Arc of Justice

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF KEVIN BOYLE

Kevin Boyle was born in Detroit, Michigan in the fall of 1960. He earned his bachelor's degree in history from the University of Detroit and went on to earn his doctorate at the University of Michigan. Boyle researches and has written extensively about the history of class, race, and political divisions in the United States of America. In 2004, he won the National Book Award for *Arc of Justice*, and the book earned him a spot on the shortlist for the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Critics Circle Award. Boyle teaches history at Northwestern University and lives with his family in Evanston, Illinois.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Arc of Justice covers a period of intensifying violence against Black Americans. The "Red Summer" of 1919 saw white supremacist terrorism and violence break out in 60 cities, towns, and localities throughout the United States, including extended and deadly riots in Washington, D.C., Chicago, Illinois (where at least 38 people were killed), and Omaha, Nebraska. Only two years later, a race riot in Tulsa, Oklahoma saw the destruction of a neighborhood famous for the wealth of its Black residents and the massacre of up to 300 people; the Tulsa Race Riot is considered one of the worst single events of racialized violence in the United States. Moreover, in the decade between 1920 and 1929, no fewer than 86 Black Americans were lynched throughout the country. Despite the violence, the years around the *Sweet* trials also saw the flowering of the Jazz Age and the Harlem Renaissance, two artistic movements that centered the experience and voices of Black Americans. Black musicians developed jazz music out of the blues and ragtime genres in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. By the 1920s, Black musicians like Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, and Bessie Smith were gaining national attention for their music. White audiences were exposed to jazz through the practice of "slumming"—visiting Black neighborhoods in large cities for voyeuristic enjoyment and through increasingly wide-spread radio broadcasts. And in Harlem, a group of writers, artists, and poets coalesced around figures like Walter White, Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, and Nella Larsen. These men and women centered the experiences of Black protagonists in ways that transcended the negative stereotypes common in American culture and celebrated, rather than downplayed, their African heritage.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

The story of Ossian Sweet's education and career, which took him from an agrarian childhood in the deep south to a professional career as a doctor in Detroit, happens in the context of the Great Migration. Isabelle Wilkerson provides an in-depth history of this event in American history in her 2010 book, *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration*. Books written by some of the men at the heart of the action in *Arc of Justice* provide a contemporary contextualization of the experience of Black Americans in the early decades of the 20th century. First among these is W. E. B. Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk*, published in 1903. This foundational sociology work also presented a call for the full participation of Black people in American culture and politics and introduced Du Bois's idea of the exceptional, "talented tenth" who would lead the way for Black integration into American life. James Weldon Johnson, executive secretary of the NAACP during the Sweet trials, published a fictional account called *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* in 1912. The light-skinned Black protagonist of this book is so scarred by the terrifying experience of living in post-Reconstruction America that he decides to "pass" as white, allowing the book to explore the individual and social toll of racism in society. In 1924, the year before the shooting at the Sweets' house and the subsequent trials, Walter White published his critically acclaimed novel, *The Fire in the Flint*. This book follows a Black doctor and World War I veteran who returns to his hometown in Georgia to open a medical practice and finds himself called to fight against the racial injustices and violence perpetrated by the town's white residents and the Ku Klux Klan. Two notable works of fiction treat themes like those in the non-fiction *Arc of Justice*. Lorraine Hansberry's 1959 play, *A Raisin in the Sun*, follows the Younger family's attempts to grapple with housing discrimination, racism, and assimilation on the south side of Chicago when the family matriarch uses a life insurance payout to put a down payment on a house in an all-white neighborhood. And Richard Wright's 1940 novel, *Native Son*, which is set in Chicago in the 1930s, explores the dire effects of housing segregation and systematic racism on Black Americans.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Arc of Justice: A Saga of Race, Civil Rights, and Murder in the Jazz Age
- **When Written:** Early 2000s
- **Where Written:** Columbus, Ohio
- **When Published:** 2004
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Historical Nonfiction

- **Setting:** Detroit in the 1920s
- **Climax:** The jury returns a verdict of not guilty in the second *Sweet* trial.
- **Antagonist:** Racism, redlining, and discriminatory lending practices
- **Point of View:** Third person

EXTRA CREDIT

Favorite Son. In 2007, in conjunction with the staging of a play based on the events covered in *Arc of Justice*, the city of Detroit honored Boyle for his scholarship on the *Sweet* trials, the history of labor relations in the city, and in recognition of his lifelong personal connection with his hometown.

A Man's Home is His Museum. In 1958, Ossian Sweet sold the Garland Avenue house to another Black family. In 2018, the city of Detroit received a $500,000 federal civil rights grant to turn the house into museum. The museum memorializes the events of the shooting and the resulting trials, and it also explores the history of segregation in the city.

PLOT SUMMARY

On the morning of September 8, 1925, Dr. Ossian Sweet and his wife, Gladys, move into their new **house** on Garland Avenue in a working-class Detroit neighborhood. They are the first Black family to move to the area. Their arrival upsets their white neighbors, who have been taught to fear allegedly dangerous Black men and who are concerned about the value of their homes tumbling thanks to redlining policies, which devalue properties owned by Black families. Segregation and racialized violence are on the rise in Detroit generally, especially in the context of a contentious mayoral campaign that pits working-class hero John Smith against a candidate openly supported by the city's powerful Ku Klux Klan branch. Throughout the summer, the Klan holds rallies that promote nativist sentiment and encourages the violent removal of Black residents from otherwise all-white neighborhoods, including Fleta Mathies, John Fletcher, Alexander Turner, Vollington Bristol, and their families.

But Ossian refuses to be intimidated by the threats of violence—even though the childhood experience of witnessing the lynching of Fred Rochelle left a lasting impression on him. He has aimed his whole life at achieving wealth and status, at becoming a respected member of the "talented tenth" whom men like W. E. B. Du Bois believe will help Black men and women become fully integrated members of American society. Ossian grew up in poverty in Florida, but his parents, staunch members of the AME Church who believe in its mission of educational, economic, and political advancement for Black people, sent him north for an education. Despite having to work service jobs to pay for his tuition and expenses, Ossian earns a bachelor's degree in science from Wilberforce and a medical degree from Howard University. Then he establishes a practice in the neighborhood where most of Detroit's Black residents live, marries Gladys, and spends a year studying in Europe. On his return to Detroit, he is ready to give his family—which now includes daughter Iva—a nice home and a respectable life.

In light of the volatile situation in the city, however, Ossian asks for police protection during the move. Inspectors Norton Schuknecht and Robert McPherson oversee a handful of officers who station themselves on the street in front of the property on the 8th and 9th of September. But he also gathers weapons and ammunition and asks his brothers Henry and Otis, his cousin John Latting, his friend William Davies, his employees Joe Mack and Norris Murray, and his insurance men Hewitt Watson, Charles Washington, and Leonard Morse to help him protect the house from within. When a threatening mob starts throwing rocks at the house on the night of September 9th, one or more of the men shoot out into the street, wounding Eric Houghberg and killing Leon Breiner. Both victims are white.

Wayne County Prosecutor Robert Toms quickly indicts Ossian, Gladys, and the rest of the defenders on charges of premeditated murder. The NAACP takes up the *Sweet* case in order to bring national attention to the rising issue of housing segregation, adding a white man, famed attorney Clarence Darrow, to a defense team initially made up of local Black lawyers Julian Perry, Cecil Rowlette, and Charles Mahoney. In front of Judge Frank Murphy, Toms tries to prove that the Sweets' move was a deliberate provocation, that there was no threatening mob, and that the shooting was unprovoked. Darrow and the rest of the defense, on the other hand, establish not only the presence of a threatening mob on Garland Avenue but work to expose the broader threats faced by Black Americans in an era of segregation, racism, and violent terrorism against Black people.

The first trial—in which all 11 defendants are tried together—ends in a hung jury; although all 12 jurors agree on acquitting the majority of the defenders, they split on the question of whether to find Ossian, his brother Henry (who admits at trial to shooting a gun on the night in question), and Leonard Morse (whom another defendant's testimony places upstairs at the time of the shooting) guilty. The defense moves for separate retrials, and Toms choses to prosecute Henry first. While the defendants wait for the second trial to begin, Ossian and Gladys become the darlings of the NAACP, headlining events around the country as their story helps to raise the money to establish the organization's legal defense fund.

In the second *Sweet* trial, Darrow and the defense double down on establishing the pervasive presence of prejudice and systemic racism in American society. Their efforts are rewarded when the jury returns a verdict of not guilty. With the

most likely suspect acquitted, Toms drops the charges against the rest of the defendants.

In the aftermath of the trial, Gladys, Iva, and Henry Sweet all die prematurely of tuberculosis. Although Ossian finally moves into the house alone a few years after the trial, he ends up selling it and moving back into the Black Bottom neighborhood in his later years. He takes his own life at the age of 65. Still, the *Sweet* trials are an important milestone for the fledgling civil rights movement. They show the country that Black Americans face almost as much segregation and violence in the North as they do in the Jim Crow South. They help the NAACP establish its legal defense fund, bring national attention to the issue of housing segregation, and inspire white men like Reinhold Niebuhr to become champions of civil rights. And many of the people involved, including Judge Murphy, Prosecutor Toms, and Darrow, spend the rest of their lives advocating for civil rights.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Ossian Sweet – Ossian Sweet is a Black doctor with a thriving practice in Detroit. He's married to Gladys, with whom he has a daughter Iva; and he has two younger brothers, Otis and Henry. Disqualified for service in World War I due to poor eyesight, Ossian instead completes his medical degree at prestigious Howard University, then moves to Detroit to open a medical practice in 1921. Ossian considers himself a member of the talented tenth promoted by W. E. B. Du Bois and thus an exemplar of Black excellence. Accordingly, his highest goals in life are to achieve wealth and status. Buying a nice **house** in an all-white neighborhood represents the pinnacle of Ossian's American Dream. Although he takes responsibility for representing his race, Ossian faces the move and the subsequent threats of white mob violence with a fear inculcated during his childhood when he witnessed the lynching of Fred Rochelle in his Florida hometown. Nevertheless, Ossian resolutely refuses to voice his fears, and, with the encouragement of Edward Carter, instead gathers an arsenal of weapons and a group of friends to help him defend the house with violence if necessary. This decision comes with immense personal costs, when Ossian finds himself, Gladys, and his friends standing trial for the murder of Leon Breiner. Although the trial brings him celebrity—he briefly becomes a valuable spokesperson for the NAACP—the consequences of his stand are terrible. Gladys and Iva both die of tuberculosis in the three years following the conclusion of the second trial. Ossian's refusal to back down seems to be associated with an arrogance and rigidity of character that he increasingly demonstrates in the aftermath of the trials. His attempts at a political career fail, and he dies by suicide at 65. Ultimately, Ossian represents the promise of the American Dream, the difficulty of succeeding as a Black American, and the tremendous personal and social tolls of racism and segregation.

Clarence Darrow – Clarence Darrow is a famous lawyer renowned for his work defending union members and political and social activists. He defends Ossian, Gladys, Otis, and Henry Sweet, John Latting, William Davis, Joe Mack, Norris Murray, Hewitt Watson, Charles Washington, and Leonard Morse when they are brought to trial for the murder of Leon Breiner. Born in Ohio and raised by a father with a fiercely independent intellect, Darrow initially pursued a conventional life practicing law in his hometown. But, at the age of 30, he moves his family to Chicago where he becomes deeply enamored with the modernist movement and begins the second, high-profile phase of his career. The celebrity of his clients vaults him to national attention as a champion of the labor movement, until a scandal in the trial of the McNamara brothers sours his reputation. Darrow reinvents himself as a disciple of modernism, and his later cases reflect his modernist values. Along with his friend Arthur Garfield Hays, Darrow joins the defense in the *Sweet* trials at the special request of NAACP executive secretary James Weldon Johnson and his right-hand man, Walter White. Darrow jumps at the chance to fight against segregation. Although the first trial ends with a hung jury, Darrow wins an acquittal for Henry Sweet in the second trial and he goes on to join the NAACP and dedicate the rest of his life to advancing civil rights.

Walter White – Walter White is James Weldon Johnson's right-hand man at the NAACP as well as an important figure in the civil rights movement and Harlem Renaissance. By the racial standards of the Jim Crow South where he grew up, White is Black, although his skin is so light that he can easily "pass" (appear to be a white person). He chooses not to after a frightening brush with racialized violence in his childhood. White's light skin proves to be an asset after the NAACP recruits him and puts him to work investigating lynchings in the South. White is also a key figure in the Harlem Renaissance, since his connections (and fair skin) give him the opportunity to introduce important Black artists and writers to the New York publishing industry. And White's own debut novel, *The Fire in the Flint*, receives wide acclaim on its publication in 1924. When the *Sweet* case comes to his attention, Johnson dispatches White to Detroit to organize the NAACP's involvement and support. There, White quickly alienates the Black lawyers representing the Sweets and their friends, Julian Perry, Cecil Rowlette, and Charles Mahoney by his insistence on adding a white lawyer to the team. Although White's flashy personal style and admitted distaste for darker-skinned Black people make him enemies in the civil rights movement, including W. E. B. Du Bois, his tireless work during the *Sweet* trials helps to win the defendants' acquittal and establishes the financial groundwork for the NAACP's legal defense fund. When he succeeds Johnson as executive secretary, he continues his

mentor's strategy of legal challenges, eventually shepherding the *Brown v. Board of Education* case—a landmark of the civil rights movement—to the Supreme Court shortly before his death in 1954.

Frank Murphy – Frank Murphy is the judge who presides over both *Sweet* trials. As a young lawyer and Democratic Party activist, Murphy wins election to the bench of Detroit's Recorder's Court (which is responsible for criminal prosecutions) on a promise to wrest control of the court from a conservative majority. Murphy builds a coalition of powerful Irish American interests, and he also earns support from Black and immigrant people on Detroit's east-side wards. He's able to appeal to so many different groups because of his promise to bring fairness, justice, and transparency to a people who desperately need a "new deal." In the *Sweet* trials, Murphy strives for justice, balanced against a nuanced understanding of the political stakes in a city where the Ku Klux Klan is trying to use nativism and fearmongering to win the mayoral election. He maintains his personal popularity through the trials and their aftermaths, rising to serve as the governor-general of the Philippines, governor of Michigan, attorney general of the United States, and Justice of the Supreme Court. In these positions, he strives to advance civil rights legislation and extend of justice to all American citizens.

Gladys Sweet – Gladys Sweet is Ossian Sweet's wife and baby Iva's mother. She grew up in Detroit, where her stepfather's career as a popular musician allowed her family the wealth and status to live in an otherwise all-white neighborhood. Gladys attended all-white schools, where she learned social graces that belie her steely, forceful character. Despite her clear intelligence, she does not complete college, since her family expects her to marry and become a housewife. She insists on joining Ossian at the **house** when they move in, and in the aftermath of the shooting, she is arrested and charged with the murder of Leon Breiner along with her husband and brothers-in-law, Otis and Henry Sweet, and John Latting, William Davis, Joe Mack, Norris Murray, Hewitt Watson, Charles Washington, and Leonard Morse. Because she is the only one in the house who never touched the weapons, her lawyers get her released on bond; while the 11 wait for the first trial to conclude, she becomes their public representative. She enjoys her celebrity and struggles to concede the spotlight to Ossian when he, too, is released. Tragically, she contracts tuberculosis, likely while in jail awaiting the first trial, which she gives to Iva. She spends the final years three years of her life living apart from Ossian, in Arizona, trying to recover her health, but she finally succumbs to her illness at the age of 27.

Henry Sweet – Henry Sweet is Ossian and Otis Sweet's younger brother. Although he is nine years younger and was still a young child when Ossian went north for school, Henry grew up idolizing his oldest brother. He attended the same college, Wilberforce University, and in his young adulthood, he cultivates a personal image styled on Ossian, including the same moustache and glasses. Henry, like Ossian, represents the talented tenth ideology, although he became involved with civil rights advocacy earlier than his brother. On the nights of September 8 and 9, 1925, Henry joins Ossian, Gladys, Otis Sweet, John Latting, William Davis, Joe Mack, Norris Murray, Hewitt Watson, Charles Washington, and Leonard Morse to defend the **house** on Garland Avenue. His natural confidence and sense of dignity make him unafraid to admit to both handling and firing a gun on the night of the shooting in an effort at self-defense, although he stops short of admitting to hitting either Eric Houghberg or Leon Breiner. This admission causes Wayne County Prosecutor Robert Toms to single him out for the first retrial in early 1926. But thanks in part to the able defense provided by Clarence Darrow, the jury acquits Henry. In the aftermath of the trials, Henry becomes a rising star in Detroit's Black community, becoming president of the NAACP's Michigan chapter in the late 1930s. But he dies prematurely of tuberculosis soon afterwards.

Otis Sweet – Otis Sweet is middle Sweet brother, between Ossian and Henry Sweet. Otis followed Ossian's example and clawed his way from poverty into the talented tenth through an education at Florida State College and Meharry Medical School where he studied dentistry. After settling in Detroit, however, Otis seems content with a low-profile life; he's more interested in attending baseball games than NAACP meetings. Nevertheless, he promises to help Ossian defend the **house** on Garland Avenue and is arrested for the murder of Leon Breiner along with Ossian, Gladys, Henry, John Latting, William Davis, Joe Mack, Norris Murray, Hewitt Watson, Charles Washington, and Leonard Morse. Before the trial, encouraged by his father, Henry Sweet, Sr. to be proud of taking a stand, he joins with Morse, Davis, and Washington in appealing to the NAACP to take over the group's defense from Julian Perry, Cecil Rowlette, and Charles Mahoney.

Dora DeVaughn – Dora DeVaughn is Henry Sweet, Sr.'s wife and Ossian, Otis, and Henry Sweet's mother. The granddaughter of enslaved people Edmund and Gilla DeVaughn, Dora was born in northern Florida while her father Remus DeVaughn sharecropped cotton with his own mother and brothers. As disciples of the AME Church, the DeVaughn family taught Dora to value education, hard work, and thrift. In turn, after her marriage to Henry Sweet, Dora teaches these values to her own children, even to the point of sending several of them north to attend Black colleges.

Henry Sweet, Sr. – Henry Sweet is Dora DeVaughn's husband and Ossian, Otis, and Henry Sweet's father. Although his parents had been enslaved in Texas and Alabama, family lore claims that they escaped before the end of the American Civil War. In any case, Henry was born after the end of the American Civil War. Like Dora, Henry exemplifies AME values of thrift, hard work, pride, and fairness. With her he teaches these

values to his own children as they eke out a living despite Jim Crow segregation in Bartow, Florida. When he visits Ossian, Henry, and Otis in jail following the shooting on Garland Avenue, Henry expresses pride in his sons, not shame; he tells Otis there's only shame in running from one's problems.

Iva Sweet – Marguerite Sweet, called Iva by her parents, Ossian and Gladys Sweet, is born in France in 1924. She is still an infant when her family moves into the house on Garland Avenue. She contracts tuberculosis from her mother sometime during the trials and dies of her illness shortly before her second birthday.

John Smith – John Smith is a Polish American Detroit resident from a blue-collar background who runs for mayor in a special election in 1924. He wins by a wide margin, having endeared himself to the same coalition of Black, immigrant, and working-class voters who propelled Frank Murphy to a judgeship in 1923. His opponent enjoys the support of the Ku Klux Klan and capitalizes on nativist sentiment in the city. This allows Smith to cast himself as a hero of the immigrant working-class and civil rights. In the leadup to the regular election of 1925, however, Smith tries to increase his support among the city's white elite by blaming the summer's violence on the Black families who moved into all-white neighborhoods. When it becomes clear that his attempts to appeal to nativist voters have failed—the Klan's candidate exceeds expectations in the city primary—Smith turns back to his initial coalition and regains the support of the wards where Black people live, like Black Bottom. However, when the Klan collapses under scandal, Smith loses his foil and can no longer maintain his coalition. His subsequent political career stalls.

Norton Schuknecht – Norton Schuknecht is a detective inspector with the Detroit Police and the commander of the precinct in which the **house** on Garland Avenue lies. He commands the police force protecting the house on the 8th and 9th of September 1924. Because he feels sympathy for the plight of the neighborhood's white homeowners—easily imagining the supposed danger a Black man poses to their daughters and all too aware of the threat a Black family poses to local property values—Schuknecht quickly settles on a version of events that downplays the size and danger of the crowd outside the house on Garland Avenue on the night of the shooting. He sticks to this story, telling it to Assistant Prosecutor Ted Kennedy and later repeating it on the witness stand in both *Sweet* trials.

Inspector Robert McPherson – Inspector Robert McPherson is the head of the city's Black Hand Squad, which is charged with policing Detroit's Italian mob and the predominantly Black neighborhoods. A decorated officer, he nevertheless fails to inform Inspector Norton Schuknecht of the Sweets' need for police protection until a day before their move onto Garland Avenue. He is among the police who guard the Sweets' **house** on the nights of September 8 and 9, 1925, and he is personally responsible for seeing that the suspects in the shooting are transported safely through the crowd to the police station.

Julian Perry – Julian Perry is Ossian Sweet's close friend; he was best man at Ossian's wedding. Although he offers his help in defending the **house** on Garland Avenue, he never shows up. Perry is an alumnus of Howard University, where he studied law. Along with Cecil Rowlette and Charles Mahoney, Perry represents Ossian, Gladys Henry, and Otis Sweet, John Latting, Norris Murray, Joe Mack, Charles Washington, Hewitt Watson, William Davis, Charles Washington, and Leonard Morse during the first trial, and he joins the defense in Henry's subsequent second trial.

Cecil Rowlette – Cecil Rowlette is a Black lawyer and friend of Julian Perry. He joins Perry and Charles Mahoney to form the first defense team for Ossian, Henry, Otis, and Gladys Sweet, John Latting, William Davis, Joe Mack, Norris Murray, Hewitt Watson, Charles Washington, and Leonard Morse. Rowlette also represented Fleta Mathies and Alexander Turner earlier in the summer. Rowlette's parents were formerly enslaved, and he grew up in Virginia, pulling himself into the talented tenth with an education at Virginia Union and Howard Universities. He presents a carefully crafted legal arguments in favor of dismissing the charges against the defendants in pre-trial hearings.

Charles Mahoney – Charles Mahoney is a Black lawyer in Detroit. He grew up the in the only Black family in a small town in Michigan; later, as a lawyer, he establishes a reputation for fighting segregation. He joins Julian Perry and Cecil Rowlette in representing Ossian, Gladys, Otis, and Henry Sweet, John Latting, William Davis, Joe Mack, Norris Murray, Hewitt Watson, Charles Washington, and Leonard Morse. Along with Rowlette, Mahoney's confidence in his abilities and his deep commitment to Detroit's Black residents make him suspicious of outside influence. Because of this, he initially fights against Walter White and the NAACP's efforts to control the defense from afar and replace the Black legal team with a high-profile white lawyer.

Robert Toms – Robert Toms is the Wayne County Prosecutor at the time of the shooting of Leon Breiner. His family were abolitionists prior to the American Civil War, and he approaches his job with moral uprightness, judging his office's performance on how well they serve the cause of justice rather than how many cases they win. But, with a shining political career ahead of him, he feels the need to prosecute the men who defended the Sweets' **house**, lest he fall afoul of the white vote in the city. His assistants in the case are Ted Kennedy and Lester Moll. A few years after the *Sweet* trials, Toms becomes a judge and in this capacity, he proves himself a staunch supporter of civil rights. He joins the Detroit NAACP branch and is later named the lead prosecutor of Nazi war criminals in the Nuremberg Trials after the end of World War II.

Thomas Chawke – Thomas Chawke is a white defense lawyer in Detroit who has achieved notoriety for representing members of the mob and for his aggressive defense style. When another case prevents Arthur Garfield Hays from rejoining the defense with Clarence Darrow, Darrow insists that Chawke join instead. Chawke is an immigrant himself, having been born in Ireland and raised in the world of working-class Detroit. He has an assertive presence in the courtroom, carefully dismantling witness statements in cross examination. After the second *Sweet* trial, however, his short-lived participation in the nascent civil rights movement ends and he returns to representing notorious gangsters and criminals.

James Weldon Johnson – James Weldon Johnson becomes the first Black executive secretary of the NAACP in 1920; with his associate Walter White, he brought the *Sweet* case to national attention as part of an effort to raise money for the NAACP's legal defense fund and to address the rising issue of housing segregation in the 1920s. Johnson is an accomplished member of the talented tenth; prior to his work with the NAACP, he established the first Black daily newspaper in the United States, became the first Black lawyer admitted to the Florida bar, founded Florida's first Black high school, wrote poetry and operas in his spare time, and represented the United States on the consular service in Venezuela and Nicaragua. He retired from his role with the NAACP in 1929 and became a professor of literature at Fisk University.

Arthur Garfield Hays – Arthur Garfield Hays is lawyer and friend of Clarence Darrow. Having formerly joined Darrow in the infamous *Scopes* trial, Hays signs on to help defend Ossian, Gladys, Otis, and Henry Sweet, John Latting, William Davis, Joe Mack, Norris Murray, Hewitt Watson, Charles Washington, and Leonard Morse in the first *Sweet* trial. On the defense, he balances Darrow's attention to the human character of the trials with a careful attention to legal detail and precedent. Another case prevents Hays from participating in the second *Sweet* trial, and Thomas Chalke takes his place. But, following the *Sweet* trials, Hays continued to focus on protecting the marginalized and the vulnerable, including representing striking union members, Puerto Rican nationalists protesting colonial authorities, and Harlem residents suffering from police brutality.

Edward Carter –Edward Carter is an established Black doctor in Detroit who becomes one of Ossian Sweet's mentors. A member of Detroit's talented tenth, Carter is active in the local NAACP branch; after the trials, he joins Reinhold Neibuhr's blue ribbon commission on race relations in the city. Carter and his family live in an all-white neighborhood and he encourages Ossian's decision to buy the **house** on Garland Avenue, despite the violence against John Fletcher, Vollington Bristol, Fleta Mathies, and fellow doctor Alexander Turner earlier in 1925. Although he proposes helping Turner and promises Ossian that he will join the crew defending the house on the nights of September 8th and 9th, Carter consistently fails to follow through on his promises to put his own body on the line.

W. E. B. Du Bois – W. E. B. Du Bois is a Black sociologist, university professor, and civil rights activist. Born into a free Black community in the American North during the years of Reconstruction, Du Bois received his secondary education first at Fisk, a Black college, and then Harvard University. He is a founding member of the NAACP where he edits the organization's magazine, *The Crisis*. Thus, he is a colleague of James Weldon Johnson and Walter White. Du Bois and *The Crisis* spearhead a national anti-lynching campaign, publicizing the details of lynchings throughout the country during the early 20th century. Du Bois hopes that Black Americans will achieve equality and civil rights through integration into white society, and he sees this integration led by the achievements of the "talented tenth," the most accomplished and gifted Black men and women in a generation. This ideology animates Ossian Sweet's drive to succeed as a doctor and amass personal wealth. Throughout his trial and his subsequent celebrity, Ossian not only understands himself as a member of this Black elite, but Du Bois directly names him as an example in *The Crisis*'s coverage of the trials.

Reinhold Niebuhr – Reinhold Niebuhr is a priest in Detroit in the early 1920s. The son of German immigrants, he organizes against the Ku Klux Klan's ascendancy in the 1925 mayoral campaign. His attention to social issues earns him the attention of the Detroit's progressive bloc. And his progressive politics dispose him to respect Clarence Darrow, despite the lawyer's atheism. Following the *Sweet* trials, Mayor John Smith appoints Niebuhr to head a blue-ribbon commission on the state of Detroit's race relations—and Edward Carter joins him as the commission's secretary. This work pushes Niebuhr towards an increasingly radical form of social theology that later influences Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.

William Sanders Scarborough – William Sanders Scarborough is the president of the AME-founded Black Wilberforce University in the early decades of the 20th century. He exemplifies the idea of the talented tenth. Born into slavery, after the end of the American Civil War he becomes a shoemaker and then studies at the prestigious—and white—Oberlin College where he majors in classics. His academic success grants him access to prestigious and then all-white organizations like the American Philological Society. At Wilberforce, Scarborough drills the values of the talented tenth into his students, including Ossian Sweet.

William Davis – William Davis is an old friend of Ossian Sweet. A veteran of World War I, by the mid-1920s, Davis has become a federal narcotics officer and has a promising future in this career. He joins Ossian, Henry, and Otis Sweet, John Latting, Norris Murray, Joe Mack, Charles Washington, Hewitt Watson, and Leonard Morse in defending the Sweets' **house** on Garland Avenue on the night of September 9, 1925, and is charged,

along with the others, with the murder of Leon Breiner. Worried about preserving his career and future, Davis admits to Ted Kennedy that Ossian had prepared the men for trouble and that Henry Sweet and Morse were upstairs when the shooting happened. While awaiting trial, Davis joins Washington, Morse, and Otis Sweet in asking the NAACP to take full control of the defense.

Vollington Bristol – Vollington Bristol is a friend of Ossian Sweet's and a fellow member of the elite, talented tenth of the Black community in Detroit. When he moves into a home in an all-white neighborhood that he formerly rented out, he becomes the target of a violent, white mob. Thus, Bristol joins the Sweets, John Fletcher, Fleta Mathies, and Alexander Turner as a victim of violence intended to maintain the color line in Detroit. Unlike Mathies, Fletcher, and Turner, he maintains possession of his home despite the mob.

John Fletcher – John Fletcher is a Black waiter living in Detroit who buys a **house** in an all-white neighborhood in the summer of 1925. When he attempts to move his family in, a white mob storms the house. Fletcher shots a rifle out of an upstairs window, injuring a man on the street below. Still, a judge dismisses the charges brought against him on the grounds of self-defense.

Fleta Mathies – Fleta Mathies is a recently-arrived Black resident of Detroit who moves from the South as part of the Great Migration in 1925. Her family joins with another in renting an apartment in an all-white neighborhood, and when neighbors threaten the families and throw rocks through their windows, she shoots a shotgun out of an upstairs window. Although she is charged with reckless discharge of a firearm, her lawyer, Cecil Rowlette, gets the charges dismissed based on self-defense.

Alexander Turner – Alexander Turner is a Black doctor in Detroit in the 1920s who is a colleague of Edward Carter and Ossian Sweet. When Turner tries to move his family into a new home in an all-white neighborhood, a mob of angry white neighbors terrorizes them, threatening Turner until he relinquishes the deed to his house to them.

Lester Moll – Lester Moll assists Wayne County Prosecutor Robert Toms in the *Sweet* trials, along with Ted Kennedy. Moll plays a key role in the pre-trial hearings, calling witnesses to build the state's case that the shooting was disproportionate to the danger posed by the crowd. And he takes the lead in examining witnesses during both trials.

Leon Breiner – Leon Breiner is a car factory foreman who lives in the Garland Avenue neighborhood. In the crowds on the night of September 9, 1925, he's fatally shot by one of the defenders when the mob starts throwing stones at the **house**. He leaves behind a disabled wife and young daughters.

Ray Dove – Ray Dove is a factory worker who lives in a rented apartment across the street from the Sweets' **house** on Garland Avenue with his wife Kathleen Dove and infant daughter. Ray and Kathleen watch the events of September 8 and 9 and are witnesses for the Prosecution during both *Sweet* trials.

Eric Houghberg – Erich Houghberg is a young plumber who rents a room in a house next door to Ray and Kathleen Dove and across the street from the Sweets' **house** on Garland Avenue. Drawn by the excitement, he is standing next to Leon Breiner in the crowd outside the house on September 9th when he's shot in the leg. He survives his injuries and testifies for the Prosecution during the *Sweet* trials.

John Latting – John Latting one of Ossian, Henry, and Otis Sweet's cousins and a fellow student of Henry's at Wilberforce University. Because he joins the Sweet brothers, Norris Murray, Joe Mack, Charles Washington, John Latting, Hewitt Watson, Leonard Morse, and William Davis at the Sweets' **house** on Garland Avenue on the nights of the 8th and 9th of September 1925, he is also charged with the murder of Leon Breiner.

Joe Mack – Joe Mack is the chauffeur Ossian and Gladys Sweet hire around the time they move into their **house** on Garland Avenue. Along with his friend, Norris Murray, and the rest of the defenders—Ossian, Henry, and Otis Sweet, John Latting, Charles Washington, Hewitt Watson, Leonard Morse, and William Davis—Joe is charged with the murder of Leon Breiner after he takes up arms to defend the house on the nights of September 8th and 9th, 1925.

Norris Murray – Norris Murray is a friend of Joe Mack's and a handyman that Ossian and Gladys Sweet hire to help with their move into the **house** on Garland Avenue. He is charged with the murder of Leon Breiner after he joins the rest of the defenders—Ossian, Henry, and Otis Sweet, Joe Mack, Charles Washington, John Latting, Hewitt Watson, Leonard Morse, and William Davis, on the nights of September 8th and 9th.

Hewitt Watson – Hewitt Watson is a friend of Ossian Sweet and an insurance agent at the Black-owned Liberty Life Insurance Company. He volunteers to join Ossian, Otis, and Henry Sweet, John Latting, Joe Mack, Norris Murray, and William Davis in protecting the Sweets' **house** on Garland Avenue, bringing two of his colleagues—Leonard Morse and Charles Washington—along with him. Along with the others, he is charged with the murder of Leon Breiner.

