The Water Dancer

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF TA-NEHISI COATES

Ta-Nehisi Coates was born to Cheryl Waters and Paul Coates, a former local captain of the Black Panther Party and founder of Black Classic Press. Coates had seven siblings on his father's side; his parents were strict and attentive, and his mother taught him to read at the age of four. Following high school, Coates attended Howard University, where his father worked as a research librarian. During his time at Howard, Coates began to work as a freelance journalist. It was during this time that he also met his future spouse, Kenyatta Matthews. After five years at Howard Coates left without graduating, and when they were both 24, he and Kenyatta had a son, Samori. Coates began publishing his journalism in a variety of outlets, including *The Village Voice*, *Time*, and *The New York Times*. He became a regular columnist for *The Atlantic*, and it is in this forum that some of his best-known essays have been published, including "The Case for Reparations" and an essay version of "Between the World and Me." In 2008, Coates published a memoir that focused particularly on his youth and his relationship with his father entitled *The Beautiful Struggle*. This was followed by a bestselling memoir focusing on anti-black racism entitled *Between the World and Me*, which was published in 2015 to wide acclaim, and a collection of essays about the Obama years entitled *We Were Eight Years in Power*, published in 2017. Coates has been awarded numerous awards, including a MacArthur "Genius" Fellowship in 2015, and has taught at the City University of New York and Massachusetts Institute of Technology. He has written a *Black Panther* series and a *Captain America* series for Marvel Comics. *The Water Dancer* is his first novel.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The Water Dancer is filled with real details from history, although these details are often alluded to in a veiled manner, thereby reminding readers of the fictional status of the narrative. The novel is set in the mid-19th century, not long before the outbreak of the Civil War. Although the war does not take place within the narrative, there are many signs that it is coming. Chief among these is the tension between slaveholding states in the South and northern states where slavery has been made illegal. In Virginia, where Hiram is born, slavery is an existent but dying institution. This is generally not due to changing opinions (although Virginia's proximity to the anti-slavery North does have an impact), but rather to agricultural and financial problems. The falling price of tobacco and the erosion of the heavily farmed land mean that the once-prosperous Virginia plantations are falling on hard times, and enslavers are selling enslaved people to the Deep South (what Hiram calls being sent Natchez-way, a reference to Natchez, Mississippi, which was a major slave-trading site). The novel also documents the intensifying abolitionist movement as well as the efforts to surreptitiously free people from slavery, mostly via the Underground Railroad. The depiction of the Underground Railroad is faithful in several ways; it was indeed a sprawling, unofficial network with different "stations" and "agents" spread across the country. The most famous leader of the Underground Railroad, Harriet Tubman, features in the novel, under both her own name and the nickname "Moses" (a name by which the real Tubman was also known). The novel strays from historical accuracy by depicting Harriet as someone who, like Hiram, has the superhuman power of Conduction. A more realistic interpretation of the novel would see this power as a metaphor for the extraordinary courage, ingenuity, and success Tubman had in rescuing people from slavery.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Like most contemporary literature about slavery, *The Water Dancer* draws on the narratives written by enslaved people about their experiences. Some of the most famous examples of this genre include Olaudah Equiano's *The Life of Olaudah Equiano* (1789), Frederick Douglass's *The Narrative of Frederick Douglass* (1845), Harriet Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861), and Booker T. Washington's *Up From Slavery* (1901). In the 20th and 21st centuries, several authors have employed magical realism in order to write about slavery. One especially significant example of this is Toni Morrison's novel *Beloved* (1987). A more recent example is Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad* (2016), which, like *The Water Dancer*, retells the story of the Underground Railroad while adding key fictional (and at times magical/surreal) elements to the established historical account.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The Water Dancer
- **When Written:** 2008-2019
- **Where Written:** Brooklyn, NY
- **When Published:** 2019
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Magical Realism, Historical Fiction
- **Setting:** Lockless, a plantation in fictional Elm County, VA, and Philadelphia, PA, in the mid-19th century.
- **Climax:** When Harriet conducts herself and Hiram from

Philadelphia to Maryland

- **Antagonist:** Howell and Maynard Walker, Ryland, and all other enslavers
- **Point of View:** First-person retrospective narration from the point of view of Hiram Walker

EXTRA CREDIT

Rooted in history. Coates spent many years doing historical research for *The Water Dancer*, including visiting plantations in Virginia and the Deep South. He noticed that he was often one of the only black people on these plantation tours.

Genre play. Coates has cited his lifelong love of genre fiction (including science fiction, fantasy, and comic books) as inspiring the more supernatural elements of *The Water Dancer*; yet he also wanted to avoid some of the chauvinist elements of traditional genre fiction, which often involve a male hero rescuing a woman in trouble.

PLOT SUMMARY

Driving a carriage by **the River Goose**, Hiram has a vision of his mother, Rose, **water dancing**. The vision makes Hiram accidentally drive the carriage off the road, sending him and his half-brother and master Maynard into the water. Maynard can't swim and calls out Hiram for help. Hiram is convinced he is about to die.

The narrative jumps back in time to when Hiram is a child. He explains that he has an extraordinary power of memory. The one person he cannot remember is Rose, who was sold. Now, Hiram walks down the Street (the part of **Lockless** plantation where the enslaved people live) to the cabin that belongs to Thena, a woman with a reputation for being mean. However, Thena takes him in, and a year and a half after Hiram moves in with her, she tells him about her husband, Big John, who died of a fever. After John's death, their children were sold.

Hiram's father is the master of Lockless, Howell Walker. Hiram is told that he is being brought to work in the house, and Thena warns him not to forget that the white people aren't his family. Soon, Howell throws a party, during which Hiram is made to entertain the guests by showing off his supernaturally good memory. Maynard's tutor Mr. Fields is especially impressed by Hiram's skills, and soon after starts tutoring Hiram in reading and math. Meanwhile, falling tobacco prices mean that Virginia plantations like Lockless are in financial trouble, and more and more enslaved people are being sold into the Deep South. Howell tells Hiram that he is being appointed as Maynard's personal manservant, which is supposedly an "honor."

The narrative jumps forward seven years, to when Hiram is 19. It is the day before "the fateful race day" (when the book opens). Howell has arranged an engagement between Maynard and Corrine Quinn, the richest woman in Elm County. Early the next morning, Hiram wakes from a nightmare and notices that the lantern is on in Sophia's room. Sophia is a young woman who is Howell's brother Nathaniel's enslaved "concubine." Hiram has a brief conversation with her but is so nervous he can barely speak. Later that day, Hiram drives Maynard to the racetrack for race day. Almost all the white people in the local area are there, plus enslaved people and a few free black people. Hiram greets Corrine's enslaved servant Hawkins.

Triumphant from his horse having won, Maynard makes Hiram take him to a brothel. Meanwhile, Hiram wanders into Freetown, the section of the town of Starfall where the free black people live. He goes to have dinner with Georgie Parks, his wife Amber, and their newborn baby, and gives the baby a wooden horse he carved as a gift. Hiram believes Georgie is connected with the Underground, and although he doesn't really know what this is, he tells Georgie he wants to flee slavery and asks for help. Georgie denies that he is involved and tells Hiram to be happy with what he has. Driving home, Hiram experiences the vision of Rose and crashes the carriage into the River Goose. After being unconscious for three days, he wakes up in a sunny room. He drifts in and out of consciousness, and when he wakes again Howell is there, saying that Maynard is dead. Later, Hiram goes for a walk with Sophia, who tells him that he reminds her of the man she was with back when she lived in Carolina.

Soon after, Corrine requests a meeting with Hiram and says that she has heard about his genius and would like him to work for her. Hiram is worried about leaving Lockless but doesn't have much choice. Christmas comes, and the enslaved people at Lockless as well as other local black people discuss Santi Bess, Hiram's grandmother. According to legend, Santi Bess liberated herself and 48 other enslaved people by leading them back to Africa through the River Goose. Hiram dismisses the story as "preposterous."

Hiram speaks to Georgie about fleeing again, and after some further reluctance, Georgie says to meet him in the same spot in one week. The next day, Hiram and Sophia agree to escape together. A week later, they go to meet Georgie, but are ambushed by Ryland's Hounds (slavecatchers). They are taken to jail together, but within a day Sophia is taken, leaving Hiram sharing a cell with a boy of around 12 and an old man who is ruthlessly tortured and degraded by the guards. Eventually, Hiram is sold, and is brought to a dark pit, where he spends an unknown length of time. At night, he and other black men are brought out into a forest and forced to run for their freedom while white men chase after them. Hiram is always caught and put back in the pit, and the whole thing starts over again. He does this again and again, until one day, when he falls and is caught, it is not the usual white men standing over him, but Hawkins.

When Hiram wakes up, Corrine tells him that he was able to

escape drowning in the Goose due to a special power called Conduction, and that it was this same power that allowed Santi Bess to lead all those people to freedom. She tells Hiram that he is free now, but that he is still going to "serve." As Hiram gets better and is able to get up and eat, he realizes that he is at Corrine's property, Bryceton. Corrine is secretly an abolitionist, and Bryceton is a station on the Underground Railroad. Hiram is trained to be an agent, engaging in both taxing physical training and by resuming his studies with Mr. Fields, who is also an agent. He learns to start imitating documents, including letters, authorizations, and bills of sale. Meanwhile, he also tries to gain mastery over Conduction—the ability to move through space using the power of memory—yet struggles to do so. Mr. Fields reveals that his real name is Micajah Bland.

After four months, Hiram leaves for Philadelphia. He is overwhelmed by the sights, smells, and sounds of the city, and particularly by seeing so many free black people, some of whom are even wealthy. He meets Otha and Raymond White, and starts living with Otha in the city. Soon after arriving, he eats a piece of gingerbread that induces a memory from his childhood and prompts Hiram to briefly experience Conduction.

Hiram takes a woodworking job for three days a week, spending another three days on work for the Underground. He meets Raymond and Otha's large extended family and learns about Lydia, Otha's wife, who remains enslaved in Alabama. One day, Hiram is walking through the city when he is kidnapped by illegal slavecatchers and taken to the forest. There, he is rescued by Bland, who kills the slavecatchers. The next day, Raymond admits that he knows that Sophia is back at Lockless.

Bland is going to Alabama to help Lydia and her two children escape, and Hiram forges documents in support of the mission. Meanwhile, Raymond, Otha, and Hiram set off for a big abolitionist convention in upstate New York. Hiram is fascinated by what he sees and hears at the convention. A woman approaches him and introduces herself as Kessiah, explaining that she is Thena's daughter. She is free now, living in Philadelphia, and also connected with the Underground. The next day, Hiram talks to Moses, a legendary figure in the Underground. Moses dismisses the myths about her powers and tells Hiram to call her by her real name, Harriet. She asks him to join her on a mission to Maryland, and he agrees. News arrives that Bland's mission failed at the final hour; he is dead, and Lydia and the children have been re-enslaved. Otha is devastated.

The group returns to Philadelphia, and shortly after Hiram sets off on his journey to Maryland with Harriet. They travel there via Conduction, which Harriet explains is "just like dancing." In order to conduct them, Harriet tells stories about her childhood, including the boy, Abe, who first inspired her to fight for freedom. After arriving in Maryland, Hiram meets Harriet's siblings, who they will be taking to freedom in Philadelphia. He intervenes in an argument between Harriet's brother Robert and his partner, Mary, who doesn't want him to leave. After, Robert confesses to Hiram that Mary is pregnant with their white enslaver's child, which he struggles to cope with. Harriet successfully conducts her siblings back to Philadelphia.

Raymond gives Hiram a letter summoning him back to the Virginia Underground. Before leaving Philadelphia, he promises Kessiah that he will bring Thena to her. After reuniting with Corrine, Hiram asks that she promise to help him take Thena and Sophia to freedom, but she is reluctant, and this doesn't cohere with her own plans.

When Hiram returns to Lockless, Howell embraces him with heartfelt emotion. The property has fallen into a state of ruin, and Hiram doesn't recognize any of the few enslaved people left there. He reunites with Thena and Sophia, who now has a baby called Caroline. Carrie is Nathaniel's daughter. Hiram works in the big house, acting as a personal servant and companion to Howell, who wants Hiram to manage the plantation after he dies. Hiram looks through the ledgers and learns that Lockless is deeply in debt. Meanwhile, Hiram, Thena, Sophia, and Caroline form a kind of family "unit." During a conversation with Sophia, Hiram suddenly feels like he fully understands Conduction for the first time. He tests it out and realizes that he's mastered it at last.

One day, Hiram and Sophia find that Thena has been beaten, her cabin destroyed, and the money she had been saving to buy her freedom stolen. They all start sleeping in Thena's cabin together in order to protect her. At Christmas, Corrine comes to Lockless, and Hiram asks her again to help him get Sophia and Thena out. Corrine realizes that she has bought Sophia from Nathaniel and that she is therefore safe, but refuses to help him get them North. Hiram resolves to get them out anyway by working alone. This means he will have to tell each of them about the Underground, Philadelphia, and Conduction, which he does, starting with Sophia. He then tells Thena and explains that he is going to organize a reunion between her and Kessiah. Thena reacts with horror and fury.

Realizing that he needs an object from very deep in his memory to conduct more than a short distance, Hiram retrieves a shell necklace from Howell's desk that Rose gave him the day she was sold. This triggers a memory that he had suppressed: Rose tried to run away with Hiram, and was on the run for three days before they were caught. Howell sold her as punishment. Thena explains to Hiram that her angry outburst was caused by her enormous pain. Soon after, Hiram conducts Thena to Philadelphia, where she is met by Kessiah and Harriet. Hiram immediately returns to Lockless.

That fall, Howell dies. Before his death, he arranged for Corrine to buy Lockless and take over its debts. Corrine and Hiram turn the plantation into an Underground station, which Hiram manages. He, Sophia, and Caroline live there together as a family.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Hiram Walker – Hiram is the main character and narrator of the novel. Born into slavery on **Lockless** plantation, Hiram is the son of Rose, an enslaved woman, and Howell Walker, his mother's enslaver, and thus is a product of rape. When Hiram is nine years old, Howell sells Rose, and Hiram is taken in by Thena, who acts as his surrogate mother. Hiram is extraordinarily intelligent, with a supernaturally good memory and the capacity for Conduction, a magical capability wherein the power of memory is used to travel through space. However, the one thing he struggles to remember is Rose, and this inhibits his ability to conduct. After accidentally killing his half-brother/enslaver, Maynard, in a carriage crash, Hiram attempts to flee Lockless with Sophia, the woman he loves. However, after being betrayed by his friend Georgie Parks, Hiram is captured. He eventually falls into the hands of Corinne Quinn and the Virginia Underground Railroad. Hiram is initially wary of the Underground because of the demand it places on its members to "serve," which Hiram feels is almost reminiscent of slavery. However, after moving to Philadelphia and meeting more Underground agents—particularly Harriet—Hiram comes to feel that fighting for the freedom of others is the greatest purpose of his life. After returning to Lockless, he reunites with Sophia and takes on the role of being a father to her baby daughter, Caroline. After Howell dies, Hiram takes control of Lockless, turning it into a station of the Underground Railroad.

