goat for Effia, while his servants bring yams and fish and palm wine. She had prepared herself for the dinner by oiling her body, braiding her hair, and putting gold in her ears.

The rituals of courtship play into gender stereotypes: the men are meant to hunt and provide food, while the women try to make themselves more attractive to the men.

When the dinner begins, Effia asks if Abeeku will work for the British. Her parents glare at her for speaking out of turn, but Abeeku smiles at her. He tells her he will work with the British, facilitating trade between the British and the Asantes.

Abeeku's answer is dangerously innocuous, considering the fact that he is "trading" human beings. The language he uses is another way in which society makes it easier for people to take part in a morally reprehensible system.


Effia nods and stays quiet, which she notes pleases Baaba. She has come to realize that Baaba prefers to remain silent and wants Effia to do the same.

Here, Baaba again exhibits some of the gender stereotypes in society: that women are meant to be seen and not heard.

Abeeku finishes eating and tells Baaba to let him know when Effia is "ready." That night, Baaba tells Effia that when her menstrual blood comes, she must hide it and only tell Baaba. Effia sees the desperation in her mother's eyes and agrees.

Abeeku's statement reinforces the stereotype of women's sole purpose being to provide children, because he (and other men in the society) will not marry Effia until they know that she has reached sexual maturity, signified by her first menstrual period.

The next spring, the chief of the village grows ill, and Abeeku marries two women as he prepares to become chief. One of them, named Millicent, is the daughter of a Fante woman and a British soldier. The soldier had died, leaving his wife and two children with a significant amount of wealth. Millicent and her mother visit Effia often, saying that they would soon be part of the same family.

Not only are there expectations on the women to provide men with children, but there are also stereotypical expectations on the men. Abeeku marries two women in preparation for becoming chief, demonstrating that having many wives is an exhibition of power and masculinity.

On one such visit, Baaba asks Millicent's mother what it is like in the Castle. Millicent's mother says that they are very well taken care of, and they pay a good bride price. But Millicent's mother notes that she is glad her daughter married a Fante man, because then she could be close to her and marry the wife of a chief.

Baaba begins to plot against Effia's marriage to Abeeku so that she will no longer have to deal with her. To Baaba, Effia continues to represent a source of humiliation in that she must take care of a daughter who isn't hers.

Two days after Effia's fifteenth birthday, she has her first menstrual period. She tells Baaba, who tells Effia to keep this development a secret. When Effia asks why, Baaba pinches Effia's tongue with her fingernails and tells her not to question her mother, threatening to make sure that Effia would never speak again.

Baaba's reaction displays violence against women as she forces Effia to lie in a way that will make Abeeku not want to marry her. Baaba's harsh scolding also introduces a recurring idea that children should not question their parents.

The following week, the old chief dies and Abeeku is crowned the next chief. Three days later, he gathers up the men of the village in his compound. He feeds them for two days and gets them drunk on palm wine until their laughter can be heard throughout the village.

Here, the dangers of colonization and the atrocities of slavery are overwhelmed by a male desire to participate in a culture that makes them feel powerful and part of a group.

Effia asks Baaba what they're doing, but Baaba tells her that it does not concern her. Baaba has stopped beating Effia in exchange for keeping the secret about her period.

The withholding of information from the women because trade is supposed to belong to the men also becomes dangerous for Effia, as she only finds out what is happening at the Castle after she has already married a British officer.

Cobbe and Fiifi return from the meeting. Cobbe carries a new machete, and shouts that they will make the village "rich with blood." That night, Effia crawls over to Fiifi in their hut, and asks what they are planning. Fiifi at first tells her it is the business of men, but then he explains that they are helping the British and Asantes with their trade, helping them sell slaves to the British.

The gender dynamics play a big part in allowing colonization and slavery to happen, as Abeeku makes the men feel wealthy and powerful in order to coerce them into participating in this trade. Fiifi's enthusiasm here and the results of his participation will leave a stain on Effia's branch of the family for many generations to come.

In the days following the chief ceremony, Cobbe continues to ask Baaba what is happening with Effia, as he had hoped that she would be Abeeku's wife by now. Baaba replies that she is not ready. Cobbe sends Baaba and Effia over to Abeeku's compound once a week so that he can remember how much he likes Effia.

The continued emphasis on Effia's ability to be Abeeku's wife and Cobbe's scheming to get her over to Abeeku's compound prove that her primary value to Cobbe lies in her marriage prospects.


On one such visit to Abeeku's compound, Baaba and Effia are there at the same time as British soldiers. When the soldiers tour the compound, Abeeku's wives tell Effia and Baaba not to speak. When the soldiers enter the hut, Abeeku introduces them as his wives and daughters.

Once again, the women are told to be silent—and that they should not speak particularly in the presence of men that Abeeku is trying to impress.

One of the soldiers, James Collins, says hello to each woman in bad Fante. When he reaches Effia, she giggles. He asks Abeeku if Effia is his wife; Abeeku tells him she is not. James looks at her intently before leaving the compound.

Here, Gyasi demonstrates how much Effia's fate is controlled by the men around her. This exchange is essentially James asking Abeeku if he can marry Effia or not.

James Collins is the newly appointed governor of the Cape Coast Castle. Within a week, he comes back to ask Baaba for Effia's hand. Cobbe is outraged because he wants her to marry Abeeku, but Baaba convinces him that Effia should marry James because Effia might not have children, and the soldier is willing to marry her regardless. He's also offered thirty pounds upfront and twenty-five shillings a month—more than any previous bride price in the village.

Baaba again shows her bias against the child that is not her own, spreading lies about Effia in order to send her to the Castle and away from the village. Baaba also shows herself to be just as resourceful as the men in plotting, as she almost single-handedly arranges Effia's marriage to a British soldier even against her husband's wishes.

Cobbe tells Baaba that they must make Abeeku think that it is his own idea for Effia to marry James Collins. To do so, Baaba tells Abeeku that there is evil in Effia's spirit and that she cannot bear children. Additionally, she says if Effia marries James, he will think fondly of their village and trade will prosper.

Baaba's point about strengthening trade shows how easy it was for colonization to become widespread, because the Fantes believed that they would benefit equally from this trade. However, as the novel will later show, colonization ultimately destroyed the village's culture and their autonomy.

Abeeku calls Effia into the room, and tells Baaba and Cobbe that they are right—Effia should marry James Collins. Cobbe weeps openly, but Baaba is happy. When Abeeku leaves, Baaba gives Effia a **black stone** pendant, which she says is a piece of her mother. Effia notes that Baaba seems relieved as she leaves.

The black stone symbolizes one's connection to their heritage. Although Effia doesn't yet know it, her biological mother, Maame (whose name means mother), left her the stone. Effia in turn passes the stone on to her descendants, ending with Marjorie at the end of the novel.

Effia is married in the chapel of the Cape Coast Castle, reciting words she doesn't understand. Effia's family does not attend the ceremony, because Baaba convinced them that Effia was a bad omen.

Effia's wedding serves as an early example in the novel of how Christianity is used as a means of colonization, as Effia is expected to conform to Christianity in order to marry James.

James Collins tries to make Effia comfortable, learning more and more Fante words so that he can tell her how beautiful she is. He leads her on a tour of the Castle: the parade ground, soldiers' quarters, stockyard, pond, hospital, smithy, kitchen. Effia is in awe.

Although it appears that James is attempting to learn about Effia's culture because he values it and wants to preserve it, later interactions (like when he sends their son to school in England) imply that James believes his own culture is superior.

Effia notices a breeze coming up from holes in the floor. She asks what's below, and James Collins says "cargo." She hears a faint crying sound. She asks if there are people down there. When he says yes, she demands to be taken home and starts screaming. James puts his hand over her mouth, telling her that her home is no better. Effia remembers Baaba's treatment and realizes that he is right.

This exchange sheds light on how British marriage to Fante women is such a cunning means of colonization, because it makes individual resistance very difficult. Even though Effia knows that the torture in the dungeon is morally wrong, she is completely powerless to stop it and thus becomes complacent.

James Collins leads Effia up to his quarters on the top floor. She can see out onto the **ocean**, and the cargo ships get smaller and smaller in the distance. She wants to ask him what the ship is carrying, but she is tired of trying to decipher his poor Fante.

The language barrier between Effia and James also allows for a convenient excuse not to know what is happening in the dungeon or what is to become of the captured slaves.

James Collins leads her to the bed, and he and Effia consummate their marriage. Baaba had told Effia what was expected of her, but James seems very unsure, and so Effia takes the lead.

Even though Effia thinks James is unsure about how to consummate the marriage, it is later revealed that James has two children back in England—in other words, he has had sex before. With this detail in mind, it seems that James is hesitant to have sex with Effia because she is Fante.

After a few weeks, Effia feels very comfortable in her new routine. She likes the attention that James Collins pays to her and the fact that she doesn't have to compete with any other wives. However, she knows she is not supposed to care for James, because her father had wanted her to marry a Fante chief rather than a white man. But instead, Baaba had cast Effia out of the village entirely.

Even after marrying James, Effia understands that she has in some way disappointed her father because she did not elevate the family status in the village, as she would have by marrying Abeeku.

Effia has also heard the Englishmen call her and other Fante women "wenches" instead of wives, in order to keep their conscience clean with their god. However, Effia and James Collins continue to be more and more affectionate: they teach each other their language, and James tells Effia that he loves her every day.

The British men maintain this language difference ("wenches" rather than "wives") despite the fact that they were married in the church. This is deeply racist, as these men believe that their Fante wives are lesser than their British wives.

One day, Effia asks about James Collins's British wife. He explains that her name is Anne. They married ten years ago, but he's barely seen her since. He had two children with her, but they've spent very little time together. Effia has a hard time understanding how James can be satisfied with having so few children, when chiefs can have nearly a hundred. James occasionally receives a letter from Anne, and when he does, he lies very far away from Effia in bed.

This revelation illuminates how the British continue to believe their culture is superior. Even though having multiple wives is normal in Effia's culture, James clearly believes he is betraying Anne by marrying another woman. Additionally, when he receives letters from Anne, he often feels more loyal to her—presumably, because she is white.

On this night, however, James Collins tells Effia that he wants children with her. Effia cringes in worry. First, she thinks she may be a bad mother, because she had such a bad mother herself. Furthermore, even though Baaba's insistence that Effia could not have children had been a ruse, Effia worries that she may not actually be able to have children because months have passed since the night of their wedding, and she still hasn't gotten pregnant. She wonders if she is cursed.

Effia's worry stems again from the gender stereotypes in her society, which asserts that she is not of value if she cannot have a child. There is also a recurring concern throughout the novel that certain qualities are passed down even if they are not genetic (like Effia's ability to be a good mother), almost like another form of familial heritage.

Effia recalls a story that the villagers used to tell in which a young girl had accidentally spilled hot oil on her sleeping father, disfiguring his face badly. She was then banished from the house and wandered the Gold Coast for years. When she returned at seventeen, a boy offered to marry her even though she was destitute. She became pregnant, but when the baby came out it was half-caste, with light skin and blue eyes, and died within four days. She lived under a palm tree for the rest of her life.

The anxiety that Effia feels over the "half-caste child" is echoed by several characters later, including her son Quey. Quey and characters like Robert Clifton and Marjorie struggle because they are not white, but they feel that they are not entirely black either. They experience both systemic oppression and a feeling that they lack a true sense of identity.

Effia knows that the village tells the story to warn children about hot oil, but she wonders about the half-caste child, which was an evil powerful enough to force the woman to live under a palm tree. She thinks that even Cobbe had disapproved of her union with the white soldier.

The story that the village tells even implies that these biracial children are evil, which adds to the discomfort that characters feel over being biracial, and the discomfort that Effia feels in being married to a British man.

Effia and Adwoa, the other girl from her village who had married a British soldier, become friends at the Castle. Adwoa tells Effia that she needs to become pregnant in order to stay, and offers her a root to put under her bed as they have sex. She tells Effia to make sure that James does not see the root, and helps prepare her for the evening.

This interaction demonstrates how heritage can provide both a sense of identity and a sense of belonging. Effia feels comforted by Adwoa's advice, knowing that the two women share a cultural background and can speak freely with each other.

When James Collins arrives home that evening, Effia pounces on him. He grows excited by her seduction, but when the two finish, he notices the root under the bed. She tells him Adwoa gave her the root for fertility. James tells her that he can't have any voodoo or black magic—that it's "not Christian."

Christianity as a form of colonization returns here, as James Collins uses the phrase "not Christian" to mean "not good," implying that his religion is superior, and Effia's "voodoo" and "black magic" is evil.

The next day, Effia tells Adwoa what had happened. Adwoa grows frustrated that the British men don't understand the truth about what is good and what is evil. She tells Effia that the root may not work now.

Adwoa, on the other hand, provides a different perspective, arguing that no religion is implicitly better than any other.

Soon after, Dutch officers visit the Castle. That afternoon, Effia and other Fante women at the Castle sit in the shade of a tree. One woman who arrived at the Castle relatively recently, Eccoah, complains that her husband cannot pronounce her name. Adwoa says that it's better to use an English name so that one's own name doesn't have to be butchered all the time.

Names are an important recurring motif, relating to a sense of identity. In making the women use English names, the British are inherently robbing them of their cultural heritage and a sense of self.

Eccoah also says that her husband comes up from the dungeons smelling like feces. She says there are women down there who are just like them. The other women grow quiet, as they never speak about the dungeons. Effia realizes that even though she knows that there are slaves in the dungeon, she had never thought that they would look like her—that James Collins would return in the evening haunted by seeing women who reminded him of her.

Gyasi again relays how easy it is for the women to ignore the people in the dungeons, because they are essentially powerless to stop it. Additionally, by centering her story on two sisters, Gyasi effectively shows how easy it might have been for their fates to have been exchanged, and how only by chance did they have such radically different experiences.

In the spring, Effia realizes she is pregnant. James Collins is thrilled at the news. But soon after, they receive word from Effia's village that Cobbe has fallen ill. Effia wants to travel back to the village, as she has not been back to her village since her wedding two years prior and has not heard from anyone in her family since then.

James's excitement at hearing that Effia is pregnant does imply that the two share a relatively affectionate relationship, and that he does not share the same fears about having a biracial child that she does—perhaps because their child represents an even stronger alliance between the two cultures.

Effia and a house girl travel to Effia's village. Baaba stands in the entranceway when she arrives, scowling. Baaba leads Effia to Cobbe. No one knows why Cobbe is ill, and Fiifi explains that Cobbe cannot speak. Fiifi says that he was the one who sent for Effia, even though Baaba did not want her to come. Effia thanks him.

Even in Cobbe's final moments, Baaba still cannot bring herself to love the girl that she raised because Effia was not biologically hers. Baaba continues to pit the town against Effia instead.

Fiifi then reveals that Baaba is not Effia's mother. Effia is actually the child of Cobbe and a house girl (Maame) who ran away into the **fire** the night Effia was born. The **stone** that Effia wears belonged to Maame, not Baaba.

This revelation finally explains some of Baaba's cruelty towards Effia, as blood relations are vital in this society.

Fiifi steps outside, and Cobbe takes his last breath. Effia thinks that Fiifi's revelation allowed Cobbe to pass on his unrest to her so that he could die. Effia wipes her tears and walks out of the compound.

The unrest that Cobbe passes on to Effia is then passed on from generation to generation, as a form of inheritance of the pain that Cobbe had caused Maame, and that Effia and Quey cause Esi and her descendants.

As Effia leaves, she starts to apologize to Baaba for the burden that Cobbe made her carry for so many years, but before she can speak, Baaba says: "You are nothing from nowhere." Pointing at Effia's stomach, she asks, "What can grow from nothing?"

With the reveal of Effia's true parentage, Baaba's internalized sexism rears its head. Instead of blaming her husband for his infidelity and his violation of another woman, she blames the victim and the product of her husband's crimes.

PART 1: ESI

Esi describes how the smell around her is unbearable. In the corner, one woman is sobbing. In another, a baby is crying because its mother, Afua, has no milk. There are hundreds of women, all pushed together in the women's dungeon of the Cape Coast Castle.

Esi's situation in the Cape Coast Castle dungeon begins a long line of brutality that both she and her descendants experience as a result of the slave trade.

One year prior, when Esi turned fourteen, she had been in Asanteland, in her father's (Big Man's) compound. He had been the best warrior in the village, and so everyone had come to pay their respects to her, including the man she would have married.

With the exception of the dungeon, Esi's story begins very similarly to the way her half-sister Effia's does, being courted by various men in her village to fulfill her role in society.

A soldier enters the dungeon, holding his nose and speaking. The women do not understand him. He comes into the room and takes the baby from a woman named Afua. When she cries, the soldier slaps her.

As will come to be repeated throughout the novel, separating children and parents becomes one of the harshest injustices of the slave trade, as it removes them not only from a loving family but also from their heritage.

Esi asks her friend Tansi why they are taking the baby. Tansi tells her they will probably kill it. Afua had conceived the baby out of wedlock, and as punishment, the village chief had sold her to the British.

Tansi's explanation reveals once again some of the double standards of the village, as women (and not the men) are blamed and punished for having a child outside of the confines of marriage.

Esi asks Tansi to tell her a story, but the soldiers interrupt them again. They bring porridge to the women, the only food that the women eat. They are not allowed outside the dungeon to go to the bathroom, and so the ground is littered with their feces.

The brutality continues as the women are treated like animals. Their most basic needs, like having a full meal and being able to go to the bathroom, are barely met.

Tansi asks Esi if she knows the story of the kente cloth. Esi shakes her head, even though she does know it. Tansi tells the story: two Asante weavers had been hunting in the forest when they met Anansi, the mischievous spider. They saw how magnificent his web was, and went home to weave the cloth the way Anansi did. From that, kente cloth was created.

Storytelling becomes an important recurrence in the novel. As Yaw explains much later, "history is storytelling," and stories are part of a cultural heritage and history. In two generations, Esi's descendants will have no knowledge of these stories.

Esi compliments Tansi on her storytelling. The previous story she had told Esi was of her capture by northerners while her husband was off fighting a war. She had been taken with other girls, but the rest had not survived.