Leonard Morse – Leonard Morse is Hewitt Watson's friend and colleague. Along with Watson and Charles Washington, he joins Ossian, Henry, and Otis Sweet, John Latting, Joe Mack, Norris Murray, and William Davis in protecting the **house** on Garland Avenue. While awaiting trial, he joins with Davis, Washington, and Otis Sweet to demand that the NAACP take charge of the defense despite the objections of the local community. Because Davis's testimony places him upstairs at the time of the shooting, the question of Morse's guilt or

innocence in the death of Leon Breiner contributes to the mistrial in the first *State v. Sweet* case.

Charles Washington – Charles Washington is Hewitt Watson and Leonard Morse's colleague. A Howard University alum like Ossian Sweet, Washington and his colleagues join Ossian, Henry, and Otis Sweet, John Latting, Joe Mack, Norris Murray, and William Davis in defending the **house** on Garland Avenue. While awaiting trial for the murder of Leon Breiner, he joins with Davis, Morse, and Otis Sweet to demand that the NAACP take charge of the defense over the objections of the local community.

Edmund DeVaughn – Edmund DeVaughn is Ossian Sweet's great-grandfather. After being born into slavery and transported from South Carolina to Florida in 1820s, Edmund eventually marries fellow enslaved woman Gilla and has seven sons with her, including Remus and Hubburt DeVaughn. He dies before the beginning of the Civil War, leaving Gilla to finish raising their children alone.

Gilla DeVaughn – Gilla DeVaughn is Ossian Sweet's great-grandmother. Born into slavery, she marries Edmund DeVaughn and has seven sons with him. Widowed before the start of the American Civil War, Gilla must raise her children alone. An early follower of the AME Church, Gilla embraces its values and teaches her children pride, thrift, and the value of hard work. Her efforts pay off when Ossian Hart appoints her son Hubburt Justice of the Peace for the county in which his family had previously been enslaved.

Remus DeVaughn – Remus DeVaughn is one of Edmund and Gilla DeVaughn's sons. As the father of Dora DeVaughn, he is also Ossian Sweet's grandfather. Born into slavery, after Emancipation, Remus joins the rest of his family sharecropping land in northern Florida. But when the fieldwork becomes more than he can manage, he moves his family to Orlando, where Jim Crow segregation prevented him from earning a steady living and forces him into early retirement.

Hubburt DeVaughn – Hubburt DeVaughn is Edmund and Gilla DeVaughn's son Remus DeVaughn's brother. He is the uncle and great-uncle of Dora DeVaughn and the Sweet brothers Ossian, Henry, and Otis. After the DeVaughn family joins the AME Church, Hubburt becomes a minister in the late 1860s. Then, in 1873, Ossian Hart names Hubburt justice of the peace for Leon County Florida, where the DeVaughn family had been formerly enslaved. Hubburt thus represents the promise of Reconstruction to elevate the voices of Black people in politics.

Ossian Hart – Ossian Hart is a member of the Republican Party in Florida during the years of Reconstruction. In the 1872 gubernatorial election, the votes of Black people carry him to the governor's mansion. Although he was himself a slaveowner prior to the American Civil War and his primary political objectives are improving the Southern economy through increased ties to the North, he repays his supporters by quelling anti-Black violence, prohibiting segregation in most public spaces, and naming Hubburt DeVaughn justice of the peace in Leon County. Later, Dora DeVaughn names her second son, Ossian Sweet, after Ossian Hart.

Fred Rochelle – Fred Rochelle is a young, light-skinned Black man who lives in Bartow, Florida around the turn of the century, working in the phosphate mines there. In 1901, he is accused of raping and murdering a local white woman. In response, a mob of white citizens lynches him. Witnessing this violence made a permanent mark on Ossian Sweet and he carried the memory—and the fear it engendered—into his adulthood.

Josephine Goman – Josephine Goman is a Detroit civil rights activist who attends the *Sweet* trials and becomes a member of Clarence Darrow's inner circle during his time in the city. A married mother of five, she nevertheless attracts Darrow's attention and engages in a direct flirtation with him. Following the *Sweet* trials, Goman continues her advocacy, taking over and improving the city's welfare system.

Philip Adler – Philip Adler is a white newspaper reporter for the *Detroit News*, who happens to be passing through the neighborhood near Garland Avenue on the night of the shooting and thus witnesses some of the night's events. He is an important witness for the defense at both trials, since his testimony undermines the state's assertion that there was no violent crowd threatening the Sweets' **house**.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Ted Kennedy – Ted Kennedy assists Wayne County Prosecutor Robert Toms in the *Sweet* trials, along with Lester Moll. Kennedy is responsible for interviewing the defendants on the night of the shooting and for collecting testimony from police and witnesses at the scene.

Kathleen Dove – Kathleen Dove is a homemaker who lives with her husband, Ray Dove, and infant daughter across the street from the Sweets' **house** on Garland Avenue. She watches the events of September 8 and 9 from her front porch and is a witness for the Prosecution during both *Sweet* trials.

Edna Butler – Edna Butler is a seamstress and a friend of Gladys Sweet. Along with Serena Rochelle, she ends up trapped at the **house** on Garland Avenue after dinner on the night of September 8. She testifies for the defense in the later trials.

Serena Rochelle – Serena Rochelle is an interior decorator and friend of Gladys Sweet. Along with Edna Butler, she ends up trapped at the **house** on Garland Avenue after dinner on the night of September 8. She testifies for the defense in the later trials.

Lucius and Elizabeth Riley – Lucius and Elizabeth Riley are Ossian Sweet's first patients after he moves to Detroit. Ossian treats Elizabeth's dislocated jaw, earning loyal clients and many

referrals to his fledgling practice. Lucius Riley later tips Ossian off that Ed and Marie Smith are preparing to sell their **house** on Garland Avenue.

Ed and Marie Smith – Ed and Marie Smith are the couple who sell the **house** on Garland Avenue to Ossian and Gladys Sweet. Ed is a light-skinned Black man who successfully passes as white.

Harry Monet – Harry Monet is a tire factory worker who lives on Garland Avenue. When Ossian and Gladys purchase a **house** there, he becomes a member of the Waterworks Neighborhood Improvement Association along with Harold McGlynn and others. He also testifies in both *Sweet* trials.

Harold McGlynn – Harold McGlynn is an auto plant inspector who lives on Garland Avenue. When Ossian and Gladys purchase a **house** there, be joins the Waterworks Neighborhood Improvement Association with Harry Monet and others. He testifies in both *Sweet* trials.

Otto Lemhagen Otto Lemhagen is Inspector Schuknecht's brother-in-law. He joins the police monitoring the mob at Ossian Sweet's house and later, he testifies against the Sweets.

TERMS

African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church – The African Methodist Episcopal Church is a Protestant sect of the Christian faith. It was the first independent Protestant denomination founded by Black people, who broke from the Methodist Church in protest over racism, slavery, and segregation. The AME Church emphasizes public service, education, thrift, and economic advancement in addition to its standard Christian theology. It was an important partner in the American government's Reconstruction programs following the Civil War, founding schools like **Ossian Sweet**'s alma mater, Wilberforce University, and giving formerly enslaved people the education and tools necessary for participation in American society.

Color Line – The term *color line* refers to the racial segregation that existed in the United States following the abolition of slavery at the end of the American Civil War. Jim Crow laws aimed to strengthen the color line in the American South in the years following Reconstruction. And, following the Great Migration, racist housing policies enforced the color line in cities like Detroit, New York, and Chicago, confining Black residents to specific neighborhoods that were often crowded and lacked the services available in areas with a predominantly white population.

Great Migration – The Great Migration was a massive movement of Black Americans from southern states to northern states that took place primarily between 1910 and 1970. Poor economic conditions, racism, Jim Crow segregation, and public acceptance of lynchings encouraged six million people to uproot their lives in the rural South and seek out economic opportunity, primarily in the urban centers of the North. The demographic shifts in northern cities instigated by the Great Migration also led directly to the rise of nativist sentiment, Ku Klux Klan membership, and increasing segregation.

Jim Crow – *Jim Crow* is the name given to a group of state and local laws put in place in the American South between the 1890s and the 1960s that enforced racial segregation in public facilities (including schools) and prevented interracial marriages. Jim Crow laws were, in many ways, part of a Southern backlash against federal Reconstruction programs in the years following the American Civil War. However, they weren't just a Southern phenomenon, and the Supreme Court upheld them in several key rulings. Many of the people who traveled north during the Great Migration, including **Ossian Sweet**, did so in part to escape Jim Crow segregation.

Ku Klux Klan – The Ku Klux Klan is an American white supremacist organization with a long history of violence and terrorism towards Black Americans, among many other targets. By the 1920s, the second iteration of the Klan had experienced massive growth, driven in part by the popularity of *Birth of a Nation*, a wildly racist film, and the demographic shifts brought about by the Great Migration. The Klan encouraged a nativist message of "One Hundred Percent Americanism." Klan concerns included gaining political power, enforcing social conservatism (including strict gender roles and prohibiting the sale and consumption of alcohol), and white supremacy. The descriptions in *Arc of Justice* of the Detroit Klan chapter stoking racial tensions, fanning the flames of violence, and involving itself directly in politics typify the second iteration of the KKK (which was active between 1915 and 1928).

Lynching – A lynching is an extrajudicial killing carried out by a mob to punish perceived wrongdoing. Historically, lynchings have been dramatic, social events. In the United States, lynching almost always refers to the killing of a Black person by a white mob. Thousands of lynchings took place, particularly—but not exclusively—in the southern states during the years following Reconstruction. They served to enforce Jim Crow laws and the fear they sparked encouraged many people to travel north as part of the Great Migration. **Ossian Sweet** claimed to have witnessed the lynching of Fr**ed Rochelle** firsthand, and this event engendered a lasting fear of white violence in him.

Modernism – Modernism was a philosophical and artistic movement that arose in the Global North in the late 19th and early 20th centuries as a celebration of humankind's capacity for progress and innovation. Modernist apostles like **Clarence Darrow** embraced secularism, technological and industrial innovation, and a revolt against the bourgeois respectability and perceived decadence that they felt characterized the past.

Its attitude of suspicion towards the past became more mainstream in the years immediately following World War I.

NAACP – The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) is a civil rights advocacy organization founded by Black and white activists, including **W. E. B. Du Bois**, in 1909. Its early efforts were focused on rolling back segregationist Jim Crow legislation in the American South and, increasingly, the North as well. Following World War I, the organization's focus on legal challenges to segregationist laws and policies expanded to include public education, lobbying, and legislation against lynchings. Under the leadership of **James Weldon Johnson**, the organization increased its membership tenfold, and by the early 1920s it boasted 90,000 members organized into local chapters nationwide. Under the direction of Johnson and his assistant **Walter White**, the NAACP took over the direction of the *Sweet* cases, securing the services of famed criminal defense lawyer **Clarence Darrow** and parlaying the publicity from the trials into successful fundraising and public awareness campaigns.

Nativism – Nativism is the political attempt to protect and elevate the needs, desires, and concerns of native-born or indigenous populations over other groups. (Importantly, in American history, "nativism" is a movement focused on the descendants of northern European colonizers, not Native Americans.) Political and social elites encouraged nativist sentiment to oppose various waves of immigration during the first century of the United States' existence. Following the American Civil War, the Ku Klux Klan promoted nativist ideology, with an emphasis on the supremacy of people of Nordic or Anglo-Saxon (in other words, northern European) descent.

Reconstruction – Reconstruction is the name for a series of policies and programs enacted by the American government in the years following the American Civil War. Reconstruction aimed to rebuild the country, reestablish trade links and a shared economy between the North and South, modernize the Southern economy, and expand the participation of formerly enslaved people in American politics, education, and life. In these efforts, the government relied on parties like the AME Church, which established schools and colleges for Black students and helped to educate a generation of Black citizens ready and able to fully participate in American politics and society—including **Gilla DeVaughn** and her sons **Remus** and **Hubburt**, and their children. Backlash to the programs fed the rise of the Ku Klux Klan and the severity of Jim Crow laws when Southern white Democrats wrested control of state and local governments back from the federal government in the 1880s.

Redlining – Redlining is the name given to a series of discriminatory practices meant to keep certain types of people—almost always a racial or ethnic minority—from buying houses or living in certain areas of a city or locality. As the Great Migration caused the demographics of northern American cities to shift, a backlash against Black migrants led to a rise in northern racial segregation. Impoverished neighborhoods formed, sometimes when immigrants created their own diaspora communities, and other times when local populations enforced nativist policies confining people thought of as less desirable into concentrated areas. Redlining meant that **Ossian Sweet** couldn't secure financing from a bank for his house on Garland Avenue, and it ensured that the presence of a Black family in the neighborhood would crater the neighboring homes' property values.

Talented Tenth – The idea of "the talented tenth"—an elite, educated, and professionalized leadership class of Black Americans who would spearhead efforts at racial integration—was developed by Northern white philanthropists in the late 19th century. It later became strongly associated with the ideas and writings of **W. E. B. Du Bois**. He publicly argued that members of the talented tenth had the obligation to sacrifice their personal interests to lead and advance the interests of the Black community. Men like Wilberforce University president **William Sanders Scarborough**, **James Weldon Johnson**, and even **Walter White** exemplified the ideal of the talented tenth. Scarborough instilled this idea into Wilberforce students, and **Ossian Sweet** seems to have understood his attempt to take a principled stand on his right to protect his house out of a sense of responsibility to represent and advance his race. Even though men like Du Bois, Johnson, and White advocated tirelessly for the advancement of Black Americans, talented tenth ideology could be—and was—criticized for its classist focus on the wealthy and the educated. It also focused on encouraging Black people to conform to white standards, rather than claiming the inherent right of all Black people—regardless of education or economic status—to participate in American politics and society.

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.

PREJUDICE, SEGREGATION, AND SOCIETY

Arc of Justice focuses on America in the mid-1920s, years during which Jim Crow-style segregation and the terroristic tactics and violence of the Ku Klux Klan flowered in northern American cities like Detroit. The trial of Ossian Sweet, his brother Henry, and eight other men accused of murder for defending Ossian's new **house** from a violent white

mob occurs in this context. Read together, the case and the broader societal situation reveal the depths of prejudice and racism in American culture at the time. By examining these circumstances carefully, the book shows how social custom and legal policies work in tandem to generate prejudice and enforce segregation.

In the years following the end of the American Civil War, Reconstruction-era politics and programs established schools for formerly enslaved people and their families, improved their economic prospects, and increased their political participation. However, former slaveowners and their descendants regained control of the governments in southern states around the turn of the 20th century. They made it harder for Black people to vote, and Black people were deemed unfit for the same kind of jobs as white people, locking them into low-paying, physically demanding labor like farm work and mining. Jim Crow legislation, which prohibited interracial marriages and enforced segregation in public facilities, legally protected these practices. And as Black Americans moved north in large numbers during the Great Migration, white people in northern states flocked to join the Klan, enforced housing segregation by adding legal language to their property deeds that prohibited Black people from buying houses in certain neighborhoods, and began support school segregation. Race riots and lynchings, the most violent expressions of white supremacy, happened in both northern and southern states during the early decades of the 20th century. The book shows how the political elite, by encouraging white people to act on their feelings of racial superiority at the ballot box, in their workplaces, and in their neighborhoods, enabled atrocities. Ossian's individual story thus illustrates broader trends. And by exposing the extensive political and social systems that uphold racism and segregation in American society, the book fights against the argument that racism is personal, rather than systemic.

JUSTICE AND CIVIL RIGHTS

Arc of Justice traces the story of Black doctor Ossian Sweet, whose move into an all-white Detroit neighborhood with his family precipitates the death of a white man when a mob attacks the house. When Ossian, his brother Henry, and eight other men are charged with first-degree murder, the NAACP seizes on the case as an opportunity to bring national attention to the issue of increasing, legally sanctioned but dreadfully unjust housing segregation. The courtroom drama in *Arc of Justice* shows justice to be a living, dynamic thing, for whether or not a law is just in practice depends on how (or if) people interpret and enforce it. Further, the book claims that justice cannot exist without equal rights in law and practice.

For instance, at one point the Detroit Mayor acknowledges the Sweets' legal rights (they can legally purchase their house) while at the same time, he suggests they should submit themselves to injustice (he suggests they're responsible for inciting the crowd's violence by purchasing the house). Other instances of individual and systemic racism illustrate the essential injustice of a system without comprehensive civil rights. In Detroit, mobs run Alexander Turner, John Fletcher, and Fleta Mathies out of homes in all-white neighborhoods, even when the police claim to provide protection. Moreover, the Detroit Police count Klan members among their ranks, and they stand accused of massive, racialized abuses of power—including murder in cold blood. These circumstances all suggest that justice is functionally impossible to achieve in a biased system.

In this context, Clarence Darrow, Walter White, James Weldon Johnson, and Judge Frank Murphy must continually strive to ensure that the co-defendants in *Sweet* receive a fair trial. But full justice—and the civil rights it depends upon—lie beyond the history presented in this book. For example, *Arc of Justice* shows how the blatant violence and overt segregation of the South turns into the more insidious practices of redlining in the North, where restrictive covenants fail to rise to the legal threshold of segregation yet still unjustly carve the city into zones for white and non-white residents. And the jury of the Sweets' "peers" contains only white men. Still, the defense earns a verdict of not guilty in the end, suggesting that the potential for justice is still there—though it requires hard work to bring it about and keep it alive.

SELF-DEFENSE, RACE, AND OWNERSHIP

Arc of Justice centers around the trial of Black doctor Ossian Sweet, his brother Henry, and eight other men who gathered to protect Ossian's new **house** from a threatening mob of white neighbors. Thus, the book presents an idea of self-defense that is deeply tied to the idea that owning (and defending) property is one important way to participate in one's racial group. For example, white Garland Avenue residents worry about safety and depreciating home values thanks to racist housing policies. But perhaps more importantly, the laborers who live on Garland Avenue make just enough money to live in an all-white neighborhood. Living in such a neighborhood confirms their beliefs that they're superior to Black Americans, even those who—like the Sweets—are wealthier, better educated, and more worldly than they are. It's this feeling of racial superiority that the book suggests is valuable enough to protect with violence. In this way, the neighbors' actions mirror the violence and political machinations of the Ku Klux Klan, which were ascendant in Detroit politics in the mid-1920s. Like the Klansmen, they draw a thin line between defending racial purity and self-protection.

Likewise, Ossian defends his humanity and the inherent value of Black people when he takes up arms in his house. The house represents his family's dignity: his wife Gladys angrily maintains that she can live where she pleases; Henry admits to shooting

towards the crowd because he felt threatened. Moreover, because Ossian believes in W. E. B. Du Bois's idea of the talented tenth—the small proportion of Black men and women who are able and are thus responsible for advocating for integration—he acts as if his actions reflect on other Black men in his community. The things that are worth defending—and which one has a legal right to protect—thus grow over the course of the book, until the jury acquits Henry (and by extension Ossian and the rest of the defendants). However, Arc of Justice also makes it clear that despite Ossian's courtroom victory, Black homeowners across the country would continue to fight similar battles to own and then defend their homes, even into the present day. Owning a home might be a way to assert one's dignity and help advance civil rights, but it remains an imperfect, sometimes inaccessible, and even dangerous way to do so.

THE AMERICAN DREAM

The man at the heart of *Arc of Justice*, Ossian Sweet, was born in Florida to parents who were only one generation removed from slavery. Nevertheless, through hard work and luck, they eventually bought a small farm and made sure that their children received the best educations available to them. From this foundation, with no small amount of his own hard work, Ossian became a doctor and built a thriving practice in Detroit's Black Bottom neighborhood. In many ways, then, he exemplifies the American Dream, the idea that, in America, anyone with enough focus and work ethic can pull themselves singlehandedly into success. The house that Ossian buys for his wife Gladys and daughter Iva represents his successful achievement of the American Dream, since it sits in a safe, predominantly white neighborhood a few blocks outside the lines of the rapidly formalizing Black neighborhood.

But Ossian's story ultimately suggests that the American Dream isn't accessible to everyone, particularly those who are poor or nonwhite. The very fact that Ossian stands trial at all highlights how his race keeps him from fully achieving the American Dream. Ossian's academic and professional success doesn't protect him from the threats and violence of the neighborhood's white residents; if anything, his superiority in wealth, education, and status seems to enflame their hatred even more. Moreover, his own social elevation depends on some degree of luck in addition to his hard work: his poor eyesight keeps him ineligible for military service in World War I and likely guarantees his admittance to a medical school that would have been too exclusive if many of his competitors weren't enlisting. And ultimately, the status and wealth that Ossian longed for and worked for don't bring him the security they promised. They cannot prevent his wife, daughter, or brother Henry from dying prematurely; cannot stop the insidious reach of the color line from creeping ever deeper into Detroit society; cannot help him achieve political success or further the cause of the Black race he believed he represented as a member of its talented tenth. Through Ossian's story, Arc of Justice shows how a person's race can prevent them from truly achieving the American Dream.

PROGRESS AND SOCIAL CHANGE

Arc of Justice traces the personal and family history of Black doctor Ossian Sweet and the aftermath of his decision to buy a **house** in a majority-white Detroit neighborhood against the broader context of early 20th century America. Several decades of social, political, and economic upheaval created great opportunities for Black men like Ossian and people from other minority groups. Men like Ossian, the grandson of enslaved people and sharecroppers, could amass fortunes. Members of recently disenfranchised minorities, like the Irish Catholic Frank Murphy or the Polish American John Smith, could challenge a political elite primarily made up of native-born white Protestants. But, the book claims, nothing guarantees progress or makes it easy or straightforward. For example, following the Civil War, the United States government instituted a series of programs, gathered under the umbrella of Reconstruction, designed to extend education to formerly enslaved people and their children, increase their political participation, and provide them equal footing in the labor market. Yet, within a few generations, the descendants of white slaveowners and planters had reasserted their political power in the South, begun a series of segregationist policies and laws called Jim Crow, and established the Ku Klux Klan to terrorize Black citizens. Similarly, while northern cities like Detroit initially promised less discrimination and better jobs for Black Southerners who were willing to make the "Great Migration," sudden influxes of new residents spurred increasing racism and segregation even in formerly abolitionist strongholds. And despite the outcome of the *Sweet* case, in which a jury agreed that Black people had the right to buy homes where they pleased and to defend them by whatever means necessary, the NAACP and other proponents of housing equality were unable to turn the tide of public and legal opinion against the social and economic practices of redlining. Thus, while the defense in the Sweet cases asserted the central humanity and dignity of the defendants, regardless of their skin color or race, the book nevertheless shows how the titular "arc of justice" is slow to create meaningful change in practice.

SYMBOLS

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

HOUSES

In *Arc of Justice*, houses (especially in white neighborhoods) represent participation in the American Dream. They also become the focal point of the contest between the forces of integration and segregation in American society. When Dr. Ossian Sweet, a Black man, buys a house in an all-white Detroit neighborhood, he means this act to broadcast his wealth and status. In this way, the house proves to the world that he has achieved the American Dream, as he raised himself out of an impoverished rural childhood to become a well-educated, widely-traveled, professionally successful, and wealthy doctor.

But home ownership also makes a statement about participation in American society more broadly. As the Great Migration brings increasing numbers of Black Southerners into northern cities, racism and segregation also increase. Restrictive housing covenants and banking policies serve to maintain the line between white and Black neighborhoods and reinforce a sense of superiority among nativist white residents. The white men and women who own homes in the neighborhood around Garland Avenue, for instance, are proud and possessive of their slice of the American Dream, and they don't want to share it with people they consider to be less worthy than themselves. When they move into houses in all-white neighborhoods, Black people like Ossian and Gladys Sweet, Dr. Alexander Turner, John Fletcher, Fleta Mathies, Vollington Bristol, and their families are saying that they have a right to full participation in American society. But, aided and abetted by the Ku Klux Klan, their white neighbors reply that white citizens have more rights when they band together to drive out these Black families by force and violence.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Holt Paperbacks edition of *Arc of Justice* published in 2001.

Prologue Quotes

In the early 1920s, sophisticates scrambled to grab a share of the black life that southern migration was bringing into the cities. White producers mounted all-black musicals. White couples fumbled with the Charleston. And white patrons poured into Chicago's South Side jazz joints and Harlem's nightclubs. If they were lucky, they squeezed into the Vendome, where Louis Armstrong held the floor, or Edmund's Cellar, where Ethel Waters sang the blues. The frenzy was shot through with condescension. White slummers thought black life exciting because it was "primitive" and vital. Visiting the ghetto's haunts became the era's way to snub mainstream society, to be in the avant-garde.

Related Characters: Ossian Sweet

Related Themes:

Page Number: 5

Explanation and Analysis

Arc of Justice explores issues of racial prejudice and segregation in early 20th century America through the example of Dr. Ossian Sweet and the friends who helped him defend his home against an angry white mob intent on keeping Black families like the Sweets out of their neighborhood. This passage comes from a prologue which describes the social upheavals and changes of 1920s America.

During and immediately after World War I, the Great Migration brings thousands of Black Southerners into the North in search of good jobs and better living conditions. White Northerners regard these immigrants with a mixture of distaste and fascination that this passage explores. On the one hand, thanks to modernist philosophies, American culture becomes more secular, and people develop a taste for less formal, more exuberant forms of artistic expression. An openness to jazz music and dancing suggests the possibility that the country's white social and political elites are interested in Black voices and Black art forms in a way that might allow progress towards racial integration in society.

But it quickly becomes apparent that cultivating an interest in a new art form doesn't mean that white people want the color line to give way; the elites who go "slumming" only want to cross it temporarily before returning to the wealthy, white enclaves where they live. Black artists—even the most popular ones—are largely confined to segregated neighborhoods through a combination of economic forces and social conventions. White people can visit these neighborhoods then return to their own segregated communities, content to enjoy the music and dancing as long as these "vital" forms of expression are prevented from spilling over their boundaries and truly infiltrating "civilized" (that is, white) society.

Chapter 1 Quotes

❝ No matter how many advantages families along Garland Avenue enjoyed, though, it was always a struggle to hold on. Housing prices had spiraled upward so fearfully the only way a lot of folks could buy a flat or a house was to take on a crippling burden of debt. The massive weight of double mortgages or usurious land contracts threatened to crack family budgets. Men feared the unexpected assault on incomes that at their best barely covered monthly payments [...] And now they faced this terrible turn of events: Negroes were moving onto the street, breaking into white man's territory. News of their arrival meant so many things. A man felt his pride knotted and twisted. Parents feared for the safety of their daughters [...] And everyone knew that when the color line was breached, housing values would collapse, spinning downward until Garland Avenue was swallowed into the ghetto and everything was lost.

Related Characters: Ossian Sweet, Gladys Sweet

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 16-17

Explanation and Analysis

The legal drama at the center of *Arc of Justice* begins when Ossian and Gladys Sweet, a Black couple, purchase a home in a neighborhood where everyone else is white. White residents react poorly to the idea of sharing their neighborhood with Black people, for both social and economic reasons that this passage explores. Home ownership represents an important part of the American Dream for the Sweets and the neighborhood's other residents in the 1920s, as it still does today. But in a period of explosive population growth and a limited housing market, homeowners faced extreme financial pressures. Twentieth-century industrial progress created opportunities, but also caused social and financial upheaval that threatens to place the American Dream out of reach for Black and white working-class Detroiters alike. In place of true financial stability, the white residents of neighborhoods like Garland Avenue accept the appearance of privilege that comes from living in an all-white neighborhood. This shows that they have at least enough financial stability to keep their families out of the city's lowest-valued areas. The Sweets have wealth, but redlining and prejudicial attitudes about Black people conspire to make them a threat to the stability of the neighborhood. And neighbors' unwillingness to accept their presence prevents them from living in the kinds of neighborhoods populated by others of their professional class.

This systemic prejudice feeds off the racial stereotypes that animate the neighborhood residents in this passage. Believing that Black people are prone to criminality—specifically that Black men's sexual appetites threaten white women's sexual purity and thus the purity of the white race—neighborhood residents worry about the safety of their families. Their unfounded fears contribute to a feeling that the neighborhood is being "invaded," suggesting that white residents need to defend their turf by repelling the alleged invaders. The book shows how this mindset leads directly to the mob violence the Sweets suffer in the days after they move into their home on Garland Avenue.

❝ It took him twelve more years to fulfill his parents' instructions, a dozen long, hard years of schooling to master the material that would make him an educated man and earn the pride that was expected of the race's best men, all the while working as a serving boy for white people [...] Ossian never excelled, but he got an education, as fine an education as almost any man in America, colored or white, could claim. By age twenty-five, he had earned his bachelor of science degree [...] and his medical degree from Washington, D.C.'s Howard University, the jewel in the crown of Negro colleges.

Related Characters: Ossian Sweet, W. E. B. Du Bois

Related Themes:

Page Number: 20-21

Explanation and Analysis

This passage provides readers some backstory on Ossian Sweet, the protagonist of *Arc of Justice*. He grows up in an impoverished family in the American South. He was only two generations removed from slavery—all four of his grandparents were formerly enslaved people. The pervasive disadvantages Ossian faces throughout his childhood and young adulthood demonstrate the deep and abiding racial prejudice in American culture, especially in the South following the end of Reconstruction. White Southerners, many of whom resented federal efforts to integrate formerly enslaved people into American society, retaliated with laws and social customs that segregated society based on race and systematically denied educational, economic, and political rights to Black citizens. Thus, Ossian must leave the South to complete his education, and he has to work throughout his college and medical school careers to afford his tuition.

But in the face of pervasive discrimination and ongoing threats of violence, Ossian manages to earn the kind of professional education out of reach to most Americans in the early 20th century, regardless of their racial or ethnic background. He thus achieves the American Dream of wealth, success, and status, while earning himself a spot in the "talented tenth," the small number of Black Americans who, according to men like W. E. B. Du Bois, would lead the charge for integration by proving their personal worthiness to participate fully in American politics, society, and economic concerns. The fact that Ossian must become a doctor in order to earn this position in American society, however, illustrates how systemic prejudice and segregation create extra barriers for marginalized groups—after all, earning a medical degree has never been easy, or for that matter, accessible to everyone.

Chapter 2 Quotes

❝ The threat of violence was constant. Across the cotton belt, planters organized terrorist cells: the Regulators, the Whitecappers, the Ku Klux Klan. Operating under the protection of darkness, the Klan and their fellows targeted anyone who dared to challenge white domination. They forced teachers in colored schools to abandon their posts. They threatened, assaulted, and burned out those few freedmen who managed to acquire land of their own. Mostly, they waged war against the Republican state governments that set Reconstruction's rules. Vigilantes assassinated dozens of Republicans in the late 1860s and early 1870s, as many as seventy in the heavily black county just east of Leon, where the Klan ran rampant.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 52-53

Explanation and Analysis

To contextualize the segregation and anti-Black prejudice faced by the Sweets and other Black residents of Detroit, *Arc of Justice* delves into American history to trace the uneven progress towards integration and civil rights for Black Americans. In the years immediately following the end of the American Civil War, the federal government instituted a series of policies, called "Reconstruction." These were designed to integrate formerly enslaved people into politics, the economy, and American society in the South. White Southerners—both the wealthy planters who had previously enslaved Black people on their plantations and the poorer white citizens who had at least enjoyed superiority of racial status over enslaved Black people—resented these efforts and fought back against them violently. Attempts to integrate Black citizens were often treated as attacks on white supremacy, so groups like the Klan and others understood their violence not as terrorism but as mounting a defense of the purity of the white race. They used fear and violence to punish Black people for seeking an education or owning land, thus limiting their access to social mobility and economic stability. The success of the Klan and other white supremacist groups, despite federal legislation and a constitutional amendment specifying that Black citizens held equal rights to white citizens, shows how social customs, prejudice, and racially motivated violence can deny people the rights they ostensibly hold as citizens. As long as their rights were curtailed in practice, if not in law, Black Americans were denied justice, equality, and true representation in American politics and society.

❝ So the revolution had come. Eight years earlier, the DeVaughn brothers had been pieces of property. Now they were men who demanded respect: missionaries of the Word, spreading the gospel to their fellow freedmen; aspiring farmers, working to earn a share of the American dream. They were still poor, still landless, still struggling to be equal to whites in fact as well as in name. But they had come so very far, there was every reason to be hopeful [...] What must have run through Gilla's mind as she cradled her granddaughter in her leathery arms? This child wouldn't be like her babies, who had been born into a world now dead and gone. This child would have a future all her own.

Related Characters: Ossian Sweet, Dora DeVaughn, Gilla DeVaughn, Remus DeVaughn, Hubburt DeVaughn

Related Themes:

Page Number: 54

Explanation and Analysis

Ossian Sweet comes from a family of extraordinary achievers, ancestors who didn't hesitate to claim their right to the American Dream. In the years following the end of the American Civil War and Emancipation, they quickly become involved in Reconstruction efforts, thus asserting their right to participate as full American citizens. Their membership in the AME Church—and embracing its values of education and hard work—show the necessity of

supportive institutions for creating equality. The DeVaughn family, including Ossian's maternal grandfather Remus, his brother Hubbert, and their mother Gilla, assert their right to economic stability and full political and social participation in American society, thus advocating for the expansion in practice of the civil rights granted to Black Americans.