Sophia – Sophia is a young woman enslaved by Nathaniel Walker at **Lockless**. Nathaniel regularly rapes her and eventually fathers her baby, Caroline. Sophia was born and raised in Carolina, where she was in a relationship with a man named Mercury. However, after being sold, she ends up in Virginia at Lockless. Sophia has feelings for Hiram but is fiercely independent, and balks at the idea of being "chained" to any man. She is thus initially resistant to getting together with Hiram, although she eventually commits to being with him and says that because she chose it, it is not a form of confinement. As well as being headstrong and independent, Sophia is intelligent, yet also light-hearted, and often teases Hiram. She gets lost in thought as a way of physically dissociating from her body, perhaps as a result of the trauma and brutality she has had to endure.

Thena – Thena is an old woman who lives at **Lockless** and has a reputation for being the meanest person on the Street (the area of the plantation where the enslaved people live). After Hiram goes to live with her as a child, he realizes that she is not really mean, just heartbroken by the pain of losing her husband, Big John, to a fever, and having her children be sold. Thena is a tough woman who does not show a great deal of outward emotional affection, yet who is extremely caring and loyal deep down. She takes Hiram in as a surrogate son even though it is painful for her to do so after her own children were taken away. When Hiram reunites with one of Thena's daughters, Kessiah, he arranges a reunion between Kessiah and her mother. Thena initially reacts to this with horror, but later explains that this is because she is afraid of the pain that will resurface if she sees Kessiah again. Thena eventually agrees to let Hiram conduct her to Philadelphia, where she spends the rest of her life living with Kessiah in freedom.

Rose – Rose was Hiram's mother and the daughter of Santi Bess. She was beautiful, and all the men at **Lockless** were in love with her. She and her sister, Emma, would water dance on special occasions. Rose was raped by her enslaver, Howell Walker, and fell pregnant with Hiram as a result. Howell was very attached to Rose, but after she attempted to run away, he was forced to confront the fact that she didn't want to be with him. As punishment, he sold her, separating her from Hiram forever. Although Rose doesn't appear directly in the narrative, Hiram experiences visions of her during Conduction, and often dreams about her. Her ultimate fate remains unknown to Hiram and everyone else in the novel.

Corrine Quinn – Corrine Quinn is a white woman from Elm County who owns a property named Bryceton not far from **Lockless**. An only child, Corrine inherited her parent's property and vast fortune when they died. At the beginning of the novel, she is engaged to Maynard, and when Maynard drowns in the **River Goose,** she remains close with Howell and regularly visits Lockless. Although Corrine maintains the outward appearance of a typical elite Virginia lady, in reality she is an abolitionist who plays a key role in the Virginia Underground. Bryceton is actually a station on the Underground, and just before Howell dies Corrine buys Lockless so that she can transform it into a station as well, giving it to Hiram to run. Corrine is a "fanatical" abolitionist who approaches her work for the Underground with intimidating zeal. Highly intelligent, she makes a series of ingenious and daring decisions in order to build the power of the Underground. At the same time, Corrine can be rather ruthless and controlling. Indeed, her desire for total control over her operation and the minds of her agents can be reminiscent of an enslaver, something that Hiram points out to her at the end of the novel. Although Corrine is a flawed person who is motivated by egotism, her contribution to the abolitionist cause is nonetheless significant.

Howell Walker – Howell is Hiram's father and also his enslaver. During the main section of the narrative he is already quite old (around 70) and dies at the end of the novel. Howell's marriage produced one son, Maynard; his wife is dead by the time the narrative opens. Howell was attached to Rose and deluded himself into believing she loved him, even though—because he was her captor—he was actually her rapist. When Rose ran away, Howell's delusion was shattered, and in punishment, he sold her. In his old age, Howell appears to soften a little,

although he never takes substantial action to right his wrongs. He often expresses his regret to Hiram and confesses that he is not a good person.

Maynard Walker – Maynard is Hiram's half-brother and Howell's only "legitimate" child, making him the heir to **Lockless**. As a teenager, Maynard is childlike, helpless, and foolish, and he remains so after becoming an adult. Realizing that Maynard desperately needs the help of a more intelligent and responsible person, Howell assigns Hiram to be Maynard's personal manservant starting when the boys are teenagers. As Maynard gets older, he struggles to fit in with the world of Virginia high society. He is vulgar and rude, fond of drinking excessively, spending too much money, and hiring sex workers. He is killed when Hiram accidentally crashes the carriage in which Maynard is riding into the **River Goose**. Hiram tried to teach Maynard to swim when they were younger, but Maynard was never able to learn. As a result, he dies by drowning. At the time of his death, he is engaged to Corrine, an arrangement she craves because it will afford her greater power and because she thinks Maynard will be easy to dupe/manipulate.

Mr. Fields/Micajah Bland – Micajah Bland, who is first introduced via his fake identity as Mr. Fields, is a white Underground agent who infiltrates **Lockless** by working as Maynard's tutor. Once Mr. Fields witnesses Hiram's intelligence and power of memory, he offers to tutor Hiram as well, thereby teaching Hiram to read and write (a skill enslaved people were usually banned from acquiring) and passing on further knowledge and skills with the surreptitious aim of training Hiram as an Underground agent. After Hiram falls into the hands of Corrine and the Virginia Underground at Bryceton, he re-encounters Mr. Fields, who travels with him up to the station in Philadelphia. It is here that Mr. Fields reveals that his real name is Micajah Bland. Hiram and Bland become close; they develop a deep emotional connection, and at one point Bland saves Hiram's life after he is kidnapped by slavecatchers. Bland is courageous, headstrong, and altruistic. Indeed, he is the only white character in the novel who is shown to behave in a genuinely noble manner. Bland volunteers to go on a highly dangerous mission to save Otha White's wife Lydia and their two children from slavery in Alabama. During the journey back to Philadelphia, Lydia and the children are captured. Although Bland has the option of saving himself, he refuses to leave them behind and ends up being killed as a result.

Moses/Harriet Tubman – Harriet, who for much of the novel is known by her nickname, Moses, is based on the real figure of Harriet Tubman. A legendary, fearless agent of the Underground Railroad, Harriet is deeply respected by all members of the Underground. She is from Maryland, where her free parents Ma Rit and Pop Ross still live. During the narrative, she and Hiram go on a mission to liberate Harriet's siblings Ben, Henry, and Robert, as well as Henry's wife Jane, from slavery. Harriet was born into slavery but was inspired by a childhood friend named Abe to rebel and seek freedom. Like Hiram, she possesses the power of Conduction, an ability to magically travel across distances in a short amount of time using the power of memory.

Raymond White – Raymond White is an Underground agent who lives in Philadelphia. Born into slavery, both his parents escaped the plantation and ended up reuniting in Philadelphia. Raymond was separated from his brother, Otha, as a child, but they also reunite in Philadelphia and work as agents of the Underground together. Raymond is married and lives just outside the city with his family.

Otha White – Otha is Raymond's brother; like Raymond, he was born into slavery. When Otha was a child, his mother, Viola, fled with both him and his brother, Lambert. However, her first escape attempt was unsuccessful, and she and the boys were re-enslaved. By the time she made her second attempt, she left Otha and Lambert behind because at that point she had two younger children and couldn't carry them all. For a long time, Otha resents his mother for this, but after he reunites with Viola, Raymond, and the rest of his family, he forgives her. Otha's wife, Lydia, remains enslaved in Alabama, along with his two children. Otha is very close with Bland, and when Bland is killed trying to liberate Lydia and the children, Otha is devastated. However, he emphasizes to Hiram that no matter how many times one loses loved ones, it is vitally important to always remain open to love.

Santi Bess – Santi Bess was Hiram's grandmother and Rose's mother. She was a "pure-blood African" who possessed the ability of Conduction. According to legend, she led 48 enslaved people to freedom from **Lockless** through the **River Goose**, theoretically descending with them into the water and reemerging in Africa. Although Hiram doubts the veracity of this story at the beginning of the novel, by the end it is confirmed that it really happened.

Georgie Parks – Georgie Parks is a widely-respected free black man who lives near **Lockless** in Freetown. Formerly enslaved, he bought his freedom and married a woman named Amber, with whom he has one baby son. Hiram and Georgie are friends, and Hiram believes Georgie is connected to the "Underground" before he really knows what this is. However, Georgie is secretly working for Ryland's Hounds and ruthlessly betrays Hiram and Sophia, leading to their capture.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Emma – Emma was Rose's sister and Hiram's aunt. She and Rose would **water dance** together. When tobacco prices started falling, Emma was one of the first enslaved people sold South from **Lockless**.

Nathaniel Walker – Nathaniel Walker is Howell's brother. He is Sophia's enslaver and regularly rapes her, although he cannot

bring himself to have her live on his property and thus makes her live at **Lockless** and travel to his property on weekends. He is the biological father of Caroline.

Boss Harlan – Boss Harlan is the white overseer at **Lockless**.

Kessiah – Thena and Big John's daughter. Kessiah, along with her siblings, was separated from Thena and sold as a child. However, after a reunion facilitated by Hiram, Kessiah is able to live freely with Thena in Philadelphia.

Big John – Big John was Thena's husband and Kessiah's father. He died of a fever.

Roscoe – Roscoe is Howell's butler. He dies while Hiram is living in Philadelphia.

Ella – Ella is the head cook at **Lockless** until she is sold.

Pete – Pete is an enslaved man at **Lockless** until he is sold.

Alice Caulley – Alice Caulley is a cruel, vulgar white woman who is friends with Howell and comes to **Lockless** for a party he hosts.

Amber Parks – Amber is Georgie's wife.

Mercury – Mercury was Sophia's former partner back in Carolina.

Hawkins – Hawkins is a black Underground agent who poses as Corrine's servant.

Amy – Amy is Hawkins's sister. She is also an Underground agent.

Helen – Helen was Nathaniel's wife. She and Sophia were best friends in childhood; when they grew up, Sophia worked as Helen's maid. Sophia says she loved Helen deeply, and the fact that Helen died in childbirth fills her with guilt and sorrow.

Ryland – Ryland is a slavecatcher in Elm County who oversees Ryland's Jail in Elm County, where runaway slaves are imprisoned. Other slavecatchers are referred to as "Ryland's Hounds" within the novel.

Old Man – While in Ryland's Jail, Hiram shares a cell with unnamed old man who is beaten and humiliated by the guards. He dies, seemingly from the abuse inflicted upon him.

Parnel Johns – Parnel Johns is an enslaved man who is the first person Hiram liberates while working for the Underground.

Lucy – Lucy is Parnel Johns's lover, although he pretends that she is his daughter. She escapes with Johns when he is liberated by the Underground.

Mars – Mars is a baker in Philadelphia who is extremely friendly, kind, and generous to Hiram.

Hannah – Hannah is Mars's wife.

Mary Bronson – Mary Bronson is an enslaved woman whom Hiram and the White brothers help liberate in Philadelphia.

Octavius – Octavius is Mary Bronson's young son.

Viola White – Viola is Raymond and Otha's mother.

Lambert – Lambert was Raymond and Otha's brother. He died before being able to escape slavery and was thus never reunited with the free members of his family.

Lydia White – Lydia is Otha's wife. She and their two children are enslaved in Alabama. She is rescued by Bland, only to be caught and re-enslaved. The reader never learns her final fate, although Otha remains determined to free her at all costs.

Laura – Laura is Bland's sister. She lives in Philadelphia.

Daniel McKiernan – McKiernan is the enslaver of Lydia and her children.

Elon Simpson – Simpson is a member of Philadelphia high society who secretly does business with enslavers.

Chalmers – Chalmers is Elon Simpson's servant.

Abe – Abe was a rebellious young enslaved boy whom Harriet knew as a child. She credits him with inspiring her to fight for freedom.

Ben – Ben is Harriet's brother.

Henry – Henry is Harriet's brother.

Jane – Jane is Henry's wife, and Harriet's sister-in-law.

Robert – Robert is Harriet's brother, and Mary's partner.

Mary – Mary is Robert's partner.

Ma Rit – Ma Rit is Harriet's mother.

Pop Ross – Pop Ross is Harriet's father.

John Tubman – John Tubman is Harriet's husband.

Caroline – Caroline is Sophia's baby daughter. She is the biological daughter of Nathaniel (making her Hiram's cousin), but Hiram assumes the role of her father.

TERMS

Conduction – A superpower that enables a person to move rapidly travel through time and space using memory. **Hiram** and **Harriett**, and **Santi Bess** possess this ability.

Low – A social category that consists of white workers who are often poor and work in terrible conditions.

Quality – The social category to which upper-class or slaveholding white people belong.

Tasked – "The Task" refers to the institution of slavery as well as specific units of slave labor. Accordingly, enslaved people are categorized as "the Tasked."

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.

MEMORY VS. FORGETTING

The Water Dancer makes the case that memory is vitally important, even when the horrors of slavery make it tempting to repress one's memories. Ta-Nehisi Coates conveys this point through the main character, an enslaved man named Hiram Walker, who has a supernaturally powerful memory. By making Hiram's ability to remember an actual superpower, Coates suggests that memory is not just personally important for individuals—it has the capacity to change the world. Indeed, the one block in Hiram's memory—he has forgotten almost everything about his mother, Rose—prevents him from accessing his other powers, including Conduction (the ability to move through space in seconds). The struggle that Hiram and other characters in the novel experience in accessing repressed memories is a metaphor for the way in which slavery is so often erased and forgotten within the American public imagination. Coates argues that just as Hiram is empowered by his eventual ability to remember his mother, so is the true transition from slavery to freedom only possible by fully reckoning with the past.

The novel shows that memory is so important for enslaved people because slavery involved deliberately corrupting the ability of the enslaved to access the past. It did so by separating enslaved family members from each other and by separating the enslaved from their homelands in Africa. Rose and Hiram's aunt Emma were both sold when he was only a little boy, which is part of why he struggles to remember them. Without these two family members, Hiram loses his connection to his own ancestors. This personal loss mirrors the larger break in memory caused by the transatlantic slave trade. This traumatic journey, alongside prohibitions against enslaved people practicing their own African religions, speaking their own languages, or engaging in their own customs, meant that enslaved people lost most of their access to their own ancestral histories. The connection between Hiram's personal forgetting of Rose and the broader erasure of enslaved people's connection to Africa is made extra clear when Hiram finally remembers Rose at the end of the novel and remembers that she used to tell him stories about Africa at night.

The separation of enslaved people from Africa and each other is not the only way in which slavery caused blocks in memory. The novel shows how slavery is so traumatizing that it leads people to deliberately forget the past because remembering would be too painful. This idea emerges both through Hiram's own story of forgetting Rose and in the story of another enslaved woman, Thena, who becomes a surrogate mother to Hiram after all but one of her children are taken and sold. After Hiram escapes from slavery and starts working for the Underground Railroad, he meets Thena's eldest child, Kessiah, and plans a reunion between them. However, when Hiram tells Thena this, she does not react in the joyful way he expects. She is horrified by the idea of seeing Kessiah, because the pain of losing her children is so unbearable that she has forced herself to repress her memory of them. She asks Hiram, "What will I do when I look at her and all I can see are my lost ones?"

Thena's heartbreaking reaction shows that choosing to forget is not really a choice at all, but rather something enslaved people are forced into out of horrific necessity. The experience of having almost all of her children taken from her was so traumatizing for Thena that the only way she can continue living is by blocking the experience from her life. The novel is sympathetic to this coping mechanism, and does not suggest that Thena should have done something differently. She was put in an impossible position, faced with circumstances that no parent should have to endure.