Though Esi and Tansi had been captured by northerners, the British are taking advantage of this tradition of taking war prisoners when they later sell those slaves for profit. Their system of slavery stems from greed, but also from racism as they find it easy to trade those slaves because they are black.

By morning, Afua has died by holding her breath until she suffocated. The soldiers then come in, forcing the women to the ground and piling more new women into the dungeon on top of them. Esi can feel the women on top of her peeing.

Afua is the first casualty of the despair of a mother who has had a child taken from her. Characters like Esi and Ness later learn to deal with this despair only through the hope that their children will be able to survive them.


Esi had been born in a small village to Big Man (who at that time was known as Kwame Asare) and Maame. Esi's father was not a chief, but he was the best warrior in the village. By the time he was twenty-five, he had five wives and ten children. Esi grows up with doting parents. Her father walks with her through the forest, describing how impenetrable it is to their enemies.

Even Esi's father's name conforms to some of the gender stereotypes in the society, as a great warrior is literally a "Big Man" with many wives and children to confirm that masculinity.

When Esi is seven, her father wins the battle that earns him the title of Big Man. The village chief tells them that the northerners had stolen guns from the British. One man, Kwaku Agyei says that they should not try to confront the northerners, because a hasty confrontation might end poorly for them. Esi's father tells Kwaku Agyei that it does not make sense to wait for the northerners to show up at their village because the village would appear weak.

The first several chapters in the novel emphasize the society's rigid gender stereotypes. Here, Esi's father's is concerned that the village will appear weak.

Esi hears the men's rallying cries and spills a bit of hot oil on her mother, Maame. Maame chastises her, telling her to be careful around **fire**. But she doesn't stay mad for long, kissing the top of Esi's head.

Maame's fear of fire reinforces its connection to the institution and destructive force of slavery, because she escaped both slavery and fire at the same time at the very beginning of the novel.


The men's plan is to overtake the northern village and steal what had been stolen from the British. When they come upon the warriors of the village, they fight bravely, but are ultimately captured. Luckily, Kwaku Agyei and a few others had waited in the forest instead of fighting. They find the guns that the northerners were hiding and free the captured men.

It is worth noting the additional destructive force of colonization here: the presence of British guns. Like the presence of the British themselves, this introduction makes the already destructive dynamic between villages a lot deadlier.

Kwame Asare apologizes to Kwaku Agyei, saying that he would never rush into a fight again. Kwaku Agyei says that it takes a "big man" to admit his folly, and thus Esi's father gains his new name: Big Man. By the time Esi turns twelve, the village has won more than fifty-five wars under his leadership.

Despite the rigid gender stereotypes at the beginning of the novel, there is still room for some progress: wisdom, measured reason, and the strength to admit one's mistakes are valued over stereotypical male aggression.

Esi is particularly fascinated by the prisoners captured in the wars, some of whom are then taken by villagers as slaves and servants. Esi asks Maame what happens to the extra prisoners; her mother tells her that that's "boys' talk."

Maame's explanation that the business of slavery is simply "boys' talk" once again reveals the sexism in the society, and the association of men with violence.

Maame, for her part, had refused for many years to choose a house girl. But with the overflow of prisoners, Big Man insists that she have one to help her with the cooking and cleaning. Maame agrees to choose a girl the next day. Esi knows that her mother would do anything for her father, because he had saved her in some way—though Esi isn't sure exactly how.

Maame's refusal to get a house girl, and Esi's understanding that Maame was saved in some way, both call attention to the fact that the reader already knows that Maame had once been a house girl herself. Yet even though she is hesitant to the idea, Maame allows her husband to control her actions and even her moral compass.

The next day, Esi and Maame choose a girl and name her Abronoma: "Little Dove." However, they quickly discover that she is horrible at the chores. When Maame complains to Big Man, he tells Esi to get his switch. Maame stops Esi from giving it to him, and says that she will do the beating. Big Man relents, but says that the next day he will make Abronoma carry water on her head across the yard, and if a single drop falls from the bucket, *he* will take care of it.

The fact that Maame had been a house girl and still has her own servant demonstrates how widespread the use of slavery is even by those who had once been enslaved. Its universality is what makes it such a dangerous presence, as it makes it difficult to eradicate.

Maame returns to her hut and pulls out her own switch, which she has never used. Maame asks Esi to leave and then she beats Abronoma as both women cry.

The cruelty of a society that condones slavery is apparent as both Abronoma and Maame cry during Abronoma's beating.

The next day, Big Man gathers everyone to see Abronoma carry the water. Esi can see Abronoma shaking as she lifts the bucket onto her head. She steadies herself and walks, sweat dripping from her nose and her eyes brimming with tears. She makes it back to the front of the yard, but just as she takes the bucket from her head, two drops slosh out. Big Man reaches for his switch. This time, Abronoma does not cry.

Abronoma's failure and her subsequent second beating relays how the intention to teach a lesson can cause people to quickly become tyrannical. Abronoma essentially completed the task, but she was cruelly and brutally beaten anyway on a technicality.

Maame is very upset after the beating, and she watches Abronoma sleep. Esi tries to comfort her by saying that if Big Man had not beaten Abronoma, everyone would have thought he was weak. Maame says that treating someone as though they belong to you is weakness.

Esi's defense of her father illustrates the importance of men to appear strong, but Maame's counterargument becomes even more potent because she had once been a slave herself.

Abronoma wakes up. Esi fetches her water, and Abronoma asks her to leave. Esi starts to say that her father, Big Man, is a good person, but Abronoma protests. She says her father was a big man, too, and now look what has become of her. She hints that Maame had also been a house girl. Esi is surprised by this news.

The fact that Abronoma had once been the daughter of a Big Man demonstrates how easy it might have been—and will be—for Esi to experience the same fate. No one is safe from the tyranny of slavery.

Abronoma explains that Maame had been a slave for a Fante family. She goes on to say that Maame had been raped and had left a daughter in her former village. Before the house girl can explain any more, Maame returns to the hut.

Maame's experience serves as the first example of sexual violation in the novel, and how it is used to subjugate women in particular.

Esi thinks about Maame and starts to acknowledge some of the remnants of her former life: how her shoulders droop and her eyes shift. Esi is filled with shame at how she had treated the slaves in the town square's cage, spitting on them as she had seen an elder do. Now she can only picture her mother behind the bars of the cage, with a sister Esi would never know.

This sequence contains a lot of dramatic irony, as the reader already knows that Esi will very soon be enslaved herself. This allows the readers to see how easily someone could have been captured and oppressed by slavery, while others (like Effia) were able to escape it only by a stroke of luck.

In the following months, Esi tries to befriend Abronoma and find out more. Abronoma says she doesn't know anything, and Esi asks what she can do to make amends. Abronoma tells Esi to send a message to Abronoma's father, explaining where she is. Esi agrees despite knowing that Big Man would be very upset with her for doing so.

Esi wants to make things right, but never does it occur to her that the system itself is unjust or cruel, demonstrating just how rooted in the society the system of slavery is.

The next morning, Esi sends a messenger man very early to Abronoma's father. When she tells Abronoma she has done this, Abronoma hugs her and says that all is forgiven. Esi imagines that she is hugging her sister.

Esi tries to escape feeling that she has participated in this cruel system, but the irony is that she will soon be enslaved, while her half-sister Effia will go free.


Months go by, and Abronoma grows excited, constantly muttering that her father is coming. But other than that, everyone goes along as usual. Fighting continues away from home, as Esi's village had never been challenged in her lifetime.

Esi and the rest of her village treat the fighting as a normal occurrence, associating typical male roles in society with violence.

One night, it is Big Man's night in the hut, and so Esi sleeps in the corner, facing away from her parents. Once she had watched them in the darkness. She couldn't see much, but she was intrigued by the sounds that they had made, lying together. She "wanted and was afraid to want."

Esi's curiosity here and her excitement at seeing her parents sleep together is placed in contrast with Esi's first sexual experience later, which is with a soldier who rapes her in the dungeon simply for his own pleasure and for her subjugation.

But this night, a call goes out, signaling that the enemy is upon their village. Big Man jumps up and grabs his machete. He screams at Maame to take Esi into the woods. Esi grabs a small knife and places it in her skirt. She grabs her mother, but Maame protests. She starts to whisper, "No more woods. No more **fire**."

Maame's fear of fire once again connects to her past experiences with slavery. She's escaped slavery and the fire before, and doesn't want to be subjected to it again.

Abronoma bursts in, laughing and dancing at her father's arrival. Outside, people are screaming and running. Maame gives Esi a **black stone** that she had been keeping for Esi's wedding day, saying that she left one for her sister as well. Esi tucks it into her headwrap.

As with Effia, the black stone that Maame gives Esi represents Esi's connection to her family and her heritage. However, Esi's later loss of the stone is emblematic of the difference between the two girls.

Esi wants to ask more questions, but the noise outside grows louder, and Maame tells her to go. Esi sees that her mother cannot will herself to come with her, and so Esi gives her knife to Maame before running out into the woods. She finds a palm tree and climbs up as far as she can go.

Even though Maame cannot bring herself to go into the woods, she still sees hope for Esi and tries to urge her to save herself, hoping that Esi might fare better in the future.

Time passes, and Esi's arms start to burn as she hugs the tree. Soon a warrior appears at the bottom of her tree. He throws rocks at her until her arms come undone. The warriors tie Esi to many other people, but she doesn't see any of her family. She walks for miles. On the tenth day, the calluses on her feet split open, and blood seeps out with every step.

The blood that Esi leaves on the ground as she walks is echoed in a later chapter when Ness tries to escape slavery, evoking a trail of pain that slavery leaves both when a person is brought into it and trying to break out of it.

The woman behind Esi—Tansi—worries that the white men will eat them. Esi shudders, then introduces herself. In an instant, the two become friends. They walk another half a week, day and night, until they reach the edge of a Fante village. They are packed into a dark cellar where they eat porridge and sleep.

Even though Esi and Tansi's fear that the British soldiers will eat them is unfounded, it demonstrates a general fear of people who are unlike oneself—the same fear that fuels the British soldiers' racism against the Fantes and Asantes.

In the morning, men enter the room, including Abeeku and Fiifi. Fiifi argues that they should not have taken the slaves, as their Asante allies will be furious to know that the Fantes have worked with their enemies. Abeeku says that their enemies are paying more for slaves.

Abeeku and Fiifi's participation in Esi's capture makes the separation of the two sides of the family tree more devastating, because one was directly involved in the oppression of the other.


James Collins and other British soldiers enter the compound. They are the first white men that Esi has seen. Abeeku shows off Esi and the others, explaining that the Asante are very strong. The men then start to undress everyone. When Fiifi reaches for her headwrap, Esi spits at him. He then smacks her so hard that her **stone** falls onto the floor, and she covers it with her body. When the men leave her there, Esi takes the stone and swallows it.

Again, there is an emphasis on male domination and power in this exchange. A sexual humiliation of the prisoners is implied here, as the soldiers undress everyone and inspect them. When Esi refuses and spits in Fiifi's face, Fiifi feels he cannot appear weak, which results in violence against her.


Back in the dungeon of the Castle, the waste is up to Esi's ankles. She can hardly breathe. That day, she had found her mother's **stone** in the river of feces. She buries it, marking the spot so she can find it again when the time comes to leave.

Esi is so desperate to hang onto her heritage that she is literally forced to consume the stone and find it later in her own feces in order to protect it.

Soldiers enter the dungeon. One of them grabs a woman and pushes her up against the wall. He gropes her, moving from her breasts down the length of her body until she screams. The other women tell her to be quiet or else the soldiers will beat them all.

This episode demonstrates how dejected the women have become in the dungeon, as they tell other women to endure sexual violence so that everyone can be spared more violence.

Another soldier walks around. When he sees Esi, he smiles. She is baffled because it had been so long since she had seen someone smile, and she thinks it is an act of kindness. The soldier grabs her and drags her out of the room, taking her back to his quarters. He gestures at a glass of water. She stands still until he gestures at a whip, and she drinks.

The soldier's smile reveals how manipulative and psychologically detrimental the system of slavery is, because it makes any small act of kindness appear extraordinarily benevolent by comparison, such as a smile or an offer of a glass of water.

The soldier places Esi on a folded tarp and begins to rape her. She screams, but he places his hand over her mouth. She finds that biting his fingers only pleases him, so she stops. She closes her eyes, trying to imagine that she is still the little girl in her parents' room, looking at the mud walls instead of at them. When the soldier finishes, he looks disgusted with her, "as though he were the one who had been violated." The soldier takes her back to the dungeon, not looking at her.

This sickening violation demonstrates how gender interplays with race. The white soldiers feel entitled to taking advantage of these black women simply because of their race and gender, yet at the same time the soldiers still feel that they are the ones being violated because of their deep-seated racism.

Days go on. Esi has not stopped bleeding since the soldier raped her. She doesn't talk to Tansi and doesn't want to hear stories. She thinks to herself that there is no pleasure in sex, only pain.

This sexual violation is completely shattering to Esi, who becomes hardened by the experience and passes on this sense of stoicism to her own daughter, Ness.

The dungeon door opens and reveals James Collins. He points to twenty women, including Esi. Another soldier grabs them by the wrists and drags them into a line. James checks over all of them, running his hands between Esi's legs. When he sees blood on his hands, he gives her a pitying look. He signals to another soldier, who starts herding them out of the dungeon.

The fact that James is unsurprised by Esi's injury demonstrates how systematic and routine the violation of the women is in the dungeon. James's presence here also implies Effia's inadvertent complacency in her own sister being sold into slavery.

Esi tries to dig for her **stone**, but she is lifted up by a soldier before she can reach it. Outside, Esi smells the **ocean** as the women are led to the beach. Before she leaves, James Collins looks at her and gives her a smile. For the rest of her life, she would see white men smile and know that it meant "more evil was coming with the next wave."

The loss of Esi's stone serves as a symbolic loss of her heritage as a result of slavery, as many of her descendants (starting with her own grandson, Kojo) lose connection to their parents at early ages, and therefore lose all ties to their history.

PART 1: QUEY

Quey lies awake in the village where his mother, Effia, grew up. He pictures the prisoners being brought into the cellars by the tens and twenties. He wishes he were still in his office in the Castle, logging numbers so that he could ignore the fact that those numbers represented people.

Even more than Effia, Quey becomes directly involved in the slave trade because he takes up his father's business, and he thus inherits the curse that is carried on to later generations.

Quey had been sent to the village because the British had enjoyed a longstanding relationship with Abeeku and wanted to set up an outpost there to ensure their good relationship continued, as they had begun trading with other companies. The new governor of the Castle thought that Quey would be a good choice to send because he knew the language and customs, even though Quey had never stepped foot in Effia's village.

In this passage, Quey begins to express some of his discomfort with his own identity, which had occurred primarily as a result of colonization and his mixed-race heritage. While his mother is Fante, he doesn't feel that he truly fits into the village or the culture from which his mother originated.

In the morning, Quey goes to see his uncle Fiifi, who welcomes him into his hut for a meal. Quey tells him that the company wants to buy more slaves from the village, but they have to stop trading with other companies. Quey had given this speech before and had been ignored many times.

Quey's interactions with Fiifi confirm just how far, metaphorically, he is from the village and its customs, because he is going to the village to broker on behalf of the British, and not going to the British on behalf of the Fantes.

Fiifi is silent, listening to two birds in the distance. He says that what you cannot hear is the third bird, the female bird, who listens to the two birds until they have finished speaking, and then speaks up and chooses a mate. The village, he tells Quey, must act like the female bird, waiting for the companies to pay more and more until the price is right. Quey sighs, and comments that there had been no birds like this in London.

Fiifi's story reads much like the story that Tansi tells in the previous chapter about Anansi—using myths and nature to model behavior or to explain how certain things have come to be. Quey's response again emphasizes how little he relates to that lineage of storytelling and those customs.

Quey had been a lonely child. When Quey was born, James had built a hut close to the Castle so that he and Effia could live more comfortably. Trade had been prosperous in those days, but Quey never saw the dungeons.

The location of Quey and Effia's hut becomes a physical representation of his identity: between the Castle and the village, but not quite inside either one of them.

Effia is a patient and loving mother, in an attempt to be as little like Baaba as possible. She never hits Quey, even when others taunt her that she is spoiling him. She teaches him Fante and English. She also tells him the story of her mother Maame and the **black stone** Maame had given her.

Effia takes it upon herself to try and be a better mother so that her son will have more loving relationships, pinning her hopes on the idea that her Quey might have a better life than she did.

Quey laments that their family is so small, unlike the other families. Effia worries that he has no friends and doesn't play with the other village children, but James Collins says that he needs to learn to make friends on his own. Nonetheless, a few weeks later, the chief of a prominent Fante village comes to visit with his son, Cudjo Sackee, in tow.

Quey's loneliness is born of his status as a biracial child, and James and Effia's reactions seem to imply that they have a difficult time knowing exactly how to socialize their child as well.

While their fathers conduct business, Quey and Cudjo walk off to a different side of the Castle. Cudjo asks if Quey is white, touching his hair. Quey says that he is not white. Cudjo says that if Quey isn't white, what is he? Quey doesn't know how to respond, and he nearly starts to cry. Seeing that Quey is upset, Cudjo asks Quey to show him the cannons.

Quey's reaction to Cudjo calling him white reveals his insecurity about his race. This insecurity in turn reveals how colonization can be personally and individually detrimental to the people who are a product of that system.

Quey and Cudjo quickly become friends. Two weeks later, Quey visits Cudjo's village—the first village he spends a lot of time in. He is amazed at how children are allowed to roam free and conduct their own business. Cudjo picks up two snails to race. Quey's snail immediately takes off, while Cudjo's only travels in circles. When they lose sight of Quey's snail, Cudjo turns to shake Quey's hand in defeat.

Quey's amazement, even as a child, reveals how far he already is from the life of a typical child living in a village, and how far he is from the life his own mother had in her village. As Cudjo makes him feel increasingly at home, perhaps this feeling of belonging helps prompt his eventual return to the Fante village.

Cudjo says that they should name the snails. He suggests that they call his snail Richard because he is a bad snail, like the way the British are bad. Quey agrees, forgetting for a second that his father, James Collins, is British, and for the first time feeling like he really belongs.

