Small Island

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF ANDREA LEVY

Born in England to Jamaican parents, Andrea Levy grew up on a council estate (public housing project) in London. As a young woman she worked in various fields, from the BBC's costume department to the graphic design company she founded with her husband, Bill Mayblin. It was only in her thirties that she began to take writing workshops and to write novels. At the time, little had been written about the lives of black Britons, so Levy's work has helped shape the genre and document these experiences for the first time. She published her first novel, *Every Light in the House Burnin'*, in 1994. Her 2004 novel, Small Island, won the Orange Prize for Fiction, the Whitbread Book of the Year, and the Commonwealth Writers Price. Over the course of her literary career, Levy has written five novels and several short stories. She currently resides in London.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In 1948, the Empire Windrush brought 1,027 immigrants—including Levy's father—to London from various Caribbean nations. As a result of the recent war (World War I), Britain's population had decreased, and there were serious labor shortages. In response, the government extended citizenship to all its colonial subjects and invited them to immigrate to Britain, promising good jobs and a better life. However, once they arrived, the hopeful immigrants faced a largely hostile British populace and discrimination in almost every aspect of life, from jobs and housing to church memberships and entry into pubs. Despite these major obstacles, Afro-Caribbean immigration increased steadily until restrictions went into effect in 1962. Today, people of Caribbean descent form a large part of Britain's multicultural society.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

There are many noteworthy novels chronicling the Afro-Caribbean experience in Britain. Author Caryl Phillips, who was born in St. Kitts but grew up in England, delves into the African diaspora and the British immigrant experience in many of his books. In particular, his novel *Crossing the River* is set partly during World War II and details a romance between an African American soldier and a white British woman. Set in 1970s working-class London, Zadie Smith's novel *White Teeth* explores the British immigrant experience from the point of view of two families, one Jamaican and one Bengali. Like *Small Island*, Levy's first (and semi-autobiographical) novel, *Every Light in the House Burnin'*, also follows a Jamaican family as they adjust to life in London.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Small Island
- **When Written:** ca. 2004
- **Where Written:** London, England
- **When Published:** 2004
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Fiction, Historical Fiction
- **Setting:** London, England; Kingstown, Jamaica
- **Climax:** The revelation that Queenie is pregnant with an illegitimate biracial baby, and Hortense and Gilbert's subsequent decision to adopt that baby.
- **Antagonist:** Racism, as personified by Bernard Bligh
- **Point of View:** First-person limited

EXTRA CREDIT

Real-life Resemblance. Although *Small Island* isn't autobiographical, it does have some similarities to Levy's life; her father immigrated from Jamaica to London in 1948, followed shortly by her mother. Levy's semi-autobiographical novel is called *Every Light in the House Burnin'*.

High Profile. Five years after its initial publication, *Small Island* was adapted into a two-part television series by the BBC.

PLOT SUMMARY

The novel opens as Queenie, one of the protagonists, visits the British Empire Exhibition as a young girl. She goes with her parents, who run a butchery together, and is chaperoned by two of their employees, Emily and Graham. In the exhibit on African tribal life, all three see black people for the first time, and Graham loudly announces that they're not civilized and "can't understand English." Hearing this, one of the actors shakes Queenie's hand bravely and speaks in perfect English. At the end of the day, Queenie looks down on the show from a view point with her father, who tells her that she has "the whole world at your feet."

Years later, in 1948, Hortense Joseph arrives in England from Jamaica and rings the bell of a tall London house. The house belongs to Queenie's husband, Bernard, but he's never returned from the war, so Queenie lives there alone. Hortense's own husband, Gilbert, has rented a room there. Hortense is furious that Gilbert forgot to pick her up at the

dock, and that the apartment he's found is tiny and cramped.

Hortense relates her childhood in Kingstown. Born to an upper-class Jamaican bureaucrat and a maid, she was given to her father's cousins to raise, in hopes that their wealth and her light skin would provide her a good life. Their household is sterile and unloving; her adoptive parents, Mr. Philip and Miss Ma, are dogmatically religious and scold her frequently. Her only friends are their son, Michael, and her maternal grandmother, Miss Jewel, who works as a servant in the house. Hortense attends school until she's fifteen, after which she begins to teach at a school run by two American missionaries, Charles and Stella Ryder. One day, a hurricane strikes the town, forcing Hortense and Mrs. Ryder to take shelter in the school. Michael braves the elements to find them, but it becomes apparent that he's in love with Mrs. Ryder, not Hortense. Hortense runs out of the school to find the townspeople gathered around Mr. Ryder, who has crashed his car into a tree and died. Enraged, she reveals that Michael and Mrs. Ryder are in the school alone together. In the ensuing scandal, Michael leaves to join the Royal Air Force (RAF) in England.

Hortense leaves home for the first time to attend a teaching college. There, she makes friends with the older and more stylish Celia Langley. The war ends, and Hortense gets to know Celia's new boyfriend, a former RAF airman named Gilbert with plans to immigrate to England with Celia. Jealous at being left behind, Hortense tells Gilbert that if he marries her, she'll lend him money for passage to England. Gilbert accepts even though he doesn't love her.

The novel then explains Gilbert's backstory. As a young man eager for adventure, he joins the RAF and is sent to Virginia, where he's shocked by the segregation and casual racism he encounters. Afterwards, he's deployed to Yorkshire, where he works as a driver and coal shifter. While British civilians sometimes make racist comments, the atmosphere is more open than in America. Gilbert is astonished that while he spent his upbringing learning about British geography and culture, the average Briton knows nothing about Jamaica and assumes it's an African country.

Walking in a meadow one day, Gilbert meets an older, mentally ill man and guides him home. The man is Arthur Bligh, Queenie's father-in-law; Queenie is unusually polite to Gilbert, thanking him and giving him tea. A few days later, he and Queenie take Arthur to a film, but the usher informs Gilbert that he has to sit in the back of the movie house in order to cater to American tastes. Indignant, Queenie and Gilbert protest, and soon all the American GIs and black soldiers are heckling each other, with the civilians caught in the middle. The fight spills into the street, and eventually military police arrive to quell it; one of them accidentally shoots Arthur and kills him.

The novel turns to Queenie's backstory. She's born in a small town in northern England. Her family life revolves around the hard work of running a butchery, but they're better off than most people in the town, who work in the mines. Revolted by the family business, Queenie goes to live with her Aunt Dorothy, who owns a candy shop in London. There, she meets Bernard Bligh; they don't have much chemistry, but she knows he can provide a stable life, so she marries him.

Soon, the Blitz begins. People from bombed-out lower-class neighborhoods are resettled on Queenie's street, and Queenie's neighbors and even her own husband resent the incursion. Disgusted by their pettiness, Queenie volunteers to shelter refugees in their own house and even gets a job with a relief organization. Even though the work is hard, it gives her a newfound sense of purpose. Bernard is angry that she's building a life away from him. Eventually, Bernard joins the RAF and is deployed overseas.

Once Bernard leaves, Queenie is responsible for his father, Arthur; the old man doesn't speak, but he's companionable and patient, and the two get along well. One day, a friend from the rest center convinces Queenie to let three RAF soldiers stay at her house during their leave. She's captivated by a Jamaican officer named Michael Roberts, who's charismatic and kind to Arthur. The night before he leaves, they sleep together. He leaves his wallet behind with pictures of his family. In the morning, Queenie rushes to the station to return it to him, but gets caught in a bombing and never finds him.

One day, Queenie offers to show Hortense around the local shops. Queenie assumes that Hortense has never seen stores or even bread before. Meanwhile, Hortense is astounded that English women wear dowdy clothes that would be unacceptable in Jamaica, and that the stores are untidy and sometimes dirty. When they return home, Queenie finds the long-lost Bernard standing on the doorstep.

In a flashback, Bernard describes his experiences as an RAF soldier deployed in India. When he arrives, he's astounded at the chaotic multilingual atmosphere of Bombay, which he interprets as evidence of Indian inferiority. He finally reaches the base where he's stationed, a primitive construction under constant threat of Japanese bombing. Older than most of the soldiers and unaccustomed to manual labor, he initially feels out of place but befriends a veteran, Maxi, who makes him feel the war is exciting. Fairly soon, the Japanese surrender, but while some troops are sent home, Bernard's regiment moves towards Burma. Some of the men mount a strike to demand demobilization, but as punishment they're all sent to Calcutta, which has been ravaged by Hindu-Muslim conflict following the British decision to partition India. With his comrades, Bernard sees streets filled with bodies and narrowly escapes being killed by mobs. Incensed at their continued presence in India, Maxi calls a clandestine meeting to plan another strike; Bernard, who favors following the rules, leaves huffily. Shortly afterwards, the barracks catches fire and most of the men, including Maxi, die.

Afterward, Bernard is court-martialed for deserting guard duty

to fight the fire and losing his weapon. Eventually, he's released from jail and demobilized. Waiting for his ship in Calcutta, he visits a brothel and has sex with an extremely young prostitute. On the ship, he develops a lump on his groin and become convinced he's contracted syphilis. Too ashamed to return to Queenie, he hides out in Brighton and works as a waiter for two years. One day, when he finally visits the doctor, he is told that if he had syphilis he would certainly be dead by now. Relieved, he returns home to Queenie.

Bernard is enraged to find that Queenie has accepted black tenants in his absence. For her part, Queenie isn't sure if she wants to resume her marriage. The next day, Bernard announces that they should evict their tenants and move to the suburbs. Queenie feels smothered by her husband's assumption that after two years of absence she'll immediately return to obeying him.

One day, Gilbert and Hortense return home to find Bernard snooping in their room, and Gilbert starts to fight with him. Queenie comes upstairs to intervene but doubles over in pain. Demanding Hortense help her, she retreats downstairs and confesses she's about to give birth. While the men, clueless as to what's going on, pound on the door, Queenie gives birth without issue and Hortense cleans off the little boy. The baby must be illegitimate, since Bernard has been away the preceding months, but Hortense is horrified to see that he's also black. She assumes Gilbert is the father.

Later, Queenie explains the situation to Bernard. During Bernard's postwar absence, she received a sudden visit from Michael, the soldier she slept with earlier. They spent three days together before he returned to Jamaica, after which she realized she was pregnant. For a while, she hoped for a miscarriage, but eventually she grew to love and want the baby. After she finishes the story, Bernard wordlessly walks out.

One of the other tenants, Winston, has just bought a house, which he wants to fix up and rent out as lodgings. He offers to let the Josephs live there if they help fix it up. Gilbert accepts thankfully, but he's worried that Hortense won't like the run-down house. However, when he shows it to her, she's uncharacteristically happy and optimistic about their ability to fix it up. That night, she lets Gilbert sleep in her bed for the first time.

While Queenie cares for the baby, Bernard mopes around the house. As time goes by, he becomes tolerant of and then attached to the little boy, and in turn Queenie softens towards him. However, on the day the Josephs move out, Queenie suddenly asks them to adopt her baby. She knows that social stigma for a biracial child will be intense, and she doesn't think she can handle the challenge. Bernard protests, saying that they can pretend the baby is adopted. Shortly after this uncharacteristic display of generosity, Gilbert touches Queenie's shoulder and Bernard starts shouting at him, making clear to Queenie that he's unable to take on a black baby.

After seeing Bernard's behavior, Gilbert and Hortense decide to adopt the baby. Queenie tearfully packs up his things while Hortense cradles the baby. Stitched into his sweater she finds a small pouch with a wad of cash and the pictures from Michael's wallet. With the baby and their few possessions, the Joseph's leave Queenie's house for their new home and new life as a family.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Queenie Buxton – Queenie Buxton, one of the novel's protagonists, is a white British woman who rents lodgings to the Josephs (Gilbert and Hortense) when they arrive in England. Queenie grows up the uneducated daughter of a butcher; unable to stomach going into the family business, she moves in with her Aunt Dorothy, who owns a candy shop in London. There, she meets and marries Bernard Bligh, a bank clerk. However, even though she's attained security and relative prosperity, Queenie feels stifled by her small-minded husband and the boring life of a housewife. Unlike her husband, Queenie is one of the few characters not blinded by prejudice. She's sympathetic to Cockney Blitz victims, while Bernard and her neighbors resent the incursion of the lower classes in their neighborhood. When Bernard is away at war, she has an affair with a Jamaican RAF soldier, Michael Roberts. Later, she offers lodgings to Gilbert and Hortense even though it earns her the enmity of her neighbors. However, Queenie's attempt to defy the prejudice that surrounds her ultimately fails. When Bernard returns from war, Queenie submits to his demand that they leave the rapidly diversifying city and move to the suburbs. Moreover, she gives her biracial baby, Michael, to the Josephs because she knows the stigma of raising a black child would overwhelm her. The contrast between Queenie's high ideals and her sad outcome exemplifies the difficulty of combatting racism on a personal level.

Hortense Roberts – Hortense Roberts, one of the novel's protagonists, is a young Jamaican woman who immigrates to England. Hortense is born out of wedlock to a famous Jamaican bureaucrat, Lovell Roberts, and a penniless maid, Alberta. Raised as an outsider by her father's cousins, Philip and Martha Roberts who prize status and respectability above all else, Hortense learns to value their world while also feeling insecure about her place in it as a illegitimate child of low birth. As a young woman, she attends a colonial teaching college, where she imbibes the narrative of British colonial superiority. Her craving for respectability and her worship of Britain lead her to immigrate to London, but the hostile and racist society she finds forces her to reevaluate her preconceptions of Britain. At the beginning of the novel, Hortense is often stuck-up about manners. She's also self-centered, betraying her best friend Celia to marry Celia's fiancé, Gilbert Joseph, and taking no

pains to understand or empathize with her new husband. However, as an embattled immigrant develops new wisdom and flexibility—for example, she learns to appreciate her unpolished but loving husband, rather than scramble for acceptance from British people who look down on her. Later, Hortense singlehandedly delivers Queenie's baby and then adopts it, displaying new empathy and acceptance of unconventional circumstances. Even though she's still struggling for a foothold in British society, at the end of the novel, Hortense has achieved a respectful and loving marriage and embarks on life as a new mother. She emerges as a mature and warm-hearted woman, maintaining her dignity and generous spirit in the face of the prejudice she faces every day.

Gilbert Joseph – Gilbert Joseph, one of the novel's protagonists, is a young Jamaican man who immigrates to England. Gilbert yearns for a more exciting and adventurous life than the one available to him as a working-class man in Jamaica, so when World War II breaks out, he eagerly joins the RAF and is deployed to England. As a result of splitting his life between England and Jamaica, Gilbert experiences profound feelings of displacement—he feels out of place in British society, with its rampant prejudice and racism, but can't readjust to Jamaica, where economic and professional opportunity are limited. Like Hortense, Gilbert is notably self-centered at the beginning of the novel. He gets married solely because Hortense can pay for his ticket to England, and when she eventually follows him, he's frustrated by her unrealistic expectations of England without bothering to help her adjust at all. However, Gilbert eventually learns to empathize with his wife, comforting and reassuring her when she's crushed by her failure to get a teaching job. He also learns to value her strong-mindedness, which keeps him from getting discouraged by the discrimination he faces every day. At the end of the novel Gilbert's maturity is reflected in his marriage, which is secure and loving rather than rooted in self-interest.

Bernard Bligh – Queenie's husband, Bernard Bligh, is an English bank clerk and RAF soldier. Bernard is the novel's most unsympathetic character. Hostile to anyone who's not of his own race or class, Bernard typifies the racism and classism that pervade British society. In this respect, he's a notable contrast to his wife, the only white character who attempts, however unsuccessfully, to combat the rampant prejudice that surrounds her. As an RAF soldier in India, Bernard experiences the horrors of war and the hypocrisies of the British army. However, rather than making him more open-minded and empathetic, Bernard's stint in the army makes him even more racist and convinced of his own superiority. Bernard's return home ruins the tenuous cohesion that exists between Queenie and her black tenants; his unmitigated rudeness towards the Josephs convinces Queenie that baby Michael can't thrive in a white community, and provides the final impetus for her decision to give the child to the Josephs.

Queenie's Father (Wilfred Buxton) – Queenie's father is a gruff and short-tempered man. Like his wife, Lillie Buxton, Wilfred is exclusively focused on the butchery, which keeps the family safe from the poverty that surrounds them in their mining town but prevents them from having any meaningful life as a family. Although Wilfred is kind to Queenie, he wishes she were a boy, as she would have been more use to him.

Celia Langley – Celia Langley is Hortense's best friend at teaching college. Hortense looks up to Celia—she's older and more experienced, a better teacher, and much more comfortable at socializing, especially with men. However, Celia's mother is insane, and her uncouth public behavior ruins the image of respectability that Celia has been crafting for herself. It's the beautiful Celia who first attracts Gilbert's attention; but when Hortense realizes he has plans to move to England, she reveals the secret of Celia's mother and steals him for herself. The dissolution of this friendship is one of the novel's most notable betrayals.

Lovell Roberts – Hortense's father, Lovell Roberts, is a light-skinned and powerful government bureaucrat. Hortense is considered lucky because of her father's high status, and her mother, Alberta, even gives her up to be raised by his family. However, Lovell never shows any interest in her and she never meets him, instead spending her childhood with his cold-hearted cousins, Philip and Martha Roberts. While Lovell gives his daughter the benefit of an education, he denies her the security of a loving family.

Miss Jewel – Hortense's grandmother, who works as a servant in the Roberts house. Although she has to call Hortense "miss" in public, Miss Jewel treats Hortense as family when they're alone. Miss Jewel is the only adult who behaves kindly to Hortense in her upbringing. Hortense tries to teach Miss Jewel the English poems and geography she learns in school, but Miss Jewel is utterly uninterested in learning about British society. Her reaction shows the absurdity of the colonial curriculum Hortense is already learning to worship.

Philip Roberts – Lovell Roberts' cousin who takes Hortense in. He is married to Martha Roberts, and the two have a son named Michael. Philip is a wealthy and respected landowner, but at home, he is ill-tempered, dogmatically religious, and ignorant, forcing the rest of the family to be silent at dinner while he pontificates. Hortense is terrified of him.

Martha Roberts/Miss Ma – Philip Roberts' wife and Hortense's surrogate mother. Hortense calls her "Miss Ma," which shows that their relationship is entirely formal, only a parody of real motherhood. Martha openly prefers her biological son, Michael, to Hortense, and goes out of her way to make Hortense feel like she doesn't really belong in the family.

Michael Roberts – Philip and Martha's son, and Hortense's first love. As a young boy, Michael annoys Hortense, but when he returns home from college as an educated sophisticate, she

immediately falls for him. However, he doesn't reciprocate her feelings and instead conducts a forbidden affair Mrs. Ryder, Hortense's white employer, which Hortense takes as a personal betrayal. In the aftermath of the scandal caused by this affair, Michael joins the RAF and goes missing in action when his plane is shot down. Later, it becomes clear that during his time in the RAF, Michael had an affair with Queenie—he's the father of the illegitimate baby Michael whom Hortense eventually adopts.

Aunt Dorothy – Queenie's aunt, who owns a candy shop in London. Through this relative, Queenie escapes the drudgery of her butchery and begins an exciting new life in the city. Aunt Dorothy encourages Queenie to marry Bernard because he's educated and of a higher class, and can therefore provide security and respectability. However, despite her good intentions, she pushes her niece into a disastrously unfulfilling relationship.

Arthur Bligh – Bernard's father, who is mute and mentally ill following his traumatic experience as a soldier in World War I. Bernard's tenderness toward his father is one of his few good qualities; however, it's Arthur and Queenie who have the closest relationship. While Bernard is away at war, Arthur grows vegetables for Queenie and plays board games with her in the evening. He's even understanding when she has an affair. Arthur is killed by a white police officer during a riot that erupts after Gilbert refuses to sit in the back of a movie house; his death shows how harmful racism is not only to the people it targets, but to the fabric of society in general.

Elwood – Gilbert's cousin, with whom he embarks as a catastrophic beekeeping business venture. Elwood, who wants to stay in Jamaica and be part of the struggle to free his country from colonial rule, is a notable contrast to Gilbert, who looks to the Mother Country for opportunity and seeks to fit into British society, rather than liberating himself from it.

Charles Ryder – An American missionary and founder of the school where Hortense works. Hortense rarely interacts with him, but he's known in the community to cheat on his wife, Stella, with local women, and potentially to have fathered illegitimate children. He dies in a hurricane when a tree crushes the car he's driving.

Miss Morgan – The headmistress of Hortense's teaching college. She constantly preaches the superiority of English customs and encourages her students to emulate the "mother country" in ever possible way. However, she's also kind to Hortense when she receives news that Michael's plane has been shot down, and writes her glowing letters of recommendation.

Gilbert's Father – A Jamaican Jew who converts to Christianity while fighting in World War I. Ostracized by his own family, he marries a Jamaican Christian woman named Louise. During Gilbert's childhood, his father is an incurable alcoholic, forcing his wife and children to take care of themselves. Still, Gilbert's awareness of his own Jewish heritage makes him eager to take part in the fight against Hitler.

Celia's mother – A mentally ill Jamaican woman. Appearing only once in the novel, Celia's mother embarrasses Celia and Hortense at a parade by appearing in a ridiculous outfit and accosting a random soldier, mistakenly believing him to be Celia's father. To Celia, who wants to become a proper and "civilized" British schoolteacher, her mother is a liability. However, Celia still behaves tenderly towards her mother and helps her home even after her public humiliation.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Queenie's Mother (Lillie Buxton) – Queenie's mother is a brusque woman who runs a butchery with her husband, Wilfred. Disgusted by the family business, Queenie seizes her first chance to leave the farm in order to avoid becoming a woman like her mother.

Alberta – Hortense's mother, an uneducated maid, who had Hortense with Lovell Roberts. Hortense barely remembers Alberta, who gave her to her father's cousins (Philip and Martha Roberts) and so that she might be raised in a wealthy and educated household.

Bernard's Mother – A young woman when Arthur returns home insane from World War I, Bernard's mother ages rapidly under the stress of caring for her husband and providing for her Bernard. She dies at the age of forty-two, when Bernard is finally old enough to work.

Baby Michael – Queenie's baby. Scandalously, the father is Michael Roberts, not Bernard, and the baby is black. Queenie gives up baby Michael to Hortense and Gilbert so the baby can have a more stable, normal life.

Emily – An employee of Queenie's parents. She chaperones Queenie at the British Empire Exhibition and makes fun of the people in the Africa exhibit.

Graham – An employee of Queenie's parents. With Emily, he takes Queenie to see the Africa exhibit at the British Empire Exhibition, and informs her ignorantly that black people can't speak or understand English.

Miss Earl – Queenie's elementary school teacher.

Billy – One of Queenie's younger brothers.

Harry – One of Queenie's younger brothers.

Jim – One of Queenie's younger brothers, who dies of rheumatic fever in childhood.

Stella Ryder – Charles Ryder's wife, a well-meaning but ignorant American missionary who makes no attempt to understand Jamaica's complex society but views all the black people around her as poor and backwards. Stella has an affair with Michael Roberts, after which he has to join the RAF to

escape the scandal.

Mr. Todd – Queenie's ignorant and racist neighbor, who complains first about Cockney refugees settling in their neighborhood and later about their black tenants. Mr. Cyril Todd represents the general racism of the neighborhood.

Blanche Smith – Queenie's neighbor, who leaves the neighborhood with her family because too many people of color have settled there after the war.

Mrs. Newman – Queenie's neighbor. During the Blitz, she's forced to rent lodgings to a Cockney family who lost their own house, but she resents having to do so, confining them to an attic and refusing to let them use her bathrooms.

Louise Joseph – Gilbert's mother, a resourceful woman who runs a cake-baking business to support her many children, as well as Gilbert's father, who is an alcoholic.

Lester Joseph – Gilbert's brother, who moves to America as a factory worker during the war.

Colonel Baxter – Gilbert's first commanding officer. All the men in the regiment despise Colonel Baxter because he refers to them condescendingly as "colony troops."

Sergeant Thwaites – Gilbert's commanding officer in England.

Levi and Jon – Two black American GIs, to whom Gilbert gives a ride during one of his errands. The American are shocked at the extent to which Gilbert interacts with white soldiers in the RAF, while Gilbert is revolted by how completely segregated the Americans' lives are.

Hubert – One of Gilbert's wartime friends, another Jamaican airman.

Fulton – One of Gilbert's wartime friends, another Jamaican airman.

James – One of Gilbert's wartime friends, another Jamaican airman.

Franny – Queenie's friend from her job at the rest center, who persuades her to let three officers stay at her house during their leave, one of whom is Michael Roberts.

Maxi – Bernard's only friend during his time as a soldier in India. A cheerful older man, Maxi takes Bernard under his wing and convinces him to go into business with him when they return to England. However, Maxi eventually dies in a fire in their barracks.

Arun – An Indian soldier with whom Bernard shares guard duty. Bernard initially likes him because he's educated and obedient. Later, Bernard accuses him of stealing his rifle with Ashok, another Indian soldier.

Ashok – An Indian soldier with whom Bernard shares guard duty. Bernard dislikes him because he speaks ironically of all the "good things" Britain has brought to India, in reality pointing out the injustice of colonial rule.

Noreen – Kenneth's landlady, who often kicks him out, forcing him to hide out in his brother Winston's room in Queenie's house.

Mr. Plant – A quiet German-Jewish refugee who lodges with Bernard and Queenie just before the outbreak of war. When Britain officially declares war on Germany, the government imprisons him in an internment center.

Bert – Gilbert's partner in his post office job, an older white man who's never convinced that Gilbert, as a foreigner, knows where he's driving.

Pierpont – A young man in Bernard's unit. Bernard despises him, partly because he has Communist leanings and helps organize the strike that results in the unit's transfer to Calcutta, and partly because Pierpont makes fun of him and constantly gives him crude sex advice.

Charlie Denton – A white soldier in Gilbert's RAF unit. Charlie is unintelligent and barely knows the basics of British history. While Hortense isn't allowed to teach in England because her extensive training took place in Jamaica, Charlie gets a job after only a year of training in England.

Rosa Anderson and Mrs. Anderson Two members of a white British colonial family whom Hortense boards with while teaching at the Half Way Tree Parish School. Hortense is shocked at their bad manners, though Celia gets along well with them.

Jean A white women, who seems likely to be a prostitute, who lives in the same building as Hortense and Gilbert in London.

Winston A tenant in the same building as Hortense and Gilbert, who offers to let Hortense and Gilbert live in a rundown house he owns in exchange for helping him to fix it up. They move into the house at the end of the book.

Kenneth Winston's twin brother. Kenneth is much less dependable than Winston, is always embroiled in some get-rich-quick scheme, and comes to stay with his brother often because he regularly gets kicked of his own apartment by his landlady.

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.

MANNERS AND CIVILIZATION

Until their arrival in England, Hortense and Gilbert believe that the "mother country" is more advanced and inherently superior to their own society in

Jamaica; as colonial subjects, the best they can do is emulate British norms and hope to assimilate into British society. However, upon experiencing life in England, the Josephs realize that the vaunted civilization they've been taught to admire doesn't exist, or at least is inaccessible to immigrants of color. The novel illustrates this with its often humorous focus on manners. In Jamaica, Hortense and Gilbert learned British etiquette from teachers who insisted this was the only way to become "civilized," but in their rough and uncouth British neighborhood they discover they're much more mannerly—and so, according to the colonial narrative, more civilized—than those around them. In fact, despite successfully crafting a narrative of their own superiority, the novel's British characters often lack not only politeness but kindness and decency, especially in regard to people of color. Ultimately, the novel uses superficial hallmarks of advancement, like manners, to argue that a society's preoccupation with its own civilization can undermine its fundamental humanity.

In both British and Jamaican communities, institutions and social norms promote the idea that the dominant colonial power is a civilizing influence among its backward colonies. Queenie opens her narrative with a description of visiting the British Empire Exhibition, which recreated tableaus from "every country we British owned." The exhibition isn't just a form of entertainment. Through essentially parodying other cultures without explaining them—an older boy, Graham, explains to Queenie that Africans aren't "civilized" and "only understand drums"—it encourages British viewers to conclude that they are superior and deserve to exercise colonial dominion.

After generations of British rule and propaganda, Jamaican society, especially the educated echelon in which Hortense grows up, is committed to colonial ideology. Although she's born out of wedlock to a poor mother, because of her light skin Hortense is raised by her father's cousins, wealthy landowners whose emulation of British customs confers on them social superiority, in the eyes of others and especially their own. Educated in schools run by missionaries, Hortense learns about English history, poetry, and even the English climate rather than about her own country. She also imbibes British etiquette and even worship for British objects, regardless of their actual value. In her first appearance, Hortense remembers her friend Celia's declaration that "in England I will have a big house with a **bell** at the front door." Now Hortense gloats that **Queenie's house** has a doorbell because it represents the civilization she's been taught to admire, even though it's irrelevant to her life and the difficulties she'll soon encounter.

As immigrants, Gilbert and especially Hortense realize that they fulfill the etiquette that represents British civilization better than most British natives. On her first shopping trip in England, Hortense wears a trim coat and heels, and she's astounded at the slovenly housecoats sported by the English women she's admired from afar all her life. In contrast to Queenie's assumption that she's never been in a shop or seen bread before, Hortense recoils from the uncouth baker who handles her bread with his dirty bare hands. Although Hortense's idea of civilization is predicated on imitation of the British, as far as manners and appearances go, she's much more civilized than Queenie and her new neighbors. Episodes like this recall Queenie's description of the British Empire Exhibition. While her teenage chaperones, Emily and Graham, amuse themselves making fun of the black actors in the Africa exhibit, one of the actors speaks to Queenie in perfect English and directs Graham to a toilet, although the boy can't find it and has to "wee behind some bins." Although Queenie doesn't realize it at the time, the man she's been taught to think of as inferior has learned his British manners better than she has.