On the other hand, the novel also shows that repressing traumatic experiences by forgetting them is never totally possible. Reflecting on Thena's breakdown after he mentions a reunion with Kessiah, Hiram realizes, "[…] worst of all I knew how the memory of such things altered us, how we could never escape it, how it became an awful part of us." Trying to forget about her lost children may have helped Thena keep living after they're gone, but it does not mean that she will ever be free of the wound their absence creates. Again, Hiram's realization can be applied both to Thena's individual situation and to the dilemma created by slavery more broadly. Many would like to forget slavery in order to escape it, but in reality, this is impossible. It must be properly remembered and commemorated.

Over the course of the novel, it becomes clear to Hiram that memories—even when they are painful—can also be empowering, an essential part of the journey to freedom. One way in which this emerges is through the fact that he is only able to gain control over his power of Conduction once he remembers Rose (and, in particular, remembers that she tried to escape **Lockless**, the plantation where Hiram was born, before she and Hiram were recaptured and she was sold). Remembering Rose allows Hiram to properly exercise Conduction, which in turn becomes the key tool he uses to convey himself and others to freedom.

By literalizing the connection between memory and freedom, the novel illustrates the point made during a conversation between Hiram and Harriet, a leader of the Underground Railroad (based on the historical figure Harriet Tubman). During their conversation, Harriet underlines the idea that slavery blocks people's access to the past, which manifests in the form of forgetting: "To forget is to truly slave. To forget is to die." Soon after, Harriet adds, "For memory is the chariot, and memory is the way, and memory is bridge from the curse of slavery to the boon of freedom." These words demonstrate that memory is important because without reckoning with the

horrors of slavery (as well as remembering the freedom that *preceded* slavery), there can be no future in which enslaved people and their descendants are truly free.

BROKEN FAMILIES

The Water Dancer depicts the ways in which slavery corrupted and destroyed the families of enslaved people. It mainly does so by exploring one of the most harrowing aspects of slavery: family separation. All of the enslaved characters in the novel have family members who have been sold (while some have been sold themselves), creating permanent separations. The novel also shows how families are broken by slavery through the prevalence of rape of black women by white men, creating "illegitimate" relations between enslavers and the enslaved, such as between Hiram and his white father Howell and half-brother Maynard. Yet even as the novel exposes the many ways in which slavery destroys families, it also highlights the ways in which enslaved and free black people form new relationships of love and care in the place of broken family ties. While this does not heal the trauma of family separation, it constitutes a moving and powerful way of life that enables black people to survive and fight for freedom.

The novel shows that part of what is so devastating about family separation is that love and family are some of the only ways in which enslaved people can experience dignity, care, and joy in the midst of the horrors of slavery. Many of the instances of joy in Hiram's life occur within a family context, including Rose and aunt Emma **water dancing** together (a form of dance performed by enslaved people) and Rose telling him stories about Africa at night. When Rose and Emma are sold, two of the precious few sources of joy in Hiram's life disappear.

At the same time, the novel also shows that joy can come from relations between people who aren't biological family. For example, when Thena becomes a surrogate mother figure to Hiram, it soothes him. In part because of the way in which slavery destroys connections between biological family members, enslaved people form kinship networks with people outside their immediate families. Unfortunately, these relationships are just as often severed by the separations enacted by enslavers.

Separation, however, is not the only way in which families are broken by slavery; another significant way is through widespread rape and its impact on family networks. Hiram knows that he is the son of the master of **Lockless**, Howell Walker, and therefore knows that he was conceived when Howell raped Rose. As if this weren't traumatic enough, Hiram must also deal with the fact that his father sold his mother and continues to enslave his own son, forcing him to work as a manservant for his half-brother, Maynard. Hiram illustrates the particular pain of being held enslaved by your own family members with the words, "all I wanted was to be home and free of Maynard's voice, though I could never, in this life, be free of him. Maynard who held my chain. Maynard, my brother who was made my master." This quotation highlights the perverse impact slavery has on families, corrupting what should be bonds of love and care into dynamics of abuse, servitude, and degradation.

Although the novel's main focus is on how black people are harmed by slavery's destruction of families, it does highlight that this phenomenon harms everyone, including the white enslavers who enact it. Howell claims to feel restricted by social norms, which prevent him from loving Rose and Hiram in the way he would like. He tells Hiram that he is not "permitted" to give him much, and later in the novel admits that he regrets selling Rose. Of course, while Howell may indeed feel pressured by the racist norms of his time, he is still responsible for complying with them. Yet his expressions of regret show that the damage that white people inflict on familial relations during slavery also becomes a form of self-harm. The racist ideology undergirding slavery is so powerful that it leads white people like Howell to destroy their own families.

There is no redemptive arc when it comes to the novel's depiction of broken families; the impact of slavery on familial relations is shown to be a wound that will never heal. Yet the novel also strongly emphasizes that constant separation encourages enslaved people to form new ties of care and support with one another, and even to see all black people as part of the same family. Indeed, the idea that all black people are family emerges in contrast to the biological relations that exist between white people like Howell and black people like Hiram—relations that, far from encouraging love and care, are often conduits for cruelty. Thena emphasizes this idea when Hiram goes to work in Howell's house as a young teenager. She tells him, "They ain't your family, boy. I am more your mother standing right here now than that white man on that horse is your father." Here, Thena shows that biological ties do not mean much given how white enslavers pervert and destroy them. What is more important is the sense of connectedness and care that emerges among all black people to counter this destruction of the family.

The book repeatedly emphasizes how the destruction of the family encourages the enslaved characters to remain open to loving other black people to whom they are not biologically related. While the formerly enslaved Otha is grieving his separation from his wife and children, he also mentions that new and improvised relationships beyond his biological family help sustain him: "I lived divided from my blood, and made brothers wherever I lived, and grieved every time we were divided—and we were always divided. But I have never, for an instant, shied away from connection, from love." Otha's final words show how important it is for him to remain open to love even after the endless repeating trauma of being separated.

There is no cure for being torn away from loved ones, but the inevitability of separation makes it even more important that the enslaved characters in the novel are able to develop new relationships of love and care.

STOLEN SKILLS, POWER, AND KNOWLEDGE

The Water Dancer draws on the common understanding that slavery is a system of stolen labor, and emphasizes that enslaved people were also robbed of their knowledge, skills, and power. It explores this point through showing all the ways in which enslaved people were more competent, talented, and knowledgeable than their enslavers, and by even depicting some of the characters born into slavery as having superpowers. Indeed, through this magical realist element of the novel, Coates emphasizes that it will always be impossible to know just how much was stolen from black people during slavery. This is because enslavers denied the existence of the forms of wisdom, talent, and power that enslaved people possessed, while at the same time robbing them for themselves. By exaggerating the skills that Hiram and other enslaved characters possess into actual superpowers, the novel reminds the reader that enslaved people had powers and talents that have been lost to history forever.

The novel illustrates the extent of the skills, power, and knowledge stolen from enslaved people by endowing the main character, Hiram, with superpowers. These extraordinary abilities take two main forms: Hiram's superhuman memory, and his ability to travel through space in seconds, which in the novel is called Conduction. The fact that Hiram possesses these two skills in particular is significant, because they both represent things that enslavers disproportionately robbed from the enslaved. Slavery systematically denied enslaved people access to their own past—their memories—by transporting captives from their homelands in Africa, prohibiting African cultural and religious practices, separating families, and banning enslaved people from becoming literate. Meanwhile, slavery also confined the movement of enslaved people, keeping them captive on the plantations where they were enslaved and installing systems of surveillance in order to prevent people from fleeing. The fact that Hiram is capable of both extraordinary memory and extraordinary movement highlights the massive amount of skill stolen from enslaved people, and why it took such a particularly expansive and brutal institution to facilitate the theft of these skills.

The novel also reverses the racist idea that black people had inferior abilities—an idea that was often used as a justification for slavery—by instead showing the opposite to be true. As Hiram explains, "The masters could not bring water to boil, harness a horse, nor strap their own drawers without us. We were better than them—we had to be. Sloth was literal death for us, while for them it was the whole ambition of their lives." Hiram's words show that logically, enslaved people were of course more capable than enslavers—slavery required them to be. While white enslavers made themselves more and more incompetent by depending so completely on the labor of enslaved people, enslaved people themselves gained more knowledge and skills, only to have them stolen through the system of slavery.

The contrast between the enslaved people's skills and the enslavers' incompetence emerges most prominently in the depiction of Hiram and his half-brother, Maynard. While Hiram is highly intelligent and even possesses superpowers, Maynard is unintelligent, lazy, incapable of taking care of himself, and prone to nefarious behaviors such as gambling and drinking to excess. Indeed, the fact that Maynard has such a skilled manservant in the form of Hiram makes him even more lazy and inept. By stealing the skills, power, and knowledge of the enslaved, white people like Maynard maintained a position of superiority yet further weakened themselves when it came to their own abilities.

The novel also shows that because slavery was a system of exploitation and theft, possessing extraordinary abilities did not necessarily confer advantages for enslaved people (as would be the case in a more just social system). As a young boy, Hiram dreams that his intelligence and talent mean that he will eventually be installed as the rightful "heir" of **Lockless**, rather than his inept half-brother. Of course, the system of slavery means that this is an impossibility. Moreover, Hiram's talent and intelligence cannot advantage him personally because under slavery, they are little more than ways to make more money for his enslavers. As Hiram reflects, "My genius would not save me, indeed my genius would only make me a more valuable commodity." He may possess extraordinary skills, but he does not have ownership or control over these skills. As an enslaved person, exercising his own intelligence and skills can only work to benefit his captors.

The fact that Hiram is ultimately able to gain control over his skills through rebellion shows why slavery was a system doomed to fail. One group of people can only steal the intelligence, talents, and labor of another group for so long before such an exploitative and unsustainable system is overturned. At the same time, Hiram's victory—using his abilities to liberate himself and others, and despite all odds becoming the "master" of Lockless when it becomes a station of the Underground Railroad—only further highlights the extent of what was stolen from black people under slavery. Even after his triumph, Hiram must keep his work secret so that he can continue the project of liberating enslaved people via the Underground Railroad. (This is of course also true of Harriet, who, like Hiram, is capable of Conduction, a skill she explicitly links to the time before slavery: "It is the old ways, which shall and do remain.") The secrecy under which Hiram's talents must be placed means that evidence of these talents never makes it

into the historical record. Herein lies a particularly tragic element of the theft that occurred through slavery. Not only were wisdom, talent, and power stolen, but evidence of these abilities was erased.

WATER, MOVEMENT, AND FREEDOM

As the title of the novel shows, water and movement are central elements of *The Water Dancer*; together, they represent the freedom that the enslaved characters in the novel are constantly seeking. Water and movement are tied together in several ways, the first of which is **water dancing**, something Hiram's mother Rose and aunt Emma used to do when he was a child. During a water dance, dancers must move while trying to keep a vessel of water perched on their heads from spilling. Water and movement are also connected by the fact that throughout the novel, enslaved people move from place to place via water. This happens both involuntarily (i.e., when enslaved people are "sold down the [Mississippi] river" into the deep South, or when they were brought over from Africa via the Atlantic) and voluntarily (as when Hiram uses **the River Goose** to Conduct himself to faraway places). The novel shows that while part of the legacy of slavery is traumatic movement as captives across water, moving through water is also the path back into freedom.

The novel explicitly frames water dancing as a reclamation of water from the trauma of the Middle Passage, the journey enslaved people were forced to make across the Atlantic while confined in slave ships. The Middle Passage signifies the end of freedom, yet the water itself symbolized freedom. This is made particularly clear by the story Sophia tells about the African chief who led a rebellion aboard a slave ship, only to be surrounded by military ships. As Sophia explains, "The chief told his people to walk out into the water, to sing and dance as they walked, that the water-goddess brought 'em here, and the water-goddess would take 'em back home." The captives may have been forced to move across water by enslavers, but choosing to dance and sing as they jumped from the ship was a way of reclaiming their own movement as they chose the freedom offered by death rather than a life of captivity. Indeed, the association between water, death, and freedom is made even more clear when Hiram mentions stories Rose would tell him about their ancestors who live "in that paradise under the sea," presumably after jumping from slave ships.

Sophia explains that water dancing is a way to honor the African chief who led the rebellion and all other captive Africans who jumped into the water during the Middle Passage. As such, it is a radical assertion of freedom in the midst of bondage. Sophia says, "And when we dance as we do, with the water balanced on our head, we are giving praise to them who danced on the waves. We have flipped it, you see?" The fact that this ritual involves honoring the rebels through *dance* is also significant. Throughout the novel, dance is depicted as an expression of agency, of the freedom of one's own body even as slavery attempted to assert total control over the body. Observing Sophia dance, Hiram sees "a flurry of limbs, but all under control." The phrase "under control" illustrates that for Sophia, dancing is a reminder (to herself and others) of her ownership of her own body. Indeed, when Hiram witnesses a group of enslaved people about to be sold, he thinks about the contrast between this sight and the image of people dancing: "where their arms and their legs had once been dancing, I saw now that from ankle to wrist they were chained." Dancing and captivity are depicted as opposites.

Water and movement are also linked to freedom through the Goose, the river near **Lockless**, which carries enslaved people into the "hell" of the Deep South yet ultimately becomes the route via which Hiram accesses freedom. The novel opens with both Hiram and his half-brother Maynard in the Goose. Convinced that he is about to die, Hiram has a vision of Rose, and is miraculously saved via Conduction. Maynard, meanwhile, drowns. Because Maynard is Hiram's captor—the man he is assigned to serve—Maynard's death becomes the beginning of Hiram's liberation (even though it doesn't immediately free Hiram when it happens). Whereas Maynard is overpowered and killed by the water, Hiram's ancestral connection to the water as a site of freedom (shown through Rose's appearance) means that he is able to survive. It also teaches him that Conduction is linked both to his memoires of his mother and to water, and it is this realization that eventually allows him to gain control over this superpower, which will eventually be key to securing his freedom.

While water is a means of movement and thus a route to freedom, Hiram must learn to trust the water in order to take advantage of the powers it offers. This is difficult; as Hiram's near-death experience shows, the danger of drowning—and particularly the ancestral memory of those who drowned after jumping or being thrown overboard during the Middle Passage—means that water is frightening. It is Harriet, who also has the power of Conduction, who teaches Hiram to trust the water, thereby allowing it to carry him to freedom. Importantly, she does so by comparing Conduction to dancing: "It's just like dancing. Stay with the sound, stay with the story and you will be fine." Given that dancing is an expression of freedom, Harriet is imploring Hiram to trust the freedom that remains inside him. Hiram is eventually able to escape slavery and help others to freedom because he remembers that freedom is inside him, a truth that he expresses by again connecting freedom to water: "I was freedom-bound, and freedom was as much in my heart as it was in the swamps." Both freedom and water are external to Hiram, but also within him; this helps to show how freedom is a state he must move toward, yet also something that stays alive inside him all along.