Even though Quey has had a good upbringing from his mother, he still feels resentful of his father because of the way in which his father makes him feel like an outsider.

The boys grow older. Quey grows in height while Cudjo grows in muscle. Cudjo becomes known for his wrestling prowess, but Quey never challenges him. He only watches Cudjo's movements, imagining Cudjo's strong arms around him.

As Quey and Cudjo's friendship develops, it is heavily implied that Quey has romantic feelings for Cudjo, but that these feelings have to be cut off because of the society's expectations of masculinity.

Cudjo tries to get Quey to wrestle, but Quey tells him to get "Richard" to wrestle him. The boys had started to name everything Richard, blaming "Richard" for getting into trouble or praising him for helping them win a race. Quey says that Richard would have no trouble beating Cudjo because of Cudjo's soft arms. Cudjo puts Quey in a headlock, warning that there is nothing soft about him. When Cudjo lets Quey go, Quey says he knows Cudjo would never hurt him. Cudjo gets very close to him, asking Quey to challenge him. Quey feels Cudjo's breath on his lips.

The flirtation here also implies that Cudjo may return Quey's feelings, although it is never fully revealed if this is the case. At the same time, it is easier for Cudjo to sidestep any accusations of being gay because he has these other markers of stereotypical masculinity (like wrestling prowess and strength) to defend him from any ridicule, while Quey does not.

The next week, Cudjo fights a match against a British soldier who had said that Cudjo would never be able to beat a white man. Many other soldiers gather to watch, and Cudjo brings his father and brothers. Quey watches as well. A minute after the match begins, Cudjo has the soldier pinned. More challengers come forward, and Cudjo beats them all.

The challenge against Cudjo is born out of racist feelings of superiority, and it is interesting to see how this stereotype changes over time: in later chapters in America, African men like Sam quickly are pigeonholed by stereotypes of being described like animals, and so they are treated as such. These simply serve as different tactics of subjugation by white men.

The solders leave; Cudjo's father and brothers go back to the village, while Cudjo plans to spend the night at Cape Coast Castle with Quey. Quey then says he'll wrestle Cudjo, tackling him to the ground. Within seconds, Cudjo is on top of Quey, pinning him down. Slowly, Quey relaxes his body and feels Cudjo do the same. They stare at each other, slowing their breath, until Quey feels the impulse to draw his face towards Cudjo's.

Quey and Cudjo are very close to escaping the strict expectations of what masculinity means, but ultimately they are unable to, and Quey's shame forces him to spend the rest of his life attempting not to appear weak in response.

James Collins interrupts them, telling them to get up. Quey doesn't know how long his father has been watching, but hears the measured threat and fear in his voice. James tells Cudjo to go home. The next month, just before Quey's fourteenth birthday, Quey boards a **ship** to England for school.

For even potentially being gay, Quey is separated not only from his best friend but also from his society as a whole, teaching him a harsh lesson about the expectations placed on him as a man.

Back at the meeting with Fiifi, Quey remembers that Cudjo had recently asked to see him, hearing that Quey had returned from London. He wonders aloud if he should have stayed there, even though he had seen the way black people lived in white countries. Fiifi tells Quey not to be weak. Quey thanks his uncle for the meal and leaves.

Quey connects his outsider status both to being attracted to Cudjo and also to being biracial. Because he found it easier to live in London, he also starts to associate his living there with weakness, which Fiifi points out here as well.

Quey goes to oversee the boys transporting slaves. On this day, there are only five slaves, including a young girl who had messed herself. He thinks of his father, who had received so many slaves; James Collins had died shortly after Quey left for London. He wonders how James felt about what he did, if he was mixed with the same shame and loathing Quey felt.

The societal expectations that Quey feels about being gay then affect his feelings about taking part in the slave trade: he comes to expect that self-loathing is a normal part of life, and that one is expected to overcome that kind of weakness.

Quey sees Abeeku Badu in the village, already drunk. Abeeku tells Quey that he should tell Effia to visit. Quey doubts she would visit, as she still feels that there is evil in the village, even though Baaba had died many years prior. He also knows she would never want to see Abeeku, because she had genuinely cared for James Collins. And even though Quey hated James, there was a part of him that still wanted to please him.

Even though Effia had been a good mother to Quey and in many ways given him a better life than she had, the same is not true of James Collins and Quey. James had made Quey feel like an outsider and feel pressured to participate in an immoral institution.

Weeks go by, and Quey does not answer Cudjo's request to see him. Instead, he dives into work. Trade has continued to increase, and the methods of gathering slaves have become so reckless that sometimes Fiifi asks for help from another Fante village. As he prepares for one of those missions, Quey realizes the other village is Cudjo's village, because he sees Cudjo preparing for battle alongside Fiifi.

As many characters come to realize later, the British involvement in the slave trade and colonization has made a bad system worse. Because slaves have become valuable in Europe and America, villages like Fiifi's not only capture prisoners during wars with each other, but now they capture slaves whenever they can simply to make a profit.

Cudjo greets Quey, asking why he hasn't returned his message. Quey says he didn't have time. Cudjo looks broader and taller, but essentially the same. Cudjo comments on the fact that Quey hasn't married, telling him that he married last spring—as a chief must be married. Cudjo also notes that Quey speaks English like a British man. He tells Quey that he is always welcome in his village before running off to start the mission.

As Quey and Cudjo catch up, Cudjo's questions once again reinforce the expectations that had been placed on them—particularly on Cudjo as a village chief, as the novel points out the pattern or the expectation of the most powerful men in the village to have many wives and children.

Quey wonders why Cudjo would comment on the fact that he is unmarried, and how he could be welcome in Cudjo's village. He asks himself how it would all work: would he live in the chief's compound? In his own hut, like a wife? Or on the edge of the village, alone?

Quey's curiosity about how he and Cudjo could possibly live together still elucidates the norms of the society, as Quey still tries to imagine what life would be like within the framework of wives having their own huts.

Four weeks later, Quey is summoned to the slave cellar. Fiifi has returned with a large gash, and Fiifi's men are clearly shaken. Quey asks what happened. In the corner of the cellar he sees two large men bleeding, as well as a young girl with an Asante marking. He realizes that she is Nana Yaa, the daughter of the Asante king, and Fiifi has stolen her.

Fiifi's plan and capture of the Asante king's daughter is centered on the idea that Quey should return to the village and should regain his sense of belonging there, marrying Nana Yaa for her royalty and to protect the village from the Asantes.

Quey tells Fiifi that the Asantes will not forgive what he has done. Fiifi says that the Asantes have been angry with them for years, since they found out that the Fantes traded a few Asantes many years prior.

The conflict between the Fantes and the Asantes gets at the heart of the tragedy of the book: one Gold Coast tribe betraying another, to the benefit only of the British.

A house girl approaches Fiifi with food, but he says that she must serve his "son" first. Quey wonders why he says that—Quey is not his son. Fiifi reminds him that mothers and sisters are the most important: if a person is a chief, his sister's son is his successor because his sister is born of his mother, but his wife is not.

Although Fiifi notes that mothers and sisters are the most important family members, the society is still patriarchal and male-centric. Even if the family line is traced through women, it is only the men who remain in power, emphasizing women's importance primarily through their ability to have children.

Fiifi goes on to say, however, that Effia is not the daughter of his mother. Furthermore, because Baaba had hated her, Fiifi had hated Effia too, particularly when she left to live with the British. He confesses that this hate fueled him, because he wanted to be better and richer than the British. He began to hate Effia and James Collins, but also himself for the person he had become.

Fiifi's story demonstrates how personal involvement and hatred allowed colonization to thrive. In wanting to be better than the British, Fiifi and the other Fantes were still forced to be complicit in their system of slavery, to the detriment of other villages on the Gold Coast.

Fiifi concludes by saying that everything he has built in the village will soon come to nothing, because he has sons but no sisters. He wants to leave what he has to Quey, to make up for the way that Baaba treated Effia. Fiifi tells Quey that tomorrow night he will marry Nana Yaa, so that the Asante king cannot kill him or anyone in the village. Fiifi says he will ensure that Quey becomes a powerful man.

Fiifi sees Quey as a means for his own line and lineage to progress, both in leaving him what he has built in the village and also in providing him with a politically protective marriage.

Quey resolves not to be weak. He would not go to Cudjo's village. He would marry for protection. He is involved in the business of slavery, and he knows that in that business, sacrifices have to be made.

Quey's acceptance of his role in the slave trade adds to the guilt and discomfort that his family continues to feel generations later, beginning with his own son, James.

PART 1: NESS

Ness is picking cotton in the heat of the southern summer sun. She has been at Thomas Allan Stockham's Alabama plantation for three months. She can't remember how old she is—her best guess is twenty-five. She only knows that it feels like a lifetime since she had been sold and taken from her mother, Esi. Esi was a solid, stoic woman who never told a happy story. For this reason, Ness always associates real love with a hardness of spirit.

Ness's introduction presents some of the harshest legacies of slavery—the brutality of forced labor, the loss of freedom, the loss of one's family, the loss of one's cultural identity as a result, and the lack of hope for progress from parent to child.

Thomas Allan Stockham is a relatively kind master, giving his slaves breaks and water. On this day, in late June, Ness waits in line for water beside another slave named TimTam. TimTam asks her how her day is; she says it's like all of the other days.

Just as Esi experienced in the previous chapter, the cruelty of slavery becomes stark when the simplest, most basic needs of a person (like drinking water) become luxuries.

Ness thinks to herself that it's still odd to hear black people speak English. When they were living on a plantation together, Esi had spoken to Ness in Twi for most of her life until their master caught her. He'd given five lashes for each Twi word Ness spoke, and then when Ness had become too scared to speak, he gave Esi five lashes for each minute of Ness's silence. Before the lashes, Esi had called Ness "Maame" after her own mother, Maame. But the master had whipped Esi for that as well, until she cried out "My goodness." Thus, she decided to call her daughter Ness.

Forcing Esi and Ness to speak English over Twi is an extension of the racism that serves as the backbone for slavery. Not only does this violence assert that English is superior to Twi, but it also robs Ness of her family's heritage and her African identity.

TimTam asks Ness where she comes from, but Ness doesn't respond. She instead gets her glass of water from the head house slave, Margaret. The glass is only a quarter full, even though there are buckets of water behind Margaret. TimTam tells her to fill it up more, and Margaret glares at him as she does so. Ness doesn't take the offering, walking away instead.

Even the fact that Ness cannot say where she comes from is telling, because TimTam clearly means what plantation she had worked at prior to Thomas Allan's. The history of her enslavement thus takes the place of her family history and culture.

Ness feels she doesn't owe her fellow slaves anything. Once a woman had told her not to be so hard on TimTam because he had lost his wife, and he was taking care of his daughter Pinky alone. Ness had responded that everyone has lost someone.

Ness finds it hard to sympathize with TimTam because she has also experienced severe loss, losing a mother, a husband, and a child by this point in the story. Yet she is still expected to be kind to the people around her, acting as if she has no history to speak of.

The day that Tom Allan had bought her, he told her she was too pretty to work in the field. Margaret helped her change into the outfit for the house slaves, but when Tom and his wife saw Ness in the outfit, they were shocked to see that she had intricate scars all over her body. They told Margaret to help her change back into something that covered her shoulders and calves.

Racism pervades the idea that Ness is too pretty to work in the field, because she is biracial, and to her masters, the more light-skinned a slave is, the more attractive they are. Another harsh irony of this incident is that Ness is not responsible for the scars on her back, and yet she is punished for them by being made to work in the field.

Thus, Ness had gone to work in the field. It's not new to her. She had previously worked in the field at a place she only refers to as "Hell." In the mornings, Ness takes a small pail of food to work in the field, eating while picking cotton. The other slaves think that Ness believes she is better than them, particularly when she rejects TimTam's advances. She makes no friends, only working all day.

In "Hell," Ness had gotten so used to her basic human needs not being met that she has a difficult time acclimating to her new surroundings, an idea that continues to be true through future generations. Additionally, other slaves assume she barely has a history, as she is judged for rejecting TimTam even though she is still mourning her loss of Sam.

One night, someone pounds on the door of the women's cabin. When they open it, it is TimTam with his daughter Pinky, distressed and worried. He says he thinks she has what her mother had. The women tell him to go fetch a doctor. Ness looks at Pinky, and sees that she only has the hiccups. She says there's nothing wrong with her.

Slavery has a psychological brutality, too, as Pinky is so distraught over her mother's death that she refuses to speak, while TimTam and the others think that the only way to help her is to scare her into speaking.

TimTam pulls Ness aside, revealing that they were only trying to scare Pinky because she hadn't spoken since her mother died. Ness tells everyone that that's a stupid plan; Pinky will speak when she wants to speak. TimTam hangs his head and tells his daughter to come back with him, but Pinky runs over to Ness and lies down with her. Ness tells TimTam that she can take care of Pinky that night.

Pinky starts to trust Ness because of her ability to speak straight to TimTam and the fact that she knows not to try to force Pinky to speak. However, as Ness starts to take on a motherly protection of Pinky, the tyranny of slavery reveals itself again as Ness gets into trouble for trying to treat her like her own daughter.

From that day, Pinky is inseparable from Ness. She moves into the women's cabin and spends the whole day with Ness. Still, she never speaks. She is the water girl, carrying the pails from the creek to the house over and over, filling basins for baths, watering the flowers, and giving Margaret water for cooking.

Pinky's responsibilities recall some of the other female characters in the earlier chapters, particularly Abronoma, demonstrating some of the ways in which Pinky's heritage stays with her even if she doesn't fully know it.

One day, Ness watches as the two Stockham children run into Pinky on the porch, knocking over one of her pails. The little girl, Mary, starts to cry that her dress is wet. Tom Jr., the little boy, tells Pinky to apologize to Mary. When only a wave of hiccups comes out, Tom Jr. goes inside and gets a cane.

This episode also demonstrates how racism is instilled in the society, and thus is taught to the children. Pinky doesn't even protest this injustice, while Tom Jr. knows he is allowed to lie and then beat a child simply because she is black.

Tom Jr. tells Pinky to speak, while Margaret, watching the incident as well, goes to get Tom Allan. Just as Tom Jr. swings the cane behind him, Ness catches it in her hand so strongly that Tom Jr. falls to the ground. Tom Sr. appears on the porch. He sees his son on the ground and Pinky crying. Tom Jr. says that Ness was going to hit him. Ness is sure that Tom Sr. can see what actually happened, but the scars on her shoulders make him doubt. He says he will deal with Ness later.

In the same way that H faces injustice in prison in later chapters, one of slavery's worst aspects is that being punished automatically marks a slave as a troublemaker, particularly when that punishment is literally scarred on their skin. But when the initial punishment is unjust, the whole system is shown to be corrupt.

That evening, Ness crawls into bed with Pinky. She drifts off to sleep and into memory. She is back in Hell, married to a man they call Sam, who speaks no English. At first they don't speak to each other. He is a large, muscular man and seems completely untamable. The first day he fights another slave, spits on the overseer, and is then whipped in front of everyone until the blood collects in pools on the ground.

Sam fights his own battles of injustice in the slavery system, particularly because of the stereotypes surrounding black men. Sam is seen as an animal, and the overseer thus treats him as such. Ness is also treated this way, being essentially "mated" to another person without her consent.

Sam refuses to learn English and is whipped for that, too. One night, Sam destroys the slave quarters in fury. Ness says that she did it. The master, whom she calls the Devil, knows that she is lying but whips her nonetheless. When he is finished, Sam is crying and Ness is barely conscious. He goes to the herbal doctor to get a salve for her back. He sleeps in the cot with her, apologizing in English. Soon he learns her name and his, as well as "love."

This episode demonstrates that even benevolence is punished in slavery, as the whole system seems geared by the idea that slaves' fear of violent punishment will be greater than the will to escape, which certainly ends up being true for Ness.

A month later, once the wounds on Ness and Sam's backs have healed, they consummate their marriage. As they clutch each other, their scars reopen. Ness wakes up to Pinky poking her, and crying "Ness." She asks if Ness was having a bad dream. Ness says it was bad, but not a dream.

Even in this brutal system, there is still some hope for love in the prospect of family—both in Ness and Sam's found relationship, and in the fact that Ness's kindness allows Pinky to find her voice again.

In the morning, Ness awaits her fate. Tom Allan had never publicly whipped a slave before, but she knows she had deeply embarrassed him. In the field, TimTam thanks her for helping Pinky speak again, and for protecting her. He offers to talk to Tom Allan for her. She says he should bother someone else with his gratefulness. He leaves her, and she looks at the porch and sees Tom Allan sitting, waiting.

The racism entrenched in the southern plantation society is apparent here, as a black slave can be whipped for stopping a white child from beating a black child simply because it embarrasses a white man, and not a single person within that society would find the action unusual or wrong.

Ness thinks about how she and Sam had spent so much time waiting. She had made Sam wait outside when she was in labor with their son, Kojo. Following Kojo's birth, Sam rarely made trouble and became a good, hard worker. When he held Kojo, called Jo, he promised that no one would harm his son.

Sam's transformation into a submissive slave marks the change that family can have on a person, as he wants to stay out of trouble in order to protect his son and make a better life for him.

Ness and Sam then met a woman named Aku at their church. Ness had been singing a little Twi tune when a woman turned to her and whispered something in Twi. Ness didn't understand, but Aku introduced herself, saying that she had come from Asanteland and had been kept in the Castle just like Ness's mother, Esi. Aku told Ness that she had taken people north to freedom many times.

Ness's inability to understand Aku's words, even though she had been singing the same language just moments before, symbolizes Ness's drifting further and further away from her heritage. By the time her son grows up, this heritage will be all but lost.

Ness and Sam started planning to escape when Jo turned one year old. They waited until spring for Aku to come get them. When she did, they walked so far that Ness's feet opened up and her footsteps left blood. When the sun came up, they climbed the trees.

Ness's bloody footsteps echo her mother Esi's bloody trail just two chapters prior as she walked to slavery, implying that the hardships of that oppressive system are being passed down from mother to daughter.