Still, prejudice and discrimination mean that they face more barriers to success than their white peers. And their difficulties show how, without social practices accepting and confirming the legal equality granted to Black people, theoretical equality can quickly disappear. Although Gilla certainly has reason to feel hopeful when her granddaughter Dora (Ossian's mother) is born, the segregation, prejudice, and violence that Ossian and his family will face (which the book explores in detail) show how slow and uneven progress towards true equality and civil rights is.

❝ He'd recount it with frightening specificity: the smell of kerosene, Rochelle's screams as he was engulfed in flames, the crowd's picking off pieces of charred flesh to take home as souvenirs. Maybe, just maybe, he did see it all. The bridge was a short walk from his home. He could have been outside—coming back from his father's fields—when the mob drove Rochelle through East Bartow. But he was only five years old in the summer of 1901. And it seems unlikely that Dora would have let him outside anytime that day. More likely, the horrific events imprinted themselves so deeply on Ossian's mind that he convinced himself that he had been there. Either way, the effect was the same. The image of the conflagration—the heart-pounding fear of it—had been seared into his memory.

Related Characters: Ossian Sweet, Dora DeVaughn, Fred Rochelle

Related Themes:

Page Number: 69

Explanation and Analysis

Growing up in the Jim Crow South—where local and state laws enshrine increasingly strict segregation of Black Americans from their white neighbors—the threat of violence hangs continually over young Ossian Sweet, his family, and his community. The impressions he forms about the lynching of Fred Rochelle, which occurred with Ossian was just a young child, demonstrate the pervasive power of violence to enforce the color line and keep Black Americans segregated. Beginning during the years of Reconstruction and increasing in the subsequent decades, white Southerners perceived the integration of Black Americans into society as a threat to the purity of the white race, and they met this imagined threat with violence. Lynchings—violent, often public, extrajudicial executions—dramatically enforce the color line by punishing those judged guilty of crossing it. The gruesome details in this passage, including onlookers taking pieces of Rochelle's body as souvenirs, are unfortunately common elements of late 19th- and early 20th-century lynchings.

Every lynching of a Black person offers a stark reminder that, despite their alleged equal rights in the eyes of the law, if social customs treat them inequitably, their rights effectively don't exist. Until civil rights are equal in practice as well in theory, true justice cannot be served. Finally, the impression that this event made on Ossian speaks to how effective violence was in enforcing the color line—despite the unlikeliness of his witnessing the events directly, they still color his decisions for years to come.

Chapter 3 Quotes

❝ Neighborhoods and businesses weren't the only places where Negroes were increasingly unwelcome: at Scarborough's beloved Oberlin, there was talk of black and white students taking their Bible studies in separate classes. None of this segregation had the sanction of law—state civil rights statutes remained on the books—and it wasn't consistently applied: it was a patchwork of practices differing from place to place and even street to street. But for colored people, the trend was frighteningly familiar.

Related Characters: Ossian Sweet, William Sanders Scarborough

Related Themes:

Page Number: 78-9

Explanation and Analysis

Ossian Sweet attends Wilberforce University—America's first Black university—in the first decade of the 20th century. By the turn of the century, the promises of Reconstruction are already starting to fade. And, as Black Southerners increasingly move into Northern cities during the Great Migration, Jim Crow-style segregationist laws and policies follow them, creeping farther and farther north. This passage describes how Oberlin College, which is located in historically abolitionist Ohio, and which is one of a small number of integrated colleges at this point in time,

begins to flirt with segregating its small population of Black students. This shows both how social pressures can undermine progress—when Wilberforce president William Sanders Scarborough studied at Oberlin, he felt as if his classmates and teachers took little or no notice of his skin color, but treated him the same as the other, mostly white, students.

Such segregation remained technically illegal throughout the United States based on the 14th Amendment to the Constitution, yet it nevertheless became more entrenched in the early decades of the 20th century. This shows the interplay between legal codes and social customs. Without the support of custom and practice, the law has little ability to prevent segregation and ensure equality and access for all people, regardless of their skin color. And without protected equality, Black Americans face growing injustice.

> A life in medicine would give Ossian the status he dreamed of—and the money he craved: a doctor could easily take home fifteen hundred dollars a year, an almost unimaginable amount to a young man whose father probably earned a fifth of that figure. If Ossian should rise in the profession, as he intended to do, his income could go even higher [...] But it wasn't the money alone that mattered. A high income would give him the outward signs of success: the dapper clothes he had never had a chance to wear, the fashionable home so different from the farmhouse his father had built. But to be called doctor—Doctor Ossian H. Sweet—that would be the greatest mark of respect he could imagine.

Related Characters: Ossian Sweet

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 85-86

Explanation and Analysis

This passage explains why Ossian Sweet, the protagonist of *Arc of Justice*, dreams of becoming a doctor. He grows up in the final decades of the 19th century in the American South, where he faces extreme prejudice and segregation. The failed promises of Reconstruction-era policies mean that his highly educated family nevertheless faces limitations on their upward mobility and success. Despite their hard work, his parents remain subsistence-level farmers during his childhood.

Determined to escape the South, Ossian sets his sights on achieving wealth and professional success as a doctor. Very few white men—and even fewer Black people—manage to become doctors; as far as Ossian is concerned, for him to do so will show that he deserves the respect of others, both Black and white. Success in this endeavor means not just achieving the wealth and status of the American Dream but becoming a member of the talented tenth—the select few Black men and women who felt themselves charged with advocating for integration. Thus, becoming a doctor allows Ossian to claim his human dignity and worth in the face of crushing prejudice and segregationist policies that hem him in and limit his opportunities at every turn. However, though Ossian fully believes that becoming a doctor will free him, the book overwhelmingly shows that this isn't exactly the case in practice. Being a doctor doesn't protect him from the racist violence he suffers when he buys the house on Garland Street, and long after his trial ends, he struggles to make ends meet and feel successful.

> Violence finally ended on the fourth day [...President] Wilson ordered two thousand federal troops into the capital to secure the streets. And a furious rainstorm drove both whites and blacks indoors. Negro spokesmen insisted, however, that neither federal action nor a fortuitous turn in the weather had quelled the attack. James Weldon Johnson [...] arrived in the city just as the soldiers were taking up positions. "The Negroes themselves saved Washington by their determination not to run, but to fight," he concluded after two days of consultation and investigation, "fight in defense of their lives and their homes. If the white mob had gone on unchecked—and it was only the determined effort of black men that checked it—Washington should have been another and worse East St. Louis."

Related Characters: James Weldon Johnson (speaker), Ossian Sweet

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 96-97

Explanation and Analysis

In July of 1919, while Ossian Sweet studies medicine at Howard University in Washington, D.C. a race riot breaks out. Rumors break out among hundreds of bored, restive white soldiers (thanks to the rise of Jim Crow-style segregation throughout the country, the armed forces at

this time are segregated) stationed near the city that local Black men have committed a series of sexual assaults, including one against a serviceman's wife. The soldiers organize themselves and march into the city's predominantly Black neighborhoods, attacking innocent bystanders. But the residents of Foggy Bottom, near Howard, take an armed stand against the soldiers' violence.

This riot points to the double standard of self-defense arguments when it comes to racial violence: the soldiers respond to a perceived threat against their group (other white people), yet their response entails violence against random Black people who are just in the wrong place at the wrong time. But the truly self-defensive actions of the Black people who opposed the mob aren't given the credit they deserve. This provides an example of how civil rights in practice failed to protect Black Americans from violence and chaos thanks to broad support of the color line and the promulgation of prejudicial fears about groups considered undesirable by the native-born, white political and social elite.

In the aftermath of the riot, James Weldon Johnson, the executive secretary of the NAACP, attributes the end of the violence to the bravery of the Black men and women who chose to defend themselves. His words in this passage acknowledge their bravery and human dignity in a way that other explanations (the weather, the presence of the national guard) ignore. This has a huge impression on Ossian, as it seems to teach him that the only way a Black person can hope to live in peace is to be willing to take up arms in self-defense. This perhaps helps Ossian justify defending his house on Garland Street later in the narrative.

Chapter 4 Quotes

❝ But it was mounting discrimination in the real estate market that increasingly sealed Negroes into Black Bottom. Since the early 1910s, white real estate agents and landlords in Chicago and New York had refused to so much as show Negroes homes in white neighborhoods, saying that the presence of colored people depressed property values. In the course of the Great War, these practices spread to Detroit. Not every real estate agent or landlord signed on: if colored folks were willing to pay a premium for a piece of property in a white part of town, some real estate men were happy to oblige them. But to defy the new racial conventions took more courage—or more avarice—than many real estate agents and landlords had. So discriminatory practices passed from office to office, property to property, and racial hatred gradually turned into common business practice, the way things were done.

Related Characters: Ossian Sweet

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 108

Explanation and Analysis

This passage describes the pressures of massive population growth—thanks in part to the arrival of Black Southerners as part of the Great Migration—and how it led to increasingly stark housing segregation. As more and more Black people come to Northern urban centers, many white residents resent their presence. This gives rise to the segregationist policies and practices known as "redlining." Although Black Americans are legally given the same rights as all other Americans, unspoken social agreements between banks, homeowners, and real estate agents serve to clearly demarcate the color line separating Black and white Americans into separate neighborhoods and social communities. The more that segregation confines Black people into specific neighborhoods—all too often the oldest, least well-maintained, and most rundown parts of a city—the more white residents accept nativist ideas about the moral, social, and economic inferiority of Black people. And the more people embrace these ideas, the more of a liability Black people seem to be in a neighborhood, thanks to prejudicial associations between them, poverty, and immorality. Thus, the color line in real estate becomes a self-perpetuating idea and breaches of it—as when the Sweets move into an all-white neighborhood—become ever more threatening to white homeowners.

❝ While Du Bois pledged that Negroes would return from Europe ready to fight for equal rights, socialists A. Phillip Randolph and Chandler Owen preached the power of armed resistance. "We are…urging Negroes and other oppressed groups confronted with lynching and mob violence to act upon the recognized and accepted law of self-defense," the pair wrote during the bloody summer of 1919. "Always regard your own life as more important than the life of the person about to take yours, and if a choice has to be made between the sacrifice of your life and the loss of the lyncher's life, chose to preserve your own and to destroy that of the lynching mob."

Related Characters: Ossian Sweet, W. E. B. Du Bois

Related Themes:

Page Number: 118

Explanation and Analysis

This passage describes reactions among important Black activists, including W. E. B. Du Bois and others, to the racial violence that rocked Washington, D. C. during the summer of 1919. A race riot breaking out in the nation's capital only seems to have confirmed the depth and breadth of segregationist sentiment, even in the North.

As the Great Migration brings waves of Black Southerners into the North in search of better jobs, Jim Crow-style segregation and violence follow close behind them. Segregationist laws and membership in white supremacist groups such as the Ku Klux Klan increased in the Northern states during the early decades of the 20th century, in part as their leaders stoked fears among native-born white citizens. A fear that native-born white Americans would have to share valuable privileges and resources with more recent immigrants and Black people—nativism, in other words—inspires efforts to shore up the color line.

In this context, the words of Du Bois and others quoted in this passage encourage Black people to take up arms in self-defense, a lesson that Ossian will carry with him into an all-white Detroit neighborhood a few years later. But the calls for armed resistance also cast the defense of life and property as an assertion of humanity in the face of utter degradation and violence. More than almost any other kind of violence, lynchings—extrajudicial executions of Black people suspected of crimes—demonstrate an utter disregard for the civil rights of victims, such as the presumption of innocence or the right to trial by jury. In this light, calls to take up arms emphasize the *humanity* of Black citizens, rather than endorsing violence for its own sake.

Chapter 5 Quotes

❝ He could demand a new status. Rather than driving his old Model T [...] he bought a brand-new Buick touring car, an automobile to match the fine machines of his senior colleagues parked outside Dunbar Memorial. There wasn't any question that, after his time away, he'd rebuild his practice in Black Bottom. But instead of moving back to Palace Drugs, he rented a space a few blocks north of the pharmacy. It was just a storefront, right next door to a funeral home, hardly a reassuring sight for sick folk making their way to his waiting room, but for the first time in his career, Ossian had an office of his own, an indulgence perhaps, but also a sure sign of upward mobility.

Related Characters: Ossian Sweet, Edward Carter

Related Themes:

Page Number: 135-136

Explanation and Analysis

On the eve of their move to Garland Avenue, Ossian and Gladys Sweet are living the American Dream. Not only has Ossian built a successful medical practice, but he has just returned from a trip to Europe where he learned about cutting-edge medical research into neurology and radiology. His fancy new car and spacious office show the world that he has achieved his goals. He has more education and wealth than many of the city's white residents. Getting this education is a way of demanding respect from others, including his own colleagues, many of whom came from much more privileged and well-connected backgrounds than Ossian's. Although they have all arrived in the same place, Ossian has had farther travel, both literally and figuratively, to get there.

But underneath Ossian's desire for status and respect lies a basic need for human dignity, especially in a world where prejudice and racism limit his social and economic mobility, in addition to threatening violence. And Ossian's need to be acknowledged and impress people, especially his colleague and mentor, Dr. Edward Carter, provides insight into the character of a man who will soon buy a home in an all-white neighborhood and will assert his right to live there with armed resistance. Ossian refuses to sacrifice his dignity for the comfort of the white people who try to oppress him and his community.

❝ Then, a woman who lived across the street from Bristol's house mounted her porch and launched into a harangue. "If you call yourselves men and are afraid to get those niggers out," she screamed, "we women will move them, you cowards!" That was it. Almost instantaneously the mob began stoning the house. Someone approached the police to ask if they would step aside for five minutes; it wouldn't take any longer to drive the coloreds away. When the inspector refused to move his men, the mob stoned them too.

Related Characters: Ossian Sweet, Gladys Sweet, Vollington Bristol

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 154

Explanation and Analysis

This passage describes the reaction when Vollington Bristol, a member of Detroit's Black elite, moves into a home against the wishes of the Tireman Avenue Neighborhood Association. Neighborhood associations like this one are key to the expansion of redlining, as they encourage homeowners to add restrictive covenants to their deeds to prevent Black people from purchasing homes in the area, and they follow up with threats and violence if these quasi-legal efforts fail to keep the color line intact. This occurs the summer before Ossian and Gladys Sweet move into their house on Garland Avenue.

In this passage, an angry woman in the crowd excoriates the men in the neighborhood for failing to protect themselves and their families against a so-called invasion of Black people. She uses a racial epithet to describe the Bristols. Her hatred and fear suggest a concern with preserving racial purity. She insults the masculinity of the men in the crowd, and threatens to attack the family herself, thus using threats of violence to bully and control her new Black neighbors. Racial purity and violence were key elements of nativist campaigns to shore up the color line in 1920s Detroit, and they show how both Black homeowners and white neighbors perceive their actions as self-defense. Unquestionably, Black homeowners bear the brunt of the violence and danger in these clashes over housing rights. The fact that Bristol sought police protection points to the fact that he was aware of the possible danger, and the fact that members of the white mob assumed that the (white) police officers would be on their side points to the strength of group affiliation along the color line.

Chapter 6 Quotes

❝ But it was nothing more than a façade, as inside the police headquarters, corruption was rampant, and every Negro in the city knew that justice received here would be tempered at best, lethal at worst. Colored people raised in Alabama, Mississippi, or Florida hardly expected justice to be blind, but still they despised the blinding prejudice that seemed to consume Detroit's cops. Colored men were two and a half times more likely to be arrested than whites, colored women almost seven times as likely as their Caucasian counterparts. Once they were in custody, Negroes routinely were held for days without being formally charged and often were denied access to lawyers—sometimes suspects were moved from precinct to precinct so they couldn't be found, then were threatened and even beaten until they confessed.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 171

Explanation and Analysis

When the book follows the Garland Avenue defenders to the Detroit Police Headquarters, it employs the building itself as a metaphor for the state of justice and civil rights in Detroit (and, by extension, America) in the early decades of the 20th century. Despite the grandeur and beauty of the building, violence and racism stain the Detroit police's reputation, especially regarding their treatment of Black citizens.

Detroit is a common destination for Southern Black immigrants who travel north during the Great Migration in search of better jobs and opportunities. The growth of industry in Detroit (especially automobile manufacturing) creates jobs that draw newcomers. But as the city's demographics become more diverse, the native-born, white political and economic elites stir up nativist sentiment against the Black people they see as outsiders to reinforce the color line and maintain their control over the city's politics and society.

The police are a key part of these efforts, especially as the all-white force is particularly violent toward Black citizens. And while the law unequivocally states that Black Americans have the same rights as everyone else, the book shows time and again that this simply isn't true in practice. Thus, Black men and women aren't just accused of crimes and arrested more frequently than their white counterparts, but they are denied equal protection and equal access to justice by policemen who file charges slowly to deny arrestees access to lawyers. This shows how social custom and the application of law in practice can undermine the theoretical equality granted to Black Americans in the wake of the American Civil War and the end of slavery.

> All summer long, the Invisible Empire had been trying to "induce Negroes to go into districts populated entirely by persons who would ... resent such an invasion," hoping that [...] Detroit would be consumed by racial violence so severe the city government would topple [...] Of course, Negroes had a legal right to live wherever they wished. But, insisted Smith, "it does not always do for any man to demand to its fullest the right which the law gives him. Sometimes by doing so he works irremediable harm to himself and his fellows." In fact, segregation was a social good, and those who dared to challenge it an enemy to their people and their city [...] "I shall go further. I believe that any colored person who endangers life and property, simply to gratify his personal pride, is an enemy of his race as well as an incitant of riot and murder."

Related Characters: John Smith (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 195-196

Explanation and Analysis

Following the shooting on Garland Avenue, the city of Detroit erupts in horror and anger that plays out, in part, in the concurrent mayoral election. John Smith, the incumbent, was elected by a coalition of progressives, working-class white people, European immigrants, and Black Detroiters. But now he faces an opponent backed by the Klan. In the context of increasingly violent racial confrontations like the one on Garland Avenue, Smith puts out a statement in the form of an open letter to the police commissioner which includes his words in this passage.

In his statement, Smith attempts to preserve his anti-Klan platform while trying to ingratiate himself to nativist Detroiters by pandering to their fears and grievances. Most tellingly, his statement points towards the yawning chasm between the rights granted to Black citizens in the constitution and the rights they can claim in practice. He directly claims that Black people should willingly give up some of their rights to maintain peace and order in society, even though this requires them to accept second-class status. His comfort with making these proclamations shows how easily the de facto, limited rights of Black Americans were accepted and even embraced by political and social leaders. His comments also emphasize the sad fact that granting equal rights in theory will not lead to justice until rights are equal in practice.

> The Klan was in the ascendancy; the Negroes' white allies on the bench had deserted them; the mayor they had helped to elect had endorsed injustice and declared the pursuit of civil rights a threat to peace and liberal democracy. No longer was this simply a question of whether the Sweets were justified in firing into the mob on Garland Avenue. Now the Talented Tenth was locked in combat against segregation itself, battling to preserve some shred of the promise that brought almost a million people out of the South in the previous ten years, to show that the North was different, to prove that there were places in America where Jim Crow would not be allowed to rule. This had become a fight over fundamentals.

Related Characters: Ossian Sweet, Gladys Sweet, John Smith

Related Themes:

Page Number: 196

Explanation and Analysis

Arc of Justice follows the case of the Sweets and the shooting on Garland Avenue to explore race relations and the state of civil rights in 1920s Detroit and, by extension, throughout the country. And as this passage lays out, in the 1920s, the civil rights of Black Americans are in dire condition. In the early decades of the 20th century, thousands of Black Southerners traveled north as part of the Great Migration in search of better jobs and opportunities. Instead of welcoming these newcomers, Northern communities all too often embraced nativism, closing ranks to protect the interests of native-born white people rather than accepting new citizens into their communities. Jim Crow-style legislation, which enshrined social segregation in local and state legal codes throughout the South, followed Black migrants north. And cities like Detroit, Chicago, and New York saw increasing segregation and hardening of the color line as the number of Black residents in each city increased. Alongside these developments, the white supremacist group the Ku Klux Klan expanded in the early 20th century into the North.

These circumstances show how social customs, legal codes, and politically powerful organizations like the Klan work together to enforce segregation, encourage prejudice, and deny Black Americans the rights they were theoretically granted under the United States Constitution. The disadvantages and injustices visited upon the Black residents of Detroit show how injustice prevails until the rights of all members of a society are truly equal. Black Detroiters are disenfranchised and confined to small, overcrowded, under-resourced sections of the city, then nearly forgotten in the electoral struggle between two

different factions of white political elites—the overtly racist Klan supporters on the one hand and the allegedly progressive but still nativist classes of laborers and established European immigrants on the other.

The end of this passage also lays out how the Sweets' case gradually morphs from the question of whether Ossian had the right to defend his house, to instead be about all Black Americans and their rights to own and defend their property. This shift brings both positives and negatives. It gives Ossian and his friends access to the celebrity lawyers needed to acquit the house's defenders, for one. But it also means that the defense must compromise on some of its principles, such as by allowing white lawyers to join the defense rather than sticking with the Black legal team they began with.

Chapter 7 Quotes

❝ With its fight against restrictive covenants, though, the NAACP believed it had a way to show its erstwhile allies that in the era of the KKK they were not assured of being on the safe side of the color line. Already the NAACP had reports of builders barring Jews from new housing developments. And there was every reason to believe that Anglo-Saxons would soon extend such prohibitions to Catholics and immigrants as well. Every opportunity they had, association officials hammered the message home. Agreements that denied blacks access to the homes of their choice were "the entering wedge of the Ku Klux Klan program of elimination."

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 204-205

Explanation and Analysis

This passage explains the NAACP's choice to support the Sweets' legal battle. This is part of the organization's ongoing legal advocacy for civil rights, especially in terms of fighting the early 20th century redlining practices (social and legal constraints that keep non-white people from buying homes in many neighborhoods) that increasingly confine people from marginalized groups into low-valued, run-down neighborhoods.

The early decades of the 20th century see an intensification of nativist sentiment in the United States, driven by demographic changes from increased European immigration and the Great Migration (in which thousands of Black Southerners moved to the North in search of better jobs and opportunities). Organizations like the Ku Klux Klan stoke nativist resentment, encouraging communities of native-born, white Americans to fear losing their power and to organize around efforts to defend the color line. While most segregationist policies, even in the North, aimed at keeping specifically Black people confined physically and socially into specific corners of society, the NAACP argues that allowing this type of segregation is a slippery slope. Thus, as NAACP agents explain, segregationist policies can be weaponized against anyone who's not considered fully white—not just Black people. Their concern shows both how legal practices and social customs work together to enforce segregation.

❝ Ossian was quoted as saying in late September, "I am willing to stay indefinitely in the cell and be punished. I feel sure by the demonstration made by my people that they have confidence in me as a law-abiding citizen. I denounce the theory of Ku Kluxism and uphold the theory of manhood with a wife and tiny baby to protect." Tough as nails on the night of the shooting, Gladys became in White's hands a black Madonna, her arms aching for the child she could not hold. "Though I suffer and am torn loose from my fourteen-month-old baby," she said, "I feel it is my duty to the womanhood of the race. If I am freed I shall return and live at my home on Garland Avenue."

Related Characters: Ossian Sweet, Gladys Sweet (speaker), Walter White, Iva Sweet, Leon Breiner

Related Themes:

Page Number: 220

Explanation and Analysis

While awaiting their murder trial for the death of Leon Breiner, who was shot while the Sweets and their friends tried to hold off an angry mob from the house on Garland Avenue, both Ossian and Gladys Sweet are held in the Wayne County Jail. This passage shows how the NAACP—mostly through Walter White's savvy efforts—crafts the Sweets' story both to cast the defendants in a good light and to serve the NAACP's broader efforts at advocating for civil rights and fair housing policies. The Sweets, an all-American success story despite the limits placed on them by racism, provide an excellent example for the NAACP to highlight the cruelty and inhumanity of a segregated society. And these words from their own mouths provide insight into how Ossian and Gladys see themselves—and their attempts to claim the

American Dream—in the context of their moment in American history.

In the 1920s, nativist sentiment—a desire on the part of well-established, native-born, white Americans to prevent Black people and immigrants from European countries deemed undesirable—encourages the rise of white supremacist organizations like the Ku Klux Klan and leads to an increase in housing segregation and other prejudicial social and legal practices throughout the country. Ossian Sweet leaves the South of his childhood to pursue greater opportunities in the North, but racial prejudice and threats of violence follow him to Detroit, where the Klan is not just popular but is also politically powerful. Racism, prejudice, and segregation limit his ability to live the American Dream of wealth and status; the white residents of the Garland Avenue neighborhood succeed, at least temporarily, in preventing Ossian and Gladys from buying a home in the neighborhood.

But Ossian doesn't just understand his life in the context of the American Dream; his self-perception also draws on the talented tenth ideology espoused by W. E. B. Du Bois and others, which holds that a small minority of very talented and special Black Americans can and will, by their excellence of character and their success, lead the process of racial integration, thus earning full civil rights for themselves and their peers in the process. Ossian's education steeped him in this ideology, and when he states his willingness to remain in jail as long as necessary to provide an example for "[his] people," he shows his determination to make good on his membership in this elite group. The comments made by both Ossian and Gladys suggest that they see themselves as blazing a path for other Black Americans while also claiming their dignity and humanity as people. This is why Ossian refers to the right of a man to protect his family, while Gladys appeals to maternal instincts in attempts to humanize herself and appeal to anyone who would be sympathetic toward a mother who's been separated from her toddler.

Chapter 8 Quotes

❝❝ Once he embraced the avant-garde, he lost all faith in the legal system—"society is organized injustice," he insisted—and grew bored with the intricacies of legal procedure. But he continued to practice law because in the glare of a high-profile case he found the perfect opportunity to attack the status quo and proclaim the modernist creed. "This meant more than the quibbling with lawyers and juries, to get or keep money for a client so that I could take part of what I won or saved for him," he said in his old age. "I was dealing with life, with its hopes and fears, its aspirations and despairs. With me it was going to the foundation of motive and conduct and adjustments for human beings, instead of blindly talking of hatred and vengeance, and that subtle, indefinable quality that men call 'justice' and of which nothing is really known."

Related Characters: Clarence Darrow (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 234

Explanation and Analysis

Clarence Darrow, America's most famous criminal defense lawyer in the 1920s, joins the legal team representing the Sweets and their friends in their murder trial. His personal and professional history mean he's well-suited for the job, and this passage explores some of his rationales for joining the NAACP in its fight for civil rights. Importantly, Darrow adheres to the modernist philosophy, a movement that celebrates humanity's capacity for innovation and improvement and which aimed to pull down old-fashioned ideas, morals, and customs. The elitism and white supremacy that organizations like the Ku Klux Klan cling to harks back to the era before the American Civil War, and they thus represent a satisfying target for Darrow's modernist crusade. The ongoing need to fight for justice on behalf of his clients also illustrates the uneven course of progress; strenuous advocates must continue to advance their causes or they'll never be successful.

Darrow's modernist sensibilities draw him to causes that advanced equal rights for historically marginalized groups, like manual laborers, European immigrants, and Black Americans in part because they helped him to see clearly the rampant injustices in a system that denied equal rights to all citizens. His comments provide the book's strongest indictment of the American legal and social systems that privilege some groups over others and deny true justice to members of historically marginalized groups. To a certain extent, the very existence of men like Darrow illustrates the

injustice in a system where people's rights are equal in the theory of the law, but where social practice and common attitudes conspire to encourage prejudice and enforce segregation.

"Above all I want them to know that they are in a court where the true ideal of justice is constantly sought. A white judge, white lawyers, and twelve white jurymen are sitting in judgment of eleven who are colored black. This alone is enough to make us fervent in our effort to do justice. I want the defendants to know that true justice does not recognize color."

Related Characters: Frank Murphy, John Smith

Related Themes:

Page Number: 249

Explanation and Analysis

The Sweets and their friends luckily find themselves in Judge Frank Murphy's court, a man of high moral convictions who was also elected to his post by a coalition of Detroit's progressive and Black communities. It is important to remember that Murphy was a savvy politician—he was elected judge by a coalition of progressive and Black voters who wanted reform in Detroit's notoriously harsh criminal court—and to a certain extent, his comments likely serve his political ambitions by casting himself as a champion of justice. Still, in the atmosphere of racial tension that characterized Detroit in the summer and fall of 1925, even something tame as trying to ensure fair (that is, color blind) justice constitutes a stand against the forces of prejudice and segregation. Murphy's comments remind readers—as they were meant to remind his peers in the 1920s—that as long as a society allows racism and segregation, it takes extraordinary and active measures to ensure justice. In this way, his comments and his attitude towards the Sweets and the trial stand in stark contrast to Mayor John Smith who, although he owed his office to a similar coalition of voters as Murphy, failed to take a stand for justice and equality throughout the *Sweet* trials.

The system isn't yet fair, unbiased, or equal—Murphy calls attention to the lack of non-white and female jurors—but in holding a trial as scrupulously fair as possible, Murphy hopes to show that justice still has a home in American society. It's this kind of thinking that helped him to create the circumstances for the Sweets to have as fair a trial as possible. Additionally, this lays the groundwork for a long and prestigious legal and political career that sees Murphy advancing civil rights at all levels of the American justice system, up to the Supreme Court.

Not once in the many appearances that the newspapers reported did Smith defend the right of colored families to live wherever they pleased, as he had done during the July disturbances; not once did he criticize banks, insurance companies, builders, and real estate agents for hemming Negroes into Black Bottom, nor did he condemn mobs for assaulting those few who managed to break through its boundaries; not once did he talk about the Sweets, although the story was white-hot as the mayoral campaign was coming to a climax. It was a political silence, given white Detroit's hostility to Negroes crossing the neighborhood color line, a simple act of omission—and an unrepentant sin of commission in the ongoing construction of a segregated city.

Related Characters: Frank Murphy, John Smith

Related Themes:

Page Number: 253

Explanation and Analysis

This passage occurs as John Smith is trying to win the general election for mayor of Detroit, which occurs at the same time as Ossian Sweet and his friends are on trial for the shooting at Garland Avenue. At this time, John Smith is mayor of Detroit. Although he didn't have the elite, native-born pedigree of Detroit's political and cultural elite, the scrappy Polish American former boxer won the office in a special election with the support of a bloc of progressive, immigrant, and Black voters; it was the same coalition that elected Frank Murphy judge a few years previously. Nevertheless, as this passage explains, in the runup to the general mayoral election of 1925, Smith tries to maintain his appeal to the broadest coalition of voters, including native-born white Detroiters that the Klan is trying to get to support their candidate.

Smith's actions show how deeply engrained prejudice is in American society in the early 20th-century and points to how difficult it will be to uproot. A whole system of economic and social pressures reinforces the color line and keeps Black families segregated, and the mayor's silence about these injustices constitutes an act of complicity. In a city where Black residents don't have the same rights as their white counterparts—in practice, if not in theory—then silence about their plight allows it to continue. In contrast, despite the anger and fear white Detroiters feel about Black

families crossing the color line, Frank Murphy takes the much more difficult step of working to ensure a fair trial for the defendants in a courtroom that is as color blind as he can make it. And in the end, of the two men, Murphy has the longer and more illustrious career. This suggests that, at least in these select cases, the people advocating for justice, equality, and humanity will prevail and those who allow injustice to continue will be left behind.

Chapter 9 Quotes

❝ When the proceedings resumed at half past nine on Thursday, November 5, the courtroom had been transformed into a tableau of American justice. On a simple bench along one wall sat the eleven defendants, Ossian and Gladys side by side on the far end, exchanging occasional whispers but otherwise watching events with grim-faced concentration. Against the opposite wall sat twelve of their peers—in name if not in fact—arranged in two neat rows of chairs set behind a low railing. Between the two groups in the well of the courtroom stood the representative of the people, the accuser facing the accused as the finest of Anglo-Saxon traditions required, a handsome young white man come to say why eleven Negroes should spend the rest of their lives in prison paying for their crimes.

Related Characters: Ossian Sweet, Clarence Darrow, Gladys Sweet, Robert Toms

Related Themes:

Page Number: 267

Explanation and Analysis

By the time *Arc of Justice* follows the Sweets and their friends into the courtroom for the first day of their murder trial, it's become clear that prejudice and segregation are rife in Detroit and in the United States in general. Judge Frank Murphy puts mighty effort into ensuring a fair and color blind trial for the defendants, and the NAACP has secured Clarence Darrow, the most country's most famous defense lawyer to represent the defendants. But on the trial's opening day, it's still an open question whether these efforts will result in a miscarriage of justice. The defendants stand accused of premeditated murder by Prosecutor Robert Toms, who holds that the Sweets' choice to move into an all-white neighborhood deliberately provoked the white mob to violence. Despite the evident weaknesses in his case, public opinion broadly sides with the prosecution at the outset of the trial, thanks to extreme levels of segregation and a rising tide of nativist sentiment feeding off the political rise of the Klan.

Thus, the outward facing image of the court—the clean lines of spectators, defendants, and jurors; the careful balance of the prosecution and the defense tables in front of the judge's bench; and the long history of the American justice system—is tranquil, with no hint of the racialized and political tensions that roil Detroit in 1925. The clean, calm courtroom suggests the potential for color blind, truly righteous justice even as everything in the surrounding society betrays the fact that justice is in no way guaranteed.