HUMANITY VS. INHUMANITY

The Water Dancer depicts the brutally dehumanizing system of slavery, yet it also shows the ways in which enslaved people experienced their own humanity under this system. It largely does so by showing the emotional lives of the characters, most significantly the protagonist, Hiram. Rather than focusing on the violence and degradation that constitute life under slavery, the novel foregrounds Hiram's thoughts, feelings, and (extraordinary) abilities. Alongside this, it also suggests that white people are the ones truly dehumanized by slavery—not in the sense that they are oppressed, but rather because they erode their own humanity by degrading the humanity of others. Indeed, the novel suggests that this is not just true of enslavers, but also of white abolitionists (like the character Corinne Quinn). Ultimately, it is the black characters whose humanity survives the horrors of slavery, and the white characters who lose their understanding of how to be human.

While readers might presume to be familiar with the system of dehumanization on which slavery was built, the novel forces the reader to confront it anew by renaming the different categories of personhood slavery produced. In the novel, white property owners are called "the Quality," whereas enslaved people are called "the Tasked," and slavery itself is known as "the Task." There is also a third category of "Low," poor white people who often have to perform similar kinds of labor to the enslaved, yet who have chosen the symbolic power that comes with whiteness rather than solidarity with black people. By renaming these different levels of status, Coates defamiliarizes slavery and the dehumanization it involved, meaning he makes the reader view it as something foreign and unfamiliar. As a result, the novel manages to re-expose the way in which slavery is an assault on humanity, while also encouraging the reader to think about this issue from a new perspective.

Through focusing on the interior lives of the characters, the novel depicts how its enslaved characters feel about the relentless attempts to dehumanize them. The two main metaphors the enslaved characters use to encapsulate this experience are objecthood and death. The enslaved characters in *The Water Dancer* are very aware of their status as property. Hiram conveys this when he explains, "You have to remember what I was: not human but property, and a valuable property." Here he explicitly shows that his status as property means that he is not considered human.

Slavery is also shown to be dehumanizing by being a form of living death. In the novel, slavery is often referred to as "**the coffin**," a metaphor that conveys both the confinement of bondage and the idea that living as a slave is not really a life. The old man with whom Hiram is briefly imprisoned after being caught by slavecatchers further emphasizes the idea of living death when he says, "For a man that can't honor his wife's dying wish ain't even a man, ain't even a life." Here the man explicitly links the dehumanizing impact of slavery ("ain't even a man") with the experience of slavery as a form of living death ("ain't even a life").

Yet even as the novel exposes all the dehumanizing brutalities enslaved people were forced to endure, it also underlines that the humanity of the enslaved remained despite all this. This point emerges in the rich interior lives of the enslaved characters, their knowledge and talents, their care for each other, and—perhaps more than anything—their ongoing yearning for freedom. The idea that slavery does not successfully dehumanize the enslaved becomes most obvious in the depiction of the Underground Railroad. Once Hiram, Harriet, and others have escaped from slavery, instead of focusing on sustaining their new lives in the North, they risk their lives in order to rescue others—family, friends, and strangers. Slavery has not robbed them of their humanity; they retain their moral drive and empathy for others.

The same is not true, however, for the white characters in the novel. This is exposed through Howell and Maynard Walker, who have both become so inhuman by their participation in slavery that they enslave their own blood relative, Hiram. Over the course of the narrative, Howell becomes a weak, despondent husk of his former self, and it is clear that life as an enslaver has drained him of his vitality and dignity.

Furthermore, the novel emphasizes that it is not just enslavers who are dehumanized by slavery, but all white people, even abolitionists. This idea is illustrated via Corrine Quinn, the wealthy white woman who works for the Underground Railroad. Describing her, another white Underground agent, Micajah Bland, notes, "When you are operating as Corrine Quinn does, on the other side of the line, the math is different. It has to be. You were part of that math." Bland's use of the term "math" is significant. Being reduced to a number is one of the many ways in which slavery dehumanized enslaved people, who were quantified alongside crops and livestock as if their only value was financial. However, Bland's words reverse this idea, showing that it is actually white people like Corinne who are "part of that math" because they materially benefit from it.

The depiction of Corrine also shows that for white people who choose not to participate in slavery, it is hard to restore their own humanity. The novel indicates that white abolitionists tend to oppose slavery for self-centered reasons. Hiram observes that white abolitionists tend to be the most "fanatical" because they are aware of the way slavery degrades their own humanity. He notes, "Slavery humiliated them, because it offended a basic sense of goodness that they believed themselves to possess […] So their opposition was a kind of vanity." Here Hiram reverses another common assumption: that white abolitionists are heroes because they acted against their own self-interest. Instead, he argues that (unlike the black people working for the Underground Railroad, who act out of true selflessness) white people engage in abolitionism for

precisely selfish reasons, in order to restore their idea of their own humanity.

SYMBOLS

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

WATER DANCING

Water dancing is an act that ties together many of the novel's central themes: rebellion, freedom, love, skill, and memory. When Hiram was a little boy, his mother Rose and aunt Emma used to water dance, an act that involves dancing while holding a jar of water on one's head and trying not to let any of it spill. It is one of the ways in which enslaved people steal moments of joy for themselves in the midst of the degradation and brutality of slavery. Moreover, it is also a chance for enslaved people to demonstrate their skill and talent to each other, which is significant given that slavery involves stealing enslaved people's ingenuity in order for others to profit. The fact that this ritual involves water is also extremely important. Water is a symbol of rebellion for enslaved people, because when captives were transported from Africa to the Americas, many chose to leap into the water in order to refuse a life of bondage (even if that meant certain death). Water dancing is a way of honoring that legacy. For Hiram in particular, it is also one of the few memories he has of his mother and aunt, from whom he was separated after they were sold. Remembering Rose and Emma water dancing is what allows him to Conduct (travel through space instantly). By recalling the beautiful rebellions of his family members, Hiram is able to rebel himself and—several times—save his own life.

THE RIVER GOOSE

The River Goose is a river that runs by **Lockless**, the plantation where Hiram was born. To some characters in the novel, it is a symbol of danger and death, but for Hiram and other enslaved people it represents rebellion and freedom. Like **water dancing**, the Goose is connected to rebellion and freedom via water. In a sense, the Goose can be read as a smaller version of the Atlantic Ocean, which captive Africans jumped into in order to avoid a life of slavery. When Hiram is growing up, he hears stories that his grandmother, Santi Bess, led almost 50 enslaved people to freedom by walking with them into the river. This makes the connection between the Goose and the Atlantic Ocean as sites of rebellion and resistance particularly clear. At the very beginning of the novel, Hiram is driving his half-brother and master Maynard home when, while passing the Goose, he experiences a vision of Rose and Emma water dancing that causes him to crash the carriage. Maynard drowns, but Hiram is mysteriously rescued when he is able to Conduct himself out of the Goose and onto dry land. By killing Maynard but saving Hiram, the water in the Goose facilitates rebellion against enslavers while allowing enslaved people to access freedom and safety. This is emphasized later in the novel when, after gaining control over his ability to Conduct, Hiram uses the Goose in order to come and go from Lockless and continue his secret operation of the Underground Railroad there.

LOCKLESS

Lockless is the plantation where Hiram was born and grows up, and it is a symbol of captivity, injustice, and the ways in which slavery distorts one's sense of family and home. The name "Lockless" is, of course, ironic: as a plantation where enslaved people are held captive, Lockless is a kind of prison. Yet the name also points to the way in which slavery is so pervasive that it *is* often literally lock-less, in the sense that actual cages, locks, and chains are not (normally) used to keep enslaved people in their place. Escape is so difficult and dangerous that physical restraints aren't usually necessary. Lockless is Hiram's "home" in the sense that it is the place where he was born and where his family lives; for a long time it is the only place he has ever known. The community of enslaved people who live at Lockless (on a part of the property called the Street) are a kind of extended family. Furthermore, Hiram's father, Howell Walker, is the owner of the property—yet because he was born to an enslaved mother, Hiram inherits slave status and will not inherit any of Howell's property. (Indeed, Hiram himself *is* Howell's property.) As a boy and young man, Hiram is tormented by a fantasy of being named as the "rightful heir" of Lockless. This injustice is made even more pronounced by the fact that the property's actual heir, Hiram's half-brother Maynard, is a vulgar and incompetent fool whom everyone predicts will not be able to manage to the estate properly. Yet in a poignant twist, Hiram *does* end up becoming a kind of "heir" to Lockless, and he uses the property as a station on the Underground Railroad. By the end of the novel, Lockless ends up living up to the literal meaning of its name, transforming from a symbol of imprisonment to a site of justice and freedom.

THE COFFIN

"The coffin" is a phrase many of the characters in the novel use to describe slavery (particularly as it exists in the Deep South), and is thus a way in which the novel characterizes slavery as a kind of living death. When characters are sent, kept, or returned to "the coffin," their fates are mourned in a manner similar to if they had actually died. Indeed, many of the characters in the novel suggest that being enslaved (especially in the Deep South, where slavery is more

brutal) is actually a fate worse than death. The coffin is also a significant metaphor because of how it evokes confinement. As the novel shows, to be enslaved is to be totally imprisoned, with one's actions and movements so severely restricted that it is as if one were living inside a coffin.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the One World edition of *The Water Dancer* published in 2019.

Chapter 1 Quotes

I had always avoided that bridge, for it was stained with the remembrance of the mothers, uncles, and cousins gone Natchez-way. But knowing now the awesome power of memory, how it can open a blue door from one world to another, how it can move us from mountains to meadows, from green woods to fields caked in snow, knowing now that memory can fold the land like cloth, and knowing, too, how I had pushed my memory of her into the "down there" of my mind, how I forgot, but did not forget, I know now that this story, this Conduction, had to begin there on that fantastic bridge between the land of the living and the land of the lost.

Related Characters: Hiram Walker (speaker), Rose

Related Themes:

Page Number: 3

Explanation and Analysis

The novel opens with Hiram experiencing a vision of his mother, Rose, dancing above the water of the River Goose by the bridge. In this passage, he explains that he usually avoids the bridge due to its bad connotations. When enslaved people on Lockless plantation are sold, they are taken over the bridge at the start of the journey into the Deep South. Yet this quotation reveals an important part of how painful memories function in the novel. While they are sites of immeasurable suffering, they are also powerful, because they are connections across time and space. Although much of what Hiram says here will not become clear until later in the novel, this early passage reveals that for him, family separation and painful memories are connected to a mysterious power, a form of hope and redemption in the midst of brutality.

I was pushing the horse as hard as I could, because all I wanted was to be home and free of Maynard's voice, though I could never, in this life, be free of him. Maynard who held my chain. Maynard, my brother who was made my master.

Related Characters: Hiram Walker (speaker), Maynard Walker

Related Themes:

Page Number: 5

Explanation and Analysis

Hiram has explained that he is the only person who can see the vision of his mother, Rose, water dancing above the River Goose. His half-brother (and master) Maynard is sitting in the back of the carriage Hiram is driving, boasting to a "fancy girl" (sex worker). In this passage, Hiram underlines the particular pain of being enslaved to one's own brother. In a sense, Maynard is a kind of evil twin to Hiram, his opposite in every way. Whereas Hiram is intelligent and talented, Maynard is vulgar and foolish. Yet the illogical injustice of slavery means that it is Hiram who is forced to be subservient to Maynard, robbed of his own agency and dignity because his whole life must be in service of his brother. This is one of the many ways in which the novel shows slavery to have a corrupting and destructive impact on families.

Chapter 2 Quotes

"They ain't your family, boy. I am more your mother standing right here now than that white man on that horse is your father."

Related Characters: Thena (speaker), Boss Harlan, Maynard Walker, Howell Walker, Hiram Walker

Related Themes:

Page Number: 22

Explanation and Analysis

After Rose is taken and sold, Hiram moves in with Thena, an old woman with a reputation for being bitter and "broken," yet who treats Hiram with kindness and care. While he is living with her, she explains that her husband died and five of her children were sold, which is why she carries such heavy sadness around with her. One day, Boss Harlan and Desi inform Thena that Hiram is due to go and work in the house, and in this quotation Thena warns Hiram not to forget that the white people up there are not his family.

Of course, on one level what Thena is saying isn't true—Howell and Maynard *are* Hiram's family, in the sense that they are his literal father and brother. Yet as the book has shown thus far, under slavery, being blood relatives with someone does not necessarily make them "family." This is particularly true in cases like Hiram's. Like many people born into slavery, Hiram is the illegitimate offspring of an enslaved black mother and his mother's white master. The fact that Hiram is enslaved by his own family obviously destroys the connection he would otherwise have to them.

Moreover, the role of white supremacy means that Hiram's relation to Howell and Maynard is essentially undone by the simple fact of their racial difference. This means that Thena is more his family than them simply by nature of the fact that she is also enslaved and black. In addition, Thena has actually acted like Hiram's mother, which distinctly separates her from Howell and Maynard.

Chapter 3 Quotes

❝ The masters could not bring water to boil, harness a horse, nor strap their own drawers without us. We were better than them—we had to be. Sloth was literal death for us, while for them it was the whole ambition of their lives.

Related Characters: Hiram Walker (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 35

Explanation and Analysis

Hiram has been working in the house at Lockless for a number of months, while also receiving lessons in literacy and math from Maynard's tutor, Mr. Fields. During this time, Hiram comes to realize just how dependent white people are on the enslaved. The enslaved are usually kept out of sight, all evidence of their labor hidden as much as possible. In this quotation, Hiram examines the irony of white people's helplessness. While slavery relies on the idea of black people's inferiority—an idea that isn't true in the first place—it also necessitates that black people be "better than" whites. Indeed, Hiram points out that for enslaved people, the punishment for not working hard or well enough is death.

❝ It occurred to me then that even my own intelligence was unexceptional, for you could not set eyes anywhere on Lockless and not see the genius in its makers—genius in the hands that carved out the columns of the portico, genius in the songs that evoked, even in the whites, the deepest of joys and sorrows, genius in the men who made the fiddle strings whine and trill at their dances, genius in the bouquet of flavors served up from the kitchen, genius in all our lost, genius in Big John. Genius in my mother.

I imagined that my own quality might someday be recognized and then, perhaps, I, one who understood the workings of the house, the workings of the field, and the span of the larger world, might be deemed the true heir, the *rightful heir*, of Lockless. With this broad knowledge I would make the fields bloom again, and in that way save us all from the auctions and separation, from a descent into the darkness of Natchez, which was the coffin, which was all that awaited, I knew, under the rule of Maynard.

Related Characters: Hiram Walker (speaker), Maynard Walker, Rose, Big John

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 35

Explanation and Analysis

Hiram has been reflecting on what he's learned over his period of working in the house at Lockless. He has noted the irony of the fact that slavery, which relies on the false logic that black people are inferior to white people, forces black people to become *superior* to white enslavers while in turn making white people entirely dependent on enslaved workers. Here, Hiram notes that his supposedly exceptional talents may not really be so exceptional at all among enslaved people, who are brimming with all kinds of "genius." Yet even as he recognizes the patent injustice and illogic of the way slavery steals and exploits black genius, he also cannot help but dream he will one day be acknowledged as the "*rightful heir*" of his father's plantation.

These conflicting ideas illuminate how disorienting it is to be in Hiram's position: brutally exploited by his own biological family members, denied basic rights, kept in a state of degradation, and yet still picked out for differential treatment based on his supposedly unique intelligence and talents. Every day Hiram is forced to witness an unbearable system of injustice; even though he has no reason to hope that anything will change, he cannot help but dream that it might. Indeed, this emerges as one of the most torturous

aspects of Hiram's experience: the agonizing and confusing persistence of hope in the midst of utter hopelessness.