Days passed this way. One day, Ness asked Aku to take Jo for the night because her back was aching. That morning, the dogs came with the Devil behind them. Ness called to Aku, telling her not to come down no matter what. She then descended from her tree. Sam had done the same.

For Ness and Sam, Kojo represents a better and free life in the future, and thus they are willing to sacrifice themselves in the hope that their son is able to gain that freedom.

The Devil had asked where the boy was. Ness told him that Jo died. The Devil then took her and Sam back to Hell. Once there, he stripped them both naked. He tied Sam up and made him watch as Ness received her scars. By the end of it, Ness could not lift her body or her head, so the Devil picked up her head and made her watch as Sam was hanged from a tree.

The hardships that Ness had endured on her previous plantation, "Hell," are revealed here, and it becomes clearer why Ness seems so hardened and hopeless: she lost her hope when she lost what remained of her family.

Now, as Ness awaits the punishment from Tom Allan, she can't help but remember that day in Hell. Ness continues to pick cotton. She thinks of picking cotton like a prayer, asking for forgiveness of her sins, deliverance from evil, and protection for Jo.

It is worth noting that Ness has also been distanced from her heritage by having to give up her ancestors' religion in favor of Christianity, as she prays for herself and Kojo using Christian vocabulary.

PART 1: JAMES

James hears word that the Asantes have Governor Charles MacCarthy's head. The children outside start to sing in celebration, but James warns them that if the Asantes defeat the British, they will come for the Fantes next. He tells them that this village is safe, however, because his family is royal.

James's storyline begins as the British are moving past their involvement in slavery and trying to take control of the land; the Asantes work against the British, while the Fantes continue to work with them.

James's father, Quey, returns from the Castle with a white man. He motions to James to join them. The white man explains that Quey's wife's (Nana Yaa's) father, the Asante king, has died, and that the Asantes are blaming the British. When James asks if they did in fact kill him, the white man looks away. James grows angry, knowing that the British had been inciting wars for years in order to buy the captives as slaves from the Fantes and sell them back in Europe.

James explicitly acknowledges an idea that other characters had known implicitly: that by turning the Gold Coast villages against each other and taking advantage of their rivalries, the British only gain slaves, land, and power.

Quey explains that Nana Yaa wants to go to the funeral, but the white man says that it is too dangerous for them to go because the Fantes have been allied to the British for so many years. James and Quey resolve to go anyway.

Now, after years of alliance with the British, Quey and James begin to see the dangers of taking part in a system that pits village against village as they have also helped the British colonists gain power and land.

James holds a gun as he, Quey, and Nana Yaa ride through the forest in a carriage. Nana Yaa and Quey argue about the trip, while James stays silent in the back. He knows that his parents have never loved each other—it was a political marriage.

Much of James's storyline involves trying to create a better life for himself and his future descendants than the one he inherited from his mother and father, particularly in having a more loving marriage.


After days of travel, they spend the night in Dunkwa with David, a friend of Quey's from his time in England. When they arrive, Nana Yaa goes immediately to bed, but James, Quey, and David sit and talk. Quey complains about Nana Yaa, and David states that political marriages are often loveless ones. David starts to quote the Bible, but Quey stops him and tells him that he has no use for Christianity. He has chosen the Fantes and their customs. David implies that this life was chosen for him. James thinks about similar criticisms Nana Yaa had made, saying that Quey was weak.

Quey's conversation with David touches on many social structures: the expectation of Quey's marriage to Nana Yaa despite the fact that he was interested in men; the colonial influence of Christianity and Quey's rejection of it in favor of the customs of his mother and his ancestors; and finally, the implication that Quey is weak because Fiifi had provided him with his life's path, even though Quey had chosen that life in order to appear strong.



David asks if James is going to marry soon, and Quey explains that he has chosen a wife for James to marry. Her name is Amma Atta, the daughter of Abeeku Badu's successor. This marriage would fulfill the promise that Cobbe had made to Effia; that her blood would be joined with the blood of Fante royals.

Quey's decision to fulfill Cobbe's promise demonstrates how potent the idea of marrying to better the family standing still is after three generations, even at the expense of a person's happiness.


James had known Amma all his life, and the older they got, the more she started to annoy him. By the time he was fifteen, he knew he could never love her, but that didn't matter.

James knows that it is in some ways a duty for the child to accept the person to whom they had been promised, as had been true of Effia and Quey before him.

David asks Quey if it's true that the British are going to abolish slavery. Quey shrugs and says that the year James was born, they told everyone in the Castle that the slave trade was abolished, but it continued anyway, and the British stayed. Quey explains that what is happening on the Gold Coast goes beyond slavery: it is a question of who will own the land, the people, and the power.

Quey's explanation illuminates how the British moved past simply taking part in the slave trade to a full-blown plan for colonization and control of the land and villages around them. Yet what is striking is that the Fantes are still working with the British, likely because of people like Quey who now has family in both sides of the conflict.

The next morning, James, Nana Yaa, and Quey set out once again. They pass little towns and villages, where Quey's light skin attracts more and more attention. They reach Kumasi and are greeted by Nana Yaa's eldest brother, Kofi.

Quey's light skin still places him outside of the norm in the rural villages, as colonization continues to take a more personal toll on him.

The next day, the funeral proceedings begin. Nana Yaa joins the women in the village, mournfully wailing to announce the celebration. There is drumming, dancing, and chanting, and the king's family is greeted by a long line of mourners.

The funeral proceedings not only demonstrate the immense amount of respect for the king, but also for his family as they represent a way for his life to carry on and for future generations to progress.

One girl (later revealed as Akosua) offers James her condolences, but does not shake his hand, saying that she will not shake the hand of a slaver. James is too stunned to respond, and she leaves. James is baffled: both the Asantes and the Fantes take part in the slave trade—the Asantes capture slaves, and the Fantes trade them. He thinks that if the girl could not shake his hand, she could not touch her own, either.

Akosua causes James to question his own blind faith in a system that both oppresses people and, as the British have introduced it, has racist underpinnings.


The family lays Osei Bonsu to rest. James is supposed to leave in the next few days, but he is intent on finding Akosua. He goes to his cousin and describes her, and his cousin tells James where to find her. When James finds her, she is carrying water on her head back to her hut. He offers to help her, but she refuses, saying that he shouldn't be doing that kind of work. He walks with her anyway, and the two introduce themselves.

Akosua's refusal to let James help her with carrying the water—which is work that he "shouldn't be doing"—could refer to his royal status, but could also refer to his status as a man. Either way, her response relies on rigid social structures that he ultimately feels the need to escape.


James again asks Akosua why she would not shake his hand. She explains that when she was a girl, there was a war between her village and another village, and three of her brothers were taken. She knows that her village does the same thing, but she refuses to be a part of it or accept that it is the only way for the world to function.

Akosua's story causes James to realize how everyone is hurt by the slave trade (everyone, that is, except for the British). This causes James to want to break free from the slave trade, even though his family is deeply involved in it.




As James listens to Akosua speak, he finds himself incredibly attracted to her. He asks if she is promised to anyone, and she replies that she is not. He thinks about his own wife-to-be and knows that he would never love her; he also knows that his parents would never approve of Akosua, as she "had nothing, and she came from nowhere."

James starts to question yet another aspect of societal and familial expectations on him: that he should marry to improve the family standing, and should not marry a girl for love.

Thinking this, James remembers the phrase "nothing from nowhere," and how Effia used to say it on nights that she was saddest. When he was a small boy, he'd spent a weekend with her at the Castle. He'd heard her crying, and when he asked her why, she had told him the story of Baaba.

Effia's life not only becomes a story to tell her grandson, but also a form of heritage that he uses to shape his own identity. From this story, he formulates a plan to marry Akosua.

James grabs Akosua's hand and says that he wants to marry her. She asks how she could marry him. He tells her to hide her blood when it comes, and then he'll come back for her and start a new life in a small village. He asks if she trusts him. She says no, but that he would earn her trust if he came back for her. James thinks to himself that he will find a way.

James uses Effia's story to find a way that he can prevent Akosua from marrying anyone else. Again, because of the expectations on women, they cannot marry until they are able to have children, as having children and carrying on a family is the primary value of a woman in this society.

Three months after James's wedding to Amma, they have still not consummated their marriage. James always makes up some excuse like illness, or embarrassment. He knows that she will be blamed for their failure to conceive and feels bad for her, but he wants to remain faithful to Akosua.

The fact that Amma will be blamed for the couple's infertility (and essentially for James's infidelity to her) serves as another example of the sexism within the society.

It has been nearly a year since he promised Akosua he would come back for her, and he still does not know how to fulfill that promise. He wants to leave Fanteland, but cannot figure out how to get away.

For James, his family actually becomes a hindrance, because he feels trapped in many ways, and the only way to be able to pursue a life of his choosing is to leave his family behind completely.

Amma tells James he should go to Mampanyin, the apothecary. He agrees to go the next day. His father, Quey, and many others had always called the apothecary a witch doctor. When he goes to her, she criticizes him for not believing in her powers, and for selling slaves. He tells her that that was his father's work, not his. He says that he no longer wants to do that work.

James's explanation to Mampanyin reveals how much he has inherited the work of his father and grandfather, but he is the first one to see it as a curse because of its immorality. He, his daughter, and several generations after him will all deal with the fallout of participating in the slave trade.

Mampanyin looks James over, saying that he cannot have a child because he does not want a child. He is startled to see how she has understood him so quickly. He tells her truthfully that he wants to leave Asanteland, marry Akosua, and work as a farmer. Mampanyin says that James already knows how to do this. James, in fact, has already come up with a plan: join the army and pretend to be killed. Mampanyin tells him that the Asantes will be attacking Efutu soon.

James feels he has to separate himself from his family and from what he has inherited (his life, the slave business, his ability not to work at all) so that he can live an honest and guilt-free life going forward.

Back at home, Amma is waiting for James. He tells her that Mampanyin said she must be patient. For a week, James starts to wonder whether his life is really so bad as to want to escape it. He has all but resolved to continue Quey's work when Effia visits.

One of the difficulties of escaping this colonization is the fact that James must leave his family in order to leave the work, and that he truly does benefit from it and gain an easier life (even if it is at the expense of many others).

One night at dinner, Effia asks James what's wrong. He tells her quietly that he wants to leave the village. She smiles at him, assuring him that he will find a way to do so. James begins to cry. The next day, James tells his family that he is going back to the Castle with Effia, but he instead goes to Efutu.

James, like Quey before him, has concerns about appearing weak and concerns about trying to make his own way. Effia understands that there is strength in being able to choose one's own life, instead of letting it be chosen.

James helps a Scottish doctor treat soldiers in Efutu. One night, James hears the call of the Asantes coming to attack the town. He panics and runs, wondering why he had trusted a witch to help him make his life choices. He also wonders, in his fear, why he had thought that he could find a happier marriage than his parents.

For Quey, marriage represented a means of gaining political power, and thus his marriage to Nana Yaa constituted progress. For James, real progress lies in having a happy marriage and a loving family, and that is what he intends to seek out.

James wakes up in the bush of an unknown forest. His body aches. An Asante warrior stands beside him. The warrior is shocked that he is not dead, then quickly recognizes him as Osei Bonsu's (the Asante king's) grandson. James makes the warrior promise not to tell anyone that he is alive. For the rest of the month, James travels to Asanteland. He sleeps in caves and hides in trees. When he finally gets to Akosua, she is waiting for him.

It is perhaps ironic that the only reason that James is able to escape his life is because he is recognized through his connection to his family, perhaps demonstrating that there is still privilege in being able to give up everything that a person has inherited in his or her lifetime.

PART 1: KOJO

Someone has robbed the **boat** that Jo is working on, which means that the police will come searching the boat and asking the ship workers about it. Jo has been working on ships in Fell's Point for two years and has never caused any trouble, but he is still jumpy around the police.

Even though Jo has escaped slavery, racism is still a part of his everyday life. He and the other black men working on the ships are the first people questioned about the robbery, and his jumpiness around the police will be passed on to many of his descendants as well.

Jo asks his friend, Poot, to cover for him, and Jo jumps off the **boat**. As he looks at the Chesapeake Bay, he's reminded how much he loves the boats, even if Ma Aku always says that there's something evil about him and other freed slaves working on the things that had brought them to America in the first place.

Ma Aku's comment concerning the boats shows how removed Jo is from his family already. Having never truly known his mother, Ness, or his grandmother, Esi, Jo does not share their discomfort regarding boats and water.

Jo walks down the street, knowing that he should go help his pregnant wife, Anna, at her cleaning job. But he takes a moment to appreciate Baltimore and his freedom in it. Jo had only known the South from the stories Ma Aku told, and he couldn't miss what he didn't know.

Again, because of Jo's disconnection from his family early in his life, he loses the negative associations with the South. However, throughout his chapter, he still feels the fallout of being a runaway slave.

Jo then swings by the Mathison house, where Anna and Ma Aku are cleaning. He buys a flower for his wife on the way. She greets him at the door and he kisses her, rubbing her stomach. When he was seven, Jo had asked Ma Aku what to do when you like a girl. (Jo was in love with a girl named Mirabel at this time.) Ma Aku said that in the Gold Coast, a boy would go to the girl's father with an offering. So, the next Sunday, Jo brought Mirabel's father a frog he'd caught. This made Ma Aku laugh so hard that pastor said Ma Aku was teaching Jo witchcraft, and he kicked Ma Aku and Jo out of the church.

Although what Jo and Ma Aku experience at the church isn't the same thing as colonization, there are echoes of what happens on the Gold Coast as Christianity starts to spread, particularly in the chapter after this one. This serves as another way that Jo and Ma Aku are distanced from their heritage.

When Jo had seen Anna for the first time, walking on the street, he had been mesmerized by her body. He had gone up to her and asked if he could walk with her, and they had walked the whole length of Baltimore together.

The gender stereotypes persist regardless of the society in which the characters live. Though Jo can choose his wife himself, this has only created different kinds of sexist requirements for a partner.

The house that Anna and Ma Aku are cleaning belongs to an old white family, and it had once been a stop on the Underground Railroad. It is two stories and has ten rooms, which takes several hours to clean. As Jo cleans, he can hear Mr. Mathison and other abolitionists talking in the drawing room. They're saying that they need to make sure there are more emancipated slaves in Baltimore.

Tracking the jobs that the female characters in America have demonstrates the slow but steady progress in the society. Whereas before Ness and Margaret had been slaves, now the job is largely unchanged, but they are no longer unpaid laborers. Still, they work for a wealthy white family.

When Jo had first heard them speak this way years prior, he had been heartened by their words. But as the years went on, he knew that these people could only do so much.

Even though the Mathison's support the abolition of slavery, the country as a whole is deeply divided on the issue and even after its abolition, racism maintained a strong presence in American systems.

Jo, Anna, and Ma Aku return to their apartment. Inside, their seven kids are playing. Each child's name starts with a different letter of the alphabet, A through G, and so Anna has lovingly started referring to the new baby as H, as a placeholder name.

H's placeholder name is symbolic of his loss of his family and his heritage. His name will soon be the only remnant of his family that he will ever have.

Jo strives to be a good father, because he knows that his father never got the chance. He gets to know his children well and promises Anna that he will always be there for her.

Like Effia, Jo sees his children as an opportunity to build a better family and better relationships than he had with his parents, Ness and Sam.

Jo and Anna get all of the kids to sleep. As Anna undresses, Jo tells her that the police had come by the **boat** that day. Anna asks if it scared him; he tells her nothing scares him. They kiss and begin to make love, their room separated by a curtain. He thinks about how much he loves holding her.

Even though Jo is terrified by the police and other law enforcement officials, he still wants to project an exterior of strength in order to comfort Anna.

The next morning, Jo goes back to work. Poot tells him that the police asked the usual questions, but they think they found the man who robbed the **boat**. Poot had been born free, and had worked on ships his whole life. Jo had come up under Poot, and knew everything there was to know about ships because of it. Once, Poot had even saved his job, putting out a **fire** that Jo had started, which threatened to take down the entire boat.

The fire, just like in the chapters with the family members on the Gold Coast, represents destruction and despair, and also the legacy of slavery. Just like the fire, slavery threatens to return to take Jo's job and the life that he has built for himself and his family.


Towards the end of the day, Jo sees Anna on the dock, which is odd because he usually finishes his work day before she does. She tells him that Mr. Mathison is asking for him to come to the house immediately. At the house, Mr. Mathison greets him and Anna, calling him by his full name, Kojo.

The fact that Mr. Mathison calls Jo by his full name demonstrates a respect for his culture and heritage—in contrast with, for example, "The Devil" in earlier chapters who would not let Esi name her daughter Maame.

Mr. Mathison tells Jo that there's a new law being drafted by the South that would require law enforcement to arrest any runaway slave in the North and send them back, no matter how long ago they escaped. Mr. Mathison says that he is concerned for Jo and Ma Aku. He suggests that they move farther north, to New York or Canada.

This law, the Fugitive Slave Act, is a historical reminder that even though there were avenues available for slaves to become legally free, there was still a lot of codified racism written into the laws, because it does not allow for equal or sustained freedom.

Later that night, Jo explains what Mr. Mathison said. He knows that Ma Aku would never leave Baltimore, and Anna is too pregnant to move. He decides to keep his family there, even though he worries for himself and his family.

The Fugitive Slave Act caused many people to move north in "The Great Migration," but that in and of itself was evidence of the racism in the South, which literally forced black people out of it so that they might remain free.

The next day, Jo asks Poot if he would leave Baltimore. Poot says no, claiming that Baltimore is a great city to be a black man in: there are black porters and teachers, and builders, and a person doesn't have to be a servant. Most other people stay in Baltimore as well, tired of running.

Poot's explanation reveals his belief that progress lies not only in becoming a free person, but allowing people to have jobs that value them instead of simply being paid servants. That progress would not come for Jo's family for several generations.


Baby H continues to grow. Jo's oldest daughter, Agnes, gets a cleaning job at the Methodist church. Two weeks later, the pastor's son Timmy comes by the docks to ask Jo for Agnes's hand in marriage.

Due to an intersection of both racist and sexist stereotypes, the women in the family are only able to get cleaning jobs.