The novel doesn't dwell on moments like these to assert the importance of superficial etiquette. Rather, they show that besides lacking the manners they use as evidence of their advanced civilization, the British often lack the essential kindness and compassion that manners are supposed to denote, especially towards colonial immigrants. While Hortense and Gilbert initially believe that by acting as British as possible they can gain acceptance, they quickly discover that most British citizens are so convinced of their inherent superiority, they're blind to the fact that, by conventional markers, the Josephs are more civilized than they are. This is especially true of Bernard, who interprets Gilbert's repeated gestures of civility as impertinence, calling him a "cheeky blighter" when he tries to shake hands, and boorishly shutting the door in response. This surface rudeness underscores deeper personal flaws, like Bernard's overwhelming arrogance, and foreshadows his future unkindness to his wife. Ultimately, Hortense and Gilbert's experience in England exposes not only a failure of British manners, but of human kindness. By the end, they're establishing tenuous security and happiness, but they do so by forging connections among the immigrant community, not as a result of any gesture of welcome from their hosts. If the Josephs carve out a life in England, it will be in spite of British "civilization," not because of it.

While many of the novel's characters devote inordinate attention to issues of etiquette, superficial manners are meaningless if they don't correspond to deeper attributes like kindness and compassion. The novel makes light of etiquette in order to show how arbitrary it is as a metric of one society's superiority to another. More importantly, the many failures of manners underscore the failures of the values they're supposed to represent, and argues that regardless of the manners it does or doesn't display, a society can't claim to be civilized in the face of the unkindness it so casually dispenses to those who arrive on its shores as immigrants.

RACE AND PREJUDICE

As black people in societies controlled by white institutions, Hortense and Gilbert's daily interactions and the possibilities of their lives are framed by racism. While the novel focuses on the Josephs' experience of racial prejudice in England, it also offers glimpses of the way race operates in two other societies: colonial Jamaica and Jim Crow-era America. The remarkable lack of prejudice Gilbert experiences in wartime Britain spurs his decision to immigrate, and suggests that Britain, in its first attempt to absorb non-white citizens, might prove a positive contrast to the prejudice running rampant in Jamaica and the United States. However, in the postwar era, the Josephs face racism that's even worse than what they anticipated. The Josephs achieve a modest triumph over their circumstances, establishing themselves in their new country against the odds and learning to find security and support in each other rather than relying on a hostile society. Still, it's clear that England's rampant prejudice will influence their lives forever. Regardless of their strength or resilience, racism remains a huge and unresolvable demon at the end of the novel.

While Jamaica is a majority-black society, it's controlled by colonial institutions, which means that racial prejudice permeates its social structures. In a colony that largely aspires to emulate the "mother country" (England), light skin is a mark of higher status, and light-skinned people are privileged among others. Hortense's upbringing is a striking example of this phenomenon. She's born out of wedlock to a light-skinned government official named Lovell and a dark-skinned maid named Alberta. Hortense's mother gives her up to be raised by Lovell's cousins because "with my golden skin, everyone agreed that I would have a golden future." Similarly, Hortense notes that the best schools, staffed by white missionaries, accept "only the wealthiest, fairest, and highest-class children."

However, it's important that this system benefits even light-skinned black citizens only to a limited degree. Hortense's complexion allows her an education, but lack of opportunity still leads her to emigrate away from her society. She says that even the wealthy and light-skinned children "nevertheless still looked poor" to the white missionaries. This shows that the white people of the book, especially representatives of colonial institutions, perceive all Jamaicans as a homogenous and backward bloc, oblivious to the socioeconomic distinctions that exist between them.

As Gilbert sees it through his experiences with American soldiers, the United States enforces racial prejudice through complete and brutal racial segregation. As an RAF soldier, Gilbert experiences curiosity and sometimes insults from British people, some of whom have never seen a black person before and think that by rubbing his skin they can "make it turn white." However, this pales in comparison to the treatment he, and black American GIs, receive from white American officers. In one episode, Gilbert watches in astonishment and dismay as his arrival at an American base causes a diplomatic flurry. Gilbert can't retrieve the weapons he was supposed to collect, because the American soldiers would revolt if they saw a black man on their base, much less in the important position of driving a truck. Shortly after, he gives a ride to two black GIs, who have lived in such segregated towns that they "never talked to a white person 'fore," and are astounded that Gilbert shares a room with other white soldiers. They inform Gilbert that under the army's rules, black and white soldiers are allowed into the neighboring town on alternate days, so they never have to interact. Their casual acceptance of this fact, and Gilbert's revulsion, highlights the institutionalized nature of racism in the United States, and contrasts it with the more casual prejudice displayed by the British.

The climax of American racism occurs when Queenie and Gilbert take her father-in-law, Arthur, to a film, only to be informed that, in deference to the tastes of American patrons, Gilbert has to sit at the back of the movie theater. Queenie and Gilbert's indignation and refusal to comply sparks a riot and street fight between black and white soldiers, and in the ensuing chaos, Arthur is accidentally killed by a member of the Military Police. Gilbert describes Arthur as a "casualty of war," referring not to the war against the Germans but the one fought every day by white Americans to deny black soldiers basic dignity. Arthur's death shows that this visceral racism isn't just harmful to the black community—it can also tear the fabric of the entire society.

While Gilbert's favorable impression of British society compared to Jamaican limitations and American segregation leads him to immigrate to England, he soon realizes that as England becomes more diverse, racism inexorably takes root. While he generally received good treatment as an RAF soldier, when applying for jobs after the war, Gilbert finds that employers are indifferent to his contributions in the army. Instead, they give desirable jobs to white soldiers and tell Gilbert that in order not to offend other white workers or set a precedent that immigrants of color can expect professional jobs, Gilbert must be restricted to manual labor. Hortense also experiences an immediate rejection when she applies for a job as a teacher, which is shocking to her because in Jamaica, she was qualified as a professional. Queenie's neighbors, represented by Cyril Todd, are increasingly worried about preserving a "respectable"—in other words, white—neighborhood. While they may have accepted small numbers of black soldiers during the war, when Hortense arrives in a large wave of immigrants, the neighbors become actively racist in response to what they perceive as an attack on their society's traditional character.

It's important that, in England, racism is closely linked to entrenched class prejudice. Before Cyril Todd faces the Josephs, he resents that Blitz refugees from a poorer

neighborhood come to live on his block. It's Queenie's defense of and volunteer work for these people, whom she's been taught to look down on her entire life, that primes her to accept and befriend black tenants later. The neighborhood's similar attitude toward the Blitz refugees and the Jamaican immigrants shows that for them, prejudice is a way to preserve and enhance their own status at the expense of others. At the same time, their attitude towards immigrants of color is particularly cruel because they've never spent time with non-white people before, but rather have imbibed stereotypes about them since birth.

As they move through different societies and eventually settle in England, Gilbert and Hortense experience many different forms of racism. Their inability to ever escape its presence qualifies their personal happiness at the end of the novel; it's a foretaste of the decades of fierce fighting for civil rights that will occur in Britain and America. Ultimately, the novel's refusal to neatly resolve the racism that pervades it is not only a strong indictment of racism's potential to shape the protagonists' lives, but a statement of doubt that the paradise Gilbert imagines Britain to be—a heterogeneous society existing without racial tension—can ever actually exist.

REDEMPTION

While most of the novel's main characters are sympathetic to some degree, they've all done things in the past of which they're not proud. By the novel's climax, when Bernard returns home, Hortense and Gilbert's marriage of convenience is on the verge of collapse; while Bernard thinks he can resume the marriage he left behind, Queenie's sudden delivery of an illegitimate child shows that things have changed irrevocably. For all the characters, the mistakes of the past threaten to destroy the relationships of the present. While the arrival of Queenie's baby seems like one more crisis, it actually affords all four characters the opportunity to address and overcome past wrongs. However, by eventually adopting the baby, it's Hortense and Gilbert who embrace this chance for redemption, while Queenie and Bernard let it slip away. Through this contrast, the novel argues that in order to improve their future, people must actively confront and acknowledge their mistakes in the past.

By the time the baby is born, all the main characters have behaved badly, mostly in regard to each other. In a remarkable display of insensitivity, Hortense betrays her best friend Celia in order to marry Gilbert and secure her passage to England, where she consistently berates him for failing to provide the posh life she imagined. Her self-centeredness often detracts from her strong character. For his part, Gilbert marries Hortense solely because she can provide the money for his passage to England. During the war, Queenie cheats on her husband; later, she remarks that she "made her own bed," acknowledging that her pregnancy contributes to the bad state of affairs between her and Bernard. Bernard is a notably bad husband, expecting Queenie to submissively comply with his every demand and deserting her for two years after the war. Moreover, in his unmitigated rudeness to people of color (namely the Josephs), he epitomizes the deep-seated racism and prejudice that pervades Britain.

While the birth of an illegitimate, biracial child is a disaster by the standards of the time, it immediately forces the adults around it to change their behavior. Delivering the baby single-handedly, Hortense is forced into a generosity and spontaneity she rarely displays. In the process, her best dress, which represents the stiff English decorum to which she clings, is spattered by afterbirth. However, Hortense uncharacteristically remarks that the baby is "gift from the Lord" and thus worth "a little disgust on your best dress." In a rare moment of openness, Queenie shares her experience and feelings during the war with Bernard, who "listened to me right through," although afterwards he characteristically has "absolutely nothing to say." Even Bernard looks past his racism—at least initially—to become attached to the baby. His tenderness towards the child leads to a sincere conversation with Queenie, in which he discloses the horror of his imprisonment in India.

However, in the end, Queenie and Bernard quail before the task of raising a black baby, while Hortense and Gilbert step up to adopt it. In this final confrontation, the Josephs redeem themselves and their marriage, while the Blighs fracture theirs forever. Surprisingly, when Queenie first suggests that the Josephs raise her baby, Bernard is the most vocal opponent, saying staunchly that the baby needs his mother. This moment of "caring" is the closest he comes to overcoming his previous racism and redeeming himself. However, a minute later when Gilbert moves to comfort a crying Queenie, Bernard demands that he remove his "filthy black hands," showing that Bernard can't overcome his past and is in no position to care for a black son. Queenie admits that she also can't face the social stigma of raising a biracial child, saying, "I haven't got the guts for it." Her position is more heart-wrenching than Bernard's, and she truly believes it's better for her baby to grow up with black parents. Even so, this moment represents a failure of courage for her as well, a final inability to live up to the open-mindedness she's championed throughout the book.

On the other hand, when they decide together to adopt the baby, Gilbert and Hortense become a generous and committed family, redeeming their past self-interested behavior. For Hortense, this moment is especially relevant to overcoming her own past. She's initially reluctant to adopt Queenie's baby because as a child, she herself was given to another family for a better future, and as a result was raised as an outsider in an unloving household. In her final decision, Hortense vows to give this baby an experience different from her own, thus easing the

memory of her own painful childhood.

DISPLACEMENT AND BELONGING

Feelings of displacement plague all the novel's main characters. As educated young people facing their limited prospects on a colonial island, Hortense and Gilbert feel out of place in their native country of Jamaica and look toward the wider world of England as a place where they can truly thrive. Less central to the novel, Queenie and Bernard's feelings of displacement in their native society of England echo those of their immigrant tenants. All these characters try to force the world around them to conform to their expectations of it, and all are unsuccessful. By the end of the novel, everyone realizes that they can't count on their society to make them feel at home; instead, they arrive at a sense of belonging by forging close personal relationships. While this conclusion is empowering in its insistence on the agency of individuals (especially immigrants) to carve out strong communities, it's also a demoralizing reflection on the wider British society that refuses to accommodate diversity.

All the characters, but most importantly Hortense and Gilbert, feel out of place in the societies in which they're born. Trained rigorously as a teacher, Hortense finds few opportunities to work in Jamaica and thinks she will find better and more rewarding jobs in the British school system. As an RAF soldier, Gilbert experiences life in Britain and all it has to offer; when he returns home after the war, Jamaica's stalling economy and his cousin Elwood's ill-considered business schemes fill him with dread. Dreaming of a career as a lawyer, Gilbert thinks he can only fulfill his aspirations outside his country. Importantly, Hortense and Gilbert's feelings of displacement are caused by their education within a colonial structure, which has taught them to aspire to British lives and careers without building a Jamaican society in which such lives are accessible.

Similarly, as a young girl, Queenie is revolted by her family's butchering business even though everyone around her is completely committed to it. Although she marries Bernard to secure a different life and escape these feelings of displacement, Queenie also feels out of place in the role of traditional, submissive housewife Bernard expects her to play. Before the war, Bernard carves out a place for himself in society by pursuing a modest career as a clerk and rigidly adhering to conventional norms. When he returns, he finds that his career isn't valued any longer, and his marriage is on shaky ground. He can't even feel superior to people of color, as he did during the war, because they're living in his neighborhood and in his very **house**. Although Bernard's mentality is deeply unsympathetic, he does experience similar feelings to his wife and tenants, showing that displacement isn't limited to immigrants or other marginalized groups.

To combat these feelings of displacement, the main characters try to force the community they live in to conform to their expectations of it. Gilbert repeatedly applies to professional jobs from which he's rejected on the basis of his race, believing that if he simply tries hard enough to belong in the British society he imagines for himself he'll eventually succeed. Similarly, Hortense is deaf to Gilbert's explanations that her teaching certificate is valueless in Britain; despite the racism she experiences from her first day in Britain, it's not until she applies for a job and is rudely rejected that she realizes she can't, through sheer will, make Britain into the paradise of opportunity she imagined.

An unusually open-minded woman, Queenie wants her neighborhood to be more welcoming towards war refugees and immigrants of color. She imagines that by accepting these people as tenants herself, and defending them from her bigoted neighbors, she can force the neighborhood into a more tolerant attitude. Of course, this is unsuccessful, and neighborhood feeling towards Queenie's black tenants only worsens throughout the novel.

Bernard's behavior on this front is the most egregious. Incensed to find people of color living in his neighborhood and his own house, Bernard immediately ejects all the tenants, as if by doing so he can restore both his neighborhood and his own mind to its comfortable pre-war state. When Queenie aggressively defends the tenants, Bernard realizes he's no longer the undisputed master of his house; now he has to contend with his wife's new independence and, when she delivers a biracial baby, to accept that the segregated society he imagines is gone forever.

Ultimately, after striving for acceptance from a society that doesn't live up to their expectations, all the characters learn to carve out enclaves where they can achieve a sense of belonging denied to them by society at large. When Bernard arrives home and destroys Gilbert's hopes of living peacefully in a white neighborhood, it's Winston, one of the Jamaican tenants, who, through the Jamaican immigrant community, finds them a real house they can afford. The Josephs' change of housing shows that they're achieving security not by trying to become more British but by cultivating a friendly community within the generally hostile British society.

Meanwhile, Bernard does the opposite. In announcing his intention to move to the suburbs, he's retreating from the newly heterogeneous city into an all-white enclave, just as many of his neighbors do. While he can't rid the city of immigrants, he can live among other people who share his intolerance and recreate in miniature the society that's since vanished with the war. The only person who doesn't find a sense of belonging is Queenie, who can't create or envision any community that reflects her own attitude of tolerance and compassion.

While the Josephs' move represents perseverance and ingenuity in the face of steep opposition to their presence in Britain, Bernard's shows cowardice and a redoubled embrace

of his own intolerance. These disparate characters are linked by the similar feelings they experience, but their differing responses drive them apart. Through this contrast, the novel valorizes the struggle of immigrants to create communities where they can feel secure and valued, while also warning that bigotry can also survive in closed communities, even if the larger society around them is slowly becoming more progressive.

MARRIAGE AND WOMEN'S ROLES

At the end of the 1940s, British and Jamaican society are highly restrictive of women, seeking to confine them to marriage and domestic roles. However, while they do spend most of their time within the home (specifically, within **Queenie's home**), Hortense and Queenie both chafe against the limiting prospects of domesticity and subservience to their husbands. The women's failure and refusal to submit to traditional roles causes friction in their marriages. However, while Gilbert eventually comes to appreciate his wife's headstrong and high-minded behavior, after initial resistance, Queenie eventually submits to Bernard's self-centered vision of their future, even though it makes her feel trapped and unhappy. By the end of the novel, both marriages have reached a state of agreement, but the contrast between the Josephs' optimism and the Blighs' dim future argues that purchasing such agreement by fulfilling gender norms won't lead to happiness.

Hortense is in many ways a conservative and prim woman, but she continually flouts and eventually forces Gilbert to rearrange his expectations for a wife. While she's sometimes annoyingly obsessed with her rights and status as a wife, it's clear that she's married Gilbert not in pursuit of conventional romance, but in order to get to England and pursue her own goal of becoming a teacher. Rather than being oriented around the home, she's outward-looking and has strong career aspirations. This is underscored by her lack of domesticity; she's unable to cook for Gilbert when she arrives in England and isn't interested in learning how.

When Gilbert first tries to sleep with her, Hortense is offended and kicks him out of the bed. Displaying a sexual prudery inherited from her Victorian schoolteachers, on one level Hortense is proving herself committed to a very conservative vision of femininity. However, she's also showing a strong will and a refusal to obey her husband unthinkingly. When Hortense finally invites Gilbert to share the bed at the end of the novel, it signals that she's finally ready to begin her marriage, but only after her own period of adjustment and on her own terms. For his part, Gilbert often bemoans his wife's lack of traditional skills and belittles her unrealistic attempts to secure a teaching position. However, he ultimately comes to her aid; although he can't find her a job as a teacher, he encourages her in the pursuit, saying that "a teacher you still will be" even if she has to take a menial job in the meantime. His anxiety that Hortense approve of the new house he finds at the end of the novel, contrasted to the peremptory decisions he used to make about their future, shows his appreciation of his "proud, haughty [...] even insufferable" wife and his willingness to undertake a marriage of partners.

Seemingly abandoned by her husband and in no hurry to see him return home, Queenie at first seems much more unconventional than Hortense; but by the end of the novel she's again entrenched in the marriage she thought the war had liberated her from. For most of the novel, Queenie is stationed firmly within the feminine sphere of the home, stewarding her husband's property and taking care of his father during the war—fulfilling traditional expectations of a wife. At the same time, she makes her home the staging grounds for a domestic revolt, taking in Jamaican immigrants even though she knows Bernard wouldn't approve, and conducting the first sexually satisfying affair of her life. Bernard's absence liberates her from marriage while his house, paradoxically, gives her the economic means to become an independent woman.

When Bernard reappears, Queenie resists allowing him to resume the role as head of the family. She banishes him to a guest bedroom and insists that the renters come to her to adjudicate her problems, even though Bernard insists he should be in charge. Bernard's chagrin that Queenie shouts at him "in front of the coloreds" highlights his wife's unusual independence and his own anxiety about losing his domestic status. Queenie's defiance is largely fueled by her secret knowledge that she's pregnant with a biracial baby, an incredibly transgressive act in her society. However, once she decides to give up the baby, she's fatalistically resigned to resuming life with Bernard, speaking of their life with "proper decent neighbors out in the suburbs" as if it's a given, rather than a choice she's making. Although she loves her son, her realization of the difficulties of raising a black child drive her back to her conventional, repressive marriage.

At the end of the novel, both the Josephs and the Blighs, once almost irreparably divided, are living together and seemingly reconciled. However, while Hortense is settling into a marriage that accepts and values her strong will and sense of independence, Queenie is resuming a relationship against which she's always chafed, and for which she has to give up her son. The contrast between Hortense's new optimism and Queenie's uncertain future happiness argues that while marital concord is important, and compromise between disparate personalities may be required to achieve it, prioritizing domestic security above one's sense of self is a dangerous gamble.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and

Analysis sections of this LitChart.

QUEENIE'S HOUSE

Queenie's house, in which most of the present action takes place, represents not just domestic comfort but refuge and liberation. For Gilbert and Hortense, the house is the one place where they can live on their own terms, away from the discrimination they experience elsewhere—notably, Gilbert is adamant that Hortense never clean on her knees because he wants their room to be a place of dignity. Additionally, the house is the location of their tenuous friendship with Queenie, one of the novel's few instances of racial cohesion. When Queenie arrives as a dubious bride, the house and its stultifying routines feel like a trap; but when Bernard fails to return after the war, it provides her an independent livelihood as a landlady, freeing her from the smothered feeling of married life. Moreover, the house's privacy allows her to have an affair with Michael without subjecting such a relationship to the scrutiny and stigma of the outside world, liberating them both—if only for a moment—from the confines of structural racism. The house is a refuge for Bernard as well, but for him it represents the intensely segregated, classist, and patriarchal prewar society in which he felt privileged and comfortable. While Bernard is dismayed by changed society to which he returns after the war, he hopes to retreat into his house and recreate a world that is rapidly vanishing.

These two clashing ideas of what the house should represent—subversive progress or regressive traditionalism—mean that the house is not only a place of refuge but a battleground, playing out in miniature the social conflicts that are gripping the nation as a whole. By the end, the Josephs move out of the house, and the Blighs make plans to leave as well; either side wins or loses, but the house becomes intolerable to everyone. Because of this outcome, the house represents not only the possibility of refuge, but the ephemeral, transient nature of such comfort.

DOORBELLS

Throughout the novel, doorbells symbolize the superficiality of "civilized manners" and the manifest hypocrisy that underlies them. During Hortense's stint at teacher's college, her friend Celia Langley declares that one day she'll move to England and have a house with a doorbell. For her, the doorbell—a European invention, not used in Jamaica—epitomizes status and success as she's been taught to view these concepts through her colonial education. From a young age, Celia, Gilbert, and especially Hortense have learned to admire British customs and aspire to British lives without ever questioning their value, thus fostering the belief that British society is inherently superior to their own. When Hortense arrives in England and rings Queenie's bell, she remembers Celia's daydream and gloats that she's the one reaping the benefits of British civilization. However, when she sees the dirty shops and dismal clothes of the people around her, she realizes the British aren't nearly as mannerly as she'd been led to believe. Moreover, she quickly finds that succeeding in Britain isn't a matter of having a doorbell or wearing the right clothes; no matter how she behaves, people judge her and discriminate against her based on her race.

At the end of the novel, sharing a bed for the first time, Hortense asks Gilbert playfully if their new house will have a doorbell. However, the question is ironic; the important thing about the house isn't that it lives up to the civilized customs she's been taught to worship, but that it belongs to them and provides an escape from the relentless racism of British society. By this point, the doorbell highlights the contrast between Hortense's initial worship of British civilization and her current mockery of it, showing that she's learned to find security in relationships, like her marriage, rather than in the rigid and meaningless customs that have so dominated her life.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Picador edition of *Small Island* published in 2004.

Prologue: Queenie Quotes

❝ Father said later that this African man I was made to shake hands with would have been a chief or a prince in Africa. Evidently, when they speak English you know that they have learned to be civilized—taught English by the white man, missionaries probably. So Father told me not to worry about having shaken his hand because the African man was most likely a potentate.

Related Characters: Queenie Buxton (speaker), Queenie's Father (Wilfred Buxton)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 6

Explanation and Analysis

As a child, Queenie visits the British Empire Exhibition with her family, where she sees a recreated African village, complete with black "African" actors. Her older babysitter encourages her to kiss one of the men, thinking he can't understand English; but instead the man introduces himself to Queenie in flawless English and shakes her hand. Father, in evaluating this incident, doesn't worry that the children might have offended this man but that they might have

contaminated themselves by touching someone beneath themselves. Everyone in the family is oblivious to the fact that, by the standards of their own society, which prizes politeness, the unfailingly polite African man was much more civilized than the blatantly rude English children. Throughout the novel, characters will constantly talk about "civilization" or "civilized people," but this incident shows that such ideas are a mechanism for defining social status and enforcing prejudices, rather than an objective measure of personal qualities and politeness.

Chapter 3: Hortense Quotes

❝ With such a countenance there was a chance of a golden life for I. What, after all, could Alberta give? Bare black feet skipping over stones. If I was given to my father's cousins for upbringing, I could learn to read and write and perform all my times tables. And more. I could become a lady worthy of my father, wherever he might be.

Related Characters: Hortense Roberts (speaker), Alberta, Lovell Roberts

Related Themes:

Page Number: 32

Explanation and Analysis

Hortense's father is a light-skinned, educated bureaucrat, while her mother is a penniless maid. Because she is fair like her father, Hortense has a chance at an education and an easier life, so her mother gives her up to be raised by wealthy cousins. As a child in her cousins' pretentious and status-conscious household, Hortense learns to be inordinately proud of light skin, believing that it entitles her to advantages, rather than acknowledging that it lets her benefit from systemic racism; she also learns to value her high-status father over her lowly mother. Although Hortense doesn't question these assumptions until she arrives in England, this passage—with its poignant evocation of her lost mother contrasted with the cold advantages, like "times tables" conferred by her father's family—demonstrates the huge loss that Hortense sustains when she goes to her cousins for a "better life."

Chapter 4: Hortense Quotes

❝ I could understand why it was of the greatest importance to her that slavery should not return. Her skin was so dark. But mine was not of that hue—it was the color of warm honey. No one would think to enchain someone such as I. All the world knows what that rousing anthem declares: "Britons never, never, never shall be slaves."

Related Characters: Hortense Roberts (speaker), Celia Langley

Related Themes:

Page Number: 59

Explanation and Analysis

While watching a military parade with Celia one day, Hortense wonders aloud why so many Jamaican men have to fight in a war that is so far away. Celia says earnestly that if Hitler wins, he will reinstate slavery. Hortense's response is almost comical in its oblivion. Although Hortense has no material advantages over Celia (both are struggling teachers) and although she's not as well-liked as her friend, Hortense has learned to consider herself superior by virtue of her fair skin. Hortense both accepts the racism embedded in her own society and is oblivious to the way race operates in the world beyond Jamaica. It's not until she arrives in London that she realizes the English extend prejudice to all black people regardless of if their skin color is light like Hortense's. Moreover, at this early point in the story, Hortense's reliance on the patriotic anthem shows she identifies unequivocally as a British subject, more so than as a black Jamaican. When she immigrates, and faces the hard knowledge that people in her new country don't consider her as British as they are, she'll realign her priorities and find community among other Jamaicans.

Chapter 11: Gilbert Quotes

❝ Anthropoid—I looked to the dictionary to find the meaning of this word used by Hitler and his friends to describe Jews and colored men. I got a punch in the head when the implication jumped from the page and struck me: "resembling a human but primitive, like an ape." Two whacks I got. For I am a black man whose father was born a Jew.

Related Characters: Gilbert Joseph (speaker), Gilbert's Father, Elwood

Related Themes:

Page Number: 108

Explanation and Analysis

When Gilbert is considering enlisting in the RAF, his cousin Elwood urges him against it, arguing that he'd be fighting a "white man's war," rather than staying in Jamaica to improve his own country. However, when reading about Hitler in the newspaper, Gilbert remembers his own father, born a Jew, and identifies himself with the European Jews suffering persecution. Later, he even compares a newspaper picture of Germans looking at a Jew in disgust to his father's unsuccessful attempts to fawn over white members of their church. Even though the struggles of European Jewry are far from identical to his own, Gilbert is eager to point out their commonalities. This seemingly instinctive compassion is one of Gilbert's sterling personal qualities; it also differentiates him from other characters like Bernard, who refuse to acknowledges their own similarities with people who don't look like them, even if they fought in the same war together.

Chapter 12: Gilbert Quotes

❝ Living far from you is a beloved relation whom you have never met. Yet this relation is so dear a kin she is known as Mother. Your own mummy talks of Mother all the time. "Oh, Mother is a beautiful woman—refined, mannerly, and cultured." Your daddy tells you, "Mother thinks of you as her children; like the Lord above she takes care of you from afar" [...] your finest, your best, everything you have that is worthy is sent to Mother as gifts.

Related Characters: Gilbert Joseph (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 116

Explanation and Analysis

Deployed to England as an RAF soldier, Gilbert sees that the reality of the country is much different than his expectations. After years of war, it's squalid, dirty, and depressing—hardly the paradise about which he learned to recite poems as a child. Moreover, its citizens are usually ignorant and often rude, operating according to blatant prejudice and behaving condescendingly to black soldiers. Here, Gilbert compellingly describes the love and worship that he and everyone around him felt for the Mother Country, without actually knowing anything about it. When Gilbert finally sees that "Mother" isn't necessarily "refined, mannerly, and cultured", and that she certainly doesn't care for her colonial subjects "like the Lord," he feels a profound sense of displacement. He grows disillusioned with the ideals of his native society but unable to find a foothold in an England, which is much more hostile than the country of his imaginings.

❝ Ask any of us West Indian RAF volunteers—ask any of us colony troops where in Britain are ships built, where is cotton woven, steel forged, cars made, jam boiled, cups shaped, lace knotted, glass blown, tin mined, whiskey distilled? Ask [...]

Now see this. An English soldier, a Tommy called Tommy Atkins [...] Ask him, "Tommy, tell me nah, where is Jamaica?" And hear him reply, "Well, dunno. Africa, ain't it?"

Related Characters: Gilbert Joseph (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 118

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Gilbert contrasts his own exhaustive knowledge of Britain with the British people's complete ignorance of their own colonial territories. While Gilbert spent his whole childhood learning about Britain instead of Jamaica, and learning to value Britain above his own country, the average Briton learned about the colonies through public spectacles like the one Queenie attended as a child, which uphold stereotypes and perpetuate prejudice. This passage foreshadows the behavior that Gilbert and Hortense will encounter when they immigrate. Even well-intentioned people like Queenie don't know where Jamaica is, and are liable to assume, even after being told otherwise, that it's a savage and uncivilized place. It also contradicts the principles of characters like Bernard, who insist that Britain knows what's best for its colonies and that British government is the only thing keeping them safe. Since the British barely know anything about the territories they control, it's highly unlikely they can govern them effectively or justly.

Chapter 16: Gilbert Quotes

I was learning to despise the white American GI above all other. They were the army that hated me the most! Out of place in the genteel atmosphere of this dreary tea-shop these three aggrieved GIs twitched with hostile excitement, like snipers clearing their aim at a sitting target [...] these poor GIs were in a murderous mood watching a nigger sitting with his head still high. If the defeat of hatred is the purpose of war, then come, let us face it: I and all the other colored servicemen were fighting this war on another front.