Chapter 6 Quotes

❝ You have to remember what I was: not human but property, and a valuable property—one learned in all the functions of the manor, of crops, read, capable of entertaining with my tricks of memory.

Related Characters: Hiram Walker (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 87

Explanation and Analysis

After the carriage Hiram is driving plunges into the river Goose, Maynard dies by drowning, whereas Hiram miraculously survives. Ever since Maynard's death, his fiancée, Corrine Quinn, has been coming over to Lockless to pray with Howell. On one occasion, she asks to speak to Hiram about Maynard, and indicates that she wants Hiram to come work for her now that he no longer has Maynard to look after. In this passage, Hiram reflects on Corrine's desire for him to work for her, and his status as "property."

Hiram's thoughts show how slavery robs him of the ability to take pride and pleasure in his own talents. This is because, as property, his talents do not belong to him—they become the possessions of whoever "owns" him. Indeed, his talents might be put to a use that he is against, or that even harms him. Being alienated from one's own intelligence and skills is one of the many ways in which slavery degrades and dehumanizes enslaved people.

❝ At every gathering there was this dispute about my mother's mother, Santi Bess, and her fate. The myth held that she had executed the largest escape of tasking folk—forty-eight souls—ever recorded in the annals of Elm County. And it was not simply that they had escaped but where they'd been said to escape to—Africa. It was said that Santi had simply led them down to the river Goose, walked in, and reemerged on the other side of the sea.

Related Characters: Hiram Walker (speaker), Santi Bess

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 92

Explanation and Analysis

It is Christmas Day, and after serving the Walkers and their guests a Christmas feast, the enslaved people of Lockless are joined by other local black people (both enslaved and free) for their own feast. After, the conversation turns to a story about Hiram's grandmother, Santi Bess. Hiram's account of this story paints it as more myth than reality, and it is obvious why. Not only is Santi Bess have said to escaped the plantation (a difficult enough feat in itself), but she is said to have taken an astounding 48 people with her and transported them through the water back to Africa.

This story—and Hiram's recollection of it—have the markers of a supernatural myth. Yet as has already been made clear, the novel does not draw a hard line between supernatural, magical occurrences and a more conventionally "realistic" account of reality. The possibility remains that Santi Bess may have actually rescued these people and transported them home, although it is not yet clear how this could have happened. Note, however, that water has a very important place in the history of slave rebellions. While captive Africans were being transported across the Atlantic Ocean, many chose to rebel by jumping into the water. Whereas one interpretation of this act is that these captives simply chose death over slavery, other, more mystical interpretations hold that they trusted their own cultural wisdom and ancient beliefs to rescue them via the water.

Chapter 11 Quotes

❝ Maybe the power was in some way related to the block in my memory, and to unlock one was, perhaps, to unlock the other. And so in those dark and timeless hours in the pit, it became my ritual to reconstruct everything I had heard of her and all that I had seen of her in those moments down in the Goose. Rose of the kindest heart. Rose, sister of Emma. Rose the beautiful. Rose the silent. Rose the Water Dancer.

Related Characters: Hiram Walker (speaker), Emma , Rose

Related Themes:    

Related Symbols:  

Page Number: 147

Explanation and Analysis

After being set up by Georgie Parks, Hiram is captured and imprisoned for his attempt to escape slavery. He is then

taken to a forest where he is placed in a pit and made to participate in a nightly "hunt" wherein he flees from a group of white men for their entertainment, only to be caught and start the whole thing all over again. During his time in the pit, Hiram discovers a seemingly simple but incredibly important fact about the supernatural powers he possesses: they are related to memory, and specifically the memory of his mother. If Hiram cannot access these memories, he is lost and alone.

Yet as his words show, despite how hard he tries they remain out of reach. The fact that he must remember his mother as "Rose, sister of Emma" and "Rose the Water Dancer" indicate that he is not accessing his memories of her first-hand, but is rather summoning her via the memories of others. This quotation indicates that until Hiram can directly remember Rose himself, he will be cut off from his own power.

Chapter 14 Quotes

❝ The Task was a trap. Even Georgie was trapped. And so who was Corrine Quinn to judge such a man? Who was I, who'd run with no higher purpose save my own passions and my own skin? Now I understood the Underground war. It was not the ancient and honorable kind.

Related Characters: Hiram Walker (speaker), Corrine Quinn, Georgie Parks

Related Themes:

Page Number: 176

Explanation and Analysis

Having been saved by Corrine Quinn, Amy, and Hawkins, and finding out that they are all agents of the Underground Railroad, Hiram prepares to join the Underground himself. In order to test if he is trustworthy, Corrine asks for Hiram's permission to seek revenge against Georgie for betraying him, which will involve Georgie being killed (at best) or tortured, re-enslaved, and sent into the Deep South to die an even more agonizing, slow death (at worst). Here, Hiram expresses his own reservations about Corrine's quickness to judge Georgie. Although Georgie did indeed betray Hiram in a way that almost certainly got him killed, Hiram points out that it is difficult expecting people to make ethical choices under slavery. Corrine's merciless desire for revenge against Georgie shows that the "war" in which the Underground is engaged is not fair or noble. Instead, it is ruthless and brutal.

Chapter 18 Quotes

❝ And in all of these words, and each of these stories, I saw as much magic as anything I'd seen in the Goose, souls conducted as surely as I was out from its depths.

Related Characters: Hiram Walker (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 227

Explanation and Analysis

After being illegally kidnapped by slavecatchers and rescued by Bland, Hiram returns to Philadelphia and agrees to go to Alabama in order to help rescue Otha's wife Lydia and their sons. Raymond shows Hiram crates full of documents relating to the Underground's activities, and Hiram spends hours looking through all of them. He is inspired by the stories of freedom and rebellion, and in this passage characterizes them as containing a kind of "magic." This quotation helps show how the novel uses magic as a metaphor for the ingenuity and daring of enslaved people seeking their freedom in the most desperate circumstances. Although Hiram himself performs literal magic in his work for the Underground, this actual magic is arguably no more special and impressive than the actions of those who have no extraordinary powers at their disposal, yet manage to fight for freedom anyway.

Chapter 21 Quotes

❝ "Micajah Bland was not my blood, but he was so much my brother that he would die for me and mine. I am not young to any of this. I lived divided from my blood, and made brothers wherever I lived, and grieved every time we were divided—and we were always divided. But I have never, for an instant, shied away from connection, from love."

Related Characters: Otha White (speaker), Mr. Fields/ Micajah Bland

Related Themes:

Page Number: 258

Explanation and Analysis

While Hiram and other members of the Philadelphia Underground are attending the abolitionist convention in upstate New York, Bland is on a mission to rescue Otha's

wife Lydia and their two children from slavery in Alabama. Those in New York have just learned that the mission failed; Bland was killed, and Lydia was sent back into slavery. Otha is initially hysterical with pain, but after recovering slightly, he talks to Hiram about what happened. In this quotation he explains that although Bland was a white man, Otha considers him his brother. This is significant, as it is a reversal of what Hiram has experienced (and what slavery made very common): blood relatives not acknowledging each other as such due to racial difference. In this case, although Otha and Bland are not actually family and are not the same race, they become like family through their love and commitment to each other, as well as their shared commitment to fighting for freedom.

Being separated from his relatives—including through death—is something that Otha has experienced many times before. Yet, as he points out here, he has found it vital not to let these agonizing separations stop him from being able to love. Indeed, refusing to love again after being separated from one's loved ones would only make the pain worse.

Chapter 23 Quotes

"We forgot nothing, you and I," Harriet said. "To forget is to truly slave. To forget is to die." […] "To remember, friend," she said. "For memory is the chariot, and memory is the way, and memory is bridge from the curse of slavery to the boon of freedom."

Related Characters: Moses/Harriet Tubman (speaker), Hiram Walker

Related Themes:

Page Number: 271

Explanation and Analysis

While they are at the abolitionist convention in New York, Harriet asks Hiram to accompany her on a mission to Maryland. She says that she usually works alone, but this time needs another agent who is skilled at both literacy and running. Not long after, Harriet and Hiram meet in the middle of the night to set off on the mission. Here, Harriet explicitly spells out the significance of memory, which is presented as a sort of superhuman power in the novel. She explains that memory is so important because it is a route back to freedom. If a person forgets that this route is there—or cuts themselves off from it—then they "truly slave," because they have lost their chance of ever becoming free.

"It's just like dancing. Stay with the sound, stay with the story and you will be fine."

Related Characters: Moses/Harriet Tubman (speaker), Hiram Walker

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 271

Explanation and Analysis

Hiram and Harriet are about to set off on their mission to Maryland. As they are embarking on their Conduction, Harriet tells Hiram that Conduction is "just like dancing." In this short quotation, she shows how several of the story's central metaphors are connected to each other via Conduction. Conduction works through memory, and thus through stories—yet it is also a kind of dance. Dancing, of course, can be a way of telling stories, and for Hiram, water dancing is the most important memory of Rose, connecting him both to his family and to the captive Africans with whom the water dancing ritual began. Moreover, dancing is also a way of moving through space, in the same way that memory and storytelling are way of moving through time. Both of them are thus important assertions of freedom in the midst of the brutality of slavery.

Chapter 24 Quotes

"We can't ever have nothing pure," Robert said. "It's always out of sorts. Them stories with their knights and maidens, none of that for us. We don't get it pure. We don't get nothing clean."

"Yeah," I said. "But neither do they. It is quite a thing, a messy dirty thing, to put your own son, your own daughter, to the Task. Way I see it, ain't no pure and it is we who are blessed, for we know this."

Related Characters: Hiram Walker, Robert (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 293

Explanation and Analysis

Hiram has accompanied Harriet on a mission to rescue her siblings, who remain enslaved in Maryland. When Hiram goes to fetch Harriet's brother Robert, he meets Robert's wife, Mary, who is pregnant from having been raped by her enslaver. Robert confesses to Hiram that he had planned on

fleeing from Mary because he can't stand the idea of raising another man's baby. Understandably, Robert feels full of resentment about the way that slavery corrupts the most fundamental and important human experiences, including the experience of loving another person and having a family with them.

Hiram's rather philosophical response is important, because it illustrates one of the main points the book makes about the dehumanizing impact of slavery. The separation of families and the rape of enslaved women were two ways in which enslavers sought to dehumanize the enslaved by brutally destroying their capacities to form loving connections with one another. Yet as Hiram points out, in behaving in such a brutal manner, it was white people who actually dehumanized *themselves*—all while keeping up a false illusion of purity.

Chapter 31 Quotes

❝ Corrine Quinn was among the most fanatical agents I ever encountered on the Underground. All of these fanatics were white. They took slavery as a personal insult or affront, a stain upon their name. They had seen women carried off to fancy, or watched as a father was stripped and beaten in front of his child, or seen whole families pinned like hogs into rail-cars, steam-boats, and jails. Slavery humiliated them, because it offended a basic sense of goodness that they believed themselves to possess. And when their cousins perpetrated the base practice, it served to remind them how easily they might do the same. They scorned their barbaric brethren, but they were brethren all the same. So their opposition was a kind of vanity, a hatred of slavery that far outranked any love of the slave.

Related Characters: Hiram Walker (speaker), Corrine Quinn

Related Themes:

Page Number: 370-371

Explanation and Analysis

Hiram has decided that it is time to conduct Thena, Sophia, and Caroline out of Lockless and into freedom in the North. While Corrine is visiting Lockless for Christmas, he tells her this, but she replies that she has already made an arrangement regarding Sophia with Nathaniel; the ownership of Sophia is about to switch from him to her. In this quotation, Hiram comments on the "fanatical" nature of Corrine's commitment to the Underground. He makes what might appear to be a counterintuitive point about white Underground agents: namely, that they work with a more intense and frenzied passion than black agents do.

As Hiram's words show, this is not necessarily something to be admired. This is because it is produced by "vanity," and is thus actually a kind of selfishness. Although Corrine risks an enormous amount through her work in the Underground—and has been prepared to sacrifice her whole life to the cause, such as by marrying the horrible Maynard—she doesn't do so for selfless reasons. This complicated reality means that while Corrine shouldn't be condemned, she should perhaps also not be too intensely admired as a heroine or martyr who works outside of her own interests. In a counterintuitive way, Corrine is actually behaving in a self-interested manner, even if this leads her to acts of self-sacrifice.

Chapter 32 Quotes

❝ "Was a big king who come over from Africa on the slave ship with his people. But when they got close to shore, him and his folk took over, killed all the white folks, threw 'em overboard, and tried to sail back home. But the ship run aground, and when the king look out, he see that the white folks' army is coming for him with they guns and all. So the chief told his people to walk out into the water, to sing and dance as they walked, that the water-goddess brought 'em here, and the water-goddess would take 'em back home.

And when we dance as we do, with the water balanced on our head, we are giving praise to them who danced on the waves. We have flipped it, you see?"

Related Characters: Sophia (speaker)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 379

Explanation and Analysis

After Corrine tells him that they need to wait to bring Sophia and Thena to freedom, Hiram decides to work alone, which means he has to tell both Sophia and Thena about the Underground, Philadelphia, and Conduction. He begins with Sophia, telling her everything and showing her how Conduction works. During one of the times when he conducts with her, they see a vision of a woman water dancing, and talk about it the next night. Here Sophia explains the story behind the ritual. Her explanation frames water dancing as a celebration of rebellion, freedom, and

the traditional wisdom and power that lay within enslaved people's African cultures.

Although enslaved people are systematically robbed of this power under slavery, through memory something of it can remain. Indeed, water dancing is not only a way of honoring the rebels who walked onto the water, but *remembering* them and summoning them into the present. The story also shows why water is so important in the novel, playing a major role both in water dancing and in Conduction. Water, like memory, is a connection from one place to another. Captive Africans were taken to the Americas across water, and thus water becomes a symbolic (and, in the novel, literal) point of connection back to home.

Chapter 33 Quotes

"What will I say to her, Hi? What will I be? What will I do when I look at her and all I can see are my lost ones?"

Related Characters: Thena (speaker), Hiram Walker, Kessiah

Related Themes:

Page Number: 391

Explanation and Analysis

Hiram has told Thena about the Underground, Philadelphia, and his reunion with Kessiah. He tells Thena that he plans for her to meet Kessiah again, too, but instead of being happy or relieved, Thena is furious. They don't speak for a while, but Thena eventually explains that the reason why she reacted this way is a result of the unimaginable pain of having lost her children. In this heartbreaking quotation, she reveals her own fear about being reunited with her daughter. The phrase "What will I be?" shows that even if Thena rationally knows it is not her fault that her children were taken, she still feels profound guilt over it.

Thena's words highlight why people repress memories, particularly in the context of family separation. The only way for Thena to survive her children being taken was to harden her heart and convince herself that she would never see them again. In a sense, Thena deliberately "forgot" her children as a way of dealing with the pain of having being taken. Although this did not actually relieve her of pain, it was the only way in which she could survive. The possibility of being reunited with Kessiah thus becomes a reminder of everything that she lost.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

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

CHAPTER 1

Hiram has a vision of his mother, Rose, picturing her dancing on the bridge and looking like she did when he was a child. She was taken across this bridge, which straddles **the River Goose**. Previously he has always avoided the bridge because it reminds him of family members who have been sent toward Natchez. However, he now realizes how important it is that he confronts the memories that the bridge evokes, because memories have the "awesome power" to transport people between the world of the living and the world of the dead.