Jo had been to church only once since the day he and Ma Aku were kicked out for witchcraft—the day of his own wedding. They day they were kicked out, he had cried because the pastor had said they were practicing "African witchcraft," and it was the first time he had felt shame. Ma Aku had grown angry with him, saying that the people in the church had simply chosen the white man's god, but that that is not the only option. The people in the church think witches are bad, she explained, because white people had said so. Jo had stopped crying.

Ma Aku's explanation reveals a more complicated type of colonization that had not only happened on the Gold Coast, but had also happened in America: the spread and adoption of Christianity. Even though many people chose to practice the religion, many others didn't or weren't given another option because they had been forcibly removed from their heritage.

Jo agrees to let Timmy marry Agnes. They marry the next month, the morning the Fugitive Slave Act passes. Just as the ceremony finishes, a little boy runs by the door shouting that the law has passed. A few people squirm in their seats and one person leaves. A collective sense of fear starts to grow.

This law is an uncomfortable, anxiety-inducing development. Even though there were avenues available for slaves to become legally free, the Fugitive Slave Act is evidence of codified racism written into the laws.

Within a few weeks, people start to move up to Canada by the hundreds. Mathison tells Jo to always carry his free papers. In the mornings, Jo makes the children practice showing their free papers to law enforcement officials. The children laugh about this at first, and Jo grows more afraid. Anna, who is due any day, tells Jo that he is worrying too much; no one is looking for them.

As "The Great Migration" begins, so does Jo's fear of law enforcement and other officials. Jo's conversation here even echoes modern fears of black parents in having to teach their children what to do if they are confronted by police officers.

Then one day, Anna doesn't come home. Jo asks Ma Aku where she is, and she says that Anna was going to pick up sardines before coming home. Jo looks for her all over town. He knocks on Mr. Mathison's door, who says that he will start looking for her.

In this episode in which Anna disappears, readers can see how even the fear of being targeted due to one's race also serves as its own form of anxiety and oppression.

Timmy draws a picture of Anna, and the next day Jo carries it around with him, asking everyone he meets if they have seen her, but no one has. He grows more and more frantic, desperately asking a white woman on the street if she has seen Anna. An officer then comes up to him, grabbing him away from the woman. Jo says that his wife is missing, showing him the picture. The officer snatches the picture from him and asks to take it. Jo says it's the only one he has, and the officer tears it up.

As Jo becomes frantic, he starts to forget some of the basic survival techniques that he has internalized. It is more evidence of the society's prejudice that Jo cannot ask a white woman that he does not know a question, even if it is regarding the safety and well-being of his wife. It is assumed, instead, that he is causing trouble.

The officer asks if he's a runaway. Jo starts to shake, and says that he was born free in Baltimore. The officer tells him to go home, and Jo sits on the ground, trembling.

This exchange with the police officer displays more of the society's prejudice. While Jo needs the police officer's help to find his wife, instead the police officer threatens him and his well-being because of his race.

Mr. Mathison finds a boy who says he saw a white man take a pregnant woman into his carriage. Jo assumes that they sold her. Mathison says that they don't know that, but his voice seems unsure. Back at home, Ma Aku tells Jo that he'll make it through this.

The irony of Anna's kidnapping is that even though the Fugitive Slave Act had made Jo fear for himself, the law was then used in a much more sinister way, enslaving a person who was legally free.

Jo crawls into bed with Ma Aku, resting his head on her as he had done when he was a boy, crying for Sam and Ness. Even then, Jo had seen that he would never truly know who his people were. When he felt this way, Ma Aku would tell him stories about the people on the Gold Coast.

By juxtaposing Jo's need for comfort regarding Anna and his need for comfort regarding the loss of his parents and heritage, Gyasi illuminates how these losses are borne of the same system, and how difficult it is for Jo to escape that system fully, even though he was able to leave the plantation.

Ten years pass. Ma Aku dies, Agnes has three children, and the other kids have since married or moved out. Jo is still depressed, seeing Anna everywhere. He goes to New York, unable to look at a **boat**. One December day, he goes to his usual bar. A man next to him says that South Carolina seceded that morning and that war is coming. Jo had been hearing of war for years, and so the man's words don't matter to him much.

As a result of Anna's kidnapping, Jo becomes disconsolate. His inability to look at a boat also ties back to the institution of slavery, as Ma Aku had hinted at earlier, and how one can draw a line from slavery to Anna's capture to Jo's depression, and his lack of optimism surrounding the future.

PART 1: ABENA

Abena makes the journey back to her village with new seeds in hand. She thinks again about how old she is: an unmarried twenty-five-year-old woman is unheard of. But none of the men in her village want to take a chance with "Unlucky's" (James's) daughter. Her father's crops had never grown, and even her childhood best friend, Ohene Nyarko, would not take her as his second wife because she is not worth the bride price.

Abena's thoughts affirm once again the rigid stereotypes and expectations placed on women, as at twenty-five years old, she thinks she is old to be unmarried, and that no one would ever want her. Additionally, the fact that she is not "worth" the bride price illustrates how the women in this society are literally commodified.

Abena brings the seeds to James, and announces that she would like to visit Kumasi. She says that she wants to visit people from other villages and the old palace of the Asante king. He asks her why she wants to do that; she says that she is an Asante, and that he has kept her like a prisoner with his bad luck. James slaps her and walks out of their hut.

While James has tried to distance himself from his family and the old villages that he had been a part of because of their participation in slavery, this distance makes Abena feel that she has been disconnected from her heritage.

Abena's mother, Akosua, tells her to sit. She explains that they are not welcome in Kumasi because she had defied her parents to marry James, who had wanted to live a life for himself instead of a life chosen for him. When her mother leaves the hut, Abena resolves to do the same and go to Kumasi.

While family is important, the punishments for defying one's parents are harsh, and ironically often results in being separated from the family entirely, as shown by James and Akosua here.


That evening, Abena slips away to Ohene Nyarko's compound. She asks his wife, Mefia, where he is, and Mefia rolls her eyes and directs her. When Abena goes to Ohene, she says that his wife hates her. Ohene says that Mefia thinks that he is still sleeping with Abena.

Mefia's dislike of Abena confirms another form of sexism, as she blames Abena for her husband's infidelity, instead of blaming them equally.

Abena cringes, thinking of their youth, when Ohene had shown her his penis, and she had demanded that he lie on top of her. Ohene had been mortified, saying that they could not do that until their marriage ceremony. But eventually she had been able to convince him, and they had had fast, pleasureless sex.

Even though the society around her judges women harshly, Abena subverts some of those stereotypes and expectations by initiating hers and Ohene's sexual relationship.

Abena asks Ohene to take her to Kumasi. He says that he must tend to his farm; he cannot marry her if his yams don't grow. Abena says that he will never marry her, starting to cry. Ohene pulls her to him, agreeing to take her to Kumasi.

While Abena and Ohene want to marry for love, the society still demands that Abena be bought with a bride price, almost like another form of ownership.

At the end of that week, Abena and Ohene go to Kumasi. Abena is amazed at the size of the compounds. She asks to see the Golden Stool, which contains the soul of the Asante nation. No one was allowed to sit on it, not even the king himself. Abena is moved, seeing it with her own eyes.

Abena, who has been relatively removed from her heritage, sees the power in being tied to a history firsthand, and is moved because she knows that her life has been in some way shaped by the Asantes even if she never directly interacted with them.

Abena and Ohene continue to walk through the village, and they part ways when Ohene wants to go buy new farming tools. Abena is stopped by a man asking to talk about Christianity and offering to show her the work that he is doing. Abena is curious and follows him. The man takes her to the Missionary, the first white man that Abena has ever seen. She starts to leave, thinking that white men only cause trouble. As she leaves, the first man says that they are trying to build churches, and he says to find them if she ever needs them.

Although the slave trade has ended, as Quey predicted, the British do not leave. Instead, a different form of colonization springs up in the form of Christianity, as the Missionary tries to spread Christian ideals and argue that it is a superior religion to the one that Abena practices. Although the spreading of the religion is hidden under the guise of trying to be helpful, the practices of the Missionary reveal his racism.

Abena meets up with Ohene again, telling him that she has just seen a white man. Ohene spits, saying that they should stay out of Asante. Abena thinks about James, who had explained to the men in their village where the captured prisoners of war are taken, even though the men didn't know what the Castle is or what America is. Ohene says that they should go.

Abena begins to realize how her father's own history has shaped her thoughts and identity, as she knows the violent ends of the slaves that are captured in war, and knows to avoid the white men.


Ohene and Abena travel back to their village, stopping to rest even though Abena wants to continue. He tells her that it is another day's journey, and calls her darling. Abena asks him not to call her that, because he won't marry her. Ohene says that he will marry her after his next big harvest. He asks her to be patient. Abena begins to cry, and he wipes away her tears.

Abena and Ohene's exchange reveals how the burden of the society's marriage structure falls on the women, as Abena can only wait for Ohene to marry her and has very few other viable options in the society. This echoes her mother Akosua's path, as she also simply had to wait for James to return for her.

Abena and Ohene start to kiss before undressing and lying down together. She thinks about the last time that he had touched her in her parents' hut, but soon she quickly forgets everything else but him. When they finish, she lays her head on his chest.

Even though Ohene and Abena share the relationship equally, Abena is the one who will be blamed not only for Ohene's infidelity but also the inability of the entire village to have a good harvest.

As they rest, Abena thinks about when she was five and had been watering James's farm. When the plants had died despite her best efforts, she had begun to cry and said that she would have brought more water. Her father had told her that she should bring more water next time but not cry for this time, that there should be no room for regret in life. Abena thinks that now, lying on Ohene's chest, she regrets nothing.

In stories like these, the importance of the parent-child relationship becomes apparent. James's advice to leave out room for regret in a person's life shapes Abena's worldview as she resolves to regret nothing in her life.

That year, everyone in Abena's village has a bad harvest, followed by another bad year. After that, there are four more years of bad harvests. People begin to starve. Even Ohene's lands have turned barren, and so his promise to marry Abena has been set aside, but they continue to see each other.

Coming out of the decision to regret nothing, one can also see how Abena's father's advice had shaped not only her worldview but also her decisions going forward, as she and Ohene continue their relationship.

The people begin to suspect that there is a witch among them, and when a woman in the village sees Ohene walking back from Abena's hut to his own, she accuses Abena of spreading evil. The elders gather and decide that Abena will be removed from the village when she conceives a child or after seven bad years. If a good harvest comes before then, they will let her stay.

In the same way that James had mistrusted Mampanyin, there is sexism in assuming that Abena's deeds have caused the village's famine. While Ohene goes essentially unpunished, Abena's life will be determined by the village elders for her actions.

Abena visits Ohene's hut on the third day of the sixth bad year. He is going to Osu, saying that someone has brought over a new plant that will grow well. Abena worries that they will kick her out. He tells her that the village will have to deal with him when he gets back. The two make love quickly that day, and then Ohene leaves. Abena returns home, where James and Akosua barely talk to her. Abena knows she has shamed them, and their only solace is that Abena has not yet conceived a child.

James and Akosua's attitude towards their daughter again highlights how they view children as a way to bring good standing to the family, and so they are particularly disappointed when she has instead brought shame to them, even though her situation has largely been caused by James's inability to grow anything.

Ohene Nyarko returns a week later with cocoa seeds. Within months, his trees sprout with gold and green fruit. At the harvest, they crack open the fruit and find pulpy beans. They are disappointed, but Ohene says he will go to the market the next day to sell what he can.

The introduction of cocoa beans to Ghana (which came from Europeans, who had in turn acquired it from the Aztecs in South America) adds another complicating dimension to colonization, as it would then become a major Ghanaian export. It is difficult to get rid of a system that can be advantageous.

Ohene returns three days later with four goats and sacks of yams and nuts, palm oil, and palm wine. The villagers throw a huge celebration. In the middle of the celebration, Abena approaches him, wanting to tell him that she is four days late. But when she reaches out to touch his shoulder, he moves away and tells her not to make a scene. She goes back to her hut, lying down with her hand on her stomach.

Ohene's reaction towards Abena is not only cruel, but also plays into more sexist stereotypes in assuming that Abena is going to "make a scene" or get emotional over the fact that he is refusing to touch her or honor his promise to marry her.

The next day, the elders announce that Abena can stay in the village, and Ohene can marry her, but Abena knows that he will not marry her. Ohene explains to them that he had to promise a man in Osu to marry his daughter in exchange for the plants. Abena will have to wait until the following season.

While Ohene's actions are unfair to Abena, it is worth noting that her fate had still been largely determined by her father's bad luck, which Gyasi poses as a retribution for his family's earlier misdeeds.


Abena resolves to leave. Before she goes, James gives her Effia's **black stone** necklace. He tells her that his father had been a slaver, but that he wanted to escape the dishonor that he felt doing his family's work. He offers the stone to her so that it might serve her well, as it had served him. Abena takes it and hugs her parents. The next day she sets out for Kumasi and goes to the Missionary's church.

While James explains that the stone had served him well, the stone also symbolizes the ties to his family, and thus also carries a kind of curse that is then passed down to Abena and also to Abena's daughter, Akua, in the next chapter.

PART 2: H

Four policemen put H in chains, against his futile protests. He rattles the bars of his cell, while his cellmate tells him to stop or they might kill him. H asks what his crime was; his cellmate explains that they said he was "studyin' a white woman" named Cora Hobbs. H says he wasn't, but his cellmate says that it doesn't matter whether he was or wasn't. He says that even though slavery and the war have ended, the struggles are far from over.

Like his father (Kojo), H experiences some of the racism still prevalent in the society, even though slavery has been abolished by this time. H is thrown in jail simply for looking at a white woman, a punishment that is doled out exclusively based on his skin color.


H thinks about the day the war had ended, when he was about thirteen. He had left his master's plantation and walked from Georgia to Alabama. He was happy to be free, but it hadn't lasted long. H spends the next four days in the county jail. They won't tell him his charge, only that he has to pay ten dollars by the end of the night. But he doesn't have money or family.

Not only is the culture still steeped in racism, but it is also still present in its legal systems, as it is completely unjust to not tell someone what they are being tried for. Additionally, H continues the trend of characters losing more and more of their connection to their families and their heritage.



H had been eighteen when he met Ethe. His relationship with her had been his longest relationship with anyone. He thinks about calling her, but she hasn't spoken to him since he'd said another woman's name by mistake. He also worries that if she came to the jail, she would be taken into a back room by the policemen and told there are other ways to pay a fine, which he had heard happened before.

What H describes is yet another way in which women are targeted for both their race and gender, as they are expected to perform sexual acts in order to free their husbands or family members from jail.


Unable to pay the fine, the next day—in July 1880—H is chained to ten other men and sold by the state of Alabama to work in the coal mines. One of the men he is chained to is really no more than a boy of twelve who pees himself as he is pushed in front of the pit boss. H is sold for nineteen dollars a month, while he struggles against his shackles and shouts that he is a free man.

The convict leasing system, as Marcus describes later in the novel, is in many ways simply an extension of slavery, as men are imprisoned on imaginary charges, sold to the state, and then made to work for free in brutal conditions for years.

The first thousand pounds of coal are hardest to shovel, and H spends hours and days on his knees. His arms burn, but he knows the pain is only one thing that can kill him—the warden had also whipped a man until he died, and the mines have sometimes collapsed, burying prisoners alive. Dust explosions could also wipe out men by the hundreds.

The brutality H describes here contains a lot of similarities to some of the descriptions Gyasi includes in Ness's chapter when she describes life on the plantation known as "Hell," as H similarly fears being brutally whipped or killed.


H can hardly remember being free, and he tries to remember Ethe. The convicts in the mines are almost all like him: former slaves. Occasionally one of the wardens would bring in a white man, who would protest being chained to a black man until he realized that he needed the other convicts down there in the mines.

The fact that most of the people H works with are also former slaves confirms how this system of imprisonment and forced labor is racially biased, as black men are the ones predominantly sold into it.

At one point, H is partnered with a white man named Thomas whose arms start shaking so badly he can't lift the shovel during his first week. H takes up Thomas's shovel and fills both men's quotas, shoveling with both hands. The next day, H can't feel his arms, and he tells his friend Joecy that he doesn't want to die.

Despite the fact that white people are the reason that H is in the mines in the first place, H still helps Thomas because he refuses to condemn another person to death. This later earns him a respected reputation amongst the other people working in the mines.

That morning, H is partnered with Thomas again. He tries to lift his shovel but can't. Joecy, his partner Bull, and Thomas all start to shovel a pile for H's quota. At the end of the day, Thomas thanks him for his help from the day before.

In return for his kindness, the other prisoners begin to help H as well, fostering a newfound cooperation that extends into the union that H eventually joins that includes both white and black workers.

Thomas asks H about his name. H explains that his mother, Anna, called him H before she gave birth. She then killed herself, and the owners of the plantation had to cut him out of her stomach before she died. Thomas doesn't respond. A month later, Thomas dies of tuberculosis.

H's story reveals Anna's fate, and also confirms how he had lost his family, his heritage, and thus his identity entirely—so much so that he doesn't even have a full name.


H shovels his last thousand pounds of coal in 1889. He thinks about going home, but he doesn't really know where home is. He walks as far as he can and enters the first bar he sees with black people. He starts speaking to a woman named Dinah who is visiting Birmingham.

Even when H is released from prison, he has a hard time finding a place or people to anchor him. The only real connection he has to others is through the color of his skin.

Another man joins their conversation, saying that H looks really strong. The man asks him to roll up his sleeve. H rolls it up to show his muscle, but then the man notices something else. He tugs on H's sleeve, and his whole shirt falls apart, revealing the fresh whip scars on his back. The man tells Dinah that H is one of the convicts from the mines. Dinah goes to stand on the other side of the bar.

Like Ness had been at the plantations, it is a brutal kind of irony that H is punished and judged because of an unjust system. Though he did not deserve the scars on his back, they still prevent him from making friends and connecting to people.

H moves to Pratt City, a town made up of ex-cons. He meets up with Joecy, who had also moved out to Pratt City. Joecy tells H to try to contact Ethe, and asks his son Lil Joe to write a letter for H, but H refuses. The next morning, H goes with Joecy and gets a job working in a mine as a free laborer.