Related Characters: Gilbert Joseph (speaker), Queenie Buxton

Related Themes:

Page Number: 147

Explanation and Analysis

Gilbert is never actually deployed to the front, since combat roles are generally given to white servicemen. Instead, he performs manual labor behind the lines. His primary battle is the fight to maintain his dignity and humanity as he faces a primarily white, discriminatory society for the first time. While Gilbert encounters ignorance and prejudice from the British, his real frustration is with the Americans soldiers, who truly hate people of color and insist, even though they're guests in a foreign country, that the British adopt American policies of total segregation. Here, Gilbert points out the absurdity of men who wish to deny him rights he considers completely uncontroversial, like the ability to have tea with a white woman. Moreover, it's clear that in some ways, Elwood was right when he said Gilbert was fighting a "white man's" battle. Winning this war won't eliminate racial hatred, and in fact Gilbert will have to fight even harder once this war is over.

Chapter 17: Gilbert Quotes

Arthur Bligh had become another casualty of war—but come, tell me, someone...which war?

Related Characters: Gilbert Joseph (speaker), Arthur Bligh, Queenie Buxton

Related Themes:

Page Number: 160

Explanation and Analysis

Earlier in this chapter, Gilbert differentiated between the war he's ostensibly fighting against the Germans and the simmering racial battle with the American soldiers that seems much more relevant to him. Shortly afterwards, Gilbert's refusal to sit in the back of a movie theater sparks a street fight between black and white American GIs, and in the ensuing chaos, a policeman kills Arthur. Horrified by Arthur's unjust death, Gilbert realizes that the second war he's fighting doesn't just affect black soldiers but threatens the fabric of society as a whole. The fact that Arthur, who's an adult man but as well-meaning and innocent as a child, dies shows that racial hatred can harm even the most blameless members of society.

Chapter 18: Gilbert Quotes

In that moment, standing tall on Kingston harbor, I was shocked by the awful realization that man, we Jamaicans are all small islanders too!

Related Characters: Gilbert Joseph (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 163

Explanation and Analysis

When he first joins the RAF, Gilbert scorns the men in his unit who come from smaller islands around Jamaica, referring to them as "small islanders" and saying they're more naïve and ignorant than he is. When he returns to his native city after spending so much time away from home, and undergoing experiences that most of his friends can't fathom, Gilbert realizes the country he's so proud of is, in its own way, provincial and limited as well. For the first time, Gilbert feels out of place in his native land, and his solution to this feeling is emigration. However, when he settles in England, he'll find that, while the British feel their country is the center of the world, they're remarkably ignorant about the world outside their borders, and generally constrained by rampant prejudice. The two societies on which the novel focuses, England and Jamaica, are both island nations, and this physical similarity serves as a reminder of their fundamental limitations.

Chapter 24: Queenie Quotes

"The cheeky ones," she told me, "will be Cockneys. You'll want nothing to do with Cockneys, they're all jellied eels and kneesups. No, that one's a gentleman. No spivs or ne'erdowells ever read *The Times*."

Related Characters: Aunt Dorothy (speaker), Queenie Buxton

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 209

Explanation and Analysis

Queenie grows up sharing the punishingly hard work of her parents' butchery; just as she's decided she can't stand this life any longer, her Aunt Dorothy invites her to live with her in London, where she runs a candy shop. In London, Aunt Dorothy endeavors to improve Queenie, giving her elocution lessons and looking out for a suitable husband. Aunt Dorothy's aversion to Cockneys (a lower-class London demographic) is comical at face value, but it's indicative of the sharp attention to class differences that pervades British society, and the eagerness to enforce such differences that makes life so hard for members of marginalized groups, like Hortense and Gilbert. Moreover, Aunt Dorothy's insistence that she can identify a worthy match based on his newspaper preferences, and her eventual endorsement of Bernard based on qualities like these, shows that class status ultimately rests on a series of meaningless customs.

Chapter 33: Hortense Quotes

❝ For this dismal garment, which I had taken to be her dressing gown, was her good outside coat [...] She look on me distasteful, up and down. I was dressed as a woman such as I should be when visiting the shops in England. My coat was clean, my gloves freshly washed and a hat upon my head. But Mrs. Bligh stare on me as if something was wrong with my apparel, before telling me once more, "I'm not worried about what busybodies say. I don't mind being seen in the street with you."

Related Characters: Hortense Roberts (speaker), Queenie Buxton

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 272

Explanation and Analysis

When Hortense arrives in London, Queenie offers to show her around the neighborhood shops, and although Hortense is hesitant to accept help from this prying Englishwoman, she consents to go shopping together.

Dressed primly with her usual attention and care, Hortense is shocked to see Queenie leave the house looking disheveled and dreary. Hortense is even more perplexed that Queenie seems to consider her a potential embarrassment, rather than the other way around. Hortense's careful dress represents the extent to which she perfectly and mindfully fulfills the customs of British "civilization." Meanwhile, Queenie's outfit shows that these customs, which the British export to their colonial territories, are not always practiced at home. That Queenie, despite her good intentions, sees it as an act of bravery to go out in public with Hortense shows that the British don't really judge people by their commitment to the ideals of "civilization," but by their race.

❝ She think me a fool that does not know what is bread? But my mind could not believe what my eye had seen. That English people would buy their bread in this way. This man was patting on his red head and wiping his hand down his filthy white coat. Cha, why he no lick the bread first before giving it to me to eat?

Related Characters: Hortense Roberts (speaker), Queenie Buxton

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 275

Explanation and Analysis

After her initially shock over Queenie's outfit, Hortense continues to feel bewildered, but not for the reasons Queenie imagines. Assuming that this is Hortense's first experience in European-style shops, Queenie explains everything in detail, going so far as to describe what bread is and explain that one buys cloth at a draper's shop. On the other hand, Hortense isn't astounded by modern conveniences (all of which she enjoyed in Jamaica) but appalled that England is far less civilized than not only her expectations, but her native Jamaica. Hortense's reaction to the slovenly baker who touches her bread is a cunning rebuttal of British assumptions that the colonies are savage or undeveloped; in fact, they're often more developed than Britain itself. Moreover, Queenie's inability to believe that Hortense knows what she's doing shows that even those with the best intentions have a hard time moving away from a conviction of their own inherent superiority.

Chapter 37: Bernard Quotes

❝ The mechanics, the teachers, the clerks who were all left out here sat brooding on their worth to a country they loved. Wondering what sort of Britain was being built without us. Forgotten war, forgotten army, forgotten again.

Related Characters: Bernard Bligh (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 301

Explanation and Analysis

After the war with Japan ends, Bernard expects his unit to be sent home without delay. He doesn't resent that prisoners of war get to leave first, but when some men are demobilized before others because they're more "necessary" to Britain's rebuilding process, Bernard's unit becomes uneasy. The knowledge that he isn't immediately "necessary" to society makes Bernard feel not just physically remote but emotionally displaced from a country in which he considered himself deeply rooted. Therefore, Bernard's unwillingness to accept further change in his country reflects his understandable anxieties. It's also notable that many of the men demobilized before him are from higher-status professions, so his feelings stem from class oppression that's not so different from the racial oppression Gilbert and Hortense face. However, Bernard's experience of feeling displaced from his own country doesn't make him more open-minded or compassionate; instead, it makes him even more committed to his most appalling prejudices. Bernard's refusal to learn from his own experiences makes him a notable foil to Gilbert, whose trials develop his character significantly over the course of the novel.

Chapter 40: Bernard Quotes

❝ Still he went on: "I am not one of those people who wish the English out of India. I like you. Are you not protecting us all this time from the filthy Japs with their slitty eyes? Your British bulldog understands that there is nothing worse than foreigners invading your land [...] A dreadful thing to have foreign muddy boots stamping all over your soil. Do you not think?

Related Characters: Ashok (speaker), Arun, Bernard Bligh

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 317

Explanation and Analysis

After he stalks out of the "Communist" meeting in his barracks, Bernard has to share guard duty with two Indian soldiers, Arun and Ashok. Bernard likes Arun because he's uneducated, obedient, and never questions orders. On the other hand, even though Ashok speaks perfect English, Bernard dislikes him, because the Indian man talks to Bernard like an equal. Ostensibly flattering Bernard, Ashok talks about all the great things the British have brought to India, although the examples he cites—taxes, cricket, imported fabric—really show that Britain's contributions to India have been feeble. In this passage, while Ashok claims to feel gratitude for British protection, he's really pointing out that the British are imposing foreign rule on India at the same time as they fight fiercely against a foreign invasion from Germany. The "boots" Ashok resents are not those of the Japanese or the Germans, but of the British. Notably, while Bernard realizes that Ashok is not sincere, he can't grasp the man's irony or the deep sense of injustice he's expressing.

Chapter 48: Bernard Quotes

❝ I want to shoot him [...] but he's still smiling and I start to think, Oh, well, maybe he's not so bad. Until I see his sword flash. Light cracking off it in a spark. I knew we were in danger. But suddenly Queenie sits up in bed, turns to the door, looks the Jap straight in they eye and says, "Hello." Just like that. Hello. Like she's talking to a neighbor. Hello. As if she'd known him all her life. "Hello. Come in."

Related Characters: Bernard Bligh (speaker), Queenie Buxton

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 363

Explanation and Analysis

After returning home, Bernard experiences recurring nightmares of a Japanese pilot entering his house. Bernard feels fright and hostility, partly because of his experiences as a soldier and partly because of his ingrained prejudice against people different from him; in fact, this episode suggests that these two factors reinforce and exacerbate Bernard's negative behavior. In contrast, Queenie displays an instinctive friendliness and hospitality towards the pilot, even though she knows nothing about him. Bernard's dream shows that he's very conscious of the differences between himself and his wife; his fascination with her response

shows that, at least on a subconscious level, he admires her welcoming attitude. Episodes like this hint that Bernard is capable of overcoming his prejudices. However, he repeatedly turns away from opportunities for redemption and becomes even more entrenched in hate by the end of the novel.

Chapter 49: Gilbert Quotes

❝ There was something I recognized on the face of Bernard Bligh […] Come, I saw it reflected from every mirror on my dear Jamaican island. Staring back on me from my own face. Residing in the white of the eye, the turn of the mouth, the thrust of the chin. A bewildered soul. Too much seen to go back. Too much changed to know which way is forward. I knew with this beleaguered man's return the days of living quiet in this house had come to an end.

Related Characters: Gilbert Joseph (speaker), Bernard Bligh

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 368

Explanation and Analysis

Bernard's return home throws Queenie's lodgers into chaos. First, he takes offense that Gilbert is too familiar with his wife; later, Kenneth reports that Bernard has insulted him and told him he has to move out of the house. Even though Bernard's arrival means he might be homeless soon, Gilbert sympathizes with the anxiety he's so clearly displaying. Knowing nothing about the other man, Gilbert surmises that Bernard's experiences in the war and in his rapidly changing country have forced him to struggle with similar feelings of disillusionment and displacement that Gilbert faces himself. Gilbert's tendency towards empathy suggests the possibility of cohesion and compassion between disparate groups. However, it's important that the passage ends on a fatalistic note, with Gilbert's certainty that his days in Queenie's house have "come to an end." The fact that Gilbert's empathy is never mirrored by white characters such as Bernard emphasizes the difficulty in overcoming barriers of prejudice.

Chapter 51: Gilbert Quotes

❝ Hortense should have yelled in righteous pain not whimper in my ear […] Come, let me tell you, I wanted to tempt these busybodies closer. Beckon them to step forward and take a better look. For then I might catch my hand around one of their scrawny white necks and squeeze. No one will watch us weep in this country.

Related Characters: Gilbert Joseph (speaker), Hortense Roberts

Related Themes:

Page Number: 380

Explanation and Analysis

After Hortense is rejected by the education authority, she loses her characteristic composure and begins crying on a park bench while Gilbert comforts her. Seeing his wife overcome, Gilbert, who usually relates even the most frustrating experiences with humor and irony, is so angry that he wishes (if only theoretically) to commit violence. The inability of Hortense, a highly qualified and skilled teacher, to obtain professional work is one of the novel's gravest moments of injustice. This is reflected in the fact that both characters momentarily lose their best attributes—Hortense her composure, and Gilbert his good nature.

However, this episode also marks Hortense's first moment of vulnerability before her husband, and Gilbert's first true display of compassion towards his wife. In doing so, each one atones for their earlier behavior toward each other, which was often petty and self-centered. Moments like this, which occur more frequently as the novel approaches its climax, make the Josephs feel like loving spouses, rather than partners in a mutually beneficial arrangement. In fact, it's through their shared experiences of injustice—and their ability to buoy each other throughout these experiences—that Hortense and Gilbert maintain their individual pride and create a strong marriage.

Chapter 52: Bernard Quotes

❝ The war was fought so people might live amongst their own kind. Quite simple. Everyone had a place. England for the English and the West Indies for these colored people. Look at India. The British knew fair play. Leave India to the Indians. That's what we did.

Related Characters: Bernard Bligh (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 388

Explanation and Analysis

While he's snooping through the Josephs' room, Bernard bitterly meditates on the purpose of the war he's just fought, and the changed reality of the nation to which he's returned. In doing so, he displays his utter incomprehension of his own society and his lack of empathy towards others. Bernard assertion that the war's purpose was to allow people to "live amongst their own kind" is untrue, a reflection of his personal prejudices rather than an accurate description of political events. Moreover, his description of British colonial rule of India as "fair" is ridiculous; while the novel doesn't discuss Indian politics explicitly, it's important that Bernard's sojourn in the country coincides with the unwise British decision to "partition" the country between Hindus and Muslims and then withdraw abruptly, leading to decades of unresolved religious violence. Bernard's expectation of colonial subjects, that they remain loyal to the British Empire but stay obediently in their places, is a marked contrast to Gilbert's and Hortense's colonial education, which taught them to believe that they were equal citizens of an empire which has their best interests at heart. This passage demonstrates that the British Empire puts forth two very different narratives to its central and peripheral citizens, which allows Britons to dominate other parts of the world without cultivating any sense of cultural understanding.

Chapter 53: Hortense Quotes

"And I said to myself, Hortense, come, this is a gift from the Lord—life. What price is a little disgust on your best dress? I decided to pay it no mind.

Related Characters: Hortense Roberts (speaker), Baby Michael, Queenie Buxton

Related Themes:

Page Number: 400

Explanation and Analysis

When Queenie goes into labor unexpectedly, she locks the men out of her room and demands that Hortense coach her through the process. Hortense is initially reluctant to do so, since she has no experience and hates anything messy or disruptive; even worse, she's still wearing her best dress (her wedding dress) from her failed interview with the education department. When the baby is finally born, Hortense breathes a sigh of relief that the dress has emerged unscathed, only to be spattered with the bloody afterbirth. Uncharacteristically, Hortense chooses to disregard the mess, knowing that the beginning of a life is much more important than clean clothes. This moment marks a loosening of Hortense's obsession with conventional manners and propriety, which is her most aggravating attribute and sometimes causes her to behave unkindly towards others, namely Gilbert. However, it's important that this passage *doesn't* show Hortense giving up on her standards out of disillusionment with Britain; rather, she realigns her priorities to become a more compassionate person, while still maintaining her formidable sense of dignity and her high expectations of others.

Chapter 56: Gilbert Quotes

"Gilbert, come, you no scared of a little hard work. I can help you." She spun round the room. "With a little paint and some carpet." She moved to the corner leaning over to spread out her arms and say "And a table and a chair here," before rushing to the fireplace with the suggestion, "and two armchairs here in front of an open English fire. You will see—we will make it nice."

Related Characters: Hortense Roberts (speaker), Gilbert Joseph

Related Themes:

Page Number: 417

Explanation and Analysis

Before arriving in England, Hortense daydreamed about owning a beautiful house, where she could sip tea by a fireplace. When the Mother Country doesn't live up to her expectations, Hortense often blames Gilbert, rather than the deeply frustrating circumstances under which they're now forced to live. At the end of the book, Gilbert's acquisition of a place to live shows that he's finally gaining a foothold in England, and is able to provide for his wife in a way he couldn't before. Meanwhile, while Hortense maintains high expectations, she's no longer self-centered or unsympathetic towards her husband. Rather, she's committed both to her marriage and to the hard work of establishing her new family in Britain. In this passage, Hortense turns away from her negative behavior earlier in the novel and demonstrates the extent to which her character has developed.

Chapter 58: Queenie Quotes

"It would kill you, Bernard," I said. "Have you thought about all that? Because I have. I've done nothing but think about it. And you know what? I haven't got the guts for it. I thought I would. I should have but I haven't got the spine. Not for that fight. I admit it, I can't face it, and I'm his blessed mother."

Related Characters: Queenie Buxton (speaker), Bernard Bligh

Related Themes:

Page Number: 432

Explanation and Analysis

When Hortense and Gilbert are finally leaving the house, Queenie begs them to adopt her mixed-race and illegitimate son, Michael. To her surprise, Bernard objects, insisting that the child belongs with his mother and even saying that they can find a way to take care of him. In this passage, Bernard and Queenie seem to switch roles; instead of his usual frigidity, Bernard speaks warmly with emotion, while Queenie is motivated by pragmatism and considers the social consequences of their actions. Bernard's sudden display of feeling and compassion suggests that he could redeem his previous behavior and move away from his prejudices. However, as the voice of reality, Queenie points out the near impossibility of doing so. Her speech is especially tragic because it makes clear that even motherhood, a traditionally powerful and sacred bond, can't prevail against the racism that surrounds her. Moreover, Queenie's speech finally exposes the limitations of the idealism and open-mindedness she's displayed throughout the novel.

Chapter 59: Hortense Quotes

Gilbert sucked on his teeth to return this man's scorn. "You know what your trouble is, man?" he said. "Your white skin. You think it makes you better than me. You think it give you the right to lord it over a black man. But you know what it make you? You wan' know what your white skin make you, man? It make you white. That is all, man. White. [...] listen to me, man, we both just finish fighting a war—a bloody war—for the better world we wan' see. And on the same side—you and me. [...] But still, after all that we suffer together, you wan' tell me I am worthless and you are not."

Related Characters: Gilbert Joseph (speaker), Baby Michael, Bernard Bligh

Related Themes:

Page Number: 435

Explanation and Analysis

When Queenie is overwhelmed by the debate over little Michael's fate and runs out of the room, Bernard rudely tells the Josephs that they can't possibly be fit parents for the baby. Frustrated, Gilbert responds not with his usual insults but an impassioned speech. This passage is especially notable and strong for its simplicity: when Gilbert tells Bernard that the problem is "your white skin," he's articulating a problem so basic as to be absurd, yet he's also encompassing the novel's manifold injustices, frustrations, and humiliations.

Importantly, this speech is also a declaration of Gilbert's superior moral position. For most of the novel, he and Hortense focus on the steps they can take to assimilate into English society and cajole its citizens into tolerate them; here, he's asserting plainly and correctly that he and Hortense shouldn't have to scramble for acceptance, and it's people like Bernard who deny them the natural dignity and equality to which they're entitled. Finally, Gilbert's entreaty that Bernard recognize their mutual sufferings "on the same side" of the same war is the novel's strongest comparison between Gilbert's natural empathy and Bernard's refusal to acknowledge his similarities with people he doesn't like. Through this comparison, the passage shows both the potential for a positive relationship between the two men and the unlikelihood that it will ever come to fruition.

For at that moment as Gilbert stood, his chest panting with the passion from his words, I realized that Gilbert Joseph, my husband, was a man of class, a man of character, a man of intelligence. Noble in a way that would some day make him a legend [...] But this Englishman just carried on, "I'm sorry... but I just can't understand a single word that you're saying."

Related Characters: Hortense Roberts (speaker), Bernard Bligh, Gilbert Joseph

Related Themes:

Page Number: 435

Explanation and Analysis

As Hortense listens to Gilbert's impassioned entreaty for

Bernard's respect and understanding, she comprehends the extent of her husband's many good attributes for the first time, and feels lucky to be married to him. Her prediction that Gilbert will one day be a "legend" is notable because at the very beginning of her narrative, she describes her absent father as a "legend" in her small town. Importantly, Gilbert and Lovell Roberts are legendary in different ways: Lovell was a successful bureaucrat in a colonial regime, while Gilbert may never achieve conventional success but bravely confronts the racism he encounters. Hortense's praise of her husband shows that her values have shifted, and she now prizes Gilbert's authenticity and moral rectitude over the stuffy social status she was raised to strive for.

While Hortense's reaction marks a positive change in her character and marriage, Bernard's literal inability to understand reflects his mental refusal to empathize at all with Gilbert, and demonstrates how difficult it is even to have a conversation about prejudice. Thus, the personal optimism of this speech is qualified by the demoralizing knowledge of their inability to vanquish the racism surrounding them.

❝ Michael Joseph would know his mother not from the smell of boiling milk, a whispered song or bare black feet but from the remembered taste of salt tears. Those tears that on that day dripped, one at a time, from her eye, over his lips and on to his tongue.

Related Characters: Hortense Roberts (speaker), Baby Michael, Queenie Buxton

Related Themes:

Page Number: 437

Explanation and Analysis

As Hortense watches Queenie pack up Michael's clothes, she reflects on her own mother, Alberta, whom she barely remembers. Queenie and Alberta make similar choices: both women give up their babies to live with parents who look more like them, in hopes of a better or more stable life. While Hortense used to be proud that she was fair enough to live among her father's family, she's become more conscious of how much she lost by growing up in an unloving home instead of with Alberta. This passage poignantly expresses Hortense's longing for her mother, and thus the unfairness of social structures that encourage parents to give up babies because of their race. Hortense's personal experience makes her initially reluctant to participate in the separation of another baby from its mother; however, it also makes her more compassionate and understanding as she unexpectedly takes on motherhood. Ultimately, her decision to adopt baby Michael allows her to resolve the trauma of her own harsh upbringing and move, atoning not for her own mistakes but for those of others.

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.

PROLOGUE: QUEENIE

As a young girl, Queenie Buxton visits the British Empire Exhibition. The trip is organized by the Butchers' Association, and Queenie goes with her parents, who are butchers, and most of their employees. To their dismay, Queenie's younger brothers have to stay home with one of the hired girls. Mother orders two of the employees, Emily and Graham, to watch Queenie, but they spend most of the time flirting.

The trip to the Exhibition contrasts Queenie's prosaic working-class childhood—outings organized by trade organizations, babysitters for little brothers, flirting teenagers—with the pomp and grandeur of the British Empire. For ordinary Britons, life is enlivened by the knowledge such spectacles provide: that they are part of a powerful nation that exercises dominion over vast groups of other people.

Amid crowds of sweating people, Queenie, Emily and Graham visit different exhibits, which are themed according to different countries in the British Empire. In "Canada," they see a butter sculpture of the Prince of Wales, and eat apples in "Australia." By the time they get to "Africa," they're tired, and Graham needs a toilet, but they can't find their way out of the recreated African village. As they watch a woman weaving, Graham announces loudly that these people aren't civilized and don't understand English.

The different exhibits in the exhibition allow British spectators to feel connected to their colonies, while at the same time eliminating their complexities and reducing them to stereotypes. Childhood experiences condition the adult behaviors displayed later by characters who judge colonial citizens exclusively by stereotypes and can't understand why doing so is wrong.

Suddenly, Queenie sees a tall black man. It's the first black person she's ever seen, and she's scared. Graham jokes that she should kiss him, and Emily laughingly eggs her on. However, the man smiles and offers, in perfect English, to shake Queenie's hand instead. He gives Graham directions to the bathroom, but Graham can't find it and urinates behind a trash can.

Contrary to Graham's assertion, not only do the "Africans" speak English, they're more civilized, according to British norms. It's the black man who behaves politely and knows how to navigate the fairground, while Graham is rude and eventually reduced to exposing himself in public.

Later, Father declares the man Queenie met must have been a prince, since only rich and powerful Africans know how to speak English. Father takes Queenie on a specially constructed railway to a lookout point from which she can see the entire Exhibition. Queenie is dazzled by the spectacle, and Father says, "you've got the whole world at your feet."

While the ironic contrast between Graham and the African man seems obvious, Queenie's father's insistence on viewing him as the educated exception to a horde of savages shows how deeply ingrained his conception of himself as inherently civilized is, as well as his conviction that it's his society that correctly defines the norms of civility.

CHAPTER 1: HORTENSE

Hortense recalls that her old friend Celia Langley used to daydream about moving to England and living in a house with a doorbell. She told Hortense that she would ring the bell every day. At the time, Hortense couldn't have imagined that she herself would go to England—but that's exactly where she is right now. She wishes Celia could see her now, a married woman pressing the doorbell of a tall English house.

Hortense's reverie and Celia's fantasy demonstrates their worship for the hallmarks of civilization—such as doorbells—as they are defined by the British. On the other hand, Celia's ignorance of the purpose of the doorbell—she doesn't understand that one doesn't typically ring the bell at one's own house—shows how arbitrary and ultimately meaningless such hallmarks are.

Hortense rings the bell several times while adjusting her coat and hat. A disheveled English woman eventually answers and doesn't seem to understand Hortense when she says she's looking for Gilbert Joseph. Squinting at Hortense's immense trunk, the woman says that Gilbert was supposed to meet her, but Hortense hasn't seen him. The woman scampers upstairs to find Gilbert, leaving Hortense in the doorway marveling at the house's height.

Hortense's preoccupation with her accessories contrasts with the Englishwoman's haphazard attire and her informal, almost rude behavior—leaving Hortense standing in the doorway instead of welcoming her inside.

In his last letter, Gilbert had assured Hortense that he would meet her at the dock, "waving my hand with joy." However, when she arrives, no one is there. Hortense waits for two hours, sitting on her trunk. A white woman approaches her and asks if she is Sugar, a woman coming to be her nanny. She's surprised that Hortense can't help her find the woman, assuming that all the Jamaicans know each other.

Hortense's interaction at the dock shows the tendency of white Britons to treat all people of color as a monolithic bloc, even to the extent that it makes their behavior completely irrational—the woman who confronts Hortense would probably never assume that a group of Europeans all know each other simply because of their shared nationality.

Eventually, a dock porter helps Hortense find a taxi. Hortense speaks formal English and won pronunciation prizes as a schoolgirl, so she's surprised that both men find it difficult to understand her. After some confusion, the taxi driver takes her to the address Gilbert provided in his letter, instructing her along the way how to ring a doorbell.

In this episode, both Hortense and the British man display unrealistic expectations of each other; Hortense realizes that the British don't behave or even speak exactly as she thought they would, while the British man can't fathom that Hortense has learned all about Britain, down to its modern conveniences, prior to her arrival.


Now, Gilbert comes running down the stairs. Hortense hasn't seen him for so long that she hardly recognizes him. He's happy to see her, but she's furious that he didn't come to meet her. Sheepishly, he explains that when he first came to the dock, the ship wasn't there, so he went home to tidy up. Hortense is confused, and she's unhappy that the Englishwoman is still standing there, listening to their private discussion. She asks Gilbert to bring her trunk to their apartment, but he leaves it in the foyer to the consternation of Hortense and the Englishwoman, whom he addresses as Queenie.

From their first meeting, Hortense and Gilbert start off on a bad foot. Just as Hortense and the taxi driver were fundamentally ignorant of each other's lives, she and her husband lack understanding, despite their shared nationality. Hortense doesn't appreciate that Gilbert's under a lot of pressure as a struggling immigrant, while he doesn't see that she's bewildered and unable to navigate this new land alone.


After climbing many flights of dingy stairs with difficulty, Gilbert proudly shows Hortense a tiny room that smells of gas. Tiredly, Hortense asks him to show her the rest of the apartment so she can lie down, but Gilbert says that "this is it." Hortense is astonished that she crossed the ocean to live in such a shabby place. However, Gilbert is angry that she doesn't appreciate what they have, given that a war has just ended, and many houses are completely bombed out. He storms out of the room, leaving her alone.

Hortense is disappointed both in her new husband and her new country. Queenie's house is nothing like the beautiful home she and Celia imagined, and Gilbert is nothing like the refined spouse she longs for. As the novel progresses, Hortense will reevaluate expectations both of marriage and of her new country.

CHAPTER 2: GILBERT

After leaving the room to fetch Hortense's trunk, Gilbert finds Queenie downstairs. She says that Hortense is a funny name, but he points out it's no stranger than Queenie. The trunk is much too heavy for Gilbert to lift, so he knocks on the door of one of the house's other lodgers, Winston. Winston's twin brother, Kenneth, answers. Gilbert likes Winston but mistrusts Kenneth, who's always trying to embroil him in get-rich-quick schemes and frequently comes to stay with his brother when his own landlady, Noreen, kicks him out.

In his exchange with Queenie, Gilbert points out that ideas of what is normal and what is "funny" are always relative, based on cultural conditioning rather than objective fact. In many episodes throughout the novel, characters' inability to embrace and respect different conceptions of normality will prevent them from living or working together cohesively.

The two men struggle up the stairs with the trunk, only to find Hortense haughtily directing them where to place it. In typical Jamaican fashion, Kenneth interrogates Hortense on her family and background, while it becomes clear to Gilbert that Hortense dislikes the man. Gilbert finally gets Kenneth to leave, but straight away starts arguing with Hortense about where to store the trunk, which occupies almost all the space in the tiny room.

Instead of being comforted by the presence and familiar behavior of a man from her native land, Hortense's reaction shows that she's already reluctant to identify as a Jamaican. She is eager to begin her new life as a British citizen, even if it means turning away from her background.

In order to make the room warmer, Gilbert tries to turn on the gas, but he can't find money for the gas meter. In truth, he'd been asleep when he was supposed to meet Hortense, having just finished a twelve hour shift at work. He hasn't cleaned the room, and he has to search the bed for coins, leading the sharp-eyed Hortense to conclude that he had in fact slept through the arrival of her ship.

Gilbert's fumbling with the gas meter underscores the haphazard conditions the new couple is forced to endure. While Hortense's behavior often makes her seem oblivious, she's actually very intelligent, as her keen observation shows here.

Gilbert is embarrassed that he's so unprepared. When Hortense runs her hand along the mantel, he's chastened to see that her glove is blackened by dust. He finally convinces her to stop inspecting the room and sit down for a cup of tea. He explains to her that Queenie, whose husband died in the war, owns the **house** and lives there as well. Hearing that she's single, Hortense asks suspiciously how friendly Gilbert is with her; he answers carefully that she was kind to him during the war, and he was lucky to find someone who would rent to a "coloured boy."