This opening passage introduces almost all of the novel's main themes, as well as showing how they work together. Hiram is connected to Rose only via memory, presumably because—like other members of Hiram's family—she has been sold toward Natchez, a major slave-trading town in Mississippi that serves as a symbol of both family separation and the horrors of slavery in the Deep South.

Hiram sees Rose **water dancing**, wearing a large jar on her head filled with water which, despite her movements, does not spill. Hiram's half-brother, Maynard, sits with a "fancy girl" (sex worker) in the back of the carriage. Yet only Hiram can see Rose, and as he watches her, he clearly remembers her dancing in a circle of his "people," including Aunt Emma and Uncle John. Rose had been the best dancer at **Lockless**, though Hiram didn't inherit her talent.

Hiram's family members are deeply important to him, yet he is separated from them. They exist to him only as phantoms, happy memories of a different time and perhaps even a better version of the world—one not torn apart by slavery.

It is autumn, and Maynard has just won a bet at the races, though after he was shunned by other white men, who consider him a "rotten apple" and a "fool." Furious, he ordered Hiram to drive him to pick up a fancy girl. They are now heading home, to the big house at **Lockless**. Maynard is Hiram's brother, and also his master. Consumed by thoughts about those who have been sold South, Hiram accidentally drives the carriage off the road, causing it to tumble into the water. He is stunned by the shock and pain of finding himself underwater, with no air to breathe.

While Rose, Aunt Emma, and Uncle John appear as beautiful memories of a lost time, Hiram's present relative, Maynard, provides no such comfort or solace. Indeed, Maynard is Hiram's enslaver, and thus a brutal, dehumanizing presence. The few pieces of information provided about Maynard thus far suggest he is an especially cruel and unpleasant person.

Forcing himself to remain calm, Hiram manages to push himself to the surface, and sees that the bridge is already "a half mile away." The current is strong, and Hiram can't see the fancy girl, but he can hear Maynard shouting, "Help me, Hi!" In the past Hiram has tried to teach Maynard to swim, without any luck. Slavery has "made a child of him," such that he is totally dependent on Hiram and helpless on his own. Hiram observes that being submerged in the **Goose** has made the reality of Maynard's childlike dependence on him inescapably obvious.

This passage introduces another crucial idea in the novel: although slavery is founded on the racist lie of black people's inferiority, it actually creates a situation in which white people are inferior in knowledge, talent, and skills to the enslaved. Totally dependent on Hiram, Maynard is helpless and rather pathetic in his own right.

Certain that he is about to die, Hiram thinks about his loved ones at **Lockless**: the elderly Thena and the young Sophia. He feels calm, convinced that he is "going to [his] reward." He thinks about Emma, who used to work in the kitchen. Hiram is overcome by a sense of peace, knowing that there really is a world that lies beyond "the Task." However, he is then brought back to the mortal world by Maynard's screams. Maynard disappears, and Hiram knows immediately that he is dead. Returning to his vision, he now sees Rose giving a young boy a shell necklace and kissing him before walking away. Crying, the boy approaches Hiram and offers him the necklace.

There is a great deal of spiritual, mystical, and supernatural imagery in the novel, and it is often left to the reader to decide what is really happening when this imagery is deployed. The function of these phantoms is therefore unclear—a possible interpretation is that Hiram is being welcomed into a heavenly afterlife by his loved ones, or that his life is flashing before his eyes simply because he thinks he is going to die.

CHAPTER 2

Like all enslaved people, Hiram has dreamed of escaping the plantation his whole life. However, he is unusual in that he "possesse[s] the means" to do so. He was a "strange," highly observant child, with an extraordinary gift of memory. Any information he learned, he remembered, no matter how complex, detailed, or trivial. However, the one thing he is not able to remember is Rose. She was taken when he was nine years old, but all his memories of her are "secondhand," as if he never knew her personally but only learned about her from other people's stories.

For Hiram, memory is simultaneously a superpower and a deficiency, a site of joy and a site of pain. Indeed, the book suggests that memory achieves its significance through these paradoxes. If it were only one or the other, it wouldn't be as meaningful.

When Hiram thinks back to the day that Rose was sold, he remembers "screams" and "pleading," as well as a "long trough of water." After Rose is taken, Hiram is seized by a new determination to escape. One Sunday in December, he awakes early. The Street is deserted, as everyone is inside, trying to keep warm. Hiram walks past the cabin belonging to Boss Harlan, a "low white" who works as the overseer on the plantation. He searches for signs that might lead him to Rose. He thinks again and again of the trough of water, and suddenly starts running as fast as he can go. He is overwhelmed by visions, and sees the blue light that will, many years later, appear by the bridge.

The Street is the part of Lockless plantation where the enslaved people live. The overseer is the person assigned to supervise work on the plantation, usually doing so in an extremely brutal manner. "Low white" is a category invented by Coates in this novel to describe white workers, many of whom are very poor and work in brutal conditions. However, they are not enslaved and have relative power over black people due to their race.

However, the blue light disappears, and Hiram finds himself back in the cabin where he woke up. When he tries to think of Rose, the memory of her dissolves into wisps. He falls asleep and wakes again realizing that he is now completely alone. He goes to collect the allocation of pork and corn he is given for the week, then gathers his clothes and marbles—his only possessions—and walks over to Thena's cabin. Although most people on the Street are sociable, Thena "ke[eps] to herself." Nowadays she is bitter and unfriendly, but Hiram has heard that in the past, she was a mother "not just to five children of her own but to all the children of the Street."

The detail of the marbles provides a heartbreaking reminder that Hiram is only a child. Not only is he already made to work, but—after his mother is seized and sold—he is left to fend for himself. It is striking that of all people to go to for shelter and support, Hiram chooses Thena. This indicates that he sees something beneath her meanness that others do not.

Now those children are gone. Hiram is unsure if showing up at Thena's house is a good idea, as there are others who are more likely to want to take him in. Yet he isn't put off by Thena's bitterness and aggression, because he sees that it comes from a place of pain. He reasons that "she [is] not the meanest woman at **Lockless**, but the most honest." After he knocks and gets no answer, Hiram enters the cabin and curls up in the loft. He wakes up to the smell of food and Thena telling him to come down to eat.

As an unusually perceptive child, Hiram seems to appreciate Thena's bitter demeanor as being more "honest" than those who act in a more cheerful manner despite the degradation around him. Hiram feels that he can trust Thena, and this inclination appears to be right.

It takes a year and a half of living with Thena for Hiram to understand the source of her pain. One night he hears her talking to someone named John in her sleep. Ever since Hiram moved in with her, Thena's "rages" have begun to subside. However, when she wakes and notices that Hiram was watching her dream, she furiously runs him out of the house. He runs to the cabin he used to share with Rose and waits on the steps until the Task begins for the day. He is now 11 and rather small, but still has to "work like a man." On a hot day like this, he and the other children are charged with bringing water to those who are tasking in the fields.

The Task is another term used by Coates in this novel as an alternative way to refer to the hierarchy of slavery. The Task refers both to slavery in general and to a specific unit of slave labor (hence Hiram waiting for the Task to begin). Enslaved people are referred to as the tasked, a term that highlights the torturously never-ending nature of their labor, as well as the fact that their whole existence is reduced to their ability to work for others' benefit.

At the end of the workday, Hiram does not at first go back to Thena's cabin. Then, when he does go, realizes that she has been waiting for him to come home to eat dinner. After they eat, Thena whispers to Hiram that her husband was known as Big John. He died of a fever, which should be a natural death, but in fact it was "murder." She explains that Big John was the driver assigned to watch over the tobacco fields. He didn't get the job for being cruel, but rather for being intelligent and skilled. She reflects that the white enslavers' "whole lives depended on him."

Thena's words that John's death from fever was "murder" illustrates an important point about the brutal impact of slavery. Enslaved people were forced to work in extremely difficult conditions, given hardly any rest, and denied proper medical care. As a result, even death from a seemingly natural cause can be viewed as a kind of murder.

Thena reminds Hiram that all the wealth of **Lockless** comes from the tobacco fields. John was favored by the white bosses, but he insisted that whatever extra provisions he was given were allocated to those who were struggling. She emphasizes that she loved John, and that after he died everything went "bad." Many others died of fever too, and Thena believes the issue was caused by the land rebelling against the perverse horrors of slavery. She says she remembers Rose and Emma, how they used to dance, and urges Hiram not to forget them, no matter how much it hurts.

As this passage emphasizes, Thena's bitterness is a form of wisdom. She has experienced the horrific reality of slavery for many years and understands it in ways that others are perhaps not able to. Now she passes on this knowledge to Hiram—and the fact that she emphasizes the importance of memory is especially important.

Thena then says that five of her own children were sold at the racetrack, too. She says she knows the other enslaved people in their community talk about how she is "broken," but that she thinks Hiram sought her out to take care of him for a reason. She says she can't take Rose's place as Hiram's mother, but that she appreciates that he chose her.

This passage introduces the ways in which enslaved people form new, improvised relationships in the wake of family separation.

Hiram's father, Howell Walker, is the master of **Lockless**. When Hiram occasionally sees him riding through the plantation on his horse, Howell tips his hat at him. Hiram knows that Howell sold Rose, yet Hiram cannot help but see him as an aspirational figure. Still young, he is only just beginning to understand the distinction between the Quality and the Tasked, and dreams about the life of "splendor and regale" that the Quality lead.

The fact that Howell even acknowledges Hiram is somewhat rare. Under slavery, it was common for enslavers to rape the enslaved, which of course often produced resulted in pregnancies. The children born from this rape were usually enslaved, because the law held that children inherited their mother's status.

One Sunday, Hiram is in the Street, performing a song where he sings both the call and response, taking turns to mimic the voices of the elders who have gathered around him. The elders are delighted by the performance, but Hiram is distracted by the arrival of Howell, who takes something from his hat and throws it toward his son. Hiram catches it one-handed. Howell, who is smiling, nods at Hiram and walks away. Back in Thena's cabin, Hiram permits himself to look at the object, and sees that it is a copper coin. He convinces himself that this is his "ticket out of the fields and off the Street."

Howell's unusually cordial treatment of Hiram should not be mistaken for kindness. While Howell might appear friendly, it is important not to forget that it is his decision to keep his own son enslaved. Moreover, the small gestures of kindness create a false hope in Hiram that he will one day be able to escape slavery, as shown by the way he reacts to receiving the coin from his father.

The next day, after dinner, Hiram peeks down from the loft to see Boss Harlan speaking with Thena. After he leaves, Thena tells Hiram that his life is about to "get more brutal," because he is being called to work in the house. She urges that Hiram must not forget her, and warns him that in the house, he will be under the constant surveillance of the white people. She tells him to remember that the white people aren't his family, and that she is more his mother than Howell will ever be his father.

Thena's reaction to this news is a little surprising. Usually, working in the house is seen as a relatively better position, because the labor is somewhat less physically intense and the treatment a little better. However, Thena emphasizes that the proximity to white people that comes from being in the house is dangerous—particularly for Hiram.

However, the next day when Hiram walks up to the house, he shudders with awe, feeling that the house belongs to him, that it is "[his] by blood." Howell's butler, Roscoe, leads Hiram and Thena down to the space in the basement where Hiram will sleep. When Roscoe takes him upstairs, Hiram is dazzled by the elegant furnishings and especially the books, although he is careful not to look at them too closely. Roscoe brings him into a room where Howell and a white boy around Hiram's age are waiting. Hiram knows instinctively that this is his brother. He touches the coin in his pocket.

Again, it is painful to witness the way in which Hiram has been infused with false hope about his future at Lockless. Of course, he cannot be blamed for wanting more for himself than the life of degradation and brutality he has been accorded. At the same time, it is hard not to wish that Hiram had some more of Thena's bitterness and less of his own naïve optimism in this moment.

CHAPTER 3

Like all enslaved people, Hiram wakes before sunrise. He spends the day helping others with a variety of jobs, going wherever he is needed. There are fewer enslaved people working in the house these days, indicating that even those in the house are at risk of being sent to Natchez. Four months after Hiram (now 13) started working in the house, Howell hosts a celebration to celebrate the fall harvest. He listens to Ella, the head cook, complain to Pete, another enslaved man working in the house, about the white people. She says, "They don't think about nothing and nobody [...] It's wrong."

As if being subjected to the daily horrors of slavery was not bad enough, enslaved people must endure an additional psychic trauma: the constant threat of being sold and having one's life be made even worse. The fact that being sold is worse than staying is true in two senses. Being sold means leaving behind loved ones, familiarity, and a sense of home; it also usually means going to the Deep South, where conditions are more brutal.

Pete notes that the problem is falling tobacco prices, which have caused the "old" slaveholding families to move south, to Natchez, Baton Rouge, or Tennessee. Those who remain are left on edge, not knowing what will happen next. The enslaved people in the house are tense all day, but by the time of the party they all put on fake smiles. Hiram observes the guests, including Maynard's tutor, Mr. Fields, and the women wearing extravagant clothes. The guests play cards, eat cake, and get drunk on cider.

Slavery involved horrifyingly intense physical labor, but also traumatizing emotional labor, too. No matter what suffering had been inflicted on the enslaved, if white people demanded they be cheerful or funny or entertaining, then this is what they had to do. The result was an intensification of already unbearable mental pain.

One of the women is Alice Caulley. Half of her family has moved to Kentucky, taking Pete's sister with them. Alice drunkenly slaps an enslaved man, demanding that he sing for them. Hiram thinks that it never takes too long for white people to get bored of pretending to be civilized and to slip back into this kind of behavior. Howell turns to Hiram, telling Alice that they "have something better than any Negro song." Hiram spots a deck of cards that Maynard uses in his lessons on a table. Each of the cards has a rhyme on it, which Hiram has memorized. Picking them up, he asks Alice to shuffle them.

This passage explores how enslaved people's talents, skills, and intelligence are stolen from them by white people who treat them as pets or accessories to be shown off to others. The fact that Howell does this to his own son is especially disturbing.

After glancing at the card, Hiram gives them to Alice to place face down in a mixed-up order. Each time she picks up a card to look at, he correctly recites the rhyme on the back. Alice, who was at first skeptical, laughs in delight. Once this game is done, Hiram makes all the guests line up and asks them questions about their lives. He then recites all the answers, adding "drama and embellishment." Everyone is smiling in astonishment, even the enslaved servers—all except Mr. Fields.

The way Hiram interacts with the guests is at times almost as if he is a guest himself—yet in reality, he is doing everything in service of them and is not even perceived as fully human by them. Despite his close proximity to these men and women of Quality (the word Coates uses for upper-class and/or slaveholding white people), he will never be seen as their equal.

Hiram and the other enslaved people in the house only get a few hours' sleep, having to rise again to prepare breakfast for the guests. In the morning, Hiram runs into Howell, who smiles at him. Behind him, Maynard sits at a writing desk, accompanied by Mr. Fields. Howell asks that Hiram spend some time with Mr. Fields, and Hiram politely agrees. Howell leaves, taking Maynard with him. Once they are alone, Mr. Fields compliments Hiram on the "trick" he performed the previous evening. He makes Hiram do a series of similar memory challenges, which Hiram completes with perfect accuracy.