❝ Ossian didn't have to testify. No one could have objected to his refusing, so great was the responsibility: if he said the wrong word, put the wrong inflection in his voice, sat in a way that struck the jurors as too casual or too confident, grew rattled under cross-examination, succumbed to a single flash of anger, whatever sympathy Darrow and Hays had won for the defendants could be lost, the entire defense destroyed. But Ossian didn't refuse. Undoubtedly he agreed out of pride—the intoxicating sense that in the past few weeks he had become the representative of his race and the champion of its rights—and, as always, out of obligation. He would do what his lawyers wanted him to do, what his wife and brothers and friends needed him to do, what his colleagues surely expected him to do. He had no choice, really, but to take the stand.

Related Characters: Ossian Sweet, Clarence Darrow, Gladys Sweet, Arthur Garfield Hays

Related Themes:

Page Number: 288

Explanation and Analysis

Ossian Sweet takes the stand near the end of the first Sweet trial as a witness. He thus makes a dangerous choice: since public opinion sides with the mob rather than the defendants so strongly in the weeks preceding the trial, Ossian's testimony must be perfect to avoid alienating the jury or confirming racist white Detroiters' erroneously held beliefs about the inferiority of Black people. In a way, taking the stand fulfills Ossian's American Dream almost as much as owning the house on Garland Avenue would have. From his impoverished youth in the American South through his Northern education and the beginning of his medical career in Detroit, the book has shown that Ossian is driven by the desire to fulfil the ideals of the talented tenth, to be a representative of Black Americans and to use his successful

example to break down the walls of segregation. In standing trial, and particularly in his eloquent testimony and calm self-control under vigorous cross-examination, Ossian fulfills the role admirably, both understanding and portraying his trial as a selfless act of service in the name of advancing civil rights. This passage highlights the limits that racism and segregation place on Ossian's American Dream, while also suggesting his power to transcend those limitations by testifying.

But, as this passage suggests, the weight of this responsibility renders his choice somewhat forced. And after all, Ossian's home wasn't the first surrounded and attacked by a white mob over the summer of 1925; he merely had the bad luck to be the owner of the house where a bystander was shot and killed. Moreover, Ossian chose to live in Detroit because, as a friend once told him, it was a place where even a Black man could earn respect and opportunity through hard work. But when he arrived in the city, increasing segregation and hardening of the color line had conspired to limit his opportunities before he could even establish himself. Ossian becomes a representative of his race because he dared to challenge the systemic social and legal forces enshrining prejudice.

supremacist groups like the Ku Klux Klan (or even just by neighbors who don't want Black families to compromise their property values) lie beneath what happened on the night of the Garland Avenue shooting, Darrow sidesteps these issues in the first trial. Racial tensions in the city are high, both on account of violent clashes over the summer and the Klan's overt political involvement in the mayoral election. In part, it seems like good legal strategy to avoid asking the jurors to recognize their potential prejudices or to put them aside.

But backing off from the underlying social issues at play in the trial also shows how slow and arduous progress towards equal civil rights in American society can be. Darrow asks for justice, but he does so under the guise of asking the white jurors to show mercy and kindness towards the historically marginalized and systematically disadvantaged defendants. While any verdict of "not-guilty" will represent justice served and a step forward for civil rights—since that will show the defendants have received a fair trial on the grounds of self-defense—without acknowledging the root causes of systemic prejudice and racism, only small progress can be made toward achieving truly equal civil rights.

❝ But his message was soothingly soft. He wouldn't demand that the walls of segregation be brought down, that whites welcome blacks into their neighborhoods, or that they acknowledge Negroes as the brothers they were. Like Johnny Smith before him, he asked for nothing more than tolerance. "I ask you gentlemen in behalf of my clients," he boomed, "I ask you more than anything else, I ask you in behalf of justice, often maligned and down-trodden, hard to protect and hard to maintain, I ask you in behalf of yourselves, in behalf of our race, to see that no harm comes to them. I ask you gentlemen in the name of the future, the future which will one day solve these sore problems, and the future which is theirs as well as ours, I ask you in the name of the future to do justice in this case."

Related Characters: Clarence Darrow (speaker), John Smith

Related Themes:

Page Number: 295

Explanation and Analysis

This passage summarizes the general direction of Clarence Darrow's closing argument in the first *Sweet* trial. Although it's clear that systemic forces like redlining and the threat of vigilante violence against Black residents by white

Chapter 10 Quotes

❝ Ossian's sense of himself soared with all the acclaim. When the Harlem rally was finished, Walter White dispatched the Sweets on a six-day tour of NAACP branches. The association wanted the couple simply to appear at each venue, say a few words of thanks, and stand by quietly while the association's director of branches [...] appealed for contributions. But whenever Ossian saw the people waiting for him [...] he began to hold forth like the luminary everyone said he was [...] Although he claimed to be no orator, Ossian "thundered" at his audiences, according to the *Chicago Defender*, trying to impress them with a mix of exaggeration, self-righteousness, and more than a touch of arrogance.

Related Characters: Ossian Sweet, Walter White, Gladys Sweet

Related Themes:

Page Number: 306

Explanation and Analysis

The first *Sweet* trial ends with a hung jury, but the Sweets have won their case in the court of public opinion, at least among American progressives and civil rights champions,

who find in the couple an excellent test case. Free on bond while awaiting retrial, the Sweets fulfil their obligations to the NAACP by participating in their fundraising efforts around the country. This passage describes Ossian's reaction to his new-found celebrity. In one way, despite the trauma and upheaval of the trial, the silver lining for Ossian is that it allows him to claim the status he's always wanted. Now, he's a shining example of the successful Black man and a member of the talented tenth responsible for leading the integration efforts of Black Americans by their outstanding excellence.

More subtly, however, this passage points back towards the tremendous burdens of injustice and inequality. In many ways, Ossian is a deeply flawed example, prone to arrogance and exaggeration. Yet, in an era when civil rights weren't extended to Black Americans (despite having been formally granted by the 14th Amendment), the NAACP and other civil rights advocates must seize whatever representatives appear. This passage thus foreshadows the decidedly un-triumphant end of Ossian's story, where his personal weaknesses, combined with the systematic disadvantages he faces as a Black man in a segregated and prejudiced society, will lead to tragedy.

"Why deny that the greatest asset that the State has in this case is prejudice and the greatest handicap that we have on this side of the table is prejudice [...] I thought this case was fraught with nothing but disastrous things, and apart from the testimony, when I viewed here the sinister figure of prejudice, sitting before you twelve men in a dispensary of justice, but as I sat here this morning, and I saw an attempt made to arouse that prejudice, in order to becloud the issue here, so that you twelve men would not decide this case upon the testimony...I was amazed to think that a public prosecutor should go to the burial place of Leon Breiner and drag his helpless body before you in order that you might send Henry Sweet to jail because Leon Breiner is dead and Henry Sweet is black instead of white."

Related Characters: Thomas Chawke (speaker), Henry Sweet, Arthur Garfield Hays, Leon Breiner

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 329

Explanation and Analysis

Although defense attorney Thomas Chawke's career as a civil rights advocate is limited to his time on Henry Sweet's defense team in the second *Sweet* trial, his fiery closing statement focuses squarely on racial prejudice. In the first trial, the defense tried to avoid talking explicitly about racism and prejudice, in an attempt to create color-bind justice in the courtroom. But in the second trial, it is the centerpiece of their argument. In this passage, Chawke directly accuses the prosecution of attempting to drum up prejudicial sentiment among the jury. The prosecution's case for premeditated murder means they must convince the jury that the Sweets moved into a white neighborhood to deliberately provoke Garland Avenue's white residents. The prosecution must then also show that the Sweets had no right to defend themselves against the violent mob. To do this, they have engaged in a mockery of justice, calling witnesses with clearly coached and altered testimony. And they hope that by raising the specter of Black men invading white neighborhoods to ruthlessly kill white men in the streets, they can convince the jury to return a verdict of guilty. The confidence with which they embark on this strategy suggests the prevalence of prejudice in American society, and shows, by contrast, just how important a step towards true civil rights the *Sweet* trials end up being.

Thomas Chawke, on the other hand, makes it really clear what's going on: he implies that were Henry Sweet white, he wouldn't be on trial right now, and the prosecution wouldn't have gone to all the trouble to fabricate evidence and witness testimony. The issue, in other words, is racism. The Sweets and their friends are on trial because they're Black, and as Chawke sees it, the prosecution is taking the trial as an opportunity to continue to chip away at Black people's rights.

"Prejudices have burned men at the stake," Darrow told the jurors, "broken them on the rack, torn every joint apart, destroyed people by the million. Men have done this on account of some terrible prejudice which even now is reaching out to undermine this republic of ours and to destroy the freedom that has been the most cherished part of our institutions. These witnesses honestly believe that it is their duty to keep colored people out. They honestly believe that blacks are an inferior race and yet if they look at themselves, I don't know how they can [...] They are possessed with that idea and that fanaticism, and when people are possessed with that they are terribly cruel. [...] Others will do the same thing as long as this weary world shall last [...]but, gentlemen, they ought not to ask you to do it for them."

Related Characters: Clarence Darrow (speaker)

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 333

Explanation and Analysis

In his closing argument in Henry Sweet's trial, Clarence Darrow focuses on the prevalence of anti-Black prejudice in American society and in the hearts and minds of all white people. His words condemn racist and white supremacist thinking as foolish, arrogant, and cruel, but he also seems to accept prejudice and hatred as inevitable, a part of all human psyches. Darrow, an avowed modernist, delights in attacking the status quo and scandalizing people who hold old-fashioned ideas. And while he approaches the *Sweet* cases, with their civil rights concerns, as an opportunity to topple the outmoded ideas of American racism, his words here show the limits generations of racial prejudice and segregation place on even progressives' imaginations. In part, his words suggest, this is because of how deeply ingrained segregation and prejudice are, not just in the individual hearts and attitudes of people, but in the institutions of American society. Although he seems to long for one, Darrow cannot conceive of a world in which all Americans live without prejudice and segregation, regardless of their race, ethnicity, religious beliefs, or any other characteristics. For all his faith in modern progress, then, Darrow acknowledges that advancements towards justice and civility come slowly and require great effort.

The jurors hold justice and injustice in their hands; Darrow pleads with them to make good on their American ideals and choose justice (by finding Henry Sweet not guilty). His words show how deeply-ingrained biases have long prevented Black Americans from having full civil rights and show the path forward from blind racism and prejudice. This path forward requires recognizing internal, often subconscious biases, and then making the conscious effort to behave fairly. If injustice and prejudice are failures of human judgement, he implies, then justice and equality are human judgement applied appropriately.

Most importantly, Darrow's words link justice and civil rights with prejudice and segregation, suggesting that as long as the rights of any minority group are curtailed, true justice can never exist. And when the jury returns a verdict of "not guilty" for Henry, they demonstrate the capacity to transcend fanaticism and cruelty to help create a more just and equitable world.

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: AMERICA: 1925

Every day in the summer of 1925, trains carry Black Americans through the cotton fields of the South, the lumber camps of the Southwest, and the coalfields of Appalachia. Along the way, they pass myriad sites where white mobs have lynched Black people.

The American Dream promises economic and social opportunity to hard-working people. In the early years of the 20th century, many Black Southerners travel north as part of the Great Migration to claim their version of the American Dream. Yet, the social realities the country belie this mythology: as white citizens increasingly feel the need to protect their racial purity (and social advantages) with violence, segregation became increasingly entrenched in both custom and law throughout the country.

Few people break into song when crossing in the North any longer since Northern white people have proven themselves just as capable of racism, terrorism, and violence as Southern white people. But excitement rises as Southern migrants arrive in the industrial hubs and glittering cities of the North. In 1925, cities like New York, Chicago, and Detroit demonstrate the attitude and values of the new century. They have spawned an expansive stock market, sprawling factories, and immense department stores.

The glittering opportunities of the northern cities, with their advanced technologies and huge economies, suggest the ways in which life improves through industrial and social progress. Still, the commonplace nature of segregation and prejudice offer a pointed reminder that progress isn't guaranteed or smooth.

Late 19th-century immigration turned America's urban areas into "polyglot" places where immigrants vastly outnumbered "native-born Americans." In cities, people of varying races, religions, cultures, professional classes, and education levels live side-by-side. The flood of white immigrants from Europe and Black immigrants from the South initially appalled white, native-born Americans. But by the 1920s, some "sophisticated" white people embrace "slum" culture's speakeasies, jazz clubs, and Vaudeville performances.

Access to the wealthy American cities doesn't mean integration or equality for the many newcomers from Southern states and the rest of the world. Even as they enjoy elements of Black culture like jazz music, native-born white citizens maintain separation between themselves and minorities by using pejorative labels like "slums" for neighborhoods where Black residents make up the majority.

The grand architecture and urban clamor of the great cities impresses the Southern immigrants. Some of them meet family members who have already established themselves in the new city.

The cities' skyscrapers show the dominance of the Northern industrial economies and promise that the 20th century's progress will improve everyone's lives. But the reality for newcomers is much harsher.

Racism and hatred divide northern American cities in the mid-1920s, even though they lack the formal segregationist policies of the Jim Crow-era South. Beginning in the late 19th century, nativist politicians opposed the so-called "ethnic" influence in politics. Businessmen like Detroit's Henry Ford, who spread conspiracy theories about Jewish and Bolshevik people, contributed to the nativist chorus. By the 1920s, most nativists are middle-class white people who, having worked hard to achieve a small level of success, resent having to share with foreign "intruders." Their social and political organizations confirm their exclusionary ideas. And many people—even in the North—join the Ku Klux Klan.

Jim Crow laws (those upholding racial segregation) formally exist only in the South, but nativism and segregation even in northern cities show how social and legal practices work together to keep groups separate. When rights are equal only on paper, not in practice, justice cannot prevail and groups like the Klan flourish both socially and politically. Native-born white people, leaning on ideas of racial purity, want to defend racial purity and preserve their slice of the American Dream.

In 1924, the nativists achieve a significant victory in the National Origins Act, which drastically limits immigration. Then they flaunt their power within both parties during that year's presidential campaign. Still, most white supremacy efforts operate locally, in the form of unwritten rules about what kind of work suits Black or white workers, who can shop at white-owned stores, and where Black people can and can't live. White people flee to cities' outskirts and suburbs, increasingly leaving Black people confined in city centers.

The book explores how ideas of self-protection often expand into defense of the group; nativists, fearing that immigrants will undermine the political power and compromise the economic security of native-born citizens, successfully defend themselves by limiting the number of people allowed into the country. And increasing housing and employment segregation shows how social custom alone—even without the force of law—can effectively perpetuate prejudice and segregation.

Black immigrants from the American South thus head for their new cities' "ghettos"—the neighborhoods like Harlem in New York City or Black Bottom in Detroit where most Black residents live. Here, they find glittering streets of Black-owned businesses and jazz clubs. They also find warrens of overpriced, overcrowded, and suboptimal housing. But, they know they have few alternatives.

The glittering districts of Black neighborhoods show the promise of the American Dream: people can achieve economic success regardless of their skin color. But the dreadful housing conditions remind newly arrived residents of the limits that legal and social segregation, perpetuated by a nativist elite, place on their prospects.

CHAPTER 1: WHERE DEATH WAITS

September of 1925 in Detroit is exceptionally hot. The city is a bustling metropolis; the auto-industry boom transformed Detroit into a "great machine" and quadrupled its population over the first two decades of the 20th century. Wealthy factory owners live in pristine suburbs, Black people and poor immigrants live in the city center. Between them lie vast neighborhoods of working- and professional-class white people and immigrants, and a thin band of middle-class homes.

Here, progress is tied to economic success and expansion. By this metric, Detroit represents a sterling early 20th century success. Automobile manufacturing brings jobs, and work promises social and economic mobility—the definition of the American Dream. Still, the varyingly wealthy neighborhoods show the uneven path of progress and highlights that wealth accrues unevenly.

Garland Avenue sits between the city center and the luscious suburbs. It's full of small **homes** on narrow, cramped lots. Its residents—all native-born white people or "respectable" immigrants (which means immigrants who aren't Polish or Russian)—work hard to keep their families out of the inner city. Still, houses are expensive, and most people face job insecurity. And now a Black family plans to break into white territory.

The families who live in the neighborhood around Garland Avenue believe in the American Dream, trusting that their hard work has earned them the right to live in their modest homes. But their anger and fear at the prospect of Black neighbors—which are described as though they're invading foreigners—betrays a belief that this mobility should be limited to native-born citizens or the immigrants they chose to include. This points to the fragility of justice when equal rights under law aren't supported by social customs.

One hot September morning, the Black family arrives. By the time the neighborhood men and children arrive home from work and school, eight police officers loiter around the intersection. Curiosity and the intense heat draw neighborhood families outside in the evening. Ray and Kathleen Dove sit on their stoop as the street fills with curious adults and children. Leon Breiner arrives from his **house** (which is much more modest than the Black family's) on the excuse of picking up some groceries at the corner market.

The modesty of the Black family's American Dream—moving into a simple, working-class neighborhood rather than an exclusive suburb—points clearly to the limits prejudice and racism place on Black Americans.

Norton Schukenecht, the commander of the local police station, and his brother-in-law, Otto Lemhagen, guard the **house** that evening. As the crowd swells, its attitude turns sinister and Lemhagen can hear people wondering why the police don't "drag those niggers out." Meanwhile, a young man named Eric Houghberg puts on a clean set of clothes before joining the crowd on Garland Avenue.

The crowd's words point to the racial hierarchy: white neighborhood residents expect the white police officers to support their efforts to intimidate the Black family. The fact that Eric Houghberg dresses up to join the angry mob points to the ways in which racialized violence, up to and including lynching, were often treated as social events by their perpetrators.

Inside the house, Dr. Ossian Sweet sits at a card table in the dining room. Only in his late 20s, he cultivates the look of a more mature man. He wears beautiful suits. He wants people to see that he is better educated and wealthier than most of the white people he encounters. Ossian grew up on his family's farm in Florida, helping until his parents sent him to the North for an education. He worked as a servant to afford books and tuition, graduating from Howard University with his medical degree at age 25.

The book only introduces Ossian Sweet after building up the crowd outside and exploring its growing anger. In some ways, this suggests the unimportance of his humanity or individuality to the crowd outside; they don't care about him as a person but despise him as a Black man. But it also subtly suggests the ways in which he will be subordinated and used as a tool by the many power players in the subsequent legal drama. Ossian represents an American Dream success story, at least at first, having overcome both poverty and racism to become a wealthy and respected doctor.

Ossian arrived in Detroit in 1921, built a medical practice in the Black Bottom neighborhood, and married Gladys. They honeymooned for a year in Europe while he completed postgraduate medical education. Despite his success, sometimes Ossian tries too hard to prove himself. And in the evening's growing darkness, he feels not just insecurity but outright fear.

By buying the house on Garland Avenue, Ossian asserts his humanity and his civil rights, since the laws say that he can live in whatever house he can afford to buy. But the unwritten codes of segregation and prejudice very clearly say he should have stayed in Black Bottom. Ossian worries because he knows that crossing the color line in this way has consequences.

The **house** should have been one of Ossian's greatest accomplishments. Gladys wanted a house with a yard for their daughter, Iva, to play in. The house itself exemplifies the arts and crafts style, having been built with great love and attention by its original owner. Because it has one more room than her family home, it also allows Gladys to feel the thrill of social advancement. Ossian loves the house because it sits in a neighborhood that's better than the neighborhood where he practices. Established physicians like himself almost always live in better areas.

Home ownership, especially in the overheated housing market of rapidly expanding Detroit, shows perhaps better than anything else that a person has achieved the American Dream. By buying a gracious, charming, and large house in a white neighborhood, the Sweets claim that the American Dream should be available to everyone, regardless of their skin color.

Still, the racial violence Ossian has witnessed, both in Florida and Detroit, scares him. He knows that profession and wealth can't protect him; recent murders in Arkansas and the destruction of race riots in Tulsa, Oklahoma and Rosewood, Florida prove as much. But despite his fear, Ossian didn't want to disappoint Gladys or appear cowardly to colleagues, including Dr. Edward Carter, who specifically encouraged him to buy the **house**.

Violence serves as a social means to perpetuate prejudice and segregation. The terrifying specter of race riots and lynchings reinforce the social status quo by making Black people afraid to cross the color line, as the many examples Ossian considers show. But he knows that protecting the house protects his human dignity as well.

The Great Migration ratcheted up racial tensions in Detroit. In the first half of 1925, the police—many of whom were also Klansmen—shot 55 Black people. In one event, policeman Proctor Pruitt shot Steve Tomkins, a Black man he'd long disliked, in cold blood while serving a summons. Pruitt claimed self-defense. And mobs committed violence, too: white mobs had attacked five Black families who moved into all-white neighborhoods. One of these incidents involved another doctor, Alexander Turner. He barely escaped with his life after opening his door to men pretending to be from the police.

Ossian takes a principled but very dangerous stand. He doesn't just face the prejudice of the mob of white people outside, but also the essential injustice of a police force and legal system that fails Black residents in many ways. The specter of police violence in 1920s Detroit also points towards the slow and uneven pace of progress, since it's still a social and political issue in America a century later.

Ossian heard Dr. Alexander Turner's story from Alexander himself earlier in the summer. Nevertheless, friends and colleagues encouraged him to buy the **house**. Dr. Carter specifically told Ossian that white people were bullies who needed to be confronted. Gladys also refused to be intimidated, although her Northern upbringing, light skin, and proximity to white spaces offered her a more protected childhood than Ossian had.

Ossian and others interpret Turner's loss of his home as a personal failure rather than as an example of the larger systems of prejudice and segregation that aid and abet violent mobs. Dr. Carter and Gladys's attitude show that the house has already become symbolic to many people of taking a principled stand for the essential dignity and humanity of all Black people.

The Sweets wait to move in until after Labor Day, when a weekday arrival will draw less attention. And they plan to stay off the streets as much as possible—Gladys must even limit trips to the grocery store. The police department offers temporary security. But Ossian knows that he must defend his **house**, violently if necessary. He calls on his brothers Otis Sweet and Henry Sweet, and his friends Edward Carter, Julian Perry, William Davis, and John Latting for help.

Despite claiming a right to live where they please, the preparations Ossian and Gladys undertake demonstrate clear awareness of the potentially dangerous ramifications of breaching the color line. They may assert their civil rights, but they know that social practice often has more power than the law.

Ossian and Gladys Sweet move into the **house** midmorning on the 8th assisted by their chauffeur Joe Mack, a handyman named Norris Murray, and Otis, Henry, and Latting. Soon a policeman named Inspector McPherson knocks on the door to introduce himself. He assures Ossian that he'll be alright as long as he acts like "a gentleman." The Sweets unpack and receive visits from Gladys' friends Edna Butler and Serena Rochelle. Anxieties only start to rise when the party realizes that darkness fell while they ate dinner. Policemen position themselves visibly around the house while hundreds of white people gather across the street.

Being able to hire a chauffeur suggests the Sweets have achieved the American Dream—but the fact they need police protection for their house points towards how fragile this ideal really is. Inspector McPherson's suggestion that Ossian should adopt a compliant attitude, should be read in the context of the book's claim that social customs (including terrorism against Black people) and legal policies work together to create and maintain racism. McPherson thus subtly reminds Ossian that the culture expects him to be deferential, rather than defend himself.

Ossian distributes weapons among the seven men in the **house**: Otis, Henry, Davis, Latting, Mack, Murray, and himself. Neither Julian Perry nor Dr. Edward Carter came—and Carter even called to beg off, indicating his fear of danger. The men arrange a watch rotation, snatching rest when they can without letting down their guard. The night passes uneventfully.

Ossian hasn't prepared for compliance; he has prepared to defend what he believes to be rightfully his, with violence if necessary. The men who promised but failed to show up suggest the difficulty and danger of this task, despite encouraging Ossian to take it on.

The following morning, Joe Mack drives Ossian and Gladys to the furniture store. In the afternoon, Gladys visits her family and Iva, and Ossian sees patients. He can't shake his anxiety about the coming night, which he shares during a chance call with his insurance broker, Hewitt Watson. Watson and two of his friends, Leonard Morse and Charles Washington, agree to join the night's watch over the **house**.

The growing posse of defenders suggests that other Black Detroiters understand this isn't just about the house on Garland Avenue; it's about the larger assertion that Black people have the same humanity and should have the same rights as everyone else.

When Ossian drives from the decaying streets of Black Bottom to Garland Avenue that evening, to his great relief and surprise, he finds the street quiet. But in the kitchen, a frightened Gladys tells him that her friend Edna overheard a white woman threatening violence on the streetcar that morning. Ossian calls Henry and Lessing in from the front porch, admonishing them to avoid provoking the white neighbors. He sends Mack to ask Murray to join them again, and anxiously waits to see if any other defenders will arrive.

Ossian's drive illustrates the importance of tearing down the color line that condemns Detroit's Black residents to the rundown Black Bottom neighborhood. Nevertheless, the task is demanding and dangerous. While on the one hand Ossian feels entitled to live in the neighborhood, his efforts to minimize his (Black) family's visibility there suggests how deeply rooted segregation and prejudice are in the culture.

In the kitchen, Henry helps Gladys prepare dinner. Henry possesses more charm than his aloof, formal brother Ossian. Nevertheless, he adores his older brother and followed his footsteps to college. Gladys shares her husband's forcefulness, although she has better social skills. Her grace and charm draw people to her, and Ossian adores her. Alone in the dining room, Ossian worries about the night. He worries that a handful of policemen won't be able protect the **house** from an organized, directed mob. Around six, the arrival of Mack with Murray, Washington, Watson, and Leonard Morse interrupts his ruminations.

Most of the people gathered in the house are cultured, sophisticated people. Ossian and his brother Henry have both worked hard to achieve the American Dream. Nevertheless, entrenched racism and systemic segregation empower white people who refuse to share their power with others. And the insufficient size of the force protecting the house suggests a lack of real concern for the family's safety on the part of the police, even though their job is ostensibly to protect all citizens regardless of race.

Shortly before 8:00, the crowd starts to throw things at the **house**. A few police officers stand on the sidewalk, opposite hundreds of white people massing in the streets. The men in the house grab weapons and take up defensive positions. Ossian's hands shake so badly he can barely load his pistol. He ducks into the bedroom to calm himself, and he is there with Gladys when a rock crashes through the window. Just then, a taxi pulls up in front with Otis and William Davis. While Ossian opens the front door to let them in, the mob screams insults and hurls rocks at the house. Another window shatters, and suddenly a gunshot rings out from upstairs.

The lack of concern on the part of the white police officers—including pointedly ignoring the breaking glass—contrasts sharply with the fear on the part of the house's Black defenders. This points to the officers' privilege; their skin color has protected them from the types of violence (including race riots and lynchings) used to exert social control over Black Americans in both the North and South.

Outside, white neighborhood resident Eric Houghberg joins the mob. As the first shots ring out, he approaches Leon Breiner, who is standing on the sidewalk. Almost immediately, a bullet tears through Breiner's abdomen and grazes Eric's leg. Eric stumbles away as Breiner collapses to the ground, dead.

Again, the actions of the white mob members and the Black defenders inside the house demonstrate the power differentials that segregation reinforces. The white men feel empowered rather than fearful, and clearly don't expect to meet violent self-defense.

The sudden gunshots shock Inspector Schuknecht. He knows that the dozen officers on the street will be overrun if the crowd gets out of hand. He pushes his way through the roiling crowd to the porch. When Ossian opens the door, Schuknecht maintains that he hasn't seen any threat that would justify shooting. He demands that the men hold their fire.

Schuknecht's refusal to acknowledge any threat suggests his bias towards the interests of the mob, which is made up of white men like himself. And it points towards the essential injustice of a system that fails to uphold the civil and human rights that the U.S. supposedly grants to all citizens.

Outside, as Schuknecht learns about Leon Breiner's death, the crowd grows more volatile. The fearful flee, and those who remain clearly want an excuse to attack. Schuknecht orders his men to set up a perimeter and to call for reinforcements and a paddy wagon. Amazingly, they hold the crowd back, but a few Black passersby, unluckily caught in the fray, find themselves attacked.

The angry crowd looks for an excuse to carry out vigilante justice of the kind that serves to keep Black people contained and fearful. Denied access to the perpetrators of the shooting, the mob turns its violence on other Black people in the area to assert their racial superiority.

When Schuknecht rings the doorbell again, Gladys answers it. Immediately, policemen flood in, turning on the lights and rounding up the defenders. As the police handcuff Ossian to Davis, Ossian flashes back to a childhood memory of mob violence. Joe Mack knows one of the policemen, a member of the Black Hand Squad committed to ensuring the defenders' safety. He sends the police wagon around back and brings the handcuffed men out through the dark yard without the crowd noticing. As the police vehicle with the arrested men inside inches out into the street, the crowd slowly parts to let it pass freely.

Ossian feels a close connection between the violence of the mob on Garland Avenue and other acts of vigilante and racial violence designed to punish Black Americans for breaching the color line or for other alleged crimes. The fact that the police protect him and his friends from a potential lynch mob suggests that the defenders may have a hope of true justice, after all.

CHAPTER 2: AIN'T NO SLAVERY NO MORE

In the police van, Ossian feels relief—the mob can no longer reach him. But he also feels fear. He and his compatriots have changed from potential victims into "crazed colored men." He will need to make people understand the complex reasons he felt the need to buy a home in an all-white neighborhood and protect it by any means necessary. These reasons lie in the past.

The fact that Ossian initially feels relief over being arrested and taken to the police station points towards the prevalence of racialized violence as a tool for maintaining segregation. And as Ossian considers how he will defend himself, his personal and family history will show how deeply entrenched racism, segregation, and violence are in American culture.

Ossian's great-grandfather, Edmond DeVaughn, was born into slavery and taken by his owner, Alexander Cromartie, from North Carolina to the northern Florida panhandle in the 1820s. It was prime cotton land, both by virtue of the rich soil and Florida's brutal dehumanization of enslaved people, who couldn't even go for a walk without their masters' permission. Violence occasionally surfaced in Leon County, where Black enslaved people outnumbered their white masters by 3 to 1 by the 1860s.

Ossian lives only a few generations removed from a world in which white Americans enslaved Black people. Because they were vastly outnumbered by the Black people they kept enslaved, white planters and their families feared violent uprisings. This shows how white Americans had long felt that their safety depended on keeping clear and impermeable barriers between themselves and Black people.

Edmond DeVaughn married an enslaved woman named Gilla in the 1840s and they had seven sons. Edmond died in 1857, and Gilla raised her sons on her master's plantation against the backdrop of increasing national debate about slavery and the Civil War. When emancipation came to Leon County, the DeVaughn children were in their teens and early 20s. But their newly granted freedom "had no shape [or] substance." Formerly enslaved people had no land, little education, and no political representation. Still, they were determined to claim freedom, property, education, and prosperity for themselves.

Following the American Civil War, the United States government granted formerly enslaved people freedom and gave them the rights of citizenship. But the situation of most Black Southerners didn't change very much at first. True progress entails social upheaval and the hard work of education, labor, and fighting for civil rights—and at this point in the story, the narrative highlights that there's still a long way to go.

The white planters quickly passed laws to recreate as much of the circumstances of slavery as possible. These actions drew the federal government's attention, which reasserted military control of the South and instituted Reconstruction. Republicans, in control of the federal government, planned to remake the South, not only granting rights and freedoms to formerly enslaved people, but reviving the Southern economy by linking it to the North with train lines and opening public schools for Black and white children.

Because social customs and legal interpretations are often more powerful than grand ideas like "equal rights," the political and social white elite continued to torment and control newly emancipated Black Southerners with oppressive laws. Reconstruction represents the federal government's realization that true justice requires equal rights in law and practice. Thus, it both rewrote laws and tried to provide Black Southerners with the education and resources necessary for full political participation.

Among the agents sent to the South to bring Reconstruction to fruition were many priests and pastors, including representatives of the African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church. The AME broke from the mainstream Methodist Church when congregations began to enforce racial segregation during the early 1800s. AME preachers emphasized education, frugality, and self-discipline.

To combat the systemic oppression of white Southern planters, organizations like the AME Church sought to empower Black Southerners with the tools necessary to achieve the American Dream: hard work, education, and financial acumen. The fact that the AME broke from the mainstream Methodist Church demonstrates the pervasive nature of segregation and racism in American society.

The DeVaughn family embraced the AME's message. Two sons entered the ministry, and the whole family became sharecroppers together on one plot of land. This allowed them to pool and save their resources, send their children to the AME school, and open accounts when the government established a Freedman's Bank. Nevertheless, they—and the rest of the formerly enslaved people—faced an uphill battle. Bad weather could ruin crops, and white planters never stopped their attempts to limit and disenfranchise people they once enslaved. And organizations like the Ku Klux Klan used violence to rebel against Reconstruction.

As newly enfranchised Black Americans begin to claim their rights as citizens, opposition forms among those white planters and elites who want to maintain their power and who believe in their own inherent racial superiority. The Ku Klux Klan and other organizations serve to defend the purity of the white race and they use violence, intimidation, and political savvy to reinforce the color line between Black and white Americans.