While Gilbert isn't lying about his relationship with Queenie, he doesn't tell Hortense that he was initially very attracted to Queenie and pursued her briefly, as he'll relate later in his own narrative. Hortense and Gilbert both come into their marriage harboring feelings for other people, which informs their unromantic and sometimes unkind behavior toward each other.

Gilbert tells Hortense that, instead of a real kitchen, she'll have to cook their meals on the tiny gas burner in their room. Overwhelmed, Hortense excuses herself to the lavatory, but wanders mistakenly into the room of another lodger, a heavily made-up woman named Jean. Gilbert has to go down and help her, since Jean can't understand her English either. Hortense blames her embarrassment on Gilbert and his faulty directions.

Hortense is understandably bewildered and upset, but she's wrong to blame Gilbert, who's trying to help her. For much of the novel, Hortense will take out her frustrations with life in England on her husband.

When Hortense returns, Gilbert explains that she can also use the chamber pot under the bed. However, he holds it up to show her without realizing it's full from the previous night, and some of its contents spill onto the floor and Hortense's shoes. Frustrated, Gilbert empties the chamber pot into the sink, right on top of the cups from which they've just drunk tea. Hortense shrieks that he wants her to live like an animal, and Gilbert retorts that she'll have to get used to it, and that she's so new to England she doesn't even appreciate how lucky she is.

This scene is so absurd that it's almost funny, even though it represents the state of Hortense and Gilbert's marriage. Throughout the novel, the author will use unsparing descriptions of small indignities like this to illuminate the comedy and sadness that exist side by side in immigrant life.

CHAPTER 3: HORTENSE

In a flashback, Hortense describes her childhood. Her father, Lovell Roberts, is a "government man," well-known and almost worshipped in her town, Savannah-La-Mar, long after he'd left. Her mother, a "country girl" named Alberta, gave birth to her out of wedlock. Hortense remembers her mother's smell and her favorite endearment, "me sprigadee," but not much more. Hortense is light-skinned like her father, and Alberta knows that "with such a countenance" she has a chance at "a golden life," instead of growing up poor and uneducated like her mother. In hopes of a better future, Alberta gives her daughter to Lovell's wealthy cousins.

Even though Hortense's skin, and the social expectations that come with it, separate her from her mother at a young age, for much of the novel Hortense won't question this arrangement, and will consider herself entitled to certain advantages because of the way she looks. This shows both how much Britain's colonial rule affects the mindsets of ordinary Jamaicans, and how racism can operate even in a society composed almost entirely of people of color.

Philip Roberts is Lovell's cousin, a wealthy man who controls all the district's produce. Because of his wealth, he's respected throughout the neighborhood as an adjudicator of disputes. His wife, Martha, is known for her unusually light grey eyes. Hortense is told to call her Miss Ma. The couple have one son, Michael, to whom they are devoted.

Hortense's uncle has prestige, but it stems from his money, rather than a meritorious character. Moreover, the appellation "Miss Ma" shows how stiff Hortense's relationship is with her surrogate family; it's a notable contrast to her mother's intimate endearments for her.

Alberta's mother, Miss Jewel, takes the young Hortense to her cousins' house. Alberta agrees to move to Cuba, while Miss Jewel stays to work as a servant in the Roberts' house. For all Hortense's childhood, her grandmother takes care of her like a nurse, calling her Miss Hortense when other people are around and "me sprigadee" when they are alone.

Even though Hortense is taught to disregard her grandmother by treating her like a servant, Miss Jewel is the only person who displays familial affection for the little girl. Here, the novel creates a dichotomy between relationships based on social status—like Hortense's with her cousins—and those based on love.

As a young girl, Hortense sits quietly in the henhouse and watches the hens lay eggs. Michael comes to find her, and Hortense is frustrated, since Michael always disrupts the hens in order to see them run around in fright. Hortense carefully carries a new egg in the house, but Miss Ma gives the credit to Michael and thanks him, while scolding Hortense to stay out of the henhouse. Hortense says that Michael is always getting her into trouble. He likes to have her as an accomplice when he climbs trees or goes wading in the stream, but Mr. Philip always says it's "not godly" for little girls to do these things.

It's clear that Hortense plays a secondary role in her family. She's an object of criticism rather than affection for both Miss Ma and Mr. Philip, rather than someone who belongs among them. While Michael is sometimes her friend, he clearly doesn't try to defend her from them. Hortense's skin buys her a slightly better position in society, but it also steals from her the security of loving parents.

Every time the family sits down for a meal, Mr. Philip conducts a long prayer, which often turns into a sermon on his own strict religious beliefs. While they eat, Miss Ma lectures the children on proper table manners.

The Philips' family life revolves completely around the fulfillment of conventional mores. Hortense's strict upbringing in this environment informs her adult obsession with manners and propriety.

Eventually, Michael leaves home to attend boarding school. While Mr. Philip chides Michael about remembering his religious principles, Hortense pinches herself so as not to cry. Michael brags that he's going to learn about "the whole world," while Hortense stays at the ordinary day school singing "silly rhymes."

Even though Michael is rude and arrogant, Hortense is sad to see him go. Her reaction shows how truly starved the little girl is for affection and friendship. It also shows that despite her place in a "good" family, her opportunities for education and advancement are limited by her gender.

After Michael leaves, Hortense spends more time with Miss Jewel, helping her with the chores. Miss Jewel has a habit of singing while she works, replacing the words of hymns with her own lyrics. Hortense says that instead of "Mr. Roberts wash him sock at night," she should sing, "While shepherds watch their flock by night." Miss Jewel doesn't know what a shepherd is, and when Hortense explains, Miss Jewel counters that there are no shepherds and no sheep in Jamaica. Hortense explains that the song is about England, where there are many sheep and where Jesus was born. Hortense tries to teach her grandmother poems about England that she's memorized at school, but while her grandmother is eager to learn, she continues to replace the words with her own.

Hortense's relationship with her grandmother helps illuminate the dynamic between an imperial power and its colonial subjects. While all Jamaicans have to learn English songs, Miss Jewel's disregard for the lyrics shows how irrelevant to her real life these bits of British culture really are. However, Miss Jewel never explicitly realizes this; rather, both she and Hortense accept that the little girl should take on a pedagogical role in their relationship because she's been educated in the colonial school system, even though Miss Jewel is much older and probably much wiser.

When Hortense turns fifteen, she finishes school and goes to work at a private school for children "from good families." She enjoys helping the bright students and handing out books, which smell new and fresh unlike the used books at her government school. Hortense's school is run by two American missionaries, Stella and Charles Ryder, who tell her that they are there to help the "poor negro children." Hortense wonders if they're aware that their school caters only to the richest and fairest children in the districts.

Hortense likes teaching, but only when her work is organized and her students are obedient—this reluctance to embrace disorder will be a problem later on, both personally and professionally. Moreover, the Ryders' obliviousness to their students' backgrounds shows both that colonial "aid" isn't effective at reaching people in need, and that their ingrained racism prevents them from understanding any of Jamaica's social nuances.

Hortense is fascinated by Mrs. Ryder, the "whitest woman [she] had ever seen." Everyone in the district gossips about the Ryders, both because Mrs. Ryder is unusually independent and likes to drive herself around, and because Mr. Ryder is known to conduct dalliances with local women and has perhaps fathered illegitimate children.

While the Ryders are missionaries, their behavior is far from spotless. In particular, Mr. Ryder displays the same irresponsible greediness as imperial powers that seek to dominate their colonies, rather than any kind of religious compassion.

While Hortense is working at the Ryders' school, Michael returns home. Mrs. Ryder gives Hortense an old dress for the occasion, and she stays up for many nights mending it. When he arrives, Michael seems very different—he has a deep voice and stylish clothes, and he shakes his father's hand like an equal. After dinner, Mr. Philip begins to read from the Bible as usual, but Michael interrupts him, saying that he's learned that the earth moves around the Sun, contrary to the teachings of Genesis. Michael wants to discuss new concepts like this with his father, but Mr. Philip is enraged that his son dares to speak at the table and to contradict his ideas. He storms out of the room, followed by Miss Ma. For her part, Hortense decides she's completely in love with Michael.

In the Roberts' household, compulsive fidelity to good manners and propriety prevents the exchange of new ideas. Through the microcosm of the household, this episode shows that a focus on maintaining "civilized" customs prevents societies from embracing positive change. Moreover, the Roberts' behavior stifles their personal relationship with their son—even though Hortense herself cares deeply about manners, her immediate worship of Michael shows that she instinctively recognizes this fact.

In the following days, Hortense analyzes Michael's every action for evidence that he reciprocates her feelings. Eager to show off, Michael tells her to ask him about the League of Nations or the "Irish questions;" Hortense thinks that he wants to impress her, but she doesn't know enough about these subjects to converse with him.

Michael is very well-educated, but he's only using his knowledge to show off. Moreover, it's important that all the things he learns in school are related to the British Empire; he's largely ignorant as to affairs in Jamaica itself.

When Hortense returns to work a few days after Michael's arrival, Michael escorts her to the schoolhouse. As it turns out, he's already acquainted with Mrs. Ryder—she says they met at church, while he contends it was at the grocery store. Michael gets into the habit of walking Hortense to and from school, which she believes is a sign of his romantic interest in her.

Hortense's certainty in Michael's affection is undermined by his unexplained familiarity with Mrs. Ryder. As she is in this episode, Hortense is often unable to correctly analyze other people's emotions and desires.

Some days later, a hurricane strikes the town. Hortense and Mrs. Ryder are alone in the school, preparing the building for the storm. Mrs. Ryder is excited, while Hortense is praying that the roof doesn't collapse. Suddenly, Michael arrives at the school, soaked through from the rain. Hortense is touched that he's come to be with her, but he runs past her to Mrs. Ryder's side. Addressing her by her first name, Stella, Michael says that he came because he was worried for her safety. With the hurricane "crashing" around them, Mrs. Ryder is frightened and glad to have him there. As the night passes, Michael and Mrs. Ryder begin to hold hands, and Hortense realizes that Michael is love with her employer, not her. She's desperate to escape the room, but she can't leave because of the storm.

Hortense thinks that the hurricane will mark the inception of her hoped-for romance, but instead it catalyzes her disillusionment with Michael. The hurricane's shift from exciting to frightening mirrors the shift in Hortense's emotions, from hopeful to anxious to despairing. It's also notable that Hortense is too focused on her own personal tragedy to note that the affair, as an interracial relationship, is deeply transgressive in her traditional community.

When the rain finally abates, Hortense runs out of the school, only to find Mr. Ryder's car "wrapped around the base of a tree" by the road. Mr. Ryder is inside, dead. Distraught and confused, Hortense informs the gathering crowd that Michael and Mrs. Ryder are alone in the schoolhouse.

It's unclear whether Hortense betrays Michael on purpose or because she's too distressed to think properly. This isn't the last time Hortense will say something damaging to a friend when she's feeling hurt or under pressure.

By the time Hortense returns home, the entire town is gossiping about the incipient scandal. Miss Ma is in tears at the thought that Michael has been "committing a mortal sin" with a married woman; in her distress, she hits Hortense several times. Hortense runs to her old haunt, the henhouse, and squeezes in among the hens.

Even though Hortense isn't responsible for Michael's transgression, Miss Ma punishes her for it. The woman's violent reaction mirrors (and probably magnifies) Hortense's feelings of betrayal and inadequacy.

In the aftermath of the scandal, Mrs. Ryder leaves the island, while Hortense closes up the school. A local newspaper publishes an article suggesting that Michael may have murdered Mr. Ryder. When Hortense returns home three days later, Michael is gone. Miss Ma tells Hortense tersely that he's gone to England to join the Royal Air Force (RAF). When Hortense shows her distress, Miss Ma reprimands her, but the young girl still can't keep from weeping.

The forbidden affair alters the course of Michael's life, robbing him of his place in the community and forcing him to join the army. It even seems like he's lucky, since despite the newspaper articles, no one formally accuses him of murder. The intense reaction to the affair shows how destabilizing interracial romance is to a society that operates on racial prejudice.

CHAPTER 4: HORTENSE

Sometime later, Hortense finally leaves Savannah-La-Mar to attend teacher-training college in Kingston, catching a bumpy ride in the newspaper's van. Mr. Philip and Miss Ma are completely indifferent to her departure; they seem to have forgotten that her father is the famous Lovell Roberts. Only Miss Jewel puts on her best clothes to bid Hortense farewell, giving her granddaughter all her savings and an embroidered handkerchief.

While Alberta thought that giving her daughter to the Roberts family would improve her life, the family is hardly attending to Hortense's wellbeing; instead, it's Miss Jewel, the one vestige of her mother's presence, who helps Hortense. This demonstrates that Hortense's fair skin is far from the blessing it initially appears to be.

In Kingston, well-dressed and prim girls are arriving from all over the island to study at the prestigious school. They wait nervously in the school hall until the staff enter. All the teachers are white, but their skin is blotchy pink from living on the sunny island. The principal, Miss Morgan, has a calm and gentle voice, but her gargoyle's smile makes Hortense fear her.

The white teaching staff shows that the most respected education in Jamaica comes from colonial authorities. By attending college, Hortense is subscribing to the narrative of colonial superiority and preparing to transmit that narrative to a new generation of students.

That night, Hortense dreams that Michael is holding out his hand to her with a scorpion on his palm. Hortense wants to warn him that he's in danger, but someone is holding her wrist, and she can't talk. Waking up suddenly, she finds that an older girl really is holding her wrist. The girl drags her out of bed and down the hall with a crowd of other girls. When they reach the bathroom, the older girl strips off her own nightgown and Hortense's. Freezing water streams from showerheads in the ceiling, and all the girls scream while they bathe. The older girl is Celia Langley, a third-year student who takes Hortense under her wing.

Even though Michael probably never cared for her as she does for him, Hortense still feels deeply protective of him. However, the sudden interruption of her dream shows that her feelings for Michael will now have to take a backseat to her own personal development. While Hortense always tries to be neat and proper, the frenzied group shower on her first day shows she has to get used to proximity and friendship with other people.

At night, Celia sits on Hortense's bed and knits socks for soldiers while the two girls gossip. Celia advises her on the classes she'll take and how to appease her teachers. She even coaches Hortense on her recitation assignments.

Celia is Hortense's first friend, and for the first time in her life it seems she's achieving a sense of belonging—under the older girl's protection she feels like an integral part of the college, rather than a disregarded accessory.

Soon, Hortense becomes an apprentice teacher at a government school. Her first class has sixty pupils, and they're rowdy, dirty, and distracted. Hortense can't even get them to pay attention or prevent them from stealing her pencils. While the children mock her, one of Hortense's own teachers watches her flounder from the back of the room and vaguely advises her to "maintain better discipline among your students."

Hortense's first internship illuminates the vast difference between the Ryder's school, which caters to rich and light-skinned children, and the underfunded institutions that serve everyone else. However, Hortense seems unconcerned with the racism that's obviously at work in determining the quality of children's education; she objects to her environment mostly because it's difficult and unpleasant.

One afternoon, Celia picks Hortense up from school. At first, her friend looks sad, but when she sees Hortense she cheers up and announces that the RAF soldiers are parading through the city before the leave for England. Both girls are eager to see the parade, as they've spent a lot of time spying on the soldiers through the fence of their barracks and knitting garments for them to take from the front. They stand among a crowd of women watching the soldiers, who are mostly young boys.

The RAF parade is one of the first indicators that, as part of the British Empire, Jamaica is fighting a war. While Hortense feels like a citizen of the British Empire as much as she does a citizen of Jamaica, in her daily life she's largely alienated from the empire's policies and concerns.

Hortense wonders aloud why so many men have to fight, and Celia responds gravely that if Hitler wins the war, he'll reinstate slavery. Hortense thinks to herself that Celia, with her dark skin, is right to fear Hitler, but that "no one would think to enchain" her, with her "honey" complexion. Besides, Hortense comforts herself, everyone knows the British anthem that says "Britons never, never, never shall be slaves."

Here, Hortense's reaction shows how completely ignorant she is of the racism she'll face once she immigrates to England. Despite her previous observation of the Ryders, who view all black people as a homogenous bloc, she believes that non-Jamaicans will see her as superior because of her light skin. Moreover, she actually seems to believe she's entitled to the privileges that superiority entails.

Women call out to soldiers they know; Celia wonders aloud which ones are wearing her socks. She tells Hortense dreamily that one day she'll move to England and have a house with a doorbell. Suddenly, a tall woman wearing two dresses and a dirty wig walks toward them through the crowd, calling Celia's name. Hortense is confused, and Celia dismayed, but the woman doesn't notice their consternation. She takes Celia's arm and examines the parade closely, looking for a particular man. Hortense can tell from her looks that the woman is Celia's mother; as she exhorts her mother to be quieter, Celia is too embarrassed to look her friend in the eye.

As aspiring teachers and professionals, Hortense and Celia are both deeply committed to maintaining the British propriety their teachers instill. With her unkempt attire and erratic behavior, Celia's mother strikingly disregards these dictates. Therefore, she's embarrassing not just on a personal level but because she prevents Celia from fulfilling the ideal of colonial "civilization" to which she aspires.

Suddenly, Celia's mother lurches away from her daughter and into the parade. She clings to a young boy and yells to Celia that "this is your daddy." The crowd jeers, but Celia, trying to disentangle her mother from the confused airman, is humiliated. Eventually, Celia's mother runs away from the parade. Celia and Hortense have to chase her and escort her home against her will.

It's notable that Celia doesn't try to distance herself from her mother. Even though she's embarrassed, she's more worried about her mother's safety and dignity than her own humiliation. Celia's altruism contrasts with the narcissism Hortense often displays.

When she returns to her college, Hortense is summoned to Miss Morgan's office. Hortense is sure that she's in trouble for running in public or consorting with a lunatic. However, Miss Morgan gives her a letter from Miss Ma and gently informs her that Michael's plane has been lost in England. At first, Hortense doesn't understand that this means he's probably dead; even when Miss Morgan explains the circumstances to her, she insists that he will soon turn up. Interpreting Hortense's behavior as laudable British stoicism, Miss Morgan assures her that Michael has died a hero in the battle against the Germans.

Hortense's refusal to acknowledge Michael's probable death exemplifies the stubborn disregard to reality she often displays. Moreover, Miss Morgan's reaction, and the platitudes with which she comforts Hortense (who's already shown she doesn't care much about fighting the Germans) is an example of how members of Jamaican and British communities chronically misunderstand each other.


CHAPTER 5: HORTENSE

Years later, after the war has ended, Hortense is walking home from the market when she thinks she sees Michael cycling down the street. She runs after him, but when she turns the corner, she finds the man has left his bicycle and joined a large crowd running down the street. As Hortense follows him through the crowd, fighting breaks out. Someone throws a chair, which hits Hortense, and she falls to the ground. Someone carries her to safety outside the crowd, and she realizes it's the man she mistook for Michael. Up close, he looks much different from her lost love. The man is worried about Hortense; he tells her that she shouldn't come to "meetings" like this, and he scolds another man in the crowd for cursing in front of a lady. Shaken and embarrassed, Hortense rebuffs his solicitude and tells him to leave her.

Hortense's unladylike action is uncharacteristic and shows that she's still enthralled by Michael and desperate for him to reappear. The chaos in the street, as well as the man's warning, suggests that Hortense has stumbled into a (possibly illicit) political meeting, which hints at the unrest and dissatisfaction with colonial rule gripping Jamaica in the postwar era. However, Hortense is completely uncurious about the meeting, which shows she's not at all interested in questioning colonial narratives, especially as it would involve putting herself in an improper situation.


Hortense has been waiting for Michael to come home since the war ended, unwilling to believe he could really be dead. She's watched many parades and returning ships, but he's never been among the soldiers reunited with their families. She wonders what he looks like flying his airplane, and what it's like for him to live in England. She hopes that he's not cold, and that someone is making him tea, but she can't really imagine him anywhere other than Jamaica.

Hortense's longing for Michael hints at her deeper loneliness. Besides Miss Jewel, Michael was the closest member of her family. Fantasizing about his return allows her to imagine a sense of belonging and tranquility that she's never been able to achieve before.

CHAPTER 6: HORTENSE

Hortense covets a job at the prestigious Church of England school, where all the students are wealthy and well-behaved girls. However, despite Hortense's well-known father, the headmaster won't hire her because she was born out of wedlock, and her "breeding was not legitimate enough." In the end, Celia finds her a job teaching in the "scruffy" Half Way Tree Parish School. All of the students and teachers love Celia and tell Hortense how grateful she should be for her friendship and guidance, but Hortense is demoralized by the large and disobedient classes.

Hortense's upbringing allowed her an education and taught her to aspire to jobs in wealthy and high-status spheres, like the Church of England school. However, it can't erase the fact of her illegitimacy, which prevents her from actually achieving the things she wants. In this sense, Hortense's fair skin contributes to her feelings of displacement, rather than conferring advantages on her.


Hortense boards with a white family, the Andersons. She thought they would be a "respectable family," and is shocked to find them "boorish" and "ill-bred." The grandmother, Rosa, eats dinner with her hands, while Mrs. Anderson talks with her mouth open about her experiences in childbirth. Hortense invites Celia over for dinner to witness their bad behavior, but Celia gets along well with the Andersons, who seem to like her more than Hortense.

Hortense assumes that the Andersons, as British citizens, would emblematize the culture she's always worshipped. This is her first realization that British behavior doesn't always coincide with British colonial narratives. Celia's more lenient reaction to the family contrasts with Hortense's unhealthy preoccupation with manners.


Meanwhile, Celia confides to Hortense that she's courting a former RAF soldier. She retells her new boyfriend's thrilling tales about the war, and she's excited that he wants to return to England, hoping he'll take her with him. When Hortense finally meets Celia's boyfriend, it turns out he's the same man who rescued her from the crowd months ago. Celia is unhappy that they've already met, while Hortense is upset by the man's slight resemblance to Michael. Celia finally introduces him as Gilbert Joseph.

With Gilbert, Celia imagines herself making a new start in a new country. However, when she finds he already knows Hortense, Celia realizes he's more tied to her past than she expected or wanted. For her part, Hortense finds in Gilbert an unpleasant reminder of her own past and the future she lost with Michael's disappearance.


Hortense frequently accompanies Celia on outings with Gilbert. Gilbert loves to joke with the two women, and while Celia is receptive to his teasing, Hortense always keeps her distance. When they're not with him, Celia daydreams constantly about marrying him and moving to England. One day, after telling them all about the splendid monuments of London, Gilbert suggests, half seriously and half in jest, that Celia come with him to England. Dazzled, Celia agrees and says that Hortense will have to take over her classes.

Hortense's stiffness shows she finds it difficult to approach new friendships—possibly because of her childhood in an unloving family. In contrast, Gilbert and Celia display an appealing casualness. However, their tendency to make plans spontaneously, rather than thoughtfully, suggests that these plans won't come to fruition.


Feeling angry and left out, Hortense reminds Celia innocently that she'll have to take her mother as well. When Celia says nothing, Hortense explains that Celia's mother is "quite mad," citing the incident at the parade. With the excuse of finding some ice cream, Gilbert extricates himself from the women and runs away. Furious, Celia slaps Hortense in the face and stalks off.

Just as she did when she saw Mr. Ryder's body, Hortense betrays a friend because she herself feels hurt. In this instance, her action seems more deliberated and thus more blameworthy. Her self-centered behavior toward Celia is one of the major flaws in Hortense's character.

CHAPTER 7: HORTENSE

Hortense and Gilbert stand in a church, half-listening as the minister lectures them about embarking on married life together. When he asks how long they've known each other, Gilbert equivocates, then winks at Hortense.

Just as he did with Celia, Gilbert seems to have rushed into other plans with Hortense. He's still just as cocky about doing so, which raises doubt as to whether these plans can succeed.

The Andersons are shocked when Hortense introduces Gilbert to them as her fiancé, and when she admits they've only known each other for five days. However, they accept the unconventional marriage and Mrs. Anderson even hugs Hortense.

While Hortense judges the Andersons by their failure to fulfill conventions, the Andersons are remarkably not judgmental when it comes to her behavior.

Even after the fallout with Celia, Gilbert and Hortense have remained friends. He's intensely restless and consumed with the desire to return to England, where he says "opportunity ripened […] as abundant as fruit on Jamaican trees." However, he's lost all his money investing in his cousin's failed beekeeping business, so he can't buy a ticket.

Gilbert's restlessness—and his desire to opine about it to women—demonstrate his feelings of displacement in Jamaican society. However, at this point it's unclear, given the rosy picture he paints of England, why he ever returned.

One day, Gilbert sees an article about the *Empire Windrush*, a ship leaving for England in a month. He tells Hortense about it, despondent that he can't pay for his passage. However, Hortense has been saving prudently for years, and she offers to lend him the money if he marries her and sends for her once he's established. Gilbert doesn't pretend for a minute that he loves Hortense, but he decides it's the only way to get to England. When he asks her formally to marry him, they shake hands as if to celebrate a "business deal."

Neither Gilbert nor Hortense feels or feigns love for the other. Hortense is actively pining for someone else. At the outset, their marriage is based on mutual self-interest. While that might be enough to get them to England, as the discord in the opening chapters shows, it's not enough to sustain them once they arrive.

Hortense spends her time daydreaming about life in England. She imagines she'll have a modest but proper house with a lovely dining room, where she'll serve English meals and sip tea. When she goes shopping, the storekeepers will greet her politely in perfect English.

Hortense's daydreams are based on the propaganda she's imbibed in her colonial education. Notably, they don't consider the uncouth behavior of the Andersons, the only British family she knows.

The only guests at the wedding are the Andersons, who ask several times where Celia is. Afterwards, the Andersons host a celebratory dinner; Hortense is still disgusted by their manners, but Gilbert gets along with them well and romps with the little boys.

Gilbert's ease with the family further underscores Hortense's stiffness. However, it's important to note this character flaw isn't necessarily her fault, but a remnant of her traumatic childhood.

When the new couple is finally alone in Hortense's room, Gilbert tries to kiss Hortense and undress her, but she's frightened and startled to see him naked. She screams at him to stay away from her; frightened that she'll wake everyone up and embarrass them both, Gilbert hastily puts his clothes on and agrees to sleep on the floor. The next day, he sails for England.

Hortense's prudery is a reminder that, for her, the marriage is a business deal, and has nothing to do with romance. However, it also displays her strong character—she has no intention of obeying her husband, even if the conventions of her society dictate that she should.

CHAPTER 8: HORTENSE

The night before she leaves Jamaica, Hortense stays in a small boardinghouse near the dock. The landlady cooks her dinner and questions her about her husband. Normally hostile to impolite prying, on her last night at home, Hortense is unusually talkative. She tells her that Gilbert has been alone in England for six months. The old woman is shocked, and exhorts Hortense to reunite with her husband before he's corrupted by the English women. She also gives Hortense an enormous blanket that she started knitting for the soldiers but finished only after the war had ended.

Hortense is unconcerned by the woman's injunction, probably because she doesn't love Gilbert enough to be worried about his fidelity. Her interaction with the landlady foreshadows the problems that will arise when Hortense reaches England and has to live within a marriage of convenience to a relative stranger.

CHAPTER 9: QUEENIE

Queenie's neighbor, Mr. Todd, informs her that "colored" immigrants are flocking to England to take advantage of their healthcare and social services. Queenie knows he's just coming over to snoop, having noticed the arrival of Gilbert's wife. Before the war, Mr. Todd complained about Poles and Czechs; now he rants about immigrants and Jews, even though the persecution they've endured is now common knowledge. He's chagrined that Queenie has taken in black tenants.

Mr. Todd, who will come to represent the racism of the neighborhood as a whole, is prejudiced not only against Jamaicans or other people of color, but anyone who isn't British. This shows that his views don't stem from knowledge or facts but rather a generalized fear of people who are different from himself in any way.

Even though renting to Gilbert has earned her the enmity of her neighbors, Queenie has been glad to have him around. She hasn't seen him for years, ever since "the incident." Moreover, she hasn't wanted to see anyone. Her parents have suggested she move home, but each time, she tells them she wants to stay in London and keep the **house** ready for the return of Bernard, her husband.

Queenie's thoughts here suggest that she and Bernard have lived through unusual circumstances together, but doesn't shed light on the nature of their relationship. Moreover, she establishes herself as a freethinker—she doesn't want to live with her parents, although she's evidently alone, and she's audacious enough to rent to Jamaicans even though most people around her are prejudiced against them.

When the war ends, Queenie prepares for Bernard to return, scrounging up some stockings and sharing makeup with her neighbor, Blanche. She watches Blanche's husband kiss her enthusiastically in the yard and hopes Bernard won't do anything of the sort. However, two years pass, and Bernard never turns up. The War Office insists that Bernard hasn't died, and everyone assumes he's run off, but Queenie thinks he's too conventional to do such a thing.

Queenie's relationship with her husband is largely a mystery, but in some ways it seems a lot like the Josephs' marriage. Both Hortense and Queenie feel ambivalent about their husbands, and even the thought of displaying affection makes them uncomfortable. Queenie's composure in the face of Bernard's absence shows she's identifies more as an individual woman than as a wife.

When Gilbert arrives, Queenie takes him in because she knows Bernard would hate it. Blanche tells her that black people have no manners and "animal desires," but Queenie doesn't listen to her. Moreover, she even gives lodgings to Winston, a friend of Gilbert. By this point, Blanche and her husband are so furious that they leave the neighborhood. Blanche says bitterly that her husband no longer feels at home in his own country.

It's ironic that while the neighbors are racist in part because they feel not "at home," their behavior consequently makes immigrants like Gilbert feel like they don't belong, either. Throughout the novel, racist interactions create situations in which both parties suffer from and can't resolve feelings of displacement.

Now, Mr. Todd informs Queenie that just today his sister was forced to step off the sidewalk to let two black women pass. He says that Queenie should make sure her lodgers know it's polite to step into the road if an English person is approaching. Dryly, Queenie suggests that he tell them this himself.

In response to influxes of immigrants, Mr. Todd seeks to reaffirm what he sees as his own superior status. This suggests that his antipathy toward immigration stems from a fear of losing ground in his society.

CHAPTER 10: HORTENSE

That night, Hortense makes Gilbert close his eyes while she undresses, and banishes him to sleep in the armchair while she takes the bed. When she finally lies down, she can't sleep because of the mice that are loudly scurrying about in the ceiling and walls. Hortense demands that Gilbert get rid of the rats, but he tells her wearily to go to sleep, and that she'll feel better about it in the morning.