It is important to remember that during slavery, enslaved people were usually banned from learning to read and write. Indeed, in some circumstances, literacy was punishable by beatings, torture, or even death. The fact that Howell wants Hiram to spend time with Mr. Fields is thus a little suspicious. Whatever Hiram might learn from Mr. Fields could ultimately be used against him.

Eventually, Mr. Fields shows Hiram a drawing of a bridge, then asks him to draw it from memory. Hiram does so, making a show of hesitancy and struggle even though the task is easy for him. As he completes the drawing, Mr. Fields is astonished, and walks out of the room. Howell comes in and asks if Hiram would like to work for Mr. Fields. After another pretend show of hesitancy, Hiram agrees.

Enslaved people were forced to master the art of putting white people at ease and never making them feel threatened. Here, Hiram does this by pretending to find these tasks more difficult than he actually does. If he treated them as easy, Mr. Fields might feel insulted and retaliate.

Mr. Fields begins tutoring Hiram, teaching him literacy and math, along with rhetorical skills. Hiram is thrilled by the new worlds this opens to him. He can tell that Mr. Fields prefers to teach him than Maynard, who is unintelligent and rude, constantly embarrassing himself and Howell in front of company. He remembers Thena's insistence that Howell is not his "family," but also cannot help but fantasize that he truly belongs at **Lockless**, and that he will one day inherit the property. Yet Hiram is also haunted by stories of enslaved people sold south, and troubled by the ongoing reports he hears from the white people about falling tobacco prices.

Bear in mind that Hiram's treatment here is very far from what enslaved people usually endured, although it was not completely unheard of for enslaved people to be taught certain skills (including literacy) if this could be of use to their enslavers. In general, literacy was seen as a highly dangerous skill for enslaved people to have, because it encouraged communication, knowledge of the outside world, and therefore rebellion.

Pete comments that white people used to be embarrassed when they sold enslaved people, and Ella responds that this was only because business was good back then. A week later, Ella herself is sold. Hiram continues to feel both "horrified" and envious of the white people at **Lockless**. From working there, Hiram has come to learn just how dependent the functioning of the house is on enslaved labor which is, wherever possible, carefully kept hidden from view. On the rare occasions when the enslaved people are visible, they are dressed in such a way as to hide the reality of their condition, making them seem like "mystical ornaments."

This passage explores the complicated, hypocritical, and disingenuous psychology of white enslavers. Pete seems to believe that enslavers' morals have degraded, as there was previously a time when they would have been embarrassed to sell people off. However, Ella's disagreement suggests that any semblance of morality enslavers claim to have is always an illusion. The truth is that they act in the interests of themselves and their profits.

Meanwhile, although Hiram's intelligence is treated as exceptional, he can see signs of "genius" among all the enslaved people living at **Lockless**. A year after he first starts studying with Mr. Fields, Hiram goes to his lesson to find Howell there, saying, "It's time." He explains that he's long recognized that Hiram had a "particular talent," and that he is appointing Hiram to be Maynard's personal manservant. Howell notes that most enslavers would sell Hiram for a huge sum of money, commenting, "Nothing more valuable than a colored with some brains in him." However, Howell is loyal to Virginia, and thinks it will be an "honor" for Hiram to serve his brother.

Once again, Hiram's hopes are raised only to be cruelly dashed. Given the special recognition and education he has received, one might expect that he was being prepared for an important role. However, it turns out this role was actually the degrading position of being the personal manservant of his foolish brother. The fact that Howell frames this as an "honor" is extra insulting.

Hiram spends the next seven years working as Maynard's manservant. Strangely, it takes time for him to see this setup as the "insult" it is. The narrative jumps forward to when Hiram is 19, the day before the "fateful race-day." He is standing in Howell's study, reading a journal. He thinks about Maynard, who drinks too much, gambles, gets into fights, and spends exorbitant amounts on sex workers. Hiram has heard Maynard's relatives lament his existence behind his back, predicting that he will cause the downfall of **Lockless**.

The fact that Maynard will one be entrusted with the running of Lockless despite the fact that everyone believes he will destroy it highlights the irrationality of white supremacy. Hiram would clearly be a better candidate for running the plantation than his brother—yet enslavers would rather see their own property destroyed than placed under the control of a black man.

Howell, meanwhile, has managed to find hope in the form of Corrine Quinn, "perhaps the wealthiest woman in all of Elm County," who he hopes will become Maynard's wife. Although Corrine is "superior to Maynard in every way," she still needs him; her parents are dead and social norms dictate that she must have a husband to help her manage her enormous inheritance.

The phrase "superior to Maynard in every way" draws a parallel between Corrine and Hiram. Both of them are tied to a foolish, inferior white man because of structural oppression (in one case based on race, the other on gender).

Hiram listens to Howell and Maynard discuss a local white man who recently went outside in a blizzard and froze to death. Howell mentions a family who recently took all the enslaved people on their estate to Baltimore and granted them their freedom. Ever since, the family have been struggling to cope. Howell calls Hiram inside, giving him the same forced half-smile he always does. Hiram is sure that Howell thinks of himself as a "reflective," intellectual man, but really this is not the case. Now 70 years old, Howell looks like what he is: the last member of a dying class.

Howell's words reveal something very telling about white people's reasoning in a moment of shifting attitudes toward slavery. While some white people might be sympathetic to abolition (such as the family who freed the enslaved people on their estate), one of many reasons why they will not actually take steps toward it is because they have become too dependent on the enslaved to consider it.

Maynard discusses the races taking place the next day. He is determined to prove himself, even though Howell suggests that it might be best for him not to go at all. Maynard leaves, and Howell asks Hiram to sit with him by the fire for a while. This is a highly unusual request for a white man to ask of an enslaved person, but is somewhat typical of Howell and Hiram's relationship. By this point Howell has sold off so many of the enslaved workers at **Lockless** that the house has a deserted feel. Now, Howell urges Hiram to take good care of Maynard, and expresses regret at how little he has been "permitted" to give Hiram, despite his affection for him. He acknowledges that the system is unjust.

This passage explores how slavery led white people to perform acts of self-sabotage in the name of upholding a racist, unjust, and nonsensical system. Howell blames this system for forcing him to do things he doesn't want to do, including selling off enslaved people and not giving Hiram the inheritance he is owed. Yet the reality is that of anyone introduced in the novel up to this point, Howell has the most power by far. He cannot blame the system for dictating his decisions.

Howell also tells Hiram how terrible it has been to watch "[his] people" be taken off South. Again, he insists that Hiram take good care of Maynard, and Hiram promises that he will. After Howell leaves, Hiram reflects that although any enslaved person would gladly be in his position, there is something particularly difficult about being in such close proximity to the Quality and seeing the injustice so clearly as a result. That night, Hiram dreams that all the enslaved people at **Lockless** are extremely old and standing in the tobacco field. They are chained to Maynard, who is only a baby and doesn't notice the presence of the Tasked. Everyone disappears but Hiram and Maynard, then Maynard and the field dissolve too, and the only thing left is the night sky and the North Star.

Hiram's dream is a fairly obvious representation of the anxiety, resentment, and anger caused by the injustice of life as an enslaved person at Lockless. Yet the surprise appearance of the North Star at the end of the dream indicates that all hope may not be lost. The North Star was an important way in which people who escaped slavery helped navigate themselves. It therefore became a symbol of rebellion, freedom, and hope.

CHAPTER 4

Hiram wakes from his dream shaking and cannot fall back asleep. He gets some water from the well and thinks about all the enslaved people chained to the clueless Maynard. At 19, he should be thinking about finding a wife, but has seen too much of the horrific trauma of separation in order for this to be appealing. He observes that "families formed in the shadow [...] turned to dust with the white wave of a hand." Walking from his room, he passes the room belonging to Sophia, who is sitting with her lantern on.

Family separation doesn't just destroy existing families. As Hiram shows here, it also puts enslaved people off of even forming loving and familial connections with others in the first place, because the risk of pain caused by separation is too much to bear.

Sophia is a young woman who does not seem to task, though this is because she "belong[s]" to Nathaniel Walker, Howell's brother. Every weekend Hiram drives Sophia to Nathaniel's house, then picks her up to bring her back to Lockless. Although this is a very normal relationship under slavery, Nathaniel cannot make peace with it, which is why he insists that Sophia doesn't live on his property. She dresses "like a lady of Quality" when she goes to see him, but still uses the back entrance. Nathaniel also keeps an eye on enslaved men who might be interested in her, but this hasn't dissuaded Hiram.

The systemic rape of black women by white men was a key part of slavery. It took many forms, including the one described here, wherein an enslaved woman was forced to act as the "concubine" or "mistress" of an enslaver. Calling women like Sophia a "slave mistress" or "concubine," however, can risk obscuring the reality that this was a relation of institutionalized rape.

Seeming a little dazed, Sophia says that she had already imagined Hiram coming to say goodbye to her before race-day, and even heard the conversation in her head. Hiram is lost for words. When she asks him how she looks that day, he replies, "Not so bad, if I do say." After bidding her goodbye and walking away, Hiram thinks about how slavery not only robs him of his inheritance and the products of his labor, but even of his own desires.

The contradiction between the resistance Hiram expressed at the beginning of the chapter to finding a wife and his obvious feelings for Sophia prove his point: slavery alienates the enslaved from their own desires.

As Hiram drives Maynard to the races, Maynard talks the whole way. All the men and women of Quality are there, the men looking smart and the women glamorous. Hiram sees a few people he recognizes, including Mr. Fields, who tips his hat at him. Hiram feels bad for Maynard, who so obviously does not fit into this elegant world. Maynard spots Adelaide Jones, a woman he once unsuccessfully pursued and greets her. Hiram watches as Maynard drones on while Adelaide smiles politely in response. Both Hiram and Maynard then see Corrine Quinn, standing in the ladies' section.

It is remarkable that, despite the system of brutal degradation to which Maynard subjects him, Hiram still has a capacity for empathy with his brother. Indeed, despite Hiram's own degraded social status, he manages to pity Maynard for all the ways in which he fails to live up to society's image of a respectable gentleman.

Maynard gazes at Corrine, but then goes to stand among the low whites. Hiram is always astonished by the position of the low whites in society. They accept horrific degradation at the hands of the Quality just so they can in turn oppress and degrade the Tasked. Hiram, meanwhile, goes to join the black people, some of whom are enslaved and some free. He nods to Corrine's servant Hawkins, who has a "cold" and intimidating manner. Once the races begin and Maynard's horse, Diamond, wins, he screams in delight, embracing everyone around him. By the end of the day, Maynard remains ecstatic, shouting, "I told them all!"

The brief discussion of low whites in this passage is key. In North America, whiteness was a social category invented during slavery in order to prevent solidarity forming between black people and what Coates calls "low whites." Low whites were often desperately poor and were forced to engage in brutal, dehumanizing labor. Yet by offering them the (often largely symbolic power) of whiteness, the overall hierarchy was preserved.

Thinking of Howell's insistence that Hiram take care of Maynard, Hiram tries to lead them home, but Maynard insists on staying. Quickly dissatisfied with his gloating, Maynard makes Hiram take him to a brothel and collect him in an hour. While he is waiting, Hiram thinks about Sophia. He is infatuated with her, and thinks that although she doesn't love him now, she might "in a world beyond the Task." Given the state of Virginia, it would no longer be possible for Hiram to buy his freedom. Meanwhile, the possibility of running away is "unthinkable." He has never known anyone who has successfully escaped.

Compared to Maynard's rather vulgar attitude toward women, Hiram's love for Sophia is pure. However, at the same time, slavery inherently corrupts what should be the straightforwardly positive, respectful feelings he has for her. Even the question of whether she loves him in return cannot be properly answered while they are both enslaved.

Georgie Parks is a highly respected free black man who, like Big John, had a natural understanding of agriculture. There is a rumor that he is connected to the Underground, "a secret society of colored men [who] had built their own separate world deep in the Virginia swamps." Suddenly, a fight breaks out among a group of white people in the town square. Hiram knows that he could get into trouble just by being there, so walks over to the "free colored" part of town. This area begins at Ryland's Jail, which is solely used to imprison enslaved people who have either tried to run away or are about to be sold.

Readers will likely recognize that "the Underground" refers to the Underground Railroad, the network of safehouses and "agents" that helped enslaved people escape to freedom in the North. It is clear from this passage that although Hiram has heard of the Underground Railroad, he doesn't really know what it is, leading him to a mistaken belief that it is an actual world of rebels living in the swamps.

At Georgie's house, Hiram is greeted warmly by Georgie and his wife, Amber. Their newborn son is lying in a cot. Stepping out into Georgie's garden, Hiram hands his friend a wooden horse he's carved for the baby. Amber brings them plates of food before returning inside. Hiram asks how he felt when Georgie walked off of **Lockless** after buying his freedom, and Georgie replies, "Like a man," adding, "Which is not to say I wasn't one before, but I had never truly felt it." Georgie then tells Hiram that all the men used to be in love with Rose. He reminisces about watching Emma and Rose **water dance**.

Hiram's own family may have been destroyed by slavery, but he maintains touching connections to other families that remain intact, such as Georgie's. Georgie's life represents the simple dream of freedom: the ability to live with dignity, on one's own terms, with the people one loves. The grim reality is that even this basic dream is withheld from enslaved people.

When Hiram comments that Georgie is now "out" of slavery, Georgie replies that no one really gets out, although he is glad that he is not captive at **Lockless** anymore. As Hiram gets ready to go, he tells Georgie that he has begun to feel that he has to get out himself. Too many people are being sold down to Natchez, the soil in Virginia is dead, and the white people who remain behave with erratic carelessness. He then says that he believes Georgie is connected with the Underground Railroad. Georgie tells Hiram to go home, insisting that he must choose to be satisfied with what he has.

Georgie crushes Hiram's optimism twice in this passage—first, when he says that no one ever truly escapes slavery, and second, when he tells Hiram to forget about his dream of getting out. Is Georgie trying to protect Hiram from the risk of trying to leave—or is his behavior grounded in more selfish motives?

Hiram leaves, but remains convinced that Georgie is testing him. As he walks through town, he sees items of clothing strewn about, and a man of Quality lying face down in a pile of manure. He sees Maynard, very drunk and standing outside the brothel with a fancy girl. Next to him is Hawkins. Maynard warns him not to tell Corrine about the fancy, and Hawkins assures him he won't. As Hiram drives them home, he becomes convinced that as soon as Howell dies, Maynard will sell him, and he will end up in Natchez. At this point they reach the bridge, and Hiram has the vision of Rose. He is not sure how exactly, but it was this memory that facilitated his Conduction.

The chaotic, unpredictable, and terrifying nature of life under slavery emerges with stark clarity in this passage. Despite being an intelligent and level-headed person, Hiram's fate is not in his own control but rather subject to the whims of men who are not only more foolish than him, but only care about their self-interest.

CHAPTER 5

Hiram is in the water, seeing the blue light and being "guided by [his] dancing mother," and then suddenly is standing in a field. He recognizes the part of **Lockless** where he stands without understanding how he got there. Hiram spends three days unconscious with a fever before he awakes, paralyzed, in a sunny room. Sophia is sitting near him, humming a song and knitting. Over time, Hiram moves his body again, and begins to remember what happened with the bridge and the water. When he tries to speak to Sophia, she tells him not to, warning, "You may think yourself out of the **Goose**, but the Goose ain't yet out of you."