In 1868, the Republican Party took control of the Florida state legislature and installed 19 Black legislators. But their white Republican colleagues were more interested in attracting Northern business than overturning white supremacy. In 1872, the Black delegates staged a political coup to nominate Ossian Hart for governor. Black voters helped propel Hart to victory. Although he was a former slaveholder himself, he was primarily interested in forging economic ties with the North. Hart repaid his Black supporters with a law prohibiting discrimination in public facilities and appointing Hubbert DeVaughn as the county's first justice of the peace.

In the years following the American Civil War, political progress towards a more racially just and economically integrated nation meets defeats as well as victories. Economic policies that will help rebuild the South motivate Ossian Hart, a former slaveholder himself. Still, he pushes through legal changes that protect the rights of Black Southerners and he honors their political voice.

Just 14 months later, however, Ossian Hart died suddenly. The Republican Party lost control, while white economic opportunists reclaimed power. Then, the Democratic Party seized control of the state legislature in the 1872 election. While Democrats maintained the Republicans' economic policies, they also systematically enshrined race-based oppression. Poll taxes reduced Black political representation, while a systematic cultural narrative of white supremacy—enforced through anti-miscegenation laws preventing sexual relationships between white and Black or mixed-race persons, segregated schools, and employment discrimination—ensured a common dehumanization of Black people.

The backlash against Reconstruction shows that progress isn't guaranteed and must be fought for over long periods of time and despite reversals of fortune. The rise of the Jim Crow South depends on both social customs—the systematic narrative of white supremacy—and legal policies to reinforce the color line. In generating this segregated society, white politicians and powerbrokers play on their constituents' sense of superiority and fear of integration to enshrine an ideal of white racial purity.

Dora DeVaughn, Remus DeVaughn's daughter, grew up as Reconstruction's promises crumbled around her family. By the 1880s, most of the DeVaughn brothers, including Remus, left Leon County. Remus moved his family to Orlando, where he tried to eke out a living doing manual labor. White people in the cities enforced Jim Crow segregation just as enthusiastically, if not more, than their rural counterparts. But quiet, dignified, determined Dora never abandoned the AME principles instilled during her childhood. In 1890 or 1891, she married Henry Sweet Sr., a man born free in 1865 to parents who—according to family lore—escaped slavery in Alabama in the midst of the Civil War. They named their first son, who died in childhood, Oscar. To her second child, Dora gave the name "Ossian."

The collapse of Reconstruction's promise into the violence, political disenfranchisement, and segregation of the Jim Crow South demonstrates the precarity of progress: without vigilant effort to maintain Reconstruction initiatives, the racism and elitism of Southern white people returned. Despite being born after the end of the American Civil War, in practice Henry and Dora don't have many more rights of opportunities than their parents and grandparents. Nevertheless, they cling to the idea of the American Dream for themselves and their families.

In 1898, when Ossian was three, Henry Sweet, Sr. purchased and moved his family to a small plot of land in Bartow, Florida. When it was on the Florida frontier in the 1880s, Bartow was much more integrated. But the arrival of the railroad, with its economic opportunities, and the discovery of mineral reserves, spurred the town leaders to forbid Black people from living on the "white" side of town. East Bartow—where the Black families lived—had a cohesive social community and vibrant businesses. But they had no public utilities, and life was still hard.

Bartow's history shows how economic progress and prosperity go hand in hand with segregation. Not wanting to share the economic benefits of the growing town, white residents first force Black residents into their own part of town, then deny them services like public utilities and education. The disadvantaged population, closed off from civic life, becomes an ever-easier target for prejudice.

Henry Sweet Sr. toiled on his farm and sold his produce both in Bartow and in Tampa's bigger city market. Dora and Henry's 10 children helped on the farm. The parents raised their children in the AME tradition, with its emphasis on self-discipline, hard work, and religious faith. They taught their children the value of an education. Unfortunately, the town showed little interest in providing a school for Black children. The Union Academy opened the year the Sweets arrived, but it was chronically underfunded and understaffed. It taught children to read, write, and do basic arithmetic. But after completing this rudimentary education, the children had nowhere to go: the high school was only for white students.

Although Henry, Sr. never achieves the economic and social status of his sons, Ossian, Otis, and Henry, he nevertheless demonstrates the core principles of the American Dream: by working hard, saving money, and valuing morality, he makes a place for himself and his growing family to thrive. Still, prejudiced beliefs about the rights and abilities of Black children to learn limit educational opportunities for the Sweet children in Florida.

The violence of the Jim Crow South provided the constant backdrop of Ossian's childhood years. Social and economic change had stripped many white people of their accustomed power and security, and white leaders played on their constituents' fears to ensure that disenfranchised white people directed their anger at their Black neighbors rather than the wealthy and powerful white people. In Bartow, much of the racial fear centered on the phosphate mines. Low pay and backbreaking labor meant that the jobs were primarily filled by young Black men who lived in squalid company barracks. Brothels, bars, and gambling houses grew up around the barracks, both repelling and attracting white voyeurism and interest. The white community's fear and disgust for these places fueled violence. Lynchings and other forms of vigilante justice occurred commonly.

The circumstances of Ossian's childhood show how political and economic elites manipulate less-advantaged white citizens into acting on their racist beliefs and supporting segregation in the Jim Crow South. Yet again, this shows the connection between economic progress and segregation. And segregation makes a fertile breeding ground for fear and prejudice. By confining the Black population and the seedier, less desirable businesses to the same part of town, white Bartow residents began to associate criminality with Black people, further perpetuating cycles of prejudice and segregation and licensing violence.

Then, in May of 1901, a white woman fishing in the river was raped and murdered. The testimony of a Black man who heard her screams implicated 16-year-old Fred Rochelle, a Black man who worked in the phosphate mines. As a mob gathered to march on the **home** where he lived with his sister, the AME church issued a statement condemning his actions and proclaiming their solidarity with the white mob. Two days later, three local Black men found Rochelle hiding near the mines and turned him in.

When Fred Rochelle stands accused of rape and murder, other Black residents in Bartow hurry to distance themselves from him. It's a matter of survival, since anyone supporting Rochelle could fall prey to the same violence he faces. But it also shows how segregation consolidates power, forcing the marginalized group to align itself with its oppressors for safety.

A crowd of 300 gathered in the town center when Fred Rochelle was brought in. That evening, Bartow's town leaders placed Rochelle on a barrel of fuel and chained him to a tree. They piled tinder around the barrel, then allowed the victim's husband to light the match. Although other men suffered horrific lynchings during Ossian's childhood, Rochelle's death made the strongest impression on Ossian. Although he was only five at the time, he maintained throughout his life that he hid in the bushes and witnessed the execution with his own eyes. Eight years later, just after Ossian completed eighth grade and another mob lynched another Black man in Bartow, Ossian's family sent him north to complete his education.

Like all acts of extrajudicial, vigilante justice, Fred Rochelle's lynching parodies true justice. Yet, his execution happens with the implicit permission of the town's leaders. Justice, in the Jim Crow South, isn't available to all people equally, but depends on the color of a person's skin. It teaches Ossian two terrible lessons. First, he must not expect justice or the full protection supposedly afforded by the laws from white officials. Second, he will always be vulnerable to the anger and hatred of white people.


CHAPTER 3: MIGRATION

Tracing the story of Ossian Sweet's past, the narrative follows him to Xenia, Ohio, where he arrives by train in September of 1909. In the early years of the 20th century, many Black Southerners like Ossian go north hoping for better treatment, better jobs, or the promise of education. Xenia boasts Wilberforce University, the nation's first Black college.

Ossian goes north seeking educational opportunities that don't exist in the Jim Crow South, just as everyone else participating in the Great Migration hopes to find less racism and segregation and more safety and opportunity in the North.

Wilberforce is not the best Black college: many educated Black elites, including W. E. B. Du Bois,—who taught there for a year—consider it a backwater. But it offers a four-year preparatory curriculum for students who, like Ossian, didn't attend high school. The AME owns and operates the school, and a scholarship promises Ossian a free education.

Wilberforce enshrines the hope of Reconstruction-era initiatives undertaken by the AME Church and white progressives to expand educational access for newly freed Black citizens and their descendants. But its declining reputation shows how much Ossian still must overcome to achieve the status and success his family wants.


The school has a long history. In the mid-1850s, Ohio abolitionists bought the grounds of a former resort patronized by the wives and daughters of Southern planters. They established Wilberforce, the first college for free Black students. It was controlled by white people until the AME purchased it in 1863. By the time Ossian arrives, segregation and chronic underfunding mean that the buildings are slowly crumbling, the lab equipment is outdated, and the scholarship fund is empty. To pay for school, Ossian works on campus, performing the kind of manual labor from which his education was supposed to free him.

Wilberforce's history also shows the degree to which segregation perpetuates itself in American culture, even among abolitionists—white people who worked to end slavery. Even they fail to imagine integrated colleges, instead establishing separate institutions specifically for Black people. This leaves the college vulnerable to the waning interest of its white founders and to consequently dwindling financial support.

Wilberforce University, like other Black colleges and universities, was founded on ideas promulgated by men like W. E. B. Du Bois, who believed that the race will only advance on the efforts of "exceptional men and women," a "talented tenth" capable of great things. A rigorous education will mold these people into racial standard bearers. Early in Reconstruction, Northern abolitionists embraced these ideas, but their interest faded in the economic, political, and social upheaval that followed the Civil War. By the early decades of the 20th century, many Northern white people seem to tacitly agree with their Southern peers that Black people were inferior. As a result, trade schools were replacing Black colleges. Even Wilberforce had to institute "industrial arts" programs to attract state financing.

The history of Wilberforce and of Du Bois's idea of the "talented tenth" illustrate how deeply segregated thinking pervades American society, even during the hopeful Reconstruction Era. The idea of the tenth acknowledges the fear that white society will only accept the most exceptionally talented Black people. And an impulse to keep Black students segregated in their own colleges tempers abolitionists' push to advance civil rights through education. The readiness with which state financing became associated with preparing Black students for trade and labor jobs (rather than professional careers) shows the deeply ingrained nature of American racism and segregationist tendencies.


But the university's president, William Sanders Scarborough, refused to compromise the talented tenth ideal when it came to the college's academic students. Scarborough was born into slavery in 1850. But determined to join professional society, after Emancipation he studied at Atlanta University and Oberlin College, where he earned bachelor's and master's degrees in classics.

Scarborough (who was Black) majors in Classics, the study of the ancient Greek and Latin languages and their literatures. Thus, this ideal figure of the talented tenth makes his mark in the world by becoming an expert in the very foundations of white Western civilization. This highlights the idea that in order for a Black person to be accepted into white society at this time, they must fully embrace white culture.


Ossian thus receives a rigorous education in the preparatory program, with classes in literature, history, philosophy, math, science, Latin, French, music, and drawing. The college program, which he begins in 1913 with his eye on a science degree, combines academic rigor with moral training. The college strictly separates men and women, forbids swearing, and prohibits alcohol and tobacco. And Ossian participates in the military cadet corps.

Ossian's education is based in the liberal arts tradition and emphasizes creating well-rounded students, not just cranking out men and women fit for trade jobs and manual labor. In this way, Wilberforce's curriculum claims that its Black students have the same human dignity, potential, and rights as anyone else. Its moral training falls in line with AME ideology, but also reinforces the idea that the Black men and women leading the drive for integration must meet a nearly impossible standard of excellence.


Scarborough supplements the school's efforts to shape its students with "racial politics." In 1905, Scarborough becomes a charter member of W. E. B. Du Bois's Niagara Movement for racial equity. At this time, integrationists face steep challenges. Scientists and philosophers are increasingly promoting theories of racial purity that directly claim that white people are superior to so-called "colored" people (including Black people, Native American people, and members of other marginalized immigrant groups). These theories are becoming popular among working-class white people, too. The white women of Xenia shun Scarborough's white wife because they are horrified by her interracial marriage.

By the turn of the 20th century, many of the efforts of the Reconstruction Era have been undermined by resurgent segregation and racism not just in the Jim Crow South but throughout the nation. Ideologues play on people's fear of Black people to promote theories of racial purity, and racial purity requires strict segregation of non-white people to protect the supposed purity of the white race. Once again, social and scientific ideas both support and provoke legal statutes to segregate society.

Race riots in the North punctuate Ossian's years at Wilberforce. They break out in Springfield, Ohio (close to Wilberforce) in March 1904 and February 1906. A particularly violent 1908 race riot in Springfield, Illinois galvanizes white support for Black political action. In 1909, shortly before Ossian arrives at Wilberforce, Scarborough, W. E. B. Du Bois, and other prominent Black and white activists form the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP).

In race riots, white mobs believed that they were protecting members of their race from the dangers supposedly posed by Black people in their communities. Like lynchings, riots often responded to perceived crimes allegedly committed by a Black person, and by negative example they dramatically show how true justice depends on equality in both name and practice of the law.

It this atmosphere of racial tensions and expectations, Ossian studies. Perched precariously between the world of the college students and the second-class industrial arts students by virtue of his campus job, he has a relatively undistinguished undergraduate career. Only one event—nearly being expelled for being caught off campus with two drunk compatriots—stands out. Between academic years, Ossian works service jobs in Detroit. There, he makes friends who tell him that Detroit respects ambition, making it a place where a Black man's efforts can be rewarded.

Ossian's version of the American Dream story involves a lot of hard work and struggle. His campus job both illustrates the precarious nature of his path toward professional life and seems to offer an ongoing reminder of what he's trying to rise above. The fact the college's chronic underfunding costs Ossian his scholarship—and that he remains an average and undistinguished student, due in part to having to work—points toward the systemic disadvantages he faces as a Black man trying to achieve the American Dream.

But for Ossian, college mostly means financial struggle. This strengthens his resolve to become a doctor and "amass a substantial fortune." But medicine is a very competitive field when he graduates. Raised standards and regulations have closed all but two Black medical schools, and these accept just a handful of students yearly. Ossian needs more than a second-rate college degree to ensure his admittance. But then the United States joins the Great War (later called World War I). Poor eyesight prevents Ossian from serving, and the talent drain of the war renders medical schools much less competitive. Howard medical school admits Ossian.

Again, the situation when Ossian graduates shows the pervasive effects of segregation and prejudice in limiting opportunities for Black Americans: Black would-be doctors can only attend one of two Black medical colleges. The small number of Black doctors carries huge implications for Black patients, who are systematically denied access to medical care. When WWI begins, a stroke of luck augments Ossian's efforts to achieve the American Dream, which for him has boiled down to accruing the wealth and status normally denied to Black men like himself.

The Great War changes America. Patriotic fervor revitalizes racism and nativist sentiments. Jim Crow segregation seeps into Washington D.C. under President Wilson. For example, the War Department organizes Black soldiers into a single, white-commanded company to prevent racial mixing in the ranks. Industry—from the great Detroit motor plants to the smallest sweat shops—turns to creating war materials. With European immigration all but cut off by the war and factories drained of workers by the draft, Southern Black men move north in record numbers to fill labor shortages. In response, racist violence increases in the North. A race riot in East St. Louis, Illinois in the summer of 1917 leaves dozens of Black residents dead, hundreds injured, and thousands homeless. The president refuses to condemn the violence, and the NAACP leads a silent protest march down New York's Fifth Avenue.

The changing demographics of Northern cities during World War I, thanks to the war and the beginning of the Great Migration, demonstrate the pervasive and systemic effects of racism in American culture. More established (and lighter-skinned) European immigrants become increasingly accepted by their white, native-born neighbors as Black Southerners begin to flow into cities from the South. This in turn leads to de facto segregation, even though northern cities remain largely free of the legal segregation common in the Jim Crow South. And the NAACP leans on increasingly visible and political tactics in its efforts to assert civil rights for Black Americans.

Ossian arrives in Washington D.C. in this atmosphere of heightened racial tensions. Howard University is everything Wilberforce is not: the federal government subsidizes the college and its graceful campus borders not only the impoverished Black neighborhood of the capitol but the graceful neighborhoods where the successful Black elite—the talented tenth—live. And its medical school is its crown jewel. The curriculum easily meets the new standards; its Freedman's Hospital is nearly brand-new. Despite the University's insistence that medical students focus on their studies exclusively, Ossian still works to cover his tuition and expenses. Perhaps because of this added pressure, his academic career at Howard is good but undistinguished.

The contrast between chronically underfunded Wilberforce and elite Howard shows the damaging effects of systemic segregation and racial prejudice; with colleges segregated and all but the finest Black schools starved of resources, only the most elite Black students have access to the education that can help them achieve the American Dream of stability, success, and wealth. And initially, the university and its modern, well-appointed medical school seem to prove that the talented tenth has the power to break into mainstream white culture.

But even an undistinguished Howard medical student has the kind of status and gravitas that Ossian craves. He begins to dress sharply and adopts a doctor's professional detachment. Sometimes, he indulges in arrogance, like when he openly criticizes Meharry Medical College, where his brother Otis studies dentistry. Determined to make good on his education, Ossian looks sets wealth and status as his life goals. But he knows that racism will always limit him: his patients will be Black, his wealth and status dependent on their economic and social circumstances.

Although Ossian undoubtedly works hard to support himself and complete his education at both Wilberforce and Howard, his apparent inability to perceive the role of luck in his path gives him a sense of superiority verging on arrogance that will surface again later in his life story. But even with his potential for wealth and success, systemic racism and commonplace, socially-reinforced segregation limit his upward mobility. The higher Ossian rises from his impoverished childhood, the clearer the chasm between himself and the world of the white, native-born American elite becomes.

While Ossian studies medicine at Howard, the war exacerbates political and racial tensions. Fear about the influence of communist ideology leads to a campaign against left-wing activists and feeds narratives of nativist white superiority. A white mob even lynches a Black soldier for wearing his uniform in public in early 1919. Then, in the summer, a race riot breaks out in Washington D.C. The army houses thousands of soldiers on the outskirts of town. After a rumor circulates that a Black man raped a white soldier's wife, a mob of soldiers descends on Black neighborhoods, terrorizing them for three days and nights.

Fear of outsiders and extreme patriotism fuel white supremacy during World War I as social and political narratives increasingly reinforce segregation in common practice and law. When a white mob lynches a Black soldier, they make a claim about who is—and isn't—allowed to be a proud American. Protecting the country expands into an idea of protecting the racial purity of the white, native-born elite. And in the case of the D.C. riot, a desire to protect the sexual purity of white women—and by extension the white race—animates the mob of soldiers.

But Black residents near Howard gather weapons and meet the mob's violence with their own force. Although the president calls the National Guard and a rainstorm quells some of the violence, the NAACP forcefully claims that Black self-defense ended the white violence. Ossian may not participate in the stand, but he doubtlessly knows about it.

The D.C. race riot sees the NAACP making a pivotal claim for the rights of Black people to defend themselves against white violence. The early decades of the 20th century show Black Americans that attempts to ingratiate themselves with the white elites—as the AME Church in Bartow did when Fred Rochelle was lynched—don't provide safety. Black Americans must exercise the civil rights that white society denies them.

Less than a week later, a similar race riot breaks out in Chicago, and smaller ones follow in Tennessee, Nebraska, and Arkansas through the summer and fall. Although the riots subside in 1920, the nativist sentiment revitalized by the war and the communist scare continues to grow. White supremacist ideas promoted by intellectuals and politicians merge with the direct political actions of groups like the Ku Klux Klan. Congress moves closer to limiting foreign immigration, and racial segregation becomes entrenched in northern cities like Chicago.

In the immediate aftermath of World War I, nativist political changes work together with the racialized terrorism of the Klan and other groups to enforce both legal and de facto social segregation in American society. Protection of racial purity becomes both the rallying cry and the impetus behind efforts to reinforce the color line in all aspects of society. This offers a pointed reminder that progress towards a just and civil society is neither guaranteed nor easy.

Ossian completes his medical education caring for patients at the Freedman's Hospital, many of whom suffer from the preventable diseases linked to poverty and poor sanitation like malnutrition, gangrene, diphtheria, and typhoid. He graduates in 1921. His Floridian hometown beckons with a life of comfort and security. But not content with comfortable obscurity, he heads to Detroit.

The patient population at Freedman points towards the consequences of systemic segregation, which is still entrenched in American culture decades after the end of the Civil War. Denied access to education, good jobs, and medical care, Ossian's patients suffer from preventable diseases. This also points to an uncomfortable truth in Ossian's American Dream, for his success depends, in part, on the misery of other Black people.

CHAPTER 4: UPLIFT ME, PRIDE

Ossian Sweet arrives in Detroit a newly minted doctor in the late summer of 1925, with little more than $200 in his pocket. In the 10 years since he first came to the city for summer work, the city's economy has rapidly expanded and its population has boomed. Although initially, the founders of industry, like Henry Ford, thought they could create a city as mechanical and tidy as their factories, early efforts to encourage clean living, a culturally American population, and a Protestant work ethic have been overrun by expansion. Drugs, alcohol, sex work, and other vices are rife. As industrial leaders lose faith in their ability to forge society according to their ideals, racism, xenophobia, and antisemitic sentiment increase. Henry Ford spreads virulently antisemitic conspiracy theories. And violence simmers constantly just below the surface.

American industrial progress, represented by the automobile factories, has brought economic prosperity and opportunity to many people by 1925. But not everyone benefits equally, and city leaders quickly set themselves up as the gatekeepers of social and political power. When men like Henry Ford lose their ability to dictate social morals among their workers due demographic shifts, this loss of control generates a sense of embattlement, a siege mentality. Nativists rally working-class white people to defend racial purity by generating fear and hatred, co-opting people's natural tendencies towards self-defense for the purposes of increasing segregation.

Ossian rents a room in Black Bottom, the neighborhood where most of Detroit's Black population lives. When he came to the city a decade earlier, it mostly housed people considered less desirable by native-born white residents (immigrants from eastern Europe and the Mediterranean). But by the early 20s, the demographics have shifted. Black people from the South, traveling north during the Great War, have inundated Black Bottom and changed its character. Predictably, an increasing Black population means deteriorating race relations and increasing segregation and violence. Factories start segregating bathrooms, while white laborers terrorize and sabotage their Black colleagues. Black women must take low paying, exhausting domestic jobs.

As a professional, Ossian returns to a city more segregated and divided than he remembers. Increasing racial diversity drives prejudice and segregation, rather than integration. White residents, feeling threatened by the influx of new Detroiters from the South draw increasingly strong color lines to protect their race from any loss of privilege or power, forcing Black people to take the hardest and most degrading jobs. And because fear animates ideas of racial purity, white people rally to defend their race from perceived invaders with acts of sabotage and violence.

Some Black immigrants to Detroit come to Black Bottom knowing that it's where they will find community and opportunity. And many of the poorest European immigrants still live there, too. But increasingly, redlining practices confine Black residents to this area of the city. Real estate agents often refuse to show Black families **houses** in white neighborhoods. And the few Black families that try to encroach into these enclaves often face violence from their neighbors. For example, in 1917, a greedy landlord started renting apartments in an all-white neighborhood to Black families since he could charge them more. A white crowd threatened the new residents and they appealed to some passing policemen for protection. The officers instead stood by while the crowd ransacked the home.

Both policy and social forces contribute to building Detroit's color line. On the one hand, many new Black residents of the city often chose to live near other Black people, since numbers confer a degree of safety. But on the other hand, white, native-born Detroiters increasingly fence in Black Detroiters through official redlining policies, reinforced by occasional acts of violence. White mobs that cast out Black families believe themselves to be acting in self-defense, protecting the purity of their race by keeping others far out of sight and contact. And when police allow white residents to terrorize Black ones, they show how empty theoretical civil rights are in the face of prejudice and violence.

Black Bottom is an older neighborhood that struggles under the strain of thousands of newcomers. Near the river, flophouses and rat-infested boarding **houses** provide scant shelter for the poorest residents, while better-off residents live in tiny, cramped, dilapidated buildings. Deprived of options, people pay exorbitant rents for rundown buildings that landlords fail to maintain. Few have amenities like electricity, running water, or indoor plumbing. The most destitute pay a fee to sleep on tables in the pool halls. In addition, Detroit policemen frequently subject residents to indignities like random searches and arrests. The preventable diseases linked to poverty and lack of sanitation run rampant through the population: Black residents die of pneumonia at twice the rate and of tuberculosis at three times the rate of white Detroiters. Most can't afford—or even access—doctors of the city's predominantly white hospitals.

In this book, houses represent the American Dream as a signal of success. But because there are complex, often unspoken social rules about who can live in which neighborhood, they also mark the segregation and division in society. The difference between houses in Black Bottom—rat infested and rundown—and the rest of the city metaphorically explains the bleak limits that prejudice and segregation place on the city's Black residents. Every reality of living in Black Bottom, from the preventable diseases to police brutality to punishing rents, confirms the second-class status of Black residents in the city of Detroit and, by extension, in American society in the 1920s.

Ossian establishes his medical practice in Black Bottom at the back of the centrally-located Palace Drug store just a few blocks from his rooms. His first patients, Lucius and Elizabeth Riley, come to him fearing that Elizabeth's stiff jaw signifies a potentially deadly tetanus infection. Fortunately, it's just dislocated. Ossian resets it for the modest fee of $5. And the Rileys' word-of-mouth recommendation encourages new patients to try Ossian's tiny practice. Most can't afford to pay much, but Ossian works hard and carefully squirrels away his cash.

Despite the impediments of systemic segregation and the prejudice faced by Black Southern migrants like himself, Ossian doggedly pursues his American Dream, and his hard work appears to be paying off in the way the American Dream mythology says it should. Thanks to previous chapters, however, readers are already aware that what seems like Ossian's good fortune won't last.

Ossian also begins to network in the Black Bottom community, joining fraternal organizations like the Elks and the Masons, and starting to attend Ebenezer AME Church. His connections earn him the role of medical examiner for an insurance company, vastly expanding his practice. And he makes a few friends, including lawyer and fellow Howard alum Julian Perry and Dr. Edward Carter, a colleague and fellow Elk and Mason. Carter has the life Ossian wants in the upper reaches of Black society, comprised of mostly Northern-born, well-educated ministers, lawyers, and doctors. Most work in Black Bottom, but few of the elite live there, commuting from **houses** in predominantly white neighborhoods.

The location of a person's house broadcasts not just their success (according to the idea of the American Dream), but it also shows who can pass through the color line between the Black and white worlds and meet with tolerance, if not acceptance. The idea of the talented tenth posits that people who can make this transition will lead American society towards racial integration, and Ossian wants to participate in leading that charge. He also wants to show Black and white Detroiters that his hard work has paid off.

Ossian and Carter both work at Dunbar Memorial, a tiny, threadbare hospital founded by the city's Black doctors in 1918. It represents a proud achievement—a place where Black residents can receive care with dignity—although its resources are severely limited. But it's a place where Ossian can rub elbows with the city's established, elite Black doctors.

Dunbar Memorial, like many of the services available in Black Bottom and other segregated communities, shows how harmful prejudice and segregation can be to the groups being discriminated against. And it shows how capably Ossian rises in the ranks of his segregated community.

In the early 1920s, the civil rights movement gains momentum. However, it's increasingly divided between competing impulses for integration (spearheaded by W. E. B. Du Bois) and Black nationalism. More and more activists preach the value of armed resistance. While Black nationalist ideas draw some Black Bottom residents, most of the Black talented tenth, including Ossian and his medical colleagues, remain staunch integrationists. Their efforts to improve the lot of the city's Black residents often take on a tone of condescension, lecturing poorer residents about the need to behave with decorum and embrace hygiene. At the same time, the local NAACP branch engages in litigation fighting segregationist policies. And they step in to provide legal aid for a Black man who murdered his abusive landlord. They protect him from lynching and help him to earn a judgment of justifiable homicide.

Prejudice and segregation follow the influx of Black Southerners heading north during the Great Migration, beginning to suggest that grand hopes for integration based on the excellence of a few men and women are naive. Some, like Ossian and his colleagues, double down on their belief that their personal efforts will allow them to cross the color line and bring the rest of Black Detroit in with them. In doing so, they align themselves—consciously and subconsciously—with the exclusionary and prejudicial attitudes of white nativists. Others begin to respond to this dawning realization with more overt calls for civil rights. And the NAACP's efforts to provide legal protection for Black people caught up in housing disputes foreshadows the violent summer of 1925 in Detroit and the Sweet case.

But when the national organization poaches the Detroit NAACP branch's charismatic leader, the local branch disintegrates. By the time Ossian arrives, despite solidifying power in the white supremacist movement, local civil rights campaigns have become sporadic. Ossian resents growing discrimination, but he joins the fight against it reluctantly. He participates in a small, safe protest, joining nine of his Black colleagues in very visibly attending an event in honor of a notoriously racist baseball star. Although this action makes Ossian feel powerful, in the context of the city's increasing segregation, it does little to improve the lives of Black Detroiters or Black Americans. Race riots destroy the Black community in Tulsa, Oklahoma in 1921. In 1922, 51 Black men are lynched. And in 1923, race riots destroy Rosewood, Florida.

Ossian approaches the discrimination and segregation in Detroit as a personal issue. He seems to believe that if he focuses on making himself an exemplar of the Black race—a member of the talented tenth—he will find acceptance in the white community. His single act of protest isn't very meaningful for anyone other than himself. All the while, the situation in the city and the country more broadly continues to escalate. This shows both how invested white Americans are becoming in protecting their racial purity and privilege and how easily the theoretical progress of the Reconstruction Era and the granting of civil rights to Black Americans can be undermined in practice.

Against this backdrop of increasing violence, Ossian meets Gladys at a dance in 1922. Gladys was born in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. Her single mother luckily married a young Black musician, who took his family to Detroit and then built a successful career. The family could afford to live in a white neighborhood, allowing Gladys to attend white schools. To Ossian, the graceful, cultured, and educated Gladys represents the perfect wife. They marry in December 1922 and move in with Gladys' parents—Black Bottom is no place for a lady like Gladys to live.

Like Ossian, Gladys's life exemplifies the ideals of the talented tenth and the American Dream. Her stepfather's efforts earn a comfortable life and advantages for his family. And access to nice housing, good schools, and a comprehensive education turns Gladys into a model American woman. The only thing that holds her apart from the middle-class white people in the city is her skin color.

Following his marriage, Ossian plans to spend a year in Europe studying the latest medical advances. Not only will this polish his medical credentials, but it adds a layer of elite sophistication to his growing self-presentation. Moreover, the relative lack of overt racism in Europe promises a welcome respite from the exhaustion of survival in America. Through the spring and summer of 1923, he works out the trip's logistics, despite Gladys' pregnancy. She delivers a premature baby boy in July who dies three days later. Thus, the European trip provides a distraction from the couples' personal grief in addition to a break from Jim Crow-style racism. Their ship cabin for the European voyage sits between two white couples' cabins.

The Sweets' trip to Europe demonstrates how American culture specifically fosters and perpetuates the prejudice, segregation, and violence they experience. In the rest of the world—and even just on the steamer ship that carries them across the Atlantic—others recognize and respect their dignity and worth as human beings. This offers readers a pointed reminder that legal and social factors worked together to generate the extremely overt and violent forms of racism common in 1920s America.

The Sweets stop in Vienna first, and Ossian attends lectures by Baron von Eiselberg, the father of neurosurgery. Studying at the Eiselberg Institute itself would have given him better access to cutting-edge medical research, but just attending such a famous man's lectures provides Ossian with knowledge far beyond the medicine practiced in the resource-starved Dunbar Hospital. In Vienna, Gladys discovers that she is pregnant again. Then the couple moves to Paris, where Ossian listens to Marie Curie, the mother of radiology. In Europe, the Sweets relish the lack of racial discrimination, much like the growing community of Black expatriate artists, musicians, and writers converging on Paris.

Ossian's European trip also shows how much work it requires to earn a spot in the talented tenth. Burnishing his credentials in Europe won't impress his working-class patients; instead, it signals to his colleagues (and the city's white medical establishment) that Ossian deserves respect. And as they spend more time in Europe, the Sweets increasingly glimpse the promise of a life in which they are treated as the equal members of society they only are in theory in America.

But Jim Crow follows the Sweets abroad, too. Although Ossian makes a sizeable donation to the American Hospital in Paris, it refuses to allow Gladys to deliver there, saying that she would make white patients uncomfortable. Fortunately, baby Iva arrives without incident in May, shortly before the family's return home to Detroit.

In fact, the only notable experience of segregation the Sweets have in Europe is at the American hospital. American society's commitment to segregation runs so deep that its white institutions refuse to relinquish their superior privilege even while abroad.

CHAPTER 5: WHITE HOUSES

Throughout the summer of 1925, rumors flow around Garland Avenue that a Black family has bought the corner **house**. The threat seems more imminent when posters advertising the Waterworks Park Improvement Society go up, asking people interested in "self-defense" to band together. Chairman Harold McGlynn hosts 700 people for the Society's first public meeting in the schoolyard across from the bungalow. The main speaker, who represents the Tireman Avenue Association neighborhood association, riles up the crowds' segregationist sentiment.

Organizations like the Waterworks Improvement Association provide one clear example of the way that legal policies work hand in hand with social customs to enforce segregation. The group starts out of fear and anger: it's a group of neighbors determined to keep any and all Black families from moving in. And the fact that they understand their actions as self-defense points towards the way many white people in the pre-Civil Rights Era felt that any small step towards integration threatened their privilege.