Here, Gyasi subtly marks the progression of time and society. Most slaves did not know how to read and write, but Joecy's son, Lil Joe, demonstrates generational progress when he is able to write Ethe a letter.

Life in Pratt City is unlike anything H had experienced before, with black and white people living next door to each other. H gets paid sometimes forty dollars in a single month. He moves in with Joecy and his wife Jane for a bit before starting to build his own house. When Joecy asks him to join the union, H is nervous about it, but relents.

H starts to become more optimistic about the future and the potential for progress because he now has the freedom to create a new life for himself. He saves money, plans for a family, and join a union to fight for better working conditions.

H sits in the back at his first union meeting, while a doctor explains some of the negative side effects of being in the mines, like black lung. The doctor says that they should fight for shorter hours and better ventilation, but H says that they should be fighting for more money. The doctor counters that mining could be safer than it is, and that lives are worth fighting for, too.

The doctor's explanation demonstrates how, even with freedom, people can still be locked into poor systems. As H is only able to take up a difficult trade like working in the mines, he shortens his life because of the terrible working conditions, meaning that he then will have fewer years to support his family.

H starts to feel very aware of his own mortality and the kind of life he is building for himself. After the meeting, he coughs and coughs as he walks to Joecy's house. He asks Lil Joe to write a letter for him, telling Ethe that he is free and in Pratt City.

Now afraid of the time and the life that has been taken from him, H focuses on building a family so that a future generation might be able to benefit from his hard work.

At the next union meeting, a white member says that they should strike. H, who has become more vocal at the meetings, explains that white people barely listen to black people, and that no one would pay attention. The white union member says that they have to work together. H agrees to the strike.

Spurred by their collaboration in the mines, the white and black union members collectively fight for better rights, in a way still confirming H's fear that the white mine owners in power will listen more readily to the white union workers.

The next day, the union members give their bosses a list of demands, but the bosses simply answer that free miners can be easily replaced by convicts. The next week, a carriage of black convicts appears, all under the age of sixteen. H worries that they are arresting more people simply to get more workers.

As H watches the new carriage with black convicts arrive, it only confirms the idea that he and the other black men in the mines were jailed and convicted of fake crimes so that the bosses would gain cheap labor.

The members make signs and picket outside the mines. H sees one boy pee himself waiting for the mine shaft before trying to run away. A gunshot quickly goes off. The people on strike break the line, swarming the white bosses. H grabs a man by the throat and holds him over the mine pit. He stops himself from throwing the man down.

This is one of a few instances of violent death in the novel, and like Sam's death, it comes as a direct result of longstanding systematic oppression and contains a total disregard for the life of a young black man.

After six months, the bosses give in to paying fifty cents more. After the union meeting where the raise is announced, H returns home to find Ethe waiting for him, cooking greens. She says that when she received his letter, she let two months go by thinking about what she wanted to do. She tells him how upset she'd been when he'd called her by another woman's name, and didn't know what to do when she found out he'd been locked up for a crime he didn't commit.

Names have an important recurrence throughout the book. For characters like Ness, Jo (Kojo), H, and Willie, their names symbolize their attachment or distance from their culture and help to define their identity. This means that for Ethe, to be called by a different name represents a taking away of her own identity.

H doesn't respond, simply taking Ethe's body in his arms as she cooks. She doesn't give in so easily. She doesn't lean into him until the pot has been scraped clean.

Ethe's actions contain a sense of forgiveness, but she still maintains agency. The pot being scraped clean also symbolizes here a starting over for H, and a new path to a family.

PART 2: AKUA

Akua is frying yams in palm oil. She had grown up in missionary school, where they were taught to go to God with their worries and problems. But when she sees a white man being swallowed by **fire**, she cannot let go of her nightmares. In her dreams, the fire is shaped like a woman holding two babies to her heart.

The nightmares that plague Akua are extensions of the curse that her family brought upon itself from the involvement in slavery, manifesting in her dreams as a woman of fire with two babies—a clear reference to Maame, Effia, and Esi.

That night, Akua has another nightmare, and her husband Asamoah wakes up and comforts her. She tells him that he should not have burned the white man, even though she knows they had done this because the Asante king had been arrested and exiled.

The retribution for the exile of the Asante King reveals how the conflicts between British attempts to colonize Ghana and the Asante assertion of independence are coming to a head.

Akua spends her days in her compound with her mother-in-law, Nana Serwah, and her children, Abee and Ama Serwah. She starts each morning by sweeping. After she sweeps, she helps the women do the cooking. Nana Serwah believes that she coddles her daughters because she was raised by white men.

Even as the chapters stretch into more modern times, the women still largely conform to the same rigid gender roles in the home: cooking, cleaning, and raising children.

Akua walks to the market, stopping at the spot where the townsmen had burned the white man. He had been sitting under a tree when a small child named Kofi Poku had pointed and said "*obroni*." The first time she heard this word, she thought it simply meant white man. But the fetish priest in her village had explained that the word had started as two words: "*abro ni*," meaning "wicked man."

The evolution of the word obroni *illustrates how culture can be affected by previous generations, sometimes without a younger generation even being aware of their influence—similar to the way that each generation on the family tree is affected by the one before it, even if they did not know their parents.*

Akua had made friends with the fetish man, against the wishes of the Missionary. They called him a fetish man because he prayed to the ancestors and collected things to make offerings. Despite this, she knew that he was not wicked. The fetish priest had then told her that one could only judge wickedness by a person's actions, and that the white man had earned his name.

Akua's chapter also explores the new influence of Christianity on the Gold Coast. Althought the Missionary attempts to instill Akua with negative attitudes toward her own culture, she tries to fight these attitudes throughout her youth.

Akua remembered this incident as the white man sleeping under the tree had been picked up by the crowd, tied to a tree and **burned**. He had been shouting in English that he was only a traveler, and not from the government. Akua was not the only person in the crowd who understood English, and she was not the only person who did nothing to help.

Akua's actions here echo the actions of some of her forbears who lived in the Gold Coast and who were involved in slavery: it is easy to feign ignorance of injustice, particularly when there are other people doing the same thing. But this willful ignorance also haunts her.

Akua returns from her walk. Nana Serwah tells her to help with the cooking. The men are shouting outside. Nana Serwah explains that the British governor had been in Kumasi today, refusing to return the king from exile, and asking for the Golden School for himself or his queen. By the next week, the men set out to fight. Akua watches as Asamoah leaves.

The British governor's request demonstrates how the aim of the British is not only to gain land and power, but also to usurp the culture in Ghana as he asks for the Asante's most precious cultural possession and heirloom.

The Missionary had kept a long, thin switch on his desk. One day, he told Akua that she would not go to class with the other students, but instead take lessons alone with him. He called her a sinner and a heathen, telling her that all people must give up their heathenism and turn to God. He told her to be thankful the British are there. He then gave her five lashes, commanding her to repent her sins and repeat "God bless the queen."

The Missionary's actions reveal the way in which Christianity is being used as an extension of colonization. While he does use religious language regarding sins, most of his language has to do with race and culture. Here he demonstrates his prejudicial beliefs that the British have come to save the "heathens."

Every day Akua wakes her daughters before sunrise, and they walk out singing in support of their warriors. The rest of the day they cook for the men in shifts. At night, Akua continues to dream of **fire**.

Although Akua believes that she dreams of fire because she saw the white man being burned, it is also thematically relevant that the relationship with the British is turning sour during this time as her family reaps what had been sown generations earlier.

Akua and Asamoah have been married for five years. He had seen her one day at the missionary school and had stopped to talk to her. Two weeks later, he asked her to marry him. The Missionary had forbidden it, but she had left the orphanage as he yelled at her futilely to repent. She had begun to question God and the Missionary and why her mother, Abena, had gone to them. But she is unable to find the answers.

The prospect of family and love allows Akua to make a change in her life and escape the abusive situation she deals with at the orphanage. The same is true for many other characters in the novel, including Akua's own mother, Abena.

As the war rages on, Akua's dreams become worse. In the midst of her turmoil, she discovers she is pregnant. One day while Akua is boiling yams, she finds herself staring at the **fire**. Nana Serwah catches her and shakes her out of her stupor. However, the same thing happens each day for three days. Nana Serwah decides that Akua is sick and must stay in her hut away from her daughters.

Akua's hypnotic obsession with the fire foreshadows some of her later actions when she burns her family's hut. Akua is bearing the brunt of the guilt and the actions of the family tree.

At first Akua is grateful for the break, but when she sleeps, she continues to see the firewoman, who asks where her children are. The next day Akua tries to leave her hut, but Nana Serwah has placed a man at her door to lock Akua in. Akua begs to see her children, but Nana Serwah says that she can see them when she is no longer sick. By nightfall, Akua prays to every god she knows. She stays for a week in the hut, chanting: **fire**, fire, fire.

Nana Serwah's response to Akua's "sickness" has some ties to sexist diagnoses of hysteria around this time period, as women were made to rest when in fact it was restlessness that caused their anxiety in the first place. While Akua simply wants to see her children, she is instead forced to spend a week alone with her nightmares.

The Missionary would not let Akua leave the orphanage to marry Asamoah. She had asked the Missionary if he would beat her to try to make her stay. The Missionary instead offered to tell her about her mother, Abena. He said that Abena would not repent; she didn't regret her sins.

In finally telling Akua the story of her mother, Akua gains a sense of her identity back and realizes that her mother did not in fact accept Christianity, as the Missionary had led her to believe.

The Missionary went on to say that after Akua was born, he took Abena to the **water** to be baptized. She thrashed in the water as he lowered her down, until she was still. He said that he only wanted her to repent. Akua asked where her body was; the Missionary said that he **burned** it. The Missionary had then fallen to the ground. Akua walked over his body to leave.

The Missionary's explanation shows some of the deadly consequences of colonization. In an attempt to get Abena to adopt his culture, the Missionary kills her instead. He continues to show disregard for Abena and her culture by burning her body and raising her daughter in a religion that led to her death.

Asamoah returns at the end of Akua's week of imprisonment. Upon seeing the man at the door, he roars at Nana Serwah. Asamoah enters the hut, and Akua sees that he now has only one leg. Akua looks at him in a daze, not having slept in a week. Asamoah then brings their daughters to her. Akua finally stands up.

Asamoah's ability to return home and instantly free Akua from her forced imprisonment makes clear that Akua could only have been punished in this way because of her mother-in-law's bias and because of her gender.

The war ends in September. Crops have died and food is limited, but they still have freedom. Akua and Asamoah try to acclimate to the loss of his leg. Akua also no longer sleeps through the night, though she pretends to. The day Akua had left the house after her week of exile, the townspeople had looked away, ashamed at what they had let Nana Serwah do. But one child, Kofi Poku, whispered "Crazy Woman."

In the same way that Akua herself had been a bystander to injustice when the white man had been burned, the townspeople also shared guilt for allowing Akua's poor treatment to go on. Yet the child's name calling serves as a reminder of the ease with which society assumes women are crazy.

In the beginning, Akua and Asamoah had not wanted to touch each other, but one night he begins to make love to her. Afterwards, Akua is able to sleep without dreaming of **fire**. She thinks that she'll be alright, and when her son Yaw is born, she knows he will be alright, too.

When Akua is able to return to a more normal life with her husband, her daughters, and her newborn son, she is able to regain some amount of hope in the future.

Akua begins to speak more and more, and she wanders as she sleeps. The only people who bring her any joy are her children. She goes on long walks with her daughters, slinging Yaw in a wrapper. But one day, Abee mentions that the villagers call her Crazy Woman raised by white men. Akua wants to be angry, but she doesn't have the energy.

Akua's daughters and her son continue to be the only things that bring her joy, but she is still scarred by her history, both in being raised by the white missionary and also being born of the alliance between the Fantes and the slave trade.

At home, Asamoah greets Akua and his daughters. They eat dinner together before going to sleep. Akua closes her eyes, imagining that she is lying on the beach of Cape Coast. She had only visited a beach once, but she had been mesmerized by it. In her dream, the **ocean** catches **fire**, and the firewoman beckons her into the ocean, holding the two fire children. She feels calm and happy.

Akua's dream of the Gold Coast also involves the two primary symbols of the destruction and separation of slavery: fire and water. This dream confirms that Akua is plagued by her family's early participation in the slave trade, even though she never knew her family and has no knowledge of that history.

Akua then hears chants of "the Crazy Woman!" as her eyes begin to open. Ten men lift her above their heads. Her hands and feet are **burned**. They bring her out to a crowd of people, who call her wicked and evil and begin to wrap ropes around her wrists. She wonders what is going on.

Akua's treatment here is not unlike the treatment of the white man who had been burned, creating a parallel that demonstrates how the legacy of slavery and colonization had become detrimental to all people.

Asamoah comes to the front of the crowd, begging them to stop. They ask how he could be on Akua's side when she killed their children. Asamoah begins to weep; Akua thinks that she must still be asleep. He says that he rescued Yaw, and his son will need Akua. When he asks if he has not lost enough flesh, the people cut Akua down. Back in the hut, Nana Serwah and the doctor tend to Yaw's wounds. They will not tell Akua where Abee and Ama Serwah are.

That Akua's family history causes her to kill her children serves as an allegory of the way in which colonization and slavery has hindered future generations, both on the Gold Coast and in America. Yet, there is still hope for the future: even though he is scarred for life, Yaw still provides a path for the two sides of the family tree to make amends.

PART 2: WILLIE

Willie stands in the back of a church on a Saturday, coming straight from cleaning a house. Her son, Carson, is sitting in the pews, bored. Willie practices singing with the choir, humming the alto line.

While on the Gold Coast, Christianity serves as an extension of colonization and racist ideas, in America the church serves as a much more hopeful place and a part of African-American culture.

Afterwards, Willie and Carson leave the church. It is a cold fall day, and they walk down the streets of Harlem. When they reach an ice cream parlor, Willie gives a nickel to Carson, and the boy smiles at her for the first time in years.

Carson's dislike of Willie, as Gyasi goes on to explain, centers on the idea that he has very little contact with his father, and their broken family has caused all three of them a lot of pain and anguish.

The narrative flashes back to her youth, when Willie lives in Pratt City with her father, H. A boy named Robert Clifton comes with his father to the union meeting to hear Willie sing the national anthem. He is the whitest black boy she has ever seen. When she finishes the song, everyone applauds. Robert's father introduces Willie and Robert afterward, and Robert compliments Willie on her singing.

Unlike the characters in the previous America chapters, Willie has extensive contact and support from her parents, H and Ethe. This provides her with the encouragement she needs to make a better life for herself by moving up to Harlem later in her life.


Willie's sister Hazel asks if Robert is white, and he says he isn't, but that he has "a lot of white" in his blood. Hazel says that's not right; Robert responds by saying it's not right that H is as "old as dirt." Willie pushes him down and he looks up at her in surprise. From that point on, they are as close as can be. By sixteen they are dating, by eighteen they are married, and by twenty they have Carson.

Like Quey, Robert struggles with being light skinned, as throughout his life he finds tension between staying true to his black culture and identity and taking advantage of a system that rewards him for being light skinned and adopting white cultural markers.

A month after Carson's birth, H passes away. A month later, Ethe dies as well, and Willie is inconsolable. She sings at the funeral procession, holding Carson in her arms. She gets comfort both from singing and from her son.

Though the death of Willie's parents is one of the hardest things she has to endure, by mentioning Carson in the same passage, Gyasi indicates that having contact with one's family can be a person's most important support system.

Robert and Willie resolve to move up to New York. They stay with Joe Turner at first, whom they had known back when he was just Lil Joe in Pratt City. Willie is amazed by Harlem—its buildings, its clean air, its people, and its opportunity.

Staying with Joe is an example of how being connected to a family and a community allows people to thrive: Willie and Robert get some initial support that allows them to move to Harlem.


The morning after they move in, Willie and Robert leave Carson and walk around Harlem to find jobs. They notice a hiring sign in a store window, but when the store clerk sees that Robert is married to a black woman, he says that there is no job there.

The store clerk's statements become the first example of the ways in which Robert and Willie face racism, even in a neighborhood that is predominantly black.

Willie and Robert return to Joe's apartment, telling Joe that Willie needed to feed the baby. As soon as they arrive, however, Robert turns on his heel and goes back out onto the street. Willie explains to Joe that the people hiring thought he was white. She waits for Robert to return. When he comes back to the apartment, he has a new short haircut and nice, new clothes.

Robert's new haircut and clothes acknowledge how racism is ingrained into the society itself: that the more he can convince people that he is white and has money, the more likely it is that he can find a job.

Every morning, Willie and Robert wake up and walk out into Harlem to look for work. But this time, Robert always walks a little ahead of her, and they never touch. After two weeks, Robert finds a job, but it takes three more months for Willie to find work as a housekeeper for a wealthy black family named the Morrises.

Not only is Willie hindered by her race, but she also has a more difficult time finding work because of her gender. But it is notable that when she eventually finds work as a housekeeper, she is working for a wealthy black family, marking some amount of progress in the society (in contrast with the Mathisons a few chapters earlier).

During the day, Willie watches the Morrises' son and cleans their apartment. When Mrs. Morris returns, Willie goes to auditions. She had already been told that she was too dark to sing at the Jazzing. She thinks to herself that if she were Robert, she could get the job no problem. Robert, on the other hand, is too cautious to try and get a better job, worried that he will be found out.

Again, Willie faces racism even in a club that features black performers, as they look exclusively for performers with lighter skin than she has because they cater to a white audience.

The man at the Jazzing says that Willie can clean the place at night. She accepts the job and tells Robert that the Morrises need her on night duty. However, when Carson begins to call the woman who watches him "Mama," Robert tells her that she doesn't need to work. Willie thinks that she's not meant for a life of only taking care of a child, and snaps at him.

Whereas all of the female characters up to this point have been essentially satisfied and understanding of their narrow role within the home, Willie becomes the first female character in the book to want to escape those traditional gender roles.

Cleaning the Jazzing isn't too difficult. The audience is whites only, and Willie watches as the audience laughs at an actor pretending to be lost in an African jungle. In another act, three actors pick cotton onstage and sing about how grateful they all are to have such kind masters. Willie knows that none of the members of the audience have ever stepped foot in the South.