Although Hortense and Gilbert have finally achieved a degree of informality with each other, it's clear that their relationship is uneasy and far from romantic. While this is comical at face value, it also underlines Hortense's strong sense of independence, an unusual characteristic for a woman of her time.

CHAPTER 11: GILBERT

In a flashback, Gilbert describes his time in the RAF. When he first joins the armed forces, he's thrilled by his dashing uniform, telling himself that "women gonna fall at your feet" because of it. However, once he arrives at training camp, he's too preoccupied by the boiled and flavorless British food to think about women or his own looks. Gilbert's unit is composed of Jamaican soldiers, as well as men from tinier neighboring islands, whom Gilbert scorns as "small islanders."

Gilbert's obsession with his uniform demonstrates his generally carefree spirit, which finds levity in all kinds of situations, even his imminent departure to war. However, his expectations for the RAF are frustrated by a mundane reality, just as his wife's first days in England don't live up to her daydreams.

However, an American officer soon informs Gilbert and his comrades that for the duration of their stay in Virginia, they'll be confined to the military base. He explains that this is a safety measure to prevent disease and tries to console the men by assuring them that they will be able to "mix with white service personnel" and "not be treated as negroes," but Gilbert is disgruntled because he wants to try out the effect of his uniform on American women.

While Gilbert couches his disgust in terms of his coveted uniform, it's clear that he understands the thinly veiled racism in their confinement. Gilbert's stay in Virginia marks his first encounter with the expression of racism in a society that's not primarily composed of people of color.

After this incident, Gilbert remembers the words of his cousin Elwood, who was astounded that Gilbert wants to be a soldier in a "white man's war," and said he should be fighting instead for black Jamaicans to control their own country. Elwood says winning the war won't change anything for Jamaicans like them.

Elwood's opinions will always counter Gilbert's. He represents the view that colonies can never be equal members of an empire, and ought to fight for self-determination instead.

However, Gilbert has read that Hitler considers both Jews and people of color to be "primitive, like an ape." This is particularly striking to Gilbert because not only is he black, his father is a Jew. Born in the Jamaican town of Mandeville, Gilbert's father converted to Christianity while serving as a soldier in World War One, was disowned by his family, and married Gilbert's mother, Louise. Every Sunday, he took his wife and seven children to church; Louise watched the children while Gilbert's father "fawned" on the congregation's white members, seeking their approval even though they disdained him for his mixed heritage and black wife. Reading about Hitler in the newspapers, Gilbert recognizes in a picture of Germans watching a Jew walk down the street the "expression of disgust" with which these white congregants looked at his father.

Gilbert's heritage means that he's experienced racism in multiple forms, both as a black man in a colony ruled by white imperialists, and by observing his father's inability to fit in among either Jews or Christians. That Gilbert immediately likens his family's history to the plight of the European Jews shows his innate sense of empathy. Rather than pitying himself for his troubles, he considers how they link him to other people. This trait differentiates him from characters like Bernard, whose grievances make them insensitive to the views of others.

At the beginning of the war, Gilbert's older brother Lester tries to sign up for the RAF, but they refuse to accept black soldiers and send him to a factory instead. As the war progresses and becomes more desperate, the RAF changes its policy. To Elwood's disgust, Gilbert immediately signs up; he tells his cousin that nothing will change in Jamaica if Hitler wins this war.

It's obvious that although Britain is fighting against Hitler and the racism he represents and perpetuates, their army is hardly egalitarian. While the empathy that leads Gilbert to enlist is laudable, he also displays a certain naivety about British attitudes toward colonial citizens.

In Virginia, American soldiers attempt to flatter Gilbert and the other men and compensate for their confinement by insinuating that they are "superior" black people, different from African-Americans, who "won't work" and "ain't really cut out to fight." The white soldiers claim that segregation is the only way to ensure a peaceful society, and that everyone, including African Americans, likes it. Regardless of the food, everyone is soon eager to leave Virginia.

Here, the American soldiers emerge as completely tone-deaf, not seeming to notice that by insulting black people in America, they're insulting Jamaicans as well. Their insistence that African Americans approve of segregation is deeply troubling, given that they obviously don't interact with any African Americans.

Eventually, the men board a ship headed to England via Newfoundland. On the voyage, they endure long lectures from Corporal Baxter, whom they despise because he constantly belittles them as "colony troops." Colonel Baxter warns them that in England, "no white women will consort with the likes of you," angering the men further.

While Britain encourages colonial subjects to come to the defense of the Mother Country, once enlisted, Gilbert realizes that the English consider him a second-class citizen. Through his experience in the RAF, he'll realize that Britain's real feelings toward its territories are far different than the narratives it promotes within its colonies.

CHAPTER 12: GILBERT

With his regiment, Gilbert arrives at a makeshift training camp based in a Yorkshire holiday resort. Gilbert and his roommates, Hubert, Fulton, and James, are astounded that British people vacation here, because it's unbelievably cold and gray. They spend all day on seemingly meaningless drills, like running through freezing fields in their underwear. At night, the men seal the cracks in their cabin with spare clothes to preserve heat, but the bullying Sergeant Thwaites sometimes forces them to open the windows, telling them that "cold air keeps you alert."

Just as Hortense learned to sing hymns about shepherds in idyllic fields, Gilbert probably grew up imagining that Britain was a paradise. Seeing that it's not, if only on a physical level, is his first step to dismantling his beliefs about Britain's superiority to its colonies.

On their first day off, Gilbert, James, Fulton, and Hubert walk into the nearest village, looking for a bar. Gilbert notices that all the locals are looking at them, just as his childhood dog used to examine geckos that passed through his yard. Eventually, some of the braver villagers approach them, asking where they're from and if they speak English. Fulton even flirts with an attractive woman before a middle-aged man shepherds her away.

The English seem woefully ignorant about people of color, but while their curiosity makes them rude, they don't display the same ingrained prejudice that characterized the American soldiers. At least initially, this a hopeful sign, suggesting that the men can live in England without the barrier of racism that made America so unpalatable.

Explaining his relationship to England, Gilbert says the "mother country" is like a beloved relation named Mother living far away. Children like Gilbert learn that Mother is refined and mannerly, and that she takes care of little children just like the Lord. One day, Mother is "troubled, she need your help," so men like Gilbert leave everything they know to hurry to her aid. However, when they arrive, they don't find the beautiful and cultured relative of their imagination but a battered and dirty old woman who doesn't even know who they are. Just like the imaginary relative, wartime England seems squalid and debased to the Jamaican soldiers. The people are rough, uneducated and rude; a college educated soldier wonders "how many white people come to speak so bad."

Gilbert's analogy is striking—it encompasses both his feelings of closeness and worship of the Mother Country (feelings very similar to Hortense's) and his astonishment when he actually sees what Britain is like. It's notable that he hasn't yet commented on the way the British treat him, just the society's general characteristics. For his whole life, Gilbert aspired to be "refined and mannerly" like the Mother Country, but once he arrives, he realizes that by their own standards, he's a lot more civilized than most of the British.

For his part, Gilbert is chagrined that while he's known since childhood minute details of British geography and culture, and can talk intelligently about British railways and government, the average British soldier has never heard of Jamaica and thinks it's in Africa. Moreover, most British people they meet assume the Jamaican soldiers grew up in "jungles and swinging through trees." Gilbert knows that these people would not spring to Jamaica's defense as he has rushed to help Britain.

Here, Gilbert begins to express the disillusionment and bitterness that intensify as he spends more time in Britain. It's very clear that not only is the Mother Country much less "refined" than her colonial subjects believe, she doesn't have a mutually beneficial relationship with her colonies. Instead, the relationship is an exploitative one.

CHAPTER 13: GILBERT

One day, Sergeant Thwaites asks Gilbert if he can drive. Gilbert lies that he can't; he spent his entire childhood driving the delivery car for his mother's cake business, and when he went to Kingstown for night school, he had to drive his Elwood's produce truck, which broke down so often that he never got to go to school. He joined the RAF to escape menial work like this and was assured that he'd be trained as a "wireless operator/air-gunner or flight engineer," but so far his entire regiment has been doing grunt work behind the front.

When he immigrates to England later, Gilbert will attempt to find professional work and be thwarted. This repeated experience links his time in the RAF to his life as an immigrant. It also suggests that British reluctance to give professional work to immigrants isn't a matter of job scarcity but a desire to preserve white status and prevent immigrants from feeling like they belong.

Gilbert protests to Sergeant Thwaites that he wants to train for a posting to the front, but the officer dismissively tells him that it's wartime and he must do as he's told. Gilbert remembers Elwood's assertion that "the English are liars."

Although Gilbert will never fully subscribe to Elwood's views (or take his advice), he frequently remembers his cousin in times of trouble, or in moments of acute disappointment in Britain.

CHAPTER 14: GILBERT

After training, Gilbert's regiment is dispersed throughout the country. With other British volunteers, Gilbert works as a driver and coal shifter, transferring coal from trains to army bases. One day, an officer orders him to drive to a nearby American base and retrieve some British shock absorbers which had mistakenly been delivered there and which the Americans refused to deliver themselves. However, when Gilbert presents himself at the base, the American officers retreat into their office, where he hears them say that since he's black, they can't send him into the base to collect the items. The officer says that the British sergeant sent a black soldier on purpose, just to annoy him.

Not only is Gilbert assigned menial labor because of his race, he realizes he's being used as a pawn in petty power struggles between American and British officers. Here, he's humiliated not just by the Americans, but by his own British commanding officer, who purposely sent him into this disturbing situation. While the British haven't institutionalized racism as the Americans have, prejudice still operates within the RAF in subtle but important ways.

When the officers emerge, Gilbert politely pretends not to have heard anything. The officer won't let him go to the mess, but brings him something to eat. Then he dismisses Gilbert, telling him that, due to a mix-up, the parts are already on their way to the British base. Gilbert understands that his own officer sent him on this errand because doing so would force the Americans to deliver the parts themselves, rather than allowing a black man on the base.

It's especially notable that the officers don't think Gilbert can hear them or see through their thinly veiled lies. Their charade suggests both that they're ashamed of their racist society when confronted by someone who doesn't live within it, and that they truly don't think Gilbert has the mental capacities of a white soldier.

Driving back to the base, Gilbert sees two African-American GIs—the first black people he's seen in some time—and offers them a ride. They're astounded that he's a British subject, having never even heard of the Caribbean. The Americans, Levi and Jon, are on their first leave in months, and have dates set up with two women from Lincoln. However, they have to meet the women in Nottingham because Lincoln is reserved for white GIs until the next week. Levi and Jon can't go there without risking trouble from white soldiers.

While all three men are black, Gilbert and the American GIs have lived vastly different lives. Gilbert is startled and frustrated by his treatment on the American base, but Jon and Levi talk casually about even more appalling practices. Gilbert feels out of place among the white officers who use them for their own ends or the black soldiers so vastly different from him.

Gilbert is astounded that the American army has taken segregation this far, and asks his passengers if it makes them angry. However, Levi and Jon say calmly that it's the only way of life they've ever known. Anyway, life as a soldier is much freer than American society; at home, neither of them had ever spoken to a white person before, but here, they're dating two white women. However, Levi is shocked when Gilbert tells them he shares a room with seven white men, asking how he can sleep with them around.

Levi and Jon's comments demonstrate how absolute American segregation policies are. It's also interesting that, while life in the army provides the Americans an unusual amount of freedom, it's been a highly restrictive experience for Gilbert. As Levi's shock shows, racism encourages both the oppressors and the oppressed to consider the other as irremediably dangerous.

CHAPTER 15: GILBERT

A few days later, Gilbert is enjoying his day off. He's reading a newspaper on a bench outside the church when he notices that an old man seems to be following him. Gilbert wonders if he's an inept Nazi spy, or simply a curious man who wants to "feel the hair of a colored man." Gilbert walks through the fields and the man follows. Frustrated and wondering if the man means to harm him, he finally turns around and politely asks him what he's doing.

Gilbert has gotten so used to the rudeness of British citizens that he chalks up all strange behavior as a reaction to his race. While this seems funny to him now, as an immigrant, the constant feeling of being out of the ordinary will sometimes threaten to overwhelm him and prevent him from feeling secure in England.

The man doesn't respond. Suddenly, a low-flying airplane passes overhead. While Gilbert is startled, the old man throws himself to the muddy ground, terrified. Gilbert realizes that he's mentally ill, and that he might need help. Gilbert asks the man if he should take him home, and the man nods and leads him to a farmhouse.

The old man's evident insanity corresponds to the eccentricities of Celia's mother. Likewise, Gilbert's compassion and eagerness to help establishes him, like Celia, as an highly positive character.

Gilbert is anxious when he knocks on the door; he's lived in England long enough to know that most white people are initially afraid of him. However, the attractive woman who answers the door isn't concerned with him but simply asks, without preamble, where he found the old man. Gilbert explains that he's been followed the entire afternoon, and the woman explains that "he thinks he knows you."

The woman's comment is cryptic—it's unclear if she's referring to another Jamaican the old man knows, or if she's implying that all black people look alike to him. Gilbert's anxious politeness contrasts with her brash attitude; it's another reminder that the British aren't as "civilized" as they'd like their colonial subjects to believe.

The woman starts to shut the door on Gilbert but he hangs around, "not ready to leave such a pretty woman." Eventually, worn down by his jokes, she invites him in for tea and introduces herself as Queenie Bligh. The old man is her father-in-law, and his name is Arthur.

In her reappearance here, Queenie is much the same as she is in the novel's opening—not especially polite, but not displaying the racist behavior that characterizes most of the novel's white characters.

CHAPTER 16: GILBERT

Walking through town a few days later, Gilbert encounters some drunk American soldiers who demand that he salute them, as they are his "superiors." He curses them and walks away, only to run into Queenie, who greets him politely. She tells him she's lost Arthur again, and Gilbert asks if he can buy her a cup of tea while she waits for him to turn up.

Unaccustomed to this overt white supremacy, Gilbert is very confrontational in situations like these. The repressed hate displayed by the Americans, and his refusal to bow to it, foreshadow his imminent disaster in the movie house.

However, when he arrives with Queenie at the tea shop and sits down, Gilbert is disturbed to notice three white American GIs glaring at him from a nearby table, and worries that they'll make a scene. Gilbert is "learning to hate" the Americans above any other army. He feels the war he's fighting isn't against the Germans, but against the humiliations inflicted by the Americans. Meanwhile, Queenie is unaware of the threat posed by the soldiers at the neighboring table, and chats away gaily.

Gilbert's comparison of the Germans and the Americans shows that for him, the enemy is always racism, no matter which army displays it. Importantly, Gilbert says he's "learning" to hate—this is a reminder that hate and prejudice aren't natural, but rather created and enforced by social codes.

Gilbert listens uneasily as Queenie tells him that she's been staying with her parents in the country, but is planning on taking Arthur back to London, despite the danger of bombing; Arthur doesn't get along with her gruff father. Queenie offers Gilbert a bite of biscuit from her hand, which he accepts. Behind her back, the American soldier menacingly draws a finger across his throat.

The contrast between Queenie's gaiety and the soldier's menace is another reminder that race relations aren't preordained—they're deeply dependent on the social conditions under which different characters live. Episodes like this implicitly argue against the idea that segregation is natural and unavoidable, which the Americans in Virginia hold.

Suddenly, Queenie sees Arthur on the street and rushes out of the store. Gilbert stands, certain that he won't be able to leave without a fight. The Americans get up as well, but the waitress fiercely informs them that they have to stay at their table and wait for their eggs. Cowed, they remain at their table while Gilbert slips out the door. Queenie invites him to see a film with her and Arthur.

What seems like a dangerous situation is suddenly and almost comically resolved. While the waitress's intervention restores peace and levity to the afternoon, the lingering sense of menace foreshadows what's about to happen in the movie house.

CHAPTER 17: GILBERT

Queenie is excited to see a movie starring Clark Gable. The usher escorts them into the theater, but while she gives Queenie and Arthur seats in the front, she tells Gilbert that he has to sit in the gallery. Both Queenie and Gilbert are confounded, as there are plenty of empty seats. The usher tells him that all the "coloreds" have to sit in the back, and Gilbert knows this is because the white Americans refuse to sit next to them. He becomes angry, saying that Jim Crow is for Americans and "we do not do this in England." Misunderstanding, the usher responds that if Jim Crow is black, he'll have to sit in the back.

It's important that Gilbert angrily talks about what "we" do in England; it shows that, as a colonial citizen, he identifies deeply with Britain. His loyalty and even pride in a country that discounts and discriminates against him is poignant—an especially evocative moment highlighting the injustice he faces every day. Moreover, Gilbert's language demonstrates his sense of being torn between Jamaica and England, not able to belong fully to one or the other.

By this point, the quarrel has attracted the attention of other customers. An American derisively shouts for Gilbert to do what he's told, and Queenie shouts back, supported by some other British women. From the back of the movie house, black American GIs start heckling their white counterparts. The manager runs into the theater and orders everyone to leave.

There's a notable contrast between American and British reactions. While the British aren't exactly standing up for the black soldiers, they're a lot less prejudiced than the American GIs, as they haven't been preconditioned by a completely segregated society.

The American GIs begin fighting, trampling civilians in their haste to get at each other. Queenie grabs Arthur and Gilbert and hustles them towards the exit, but Gilbert soon loses her in the rush. One woman hits him with her purse, accusing him of starting all the trouble. Outside, civilians struggle to safety while soldiers taunt each other from opposite sides of the street.

Ostensibly a dispute between soldiers, the fighting quickly escalates to involve civilians who can't defend themselves, demonstrating that racial tension can't be ignored or handled by blanket measures like segregation. Addressed in this haphazard manner, it quickly bleeds into all parts of the society.

Just as it seems the fight might peter out, the American Military Police arrive and attack the black GIs with boots and batons. A white GI jumps on Gilbert, and the two men wrestle. When Gilbert extricates himself, he sees another white man bashing a black soldier's head against a wall.

Gilbert's comment that he was "learning to hate" the Americans now seems like a premonition. In all his time at the RAF, this street fight is the closest he's come to combat, and it's ironic that he's not fighting the Germans but his own ostensible allies.

A gunshot sounds, and the entire crowd stills. Gilbert makes his way toward the sound; he hears Queenie screaming Arthur's name. When he reaches the corner, he sees Arthur splayed out on the ground, dead, and Queenie distraught and hitting the policeman who shot him. Gilbert tries to go to her, but another policeman warns him to stay away.

Arthur's death is especially poignant and meaningful because his insanity and old age rendered him completely harmless and innocent. His murder shows that racism doesn't just affect those who inflict it or those who suffer for it; it also seeps into the lives of those, like Arthur, who seem to live outside it.

CHAPTER 18: GILBERT

In 1947, Gilbert returns to Jamaica. Little boys stand on the dock to greet them and a band plays. In his luggage, Gilbert carries newspaper clippings from the riot in which Arthur was killed. The day after the incident, Gilbert was transferred to another city; although he wrote to Queenie several times, she never answered.

The nature of the "incident" to which Queenie referred is now painfully clear. Queenie's refusal to talk about it or see Gilbert afterward mirrors the tactics of denial and evasion which Bernard will frequently display, linking Queenie to her husband even though the two of them are frequently at odds.

Gilbert has had to wait two years since the war's end for a ship back to Jamaica. By this time, he's tired of barracks life and British food; he wants to be among his family and in a familiar community. However, when he arrives in Kingstown, he realizes how tiny Jamaica is, and says to himself that "we are small islanders too."

When he enlisted in the RAF, Gilbert felt cosmopolitan compared to men from other islands. After his time in England, Gilbert feels that Jamaica is provincial in comparison. His new disappointment in his native country causes him to turn to England again, despite his ambivalence about his treatment there.

Moreover, Gilbert finds his family scattered. Four sisters got married and immigrated to America, while the other three moved to Canada. His brother Lester is working in construction in Chicago. Gilbert's mother pities him for being stuck in Jamaica. She's given up her cake business and spends her time decorating hats with her sister in preparation for a long visit to her children in America. Meanwhile, Gilbert's father passes the days dozing on the porch in a drunken daze.

Gilbert's familial diaspora magnifies the feelings of displacement that began when he stepped off the ship. Notably, Gilbert's feelings mirror Queenie's neighbor's assertion that he no longer feels "at home" in his native land; however, Gilbert doesn't blame his feelings on other people or address them through prejudice.

Elwood teases Gilbert for returning, saying it's obvious that he was right when he said it's better to stay in Jamaica than go to the "mother country." Gilbert doesn't tell his cousin that he did try to stay in England, applying to study law through the military employment agency. However, the officials considered such a career "high above his station" and offered to train him as a baker instead.

While Gilbert used to be confidently opposed to Elwood's views, he's not sure what to think of his cousin now. Gilbert's ambivalence shows the erosion of his ingrained trust in the Mother Country.

Elwood has an "obstinate faith in Jamaica," and insists that black Jamaicans need to control their own country and government. Meanwhile, he tells Gilbert he's planning on starting a beekeeping business and convinces Gilbert to invest in it.

Elwood's faith in Jamaica contrasts with Gilbert's lack of certainty, both in his native country and in England.

With Elwood, Gilbert takes a stubborn mule named Enid to pick up their new beehives from a friend. After carefully carting the hives home and setting them up in the backyard, Gilbert eats a mango on the verandah. Looking out on the peaceful yard filled with fruit trees and fireflies, Gilbert reflects on the beauty and abundance of his country, thinking that it's not so bad to be here after all.

This is one of the few moments in which Gilbert feels unequivocally at home, and the author's uncharacteristically poetic description demonstrates the beauty and allure of such moments.

However, during dinner Enid escapes from her enclosure and attacks the beehives, causing the bees to swarm her and the house. Despite Elwood's efforts to contain the damage, Enid dies from bee stings and the bees escape, taking all Gilbert's savings with them. Ever the optimist, Elwood wants to look for the bees in the forest, but Gilbert dismisses the idea. He's depressed by their failure and tell his cousin that "we cannot get a break in this place." In contrast, he says, opportunity is "ripe" in places like England and America. Elwood says that Gilbert wants to leave Jamaica because Gilbert's father is a white man.

The sudden disaster shows the transient and ephemeral nature of Gilbert's contentment. While life in Jamaica is certainly full of obstacles, Gilbert's argument that opportunity abounds in England seems like wishful thinking, born from a desire to feel at home somewhere; there's little evidence from his difficult experiences to back it up.

In this midst of this dilemma, Gilbert meets Celia Langley, whose adoration makes him feel valuable and excited again. He entertains himself by telling her wildly exaggerated stories about England. He's frightened of her friend, Hortense, who always seems to disdain him no matter how good his stories are.

While Gilbert and Celia's relationship is more conventional than his eventual marriage, it's also unhealthy, predicated on a charade of bravado rather than mutual understanding.

Given Hortense's evident dislike, Gilbert is shocked when she offers to lend him the money for passage to England. Gilbert has no desire to marry her, and when he retires to his house to think over the idea, he weeps under his favorite tree. In the end, he decides even this unpleasant bargain is worth it to get back to England.

While Hortense appears stubborn and ungrateful at the beginning of the book, here Gilbert seems even more reluctant to embark on a life together. His extreme hostility towards Hortense demonstrates how much work they have ahead of them to make their marriage viable.

CHAPTER 19: GILBERT

When Gilbert arrives in London again, he's proud to feel familiar and at ease, unlike the other Jamaicans on his ship who stare at everything. Stepping off the ship, Gilbert sees a sparkling brooch on the ground. He wants to pick it up, thinking that Hortense would like it, but as he bends down he realizes it's a cluster of flies perched on dog excrement. Gilbert moves back and another man immediately steps on it.

Gilbert's mistake with the "brooch" seems like a comical episode, but the moment of optimism, followed immediately by disappointment, actually foreshadows many of the frustrations Gilbert will face in the ensuing months—for example, his many hopeful job applications which are largely rejected based on his race.

Gilbert spends his first nights sharing a "malodorous" room with six other Jamaican men. They're all sure that the arrangement will be temporary, and that they'll find good jobs and apartments without delay. On the contrary, Gilbert spends two months there. It seems impossible to find a landlord who will rent to a person of color; they all tell Gilbert that other lodgers, wives, children, or neighbors would be "outraged if a colored man came among them."

While Gilbert was comparatively welcome in England as a uniformed soldier, it appears that's no longer the case. Faced with an influx of permanent, rather than temporary, immigrants, the English begin to mirror the behavior of the Americans.

In desperation, Gilbert remembers that he still has Queenie's address. Hoping the house hasn't been bombed to pieces, he rings her doorbell, which doesn't work. Eventually Queenie answers the door, and although she's surprised to see him, she welcomes him inside.

Queenie's behavior continues to set her in contrast with those around her. Her open-mindedness makes her similar to the highly empathetic Gilbert; it also represents a shred of hope for improvement in the midst of a demoralizing period of his life.

CHAPTER 20: HORTENSE

In the morning, Gilbert "rudely" wakes Hortense up and makes her a cup of tea before going to work. Hortense is shocked that the sun hasn't even risen yet. Gilbert asks if she can make him "chips" for dinner when he comes home, and she's so touched by his "plaintive" tone that she agrees without arguing.

While Hortense continues to misunderstand Gilbert's attempts to be kind to her, her sudden agreement to his request is a moment of unusual sensitivity, suggesting that their relationship does have the potential to improve.

CHAPTER 21: GILBERT

Hurrying down the stairs, Gilbert encounters Queenie. He's learned to avoid her much of the time. Since her husband is away, she often relies on Gilbert for help with household chores, but he doesn't have time right now. She also makes him convey rules and directions to the other Jamaican lodgers, and he doesn't like being her go-between.

While Gilbert appreciates Queenie, it seems like he feels stuck between her and the other lodgers—not quite a Jamaican like them, but also not part of Queenie's world. His furtive behavior shows how uncomfortable such a position can be, even if it lends him certain privileges, like Queenie's trust.

Queenie asks if it was Winston or Kenneth who helped Gilbert with the trunk yesterday. Gilbert lies that it was Winston, since Queenie hates Kenneth and has kicked him out of the house in the past. Before she can investigate further, he leaves for work.

The constant confusion between Winston and Kenneth provides comic relief amid many frustrating events. However, it's also a reminder of the British tendency to view all immigrants as a part of an indistinguishable monolith, rather than as individuals.

CHAPTER 22: HORTENSE

Hortense imagines Celia laughing at her as she looks around the cheerless room and then quickly bundles up to protect herself from the cold. She starts scrubbing the room and tiding up, only to be interrupted by Queenie. Hortense resents that Queenie enters without a formal invitation and starts instructing her in English phrases, even though Hortense is very proud of her proper English.

Queenie is trying to be friendly to Hortense, but by assuming she'll be ignorant and grateful for any assistance offered, she's patronizing her. Hortense will never feel as comfortable with Queenie as Gilbert does, which is a reminder that, for all her open-mindedness, Queenie still retains some of her imperial assumptions. In addition, even good intentions, if expressed unwisely, are not perceived as such.

Queenie questions Hortense about her marriage; she's surprised to find that Hortense has only been married for six months and spent most of that time away from her husband. Queenie offers to show Hortense the neighborhood shops, and Hortense agrees so the other woman will leave her alone. Before leaving, Queenie asks curiously if they have films in Jamaica. When Hortense replies haughtily that there are many cinemas, and that she enjoys Shirley Temple films, Queenie laughs at her.

It does seem a little silly that Hortense loves children's films; but by laughing at her, Queenie's behaving rudely and in a way she probably wouldn't toward an English person. Queenie's always careful to treat Gilbert with respect, but she doesn't apply this caution to Hortense. It's possible she behaves this way because Hortense is a fellow woman, or because her respect is reserved for immigrants who seem more "assimilated" or knowledgeable, like Gilbert.

CHAPTER 23: QUEENIE

In a flashback, Queenie details her own childhood. Her mother wanted to name her Queenie, believing that this was the queen's first name. Even after the vicar explains that the queen's real name is Victoria, and christens the baby with this name, everyone calls her Queenie. Queenie's mother, Lillie Buxton, is a strong farmer's daughter, and her father, Wilfred Buxton, descends from a long line of butchers. He wears leather straps on his wrists as protection from his knives, and only takes them off when he bathes on Saturday nights.

Queenie's parentage and name establishes her as an amalgamation of aristocratic and proletarian elements. She's named (literally) after a queen, which shows her parents' loyalty to and identification with the English monarchy. Still, her father's difficult profession, inherited over generations, is a reminder that Queenie's part of the large majority of Britons who are hardworking, uneducated, and largely unprivileged.

The Buxtons live on a small farm with a shed where Father does the butchering, carving up every usable part of the animal and saving "the bits that had no name" for sausage. Father wants sons to help him with this work and is disappointed to be presented with Queenie. Mother, who wakes up every day at four in the morning to prepare crust for pork pies, is happy to have someone help her with this grueling work. After working on the farm every morning, the Buxtons load their products into a van and drive to their shop in town, where they spend the day serving customers.

The Buxtons' work is beyond difficult—it takes up every portion of their day. Their grueling lifestyle is another contrast with the uniformly "refined and mannerly" culture Gilbert and Hortense expect in England. It also points out that while England is an imperial power, large portions of its citizenry are living hard lives on the edge of poverty.

Queenie spends her childhood in the care of various girls who work for Father and Mother, all of whom mother scorns as "miners' daughters." Mother tries her best to avoid becoming pregnant again, but when Queenie is six, Mother gives birth to a son, Billy, with twin boys, Jim and Harry, following the next year. By the time Queenie is twelve, she has to get up with her mother to make the pies and then feed and dress her younger brothers. Jim dies of rheumatic fever when he's very young.

In Queenie's recollection, her entire family life—from her mother's efforts at contraception to her own upbringing—are dictated by the needs of the butchery. Given their circumstances, the Buxtons' decision to name their daughter after the Queen suggests that a strong identification with symbols of British power helps alleviate the pressure and sadness of a very harsh life.