The family in question is the Sweets. After their return from Europe in the summer of 1924, they moved back in with Gladys' parents while they saved money for the down payment on a **house**. Newly elevated by his European studies, Ossian spent much of the year rebuilding his practice. His brother Otis moved to Detroit and established a dental practice, while the much younger Henry completed his studies at Wilberforce University in nearby Ohio. Otis, who is less driven than his brother, contentedly lives a middle-class life. Like his oldest brother, Henry has grand plans for his professional life. But he involves himself in racial activism to a much greater degree.

A determined member of the talented tenth, Ossian plans to assert his right to integrate into white society. He returns from Europe intent on the next steps towards building his American Dream. His European studies elevate his professional status and rebuilding his practice starts to refill his bank account. In contrast, brother Otis's contented, simpler life seems to acknowledge the limits prejudice and segregation place on his upward mobility, while Henry's political interests show the increasing necessity of direct political demands for civil rights rather than trusting that integration will just happen on its own.

While Ossian and Gladys put away money, enormous shifts occur in the politics of Detroit race relations. Nativist politicians with a tough-on-crime stance reshaped the city's criminal court in the late teens and 20s. This crackdown on petty crimes inspired political revolt by the lower classes. In the 1923 election, they support progressive, Irish-American Frank Murphy's campaign for judge to rebalance the court. A fear and smear campaign, launched in the papers by business and political elites, fails and the support of east-side wards, including Black Bottom, carry Murphy to an easy victory. In response, when the city's mayor announces his early retirement in 1924, necessitating a special election, the Ku Klux Klan jumps into the political fray. John Smith, a Polish-American Catholic and a former soldier with a fourth-grade education, jumps into the ring, hoping to capitalize on the support of the same coalition that propelled Murphy to victory.

The political situation in Detroit during the early 1920s shows how the personal and the political are entwined. Although much of the prejudice and segregation experienced by people like the Sweets happens in small, individual actions, these actions dovetail with larger currents in the city's political and social scene. The ascension of working-class sons of immigrants like Murphy and Smith—based on the support of both Black and working-class white Detroiters—threatens the grip native-born, wealthy white elites have on power. Thus, to protect themselves, they turn to organizations like the Klan to help them try to divide the support of the lower classes along racial lines.

The Ku Klux Klan pick an unknown lawyer as their candidate to challenge John Smith. When they fail to get their candidate on the ballot, they must resort to a write-in campaign, which they publicize with massive demonstrations and rallies meant to intimidate voters. Smith refuses to be intimidated, and both white progressives like pastor Reinhold Niebuhr and Detroit's talented tenth close ranks behind him. But, while 99% of Black Bottom voters choose Smith, enough white voters write in the Klan's candidate to assure him victory—except that Smith's supporters on the election committee disqualified hundreds of ballots on technicalities. Smith claims victory, at least until the next general election, which is scheduled for the following year. Intent on keeping racial tensions running high ahead of the election, the Klan focuses on fostering rage over Black encroachment into all-white neighborhoods.

The Klan's candidate illustrates their confidence in the power of racial prejudice and nativist fears to shape public policy by helping them win the election. Expecting the majority of white voters to support them, they don't pick a particularly qualified or recognizable candidate. And their confidence isn't misplaced: despite the support of the Black community and working-class white progressives, their candidate received more votes. And while Smith's victory could signal the start of a new era in Detroit civil rights, it doesn't. The Klan doubles down on a campaign of convincing working-class white people that potential Black neighbors are a bigger threat to their prosperity than the political elites.

Although Gladys claims no preference for a white neighborhood, police violence and poor living standards put Black Bottom—the only Black neighborhood—out of the question. But moving into a white neighborhood presents steep challenges. Most of Ossian's colleagues who live outside of Black Bottom established themselves years before, when the color lines in real estate were more porous. Now, land developers write racially exclusionary covenants into the deeds for newly built **houses**. And real estate agents rarely show Black families houses in white neighborhoods, since their presence automatically drags down property values. Some hire white real estate agents to buy homes for them, but Ossian's pride won't allow that.

The policies and practices that largely confine Black residents like the Sweets to Black Bottom are called "redlining," and they show how legal and social practices work together to reinforce segregation. The covenants—discriminatory agreements included in the deeds of homes—are legally binding on homebuyers and owners. Agents' reluctance to show homes in white neighborhoods to Black buyers suggests that segregation is getting worse, not better. The fact that it's harder for Ossian to buy in a white neighborhood than it was for many of his older colleagues also supports this idea: the years tick by but race relations in Detroit deteriorate rather than improve.

But one day, Lucius Riley, husband of Ossian's first Detroit patient, lets the doctor know about a fine, recently built **house** about to go on sale on Garland Avenue. Garland is hardly a middle- or professional-class neighborhood. Other, better neighborhoods have small Black enclaves. But Garland lies conveniently close to Ossian's practice in Black Bottom, and the house sits on busy Charlevoix Avenue, with its streetcar line. The sellers, Ed and Marie Smith, might feel sympathy for the Sweets—Ed is a Black man who passes for white—but they also know they can charge the Black family above market value for the house. To sweeten the deal, the Smiths offer to finance the purchase themselves so the Sweets can avoid the challenge of finding a mortgage lender. This benefits the Smiths, too, allowing them to charge an outrageous 18% interest on the loan.

Without comprehensive civil rights in practice as well as in legal theory, members of disadvantaged and devalued groups like the Sweets face an uneven playing field. Aligning themselves with prejudicial social and legal systems, the Smiths take advantage of the Sweets to improve their outcome in the sale. Without betraying any sympathy for the Sweets, they defend their own interests by charging much more than market value for their house. Still, in a system that aids and abets an increasingly segregated society in Detroit, even this subpar deal offers Ossian his best chance at forcing American society to acknowledge (if not appreciate) his presence and achievements as a Black man.

As soon as the Sweets visit the **house**—before they even buy it—rumors start swirling on Garland Avenue. Worry based on racist fearmongering that Black men rape white women and Black people corrupt white morals combines with wounded pride that a Black family could so easily buy their way into a neighborhood where working-class families struggle to pay the bills. But the gravest concerns are economic. Changes in the economy, including Detroit's overheated housing market and expanded credit opportunities, mean that most families in the neighborhood don't own their houses outright. Often, they hold multiple mortgages which they must constantly refinance and struggle to pay down on working-class wages. The color line giving way sets off a domino effect: property values drop, refinancing opportunities thus dwindle, and people begin to default.

The white residents of Garland Avenue fear Black neighbors because of the narratives constructed about Black criminality and white racial purity. But it's important to remember that society created the associations between Blackness and criminality, in part by confining both Black residents and socially undesirable (if popular) businesses like speakeasies, brothels, and casinos to the same areas of town through redlining. Thus, to many, the best way to protect one's home value is to make sure it's in an all-white (and so supposedly safe and moral) neighborhood. The residents are vulnerable to these fears because, as working-class laborers, they have an insecure grip on home ownership and by extension, on the American Dream.

Garland Avenue's residents' concerns lack a focus, though, until a series of clashes on the west side during the spring and summer of 1925. First, two Black families, recently arrived from Georgia, rent a flat just one block beyond the traditional border of one Black neighborhood. When a white mob tries to storm the **house**, one of the Black women, Fleta Mathies, shoots a pistol out the window. This draws police attention, and although no one is hurt, they charge Fleta with reckless use of a firearm. At the police station, an irate neighbor tells her that her "people have got more privileges than you're entitled to." She remains defiant as Black lawyer Cecil Rowlette gets her case dismissed.

The color line is an imaginary boundary, marked not by physical structures but by social agreement; the location of Fleta Mathies' home shows how porous the line is in practice. But, since working-class white people feel that their race give them power, they resent any encroachment by Black residents like Mathies. The neighbor's angry outburst demonstrates this resentment and shows how civil rights weren't necessarily considered universal rights in early 20th-century Detroit, or America. Importantly, the Detroit courts recognize Mathies' right to defend herself and her home from danger—in this case, the justice system works fairly.

Next, Dr. Alexander Turner, an established Black physician who has long lived in an all-white neighborhood on the east side, decides to move his family to a **house** a few blocks north of Tireman Avenue. Within a few hours of moving in, a mob has gathered on his doorstep. Despite a police presence at the scene, men impersonating the police convince Turner to open the door. The mob rushes inside and begins to terrorize the family. When the mob's ringleaders, members of the Tireman Avenue Improvement Association, demand that Turner sign his deed over to them, he agrees to do so at his office. But the mob attacks again when he enters his car. Injured, Turner rushes to his lawyer's office and relinquishes his new home.

The white neighborhood has long tolerated Dr. Turner and his family, even if they haven't appreciated having a Black family in their midst. But his attempt to move unleashes a firestorm of racialized violence, as residents of the new neighborhood mobilize to protect the privilege of living in an all-white neighborhood and its associated property values. A terrified Dr. Turner gives in to the mob and relinquishes his home, setting two precedents that will be important later to the Sweets. First, it shows white homeowners that violence can scare Black residents away. Second, in comparison with Mathies' case, it seems to confirm that Black families in white neighborhoods need to be prepared to protect themselves with weapons.

Two weeks later, the Tireman Avenue Improvement Association attacks Vollington Bristol, an old friend of Ossian's. Bristol owns a **house** in a white neighborhood, which he rents to white tenants. But, fed up with issues like unpaid bills and property damage, he decides to accept Black tenants instead. Each time a new Black family moves in, the neighbors terrorize them until they leave. When the ringleaders demand he stops renting to Black people, he elects to move in himself. Bristol requests police protection on the day of his move, and the white mob initially asks the police to stand aside momentarily to allow them to "drive the coloreds away." Five police officers bravely hold off the crowd until reinforcements arrive, at which point they arrest 19 men and seize 35 guns and several knives from the crowd.

As with the Mathies case, Bristol's brush with mob violence demonstrates the emotional power—but also the fictitious nature—of the color line. The white homeowners don't object to Bristol owning the home. But the visible presence of Black people across the color line drives them to violence. Bristol rises to their attention when his actions claim that he deserves the same rights as any other landlord, to have tenants that pay the rent and don't destroy his property. But his white tenants can behave with impunity thanks to social prejudice that teaches them that Bristol, as a Black man, is inferior.

Two weeks later and a few blocks away, John Fletcher moves his Black family into a new **house**. As they sit down to dinner, a mob gathers in the street. Fletcher calls the police who, to his amazement, chat amicably with the growing crowd. As the sun sets, onlookers begin to pelt the house with chunks of coal and stones while chanting "Lynch him! Lynch him!" Panicked and fed up, Fletcher picks up a rifle and opens fire through an upstairs window, wounding a person in the crowd. The crowd instantly disperses while police book Fletcher for the shooting. The next day, he makes bail and moves his family out of their new house.

As with Dr. Turner's experience, John Fletcher's clearly shows the racially inequal application of the legal and justice systems in 1920's Detroit—the police show more sympathy towards the mob than the family they're supposed to be protecting. The neighbors' calls for lynching remind Fletcher—and readers—of the ongoing threats of violence that Black Americans face. They also show the slow progress towards racial equity and civil rights, even in the North. Like Dr. Turner (and unlike Ossian Sweet), Fletcher capitulates to the threats of violence instead of standing his ground.

Turner, Fletcher, Mathies, and their families all flee. Bristol remains, but he faces daily death threats. The Tireman Avenue Association feels proud of its work preserving property values, keeping Black families off white turf, and shoring up the color line.

The pride white people feel when they chase Black families from their homes shows the extent to which the prejudice and segregation espoused by the most extreme white supremacist groups (like the Ku Klux Klan) had become common in the North in the 1920s.

The violence scares Gladys and Ossian. But Ossian feels that backing down will mean admitting his failure to live up to the principles of racial pride he learned through his education. A new generation of leaders have revitalized the local NAACP chapter, including Dr. Edward Carter and others of Ossian's colleagues. On the night of the attack on Turner's house, Carter suggests to Ossian and other friends that they join its defense, although they ultimately decide to stay away. Instead, Carter begins to censure Turner for failing to stand up for himself.

Dr. Carter has a complicated relationship to Ossian and the events on Garland Avenue. Ossian looks up to his elder mentor with a great deal of respect. And Carter certainly has strong opinions about the state of housing segregation in Detroit. But he refuses to put himself on the line, failing to follow through on his idea to help Dr. Turner defend his home just as he will later fail to show up to help Ossian defend his. And while this might point towards a personal lack of courage, it also offers a stark reminder of the real violence and terror that organizations like the Ku Klux Klan or even white neighborhood mobs could wield to deprive Black Americans of their civil rights.

The Ku Klux Klan poses a very real threat: just days after the attack on John Fletcher, they host a rally attended by 10,000 people. But mayor John Smith refuses their attempts at intimidation. The Klan rally provokes a statement from the mayor's office denouncing the violence of race riots and reminding the police they must enforce the law, which "recognizes no distinction in color or race." But Smith also urges Black leaders to back down and accept their place in society for the sake of peace. While Ossian, Turner, and other members of Detroit's talented tenth gather to discuss the attacks, Marie Smith calls to tell Ossian that the Garland Avenue neighbors are beginning to organize for violence. But Ossian feels determined to be the man Turner failed to be, to claim and protect his own house.

The increasing small-scale neighborhood violence mirrors the Klan's ascendancy on a wave of racialized resentment against recent Black immigrants to Detroit (and the North generally). And while the mayor acknowledges that Black residents have the same civil rights as white residents in theory, he also tries to place the responsibility to quell the violence directed against them on Black Detroiters themselves. In practice, they're expected to maintain the color line by conforming to the role of second-class citizens.

The Waterworks Park Improvement Association—named for a park at the foot of Garland Avenue—has its first meeting in the garage of Harry Monet, a tire-factory laborer. They name Harold McGlynn, an auto plant inspector, as chairman, although the group likely benefits from the leadership of James Conley, a local real estate agent who stands to lose his livelihood as well as the value of his home if a Black family moves to the neighborhood. Under his guidance, the Association begins to encourage members to add restrictive covenants to their deeds. And the Association holds its first rally—with a Tireman Association member as the featured speaker—at the local elementary school in mid-July.

Neighborhood associations, like the ones around Tireman and Garland Avenues, use two primary means to protect their neighborhoods against perceived "invasions" by Black residents: the threats of violence already shown by the Mathies, Turner, Bristol, and Fletcher incidents, and restrictive covenants. These are lines added to a person's property deed that specify how the property can—and can't—be used in perpetuity. The neighborhood associations encourage people to add covenants to their deeds specifying that the property must be owned by white people.

Undercover officers attend the rally and report on it to Inspector Norton Schuknecht, a life-long east-sider. Garland Avenue lies in his precinct, and he has ties to the community through his brother-in-law, Otto Lemhagen. With ties to the native-born Protestant political elite of Detroit, Schuknecht has had a comfortable career on the force. The Sweets' impending arrival puts him in a tough spot. Professionally, he's beholden to police force leadership that wants to avoid further embarrassment after police were complicit in attacks on Black property over the summer. But personally, he feels sympathy for Garland Avenue residents, since he has a mortgage and a daughter too. He can imagine their fear.

In telling the Sweets' story, the book claims that justice cannot exist until all people have equal civil rights in theory and in practice. Schuknecht's divided loyalties show why. On the one hand, as a police officer, he's supposed to protect all citizens; on the other hand, he empathizes with the white neighborhood residents, including his own relatives. And by late summer of 1925, it's become clear that most of the predominantly-white Detroit police force, like Schuknecht, prefers to protect the interests of other white people, pointing to the systemic prejudice that Black Detroiters face.

As the move draws closer, Ossian's determination to defend himself grows. He likes the way his resolve impresses his peers. He listens to encouragement from the NAACP, which asserts that if race riots are the price to pay for Black people asserting the "rights of men," so be it. He gathers his compatriots: Gladys, Otis, Henry and his friend John Latting, Julian Perry, Dr. Carter, William Davis, Joe Mack and Norris Murray. Gladys stockpiles food and Ossian collects weapons. And, at Bristol's urging, Ossian contacts the police to ask for protection, although he goes above Schuknecht's head and speaks directly with Robert McPherson, head of the Black Hand Squad that polices the Italian mob and Black community.

Ossian's undergraduate and medical school careers may have been undistinguished, but through asserting his civil right to own whatever house he can afford to buy in Detroit, he has found a way to claim a leadership role in his community. Gladys and Ossian prepare to defend their property and their human dignity, even as their preparations show their awareness of how dangerous this choice may be. The police—all too likely to side with a white mob instead of protect a Black family—are an afterthought, illustrating how injustice and racism shows Black people, like Ossian, that they cannot trust their local government to support them.

By the time the Sweets move in in early September, the Ku Klux Klan has gotten its man on the ballot for the mayoral election in the fall; exuberant Klan leaders plan to erect KKK signs on their downtown headquarters when they win. On Garland Avenue, despite an early flurry of activity, the Waterworks Association has failed to sustain the neighbor's tensions over the long, hot summer months. Mutual distrust and self-interest mean that only a handful agree to add restrictive covenants to their deeds, and interest in the Association's work fades.

The Klan's success in getting their candidate on the ballot makes them increasingly visible, and their heightened visibility emboldens nativist sentiment and increases the possibility of violence. On Garland Avenue, however, self-interest impedes the Neighborhood Improvement Association's drive to keep the Sweets out with restrictive covenants. This, too, increases the risk of violence.

Inspector Schuknecht finds out about the Sweets' move-in date from Inspector McPherson less than 24 hours in advance. McPherson is a decorated police office, but Schuknecht finds him unreliable. With little forewarning, Schuknecht scrambles to arrange around-the-clock protection for the **house** and to muster backups at the precinct house. And tensions rise higher after a fleeing Black man shoots two officers, one fatally, on the night before the move. September 8th passes without incident. But the following night, as the crowd grows restive and roils with rumors, a gang of teenagers begins throwing rocks and bricks at the house. Just after a taxicab lets out two Black men on the sidewalk in front of the house, shots ring out from an upstairs window.

The episode between Schuknecht and McPherson represents two men jockeying for dominance on the police force. But this minor interpersonal spat compromises Schuknecht's ability—if not his intent—to protect the Sweets. Without full civil rights in practice, even small hiccups disproportionately expose the Sweets to danger. Growing racial tensions set the stage for the move, which miraculously passes without incident, at least at first. But the white residents want to protect their turf. And the Sweets and their friends are just as determined to protect themselves, their right to live where they please, and the house, by any means necessary.

CHAPTER 6: THE LETTER OF YOUR LAW

Ossian and the other men arrive at the police station as confirmation arrives that, while doctors expect Eric Houghberg to survive, Leon Breiner has died. The architectural beauty of Detroit's neoclassical police headquarters belies the corruption and malice—especially towards Black citizens—of the police force itself. While Blondy Hayes, the Black Hand lieutenant who ensured the Black men's safety from the mob as police removed them from the house, treats them with kindness, the men know not to expect sympathy from anyone else. While they wait in the anteroom of the Detective's Bureau, Ossian and Hewitt Watson call their lawyers, Julian Perry and Charles Mahoney, respectively. Then, in whispers, the company agree on the story they'll tell police about the night's events.

The contrast between the beauty of the police headquarters and the corruption of the police force allows the building to stand as a metaphor for the experience of Black Americans in the pre-Civil Rights era: while in theory they have full civil rights, in practice, powerful people and institutions often treat them as systematically disadvantaged, second-class citizens. It's this reality—as opposed to their theoretical equality—that leads the men to distrust the justice system. And since they can't trust the system, the men decide to try to cover up their actions.

At 10:45 p.m., two hours after the shooting, Lieutenant Hayes summons Ossian for the first interview with Wayne County Assistant Prosecutor Ted Kennedy. Kennedy's boss, Robert Toms, dispatched him to conduct the interviews to ensure that the police's often inappropriate use of intimidation and force doesn't ruin the case. Kennedy wants to catch Ossian in a conspiracy to commit violence, but Ossian weakly maintains that he didn't know Garland Avenue was an all-white neighborhood and that the nine other men were just normal dinner guests. As Kennedy's questions become more aggressive, though, cracks appear in Ossian's story. He steadfastly refuses to admit that he planned or prepared for violence, but he does proudly assert his right to live in the **house** he purchased.

Ossian experiences surprise when he walks into the interview room to find a gentle and professional Ted Kennedy leading the interviews. His presence creates at least a veneer of justice, since his interview style avoids the thuggery and intimidation that many Black prisoners face. In Ossian's initial police interview, he initially tries to protect himself by feigning ignorance. But when Kennedy presses him too far, he does take a principled stand and asserts his civil rights.

The rest of the men stick to the same story of coincidence rather than conspiracy despite their fear. Kennedy, slowly undermining small details in their alibis, still fails to break even the weakest member of the group. Everyone in the house agrees on two things, however: the **house** was under assault before the shooting began, and no one was near the upstairs windows when it started.

The defenders' initial statements provide the core element of the defense strategy in the subsequent criminal court case. They admit that they were armed, but they insist that they were defending themselves from attack.

Gladys strikes a more defiant tone than the men, showing pride in the stand she and Ossian took. She knew she was moving into a white neighborhood and there might be trouble, she says, but she believes that she has as much right as anyone to live in a **house** she owns. But she still stonewalls Kennedy's attempts to prove that the assault was planned or to place the smoking gun in anyone's hands.

In her testimony, Gladys asserts her and Ossian's right to defend themselves and their home. But she goes farther than her husband, who feigned ignorance about moving into a neighborhood entirely populated by white people. In doing so, she asserts their humanity, their right to home ownership, and the equal rights the constitution allegedly grants them but which, in practice, are not extended to most Black citizens in early 20th century America.

Henry also shows no hint of contrition for the night's events, admitting that he picked up his rifle and went upstairs when the bombardment of rocks began. He even admits to firing the rifle—above the heads of the crowds and just to frighten them into retreat. But Henry refuses to pin the fatal shots on himself or any of his companions. And he centers self-defense: before he fired, he says, "the stones were pouring down like rain" and he had no doubt that the mob threatened his life.

Henry's testimony focuses on the threat the mob posed to the family and their friends inside the house. Like Gladys, he asserts his claim on equal rights proudly, while still protecting himself legally by refusing to admit any culpability in Leon Breiner's death. And his words, equating the frequency of the stones hitting the house to rain, eloquently capture the chaos of the mob scene and the imminence of the danger.

News of the shooting tears through Detroit's Black elite. Perry asks Cecil Rowlette, the Black attorney who represented Fleta Mathies and Alexander Turner, to join Ossian's defense. A neighbor, who happens to be on the board of the Detroit NAACP chapter, picks up Watson's call to Charles Mahoney. Rowlette and Mahoney both grew up facing discrimination and hardship but rose to the ranks of the talented tenth thanks to their educations. Both advocate for civil rights. Perry, Rowlette, and Mahoney likely go to police headquarters, but they're denied access to their clients, whom the police have yet to formally charge. The attorneys hope that if they can get a motion in front of one of the liberal judges, like Frank Murphy, they will be able to expedite their clients' release. Meanwhile, the NAACP prepares to bring its political weight to bear on the case as well.

The house defenders have access to skilled Black lawyers, in part thanks to the ways that Reconstruction opened avenues for education and professionalization to Black people. But progress is still slow, so organizations like the NAACP are necessary to ensure that the promises of Reconstruction come to pass. The lawyers' hope that they can get the case in front of a liberal justice shows yet again how imbalanced the justice system is in reality. The system's bias toward white interests means that Black defendants will need to get their case in front of a particularly sympathetic judge.

Meanwhile, back on Garland Avenue, Schuknecht's 200-man reserve holds back the crowd until it dissolves, its hatred and anger spent. He gives a reporter from the *Detroit Free Press* (the preferred paper of the city's working-class white population) comments and a tour of the **house**. The story in the paper the following morning quotes Schuknecht's claims that the street was "perfectly peaceful" when the shooting began. It speculates that the Sweets were spoiling for a fight and dwells with pathos and sympathy on Leon Breiner's senseless death and his family's plight. Similar stories run in the middle-class *Detroit Times* and the elite *Detroit News*, even though a *News* reporter, Philip Adler, found himself on the scene, where he witnessed the crowd throwing stones at the house while the police stood by.

The newspaper reports unquestioningly accept statements from an officer on a police force that has demonstrated ongoing, pervasive, and systemic prejudice against Black Detroiters. This demonstrates the color line at work: with white and Black residents largely separated from each other and each focused on the needs and concerns of their own community, biased ideas circulate easily. And where dissenting viewpoints exist—like Philip Adler's—they are often silenced to reinforce the status quo. This also highlights the injustice of a segregated society: public opinion condemns the defendants before they're even charged by the police.

These accounts help to explain why County Prosecutor Robert Toms feels it necessary to bring Ossian, Gladys, and their companions to trial. He is a fair and judicious man who has declared it better to let 99 criminals go free than to wrongfully condemn one innocent person. But he has political aspirations, and although he isn't a member himself, he can't afford to alienate the Klan, a powerful voting bloc. However, despite his conviction that, with racial tensions running so high, he must bring the case to trial, he sees its weaknesses. All of the testimony points towards self-defense, a sacrosanct right in American law.

Even normally progressive, liberal judges and politicians feel the need to hedge their bets against the Klan's evident political ascendancy. Toms can see that the prosecution's case is a weak one, but he still feels the need to appease voters with white supremacist beliefs and affiliations. And racial prejudices create the potential for him to win a case that, on legal precedent alone, the prosecution should lose.

The prosecution can only successfully fight a claim of self-defense if it proves that there was no vicious, threatening mob in the street. As it happens, Michigan law defines "mobs" as 12 or more armed or 30 or more unarmed people assembled "to intimidate or inflict harm," and as little as $25 of property damage counts. All the suspects confirmed that the Sweets had reason to be afraid. But when Ted Kennedy interviews Inspector Schuknecht, the policeman swears that he saw no more than a dozen people in the street before the shooting and only about 30 afterwards. Likewise, the rocks littering the roof and porch appeared after the shots. Otto Lemhagen colorfully adds that he saw a "hard-boiled" Gladys laughing triumphantly as the police stormed in.

The Sweets' experience on Garland Avenue certainly meets the low legal threshold for mob violence. Yet, this standard hasn't prevented a summer of violence against Black Detroit homeowners, highlighting the impunity white mobs feel when attacking Black victims. This in turn points towards the pervasive prejudice and segregation in a society that doesn't hold white mobs criminally accountable for their actions. And the ease with which white police officers like Schuknecht and Lemhagen bend the truth to protect the color line shows how deep racial prejudice runs.

Across the street, however, the Ray and Kathleen Dove claim they saw at least 50 people milling in the street before the shooting. Kennedy quickly drops this line of questioning before it can undermine his case. But even when he tries to focus on threat, he gets unwanted answers; neighbors confirm that people threw stones before the shooting, although with Kennedy's encouragement, they quickly downsize their memories to recall mere pebbles. Thus, Kennedy reasons that with more encouragement, the neighbors could say the right things to convince a jury to convict.

The eyewitness accounts immediately start to contradict the prosecution's desired story. The Doves may not have wanted the Sweets as neighbors, but they aren't as politically savvy as the police officers or the prosecutor's office. Kennedy drops lines of questioning that threaten to reveal troublesome information, clearly demonstrating how his personal prejudice leads him to conduct a biased investigation—one that he hopes won't give the Sweets justice.

While Kennedy interviews Garland Avenue neighbors, Ossian, Gladys, and the others sweat in jail. William Davis, a federal narcotics officer—another member of the talented tenth—breaks first, afraid of sacrificing a promising career. He confesses that Ossian said that "he was prepared to look after himself" if necessary and that he had the weapons to do so. And he accuses Leonard Morse and Joe Mack of shooting. Hoping to have saved his own skin but stewing in guilt, Davis then returns to his jail cell.

The members of the party—especially those who considered themselves part of the talented tenth, with a claim to the American Dream—seemed to have understood themselves as defending the dignity and civil rights of all Black people in addition to the house. But in a prejudicial and segregated system, it's dangerous to take this kind of a stand, and Davis' confession shows how easily threats of violence and retribution (such as the potential end of his career) can curtail the fight for justice and civil rights.

The first sign of legal trouble comes on the afternoon of Thursday, September 10th, the day following the shootings. A liberal judge denies the motion offered by Perry, Rowlette, and Mahoney to dismiss the charges, but this forces the Prosecutor's hand. His office presents charges to Frank Murphy, revealing that they plan to charge the group with first degree murder. More alarmingly, Murphy shows no signs of offering sympathy or mercy to the defendants. That night, the Klan holds a rally filled with racist vitriol and cheers for their mayoral candidate. And the next morning, Murphy hands down warrants for charges against all 11 accused.

The Sweets' actions clearly fall under the umbrella of self-defense both in terms of legal precedent and common sense. But it happens at a moment of increasingly overt racialized violence, led by the Klan and other groups. Even progressive Detroit judges (who are elected officials in the United States and are thus vulnerable to voters' displeasure in future elections) hesitate to show favor towards these Black defendants for fear of angering white voters. And, to pander to the interests of some white constituents, the prosecution presents clearly excessive charges. Nativist and white supremacist voters have the power to prevent, or at least seriously hobble, justice in this case.

Three days after the shooting, on Saturday, Perry, Rowlette, and Mahoney finally get access to their clients. The NAACP will cover all costs associated with their defense and has planned a massive fundraiser. Ossian provides the legal team with his official statement, the same shaky one he gave to Kennedy. The situation continues to deteriorate: a judge denies bail for everyone, including Gladys. And the city is awash with the kinds of rumors that precede race riots.

For the Black defendants in the Sweet case, the personal is political, since the timing of the shooting coincides with the runup to the mayoral election. As the NAACP joins the defense, it becomes increasingly clear that the subsequent trial will not just consider the guilt or innocence of the Sweets and their friends. Rather, it will pit the advocates of civil rights and integration against white supremacy and segregation.

Liberal mayor John Smith, swept into office with the overwhelming support of Black voters, delivers the worst blow on Sunday. In an open letter to the police commissioner, he blames the Klan's social and political machinations, even going so far as to claim that the Klan has been tempting Black families to move into white neighborhoods to provoke violence. But he also blames the Black community for inciting violence by demanding their legal rights. Claiming the social benefits of segregation, Smith declares that any Black person who endangers his or her own life and property out of a misplaced sense of pride is not only an agent of violence, but an enemy to the Black race.

If the liberal judges, including Frank Murphy, initially disappointed the defense team, John Smith deals a worse blow. Despite what he owes to the Black voters of Detroit, in light of facing a Klan-backed opponent in the upcoming election, he abandons his Black supporters—even blaming them *for inciting the summer's violence—to try to woo white voters. And his statement points out the cruel fact of life for Black Americans in the early 20th century: although they had equal rights in law and in theory, in practice, political and social forces often conspired to deny them these rights.*

Stung by this betrayal, both the talented tenth and the lowlier denizens of Black Bottom understand the danger of the moment. The Sweets' case has become something bigger than a case of self-defense. It has become a referendum on whether Jim Crow will be allowed to rule in the North as well as the South.

Abandoned by John Smith, their one-time white political ally, the Black community in Detroit prepares to learn whether its future will be hopeful—or whether social conditions are once again going to backslide.

CHAPTER 7: FREEDMEN, SONS OF GOD, AMERICANS

As soon as James Weldon Johnson, the executive secretary of the NAACP, sees the Sweets' story in the newspapers, he grasps its potential. Even in the North, segregation and racial violence—especially in terms of restrictive housing policies—are increasing.

As leader of the NAACP, James Weldon Johnson understands the danger of a moment where Southern-style segregation seems poised to take over the whole country. Until all Black Americans have the same civil rights in practice as white citizens, they live in danger of violence and injustice.

Johnson is a remarkable man. Poised, elegant, and politic, his pride and carriage developed out of a sheltered and privileged childhood in a prosperous Black middle-class family. From this foundation, he went on to establish the nation's first Black daily newspaper, become the first Black lawyer admitted to the Florida bar, founded Florida's first Black high school, and wrote popular musicals, songs, poetry, and an autobiography. President Theodore Roosevelt granted him a consular appointment, sending Johnson as an American representative to Venezuela and Nicaragua. Now, as the NAACP's first Black executive secretary, he interfaces between the primarily white board of directors and prominent Black members like W. E. B. Du Bois.

Johnson exemplifies both talented tenth ideal and the American Dream. His working-class parents provided him a solid foundation, but he achieved prominence through his own efforts at forging successful legal and artistic careers. But despite the recognition of men like the NAACP's board of directors and former President Theodore Roosevelt, he still faces discrimination and prejudice from less open-minded white people. Thus, his political career ends when Roosevelt's time in the White House does.

The Sweets' case exemplifies increasing housing segregation, especially in the North. Even Johnson's beloved Harlem neighborhood owes its existence to housing discrimination. The NAACP has been mounting legal challenges to segregated housing for several years, including a successful Supreme Court challenge of exclusionary laws in Louisville, Kentucky. At the time of the Garland Avenue shooting, the NAACP has another challenge—based in Washington, D.C.—winding its way to the Supreme Court. These legal actions are expensive, and Johnson needs to raise funds. A case like the Sweets' could galvanize national donations, and it could convince white people from less-desirable ethnic minorities—who face similar discrimination—to join the fight.