The acts at the Jazzing show how even a burgeoning black cultural institution can play into racist stereotypes because the society, and the white audiences, reward those stereotypes.

Willie works at the Jazzing for two months. Her marriage to Robert has been struggling since the night she snapped at him. Most nights, he doesn't come home. One evening, Willie's boss tells her that someone has vomited in the men's room. She knocks on the door twice and then enters.

The combination of societal structures and the various forms of systemic oppression that Willie and Robert face put extra pressures on their marriage, causing an even further downward spiral in their lives and their relationship.

There is a man in the bathroom hunched over the sink, and Willie quickly tries to leave until the man calls her name. She recognizes the voice and stops short. Willie once thought that she knew Robert better than herself, particularly his fear of not being a good father. Knowing this, Willie is terrified that she had not recognized him as the man in the mirror.

Willie's inability to recognize Robert in the mirror, because he appears to her like any other white man using the bathroom, proves just how far the society has pushed him out of his own culture.

Two white men enter the bathroom. Robert tells them to come back to the bar, but one of them notes that Robert has already found a girl. Willie clutches her mop and tries to go, but one of the men stops her. He caresses her face, and as he starts to move his hand down her body she spits in his face. Robert cries out to her.

And just as the society preys on Robert in allowing him to pass for white and making him fear that he will be found out, the society equally preys on Willie simply for her existence as a black woman in a space dominated by white men.

The two men turn to look at Robert, shocked that he knows Willie. One of the men tells Robert to give Willie a kiss, unzipping his pants. Robert kisses Willie and touches her. Before Robert enters her, the man finishes and immediately grows bored with his game. He tells Robert not to come to work the next day, and the two men leave. Willie is stiff. Robert tells her he will leave that night.

While both Robert and Willie are targeted by these anonymous white coworkers of Robert's, it is Willie who is robbed of all agency in this incident. She is violated by the person she trusts the most, remaining silent and seemingly still the entire time.

After that day, Joe offers to marry Willie, but she can't bear it. She and Carson leave in the middle of the night and find a place the next morning. Carson cries for weeks, and Willie is forced to leave him alone for many hours as she goes to work. She finds odd jobs and once in a while she takes auditions, but she finds that she can't sing anymore.

Again, even though Willie and Robert both experience oppression based on their skin color, Willie is the one who not only then bears the brunt of single parenthood, but also the weight of her child's hatred in losing a father, while Robert simply leaves the family.

Willie instead goes to church, where she meets Eli. He offers Carson an apple, and the three of them take a walk together. He tells her that he is a poet. Being with him is a rush: over the next few months, he takes her all over New York City. When she becomes pregnant, his adventurous spirit grows. But just after Josephine is born, Eli disappears for three days.

Even when Willie meets and has a child with another man, the pattern essentially repeats, as she becomes responsible for taking care of a newborn baby and a young boy alone while her partner is free to come and go as he pleases.

When Eli returns, Willie tries not to be angry but doesn't want to make the same mistake she did with Robert. Carson asks if Eli has any apples. He has started to look more and more like Robert, upsetting Willie even more. Eli says he has an apple for Carson, calling him Sonny. Willie growls at him not to call Carson that, as that is what Robert had called him. Carson protests, saying that his name is Sonny.

Willie grows angry as she sees Carson start to look like Robert, perhaps not only because she is upset at what had happened between her and Robert, but also because a physical similarity between Carson and Robert would likely doom Carson to experience the same struggles that Robert had.

The kids grow older; sometimes Willie sees Eli every day, but sometimes he leaves for weeks. She loses jobs trying to take Josephine with her, and so she starts to leave Josephine with Carson, whom she cannot keep in school. They're evicted three times in six months. When Josephine turns four and Carson turns ten, Willie joins the choir at church, even though she now has a hard time singing in public.

One of the other cruelties of the incident at the Jazzing is not only that Willie had become a single mother and the society makes it incredibly difficult for a single black woman to support a family, but also that she was so traumatized that she had to give up her dream of singing at a jazz club.

Back on the street when Carson is eating his ice cream, Willie nears the edge of Harlem. Seeing so many white people around makes her nervous. They stop at an intersection, and it is only then that Willie notices Robert with a little boy and a woman with curly blonde hair. He kisses the woman before meeting Willie's eyes.

Just like the characters in the early Gold Coast chapters, here Robert experiences a modern version of marrying for social standing, as he marries a white woman to protect himself and to improve the prospects of his future generations.

Carson tells her that they can cross the street. Willie smiles at Robert, and really forgives him. Robert smiles back, and he and his family turn in a different direction. Willie says that she and Carson should turn back.

Even though Willie forgives him, there is still a kind of tragedy in the actions that Robert has taken, as he has been forced to give up a large portion of his identity in order to be accepted.

That Sunday, the church is packed. Eli's book of poems is set to be published in the spring, and he has stayed with Willie longer than he has ever stayed before. Willie stands in the back of the church. In a moment of quiet, she drops the song book down on the stage. Everyone in the church turns to look at her, and she steps forward and sings.

The end of Willie's chapter does provide a happy ending, however, as it demonstrates how people like Willie—through the church, through the arts (like poetry and music)—have created their own new sense of African-American culture and identity, and have found empowerment through that.

PART 2: YAW

Yaw is sitting in his classroom, staring at the title of his book, *Let the Africans Own Africa*. He's frustrated with this book, having written two hundred pages and thrown out nearly as many.

Yaw's chapter takes place in the midst of the Ghanaian independence movement, in which the people on the Gold Coast demand complete independence from British colonialism.

That night, Yaw eats dinner with Edward Boahen, a fellow teacher at the Roman Catholic school where Yaw teaches history. The two joke once again that Yaw needs a wife, before moving on to more serious matters. Yaw claims that independence from the British is coming.

Even as Yaw claims that independence from the British is coming, the effects of British colonization can still be felt quite distinctly, as Yaw is teaching at a Roman Catholic school as a direct result of that colonization.

Edward tells Yaw that he should go to America to finish his schooling and to help lead the revolution. Yaw says he is too old, and that going to a school engineered by white people will only cause him to learn things that white people want him to learn.

Just as in America many characters experience a deep fear of authority figures and policemen, Yaw has inherited a deep skepticism of white people and their institutions.

At the end of dinner, Edward's wife offers to introduce Yaw to a nice girl, but he leaves abruptly. He walks home and sees boys playing football. The ball comes flying towards him and he catches it. When he gives the ball back to a boy, the boy's smile falters, and as Yaw quickly walks away he hears the boy ask what's wrong with Yaw's face.

Yaw has also inherited the fallout of his mother's madness, as the scars on his face mark him with his family's curse for having caused so much destruction in the lives of others.

It is Yaw's tenth year of teaching at the school. He teaches fourteen- and fifteen-year-olds. He starts his first lesson with three words on the board, "History is Storytelling." He then asks the boys to tell him the story of how he got his scar. The boys are hesitant at first, but they soon offer a series of theories and myths.

Yaw's lesson is one that has been taught throughout the narrative, as various characters have told each other stories, which not only explain different phenomena in the world but constitute a connection to a culture and an identity (like Tansi's story about the kente cloth).

Yaw then asks whose story is correct. He says that the problem of history is that people must rely on the words of others. In addition, people believe the one who has power—that is the person who gets to write the story. He says that when the boys study history, they must always ask whose story they are missing. As Yaw instructs them to open their textbooks, one boy asks what actually happened with his scar. Yaw says he only knows what he has heard.

Yaw's lesson explains how history itself can become biased, and a means of covering up injustices that the groups in power might have perpetrated. Not only does Yaw try to rectify this, but so does Gyasi in attempting to create a balanced, if fictionalized, view of these various historical periods.

What Yaw had heard about his scar was this: his mother, Akua, had set the hut on **fire** while he and his sisters slept. Asamoah had only been able to save him and Akua. The town had then collected money to send Yaw away to school. Asamoah had soon died, but Akua still lives in the town. Yaw has not been home since the day he left for school, even though his mother had sent many letters begging him to return.

Yaw rejects his mother because of the harm that she had caused him, and refuses to reconcile with her so that he might avoid the family curse. But his heritage has still altered his life, and his family has shaped his identity—not only on his face but in his desire for Ghanaian independence.

The semester passes. In June, a political leader starts the Convention People's Party and Edward joins. Yaw still goes to Edward and his wife's house for dinner, but does so far less often because Mrs. Boahen is expecting her fifth child. And so, Yaw gets a house girl named Esther.

The Convention People's Party was a real-life political party founded in order to call for independence, strengthening the resistance to British colonization.

Esther is a plain girl. On her first day of work, Yaw shows her to her room and tells her that he spends most of his time writing. He then goes to work, reading about the American civil rights movement, attracted to the sense of rage in the books.

The fact that Yaw draws inspiration from the American civil rights movement implies that even though the two societies have very different histories, they share commonalities in fighting racism and oppression.

Esther interrupts Yaw's work tentatively, saying "excuse me" in English. As soon as Yaw tells her she can speak Twi, she relaxes and smiles brightly, asking him ten questions in a row about how he wants his house kept what he wants for dinner, without taking a breath. Yaw tells her to make whatever she'd like. Esther asks if he wants to join her going to the market so that he can take a break from his work. He agrees.

Like Effia and James Collins's interactions at the beginning of the novel, language actually alters how Yaw views Esther. When she is free to use the language she feels most comfortable in, her entire personality shifts, demonstrating how the freedom to express oneself within one's own culture can shape one's identity.

At the market, Esther buys a goat for soup. She says her soup is so good that Yaw would think his mother had made it. She then asks where his mother is. He says that he hasn't seen her, because she gave him his scar. Esther stops walking, and observes that Yaw is very angry. She then says that anger doesn't suit him.

While Yaw sees his separation from his mother as a way to escape the family's hardships, Esther seems to know that Yaw must instead reconcile with her in order to let go of the anger and hate that he harbors, and to help the family come to terms with its darker past.


Five years pass, and Yaw realizes that he is in love with Esther. He watches her work and is upset that he doesn't think that they could be together. He is old; she is young. He is educated; she is not. He is scarred; she is not. He wishes he were a more attractive man, and he tries to come up with something to win her over, and decides to ask Esther if she wants to go to Edweso with him to visit Akua because she had been nudging him to do so for years. She nods.

Esther's expressiveness, her energy, and her incisive observations make Esther more and more attractive to Yaw. This is another break from most of the earlier generations on the Gold Coast, who married based on political power and a woman's ability to have children. Before, the concerns that Yaw expresses would not have been a factor.

When Yaw and Esther reach the town in their car, a young boy points out Yaw's face. The boy's father tells him to stop, but then realizes he recognizes Yaw. The man is Kofi Poku, who had been a young boy when Yaw left Edweso. Kofi Poku offers to make Yaw and Esther dinner.

When Yaw returns to his hometown, he sees how his mother's actions have created a legend surrounding her madness and his own face—one that he inherits upon his return.

When Esther and Yaw go back to Kofi Poku's house for dinner, the children realize that he is "Crazy Woman's" son, as his story has become myth in his village. Esther shouts at the children that Yaw has suffered enough without having to come home to these stories. Kofi's wife apologizes.

The way that the children speak about the "myth" of Yaw and his mother show how that story has come to define his own identity and how the people in the town view him.

As Yaw and Esther eat dinner, he asks what to expect from Akua. Kofi Poku explains that she lives with a house girl, tending her garden and rarely going out. Yaw and Esther finish their food and spend the night at the Poku house, with Yaw on the mattress and Esther on the floor.

Not only has the story come to define Yaw's identity, but Akua's actions and her label of "Crazy Woman" have made her essentially a recluse in the town as she tends only to herself.


The next evening, Kofi Poku brings Yaw and Esther to Akua's house and leaves them. Yaw knocks, and the girl who answers the door is so surprised to see him that she drops her clay bowl, thanking God for bringing Yaw back. Yaw walks through the house and greets Akua. Esther and Akua's house girl, Kukua, go off to make a celebratory dinner.

Kukua's response at seeing the son of the woman she works for, whom she had never known, highlights Yaw's continued importance to Akua as her son, and how much she wanted to reconnect with him.

Akua puts her hands on Yaw's scar and pulls him into an embrace. He begins to cry. After staying still a long time, Yaw asks Akua the story of his scar. Akua explains the dreams that had led her to burn the hut. She goes on to explain that the dreams had not stopped: the firewoman would take her to the **ocean** on Cape Coast, or to a cocoa farm, or to Kumasi. When she had gone back to the missionary school for answers about her mother, she had been able to get back one thing: Effia's **stone** pendant.

Akua's reconnection with Yaw allows not only for a reunion of family members, but also for Yaw to understand his identity more fully. Without completely understanding the history of Akua's family, Yaw could not know the circumstances that led to her episode and thus could not come to terms with the way in which he had been affected by them as well.

Akua had then gone to the fetish priest's son to make offerings to the ancestors, and seeing the **stone** necklace, he had said that there was evil in Akua's lineage. Akua knows that he had been right: that there are people in her family who have done wrong, and who could not see the result of that wrong. She apologizes to Yaw for what he has suffered.

The fetish priest's assertion that there is evil in Akua's lineage confirms that even though Akua and Yaw did not participate in the slave trade, their family's actions still affected and haunted them. Although Yaw and Akua are able to reconcile, the story does not end there because they must also reconcile with the people that bore the brunt of that evil—which Marjorie and Marcus do in the final chapter.

PART 2: SONNY

Sonny uses the hours in jail before his mother bails him out to read through *The Souls of Black Folk*, even though he's read it four times already. When Willie comes through the doors of the station lugging her broom, Sonny is reminded of how embarrassed he had always been to see her lug it around.

The beginning of Sonny's story has parallels with the beginning of Yaw's story, as both focus on revolutionary-minded literature. Yet it is easy to see how their stories differ, prompted by a difference in family history and heritage: Sonny reads his book in jail, while Yaw is writing his own book from the comfort of his personal office.

Willie asks how many times he has to end up in jail, but Sonny is frustrated, too. He has spent hours marching, countless nights in jail cells, and endured many bruises from the police. For Sonny, the problem is that segregation is impossible in America. He wants to go back to Africa. Willie shouts at him, telling him that he needs to spend less time in jail and more time with his kids.

Sonny's desire to return to Africa echoes Marcus Garvey's movement encouraging African-Americans to return to Africa in order to regain some of the heritage that they had lost as a result of slavery.

Sonny is on the housing team at the NAACP, and once a week he goes to the different neighborhoods in Harlem to ask how people are faring. Sonny can remember when Eli had left and took the month's rent with him, and they had ended up in an apartment with forty other people. As he goes around to the buildings, people tell him about the roaches and rats and ask if he can do anything.

Sonny's chapter examines how the segregation laws in America constitute state-sanctioned racism. Even though the laws claim to purport equality between white and black people, Sonny sees how in practice, the conditions are anything but equal.

Sonny had been arrested during march after march, and punched in the face when he had already been arrested. Reverend George Lee was fatally shot while trying to register to vote; a pregnant woman named Rosa Jordan was shot while riding a newly desegregated bus.

The examples Sonny gives here also show how even those men and women simply following the law or exercising their rights are still in danger of losing their lives because of their race.

One day, Sonny is sitting on a bench with the man who sweeps the barbershops on Seventh. He asks what the man does when he feels helpless. The man gives him a bag of dope. He quits his job at the NAACP and flushes the bag down the toilet.

Although Sonny avoids dope this time, the man in the barbershop makes it clear how prevalent drug addictions are and how initially drugs can be used as coping mechanisms for an oppressive and seemingly unchangeable system.

Sonny stays with Willie between jobs. His friend Mohammed tells him that he should join the Nation of Islam, which he can't do as long as his mother is a devout Christian woman. Mohammed asks how much school he's had. Sonny remembers how he'd skipped school because of how they had been compared to the white schools. Mohammed helps him get a job at a new jazz club in East Harlem called the Jazzmine.

The Nation of Islam was an organization that converged Islamic beliefs with a movement focusing on black empowerment, which rose to popularity in conjunction with the Civil Rights movement's calls for desegregation as a means of fighting racism.

At the Jazzmine, Sonny quickly becomes head bartender. One night, he meets a woman named Amani Zulema. After she gets a drink from him, she stands and gets on the stage to scat. The room is captivated by her singing. Sonny is reminded of the first time Willie sang in church.

Even a generation later, jazz remains an important cultural art, though it is notable that the audience is no longer exclusively white, as it had been in the jazz club in which Willie worked.

Sonny moves in with some people he knows in the projects on the East Side. He gives Willie his address, and his mother gives it to an ex-girlfriend of his named Lucille. Lucille and her daughter show up at his door, asking for money. Sonny tells her he doesn't have any money and sends her away.

Willie becomes disappointed in her son as he starts to act more and more like his father, taking advantage of the fact that he doesn't have to have responsibility for his children and putting the burden onto his ex-girlfriends.

Sonny is frustrated. He hadn't wanted children, but he had ended up with three: Angela's daughter, Rhonda's daughter, and Lucille's daughter. Willie gives each of them money every month even though Sonny had told her to stop and had told the women to stop asking her.

Even though Sonny tells her not to, Willie assumes responsibility for her grandchildren because she knows what it was like to have been a single mother herself.

When Angela had given birth to their daughter, Sonny was only fifteen. He had wanted to marry her, but her parents had sent her to Alabama and wouldn't let him see her or his daughter. They had said he was basically good-for-nothing, and he figured they were probably right.

Even though Sonny had given up responsibility of his children, it is also clear that this wasn't entirely his intention, but that others also made assumptions about his inability to be a good father, which created a self-fulfilling prophesy.

Two days later, Sonny is back at the Jazzmine, asking when Amani will be back. One of the men at the club tells him he shouldn't want anything to do with her, but he ignores the man. Three months later, he finds her at the club, sleeping at a table. He taps her awake and she asks what he wants. He says he wants her.

Whereas with other characters, relationships serve to provide characters with opportunity and hope for the future, Amani serves as an exception as she instead pulls Sonny into a downward spiral of drugs and the inability to hold a job.