No matter how hard her life is, Queenie still feels superior to the miners' children who make up the bulk of her elementary school. These children are encrusted with grime, and many of them don't even have shoes. They're all underfed, and Queenie sometimes taunts them when her mother sends her a pork pie for dinner. Once, she catches Harry sharing his lunch with another child and slaps him, telling him not to do it again.

After detailing Queenie's grim family life, the novel points out that her circumstances are relatively lucky, emphasizing how sharply the average Briton's life diverges from the narratives of civilized refinery Britain disseminates in its colonies.

Queenie is a good student and her teacher, Miss Earl, favors her and often sends her on errands. But when Queenie is fourteen, Father decides any further education is useless for a girl and puts her to work on the farm. From then on, Queenie has to work every waking hour, cleaning chicken coops, finding eggs, and helping Mother with the pies. During the Depression, when many people go hungry and children come begging at the Buxtons' door, Queenie has to make soup to feed them.

Even though Queenie's a comparatively well-off British citizen, her own education and prospects are curtailed by her gender. Hortense, with her high level of education and proper manners, had a much more refined upbringing than Queenie—a contrast of which the Englishwoman is completely unaware when she patronizes her tenant as an adult.

One day, Mother sends Queenie to fetch Father from the butchering shed. Entering the shed for the first time in her life, she sees her father and Billy, both covered in blood raising knives over a cow's grotesque carcass. Queenie screams and faints. Afterward she decides to become a vegetarian, sticking to this vow even when her father shouts at her. In the midst of this family turmoil, Aunt Dorothy, "Mother's posh sister," arrives from London and invites Queenie to come live with her.

Although Queenie loves her parents and is loved by them, her inability to thrive within her family's established routines makes her similar to Hortense, who can't find peace in her childhood homes. Both women experience an important period of personal development when they move to larger cities and acquire some comparative independence.

CHAPTER 24: QUEENIE

In London, Aunt Dorothy hires an elocution teacher to improve Queenie's pronunciation and departure so that she can succeed in "polite society." Aunt Dorothy runs a sweet shop, which she's inherited from her late husband, who died in the Great War. Now, Queenie serves the customers while Aunt Dorothy reclines on her lounger, doling out advice and playing with her dog, Prudence. Many men come to the store to win Queenie's favor, but Aunt Dorothy dismisses most of them as low-class "Cockneys," advising Queenie to hold out for something better.

In the present, the novel focuses on racial discrimination. However, episodes like this show that Queenie's life has always been pervaded by classism. Queenie's aunt has moved a step higher than her family by marrying a London-dweller. Still, she's intensely conscious of the class status of everyone she meets, and she expresses her love and anxiety for Queenie by conniving to marry her into a higher class.

Aunt Dorothy's interest is piqued by a tall, thin man who comes to the store to buy *The Times*; she claims that "no ne'er-do-wells ever read *The Times*." The man begins visiting twice a day, and each time Aunt Dorothy makes sure Queenie is dressed prettily before she serves him. The man is always polite, but they never exchange more than pleasantries.

Aunt Dorothy's declarations about the newspaper are ridiculous. Not only is she probably incorrect, she inadvertently points out that class status is based on arbitrary customs, rather than any objective analysis of character.

One evening, the man asks her to accompany him on a walk the next afternoon. He introduces himself as Bernard Bligh. For four months, Bernard and Queenie take walks twice a week. They rarely talk much, and Queenie fixates on his small imperfections, like a vein that always moves when he eats and his habit of "dithering over change." However, Aunt Dorothy says he's a "gentleman" and approves of him. Queenie wonders why courting girls seem so dreamy and happy, when she finds the process so boring.

Aunt Dorothy is well-intentioned and clearly wants the best for Queenie, encouraging her to court Bernard because he can provide security and upward mobility. However, by imploring Queenie to ignore her own inclinations, she's harming her niece rather than improving her chances for happiness.

One day, Queenie tries to end her relationship with Bernard, but he begs for another chance and even cries, telling Queenie that he was hoping to be engaged. Touched by this unexpected display of emotion, Queenie agrees to continue their walks.

Throughout Queenie and Bernard's marriage, long periods of frigidity are punctuated by brief displays of emotion. While these moments are touching, they don't make for a healthy marriage over time.

When Queenie and Bernard return to the shop that night, she finds that Aunt Dorothy has had a stroke and died on the shop floor, nearly crushing Prudence. At the funeral, Mother reassures Queenie that she can come back to live at home. Panicked at returning to the farm, Queenie announces she's marrying Bernard.

Just like Hortense and Gilbert, Queenie decides to get married out of fear and self-interest, rather than love. The Blighs and the Josephs begin marriage on similar footing, but their relationships will diverge by the end of the novel.

CHAPTER 25: QUEENIE

Following their marriage, Queenie and Bernard have an extremely lukewarm sexual relationship. Queenie is disgusted by the entire process, and wonders why she spends so much time waving her hair and putting on makeup when Bernard never seems to notice what she looks like. Queenie hopes she'll at least have a baby, but she never conceives. When she consults a doctor, he tells her to take more pleasure in conjugal relations.

While Queenie has achieved the prosperous and secure life Aunt Dorothy hoped for, Queenie realizes that the romantic aspects of marriage are more important than she thought. Queenie's inability to even have a baby represents the fundamental lack of cohesion in her marriage.

Bernard and his mentally ill father, Arthur, own a tall house in Earls Court, a nice neighborhood, but they only use a few rooms in the basement, letting the rest molder away. When Queenie arrives, she cleans the house and rearranges furniture, trying to convince Bernard to open it up; but he always shakes his head, rejecting her efforts without explaining his reasons.

Queenie's initial status as an outsider in the house is a contrast to her later power as a single landlady; her relationship to her home represents her unhappiness within marriage and her calm independence outside it.

CHAPTER 26: QUEENIE

When the Prime Minister announces that Britain is at war with Germany, Queenie can barely hear the radio over Bernard's grandfather clock. Right away, an air-raid siren sounds. Panicking, Bernard gathers their gas masks and runs to the back door, while Arthur trembles mutely. Mr. Plant, a German-Jewish refugee who rents a room, runs down the stairs screaming in German.

The novel presents the declaration of war, a huge political event, among the routine and frustrations of ordinary life. The war will completely warp Queenie's daily life, but its disruptions will also become routine to her.

All four are climbing in to the bomb shelter, which Arthur has constructed over the past weeks in the backyard, when the all-clear sounds. The air raid is the most exciting thing that's ever happened to Queenie, and she decides she's looking forward to war.

Queenie's misplaced excitement demonstrates her profound unhappiness as a housewife. While she'll realize the war is not easy, it will force her to gain more independence, thus strengthening her character.

Soon after, government officials come to the house asking Queenie about Mr. Plant. Even though she tells him he rarely leaves his room and never sees anyone, they take him away for internment. Queenie is bothered that the police won't explain anything to her, but Bernard just says that "Jews are more trouble than they're worth."

Like Mr. Todd, Bernard is hostile to anyone outside his own ethnic group. His comments are especially ironic given that the Jews and the English share a common enemy, the Third Reich.

When the Blitz begins, Queenie forgets her excitement and realizes how frightening the bombs really are. Arthur refuses to enter the shelter, since it reminds him of his time in the trenches during the Great War. Every night while Queenie and Bernard huddle underground, they hope that the bombs spare Arthur inside the house.

Arthur's insanity is a reminder of the ravages war can inflict. Even as Queenie and Bernard stoically continue their daily lives, they're aware that the war has the potential to destroy their sanity.

Families from bombed-out houses have to resettle in other neighborhoods, and a Cockney family comes to live next to the Blighs in Earls Court. Bernard and Cyril Todd are upset that people of a lower class are invading their neighborhood, muttering that "they'd be happier among their own kind." Queenie is struck by the sad spectacle of a family struggling down the street in torn clothes, carrying the few possessions they've scavenged from the bombing. The government has forced Mrs. Newman to rent them a space in her house, but she consigns them to the attic and refuses to let them use her bathrooms.

Queenie's response here shows how much she's developed since childhood. While she was mean to the miners' children at her school and prevented her brother from sharing food, now her instinctive empathy contrasts with her neighbors' petty hostility. Queenie's behavior is a hopeful reminder that characters can grow and change over time (although few of the novel's characters will actually do so). It also foreshadows her later willingness to rent to Jamaican tenants.

Queenie and Bernard become exhausted from spending nearly every night in their shelter, listening to bombs. Once, when a bomb lands particularly close, Bernard has a panic attack; but when Queenie attempts to open the shelter to look outside and reassure him, he tackles her to keep her from endangering herself. The **house** and Arthur survive intact, and afterward Bernard tells her that he loves her.

Bernard's behavior is a reminder that, despite his stony exterior, he does truly care for Queenie and his father. Still, moments like these don't balance out the rampant prejudice that prevents him from helping even fellow citizens, if they're from a lower class than he is.

The Blighs leave their shelter to find that Mrs. Newman's house has been completely destroyed, although all the inhabitants have survived. The Cockney mother curses in despair, and Mr. Todd smugly scolds her for her language.

Mr. Todd's carping about manners in the middle of a crisis shows how ridiculous, and even harmful, an obsession with the norms of "civilization" can be.

Without asking Bernard, Queenie offers to shelter the Cockney family, now displaced twice, in her own **home**. Bernard is furious and refuses to let them stay for more than a day, after which Queenie takes them to a rest center, or shelter for bombing victims. Once she's there, Queenie volunteers to help, and comes home to tell Bernard triumphantly that she has a job of which he won't approve.

Queenie's sympathy toward the Cockney family marks a turning point for her. Not only does she put her feelings of empathy into action, she develops a personal independence that contrasts with her previous submission to her husband.

CHAPTER 27: QUEENIE

Queenie works long shifts at the rest center, assisting the "population," which is the official term for the bedraggled and shell-shocked families seeking assistance after losing their homes. Queenie's task is to record where they once lived and give them the appropriate forms to fill out. Sometimes, the victims are so confused that it's impossible for them to absorb her information.

Queenie's new job shows her the wide-ranging effects of the war, and highlights her comparative good fortune. This experience is similar to her childhood, which her family's hard life contrasted with the desperate circumstances of the miners.

Seeing how sleep-deprived she is, Bernard tells Queenie the job is too much for her; but she finds the work invigorating, and even takes to sleeping at the rest center instead of coming home at night. Occasionally, Bernard walks by the rest center just to check that she's alive.

Here, Bernard is being selfish, seeking to maintain and consolidate control over his wife by his manipulative concern for her health.

Still, Queenie sometimes feels demoralized by her limited ability to provide help. Often, the rest center runs out of food or clothing and can't provide victims anything more than a cup of tea. One day, she has to tell an old woman that she can't receive compensation for her lost furniture because she's waited too long to submit a claim. Desperately wanting to do something, Queenie gives her some of the unused furniture in her own house. When Bernard confronts her, she furiously turns on him and shouts that "there's thousands of people having much more of a war than you are." Afterwards, she regrets the harshness of her words.

Without wanting to, Queenie becomes enmeshed in a bureaucracy that's often inadequate to address the needs of British citizens. However, her gift of furniture shows her determination not to submit to this state of affairs. Her behavior separates her from characters who declare themselves helpless to intervene in unpleasant situations, like the employers who tell Gilbert they can't employ black people because of other workers.

When Queenie delivers the furniture, the old woman is profoundly grateful. However, as she leaves the house, a well-dressed woman asks if she's "responsible" for moving poor people into the neighborhood, and yells after her that she's going to have them removed.

This altercation shows the deep divides within British society. Even in times of crisis, class prejudice is so ingrained and important it overrides people's commitment to the war effort.

CHAPTER 28: QUEENIE

With the war effort becoming increasingly urgent, Bernard joins the RAF. Queenie feels responsible for his decision, as she suspects he feels bad for not contributing when he sees her volunteering every day. Even though she doubts her husband—a rail-thin clerk who "blew on his tea before he drank it" can be a good soldier—she becomes uncharacteristically proud of him, and is happy when neighbors stop her in the street to ask about her husband. When Bernard leaves, she wants to give him a tender farewell, but he stiffens when she hugs him and they part without saying anything. Afterwards, Queenie realizes that now she'll have to wait even longer to have a baby.

Providing the couple with a common anxiety, Bernard's enlistment allows Queenie to imagine for a moment the kind of marriage she really wants. Because she knows how wives of soldiers are "supposed" to behave, it's easy for her to play the part, especially in public. However, in private moments, Queenie's relationship still seems stilted and inadequate, and this dissatisfaction is reflected in her rueful wish for a baby.

Now that Bernard is posted overseas, Queenie is singlehandedly responsible for Arthur. Because of his insanity, Queenie has always compared him to an apostrophe, "a mark to show where something is missing." Now that she's getting to know him better, she learns to read his facial expressions, and she appreciates his expert gardening skills. While all food is rationed and produce is scarce, Arthur grows huge vegetables in the backyard and takes over the cooking; he even waits patiently in the queues for food, so Queenie doesn't have to do it. At night, they play Monopoly; Arthur always wins.

Until this point, Arthur has been largely on the sidelines; however, now he emerges more forcefully. With his patience and domesticity, Arthur is a stark contrast to Bernard's controlling and overconfident masculinity. However, when it comes to contributing to the household and taking care of Queenie, Arthur does a much better job than Bernard ever could.

Queenie's friend at the rest center, Franny, asks her to host three officers she knows who need a place to stay while they're on leave. Queenie knows Bernard would immediately reject the idea, but when she consults Arthur, he seems to agree. When the officers show up, shy and grateful for her hospitality, she's startled to find that one of them is Jamaican, a handsome man named Michael Roberts. Watching them joke with each other and jump down the stairs for a night out on the town, Queenie feels very old.

In instances like these, it's Queenie's resentment of Bernard, rather than confidence in herself, that drives her to assert her own independence. Importantly, Michael, Hortense's long-time love, seems to have reappeared in Queenie's narrative, shortly before he ostensibly dies in a plane accident.

In the morning, only Michael gets up early. Queenie offers him some tea while she cleans the kitchen; she's flustered by his good looks and the keen attention he pays her, and she feel disheveled and dowdy. In the evening, while his companions go out again, Michael produces a rare orange and some American chocolates to share with Queenie and Arthur. The two men play poker, and Queenie is impressed by Michael's kind attitude to Arthur and willingness to let him cheat.

Michael's tenderness to Arthur is a noticeable contrast to Bernard, who never played games with his father and rarely seemed to notice him. In her husband's absence, Queenie experiences models of masculinity centered around kindness and compassion.

When Arthur goes to bed, Queenie asks Michael about his origins—like many English people, she initially thinks Jamaica is in Africa. He tells her that his mother and father are dead, and that he doesn't miss home because he has no one left behind. He tells her that once he saw a tiny hummingbird—Jamaica's national bird—in the middle of Piccadilly, and it made him feel familiar even though he was far from home. As he tells the story, he begins to caress Queenie's hair.

Michael's claims about his family are clearly untrue. On one hand, they reflect his own deep unhappiness with his strict childhood, even if he was the privileged child in the house. On the other hand, his disregard of Hortense shows that he never appreciated, or even noticed, his cousin's love for him. In that respect, he's much less sensitive than he seems to Queenie right now.

CHAPTER 29: QUEENIE

Queenie and Michael have sex. It's nothing like her previous experiences with Bernard, during which she usually "worked out what she could make for dinner." For the first time in her life, she feels beautiful and takes pleasure in sex. In the middle of the night, he returns to his own room; he knocks on her door before departing in the morning, but she pretends to be asleep in order to avoid an awkward farewell.

Queenie's night with Michael forms the culminating contrast between him and Bernard. Her positive sexual experiences firmly establishes her lover's brand of masculinity as superior to her husband's and also emphasizes the fact that she married Bernard for stability rather than love or passion.

A bit later, Arthur wakes Queenie up urgently. He's found Michael's wallet, which he must have left behind; inside are photos of an older couple and a young girl. Queenie worries that it's his good luck charm, and he might not feel safe flying without it, so she decides to seek him out at the train station. In any case, she's sure Arthur knows she slept with Michael, and she doesn't want to spend the morning feeling ashamed in front of her father-in-law.

While Michael seems to have distanced himself from his family, the pictures he carries suggests he doesn't want to give them up completely—even Hortense. Like all the Jamaican characters, Michael remains tied to his roots even as he seeks to establish himself within the Mother Country.

Queenie has almost reached the station when she's caught in an air-raid. She's thrown across the street by the impact and loses consciousness, waking up in a cloud of soot with glass shards in her hair. Briefly, she wonders if she's dead; then she realizes that she's now "population," just like all the people at the rest center. Eventually, a fireman helps her up and helps her to an ambulance; on her way, she accidentally steps on a severed hand.

The sudden bombing emphasizes that, during war, the line between life and death is very thin, even for civilians. It also shows that Queenie's prosperity and security in Bernard's house isn't absolute, and can't save her from becoming a member of the "population" that more fortunate Britons pity and scorn.

Arthur collects Queenie from the hospital and takes her home, fretting over her ceaselessly. When he tucks her into bed, he kisses her cheek and speaks for the first time, telling her that he would "die if anything happened to you." He sits by her bedside and watches her while she sleeps.

Like his son, Arthur is rarely emotive. However, he supports his rare declarations of feeling with care and comfort, actions which Bernard never takes.

CHAPTER 30: GILBERT

After Gilbert finds accommodation with Queenie, he starts searching for a job. With a letter from the labor office, he interviews for a position as a storeman. The employer questions him about the RAF and spends an hour talking about his own time in the armed forces, only to inform Gilbert perfunctorily that he can't hire him because there are white women working in the factory and "all hell would break loose if the men found you talking to their women."

When Gilbert was a soldier, he had few problems talking to white women, especially not where the British were concerned. Looking for a job, he's starting to realize that British attitudes towards soldiers passing through in time of war are very different from their feelings about welcoming immigrants to settle permanently in Britain.

In another office, a man asks if Gilbert is a Christian; he says yes, even though life in England is severely trying his faith. After praying, the man tells him that his business partner "does not like colored people." Gilbert encounters similar results in the next five places he visits; sometimes the employers are openly hostile and refuse to even interview him.

Britain doesn't have America's explicit segregation policies, but that doesn't mean Gilbert is treated equally. Rather, it seems British employers are vacillating between guilt about their prejudice (disguised as good manners) and deep fear of people of color, expressed through their hostility.

Eventually, Gilbert gets a job as a postman driver. Even though he's thrilled to be employed, he recognizes the irony of working as a driver yet again. His partner is an old man named Bert who insists on telling him the directions each day but is relatively courteous.

Like Queenie, Bert seems to mean well, but by assuming Gilbert is less capable than an average English man, he's being patronizing and racist.

However, on Hortense's first day in London, Bert gets sick. The other workers refuse to drive with Gilbert, so he has to go to King's Cross by himself. When he arrives, he's confused about which packages to take, so he asks a group of workers, but they pretend not to hear him and ask him when he's "going back to the jungle." Angry, Gilbert says that he can't go back because he hasn't "fucked your wife yet," but when the men start to push him, he realizes he can't get into a fight or he'll lose his job, so he backs down and collects his parcels while the men watch and curse him.

Not only is Gilbert unable to find the professional work he dreamed of when he immigrated, he's not even safe from humiliation working for the post office. Queenie's narrative showed the extent to which the British elite discriminates against the working classes; Gilbert's experience shows that people express their feelings of oppression by seeking out other groups whom they can oppress in turn.

When Gilbert arrives home, having forgotten all about his new wife, he finds Hortense scrubbing their room on her hands and knees. He's feeling so angry and humiliated that he yells at her to get up, telling her that "no wife of mine will be on her knees in this country." Hortense points out practically that this is the only way to clean the floor, but Gilbert pleads with her to humor him.

Even though Hortense is often haughty, one of her sterling qualities is that she's not afraid of hard work. However, at this moment her industriousness reminds Gilbert painfully of the grueling task of getting by in England, which Hortense, as yet, doesn't even comprehend.

CHAPTER 31: HORTENSE

For her part, Hortense is angry with Gilbert for constantly criticizing her behavior. After he makes her get up from the floor, he scolds her for folding his suit and creasing it. Then he finds fault with the potatoes she's made for him, even though she followed Queenie's instructions on how to make "chips." He doesn't even appreciate that Hortense has worked all day tidying the room. When Gilbert cracks his egg, only to realize it's rotten, he erupts in anger and storms out of the room.

Hortense and Gilbert's relationship continues to be a series of misunderstandings, so that both partners are angry even though each is trying to be kind to the other. In this way, their marriage is similar to the Blighs', whose gestures of kindness are timidly made and usually poorly received.

CHAPTER 32: GILBERT

Gilbert wonders if Elwood was right to say he should've stayed in Jamaica. He imagines his cousin laughing to see him in the rainy street, overcome by the "indignity and humiliation" of life in the Mother Country. He thinks about all the insults his friends have suffered. One tried to help an old women who fell in the street, only to have her scream at him and to be arrested for attacking a woman. Another was kicked out of church because of his skin color. He knows that when Hortense realizes the realities of her new life, she will lose her haughtiness and pride.

It's important that Gilbert's thoughts lead him not to self-pity but to anxiety for Hortense. Not only does this represent his outward-looking character, it shows that he truly does care about his wife, and that he actually values the proud demeanor that causes him so much inconvenience.

Suddenly, a middle-aged woman runs after Gilbert, handing him a glove he dropped in the street. When she sees his distraught face, she puts a compassionate hand on his arm and gives him a candy from a bag on her pocket. Even after she leaves, Gilbert stands in the street for a long time, staring at the candy in his hand.

This moment is less a demonstration of the woman's kindness than a representation of Gilbert's isolation, which is so severe that even quotidian actions seem monumental to him.

Gilbert buys two portions of fish and chips and brings them back to Hortense so she can understand that a chip is really a fried potato. He tells her that the English eat the food directly out of the newspaper it's wrapped in, enjoying her scandalized reaction to this barbaric behavior. As he puts the food on plates, he tells her his second lesson of the night: "not everything the English do is good."

Gilbert has learned—and now teaches Hortense—not to depend on the British to fulfill the civilized manners for which they're famous. From the way they eat to their closest relationships, Gilbert and Hortense have to insulate themselves from British society, rather than seeking to conform to it absolutely.

CHAPTER 33: HORTENSE

Meeting Queenie at her door to go to the shops, Hortense is horrified to see the Englishwoman's dreary coat, at first believing it to be something she only wears indoors. For her part, Queenie is surprised to see Hortense dressed up in her best coat and freshly washed gloves. She reassures Hortense that she's not ashamed to be seen with her; Hortense wonders why she would say this, given that Queenie is the one venturing out in a scruffy outfit with no gloves or jewelry.

This chapter will exemplify the difference not only between Hortense and Queenie as characters, but of the two societies they represent. It's especially important that both women consider the other a liability—Hortense is embarrassed by Queenie's disheveled clothes, while Queenie knows she'll be judged for associating with Hortense because of her race.

Outside, Hortense is astonished to find that every Englishwoman is dressed like Queenie. Queenie explains the concept of a grocery store as if Hortense has never seen a shop before, but Hortense is too busy looking at the strange and uncouth people around her to be frustrated. When she asks the grocer for condensed milk, he can barely understands her; this perplexes Hortense, since her she had the best diction in her college. Requesting bread next, she's disgusted to see him handle the loaf with his dirty hands, even wiping his nose while he holds it. Thinking that Hortense has never seen it before, Queenie explains what bread is.

Hortense developed her manners, mode of dress, and even speech aspiring to fulfill British norms of manners and propriety. Now, she's realizing she conforms to those norms much more thoroughly than the British do. Given that, Hortense is technically more "civilized" than they are, so it's especially ironic that the British continue to look down on Hortense.

Looking inside a draper's shop, Hortense is surprised to see bolts of cloth lying all over the floor, many of them dirty and frayed. She explains to Queenie that in Jamaica, all the fabric is organized by color on neat shelves; in response, Queenie simply expresses surprise that there are draper's shops in Jamaica.

Queenie's inability to comprehend Hortense's background, even though she's a comparatively open-minded character, shows how deeply ingrained British prejudice against colonial citizens is.

In the hardware store, a child points at Hortense and shouts to his mother that she's black. When they leave, some young men shout slurs at her from across the street. One of them throws a piece of bread at Queenie, but she just hustles Hortense away rather than confronting them. As they walk home, Queenie explains that it's probably best if Hortense, "a visitor to this country," steps off the pavement when an English person wants to pass. Hortense is disgusted by the suggestion that a woman should walk in the busy road.

Even though Queenie was annoyed when Mr. Todd told her how her tenants should behave, when she sees how prone Hortense is to harassment in the public sphere, she advises her to cave in to prejudice. This shows that even Hortense's daily life hovers close to danger, and that Queenie isn't immune to the pressures posed by her racist neighbors.

Their argument ceases abruptly when they reach the **house** to find a tall, thin man standing at the doorway. Hortense has never seen him before, but Queenie is speechless and collapses into Hortense's arms as she recognizes Bernard.

Queenie and Bernard's reunion isn't exactly romantic. In this way, it parallels the Hortense and Gilbert's disastrous first night in London.

CHAPTER 34: QUEENIE

Queenie is stunned to see Bernard arrive casually at the **house**, as if he'd never been gone. When she remarks caustically that he's "been away a long time," his only reply is "Indeed." Queenie tells him that she's going to require a much better explanation than that.

Bernard doesn't seem to have changed much in his time away—he's still terse and standoffish. On the other hand, years of independence have made Queenie much more outspoken and willing to demand the things she wants.

CHAPTER 35: BERNARD

In a flashback, Bernard describes his time in the RAF. He's deployed to India, and he arrives in Bombay to a bewildering chaos of beggars, street vendors, and rowdy children. Bernard's comrades jeer at the Indians, considering them savages. He's happy to get on the train, which makes him feel as though he's back in England.

Gilbert's experience in the RAF enlarges his worldview and helps him develop personally. In contrast, Bernard already seems hostile to any experiences that might force him to change or reevaluate his values.

Queenie hadn't wanted Bernard to join up until he was conscripted. However, Bernard knew that if he was drafted, he'd go into the infantry, which is much more dangerous than the RAF. When he enlists, he's assigned to ground crew, rather than a glamorous pilot position. He's a little disappointed, because he would have liked to return home to Queenie as a proud and dashing pilot. He knows that she too would enjoy having such a heroic figure as a husband.

Ironically, Gilbert and Bernard have similar experiences in the army—both daydream about heroism, but both are considered unfit as pilots, Bernard as an older professional and Gilbert as a Jamaican. This fact draws the two characters together, even if they never fully realize it.

When Bernard's unit reaches the base, he's unceremoniously thrown from the truck into the ground. Everyone runs for cover, as the truck has arrived in the middle of a Japanese air-raid. Bernard lands on top of another soldier in a trench, and another man crashes onto him. When the bombing stops, they hurry to clear away some Japanese planes that have been shot down. A British pilot lands and announces to applause that another Japanese plane has crash-landed not far away. A friendly soldier next to Bernard introduces himself as Maxi, and explains that these bombings happen every day.

Bernard's arrival at camp is not unlike the nightly bombings he and Queenie lived through in London. In both cases, by relating terrifying events in an understated, almost casual tone, the author emphasizes the proximity of war to the events of daily life, while also pointing out that it's sometimes impossible to truly grasp its scope.

A unit of Indian troops (Gurkhas) captures a Japanese pilot and bring him to the camp. To Bernard, the pilot looks to be no older than twelve or thirteen; he's impervious to the jeers of the soldiers as he walks by. Maxi tells Bernard that he will be shot.

Despite his ingrained prejudices, Bernard understands that the pilot is no more than a child, and feels guilt regarding the boy's imminent death. It's immediately clear that, contrary to his daydreams, life in the army won't consist of cut-and-dry heroism.

CHAPTER 36: BERNARD

Maxi takes Bernard with him on a salvage trip—an expedition to salvage parts from a British plane that crash-landed in the hills. Bernard is proud to be chosen for this important job and to have a sense of purpose. He and Maxi get along well because they're both older than most of the soldiers, and both work as clerks in England. On their hike, they have an argument about Japanese character: Maxi argues that they are more intelligent and wily than they get credit for, while Bernard believes they function according to dumb obedience, and will thus be unable to win the war.

This is a milestone for Bernard—he's never really had a friend before, and has never seemed so truly at ease as he does now with Maxi. However, it's also notable that even when Bernard feels secure and unthreatened, he clings to his prejudices. While the novel often suggests that prejudice is grounded in fear and anxiety, it's clear that Bernard's views aren't solely a function of this; they're a deeply ingrained part of his character.

Once they've set off, Bernard realizes how dense and unpleasant the jungle is, full of flies and mosquitos. It takes hours to find the plane and by the time they reach it, it's dark and they decide to camp out. Maxi shares his blanket with Bernard, and they reminisce about old stories, like the time that Maxi dreamed he was being bitten by a snake and woke up the entire room with his screaming.

Queenie had doubts about Bernard's ability to succeed in the RAF, but he's actually adapting well to army life. His feelings of ease suggest a possibility of rebirth and redemption.

Suddenly Bernard hears a voice calling out, "Johnny, come and help me." Maxi says it's the Japanese trying to trick them into revealing their position, and the men grab their guns and put out their cigarettes. For hours, they sit in the dark, afraid to fall asleep. Maxi tells Bernard about his plans for life after the war: he wants to breed rabbits, and he enlists Bernard as a partner. By dawn, they have their entire business plan outlined.

It's interesting that the Japanese play on the soldiers' sense of empathy and loyalty to their comrades; it shows they're much more intelligent that Bernard gives them credit for. Bernard's new vision for his life after the war contributes to the sense of transformation that's been building throughout this chapter.

On their way back to the base, Bernard and Maxi get completely lost; hearing foreign voices, they're again frightened of ambush. However, when Maxi sees them, he realizes they're from a friendly Indian town, and after some negotiating, the men guide them back to the camp. When they return, the army officer is frankly surprised that they made it out alive, and tells them that the war with Germany is over, and the armed forces will concentrate their power on fighting the Japanese now.

Bernard and Maxi can't determine between different types of foreigners, making them generally suspicious and even paranoid. At the same time, they're completely unable to fend for themselves in the forest, relying on the foreigners they mistrust for guidance. This shows how severely their lack of understanding handicaps them, both in the army and in their ordinary lives.