The nationwide housing segregation crisis highlights the competing interests of the national players in the Sweets' case. Of course, the NAACP and Johnson, both dedicated to fighting housing discrimination, want to support the Sweets' right to own property and defend it. But it's also convenient that the Sweets are accomplished and photogenic—they'll look good in the papers, no matter how the case is decided. And while the NAACP wants to help them win their case, its need to use them as an example for fundraising means that its focus and priorities might not always align with the local lawyers'.

But Johnson's fundraising efforts face an uphill battle: the white press largely ignores the NAACP, and Black communities aren't paying much more attention. But Johnson pays attention, especially to Detroit, where Alexander Turner, Vollington Bristol, and the Fletcher family have recently faced violent expulsion from their homes. Johnson plans to visit Detroit later in the fall. Meanwhile, the Sweets' case comes to his attention and he dispatches his protégé, Walter White, to the Motor City.

The color line impedes the NAACP's fundraising efforts. White Americans—even those in minority groups that are themselves vulnerable to housing segregation—don't know about the issue because the white press doesn't cover it. But Johnson sees the potential to awaken white people's sympathy towards Black families thrown from their homes in Detroit.

When Walter White isn't occupied with his work as Johnson's second-in-command at the NAACP, he rubs elbows with American literary elites. Although he is mixed race and therefore considered "a Negro" by the racial standards of the day, the light-skinned, blue-eyed Walter White easily passes for Caucasian—when he wants to. In principle, White embraces his mixed heritage and despises racialized hatred, but in practice he prefers the company of white people and admits, in private, to distrusting "pure Negro[s]." Still, his passion—and his ability to "pass" while investigating lynchings and other crimes on behalf of the NAACP—make him an indispensable member of the organization and positions him to help usher in the literary movement later known as the Harlem Renaissance. His own debut novel, *The Fire in the Flint*, published in 1923, becomes an instant success.

The question of Walter White's race shows how "race" is a culturally constructed idea. Most people interpret his light skin and blue eyes as "white," but his mixed-race grandmother was born into slavery as the daughter of an enslaved woman and a white man. According to "one drop" classification systems that were common in the early 20th century, having both Black and white ancestors among his grandparents qualified White as "Black." And, despite his self-identification as a Black man, his preference for light-skinned people shows how deeply rooted prejudice is in segregated American society.

The dynamic White arrives in Detroit about a week after the shootings, determined to shape up the case as quickly as possible so he can get back to New York for a weekend of parties. But conflict quickly arises. To avoid further inflaming the racial divisions in the city, the NAACP executive board wants a white defense lawyer. But the current attorneys balk at the idea. They fear that such a move will alienate the city's Black population and cut off its financial support for the Sweets' cause. White counters that the case has national ramifications and that a white lawyer could sway the opinions of white Detroiters who currently believe the Sweets guilty. White writes a letter to Johnson criticizing the trio of lawyers. He writes particularly harshly about Cecil Rowlette, who happens to be dark-skinned and the son of a formerly enslaved person.

Progress towards civil rights in America is complicated and messy. White's initial visit to Detroit also highlights the mismatched priorities between the Sweets' local and national supporters. The local lawyers want the case settled as quietly and quickly as possible, while the NAACP banks on national publicity to further its broader fight against housing discrimination. And White's personal prejudice against darker-skinned Black men adds personal vitriol to these institutional differences. White's reaction points towards the deep ways in which prejudice infiltrates a society—despite his own racial heritage and his work at the NAACP, he still demonstrates bias towards lighter-skinned people.

White attends the preliminary hearing, where Assistant Prosecutor Lester Moll sidesteps the issue of forethought (for which he has no evidence) and instead focuses on the technicalities of crowd size and antagonism. Carefully selected witnesses describe a small, non-threatening crowd. Moll seems to intend to prove the shootings disproportionate to the situation and convict the Sweets and their compatriots of conspiracy by implication. The defense attorneys, especially Rowlette, do their best to poke holes in the witnesses' testimony. But, despite this and Moll's failure to explicitly tie any of the suspects to Leon Breiner's murder, the judge finds the evidence sufficient to proceed to trial.

The seriousness of the charge against the defenders—premeditated murder—shows the degree to which Detroit political figures like prosecutor Robert Toms feel they must support and enforce the color line due to the current political situation in the city. The prosecution's lack of evidence to support that charge shows how unjustly the system functions, since Black citizens like the Sweets and their friends don't have equal civil rights in practice as well as in legal theory. And it shows how willing some leaders are—even the more progressive ones, like Toms—to pander to nativist and segregationist interests.

White uses this blow to revisit the idea of adding a white defense lawyer, but Rowlette's terms—that he and his co-counsels remain involved and that no other than Thomas Chawke, Detroit's most famous defense lawyer be allowed to join them—infuriate White. Chawke, known for defending mobsters, will give the case (which needs to be "a drama of injustice fairly fought") the wrong appearance for the national stage.

The argument over adding a white lawyer to the team—and which one to add—highlights the differences between the local legal team's focus and that of the NAACP. The local lawyers focus on the legal peril of the 11 defendants, while the NAACP's prioritizes generating publicity to draw attention to the general issue of housing segregation.

While Walter White fumes over Rowlette's impertinence, James Johnson starts fundraising. News of the Sweets' arrest spreads through the national Black press, carefully spun by the NAACP and connected to their ongoing Supreme Court challenge. Stories emphasize Ossian's injured pride and the suffering of the young couple, unjustly separated from their daughter and thrown in jail. And they raise the specter of Jim Crow segregation encroaching on Northern Black communities. But donations fail to meet expectations. More distressingly, the organization not only fails to gain traction with white audiences, but signs appear that liberal white people increasingly favor segregation. Johnson knows that white people must feel the sting of the case personally before it can cut through the color line.

The difficulties the NAACP faces in getting the Sweets' story national attention in the white press shows how solidified the color line has become—even in the North—by the early decades of the 20th century. In the Black press, however, they work to emphasize the elements of Ossian's story that connect to the American Dream—his professional success and desire to buy a nice home for his growing family—and his right to defend himself. In their telling, he took a stand not only for himself but for the dignity and humanity of any Black person denied housing by racist real estate policies.

In the week following White's visit to Detroit, Julian Perry tells the local NAACP branch that he wants to resign to make way for a white lawyer. But news of White's pressure campaign on the defense team provokes a backlash from the Black Bottom community, which begins raising a separate defense fund "uncontrolled by outside politics." Newly empowered, Cecil Rowlette remains in control of the case through the arraignment hearing.

The tug-of-war between the national NAACP organization and the community of Black Detroiters reminds readers that, although the Sweet *case becomes a local referendum on segregationist attitudes and nativist politics in Detroit, there are real people at the center of the drama. Without equal civil rights, the Sweets and their friends represent bigger issues in a segregated America, and their local friends and supporters refuse to let the NAACP lose sight of their individuality.*

While the suspects await the arraignment hearing, they receive visitors, including Henry Sweet, Sr., who travels all the way from Florida to visit his three sons. When Otis apologizes for embarrassing the family, Henry says he has nothing to be embarrassed about because "[o]nly rabbits run." Perhaps heartened by these words of approval, Otis joins Charles Washington, Leonard Morse, and William Davis in appealing to the NAACP to assume control of a case that has ramifications for the "inalienable rights under the Constitution" of all Black citizens. White tasks Perry with visiting the white lawyers on the NAACP's list, but each one declines to join the defense. The political situation—everyone expects the Klan's candidate to do well in the upcoming mayoral election—makes the proposition too risky. Only Chawke expresses willingness—for an unbearably high fee.

Henry Sr.'s conversation with his son reinforces the idea that what Ossian, his brothers, and his friends stood to defend on Garland Avenue was more than just a house. It was the dignity and humanity of themselves and other Black people. Rather than being ashamed of his sons' incarceration, Henry feels pride in their courage standing up against an unjust system. This inspires Otis to look at his situation through the lens of the ongoing fight for civil rights, so he joins with Morse and Davis in agitating for the NAACP to take over the defense team. However, most local white lawyers prioritize their careers over furthering civil rights, likely fearing that if the Klan's candidate wins the mayoral election, they'll be out of a job if they join the case.

Thus, Rowlette remains in control of the case on the day of the arraignment hearing. Witness testimony at the preliminary hearing had foreclosed his opportunity to present a self-defense argument, which he used successfully with the Fleta Mathies case. Instead, he attacks the Prosecution's flimsy case: their murder charges make no sense without an identifiable murder or compelling evidence of conspiracy. Justice demands that the Sweets and their friends be released. Although Frank Murphy carefully considers Rowlette's motion to dismiss, his instinct for political preservation overrides blind justice. The trial of *The People v. Sweet* will proceed. The next day, Klan candidates sweep the city primary, even in the city's eastern, working class, and ethnic minority wards.

The prosecution has a flimsy case that relies more on nativist fear and resentment than facts, and everyone seems to know it. But despite this evident injustice, the political situation in Detroit leaves Murphy vulnerable to the wrath of white, native-born voters who want to keep the color line intact. And this certainly seems like a winning political strategy when wards where he himself enjoyed wide support as a progressive candidate just a few years earlier swing for the Klan candidate in the primary, demonstrating how strongly people feel about defending the color line and housing segregation in Detroit.

At NAACP headquarters, a letter arrives from the chief counsel of the *Chicago Defender*. Because the case interests him, he offers any help he can—including the knowledge of great lawyers like Mr. Clarence Darrow. Twelve days before the trial begins, someone in the NAACP realizes the potential of this offer. Clarence Darrow is the most famous and brilliant defense lawyer in the country, and his involvement has the chance to change the trajectory of the Sweets' story.

The note of assistance comes from the Chicago Defender, *a Black-owned newspaper, offering another reminder of how difficult it is to carry the Sweets' story across the color line. But, in a stroke of unbelievably good luck, the connection to Clarence Darrow offers the NAACP just what it needs: the high-profile white lawyer who can capture the country's attention and perhaps ensure that justice prevails.*

CHAPTER 8: THE PRODIGAL SON

By telegram, James Weldon Johnson reaches out to gauge Clarence Darrow's interest in joining the case, only to find out that the famous lawyer is in New York City, visiting his friend, fellow attorney Arthur Garfield Hays. Johnson and his associates secure an appointment with Darrow the same afternoon. The NAACP contingent lays out the details of the case. Darrow, assuming that two of the three representatives are Black, offers sympathies for the difficulties faced by "[their] race." In fact, neither man is Black, although Walter White, whom Darrow assumes to be white, is. Chuckling over his confusion, Darrow agrees to take the case.

Johnson's ample social connections and easy access to a man as famous as Clarence Darrow shows him to be the epitome of the talented tenth—a man whose personal excellence has opened the doors of white society to him, at least to a degree. Still, in a segregated and prejudiced society, his achievements don't guarantee his equal rights, and he finds himself appealing to a famous white lawyer for help. Darrow's uncomfortable display of inaccurate racial profiling shows how contrived racial segregation is.

Clarence Darrow, at the time of the Detroit case, is the most famous lawyer in the country. He was born and raised in rural Ohio. His tradesman father was a widely read intellectual, religious, and political contrarian with ties to the abolitionist community. Darrow initially followed a conventional lifestyle, studying law at the University of Michigan, marrying, and establishing a practice in his Ohio hometown. But then, at the age of 30, he moved his family to the premier 19th-century "Machine Age" town: Chicago.

Darrow's personal and professional history predispose him to oppose nativist sentiments, segregation, and the kind of political self-preservation that characterizes most of the local players in the Sweet *case, including the white lawyers too afraid to join the defense team. He is a self-made man, rising to national prominence despite his humble upbringing, and much of his rise coincides with the industrialization boom of late 19th-century America.*

In Chicago, the avant-garde, bohemian modernist movement swept up Darrow. The modernist movement took "bourgeois respectability" as its enemy and flaunted their spurning of social norms in dress, living arrangements, and sexual relationships. Darrow divorced his wife, embarked on a series of romantic affairs, and turned his west side apartment into a "bohemian salon" of artists and writers. For a while, he considered trading his law practice to become a writer, too, but the success of his two published novels never matched the brilliance of his courtroom performances.

Darrow arrives in Chicago at an inflection point in American society. The modernist movement pushed back against Victorian-era morality and social conservatism and foreshadowed or precipitated many of the changes that were well underway during the social and cultural upheaval of the American Roaring 20s. His personal commitment to modernist beliefs also inclines Darrow to take on entrenched political powers, whether they favor capitalists over unions or white nativist populations over Black Americans.

Darrow's legal work started to draw widespread attention when he defended the president of the American Railway Union during the 1895 Pullman Strike. Having established his reputation as a defender of the "embattled working class," Darrow went on to defend workers' interests in other high-profile cases. But Darrow was driven by a belief that "society is organized injustice," and the cases he took on presented as much opportunity for self-promotion and attacking bourgeois values as anything else. His courtroom style lent itself to self-promotion and social attack, too. His famous closing arguments jumbled images, emotional appeals, sarcasm, and philosophizing together, allowing him to hold juries spellbound and seemingly bend them to his will.

Darrow represents many different kinds of people. But they are united by their position outside the white, Protestant, native-born, and wealthy classes of society. Darrow thus establishes himself as a champion for the working person, the common person, the immigrant person, and the otherwise oppressed. And, since the NAACP wants publicity to bring attention to the serious issue of housing segregation, his showmanship only adds to his appeal.

But Darrow's reputation as a labor lawyer came to a crashing halt in 1911 when he defended brothers accused of bombing the headquarters of a Los Angeles newspaper. To preserve his clients' lives, Darrow pled them guilty. The labor movement, stinging with a sense of betrayal, spurned Darrow from then on. But, in the tumult of the 20th century's early decades, Darrow found plenty of work and opportunities to continue his modernist crusade in the courtroom, defending ethnic minorities and leftists jailed for preaching revolutionary political ideas, fighting Prohibition, and even defending two wealthy Chicago men accused of brutally murdering a young child in cold blood.

Like the defenders and many of the other players in this legal and social drama, Darrow has his own flaws, one of which is his tendency towards self-promotion. And his legal career bears a few scandals that nearly sent him out of practice. Still, in the name of modernism and progress, he finds new types of cases when his star power in labor disputes dissipates. In general, he concerns himself with advancing the cause of modernism, freedom, and equality.

In 1925, Darrow enacts his most brilliant performance, defending Tennessee schoolteacher John T. Scopes in the so-called "Monkey Trial." After the state prohibits teaching evolution in schools, Scopes provides the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) with a test case to challenge the law. The ACLU's star attorney, Arthur Garfield Hays, leads the defense. But after massively famous politician and speechmaker William Jennings Bryan joins the prosecution, Darrow strongarms his way onto the defense team. With the arrival of these two famous men, the trial shifts from a focus on academic freedom to a battle between "the Old Time Religion" and modernity. Darrow even cross-examines Bryan, dismantling his fundamentalist religious ideas and exposing them to national ridicule. Darrow's reputation isn't harmed in the least by the fact that the defense loses the trial itself (Scopes is ordered to pay a fine and forced to resign).

The Scopes Monkey Trial, allegedly about academic freedom, becomes a test case pitting old-fashioned Protestant values against modernist, scientific research. Darrow took a small test case meant to wind its way up to the Supreme Court and turned it into a referendum on old-school religious beliefs. This foreshadows the way he will take the Sweet case and turn it into a referendum on civil rights, prejudice, and segregation in American society. In this way, Darrow shows how small, individual court cases can be leveraged to national attention and used to shift public opinion on important cultural matters.

Three months after *Scopes*, the NAACP approaches Darrow with the Sweets' case. Although his father had exposed the young Darrow to the ideas of abolitionists during his Ohio youth, Darrow had yet to take on segregation or civil rights in his legal career. And the Sweet trial offers the same opportunities as *Scopes*: the chance to gain the national spotlight and to dismantle the most sacred of antiquated American creeds, white supremacy.

Initially, it seems like Darrow's interest in the case arises more from his interest in self-promotion and his desire for public attention. Prior to 1925, civil rights cases hadn't formed an important part of his legal career or personal interests. The color line and socially condoned segregation allow white men like Darrow to remain ignorant of the glaring racial injustices in American society.

James Weldon Johnson and Walter White don't worry about Darrow's spotty legal record—many of his clients have still ended up in prison. True, Darrow's hunger for celebrity and preference for the fight over victory leads him to the kind of provocations that the Black community—especially in the racial tinderbox of Detroit—can hardly bear. But the NAACP primarily wants publicity due to their fundraising goals.

Hiring Darrow seems really risky for the NAACP. And although the fallout from a failure to achieve an acquittal will fall disproportionately on the Black community in Detroit, they judge the issue of housing segregation and advancing civil rights important enough to risk it.

While Johnson tries to wrangle the necessary funding money to hire Darrow and Hays from the NAACP's executive board, White travels to Detroit, where he smooths over relations with the Black defense team and the larger Black Bottom community. One week before the trial begins, the NAACP announces that Darrow and Hays have joined the defense. Everything is falling into place; the trial will reanimate interest in housing segregation as the NAACP prepares to bring its brief to the Supreme Court in their Washington, D.C. housing discrimination case. The NAACP's public statement warns Black Americans and ethnic groups about the growing danger of housing segregation, appeals to progressives, and takes a strong stand against the terrorism of the Ku Klux Klan. Darrow's name breaks the color line and the Sweets' story gains traction across the nation in the white press.

As the trial begins, the future looks promising for the NAACP's important civil rights work in terms of housing segregation. Darrow's celebrity breaks through the color line and allows them to make the case that housing policies aimed to segregate one group can easily be weaponized against other groups. Their campaign demonstrates yet again that true justice requires truly equal rights for all in practice as well as in theory. The D.C. and Sweet *cases illustrate, then, that the law and public sentiment need to line up in order for marginalized groups to receive justice and equal civil rights.*

A ray of hope reaches the defendants in jail as Gladys makes bond on October 6 and news of Clarence Darrow's retention arrives the following week. Then the great lawyer himself arrives at the Wayne County Jail to interview his clients. He reiterates what others have said: men unwilling to defend themselves would not be, in Darrow's opinion, worth defending in trial. He presses the men to admit to the shooting—in self-defense—rather than try to cling to their thin alibis.

Darrow shows respect for the defenders as human beings standing up for their rights and dignity. Although he wasn't previously involved in the civil rights movement, his humane treatment of his new clients speaks to his capacity to see them as equals, despite the attempts of nativists and white supremacists to dehumanize and degrade non-white people.

Darrow's arrival captures attention in the Black press. Southern newspapers issue unusually bold calls for justice. Papers in Chicago, Detroit, New York, and Washington, D.C. celebrate Ossian as a defender of himself and his **house** as well as a champion of Black humanity. Some papers directly endorse violent self-defense, especially where the "authorities fail to protect." Donations flood into the NAACP. Free on bond, Gladys becomes the defenders' public face. She enjoys the attention. Ossian receives glowing praise from such Black luminaries as W. E. B. Du Bois, who elevates him as an example for the talented tenth while criticizing Alexander Turner's failure to stand up. Slowly, Ossian's memory shifts; his fears and doubts fade to the background, and he begins to think of himself as a reluctant hero standing on principle.

As the case garners increasing attention, the press coverage increasingly focuses on the issue of self-defense. At this time, Black Americans were being persecuted and lynched for minor breaches of the color line in both the North and the South. In contrast, the papers—and the Sweets' defense team—claim that everyone, including Black citizens, have a right to safety. And Black voices are claiming their dignity and humanity when they declare their right to protect themselves when the police and politicians fail to do so. The growing attention seems to inflate Ossian's ego, since his newfound celebrity gives him a leading role in the civil rights movement and guarantees his position as a member of the talented tenth.

The publicity also shifts Detroit's public sentiment, giving Walter White fresh hope that the defense may win after all. Frank Murphy's political career depends, in part, on endearing himself to Black supporters by giving the case an unbiased handling. Although he denies Cecil Rowlette's motion to dismiss charges, his evident sympathy for the Black community and commitment to the ideals of colorblind justice impress White.

National attention to local issues in Detroit also seems to shift the political calculus of the case for progressive political figures like Murphy. He seems to have political aspirations that will require the support of both Black and white Detroit voters, making him hesitant to alienate either group. Still, he positions himself as a champion of true (colorblind) justice.

Outside the courtroom, the Klan's unexpectedly strong showing during the October primary election puts mayor John Smith back on the offensive. He makes a dynamic return to ethnic and Black neighborhoods, hammering away at Klan intolerance and rebuilding his coalition based on malice towards the Klan and what they represent. Once he stops trying to pander to the Klan, Detroit's progressive, ethnic, and Black communities rally around Smith.

Without the protection of fully equal civil rights in practice as well as in theory, however, the justice the defendants in the Sweet *trial will receive depends on how the political winds shift in Detroit. Mayor Smith plants himself back on the side of the Black and progressive communities—but only after it seems politically safe.*

The Klan's candidate weakly protests that he isn't a Klansman and tries to refocus the campaign on the city's vice and criminality. But his supporters suggest that people who vote for Smith should be tarred and feathered, and they force people to attend their candidates' rallies at gunpoint. The trial and campaign take on an archetypal feel, pitting the old order's entrenched intolerance, racism, and fear against the reality of a heterogeneous, modern America. Still, Smith stops short of making a principled stand for civil rights, not just in meetings with the Waterworks and Tireman Associations, but even in less hostile settings.

The inexperience and weakness of the Klan's candidate helps Mayor Smith's reelection campaign. So does his unwillingness to take a solid stand against their segregationist beliefs. Still, the Klan's overt calls for violence alienate potential voters and confirm the case being made by the NAACP and others that segregation and violence can all too easily be turned against many different groups of people.

The defense has only two weeks to prepare. Clarence Darrow's interviews with his clients give him insight into the night's events; Perry, Rowlette, and Mahoney explain the context of the Mathies, Bristol, Fletcher, and Turner cases. Arthur Garfield Hays and his legal team plan the defense's legal strategy, which will focus on the issue of whether the threatening mob justified self-defense.

The defense team focuses on the issue of self-defense because it offers the clearest path to an acquittal—the large, stone-throwing mob represented a clear threat to the house on Garland Avenue and its residents.

Hays's team builds their case around an 1860 precedent which holds that *belief* in a mob's threat is sufficient for self-defense, even if that belief proves to be inaccurate. And Walter White educates Darrow and Hays on the state of American race relations, giving them reports on the 1919 Washington D.C. and 1921 Tulsa race riots, Southern lynchings, and analyses of restrictive covenants authored by W. E. B. Du Bois and Louis Marshall. For his part, Darrow pays scant attention to the niceties of the legal arguments, confident in his intuitive ability to sway a jury's emotions towards the cause of justice.

In focusing on self-defense, the lawyers also make a case for the human dignity of the defendants and claim that they have the same rights as white Detroiters to own their own homes and to live in safety. Hays and the local legal team handle the legal niceties while Darrow focuses on the human element, since his specialty is weaving the kinds of legal stories that convince juries to side with his clients. And to do so, he allows Walter White to educate him about the violence and threats that many Black Americans faced in the early 20th century, despite their alleged equality under the law.

On October 30, just as Walter White catches the train from New York to Detroit to attend the trial, the NAACP receives word that a major donor will cover the costs associated with Darrow's work and will be considering providing seed money for a permanent legal defense fund. The NAACP's fundraising prospects, lifted by the prominence of the Sweets' case, look good. And the case's celebrity causes people to pack the courthouse.

As the case begins, it looks like some good will come of it, on the national scale at least. The funds flowing into the NAACP headquarters will not only cover the costs of the trial but will allow the organization to continue to advocate for civil rights at the local and national levels. The local attention also guarantees a full audience for Darrow's defense, which will further humanize his clients in the eyes of the general public.

Jury selection—from an unusually large pool meant to ensure scrupulous fairness—takes up much of the first day. When prosecutor Robert Toms and his associate Ted Kennedy finally turn over their 12 candidates for defense examination, Darrow handles it like a master. He easily, almost casually skewers inappropriate jurors, like an elderly man who admits Klan membership under Darrow's sharp questioning.

The unusual size of the jury pool points both towards Judge Murphy's personal dedication to creating the conditions for true justice and speaks to the difficulty of doing so in a segregated society where prejudice, especially against Black people, runs rampant.

CHAPTER 9: PREJUDICE

The faces in the jury box change as Clarence Darrow interviews potential jurors on the afternoon of October 30th and the following morning. Lawyers can ask the judge to remove a juror "for cause"—when they demonstrate potential biases—or with a peremptory dismissal that doesn't need to be justified. Because all 11 defendants are on trial together, Darrow has 330 peremptory dismissals at his disposal, and Frank Murphy's determination to be fair means that he's unlikely to challenge any of the defense's peremptory dismissals.

As the book describes the jury selection process, it's notable that Darrow has so many potential dismissals and that he uses so much time in carefully selecting the jury. Since public opinion—at least among the white, native-born people who make up the elite and working classes of the city—already opposes the defendants, Darrow must work extra hard to ensure they get a fair trial and a chance at justice.

Darrow once told a national newspaper who he does and doesn't like to see on a jury. The wealthy and powerful can't sympathize with lower classes, so they're out; prohibitionists and certain kinds of Christians are too sullen and judgmental; a lawyer should instantly dismiss any woman. Because he considers them to be "emotional, kindly, sympathetic," and poetic, Darrow favors Irishmen as jurors, followed by men of German and English descent. Especially in Detroit, where he will put "society's bigotry and brutality on trial," Darrow wants a jury of men who recognize the often-bitter realities of life outside the white, Protestant, nativist ruling class.

In a rapidly changing society, Darrow prefers people in tune with the march of social progress. He betrays his own racial and cultural stereotyping when he claims to prefer Irishmen on his juries. But in general, his selection process reveals a concern with finding people who understand the difficulties of achieving the American Dream—that is, working men. And, as an avowed disciple of social and economic progress, he prefers jurors who are less tied to the morals and ideologies of the past, such as excessive religiosity.

The trial beings against the backdrop of the fierce mayoral campaign, which John Smith has cast as a contest between not himself and his opponent but between the Klan's brutality and hatred and the values of the working classes, civil rights activists, and progressives. The elite of Black Bottom rally behind Smith, as do Reinhold Niebuhr and leaders of the city's Jewish temples. Election day sees massive turnout, and Smith carries the day by a margin of 31,000 votes. When a triumphant crowd of Smith supporters passes the Klan's headquarters, throwing rocks and breaking some windows, the terrified Klansmen huddle inside waiting for the police to quell the minor violence.

Despite his earlier attempts to blame the Black community for inciting violence by exercising their rights, John Smith jumps on the publicity of the trial to cast himself as the champion of anyone outside of the white, Protestant, native-born class that favors the Klan's intimidation and violent tactics. And while Smith wins the election in an apparent defeat of Klan ideology, the possibility of violence and intimidation remains, even though the tables are turned.

Jury selection drags into the first week of November, as Darrow and Toms jockey their preferred jurors into position. But by Wednesday afternoon, the jury's composition satisfies both sides. The all-white, all-male, all working-class group nevertheless represents a fair cross-section of Detroit demographics: it includes single and family men, immigrants and native-born citizens, homeowners and boarders. The trial itself begins on the morning of Thursday, November 5, 1925.

Despite the careful attention the defense paid to juror selection to ensure that the defendants receive a fair trial, the fact that the jury consists entirely of white men shows the slow pace of progress towards true equality and integration in American society. Still, it does capture the energy of a city in the midst of dynamic growth and demographic changes.

Prosecutor Robert Toms feels confident in his case, despite squaring off against the famous Darrow. He plans to call over 60 witnesses from the police force and neighborhood who will testify that the crowd presented no danger to the Sweets or their **house**. He carefully selected these witnesses, with the input of the Waterworks Association, to include only those who could be trusted "to say just the right thing." He also plans to keep his questioning strictly professional, avoiding any theatrics that might provoke Darrow to attack him or his legal approach. When Arthur Garfield Hays demands that the prosecution begin by presenting its bill of particulars—forcing it to precisely define the charges it plans to prove—Toms states that the state plans to prove that the defendants "premeditatedly and with malice aforethought" planned and prepared a fatal attack.

The prosecution has a weak case, since the shooting occurred in the context of a large crowd menacing the house on Garland Avenue and its occupants. To win, it must present a version of events so carefully curated as to be untruthful. Thus, Toms's large witness list attempts to paper over the weaknesses and half-truths of the prosecution's story of the shooting. It seems that Toms wants to use the image of professionalism to convince people that his case serves true justice, despite his underhanded tactics.

Then Prosecutor Toms calls his first witness, Norton Schuknecht. Schuknecht cuts a fine figure in his dress uniform. He provides curt answers to Toms's questions, stating that he and his men saw no evidence of a crowd or threat prior to the shooting. And he emphasizes the incongruity between the copious arsenal and the spare furnishings in the **house**. Over the next few days, other officers corroborate Schuknecht's account, claiming that the Sweets had police protection from the moment of their arrival. They reiterate the image of the sparsely furnished rooms. The officer who watched Leon Breiner bleed to death on the Doves' front lawn, with a pipe in his mouth but no weapons in his hands, provides the most dramatic testimony.

On the witness stand, Inspector Schuknecht adds to Toms's image of professionalism and utmost respect for the law. But he uses the respect garnered by his position and dress uniform to deliberately put forward falsehoods and exaggerations about the Sweets' actions on the night of the shooting. His theory, suggesting that the Sweets deliberately tried to provoke the peaceful white residents of Garland Avenue into violence, plays on nativist resentments of immigrants and anti-Black prejudice.

The neighbors confirm the police story from many vantage points around the neighborhood. For the most part, they state that there was no "crowd" and that if a few people gathered in the street, their actions were peaceful. A few witnesses stumble, betraying incomplete memories of events, overstating the number of people in front of the house, and recalling hearing rocks shatter windows in the **house** prior to shooting. But overall, they confirm the state's official case: five or 10 people may have gathered around the house just before the shooting, but there was no hint of trouble "until the Negroes started shooting."

Each witness who stumbles or strays slightly from the prosecution's preferred story points a damning finger at a blatant attempt to manipulate the justice system to the disadvantage of the Black defendants. This, in turn, offers a harsh reminder of the prejudicial treatment suffered by Black residents of Detroit and Black American citizens in the pre- civil rights era. The prosecution tries to build its case on white people's fears, based on false stereotypes that Black people are violent and prone to criminality.

Hays interrupts the momentum of Toms' presentation with technical legal objections, while Darrow cross-examines his witnesses. Darrow focuses his efforts on witnesses likely to undermine the prosecution's case. In cross-examining Schuknecht, Darrow's questions reveal at best incompetence—the inspector didn't investigate the Waterworks Association's intentions, and he didn't ask bystanders why they'd come to the house—and at worst clear evidence of deception, as when Schuknecht admits to seeing glass inside the house that suggests rocks thrown from outside. Darrow gets Ray Dove and others to admit to prejudicial preference for an all-white neighborhood. But he struggles to get many witnesses to discuss the Waterworks Association or the threats it made against the Sweets or to speak truthfully to the night's events.

The weaknesses in the prosecution's case—which charges the defendants with premeditated murder when they clearly acted in self-defense—lie close to the surface, allowing Hays and Darrow to easily exploit them. Still, even when admitting to details that undermine his story, Schuknecht staunchly remains on the white, nativist side of the color line by refusing to admit the meaning of the shattered glass inside the Sweets' house (which is clear evidence the violent crowd threw rocks and broke windows). Still, while witnesses like Dove admit to personal prejudice, no one willingly discusses the Association, with its mix of legal and harassment strategies.

Those witnesses who do stumble, however, critically threaten the prosecution's case. One admits to modifying his words to please Toms; another describes the Waterworks Association's midsummer rally at the schoolhouse, with its crowd of 600 people or more; two teenage boys describe seeing neighborhood boys throwing rocks at the **house** before the shooting.

The defendants' chance at true justice has always been slim, given the racial and political tensions in Detroit. Witnesses who admit to the prosecution coaching their testimony show just how difficult it will be for the Sweets to win in a system that doesn't recognize them as truly equal.

During the initial stages of the trial, Walter White continues the NAACP's fundraising efforts at a frantic pace. And he sits in the courtroom most days, networking with reporters and getting the NAACP's line into their papers. In the evenings, White attends Darrow's lectures at venues around the city. Reinhold Niebuhr also listens to Darrow; although the priest notes Darrow's bitterness about humanity, he appreciates the lawyer's portrait of the "injustices and immoralities" of industrial culture. Still, sometimes Darrow behaves in off-putting ways, such as his obvious flirtation with a married political activist, Josephine Gomon, who joins his Motor City entourage. And, in a presentation at the Black Bottom Y, Darrow tells the Black audience that slavery was the price their people paid for access to civilization; predicts that prejudice will be hard to overcome; and suggests that, while Black people need places to live, their presence still depreciates property values.

In the evening hours during the case, Darrow continues his work as a modernist evangelist by offering lectures around the city. His message resonates with progressive politicians and activists around the city, who are working hard to bring about a more just and equal society. Still, Darrow's ideas betray the imprint of systemic prejudice and racism in society. When he tries to redeem slavery as Black Americans' ticket to civilization, he both devalues the African civilizations from which enslaved people were stolen and vastly underrates the trauma and brutality of the American chattel slavery system and ongoing Jim Crow-style segregation and violence.