Amani leads Sonny into the street. He asks her about her name; she says it means "harmony" in Swahili. She says that she likes the name, but that she isn't into the "Back to Africa business." She explains that they can't go back to something they haven't been to in the first place. The two then go to a housing project in West Harlem. She leads him into a room where two women and a man are passing a needle around. He watches Amani join them, and she asks if he still wants her.

Amani's points serve as one of the main arguments of the book: as Marjorie's experiences also point out in the next chapter, the difference in the legacy of slavery in America versus in Ghana has caused the two branches of people to have severely different histories, cultures, and obstacles.

Time passes. Sonny wakes up from one of his stupors, hearing Willie call out his name. He feels sick. He's a forty-five year old dope fiend, and he knows he needs help. When his mother leaves, unable to find him, he picks himself up off the ground and goes out into the street.

Sonny's drug addiction almost feels inevitable based on the prevalence of drugs around him, his unhappy relationship with his mother, and his struggle to hope for improvement in the world.

When Sonny arrives home, Amani asks where he's been, explaining that Willie had come by. Sonny eats around the mold of a piece of bread. Amani tells him that he should go see his mother for Sunday dinner—she might give him money. Sonny doubts it, but he promises he'll go see her.

One of the tragedies of Sonny's chapter is in seeing how damaging Robert's disappearance had been on Sonny, and how their family had become so broken that Sonny only goes to see his mother to ask for money.

Sonny keeps a bag of dope in his shoe as reassurance as he walks to Willie's house. The last time he had really seen her was in 1964, during the riots. She had given him money, telling him that she didn't want to see him dead or worse. All around them, black people were being gunned down by the police.

In showing how desperate Sonny is while simultaneously mentioning the discrimination and violence that black people were facing in America, the book implies how previous forms of oppression had made people like Sonny far more susceptible to this kind of downward spiral.

Josephine answers the door at dinner, telling him that he's an hour and a half late. Sonny eats as Josephine and Willie watch, before Josephine leaves them to talk. Willie starts to tell him about Robert, and how he had left her and started a family with a white woman.

In the same way that Akua's explanation to Yaw about their family history and her actions helps him to understand himself, Willie's revelation about Robert makes Sonny more aware of his identity and the circumstances of his father's disappearance.

Willie goes on to say that Sonny had been an angry child, because he was born to a man who could choose his life, but he would never be able to choose his own. She tells him that white men get to choose their lives, and get to choose what happens to black men too.

Willie highlights the major power disparity between white and black men in society, and knows that Robert was able to overcome this power disparity, but at the expense of his black identity.

Willie pulls out a wad of cash and tells him to take it if he wants. Sonny wants to take the money, scream, and find somewhere to shoot up the dope in his shoe. But instead, he stays.

Marcus says in the next chapter that he feels that he was given opportunity over others purely by chance; this passage in a way confirms that feeling, because Sonny could just as easily have turned away from his mother and continued that downward spiral. But only through willpower and the support from his family is he able to turn his life around.

PART 2: MARJORIE

Marjorie is in Ghana visiting her grandmother Akua when a boy asks her in English if she wants to see the Cape Coast Castle. She explains in Twi that she's from Ghana, but he's confused because she had just arrived from America.

Marjorie's initial interaction with this young Ghanaian boy highlights the main conflict in her chapter: that she doesn't feel fully Ghanaian or American.

Marjorie arrives at Akua's house. Akua had moved to a bungalow on the beach to be near the **water**. She speaks to her grandmother in Twi, which is the opposite of what she does at home with her parents, who speak Twi while she answers in English. They had done this since the day they had received a note from a teacher asking if Marjorie knew English because she rarely volunteered to answer questions.

Marjorie's teacher's note demonstrates a kind of cultural elitism and stereotype. The teacher assumes that because Marjorie is from another country and speaks another language at home that she does not know English.

Marjorie and Akua go to the beach together, and Akua notes that Marjorie is wearing Effia's **stone** necklace. Akua explains that their family began here, in Cape Coast. She has come to live by the **water** to hear the spirits trapped within it. The spirits, she explains, had not known where they came from, and so they did not know how to get to dry land. Marjorie walks out into the water with her grandmother.

Akua explains a concept that Marcus elaborates on in the next chapter: that the water itself is a representation of oppression, as many people had drowned throwing themselves off of the slave ships. Akua's actions then serve as a kind of repentance, as she tries to listen to the spirits of those who had lost their lives.

Marjorie returns to Alabama, just about to enter high school. There are more black students there than she is used to seeing, but she quickly realizes that they are not the same kind of black. One of her classmates, Tisha, asks her why she speaks the way she does, imitating her almost with a British accent. Tisha says Marjorie sounds like a white girl.

Marjorie's dynamics with the other girls in her class reflect the legacy of colonialism, as the other girls make fun of her accent for sounding almost British because of the influence of the British in Ghana for generations.

Marjorie realizes that in America, "white" could be the way someone spoke; "black" could be the music someone listened to. In Ghana, one could only be the color of one's skin. Marjorie's mother, Esther, tells her not to mind them.

The difference between Marjorie and the other girls also demonstrates how in America, one's identity is largely defined by the culture they grow up in and take part of because (as with Robert) someone can straddle different cultural worlds.

Marjorie befriends Mrs. Pinkston, one of two black teachers in the school. Mrs. Pinkston tells her to find the books that she loves, that she feels deep within her. Marjorie tries to search for those books. One day in the library, a boy named Graham compliments her choice of *Middlemarch* before introducing himself. His father is in the military and his family had just moved to Alabama from Germany.

Mrs. Pinkston serves as an important relationship for Marjorie because she helps Marjorie start to define her identity on her own terms, not based on what other people think she should fit into because of her heritage.

Graham and Marjorie quickly become friends, reading in the library while everyone else eats lunch. Sometimes Graham leaves a note with his own writing, but Marjorie is too shy to show him hers.

Marjorie finds Graham's friendship valuable, but as it develops it reveals that even in a much more contemporary time period, there is still a stigma surrounding interracial couples.

Marjorie goes home and asks Yaw when he knew he liked Esther. Esther asks if she likes someone, or if someone has asked her to prom. Marjorie says no, embarrassed. Esther tells her that if a boy likes her, she has to tell him that she likes him too, otherwise he will never do anything about it.

Esther's advice stems from more equal gender dynamics. Unlike many of her female forbearers, Marjorie is allowed a little more agency in expressing her interest in Graham.

Mrs. Pinkston is putting on a black cultural event for the school, and asks Marjorie if she would read a poem about what being African American means to her. Marjorie says, however, that she's not African American. She thinks how at home, they had a different word: *akata*, people who were too long gone from the mother continent to continue calling it home. But Mrs. Pinkston explains that in America, it doesn't matter where a person comes from to white people; black is black.

Mrs. Pinkston's argument has merit in that in many ways, white people still get to define the identities of black people. However, Marjorie's story illustrates another dimension: how many of her black classmates also see that her Ghanaian heritage makes her different, and that she feels that they in turn do not share the same culture that she has.

That night, Marjorie goes to see a movie with Graham. After the movie, they drive to a clearing in the woods. Graham has a bottle of whiskey and lights a cigarette, playing with his lighter. She asks him to put it away: ever since she heard Akua's story, she has been terrified of **fire**.

Marjorie's fear of fire shows that she has inherited its association with destruction, and reinforces its symbolism of her family's early involvement in the slave trade.

Graham asks Marjorie if she liked the movie, but she had only been focused on him. She wonders if she's in love. Graham asks if he can see some of her writing. She says that she's writing a poem for Mrs. Pinkston's assembly. He says he'd love to read it.

Graham's desire to see Marjorie's writing serves as a way of marking that he likes her and respects her for her intelligence, breaking with old gender stereotypes.

Marjorie is working on her poem when Yaw gets a call from Ghana, saying that Akua is very frail. Marjorie speaks to her on the phone, asking if she's sick. Akua tells her that she'll see her this summer. Marjorie goes back to her room and sees that all she has written on her paper is "**Water**. Water. Water. Water."

While Marcus is afraid of water, for Marjorie water represents something very different. She has made the same journey as her American counterparts (from Ghana to the American South), but under very different circumstances. This difference ultimately inspires her poem, about a lost sister and the difference in heritage that that sister might have.

Marjorie and Graham go on another date to the U.S. Space and Rocket Center. Graham says America wouldn't have a space program without the Germans. Marjorie asks if he misses Germany. He says he's used to moving, and then asks if she would move back to Ghana. She says that she doesn't think so: she doesn't feel like she belongs there anymore. She says she feels her grandmother, Akua, is the only one who really understands her. When she looks up, Graham kisses her.

The development of Graham and Marjorie's romantic relationship documents some of the progress that society has made in that they date at all, whereas only two generations before (with Robert and Willie, for example), it seemed almost impossible for interracial couples to exist.

For weeks, Marjorie waits for news about Akua. At school, she is quiet. She eats lunch one day in the cafeteria, and Graham comes over to sit with her. He asks if she's okay, since he hasn't seen her since they kissed. A brunette girl then approaches Graham and Marjorie. She whispers to him that he shouldn't sit with Marjorie. He replies that he's fine where he is. Marjorie tells him he can go, but she really wants him to stay. Instead, he gets up, and she sees how easy it is for him to leave and slip in with the other students.

The interaction with the brunette girl exposes a remnant of the racism in the society, not only from the girl who believes that Graham shouldn't be sitting with Marjorie, but also in Graham himself. Even though he sticks up for Marjorie at first, he takes the easy way out by returning to his other white classmates instead of remaining with her.

The theme for prom is *The Great Gatsby*. That night, Marjorie watches a movie with her parents. The phone rings, and Graham tells her that he's sorry he can't take her. His father hadn't thought it would be proper, and the school hadn't thought it was appropriate. Graham had tried to explain to the principal that she was "not like other black girls," which had made her feel worse. She tells him she has to go and hangs up.

Again, just like with Robert, the society's implicit racism rears its ugly head when Graham implies that Marjorie is better than other black girls because she is Ghanaian, which also plays into a colonialist narrative. It is also notable that both because of her race and her gender, it appears that Marjorie is unable to fight for her own right to go with Graham.

At the school assembly, Marjorie gets very nervous. Mrs. Pinkston introduces her, and she reads a poem that refers to her family's history at the Castle, to slavery, and to a lost sister. When she looks up, Yaw is standing at the door, but she cannot see the tears running down his face.

Marjorie's poem reveals how she feels connected to her family's history and how it has come to shape her understanding of herself in America. Yaw's tears also confirm that even though he acknowledges his family's past, they have still not found a way to make peace with that history.

Akua dies in her sleep before summer. Marjorie takes the rest of the year off; her grades are so good it doesn't make much of a difference. Marjorie watches the funeral service, and when her grandmother has been buried, she throws herself onto her grave and cries, "Me Mam-yee, me Maame."

Marjorie's final cries highlight how valuable her family, particularly her grandmother, is to her. Maame *means mother in Twi, and provides Marjorie's actions with a dual meaning, as she is also crying out to the first mother in the entire novel, Maame—the true matriarch of the entire family.*

PART 2: MARCUS

Marcus doesn't care for **water**; the ocean had always nauseated him. His father, Sonny, had told him that black people didn't like water because they were brought over on slave ships. His father had always given him alternative history lessons, bearing a deep-seated hatred of white people.

Sonny's explanation for Marcus's fear of water echoes Ma Aku's explanation to Kojo of why she doesn't like him working on slave ships. Again, even though Marcus has not experienced these things, he has still inherited some of the associations that his family shared.

Marcus always saw Sonny's brilliance, but knew that it was "trapped underneath something." In the mornings when Marcus was young, Sonny would get up and go to the methadone clinic in East Harlem. Marcus saw how important his father's routine was.

Sonny's stagnation can be seen in contrast to Yaw's ability to excel in academia; this fact and the chapters leading up to theirs make it clear that the "something" was systemic racial oppression.

Now getting his Ph.D. in sociology at Stanford, Marcus has been invited to a pool party to celebrate the new millennium. At the party, he lounges on a chair instead of going into the **water**, making jokes about how he needs a tan. He leaves pretty quickly after arriving.

Marcus's inherited fear of water then shapes his interactions with his fellow grad students, as he feels uncomfortable at this kind of social event.

Marcus calls Sonny every Sunday, checking in and making sure everything is okay. Sonny tells Marcus his mother, Amani, says hi, even though Marcus knows it's a lie. Marcus misses Sunday dinners at Willie's house—he misses Harlem and Willie's singing.

Marcus's feelings about missing Sunday dinners not only show the kind of invented family traditions that he, Willie, and Sonny have, but also how important his family's support has been to him.

After his phone call, Marcus's friend Diante drags him to an art museum to try to find a girl he had met. Marcus wanders the museum alone, remembering an incident when he was in elementary school and he had lost his class at a museum. An elderly white couple had found him crying, and the man tapped at Marcus's foot with a cane asking if he was lost. Marcus had gotten scared and wet himself. Diante finds him after a while, saying that the girl isn't there, and the two leave.

In the same way that Marcus has an inexplicable fear of water, Gyasi implies that the fear that had struck him during this incident at the museum also relates to his family history and their experiences, as this episode has echoes of Tom Jr.'s attempt to beat Pinky in Ness's chapter and the police officer's threats to Jo in his chapter.

Marcus returns to his research. He had wanted to focus on the convict leasing system that had cut H's life short, but the more he researched, the bigger the project got. He wanted to talk about the Great Migration, Jim Crow, Harlem, heroin in the 1960s, crack in the 1980s, and the double standards of the war on drugs. And then he would get so angry that he'd slam the book closed, and everyone would look at him and see "his skin and his anger," which had been the thing that justified putting H in prison in the first place.

Marcus's summary of many of the time periods and storylines that have been included in the book, and also the underlying bias that allowed certain events to happen, provide Gyasi with a way of connecting racism's various throughlines in her novel, and how each person's experience in a given time period has been affected by the time period before them.

Marcus goes to a party in San Francisco that night with Diante. During the party, Diante sees the girl he had been looking for. He points at her, but Marcus only notices the woman next to her, who has very dark skin and a large afro. Diante and Marcus walk over to the two women, and the girl Diante had met introduces herself as Ki and her friend as Marjorie. Marcus introduces himself.

When Marcus and Marjorie meet, it allows readers to see how each branch of the family tree has been able to come to the same place, but through very different means as they have battled racism, colonialism, and other forms of prejudice in distinctive ways in order to get to where they are.

When Marcus sees Marjorie, he feels as though he has been found. Months pass, and their friendship grows stronger and stronger. Marjorie shows him where her family is from in Ghana, close to the beach. Marcus admits he hates the beach—he's scared of the **water**. Marjorie admits that she's scared of **fire**.

Marcus and Marjorie's twin fears recall the associations that each symbol has: fire, the destructive slave trade; water, the separation from one's heritage and family.

Marcus asks if she goes back to Ghana often. Marjorie admits that she hasn't been back since her grandmother, Akua, passed away. She then touches her **stone** necklace, explaining that her grandmother gave it to her. She continues to say that her Twi is so rusty, she's not sure she could get around Ghana anymore.

Even though Marjorie still has ties to Ghana, when she loses her grandmother and her ability to speak Twi, she finds herself becoming more and more Americanized and worries about losing her heritage.

Marcus spends the rest of the year avoiding his research. He and Marjorie had gone to Pratt City to try to find some more information on his great-grandfather, but he had said that he wanted something that was bigger than one person or one city. He wanted to capture the feeling of history's impact on him and his family, and how he himself is free only by chance.

Marcus in many ways details Gyasi's own desire in writing the book: to capture an expansive amount of time, the lasting legacy of oppression, and how the difference between Effia and Esi's fates occurred only by chance.

Marcus explains that he's afraid of the **ocean** because he has no idea where it begins. Marjorie says he would like the beaches in Ghana and suggests that they go together. He agrees.

Again, Marcus's description relates the ocean to a fear of lost heritage: just as he doesn't know where the ocean begins, he and his family don't know the beginning of their own story.

Marjorie and Marcus go to the Cape Coast Castle. The tour guide shows them the church, directly above the dungeons. He explains that many British soldiers married local women, and their children would be taught in the Castle or go to England. The guide shows them the female dungeon, and the path from the dungeon to the beach.

The tour of the Cape Coast Castle returns the reader to the premise of the book: two women who shared a mother, one of whom lived in luxury on the upper floors while another was imprisoned in the dungeons below, and the massive ripple effect that this simple difference had on the heritage of their next six generations.

Marcus feels sick to his stomach and starts to push on the door of the dungeon. He runs out on to the beach. He sees two men building a large **fire**, cooking fish, and beyond that the **ocean**. Marjorie catches up to him, asking what's wrong. She hesitates to come so close to fire, but she joins him at the water's edge.

Marcus's anxiety about being in the dungeon again relates to a heritage of associations, as he knows that one of his family members must have been trapped in a dungeon like this. Marcus's distress also helps Marjorie face her fear of fire as she follows him out onto the beach, demonstrating how they each help each other overcome anxieties that they had inherited.

Then Marjorie runs into the **water**, and asks Marcus to join her. He does, water crashing all around him. When he lifts his head out of the water, he hears Marjorie laughing and starts to laugh too. When he reaches her, she takes off the **black stone** necklace and places it around his neck. She says, "welcome home" and swims back to the shore.

The final passage of the book, in which Marjorie helps Marcus overcome his own fear and welcomes him home, represents a final reconciliation between their two families (even if they don't fully know how close their two families had been). In doing so, Marjorie acknowledges their shared heritage, but also hopes to make amends for the injustice that had befallen Marcus's family because of her own.

HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

MLA

Emanuel, Lizzy. "*Homegoing*." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 12 Sep 2018. Web. 13 Dec 2021.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Emanuel, Lizzy. "*Homegoing*." LitCharts LLC, September 12, 2018. Retrieved December 13, 2021. https://www.litcharts.com/lit/homegoing.

To cite any of the quotes from *Homegoing* covered in the Quotes section of this LitChart:

MLA

Gyasi, Yaa. Homegoing. Vintage. 2017.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Gyasi, Yaa. Homegoing. New York: Vintage. 2017.