CHAPTER 37: BERNARD

Bernard is relieved to know that everyone at home is safe, especially Queenie. He fondly imagines her at the kitchen, freed from the frightening nights in the bomb shelter. However, he assumes it will be years before the war on the eastern front is won, so he's shocked when Maxi brings him the news that the Japanese have surrendered. Not knowing what exactly it is, the men in the unit speculate on the "atom bomb" that has thwarted their powerful enemy.

Bernard's immediate concern for Queenie's safety is a reminder that he does care for her, even if he rarely expresses it. It's also interesting that he safeguards fond memories of their daily life—in this respect, he's much different than his wife, who evaluates their relationship grimly and ironically.

Everyone in the unit assumes they'll be home by Christmas, but soon they receive an order to move east, closer to Burma. Prisoners of war are demobilized and sent home before normal troops. Bernard is touched to see the frail and emaciated prisoners returning to safety, barely able to eat food. Bernard feels proud of the Britain's civilized treatment of its prisoners.

Bernard's pride is unwarranted, given that he's never seen any British prisoners and doesn't know how they're treated. His reaction demonstrates that he judges Britain's behavior not based on objective evidence, but rather based on his conviction of Britain's inherent superiority.

While no one resents privileges accorded to ex-prisoners, the unit resents that some men with "particular skills" are demobilized quicker than others, mostly builders and plumbers but including (according to rumor) a ballet dancer and upper-class men with good connections. The men who are left behind—mechanics, teachers, and clerks—feel that their skills are no longer valuable to Britain.

This moment touches on Bernard's feelings of exclusion from British society; it's a reminder that his anxieties are valid, and that he suffers, to some extent, from class prejudice in his own society. However, while the experience of being excluded makes the Jamaican characters, especially Gilbert, more tolerant, they exacerbate Bernard's racist and unfeeling behavior.

Communist sympathizers in the unit, whom Bernard disdains as "rabble-rousers," begin advocating for a strike in order to obtain demobilization. To Bernard's dismay, Maxi falls in with this group. A strike is organized, and the "ringleaders" strut triumphantly around camp for a few hours, but soon their superiors transfer the unit to Calcutta as punishment for their insurrection.

The conflict between leftist and conservative members of the army is a reminder that Britain isn't a uniform or even a cohesive society, as colonial characters, like Hortense and Gilbert, believe growing up. It's also a reminder that working-class men and even some professionals, like Bernard, have limited opportunities even in the society they've always considered their own.

CHAPTER 38: BERNARD

During the war, soldiers viewed a trip to Calcutta as a treat, because the city had British-style hotels and restaurants, and plenty of cinemas. However, when they enter this time, each men is issued a rifle and a bayonet. Driving into the city on open trucks, they see burned and looted shops and destroyed streets littered with corpses. Bernard has no idea how this violence occurred, but the men on the unit agree it's "nothing to do with us," but rather some inexplicable feud between Hindus and Muslims.

The men's attempt to distance themselves from the violence is ironic, given that the Hindu-Muslim conflict actually stemmed from unwise British policies in India. Moreover, the contrast between the Calcutta of Bernard's memory and the terrifying spectacle he sees now shows that accessories of "civilization," like hotels and cinemas, don't change the fundamental character of a society—whether it is London or Calcutta—and don't protect it from slipping into violence.

The truck stops, its wheels stuck on a corpse in the street. The officer haughtily orders two men, including one Communist "troublemaker" named Pierpont, to pick up the body, but Pierpont questions the order and refuses to get out of the truck. The officer charges them with insubordination and orders Maxi and Bernard to pick up the body, which they do without complaint.

Even amidst this scene of carnage, the officer is most preoccupied with asserting dominance over his men, while Pierpont is determined to balk him. For these men, the conventions of army life seem more pressing than the danger they're probably facing.

As Bernard and Maxi climb onto the truck, a mob of men rushes down the street, brandishing homemade weapons. The men surround the truck and begin to rock it while the soldiers, outnumbered, try to look fierce. Just when they think all is lost, a police truck arrives and fires into the air, scattering the crowd. One of the soldiers asks jokingly if the mob was Hindu or Muslim, and everyone laughs.

Proximity to the chaos and violence that British colonial rule has caused should force the men to reevaluate their views of their country, but it actually makes them more entrenched in their existing prejudices.

CHAPTER 39: BERNARD

Thousands of people die in riots in Calcutta following the end of the war. Bernard understands vaguely that Hindus and Muslims are fighting over who will take power once India gains independence from Britain, but to him it seems absurd to think of "that ragged bunch of illiterates wanting to run their own country." He believes a British presence is the only thing maintaining order in India.

Bernard, largely ignorant of the political situation in India, is using the ravages caused by colonialism to as evidence to justify British dominance. While his reasoning seems obviously illogical, it exemplifies the difficulty of combatting prejudice in people who are unable or unwilling to understand the nuances of a particular political situation.

The men in the unit are disgruntled, resenting that they've been trucked to Calcutta to bulk up a shoddy British peacekeeping operation, that rations are inadequate, and that Pierpont has been meaninglessly court-martialed. The men decide to have a forbidden meeting. Bernard attends, but only because Maxi wants him to and because the meeting is in his room.

Through the meeting, the soldiers try to exert control over a situation in which they feel powerless and oppressed; in this way, they're similar to colonial subjects all over the world resisting domination by the British elite, although they're ironically unaware of the feelings they share with the people they scorn.

Although Pierpont is no longer part of the unit, the meeting makes Bernard remember how much he disliked him. Pierpont habitually refers to him as Pop because of his age, and teases him for being married and faithful to his wife. He constantly brags about his sexual exploits and gives Bernard unsolicited and crude advice about his sex life.

Pierpont's teasing plays on some of Bernard's biggest insecurities—his fear of being ridiculed, and his feeling of inadequacy within his marriage. His antipathy to the meeting is largely caused by his personal dislike of Pierpont, just as his racial prejudices are often informed by his personal fears.

The meeting organizers keep the room dark so that no one will be able to tattle on the others later. Different men argue about what they should do, with some complaining that the soldiers are just being used to "prop up the British empire" and others advocating for a strike. Bernard retorts that he's proud to be a member of the British Empire and "represent decency." This sentiment is unpopular, and everyone else jeers at him. Angry, Bernard storms out into the sticky night air.

The men's different opinions represent, in a microcosm, the dissatisfaction with British policies and domestic unrest that outlasts the war. While Britain tries to present itself as an ideal, perfectly "civilized" society, it's clear that many of its own citizens are uncertain as to the fairness of British policies, as least insofar as they disadvantage them personally.

CHAPTER 40: BERNARD

In any case, Bernard would have had to leave the meeting for his guard duty, watching the door of the plane hangar. Supplies have to be guarded at all times, because local people, whom Bernard calls "loose wallahs," are prone to stealing them. Bernard is suspicious of all Indians, because he can't tell people who are friendly from those who may be thieves or bandits.

Bernard sees the rampant thievery as evidence of the Indians' low moral character. In fact, it's only logical that disadvantaged members of an exploitative colonial regime should fend for themselves any way they can. This moment emphasizes Bernard's utter ignorance about life under colonial rule.

Tonight, Bernard shares guard duty with an Indian soldier named Arun; he likes this man because he "took orders well" and is eager to learn about mechanics. There's also a new soldier named Ashok, who asks Bernard if he likes India. Bernard says it's too hot, and that he misses London. Ashok asks Bernard if he's angry to be kept in India, as well as asking about the men who want to strike for demobilization. Bernard becomes suspicious that Ashok is trying to pump him for information.

Bernard judges Indian men solely on their willingness to submit to his authority as a white member of a colonial regime. While Bernard usually seems timid and ineffectual, his urge to dominate others emerges when he's around men to whom he feels unequivocally superior, or whom he feels certain he can get away with exploiting.

Ashok begins to muse on all the "useful things" the British have given India. Bernard approves of this show of gratitude, but becomes uneasy when Ashok mockingly remarks on different British innovations, like tax and cricket—so much better than things India created itself, like the Taj Mahal. Ashok concludes ironically that he admires Britain's strong repulsion of the German invasion; he appreciates that the British understand how "dreadful" it is to have "foreign muddy boots stamping all over your soil."

While Bernard is slow to catch on to Ashok's irony, the Indian man delivers a scathing indictment of British hypocrisy. Pointing out that British innovations pale beside Indian traditions, like the Taj Mahal, he emphasizes the inconsistency of fighting to maintain national sovereignty even while imposing foreign rule on other countries. While Ashok is ostensibly talking about German boots, it's clear he's actually referring to the British presence in India.

Meanwhile, Bernard is telling Ashok to be quiet because he sees smoke rising from the camp and wants to discern what's happening. Ashok converses with Arun in their native language, and Bernard realizes they're talking about him. Bernard is offended because he realizes they're recalling the time when all the men were showering in a monsoon rains and Bernard got soaped up just as the skies cleared—a story that still embarrasses him. He orders the men to stop talking.

Just as when Pierpont tormented him before, Bernard begins to dislike the men even more because he's worried that they're exposing a moment of weakness. Because he feels anxious about his own character, he immediately becomes harsher toward the men, showing how much his insecurities inform his behavior.

Suddenly, two men from Bernard's unit arrive in a hurry and tell him that his barracks in on fire. Knowing that Maxi is still inside, he runs from the hanger to the burning building.

Despite his many flaws, Bernard is occasionally capable of surprising courage; moments like these are reminders of the contrast between Bernard's selfishness and his deep attachment to a few loved ones.

CHAPTER 41: BERNARD

By the time Bernard arrives, the entire building is on the verge of collapse. Bernard tries to organize the men into a chain to fetch buckets, but in the chaos no one listens to him, and one man punches him in the face when Bernard tries to grab his bucket. Eventually, a fire truck arrives and its drivers haphazardly try to put out the fire.

For all its claims as a powerful fighting force, the army appears remarkably disorganized in this scene, incapable of even organizing itself to fight the fire. Implicitly, this scene casts doubt on the vaunted superiority of the British forces.

The barracks, with Maxi inside, is reduced to cinders. Bernard notices local people and camp followers standing around and is furious that they didn't try to help or bring water. When he sees one man smiling, he grabs him and accuses him of setting the fire or knowing who did. In his rage, Bernard feels that all the "coolies" are out to get him; he tries to beat the man in order to make him talk, but his comrades pull him away.

While Bernard's grief is justified and sympathetic, he expresses his feelings through rage, violence and prejudice. Bernard's translation of valid feelings into unacceptable behavior both emphasizes his humanity and separates him from positive characters, like Gilbert.

CHAPTER 42: BERNARD

The day after the fire, Bernard's sergeant tells him he's in trouble, both for deserting his post and for losing his rifle in the process, and takes him to testify before a lieutenant. The lieutenant asks Bernard if he was in the barracks before the fire and if a meeting was taking place there, and Bernard realizes he's using the threat of punishment to frighten him into giving information about the forbidden meeting. Not wanting Maxi's memory to be spoiled by a charge of insubordination, Bernard refuses to talk and is sent to jail.

Bernard's seemingly inconsequential transgressions contrast with the important choice he has to make, between Maxi's honor and his own safety and convenience. His silence about the meeting is a brave act, and functions as a reminder of Bernard's capacity for altruism, even though he so rarely displays it.

CHAPTER 43: BERNARD

Bernard is sentenced to two weeks of prison. He's the only Englishman left in the local prison, since most have been sent home or moved elsewhere. He's disgusted to share a cell with four Indians, whom he believes are thieves or murderers. During the long, hot days, Bernard tries many times to begin a letter to Queenie, but he can never think what to say.

Bernard's inability to express himself is one of the major problems in his marriage. While Queenie sees his silence as evidence of intrinsic coldness, here it's evident that this is a trait Bernard doesn't like and wishes he could overcome.

Bernard also thinks about his own father, Arthur, who enlisted to fight in the Great War when he was barely nineteen and Bernard had just been born. While he wrote cheerful letters home, he eventually returned in an ambulance, having gone insane from shell-shock. In his first months at home, he was frightened at every loud noise and screamed at night.

While Arthur and Bernard are very different men, their mutual inability to share their feelings or communicate the horrors of war to their wives links them, and also means that they're both unable to recover from the trauma they've experienced as soldiers.

With her invalid husband unable to work, Bernard's mother had to provide for the family. She sold family heirlooms and her own jewelry, and rented rooms in the large house. The stress caused her to age prematurely, and she died at the age of forty-two.

Bernard's mother's experience makes her a contrast to Queenie, who thrives on independence and even the risk involved in providing for herself, rather than being overwhelmed by it.

When he got married, Bernard marveled at his father's adoration of Queenie—Arthur got along with his wife far better than Bernard. Bernard and Queenie spent the days before his deployment fighting, because she wanted to know where he was going and didn't believe that he himself didn't even know. The night before he left, they had passionless sex; she wouldn't even let him kiss her on the mouth before he left.

While Queenie's anger is an expression of her concern for Bernard, it actually contributes to their problematic marriage. Her misplaced and badly expressed worry shows that Bernard isn't the only one in this relationship who has trouble communicating.

CHAPTER 44: BERNARD

Eventually, the lieutenant releases Bernard from prison and demobilizes him. Nothing is left of the barracks when Bernard walks by it, and he remembers the eight men who died in the fire. One liked to recount the story of a tiger he killed, while another was part of the D Day invasion. With a few others, Bernard had completed a difficult mission to retrieve a plane from a river.

Bernard's recollections are a reminder of the soldiers' humanity, especially when their officers are eager to view them as nameless troublemakers. It's ironic that he's capable of such empathy but can't extend it to people who are different from him, like the Josephs.

Before his ship leaves, Bernard has to wait a few days in Calcutta. The city is still recovering from violence, but the rubbish and corpses that once lined the streets are gone. In the market, Bernard encounters Pierpont; with his usual crude bravado, the soldier invites Bernard to accompany him to a brothel, telling him that even Maxi did so before. Furious, Bernard tells him that Maxi died in a fire, and that Pierpont should be in prison, having organized the original strike that sent the whole unit to Calcutta.

When Bernard finds out that Maxi did something of which he doesn't approve, he reacts with violent denial—his desire for simplicity and clarity means he can't accommodate nuanced situations or flawed human characters. Similarly, when he realizes his marriage to Queenie will never be perfect, he stops trying to change or improve it.

Pierpont protests that the forbidden meeting and Maxi's death have nothing to do with him, since he hasn't been with the unit since Calcutta. When Bernard is still angry, Pierpont taunts him for his stint in prison, asking if he was jailed for being a useless soldier. Bernard jumps on him, but the younger man deflects his blows easily. Catching Bernard by the arms, he spits that he was the "laughing-stock" of the unit, and no one except Maxi could stand to be around him.

Pierpont's taunts are especially cruel because they play into Bernard's already strong sense of insecurity. While he's certainly a difficult character and probably deserves some measure of scorn, it's hard not to sympathize with Bernard given his vast alienation from the men around him. However, it's also frustrating that Bernard converts his feelings into anger rather than understanding.

Disturbed by this encounter, Bernard does visit a brothel, albeit by himself. Alone in a room with a young prostitute who barely speaks English and calls him "Tommy," Bernard feels awkward and ashamed. He holds her roughly, and when she appears to enjoy—or pantomimes enjoying—the sex, he forces her to be still. When he's finished, he realizes the prostitute is no more than a young girl, and that she's terrified by his violent behavior. Bernard imagines Queenie's disgust if she could see him at this moment; rather than making him into a hero, he realizes, the war has robbed him of his decency.

This is one of the book's most disturbing scenes; while Bernard frequently voices hatred of other people, here he actually commits an act of violence against a defenseless girl. His action is especially disturbing because it can never really be resolved; even if Bernard were to completely change his behavior and redeem himself, he's still irremediably harmed the prostitute and, as he realizes, degraded his own character.

Bernard tries to apologize to the girl, but she cringes away from him. In desperation, he starts sobbing, and she comes to him and comforts him; but when he composes himself and speaks normally, she retreats again. Bernard throws money at the "wretched whore" and leaves.

As he does in most situations, when Bernard recognizes his own anxiety or culpability, he responds with self-righteousness and justifications; by calling the woman a "whore" he tries to blame the debacle on her, even though he's clearly at fault.

CHAPTER 45: BERNARD

The sea journey home is long and boring, much different from the tense and organized trip to India during the war. Bernard wonders if he can ever readjust to life as a bank clerk after his experiences in India, which were both more horrifying and more exciting than anything he'd ever known.

While Bernard has lived in England all his life, he's so changed that it feels like he's encountering his native land for this first time. In this way, his sea journey parallels Gilbert and Hortense's voyages, headed toward a society in which they're not sure they'll belong.

Some days into the journey, Bernard notices a lump on his genitals. At first he thinks it's a mosquito bite, but it swells up and becomes so painful that he vomits when he bandages it. He's sure that it's syphilis, the deadly venereal disease against which all the soldiers were warned when they first deployed. The one experience he desperately wants to forget is going to destroy his life.

The inescapability of punishment which Bernard feels at this moment parallels the unresolved and irremediable nature of his transgression. This punishment is particularly disturbing to Bernard because it exposes him to public shame, one of the things he most fears.

Bernard worries that by the time he arrives in England, he'll be insane or incapacitated by the disease. He imagines medics dropping him off at home just as they returned his father. Most importantly, he imagines Queenie's shame and anger when they tell her that her husband has contracted syphilis.

Rather than identifying with his father's kind character, Bernard worries about repeating his misfortunes, showing his tendency to focus on the worst both in others and himself.

CHAPTER 46: BERNARD

Bernard expected Queenie to be shocked, but he didn't think she'd look quite so appalled to have her husband back. However, he is happy to see she's put on some weight, since when he left, she was wasting away on rationed food. He asks how Arthur is, and Queenie has to tell him about his death. When it happened, she wrote him a letter, but it must have been lost.

After facing so much upheaval abroad, Bernard faces not only a lukewarm welcome but a tragedy at home. However, he forestalls any other reception by being cold to Queenie and refusing to explain his absence for the past two years.

In a brief flashback, Bernard says that when he arrives in England, convinced he was facing imminent death and insanity, he hides in a boardinghouse in Brighton. He finds England changed, worn down and exhausted by the effort of fighting the war. While he waits to die he finds work as a café waiter, and later takes on the bookkeeping and becomes an informal accountant. One day, he walks by Maxi's house and grave; he even sees his old friend's family, but he doesn't introduce himself. He feels guilty that he survived the war, rather than his friend.

As a result of the war, both Bernard and England have changed; he's demoralized both about himself and the nature of his country. However, rather than learning to live with these changes, Bernard will externalize them and express them as fear and rage towards immigrants and people of color.

One day, Bernard gets sick with a raging fever. His landlady calls the doctor, but when he arrives Bernard tells him treatment is useless, as he has syphilis. However, when the doctor finds he's been back from India for over two years, he informs Bernard that he can't possibly have syphilis, or he would have died already. Bernard soon recuperates from his flu and feels "ready to start again."

Bernard realizes he's wasted two years of his life out of shame and a fear of exposing his uncivilized behavior. His mistake shows how dangerous it is to value a refined and mannerly exterior above all else, rather than embracing his humanity and recognizing his own wrongdoing.

When he returns to his home, Bernard astounded to find Queenie walking with a black woman. Queenie is furious to find out that he's spent two years hiding from her in Brighton, and even more upset when he won't explain his reasons for doing so. In her anger, she tells him abruptly that Arthur has been killed; when Bernard says nothing, she explodes, telling him in gruesome detail about Arthur's cruel death and the lack of punishment for the policeman who shot him.

While Bernard and Queenie are devastated by the same event—Arthur's death—as usual, neither can understand or value the other's reaction. Queenie reads Bernard's silence as carelessness, while he interprets her anger as an accusation of him, rather than rage at the situation.

Hearing Queenie shouting, Gilbert comes downstairs to check on her. Angry to see a black man in his **house**, Bernard demands to know who he is. Queenie introduces Gilbert to her husband; but when Gilbert puts out his hand to shake, Bernard closes the door in his face.

Even though Bernard has abandoned Queenie for years, he still views himself unequivocally as head of the household. In this capacity, he feels justified both in controlling his wife and expressing hostility toward people of color.

CHAPTER 47: QUEENIE

Stonily, Queenie tells Bernard she'll make up a bed for him, in a separate room from her own. Bernard offers to help, but she tells him to go finish his tea. Bernard spends hours looking at newspaper clips detailing Arthur's death; but even when Queenie tells him it was the worst thing that ever happened to her, he has nothing to say and doesn't ask her any questions.

While Bernard is determined to resume his own life as if nothing has happened, Queenie is unwilling to allow this to happen. Her stony exterior reflects her reluctance to give up the independence that has been so beneficial to her, and return to a marriage that has always been deeply stifling.

Neither Bernard nor Queenie have the courage to kiss goodnight. Feeling unsettled, Queenie locks her bedroom door after he retires to his own room. The next morning, she finds him gossiping on the front porch with Mr. Todd. Over breakfast, he asks her about the lodgers; Queenie feels odd to hear him return so quickly to talking about their life as a couple, using the pronoun "we."

Bernard is much more at ease with Mr. Todd than Queenie, which suggests that he's going to align himself with Mr. Todd's hostility towards the influx of immigrants into the neighborhood, rather than his wife's willingness to accept and promote change.

Bernard is unhappy that most of the lodgers are black; moreover, Mr. Todd has already told him that the one white renter, Jean, is a woman of questionable repute. Queenie contests that, with her husband missing, she had to provide for herself somehow. Bernard declares abruptly that the lodgers will have to leave; he's disgusted that "the street has gone to the dogs" with so many people of color moving in.

Bernard's assertion that people of color degrade the neighborhood's character is obviously insulting. Moreover, he's also insulting his wife by refusing to appreciate the difficult circumstances he put her in by abandoning her, and refusing to honor the arrangements she's made in his absence.

Because the city has changed so much, Bernard suggests they move to the suburbs, just as Mr. Todd is planning to do. He tells Queenie he wants to start a rabbit farm, and that she can be his partner and handle the rabbits while he takes care of the business. Queenie thinks this is a crazy idea. Her husband has only been back for a day and she already feels "smothered."

While the rabbit-farming scheme represented the culmination of Bernard's one meaningful friendship, now it represents his attempt to subjugate his wife, and the absurdity of expecting to expecting to slip right into a life he's abandoned for years.

CHAPTER 48: BERNARD

Bernard dreams that he's lying in bed with Queenie when he hears a Japanese fighter plane flying over the house. He knows the pilot is coming for him, so he's not surprised when his door opens, but Bernard lies in bed, paralyzed with fear. He sees a Japanese man enter, but instead of killing him, the pilot smiles. Bernard doesn't know whether he should shoot the man or trust his smile. Suddenly, Queenie sits up in bed. When she sees the Japanese man, she says hello and welcomes him inside as if she's always known him. Bernard wakes up.

In his dream, Bernard vacillates between hostility and acceptance of the unknown, symbolized here by the Japanese pilot but in real life represented by immigrants like the Josephs. It's important that his hostility is clearly rooted in fear (he worries that the pilot is an enemy) rather than hatred, which suggests that he could potentially overcome it. Interestingly, while Bernard opposes his wife's actions in real life, in the dream he sees her as brave and admirable.

CHAPTER 49: GILBERT

Someone knocks on the door, announcing himself as Winston, but when Gilbert answers, he's sure it's actually Kenneth, because the man doesn't bother to greet Hortense and immediately starts complaining about Bernard. Queenie's husband, he says, has insulted him and demanded that he vacate his room before the next morning. Kenneth has already had a bad day at work, because he just found out he has to pay taxes out of his hard-earned wages.

While the Winston/Kenneth mix-up is often funny, it couldn't be happening at a worse time than right now, when the lodgers' security in the house seems at risk. Gilbert's frustration emphasizes that the novel's climax is close at hand.

Because of his bad mood, Kenneth says, he's impolite to Bernard when he gets home, not realizing that Bernard is actually the owner of the **house**. When Bernard comes to his door and starts shouting, Kenneth pushes him, and he falls over. Moreover, Kenneth admits he's insulted Bernard by saying that Queenie is attracted to black men. Gilbert is aghast, knowing that his behavior will have repercussions for all of them.

The taboo on miscegenation is deeply insulting to black men, because it indicates that some women are "too good" for them. Moreover, it insults white women by turning them into pawns through which men express control and domination.

Gilbert recognizes in Bernard his own bewilderment, their shared inability to determine "which way is forward," and what they should do. He knows that with Bernard's return, they will have to find somewhere else to live. Kenneth suggests they gather some friends and beat up Bernard, but Gilbert rejects this plan and says he'll talk to Queenie.

It's interesting that, while Bernard does everything possible to distance himself from Gilbert, even when the English man is actively inconveniencing him, Gilbert is empathetic enough to realize that they're both experiencing the same feelings of indecision and uncertainty.

Kenneth asks if Hortense will share the dinner she's cooking, but when he actually smells it, he departs in a hurry. Lying, Gilbert tells her the food looks lovely and crunches his way through a half-cooked plate of rice while Hortense berates him for letting such an uncouth man in their room.

Gilbert's willingness to compromise—or at least endure bad dinners—in order to improve his marriage is another way in which he's much different than Bernard, who refuses to yield to Queenie in any regard.

Thinking that Hortense might be worried by the news of Bernard, Gilbert tells her not to fret, and that he will prevent them from being evicted. Hortense smirks and informs him loftily that she will soon be a teacher in a good school. Bernard would only be helping her if he evicted them, because such a shabby apartment isn't fit for a teacher like her.

Here, Hortense's smugness contrasts with Gilbert's forbearance. It also exposes her ignorance—even after some time in England her expectations are completely out of line with reality.

CHAPTER 50: HORTENSE

To present herself and her letters of recommendation at the education office, Hortense wears her fancy wedding dress. Gilbert makes fun of her, but she quells him by saying this occasion is more momentous than her actual wedding. Still, he takes her to the office in Islington so she doesn't have to navigate the buses by herself. When they arrive, she tells Gilbert to wait outside so he doesn't embarrass her with his shabby clothes and noticeably Jamaican accent.

For Hortense, her professional career is completely separate from her marriage, and even a contrast to it—her professional hopes make up for her disappointment in romance. On one hand, she's unappreciative of Gilbert, who's trying his best to be kind. On the other hand, this shows her remarkable independence and her refusal to give up her individual identity to married life.

When Hortense enters the building and finally locates the correct office, the three secretaries stare at her without asking what she needs. Falteringly, Hortense explains that she's a teacher and wants to present her qualifications. Smiling widely but speaking condescendingly, the head secretary rifles through her recommendations and asks where she trained to become a teacher. Dismissively, she tells Hortense that since she studied in Jamaica she's not qualified to teach in England. She won't even explain to Hortense how she can become qualified.

Hortense's entire plan for her life in England hinged on securing a teaching job—so this rejection is one of the novel's most crushing moments. Her ineligibility to teach emphasizes the fact that, even though she grew up considering herself a British citizen and aspiring to British ideals, the British don't reciprocate this respect at all, and don't see her as someone who can belong in their country.

Trying to maintain her dignity, Hortense announces that she'll be back when she is qualified to teach; the women roll their eyes. Turning to leave gracefully, Hortense accidentally walks into the broom closet. All three women are giggling when she emerges and finds the right door.

Hortense's mishap adds insult to injury—it's especially damaging to Hortense, who's very proud of her dignified demeanor. However, while she commits a gaffe, the secretaries display bad manners and maliciousness, making them even more undignified than she is.

CHAPTER 51: GILBERT

Gilbert sees Hortense exit the building; confused and bewildered, she bumps into a large man who yells at her. When he calls to get her attention, she strides in the opposite direction. Trotting behind her, Gilbert asks if she got a job, but Hortense says nothing. He has to grab her just to make her look at him. Hortense asks why he's poking his nose in her business, and although he's frustrated at her constant stoniness towards him, he reminds her that she's his wife, and he has to look after her.

After suffering a huge blow, Hortense has to decide if she wants to face it alone or as part of a married couple. Her instinct is to continue shutting Gilbert out, and it's only his insistence that causes her to confide in him. It's admirable that Gilbert acknowledges his responsibilities to her even in times of trouble, when it might be easier to turn away.

Hortense begins to cry and tells Gilbert she can't teach. He guides her to a park bench and puts an arm around her. He thinks one of his white RAF buddies, Charlie Denton, who can't even recall basic details of British history, and has qualified to teach after just a year of training. He feels "righteous pain" on Hortense's behalf, and he's angry with the bystanders who stop to stare at her. He doesn't want anyone to see them beaten down by this hostile country.

It's important that Gilbert's moments of real anger—such as his earlier frustrated walk through the London street—come when he thinks about the pain that immigrant life causes Hortense. This tendency displays his lack of self-pity and the extent to which he cares for his wife, even though she annoys and inconveniences him.

Gilbert offers Hortense a handkerchief which she rejects in favor of her own much cleaner one. She admits that she walked into a cupboard, and Gilbert teases her about the gaffe. Hortense cheers up enough to point out critically that the cupboard was very untidy—not like the neat cupboards to which she's accustomed in Jamaica.

The only thing that cheers Hortense up is reminding herself that she's superior to her enemies. While her haughtiness is often frustrating, here it emerges as both endearing and admirable, a source of strength that helps her weather frustration and humiliation.

To distract Hortense from the catastrophic afternoon, Gilbert takes her on a double-decker bus to sightsee around London. Hortense is excited, pointing out statues and government buildings she's read about her whole life. Even though the city is no longer new to him, Gilbert sees everything afresh through her eyes. While they're standing in front of Buckingham Palace, some children run up to Hortense and touch her skin, then run away. Even though Gilbert reassures her that people will always stare at them and they have to get used to it, Hortense adjusts her gloves and becomes stiff and haughty again.

Sightseeing cheers Hortense up because it allows her to feel like a British citizen again, to claim as her own monuments she's always learned to respect. However, the rude children shatter her momentary sense of belonging, reminding her that some people will always see her as an oddity in England, rather than an ordinary and equal resident.

While they're drinking tea in a café, Gilbert sees some Jamaican men and greets them. Hortense asks why he talks to the men if he doesn't really know them, but Gilbert says it's enough to "know they are from home." After so much time in London, he's always pleased and relieved to see another black person.