On the morning of November 14th, Toms rests the prosecution's case. White believes that the Darrow has already shattered the state's case in cross-examination and the defense must replace that with its own version of events. They can offer a narrative of racial injustice, provide positive character witnesses for the defendants, or even argue that the fatal shots came from a policeman's gun instead of the **house**. Instead, Hays opens with a motion to dismiss the charges. White doesn't like this idea, feeling that a verdict of acquittal will be far more dramatic than a dismissal. But it doesn't matter since Judge Murphy rejects the motion. No one knows why, although many have theories: his political career would be imperiled if he didn't fully try such a high-profile case; he shares White's assessment about the superiority of acquittal; or there isn't enough evidence to dismiss.

Hays' motion for dismissal serves the best interests of the clients, but not the fundraising interests of the NAACP, nor the national fight for housing equity. The illustrates how progress, in this case towards civil rights and housing protections for Black Americans, isn't smooth or even, and often faces setbacks. In this case, it faces a setback in Murphy's refusal to reject the motion. Without a statement of his rationale, the book offers three possible motives for Murphy's decision. It's possible he was afraid of alienating Detroit voters who liked a strong color line and thus that he opted to protect segregationist tendencies. But it's also possible he wanted to hold out for a greater victory, which an acquittal would be.

In his opening argument, Hays focuses on Ossian, presenting his rise from poverty through years of education and hard work as a sterling example of the American Dream in action. And he places the weight of Black America—from the race riots in East St. Louis and Tulsa to lynchings in the South, to the expulsions of Black families from white neighborhood in Detroit all through the summer of 1925—squarely on Ossian's shoulders. The defense's witnesses corroborate this account: among others, John Fletcher, Vollington Bristol, and Edward Carter speak to the volatile situation in Detroit; Serena Rochelle and Edna Butler describe their fearful night trapped in the **house** by a mob; and Philip Adler, the white *Detroit News* reporter who happened upon the scene, describes a crowd of several hundred people.

With the charges undismissed and the trial proceeding, Hays and Darrow have the opportunity not just to poke holes in the prosecution's flimsy argument but to offer their own narrative of self-defense. In doing so, they assert that Black citizens have the same rights and protections as white citizens, at least in theory. In practice, however, as the opening statement lays out, Black citizens face extreme levels of discrimination and violence both in Detroit and across the country. This includes the mob of hundreds of angry white people surrounding the house on Garland Avenue on the night of the shooting. Against this overwhelming level of prejudice, Ossian's achievement of the American Dream seems all the more impressive and makes him look increasingly sympathetic.

Ossian himself takes the stand on the afternoon of November 18. It's a tremendous responsibility: the fate of housing equality in Detroit, if not the country, rests in part on his performance. But he agrees out of a sense of pride and responsibility. Ossian retells his life story, from the horror of Fred Rochelle's lynching through his recent sojourn in Europe. When Toms objects that this line of questioning is irrelevant to the case, Darrow counters that justice here rests on properly understanding how "everything known to a race affects its actions." And Ossian relates knowledge of crime after crime against Black men in America.

As a member of the talented tenth, Ossian feels a great personal responsibility to do what he can to improve the fate of Black Americans. This is true even when that requires him to do difficult or dangerous things, like buy a house in an all-white neighborhood, or take the stand in this high-stakes trial. On the stand, the defense paints a portrait of a person who's achieved the American Dream, at least insofar as a Black person, under the constant threat of lynching and other violence, can.

Then Ossian's testimony takes the jury and the crowded courtroom into the house on Garland Avenue the night of the shooting. He describes stones pelting the **house** and opening the front door for Henry and Davis only to see a seething, surging sea of humanity in the street. The mob on Garland Avenue, he says, is the same one that has hounded his people throughout their history, and he knew that his "back [was] against the wall."

In Ossian's pivotal testimony, the mob around the house takes on its true form—a large, angry mass of humanity, as opposed to the prosecution's alleged five to 10 peaceful bystanders. And he shows the jurors—and readers—that this mob isn't an anomaly. It's connected to all the other angry mobs that have inflicted pain, torment, and death on Black Americans since they arrived in the country as enslaved people.

In the final four days of the trial, Ossian fends off Toms' aggressive cross-examination. Hays fails to prevent Henry's admission on the night of the shooting to firing a weapon from entering evidence. The defense calls Walter White as an expert witness on mob violence. The final witness steps down on the Monday before Thanksgiving, and closing statements begin the next day. Assistant Prosecutor Lester Moll reminds the jury of the facts the state set out to prove. Hays begins the defense's closing arguments, offering a sharp attack of the prosecution's case. But then Darrow steps into the spotlight with a closing argument that takes up the remainder of Tuesday afternoon and much of Wednesday morning.

In large part, the trial has become a referendum on the issue of maintaining the color line and protecting the purity of the white race or about the state of prejudice and segregation aimed at marginalizing Black citizens. Nevertheless, the jury only must decide the defendants' guilt or innocence on the charge of premeditated murder, and the prosecution makes sure to keep attention on this smaller and more local question of justice in its cross-examination.

For hour after hour, Darrow "chat[s] with the jurors" about the timeless problems of race and prejudice, the deliberate lies and obfuscations of the state's witnesses and the political conflict that roiled the city over the summer and fall. He turns the ordinary people of Garland Avenue into proxies for the Klan's hatred and violence and compares their violence to the bloodthirstiness of Roman gladiatorial combat. He reproaches the people of Garland Avenue for believing in the superiority of their whiteness despite (or because of) the Sweets' superior wealth, education, and sophistication. He attacks the long, uniquely American history of racism and slavery and transforms Ossian into a hero of racial justice. He alleges that white supremacy is nothing more than an illusion propped up by artificial attempts to keep races separate.

Darrow's style of law connects justice to the personal stories of his defendants; adopting a personal and intimate tone with the jury helps him to humanize the Sweets and their friends. But he also draws the jury's attention to the essential injustice of the trial, which includes not just the prosecution's witness tampering but the rampant segregation and prejudice that enforces the color line. The color line limits the Sweets' access to the housing, respect, and security that their success at the American Dream in theory should have earned them.

But Darrow doesn't follow his own arguments to their logical conclusion, stopping short of demanding that the jurors see segregation as "a social system built on a bold-faced lie." As he concludes his closing argument, he hedges a little, all but admitting that the obvious answer—ending segregation—is still unimaginable, given entrenched American attitudes. Nevertheless, he presses for justice for his clients in the face of horrific, widespread social injustices like segregation. His final argument appeals more to the white man's sense of fostering justice and morality than a belief that they should truly see the Black defendants as their equals.

The social customs and legal policies that led to the shooting on Garland Avenue—segregated neighborhoods, a tacit allowance of violence and intimidation against Black citizens in Detroit and around the country—demonstrate the systemic nature of prejudice and segregation in American society. But, either because he's unwilling to acknowledge this or because he fears it will alienate the jurors, Darrow doesn't say outright that Black citizens don't have the same rights as white citizens in practice, and that they need civil rights for true justice and equality to exist. While his participation in the trial and the national attention it draws to housing segregation mark a step towards achieving this equality, progress towards that goal remains slow and uneven thanks to entrenched beliefs and privileged groups' unwillingness to tolerate the social upheaval change involves.

With the court's Thanksgiving break looming, Toms keeps his closing argument brief, trying to pull the jury's attention back to luckless victim Leon Breiner. Then, Frank Murphy instructs the jurors and sends them to their deliberations, which drag, loudly and acrimoniously, through the holiday. Around midnight on Thanksgiving, the foreman tells Murphy that the jury has deadlocked—they agree on the innocence of most of the defendants but have split seven to five on the question of whether to convict Ossian, Henry, and Leonard Morse. Murphy orders them to resume deliberations the following morning as Gladys—the only defendant not awaiting the verdict in jail—sobs on her mother's shoulder. At 1:30pm on the Friday after Thanksgiving, however, Murphy regretfully dismisses the still-deadlocked jury and declares *The People v. Sweet* a mistrial.

To distract the jurors from the legal weaknesses in his own case and from the evidence for systemic racism and prejudice in Detroit and America, Prosecutor Toms tries to focus the jury's attention on the mangled body of the shooting's single victim, Leon Breiner. The fact that he must remind the jurors and the courtroom audience of Breiner's existence points to how the trial has become a referendum on larger social issues (rather than just being about Ossian and his friends' guilt or innocence). And while the jury won't acquit all of the defendants, their refusal to condemn all 11 shows that Judge Murphy and the defense team's careful work has ensured a more unbiased application of justice than the defendants initially expected.

CHAPTER 10: JUDGEMENT DAY

Clarence Darrow and Arthur Garfield Hays ask for their clients to be released on bail and inform Frank Murphy they want each defendant to be retried separately. While the mistrial hardly represents a surprise, given the length of the jury's deliberations, it's still a disappointing setback, given how well things seemed to have been going for the defense. The defense exposed glaring holes in the state's case.

The defendants didn't win the first trial—offering a sad reminder that progress towards equality and civil rights is slow and full of setbacks. This feels especially true since the prosecution's case was so weak. Still, in the name of justice and civil rights, the defense lawyers plan to continue their efforts.

Although attention in the white press has shifted from Detroit to a more salacious race trial in New York, the Sweets' story has successfully crossed the press's color line in strategic places such as the progressive magazine *The Nation*. And in Detroit, all the dailies side with the Sweets, representing a remarkable turnaround in white opinion in the city. Further, ongoing rallies—including a mid-December event in New York featuring Clarence Darrow himself—fill the coffers of the hoped-for Legal Defense Fund.

Despite the trial's limited ability to hold public attention, its press coverage nevertheless does change public opinion among white Detroiters. This is true even in newspapers that supported the Klan's candidate in the fall's mayoral election. And the trial's star power—now concentrated in Clarence Darrow and Ossian and Gladys Sweet—continues to attract the money necessary to continue the NAACP's fight for civil rights.

Frank Murphy grants the defense's request to release the remaining defendants but sets their bail prohibitively high. The poorer men, like Joe Mack and Norris Murray, have trouble securing funds, but the higher-profile ones—including Ossian—soon walk free. The Sweets don't return to Garland Avenue; the Waterworks Association has resumed meeting and the **house** has been subject to vandalism. They stay in the apartment Gladys rented in another white neighborhood. Throughout December, Black and progressive newspapers roundly praise Ossian's "unparalleled courage" and hold him up as "an exemplar of the New Negro ideal," fighting for his rights as a citizen.

The fact that Mack and Murray have trouble making bail—and that their struggle seems to be an afterthought to the rest of the defense team—offers a subtle reminder that race isn't the only source of social division: education, class, and political status also divide American society into powerful and powerless classes. Paradoxically, the trauma of the trial has helped Ossian achieve more of his American Dream: his has earned the right to consider himself a member of the talented tenth and a representative of his race. Still, this status comes at a steep cost.

Ossian and Gladys travel to New York City as the special guests and headlining celebrities of the NAACP's annual business meeting in January 1925 where a crowd of 1,500 Black Harlem residents applauds them at a rally. From there, they spend two weeks touring various NAACP branches in Northeast and Midwest states. Ossian, his ego inflated by the stories he hears about himself, begins "thunder[ing]" at the audiences with a mix of "exaggeration, self-righteousness, and more than a touch of arrogance," according to NAACP representatives. And his growing hero complex leads to conflict with Gladys, who had been the defendants' public face since the fall. But their tour pushes the Legal Defense Fund to $76,000—one and a half times its initial goal.

The trial has made Ossian and Gladys into heroes and celebrities in the civil rights movement. Ossian embraces the role—and perhaps even lets it go to his head—because it helps him to fulfil his American Dream of status, respect, and success. The circumstances under which he's achieved this attention offer a reminder of the limits prejudice and segregation have placed on his dreams and success throughout his life. The growing personal strife between Gladys and Ossian also points to the small, ongoing, and individual costs systemic racism extracts from its victims.

The NAACP's Washington, D.C. segregation case finally reaches the Supreme Court late in 1925, after the *Sweet* trial ends. Although the NAACP's venerable lawyers put forth their best case, their presentation lacks vigor. Their claim—that the government can't legislate individual homeowners' decisions to add restrictive covenants to their deeds, but it can refuse to honor them, thus legally defanging them—is hardly straightforward. With little expectation of success, the NAACP must wait to see what the Supreme Court decides.

The Supreme Court case demonstrates the uphill battle the NAACP and other civil rights advocates face in their progress towards ending housing segregation. The complex, detailed issues resist easy explanation to the average person. This is why the Sweet *trial is such a blessing to the NAACP—it has defendants who generate public sympathy and its grounds (the right to self-defense) are clear cut.*

Ossian and Gladys wait, too; Robert Toms has another big case to try, and the court's packed schedule pushes the retrials into the spring of 1926. Without a doubt, the first trial has greatly enhanced Ossian's social standing. Patients flood his practice and NAACP officers like White treat him deferentially. Concerns do pop up: Gladys and Iva spend much of the winter sick with racking coughs, and the local defense team—Cecil Rowlette, Julian Perry, and Charles Mahoney—express frustration with Hays's and Darrow's defense. They think it would be safer to defend all 11 together rather than separately. But Ossian doesn't argue when White tries to purge the Black lawyers from the team or when Robert Toms announces his plan to retry the men separately, starting with Henry. Jury selection will begin on April 1, 1926.

The costs of the shooting and the subsequent trial fall unequally across the defendants: Ossian's reputation rises, but Gladys and Iva suffer an alarming illness that foreshadows troubles yet to come. And another round of tension between the local defense team and the NAACP reminds everyone—including readers—that what's best for the defendants may or may not be what's best for the larger cause of civil rights and protecting housing equity.

Over the months between the end of the first trial and the beginning of the second, Darrow reverts to his normal life of public appearances. His uncharacteristic optimism about the outcome of the second trial may come from the shifting political tides in Detroit, which begin to change when mayor John Smith is inaugurated on the first of the year. Smith appoints a blue-ribbon commission to study race relations in the city, headed by Reinhold Niebuhr, who packs the committee with progressives and Sweet supporters, including Edward Carter. And a scandal has imploded the Detroit Klan, greatly reducing its power.

The trial has already brought about some positive change in Detroit society, as the mayor orders a systematic review of the city's race relations. In combination with the end of the Detroit Klan's political ascendancy, it seems that the city is poised to address some of its pervasive racism and segregation. The promise of progress towards civil rights encourages Darrow, since it dovetails nicely with his general modernist crusade.

In early March, Arthur Garfield Hays becomes involved in a high-profile case that prevents him from rejoining the defense. Darrow insists that Thomas Chawke replace Hays. This horrifies White, who earlier judged Chawke an inappropriate representative for such a high-profile trial associated with the NAACP thanks to his mob ties and no-holds-barred courtroom style. After a few days of negotiation, Chawke officially joins the defense team.

When Hays leaves the defense team, this creates yet another point of conflict between what will best serve the NAACP's broader campaign for civil rights and what will best serve the defendants in the Sweet *trials. This shows once again that fighting for progress entails both social and sometimes personal upheaval and sacrifice.*

Henry Sweet's slightly delayed second trial begins on Monday April 19th. Prosecutor Toms has recently announced that he will drop the charges against the rest of the defendants if the jury finds Henry not guilty. And he makes it clear that he intends to call the same witnesses and make the exact same case as in the first trial. When Darrow and Chawke examine potential jurors, their questions point inexorably towards the idea of prejudice; they turn jury selection into a covert opening statement on their central argument and excuse jurors unlikely to agree with them. Over the course of the week, they examine 198 people before settling on the final jury.

The prosecution's legal strategy hasn't changed since the first trial, suggesting their ongoing faith in Detroiters' acquiescence to housing segregation and desire to keep the color line intact. The defense, however, while still crafting a narrative of self-defense, seizes on the broader issues and from the first day works to implicate social and legal prejudice for creating the circumstances that led to the shooting.

Opening arguments begin on the Monday morning of the next week. Toms's opening statement outlines his plan to build up a circumstantial case against Henry. If Toms expects Darrow to put off his opening statement until after the prosecution rests, as he did in the first trial, he is disappointed. Instead, Darrow stands up and coolly tells the jury that Henry likely fired the fatal shot. But, he says, the real villains are the average people who threatened the Sweets' safety.

In the first trial, the defense attempted to show the weaknesses in the prosecution's case. Now, in a masterful manipulation of courtroom drama, they take away the prosecution's momentum by basically admitting Henry's "guilt" in their opening statement. But this allows them to build their bigger case that systemic prejudice created conditions that threatened Ossian and his friends' safety and livelihoods, justifying their acts of self-defense.

For a week and a half, Toms carefully builds his case with each witness, only to have Chawke and Darrow dismantle it through intense, sometimes combative cross-examination. When they can't expose the lies, they expose the liar. One example is Inspector Schuknecht, who casually takes the witness stand, confident in the authority that proximity to the city's elite provides him. Darrow presses Schuknecht to explain why he closed adjacent streets to traffic if there wasn't a crowd and why, if the shooting was unprovoked, he entered the Sweets' **house** without assuming a defensive posture. Each question reveals the inconsistencies in the Inspector's story.

Toms keeps his strategy from the first trial, meaning that he relies on very carefully edited witness statements. This allows Chawke and Darrow not only to expose the lies and obfuscations in the prosecution's narrative, but to begin to build up their own case implicating systemic prejudice. Systemic prejudice accounts for the mob's violent actions and the police's willful blindness to the threat the mob posed.

Other neighborhood residents provide even more damning testimony under cross-examination, placing more and more people on the streets and connecting the crowd's arrival to a desire to roust the Black family from the area. By their questions and their significant looks to the jury box, Chawke and Darrow slowly transform neighborhood witnesses into "idiots" and "slope-browed simpletons." And they press each witness on the nature and objectives of the Waterworks Park Improvement Association. Although witnesses try to claim their aim was just to "protect [their] property," the defense gets some to admit that the undesirable characters who necessitated protection were "colored people" like "Negroes" and "Eye-talians." Chawke and Darrow also get witnesses to describe not just the massive midsummer rally the Waterworks Association held at the school but the crowd's enthusiastic response to its featured speaker, a member of the Tireman Association who directly advocated violence.

In their cross-examinations, Chawke and Darrow get witnesses to admit their prejudices not just against Black people but against other immigrant groups they consider undesirable, such as Italians. This confirms the alarms the NAACP has been trying to raise about the dangerous expansion of housing segregation. And it shows how pervasive prejudice is in American society and how deeply rooted it is in the unwritten social customs that enforce color lines despite ostensible equality for all American citizens. The cooperation and strategy-sharing between neighborhood associations clearly reveals the social forces upholding segregation.

By the time Toms rests his case on May 4, the defense has already shown that prejudice has a home on the "cramped, crabbed houses [lining] Garland Avenue." Witnesses from the first trial, like Edna Butler, Serena Rochelle, and Philip Adler again confirm the size and frenzy of the crowd the night before the shooting. New witnesses like Thomas Chawke's German cleaning lady (who happens to live in the neighborhood) also corroborate reports of the crowd. Even Ossian returns to the stand, although this time his less-carefully guarded testimony almost allows Toms to catch him in a lie.

The defense's witnesses contribute to two narratives. The first pokes holes in the prosecution's story that there was no mob and the gathered onlookers were not threatening violence. The other focuses on the systemic prejudices that enforce the color line, make white residents feel entitled to expel Black homeowners from their neighborhoods, and contribute to the pervasive atmosphere of fear and danger in which Black Americans live.


Closing arguments begin with a bitter screed from Assistant Prosecutor Lester Moll, who dismisses Ossian as "quasi-intelligent" and Rochelle and Butler as "so-called artists." He excoriates Chawke and Darrow for their unwillingness to confront the specter of poor Leon Breiner bleeding out on the Doves' front lawn and their preference to carry the jury on a pointless and distracting journey through "the ages of history" and Ossian's life. In rebuttal, Chawke points out the role of prejudice on the night of the shooting and Moll's attempt to awaken it in the jurors. He taps into Detroit's recent racial and political conflicts much more directly than Darrow and Hays dared in the first trial. Thus, he reminds Detroiters who, like the Irish American Chawke himself, don't fit nativist racial ideals, of their own self-interest in the case. Instead, he pleads for a vision of American equality represented by John Smith's victory.

The prosecution's case not only willfully ignores the systematic prejudice and injustices, but Moll's closing argument contributes to them when he insults and belittles the defense's Black witnesses. In contrast, Chawke points directly to the systematic prejudices that divide 1920s Detroit. Although he himself is white, as an Irish American Catholic, he belongs to ethnic and religious minorities that have also experienced discrimination and disenfranchisement at the hands of the native-born, white, Protestant elite classes of American society. He sees the national implications of this case and pleads for the jury to choose progress towards civil rights and true equality for all American citizens.

Hundreds of people pack the courtroom on the following day to hear Darrow's closing argument, which is a brilliant "jeremiad for the modern age." He begins by reminding the jurors that they are prejudiced, just like he is. Prejudice is part of the human condition. But he urges the jurors to fight this instinct as they consider the story of Henry, a "good [college] boy" and Ossian, a man who started with nothing and made himself successful in a classic iteration of the American Dream. He holds the Sweets' achievements and class against the working-class residents of Garland Avenue who believe that "Negroes and the Eye-talians" don't count as Americans, even though the continent was discovered by an Italian man.

Like Chawke, Darrow focuses his closing arguments squarely on the issue of prejudice. A "jeremiad" is a prolonged complaint, usually about a social injustice, and Darrow's deftly points towards the poison of prejudice at the heart of American society, where it resides even within people who consider themselves progressives. He holds up the Sweets yet again as exemplary American Dream achievers while also demonstrating the limits prejudice and segregation place on their success.

Above all, Darrow takes aim at the communal nature of the violence and oppression that the Sweets suffered. A crowd of hundreds, he points out, gathered at a school funded with public money, to listen to a speaker advocate violating the constitution to protect their unearned sense of superiority. On the night of September 8, they gathered "with the backing of the law" and allowed children to throw stones at the **house**. Then, although the Sweets' bravery put a stop to the crowd's violence, a coordinated campaign of lies organized by the prosecution extended its malice from the street into the courtroom. The root cause of it all, Darrow claims, is the prejudice at the heart of the human condition which has condemned men to die at the stake and which allowed the "horrors of slavery." Against this prejudice, the white race owes Black men and women a debt that can never be repaid, though they should try.

Darrow's closing arguments refuse to let broader society off the hook for allowing violence against Black people. He shows social customs and legal policies work hand in hand to empower segregationist ideas. He explains how the law often ignores the acts of white vigilantes and mobs, giving them a sense of impunity. And he shows how this feeling of impunity dovetails with abuses in the legal system, including the prosecution's heavily manipulated and edited case. And finally, he ties all of this to American chattel slavery, even going so far as to suggest that true progress requires paying reparations for the harms white society caused to Black Americans.

Extending his hands toward the jury box, Darrow declares that humans will not be civilized until they love each other regardless of "color or creed." Although the country's constitution gives Black Americans legal equality, too many of their fellow citizens have refused to recognize this. For the sake of the progress of humanity, he begs them to return a verdict of not guilty. Then, after nearly six hours of sermonizing, he quietly returns to his seat.

Darrow paints a picture of a future in which all people have the same basic civil rights. It's currently a dream because, although the constitution allows Black citizens the same rights and responsibilities as everyone else, in practice, they don't enjoy the same rights as their white counterparts. Progress requires a rebalancing of the scales towards true justice and equality, and while the jury has limited power to bring this about, they can take a small step with a fair verdict for Henry.

The following day, Robert Toms makes a closing argument nearly as long as Darrow's, which tries yet again to pull the jury's focus back to Leon Breiner, a "poor, insignificant American [...] one man in thousands" who nevertheless had the right to live. Finally, on the morning of Thursday, May 13, 1926, Frank Murphy gives the jury its instructions. After the delay and acrimony of the first jury's deliberations, no one expects a swift verdict; Darrow and his wife, Thomas Chawke, Josephine Gomon, and their entourage leaves the courthouse for a long, alcohol-fueled afternoon at a local speakeasy. But within three hours, the court reconvenes, and the jury's foreman returns a verdict of not guilty.

In a trial that both sides have framed as a referendum on social issues, Prosecutor Toms tries to co-opt the defense's case for equal rights by focusing his closing argument on Leon Breiner's rights as a working class American to live and work in peace. His emotional delivery still doesn't square with the incongruously serious charge of premeditated murder, however, and in the end, Darrow and Chawke have made a more convincing argument for the pervasive influence of prejudice in American society. The defense has carried the cause of civil rights one step closer to equality, even though much work remains.

EPILOGUE: REQUIESCAM

One month after the second *Sweet* trial ends, the NAACP holds its annual convention in Chicago's South Side. James Weldon Johnson celebrates the promise of the now fully funded Legal Defense Fund; W. E. B. Du Bois lectures about the Harlem Renaissance's upward trajectory; Walter White networks and promotes his newly-published second novel. When Clarence Darrow takes the stage, however, he outclasses them all; 2,000 people must be turned away from the Auditorium Theatre, which is filled to capacity. Although Darrow still sees prejudice, he now confidently predicts that its decline has begun. And although racial and ethnic hatred persist well into the 21st century, the legal and social changes in American society in the 1930s, 40s, 50s do show progress. Klan power evaporates and Jim Crow segregation drains away in the North, where white people convince themselves again that they are a tolerant, forward-thinking group, unlike their Southern peers.

After the trial, the work of advocating for civil rights and pushing American society toward a more just and equitable future continues. Darrow's confident projections that the beginning of the end of white supremacy has arrived may be a little too hopeful. But it is nevertheless true that the Sweet *case represents an important step. As violent extremist groups like the Klan lose social and legal approval, Black citizens can increasingly integrate into society. Unfortunately, in the North, this also allows people to start telling themselves that racism and segregation belong to other people and other places without addressing their own culpability in allowing and perpetuating segregation.*

Clarence Darrow spends the rest of his life advocating for civil rights. He joins the NAACP's executive board in 1926 and becomes one of its most dedicated champions. He donates a portion of his lecture fees to the organization as well as regularly consulting with Johnson and White and contributing his writing to the NAACP's *Crisis* magazine. He even joins the defense in a 1932 trial for nine Black teenagers accused of raping two white girls in Alabama. He passes away in the spring of 1938 at the age of 80.

Although Darrow showed little interest in civil rights before (or even, really, during) the Sweet *trials, his time on the defense pushes him into advocacy. In part this can be interpreted as a natural extension of his modernist values, since it allows him to attack the unthinking perpetuation of the status quo. But he also appears to have been truly dedicated to the work because he believes in it.*

In contrast, others associated with the political and legal events of 1925 and 1926 fail to advance civil rights. Thomas Chawke returns to a lucrative career defending mob bosses. John Smith's promising political career crumbles in the face of the Detroit business and social elite's coordinated campaigns against him. Without the foil of the Klan to rally progressive groups behind him, Smith fails to achieve a workable coalition again.

Not everyone involved in the trial goes on to become a civil rights champion. But the book suggests that this is to be expected, since progress towards equality and justice is a long, complicated, and difficult process.

However, to a remarkable degree, others involved in the Sweet case do move America "away from the brutal intolerance of the 1920s." Arthur Garfield Hays spends a legal career defending the rights of men and women from marginalized groups. Reinhold Niebuhr studies Detroit's racial problems deeply on the mayor's blue-ribbon commission. And while this group's work fails to suggest meaningful changes, it also moves Niebuhr to develop a "radical" form of "politically involved" theology that inspires a generation of clergy, including Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Josephine Gomon transforms Detroit's struggling welfare system into a "model of well-managed generosity," and Robert Toms' career becomes so deeply involved in pursuing equal rights that he's called on prosecute Nazi war criminals at the Nuremberg Trials.

Mayor Smith's blue-ribbon commission provides a glaring example of the institutional stumbling blocks that hinder progress. While the commission gathers plenty of evidence about the problems of prejudice and segregation, it fails to offer meaningful ideas for change, in much the same way that the Sweet *trial dramatized the stakes of housing segregation without addressing the core issues of prejudicial thinking and legal segregationist policies. Still, Detroit's early 20th-century racial tensions prove to be a fertile breeding ground for the thinkers and philosophies that go on to animate the civil rights movement of the 1960s. And despite his role as a defender of the segregated status quo in the* Sweet *trial, Robert Toms later creates a legacy of civil rights advocacy.*

Although Detroit's elite defeat John Smith, they fail to topple Frank Murphy, who becomes mayor of Detroit in 1930 with the support of the same coalition of Black and white working people who carried Smith to power earlier. This launches a political career which sees Murphy becoming governor-general of the Philippines, governor of Michigan, attorney-general of the United States, and, finally, a Supreme Court Justice. During his tenure on the court, he defends the rights of marginalized groups of all types and condemns the internment of Japanese citizens during WWII.

Frank Murphy's dedication to truly fair justice characterizes his entire career and makes him an important figure in the history of the American Civil Rights movement. While his efforts to provide equitable justice show the promise of American ideals, the heroic effort involved in doing so also indicates how biased the system historically has been against marginalized groups.

James Weldon Johnson steps away from NAACP leadership to protect his health in 1929, and Walter White succeeds him. Under White's direction, the NAACP "doggedly pursue[s]" Johnson's legal strategy, using Supreme Court challenges to chip away at Jim Crow laws, including a landmark civil rights victory in the case of *Brown v. Board of Education*, which receives its decision a year before White's death.

The NAACP's advocacy in the decades following the Sweet *trials shows that progress towards ideals like equality and justice is possible, even though it requires patience, immense effort, and social upheaval to achieve. The* Brown v. Board of Education *case, decided by the Supreme Court in 1954, declared segregated school systems unconstitutional and delivered the first meaningful blow to the separate-but-equal ideology that had successfully maintained the American color line since the Reconstruction era.*

But racism and segregation still flourish, even in the North. The NAACP's challenge of the restrictive covenants in Washington D.C. fails its Supreme Court challenge shortly after Henry Sweet's acquittal. Social and economic forces, rather than legal ones, conspire to further solidify the color line in American real estate during the late 1920s and 1930s. As racism comes to be seen as a personal failure rather than a set of social systems conspiring to divide society, northern white progressives decry Southern lynchings while ignoring solidifying segregation in their own cities. Only in 1968, more than 40 years after the violent summer of 1925, does federal legislation begin to prohibit racial discrimination in buying and selling homes. But by then, segregation has become thoroughly entrenched, and today, Detroit is the most segregated city in America.

Progress towards ideals like civil rights and equitable housing access isn't guaranteed, as the NAACP's loss of its Supreme Court challenge shows. Complacency on the part of Northern progressives, who convince themselves that racism and prejudice are personal failings rather than systemic issues, further inhibits progress. And solidifying housing segregation shows how powerful social customs can be; laws enshrining equal rights have no power when society conspires to find workarounds that subvert them. Detroit's modern-day housing segregation shows that, while much progress has been made towards civil rights, integration, and equality in the century since the Sweet *trial, there is still much to be done.*

For Ossian and Gladys, tragedy ruins the news of Henry's acquittal and the subsequent dropping of charges against the remaining defendants. Iva and Gladys are diagnosed with tuberculosis, which Gladys likely caught in jail and passed on to her daughter. Despite the family moving temporarily to Arizona in hopes that the hot, dry climate would allow her lungs to heal, Iva dies just before her second birthday. At Detroit's Roseland Park Cemetery, the white groundskeeper refuses to allow the family through the main gate until Ossian threatens him with a gun. Ossian remains in Detroit, purchasing a drugstore and founding his own Black hospital while Gladys returns to Arizona in an attempt to recuperate. But in 1928, a few months after Ossian finally takes possession of the **house** on Garland Avenue, she dies at the age of 27.

The sad ending of the Sweets' story shows the ways in which systematic segregation, prejudice, and legal bias limit the ability of some people to achieve the American Dream. Trying to assert his rights to homeownership, in the end, cost Ossian his entire family.

Ossian's personal life spirals downwards after Gladys' death; two subsequent marriages end in divorce, and he remains childless. His attempts to run for the presidency of the NAACP's Detroit chapter, the Michigan State Senate, and the U.S. Congress all fail despite his fierce pride in his own accomplishments and his faith in "the American way of life." In contrast, Henry's star rises, allowing him to become president of the Michigan NAACP conference before he, too, dies prematurely of tuberculosis. In 1950, Ossian sells the **house** to a Black family recently arrived from the American South. And in the spring of 1960, just as the Civil Rights movement is poised to take off, he takes his own life in a tiny apartment above his drugstore in Black Bottom, the predominantly Black neighborhood he tried so hard to leave behind.

Ultimately, although moving to the North, getting an education, and putting in the hard work of establishing a medical practice gave Ossian Sweet access to the wealth, status, and security he craved, even achieving the American Dream couldn't protect him from prejudice and racism. In the end, he pays terrible personal and social costs for the dubious honor of representing the interests and needs of Black Americans. The tragedy of his life, capped by his death by suicide, shows how long and crooked the titular "arc of justice" can be.

HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

MLA

Duprey, Annalese. "*Arc of Justice*." *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 17 Jan 2023. Web. 17 Jan 2023.

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