Hortense doesn't instinctively identify with other Jamaicans because she's not used to living in a society where most people are hostile to her. While Gilbert's sense of solidarity is positive in some respects, it also shows him that life in Britain has forced him to evaluate new people by their race, rather than any assessment of their character.

Hortense wonders what she should do next—she hadn't once considered the possibility that she wouldn't be able to teach. Sensing an opening in her tough exterior, Gilbert takes her hand and informs her that he'll look after her, but Hortense withdraws the hand quickly and Gilbert knows he's spoken "too firm."

Hortense often feels like she's entitled to certain privileges, especially around Gilbert, but her reluctance to be "looked after" highlights her strong sense of responsibility and ambition, admirable qualities that defy the conventions for women of her time, even as she clings to customs and manners.

Hortense is outraged when Gilbert proposes she find work as a seamstress—she's trained to be a teacher, not a manual laborer. Gilbert reminds her that "a teacher you will be, even when you are sewing." He even confides in her that he wants to study law one day. The words feel foolish coming out of his mouth, but Hortense gently places her hand over his.

Gilbert has never confessed his secret aspiration to another person before. That he does so now, to Hortense, provides a glimmer of hope for their marriage. Her unexpectedly tender response shows that she's growing to value her husband and be protective towards him, instead of dismissing or scoffing at him.

Hortense suggests that she could work as a cook; in fact, her teachers in Jamaica always commended her baking skills. Acquainted with Hortense's culinary skills, Gilbert tactfully tries to dissuade her from this plan, but ends up teasing her again, and she smiles. Another Jamaican man approaches their table. This one is dirty and shabbily dressed, but when he remarks on the cold weather, Hortense answers him politely.

Normally, Hortense assesses people on their manners and refinement, rather than their race—for example, while Kenneth is Jamaican, Hortense can't stand him because he behaves improperly. In the face of so much racism, she realizes that she needs the kindness of other people of color, no matter how unlike her they seem, and that they might need hers, too.

CHAPTER 52: BERNARD

Feeling like a thief even though he believes himself justified, Bernard lets himself into the Josephs' room and looks around. He'd seen them leave in the morning, both "completely overdressed." Bernard remembers his mother used to sew and relax in this room, using the window to spy on the entire street. Looking at the crowded room and shabby curtains, he concludes that "colored people don't have the same standards." Mr. Todd has told him this is because they're ignorant, like children; but Bernard's experiences in India have taught him how "cunning these colonial types could be." To him, it seems best if everyone keeps to their own "kind."

It's ironic that Bernard thinks the Josephs have lower "standards" than he does, because since her arrival, Hortense has done almost nothing but complain that the British don't meet her own standards, from their inadequate hygiene to their shabby dress. It's also deeply ironic that Bernard thinks everyone should keep to their own "kind"—he only feels this way when immigrants are arriving his country, not when the British are exploiting or controlling other nations.

Lost in thought, Bernard doesn't hear the Josephs tramping up the stairs, and they find him in the room. Annoyed, Gilbert tells Bernard that he pays rent in order to have privacy, and Bernard retorts that it's his **house**, and he can go wherever he wants. Fed up with Gilbert, he announces that the Josephs have to vacate their room, as he's planning on selling the house.

While Bernard believes that people of color lack manners and can't behave in a "civilized" fashion, his own behavior is completely rude. The contrast between Bernard's prejudices and his behavior argues that no one society has a monopoly on the conventions of civilization.

Aghast, Gilbert asks why Queenie never told him about this and says he'll only take orders from her, not Bernard. Bernard makes clear that it's his **house**, not Queenie's, and that he can do whatever he wants with it. Gilbert may have "taken advantage" of Queenie during the war, but Bernard fought for the right to "live respectably," and that's what he intends to do now.

Both Bernard and the Josephs want to "live respectably." For Gilbert and Hortense, this is a private goal, one that has nothing to do with Bernard; on the other hand, Bernard feels he can only live the way he wants to at the expense of others he considers beneath him.

Bernard gestures around the room, calling it a disgrace. When Hortense protests that she tried to make it nice, Bernard sneers that she "could try harder." Enraged, Gilbert shouts at him and starts pushing. Just then, Queenie arrives, out of breath from the stairs. Bernard is pleased to see her witness Gilbert's bad behavior, but she yells at him to shut up.

Here, Bernard's assumption that Queenie will reassume her role as submissive wife without question crumbles. His position as an unsuccessfully controlling husband contrasts with Gilbert's loyalty and protectiveness.

The two men seem on the verge of blows, and Queenie and Hortense each try to restrain their husbands. Suddenly, Queenie doubles over and howls in pain. Bernard and Gilbert both try to carry her out of the room. When Queenie screams "get off me," Bernard smugly assumes she's talking to Gilbert, but she doesn't want either man to touch her. Instead, she grabs Hortense and staggers out of the room.

Queenie and Hortense rarely interact; neither woman feels they have much in common. Therefore, it's odd that Queenie turns to her for help instead of either man—her desire to turn to a woman foreshadows the nature of the problem she's facing.

CHAPTER 53: HORTENSE

Downstairs, Queenie makes Hortense lock the door and slide a chair under the handle. Hortense begs her to call a doctor, but Queenie just demands to be helped into the bedroom. Sitting on the bed, she sheds her dress and starts unwrapping a large bandage around her torso. Hortense wonders if Bernard—who seems like a violent man—has been beating her, but she soon realizes Queenie is enormously pregnant, and has just gone into labor.

While Bernard views Gilbert as a threat and wants to prevent him from touching Queenie, it's Bernard who seems most volatile to Hortense. Queenie's pregnancy is an enormous surprise, unknown to any of the other characters—moreover, since Bernard has just arrived home, the baby can't possibly be his. Such a development certainly won't help smooth out their marriage.

Hortense knows nothing about giving birth, and she awkwardly pats Queenie's hand while choking back tears of fear. Queenie isn't afraid—she tells Hortense it will be just like the scene in *Gone With the Wind*, when the protagonist gives birth. Hortense is indignant at the comparison; she's an "educated woman," not a "fool slave girl [...] dancing in panic." Determined to demonstrate this to Queenie, she strips off her gloves and boils a pot of water. Gilbert and Bernard are banging on the door, but she calmly tells them it's a little "women's matter."

Queenie's remark demonstrates her fundamental misconceptions about Hortense's character, and the extent to which prejudice still governs her beliefs. On the other hand, it's endearing that Hortense is actually fortified and encouraged by her remarks, because it forces her to prove herself and protect her dignity.

Queenie's contractions are coming more frequently now, and Hortense reluctantly opens her legs to examine the baby's progress; she's pleased to see the head has almost emerged. It's the "ugliest sight" Hortense has ever seen, and she's repulsed at the idea that a woman who just a day before was going about her normal chores should be abruptly reduced to such abject and primitive suffering. Still, knowing she has to keep Queenie calm, Hortense tells her the baby is doing well and encourages her to push. Soon, Hortense finds herself holding the newborn baby.

Just as the novel presents a skeptical and ambivalent view of marriage, it presents labor as a difficult and undignified endeavor, rather than glorifying it. In doing so, the novel both shows how challenging conventional women's duties are, and validates Queenie and Hortense's shared reluctance to be imprisoned in traditional female roles.

Hortense hands the slimy baby to its mother, quietly pleased that she hasn't stained her wedding dress. Following Queenie's instructions, she ties the umbilical cord and cuts it. Lovingly, Queenie inspects the new baby, counting its fingers and toes and fingers and declaring that he's a "lovely, perfect boy." Suddenly, Queenie expels her afterbirth, which lands on Hortense, spattering her dress with blood. Hortense looks down at herself in dismay; but when she looks at the baby again, she realizes that his arrival is "a gift from the Lord," well worth "a little disgust on your best dress."

This is a turning point for Hortense—her wedding dress represented the refinement she's cultivated her entire life, as well as her status as a "civilized" British lady, but she doesn't even care that it's ruined. Hortense's sudden grace and poise shows that she's starting to think about others as much as herself, and that she realizes her conception of herself and the world around her doesn't have to be based on custom and convention.

Hortense approaches the baby, which Queenie has swaddled in a towel. On closer inspection, she's astounded to see that the baby, who'd been red just moments ago, is actually darker than she is; she's even more astounded that Queenie, entranced with the little boy, doesn't care that her baby isn't white. Suddenly she hears Gilbert's voice, demanding to know what's happening, and Bernard stuffily telling Gilbert not to block the door. Hortense feels that it's a "vicious cruelty" to look at Queenie and her serene baby and tells her that she has to let the men in.

In this moment, Hortense realizes that Queenie has done something incredibly transgressive. However, it's important that she's not repulsed by the realization, and doesn't judge Queenie. Rather, she acknowledges the beauty of the bond between mother and child—no matter what race they are—and feels sad anticipating the revulsion and judgment she knows others, starting with Bernard, will express.

CHAPTER 54: GILBERT

To Gilbert's astonishment, Hortense emerges from Queenie's room covered in blood. Haughtily informing Bernard that he can enter, she stalks upstairs without a word to Gilbert. At first, Gilbert thinks that Queenie has insulted Hortense and his wife has attacked her in retaliation; but when he enters behind Bernard and sees Queenie cradling her brown baby, he understands that Hortense is angry because she assumes he's the father.

It's important that, even though Hortense incorrectly assumes the worst of Gilbert, she doesn't let her sense of betrayal keep her from caring for Queenie, or even from feeling wonder at witnessing the beginning of a life. In this sense, Hortense's identification with Queenie as a fellow woman is stronger than her identification as a wife.

Bernard also makes this assumption; before Gilbert can open his mouth to explain, the older man shoves him in the hall and curses him fiercely in between punching him. When Bernard trips on a chair and falls to the ground, Gilbert feels bad for him, notwithstanding his own bleeding nose; "no man," he thinks, "should have to look on his wife suckling a baby that is not his." He offers to help him up, but Bernard just stares at him in mute hate, so Gilbert walks upstairs to confront Hortense.

It's notable that while Hortense sees Queenie's bond with her baby as an intrinsically good thing, Gilbert is more struck by Bernard's sense of betrayal. For the women, childbirth is a moment of independence, in which outside circumstances are irrelevant. The men are more worried about who fathered the baby, and thus—in their eyes—possesses its mother.

As he reaches the top of the stairs, Hortense emerges, perfectly clad in hat and gloves. She tells Gilbert that he disgusts her, informs him that she'll send for her trunk when she's "settled in," and walks out the door. Gilbert hurries after her, but his bare foot catches on a nail and he has to pause to find his shoes. He's worried to think of Hortense wandering the streets by herself.

Hortense's flight from the house shows that she really does care about Gilbert—if she didn't love him, she wouldn't be so upset by his apparent infidelity. It's notable that Hortense cleaves to her conception of herself as independent, even though she has no idea where she's going and no resources to help her "settle" anywhere else.

When he gets outside, Gilbert realizes that he too is covered in blood from Bernard's attack. He needs to find Hortense and get inside before someone assumes he's a criminal and calls the police. He sees her walking ahead of him; she looks purposeful, but Gilbert knows she's unsure what to do. After all, she has "no place to go […] no mummy, no brother, no friend" to take care of her. She only has Gilbert.

Gilbert's knowledge of Hortense's isolation is what spurs him to feel sympathy and responsibility for her. In this sense, it's the difficulty of their lives as immigrants that draws this unusual couple together, even though its petty frustrations often cause them to quarrel.

As Gilbert approaches, a car pulls up beside Hortense and the passenger door opens. "Ever polite to strangers," Hortense bends down to hear what the driver is saying, only to spring back in fright. She sees Gilbert next to her; for the first time, she looks instinctively happy to see him. Hortense clings to her husband while Gilbert slaps the roof of the car and yells at the driver that "this woman is not your whore."

This scene contrasts Hortense's ingrained manners with the rude behavior of people who somehow believe they're inherently better than her. While Hortense is often annoyed by her husband's lack of manners, she learns the value of his rougher behavior now.

CHAPTER 55: QUEENIE

Queenie knows that she owes Bernard an explanation, so she tells him her story. After the war, she resigns herself to waiting for Bernard to come home, knowing that their cold marriage was in part her fault, and resolving to try harder when he returns. In the meantime, however, she's filled with "boring leaden yearning." She can't get a job because there are too many soldiers returning from war, and without Arthur, she has no one to talk to at home.

Unlike Bernard, who vacillates between feeling ashamed of himself and critical of his wife, Queenie is remarkably clear-eyed about their marriage. She both acknowledges that she's partly to blame for its bad state, but also understands she'll always have a sense of "yearning" that Bernard can't satisfy.

In the middle of the night, Queenie hears a knock on the door. Answering, she finds Michael Roberts on her doorstep. Instantly, she feels like a beautiful and desirable woman again, rather than a bitter and dowdy housewife. She welcomes him inside.

It's interesting that Queenie loves Michael not because of his character but because she likes the way he makes her feel. By increasing her self-worth, her romance actually strengthens her as an independent woman.

Michael tells her that his plane was shot down in France. The two soldiers who previously stayed with Queenie died. Fortunately, Michael had a soft landing. After a few days of foraging in the woods, he found a farmer who hid him because his dark skin made him an interesting oddity. At the end of the war, the farmer helped him return to the British. He tells Queenie that he'd been anxious about the fateful raid because he was flying without his wallet, which was a good luck charm. Queenie is thrilled to tell him that she's saved it. As he looks at the faded pictures, he tells her that he lost his family in a hurricane.

Michael's statement about his family isn't true in a technical sense, but he did become estranged from them as a result of events that took place during a hurricane. This moment emphasizes Michael's sense of loneliness and alienation. However, it also shows that he never truly appreciated Hortense, who would've supported and loved him if he turned to her.

His mood changing, Michael asks Queenie if she's ever felt the force of a hurricane, and takes her upstairs to bed. For the next three days, they huddle together inside the **house**, only emerging from the bedroom for haphazard meals. However, Queenie knows this affair is only temporary. Michael is heading to Toronto, which promises more opportunity than Jamaica, and he never asks her to go with him. When he finally leaves, she hopes he'll be hesitant or sad, but he's purposeful and confident as always.

While Michael helps Queenie see her own value, he also makes her feel dependent because she cares for him more than he does for her. However, it's also possible that Michael's nonchalance springs from realism—as a black man, he's probably conscious that their relationship is transgressive and forbidden, while Queenie, who's never had to consider questions of race, is oblivious to that when she daydreams about moving to Toronto with him.

Soon, morning sickness strikes, and Queenie knows she's pregnant. At first, she wants to get rid of the baby, and she jumps down the stairs and takes scalding hot baths in hopes of inducing a miscarriage. However, the first time she feels the baby kick, she imagines that it's scared of her, and she knows that she's the only one who can protect it. She resolves to carry on with her pregnancy. Still, she wraps up her stomach to prevent her nosy neighbors from gossiping about her illegitimate pregnancy and making it "sordid."

Queenie treats her pregnancy as she does her relationship with Michael—she keeps it private in order to prevent other people from spoiling it, refusing to acknowledge that this is only a temporary solution. Such behavior is unusual in the normally very practical Queenie; it shows her instinctive love for Michael and the baby, in contrast to her dry and rational relationship with Bernard.

At night, Queenie discusses plans for the future with her unborn baby. She considers using her savings to immigrate to Canada. In the postwar chaos, an unwed mother and a mixed-race child might be unusual, but not frowned upon. However, Bernard's return home puts an end to these plans.

Bernard's return doesn't just curtail Queenie's business as a landlady—it also derails her new plans for her life. In the sense that it stifles Queenie's emerging independence, their reunion is more a tragedy than a happy event.

Bernard listens to Queenie's entire story without interrupting or reproaching her. When she finishes, he stands up and leaves without saying a word.

Queenie has been unusually honest and unreserved in sharing her story; however, Bernard refuses to reciprocate, reverting to his uncommunicative behavior.

CHAPTER 56: GILBERT

Gilbert hears a knock on the door and answers warily, assuming it's Bernard. Instead, he finds Kenneth—or Winston, he can't tell—on his doorstep. The man says he has a business proposition. He's recently come into some money from his grandmother, and has used it to buy a small house in disrepair in North London.

It seems like it's Winston at the door—since Kenneth is the more irresponsible brother, it's unlikely that he would have savings or would have successfully invested in property.

Winston or Kenneth asks Gilbert to live in the house he's just purchased. If Gilbert helps to fix it up on the weekend, and watches over the other rooms that he plans to rent out, Gilbert and Hortense can live there without paying rent. Gilbert knows that this can only be Winston, and is overjoyed that he's come up with a solution just as they're about to be evicted.

Instead of harassed tenants, Hortense and Gilbert will become landlords. Here, a moment of displacement and fear turns into an opportunity to establish themselves as permanent residents in Britain.

Taking a detour in his post office van, Gilbert visits the new house. He's happy to see the high ceilings, big windows, and large garden; the flat where he and Hortense would live has its own kitchen and bathroom. However, the house really does need fixing up, and he's worried that Hortense will turn up her nose at the peeling paint, bare floorboards, and mold.

While Gilbert was initially dismissive of Hortense's complaints about their room in Queenie's house, now he's anxious for her to approve of their new home. This shows his growing commitment to his marriage and respect for his wife's opinion.

After tidying the house, Gilbert brings Hortense to visit, nervous about her reaction. Carefully, she walks around the first room and peers through the windows at the garden. Finally, she declares that the room is good, but asks if there are any others. Gilbert is so shocked that she likes the room that he points out all its flaws, making her look at the cracked windows and bad paint; Hortense says stoutly that she's not afraid of hard work, and that they will make it nice together. Happy and proud that he can finally offer her more than one room to live in, Gilbert takes her hand to show her around the rest of the house.

Instead of spurning Gilbert's goodwill, as she has many times before, Hortense is uncharacteristically proud of Gilbert and optimistic about their future. Throughout the novel, their cramped lodgings have represented the frustrations and uncertainty of immigrant life—the acquisition of a house of their own implies not only a new start for their marriage but a new sense of belonging and security as immigrants.

That night, Gilbert folds himself into the armchair to sleep as usual. When Hortense calls out to him, he assumes she wants him to chase a mouse and pretends to be asleep. However, to his surprise, she asks if he wants to sleep in the bed with her. With trepidation, Gilbert lies down under the blanket, careful not to touch her in case she screams. However, Hortense curls up next to him. While her cold foot trails up and down his leg, she asks playfully if their new house can have a **doorbell**.

This scene is comical, but it's important that Hortense commits to her marriage—at least to its sexual aspect—when she wants to, and not a moment before. That Gilbert respects her, rather than resenting her, shows his willingness to embark on a marriage of partners, rather than insisting on his right to control the relationship as Bernard does.

CHAPTER 57: BERNARD

Queenie's baby sleeps in a makeshift crib made out of a drawer. Bernard watches Queenie produce a pile of baby clothes, which she'd knitted during the long years of hoping to become pregnant. Unsure what to do and feeling useless, Bernard idles around the **house**, trying only to move around the house when Queenie is resting so he won't be confronted with her expectant look.

When Queenie first moves in with Bernard, his house represents her stifling new life as a housewife. However, by the end of the novel, the house has become Queenie's domain—it's allowed her to become economically independent, and it's sheltered her during her forbidden affair and pregnancy. Bernard's feeling of uselessness shows the extent to which the house has slipped from his control.

Bernard hears the baby whimper, which he knows will soon turn into howls. Opening Queenie's door slightly, he sees his wife asleep. The doctor has ordered her to rest, and Bernard is afraid the baby will wake her up. He puts his hand to the baby's stomach, and he quiets down. As he surveys the baby's delicate features and smooth skin, Bernard gives him a finger to hold in his tiny hand. The baby puts Bernard's finger in his mouth, and Bernard thinks that he's a "dear little thing." Soon, he's fallen asleep, and Bernard turns to leave.

Bernard is captivated by the baby—in his fascination, he momentarily relinquishes both his general prejudices and his resentment of Queenie's infidelity. The tender moment for a baby whose birth emblematizes the flaws in his marriage is a moment of unusual selflessness for Bernard—a spark of hope that he can change his behavior and redeem himself.

Bernard finds Queenie awake, looking at him in shock. He tells her that he spent time in prison during the war, and she demands to know the story. Still cuddling the baby, he tells her the story, including even his syphilis scare and his stay in Brighton. He picks up the baby and hands him to Queenie, telling her he's sorry he hasn't been a better husband. As he leaves, Queenie thanks him.

Bernard's moment of selflessness is immediately rewarded. He feels comfortable enough to confide in Queenie, which provides him with some much-needed catharsis. For Bernard, atoning for his past sins could improve him morally and help repair his marriage.

CHAPTER 58: QUEENIE

Gilbert informs Bernard that he and Hortense are leaving. Although both men end up shouting insults at each other, Bernard is pleased, since this means he and Queenie can sell the **house** and move to the suburbs. Queenie understands that Bernard wants a new start, and feels that she understands her husband better since she's heard about his experiences during the war. However, she's unsure how the baby will fit into their new future.

Despite Bernard's private tenderness, his behavior towards Gilbert remains largely unchanged, showing that redemption isn't a swift, one-step process. Moreover, Queenie's newfound sympathy for her husband poses a problem—she's not sure how to make things better for her husband without compromising her child.

Queenie has been waiting for hours for Hortense and Gilbert to pass by her door; now, she hears them giggling together in the hallway. Offering them a cup of tea, she notices they seem strained around her and no longer trust her. When they enter reluctantly, Bernard retreats frostily behind his newspaper; Queenie is angry with him for making the situation awkward.

While the Josephs' marriage initially seemed similar to the Blighs', it's clear that Hortense and Gilbert have moved forward, while Queenie and Bernard remained moored in resentment and disagreement. Importantly, it's Gilbert's respect for Hortense's independence that allows their marriage to thrive, while Bernard's sense of superiority hampers his own relationship.

Clumsily, Queenie thanks Hortense for helping her with her childbirth. She offers to give them some furniture for their new house, but Gilbert refuses to take any of Bernard's things.

While Queenie used to feel at ease among her tenants, her mixed feelings of allegiance to her husband and embarrassment at his behavior makes her suddenly awkward.

Hoping to break the ice, Queenie picks up the baby from his crib, wraps him in a shawl, and hands him to Hortense to hold. She's proud to see Hortense's face soften at the sight of the adorable little boy. She tells them she's named him Michael; Hortense, surprised, says that she had a brother named Michael, who was killed during the war.

Hortense and Queenie never quite understand they've loved the same man; this moment is the closest they come to such a realization, and is also one of their only moments of mutual concord.

Queenie goes into the kitchen to help Bernard make tea, but for a minute she watches Hortense, who's speaking softly to baby Michael while Gilbert gives him his finger to chew. When she brings the tray of tea back in, Queenie knows she has to say what's on her mind. In a rush, she asks Hortense and Gilbert if they will take the baby with them when they move out of the house.

Suddenly, it's clear why Queenie invited the Josephs in for tea. It's notable that she makes this decision and appeal without consulting Bernard—in doing so, she reclaims some of the independence that she lost upon his return.

Hortense and Gilbert are in shock, but Queenie pleads earnestly for them to bring baby Michael up as their own son. Suddenly, Bernard interjects; to Queenie's surprise, he insists that the baby needs his mother and should stay in his own home. When Queenie says that they can't look after him properly, Bernard asks, "why ever not?" Everyone else stares at him, surprised that he, of all people, seems suddenly ignorant of the impropriety of two white parents raising a black child.

This speech is highly uncharacteristic for Bernard; following on his moments of bonding with the baby, his public declaration of a willingness to change his behavior—and his entire life—to parent a black child is the closest Bernard comes to redemption and transformation.

Bernard suggests that they move to the suburbs and tell everyone baby Michael is adopted. Crying, Queenie points out that such a solution won't work when the baby grows up and other children make fun of him or ostracize him. With a black son, Bernard will never have the "proper, decent" life he wants, and eventually he'll come to resent Michael for that. Moreover, Queenie says that even she, the baby's own mother, doesn't have the "guts" for the fight that bringing up a black child would entail.

However, it's clear that Bernard's suggestion isn't grounded in pragmatic thinking, but rather in momentary optimism. In fact, it would be nearly impossible for him to give up his feelings of belonging and embrace the ostracism that would come with a black child. Queenie's response shows how much she's considered this problem, and shows a heart-wrenching awareness not only of Bernard's limitations in standing up to their racist society, but her own.

Turning back to Gilbert and Hortense, Queenie says that she trusts them to raise baby Michael, and that she prefers giving him to them rather than to an orphanage. This way, they can write to her to let her know how he's doing. She can even give them money to take care of him. She knows that they can give him a better, more stable life than she could.

While Bernard's declaration is moving, it's Queenie who has truly considered the welfare of the child. Even though she might initially be happier keeping it, she knows her son will have a more stable childhood with the Josephs.

CHAPTER 59: HORTENSE

Hortense never could have dreamed that one day a white woman would be begging her to take in her black child. Not even Celia could have imagined that this is what would happen in the Mother Country.

Here, Hortense contrasts her initial expectations with her experience in England—it's a reminder that British society and people are much different than they would have their colonial subjects believe.

Gilbert tries to argue with Queenie, telling her that no one can take care of the baby as well as its own mother. By this point, Queenie is sobbing. Gilbert puts an arm around her shoulders to comfort her, but at the sight of this, Bernard explodes, telling him to "get your filthy black hands off my wife."

Bernard's rude explosion proves that his altruistic gesture was ill-considered; he can't really overcome his racism, even in a moment of crisis when his wife is distraught. As such, he's not fit to be a father to a black child.

Gilbert and Bernard stand to face each other, heedless of Hortense's pleas that they be quiet and mind the baby. Disdainfully, Bernard says that the baby would be "better off begging in a gutter" than entrusted to Gilbert and Hortense.

It's ironic that Bernard criticizes the Josephs' parenting skills, considering he's just proved himself a completely ill-equipped to take on the baby himself.

Exasperated, Gilbert tells Bernard that his problem is that his white skin makes him think he's better than everyone else. In reality, Gilbert says, his skin doesn't make him better or worse; it just makes him white. Both men have just finished fighting on the same side of the same war, but even after all their shared suffering, Bernard still thinks that Gilbert is "worthless," and he is not. In despair, Gilbert asks if he will ever be willing to work together or if he's determined to fight people like them "till the end."

Gilbert's speech is so simple it borders on absurdity; however, he's articulating the basic problem at the root of the novel's manifold frustrations and complex relationships. Even as he's indicting Bernard's illogical beliefs, Gilbert offers him a way out, saying that he can redeem himself by finding a way to "work together" instead of fighting indefinitely.

The room is quiet; even the baby has stopped crying. Hortense is proud of Gilbert. From his speech, she's realized that her husband was "a man of class, a man of character, a man of intelligence." However, after a long pause, Bernard says that he hasn't understood a word of what Gilbert just said.

Hortense's description of Gilbert parallels her description of her father at the beginning of the novel. However, her respect for Gilbert's independent thinking and willingness to confront racism shows that her values have changed since childhood, when she worshipped her father for successfully fitting into a colonial regime.

Gilbert picks up the baby and hands him to Bernard, then takes Hortense's hand and pulls her out of the room, running up the stairs. Panting behind him, Hortense reaches their room to find him punching the wall and yelling incoherently. He asks Hortense what they should do. He doesn't think they can walk away and "leave that little colored baby alone in this country," at the mercy of people like Bernard.

Gilbert is angry because even when he makes himself vulnerable before Bernard by expressing his honest feelings, Bernard can't—or won't try to—understand him. However, even in his personal sadness, he's concerned for the fate of a baby that isn't even his.

Holding Gilbert's hand, Hortense tells him that she too was given away as a baby, because of the color of her skin. As a result, she hardly remembers anything of her mother. Gilbert asks if Michael Roberts was really her brother, and she says that he was actually her cousin. Gilbert asks if she loved him, and she says that she did. Hortense asks Gilbert if he wants to take the baby, and after a long pause Gilbert says that he thinks "there is nothing else that we can do."

Hortense's own childhood makes her reluctant to take another baby away from its mother. However, considering Bernard's behavior, her experiences show her that she should take the baby, rather than leave it to an unloving and unstable home. By accepting and loving another woman's child, Hortense can do what her own surrogate parents never did for her, thus confronting and moving past her traumatic childhood.

Hortense watches Queenie as she sadly packs up baby Michael's clothes, kissing them as she folds him. Just as Hortense only retains scattered impressions of her mother, Michael will only know Queenie from the clothes she's made him and the tears she's cried as she gives him away.

This scene makes an implicit comparison between Queenie and Alberta; in doing so, it strengthens Hortense's sense that adopting the baby gives her a chance to right the wrongs of her own youth.

With difficulty, Winston and Gilbert carry Hortense's trunk down the stairs while Hortense comforts baby Michael. She feels something hard sewn into his nappy and discovers it's a knitted pouch. Opening it, she finds a bundle of money and photograph of a much younger Queenie. She knows that if she tells Gilbert, his pride will make him insist on returning the money. Instead, she places the bundle in her bag, resolving to "put them to good use when they were required."

The Roberts' tried to erase Hortense's parentage, which they thought of as shameful, by ignoring it. In contrast, Hortense promises to value Michael's unusual origins. While she's adopting Michael so he can grow up among parents who look more like him, Hortense is doing so out of necessity, not because she thinks this is the way things should be. Here, she shows that she's not complicit in structures of racism, like her cousins. Instead, she's subverting them by safeguarding the memory of Michael's interracial parentage and promising to tell him about it one day.

Without any regret, Hortense closes the door of their wretched little room. At Queenie's door she pauses and knocks; she's sure the other woman is inside, but no one answers. Gilbert takes baby Michael from her and tells her to hurry up; their van is ready. Before leaving, Hortense straightens her hat and buttons her coat so she won't be cold.

Hortense's gestures mirror her preoccupation with her outfit upon her first arrival at Queenie's house. At the beginning, this habit showed her obsession with manners and propriety; now, it demonstrates her dignified determination as she embarks on an unconventional future. The similarity of her gestures emphasizes Hortense's significant evolution as a character since her arrival in England.

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