Hiram's brush with death has profound symbolic importance. Indeed, it can even be read as a kind of resurrection. This interpretation is supported by the fact that Hiram is unconscious for three days, which is the length of time between Jesus's death and resurrection according to the New Testament. Furthermore, the fact that Hiram was submerged in water further links this experience to rebirth through baptism.

Hiram falls back asleep and dreams that he is in the water, still trying to save Maynard, who is drowning. When he next awakes, Howell is standing before him, sobbing. Howell tells Hiram that Maynard is dead, squeezing Hiram's shoulder as he does so. He explains that they have not been able to find Maynard's body, and laments that Maynard was the only memory he had of his dead wife. He tells Hiram that Maynard loved him, and that he suspects Maynard sacrificed his own life so that Hiram could survive. Hiram is astonished that Howell believes this. He reflects on the horrific contradictions of Virginia, a place "where a man could profess his love for you one moment and sell you off the next."

It is significant that Hiram doesn't feel anger toward Howell's hypocrisy so much as bewilderment. He simply cannot fathom how Howell holds such contradictory thoughts in his head, or how he is capable of thinking as delusional as the belief that Maynard "loved" Hiram and would have sacrificed his life in order to save him. Bizarre as it may seem, this kind of paradoxical, delusional thinking was what defined the mindset of many enslavers.

After speaking with Howell, Hiram finds Sophia talking to Thena, who greets him gruffly. He embraces Thena, and although she walks away from the hug without a word, Sophia assures him that Thena knows she loves him. She jokes that it was hard for her to cope with Hiram's brush with death, and she doesn't even "like [him], much less love [him]." During a pause in their conversation, Hiram invites Sophia to his room. He reaches into his pocket to rub the coin but realizes that it's not there. Sophia tells him that it was Hawkins who saw him drowning in the **Goose**, which led to his rescue.

Sophia is constantly teasing Hiram by pretending not to like him, but her behavior indicates that this does not accurately represent the truth of her feelings. Hiram, however, seems to have taken her teasing at face value, and this is why he believes that she doesn't love him.

Later that evening, Hiram walks out of the house, passing Pete, who greets him warmly, yet whose words barely register. Hiram feels sure that the experience of being in the field near **Lockless** was real. He finds Sophia sitting by the grass, and when she speaks to him in the dazed voice she sometimes has, he offers to leave her alone. However, she explains that she has a habit of getting lost in thought and forgetting where she is. They walk together, and Sophia confesses that she used to have "big dumb dreams," which she's now let go. When Hiram asks what these dreams were, she simply replies, "breathing."

Both Hiram and Sophia have found ways to travel outside the physical limitations imposed on them by slavery. Hiram has done so via Conduction, an as yet largely unexplained phenomenon that has something to do with the fact that he was mysteriously able to escape the Goose (and show up in an entirely different field). Sophia, meanwhile, induces out-of-body experiences through the power of thought alone.

Sophia tells Hiram that she's from Carolina, and that she had family down there, and a man, with whom she used to dance. When Hiram says he didn't inherit a talent for dance, Sophia replies that there is no need for talent; the point of dancing is just to do it. She observes that Hiram reminds her of her man, whose name was Mercury. Like Hiram, he was quiet and observant. Sophia suddenly gets self-conscious about telling Hiram so much about herself, but he is used to it—people are always telling him their stories. The next morning, Hiram walks out into the field and sees something glinting, which he immediately realizes is his coin. It becomes clear that this is his ticket into "the Realm—but not the Realm [he'd] long thought."

As is obvious by now, the past plays a vitally important role in the novel. Indeed, in this passage alone, different personal histories—taking the form of memories, anecdotes, and mementos—are braided together to provide a rich but mysterious backdrop to the action taking place in the present. While the past is always prominent, its meaning is not necessarily clear, and it is up to the characters to decode this meaning themselves.

CHAPTER 6

Hiram realizes that if the coin is there, then he really must have been in the field. Feeling faint, he closes his eyes and opens them to see Thena there. She ushers him back to the house, telling him he needs to get rest. The next day, Roscoe urges Hiram to rest while he can, as soon he will be put back to hard work again. However, Hiram is tormented by his thoughts, and feels that working will be "the only escape." He sees Corrine Quinn's carriage coming up the road. Ever since Maynard's death, Corrine has been regularly visiting Howell to lead him in prayer.

It is important not to interpret this passage as implying that enslaved people enjoyed the labor they were forced to do, or that they would have chosen to do it voluntarily. Rather, Hiram's decision to work even when he is being told to rest conveys the profound psychic disturbances he is experiencing. His life has been thrown upside down, leaving him desperately clinging to anything familiar.

Hiram goes to the shed where Howell keeps furniture in need of restoration and gets to work on a mahogany highboy. Thena sees him and tries to order him back to bed, but Hiram ignores her. Working on the highboy brings him a profound feeling of peace. The next morning, he is returning to continue his work when he runs into Hawkins, who tells him that Corrine would like to speak with him. Hiram finds Corrine speaking with Howell, fondly sharing memories of Maynard, their hands clasped together. When Hiram enters, Howell exists, leaving him with Corrine and her two servants, Hawkins and Amy.

It is also significant to note that Hiram isn't doing the kind of work enslaved people are usually assigned. Rather, in devoting himself to antiques restoration, he is able to use his skills, intelligence, and creativity. Furthermore, the fact that no one has asked him to do this means that he can almost pretend that he is not doing it for someone else's benefit, but for himself (even though this is not actually true).

Hiram thanks Hawkins for saving his life, and Hawkins replies that it was Hiram who got himself out of the river—Hawkins found him lying on the grass. Corrine notes that they were all supposed to be "family," and that she doesn't see why that should not still happen despite Maynard's death. She says she's heard that Hiram is a "genius," but understands that his "genius must be kept hidden." This surprises Hiram, who is not used to the Quality speaking like this. When Hiram attempts to make a polite comment about Maynard, Corrine interrupts him, saying that she knows he was a "buffoon" but that she loved him anyway.

In one sense, Corrine is surprisingly honest—the most honest a person of Quality has been thus far in the novel. At the same time, she still employs euphemisms, including one of the most common euphemism that existed under slavery: the idea that the enslaved and their enslavers were "family." This sinister metaphor aimed to hide the reality of bondage, exploitation, and ownership under a loving, consensual façade.

Corrine observes that Hiram had been Maynard's "right arm," and that following Maynard's death he probably doesn't know what to do with himself. She asks about Maynard's death, and Hiram tells her that Maynard saved him, hoping that it will provide her some relief. Corrine thanks him for telling her this. She then asks what Hiram is going to do now that he will no longer be working personally for Maynard, and Hiram replies, "I go where I am called." Corrine indicates that she might like him to work for her. He is forced to confront his own status as property and worries that this means he will have to leave **Lockless**, the only home he's ever had.

Hiram's fears about leaving Lockless reveal the peculiar position that enslaved people are put in. The plantation has hardly been a pleasant place to grow up and is a site of many major traumas for Hiram. Yet, because it is the only home he's even known, he still retains an attachment to it. Indeed, part of the horror of slavery was knowing that as bad as things were in a certain place, there was always a risk of being sold and moved somewhere even worse.

Maynard's body is never found. The enslaved people at **Lockless** work hard restoring the house in preparation for Christmas and the arrival of the extended Walker family. Hiram greets the guests, pleased to see black people who remember him from childhood and who knew Rose. On Christmas Day, the Tasked divide themselves so that half work on preparing a feast for the white people, and the other half on making the feast that will take place on the Street. Sitting around a bonfire, Hiram's childhood friend Conway observes how in death, Maynard is being portrayed as a saint—a total contrast to how he was perceived when he was alive.

As this passage shows, holidays like Christmas were important to enslaved people just as they were to enslavers. Yet for the enslaved, preparations and the celebration itself had to be squeezed into pockets of time stolen away from the labor done to benefit enslavers. Enslaved people almost never had the luxury of getting to do things or themselves.

Thena observes that Howell's family members are "flattering" him regarding Maynard because they want to inherit his land when he dies. She then walks off, and Hiram follows her. However, sensing that she wants to be alone, he leaves her again. Back at the bonfire, Conway's sister Kat is sharing a story about how Hiram's grandmother, Santi Bess, walked into the **Goose**, taking 48 enslaved people with her. Georgie dismisses the story as nonsense, protesting that it is told and re-told every year. According to the myth, Santi Bess transported herself and the 48 others back to Africa through the water. Hiram reflects that the idea is "preposterous."

The story of Santi Bess is an important turning point in the novel. Up until now, a few seemingly supernatural events have occurred, but these could easily be dismissed as hallucinations or other misinterpretations of reality. Although Hiram is dismissive of the idea that Santi Bess could pull of such an extraordinary feat, the fact that the story is told suggests that in the world of the novel, the range of possibilities may be greater than it first appears.

Though Hiram agrees with Georgie, others around them are annoyed with how sure of his own correctness Georgie seems to be. The conversation moves on; before long people start playing music, and Sophia gets up to **water dance**. Many others dance as well, but Hiram keeps his eyes on Sophia. Seeing him, she walks over and gives him the jar to drink. He is shocked to find it is ale—he assumed it was water—but after she gently teases him, he drinks the whole thing. Sophia suggests they go on a walk together. They go to a gazebo near the ice-house and sit, drinking more ale until they both feel drunk.

Sophia's behavior here indicates that Hiram is wrong to assume she has no feelings about him whatsoever. The fact that she water dances connects her to Rose and Emma, suggesting that Sophia's arrival in Hiram's life may fill a void that has been there since Hiram's mother and aunt were sold. Indeed, simply by watching Sophia water dance, Hiram is connected to the past in a vitally important way.

Hiram and Sophia discuss Thena, and Sophia observes that she's been "soft" with Hiram, which is surprising. Hiram feels full of desire for Sophia. He worries that Corrine may soon take him away from **Lockless**. He and Sophia link arms, and they gaze up at the starry sky together.

This moment of tenderness is a heartbreaking reminder that any intimacy formed between enslaved people was at constant risk of being destroyed by forced separation.

CHAPTER 7

The new year comes, and Hiram feels sure that his "days at **Lockless** [are] numbered." Approving of the job Hiram did on the highboy, Howell sets him to work restoring more pieces of furniture. The documents of sale that accompany the furniture give Hiram insight into his own ancestry, to a heritage that will never truly be his. He keeps thinking about Georgie and "what he might know." One Friday, Hiram drives Sophia to Nathaniel's house as usual. Sophia used to work as a maid to Nathaniel's wife, Helen. She tells Hiram that she and Helen were friends, and that she "loved her."

This passage contains two examples of the unreciprocated attachment enslaved people can end up feeling for enslavers. In the first instance, Hiram is interested in his familial heritage, even though this is a heritage denied to him by his race and slave status. In the second, Sophia expresses love for Helen, despite the fact that Helen was part of a system that holds her in bondage and subjected her to brutal sexual violence.

Sophia and Helen grew up together and were best friends as children. Hiram thinks about how cruel it is to raise children as equals against the backdrop of slavery. Sophia explains that when Helen died in childbirth, she felt overcome with guilt. She still sees Helen in her dreams, and laments that once she gets a bit older, Nathaniel will discard her for a younger black woman who he will also treat like "jewelry." With great sadness, she ponders over what it means to have a child who will be born into slavery.

This passage further explores all the ways in which slavery corrupts relations between people (whether childhood friendship or marriage). The novel shows that by participating in a system that dehumanizes others, enslavers render themselves unable to have authentic, loving relationships—even with one another.

Sophia explains that she is telling Hiram this because he knows about the wider world, and because something mysterious happened that enabled him to survive his fall into the **Goose**. Their conversation is interrupted by their arrival at Nathaniel's house. As Hiram watches Sophia go inside, he knows that they must escape. Driving away, he feels more determined than ever to speak to Georgie. He understands that Georgie fears for him, particularly after having seen so many people be caught and sent to Natchez, yet he is determined to see him anyway.

The desperation Hiram feels in this passage is understandable. Sophia is forced to endure regular rape at the hands of Nathaniel and is increasingly coming to rely on Hiram as a source of strength and knowledge about the world. It is clear that, on some level, she has invested hope that he will be able to save them somehow, and he wants to live up to this belief.

The next day, Hiram goes to see Georgie, who has a grave air about him. Georgie emphasizes that he likes and admires Hiram, considering him a highly intelligent, respectable man. For this reason, he is baffled by the way Hiram is "looking for trouble." He tells Hiram to "Go home. And get a wife. And get happy." Hiram says that he is determined to escape and bring someone with him, Georgie warns him that taking "Nathaniel Walker's girl" is a highly dangerous move. Hiram denies this, and gets increasingly angry as Georgie insists that Sophia, Hiram, and every enslaved person they know belongs to white people, urging Hiram to accept this fact. Hiram insists that he is going. Reluctantly, Georgie says to meet him in the same spot in one week.

Despite being free while Hiram is still enslaved, it is Georgie who seems to subscribe to conventional ways of thinking far more than Hiram. Perhaps Georgie has simply seen enough of the brutality and horror inflicted on those to try to rebel to want to protect Hiram from this. At the same time, his words leave open the possibility that he has truly been indoctrinated by the system of slavery and believes that it is better to accept one's lot in life, even if this lot is a lifetime of enslavement.

Leaving his meeting with Georgie, Hiram passes Amy and Hawkins. Hawkins stops him, asking what brings him to town and then inquiring if he was going to see Georgie. Hiram is suspicious, and Hawkins says he doesn't mean to pry. At that moment Hiram spots Mr. Fields walking over as if coming to meet Amy. Seeing Hiram, it seems as if Mr. Fields would rather change direction and avoid the encounter, but instead he tips his hat in greeting.

There is something mysterious and suspicious about Corrine, Amy, Hawkins, and Mr. Fields. They are all presented as intelligent people, and it seems that they are up to something below the surface of their seemingly ordinary behavior.

Hiram suspects that Hawkins has been lying about here he found him after he almost drowned, and that he has somehow caught Hawkins in that lie. He tips his hat at Hawkins, Amy, and Mr. Fields and walks off. Although he doesn't know it at the time, the fact that these two enslaved people are meeting with "a learned man of the North" should prompt scrutiny. The next day, when Hiram is on his way to Nathaniel's estate to collect Sophia, he is stopped by "Ryland's Hounds," slavecatchers looking for runaways. Although he has his proper documentation, the encounter makes him nervous, because in his heart he has already decided to leave. Hiram and Sophia ride in silence, but when they get back to **Lockless**, she tells him she has to escape. Hiram replies, "Then let's get out."

"Ryland's Hounds" is a term used throughout the novel to describe slavecatchers (both in Elm County and beyond). They are named after Ryland, the man who controls the jail where runaways are imprisoned, and who appears more as a mythical figure representing the brutal authority of the law than an actual character. Slavecatchers were a pervasive feature of the South (and, to a lesser extent, the North) during this period. They were one of the biggest reasons why escape was so challenging.

CHAPTER 8

Hiram knows that his fate is tied up with the Virginia families who have grown wealthy from slavery. He knows that his genius won't "save" him, adding, "my genius would only make me a more valuable commodity." Later in the week after they agree to escape together, Sophia comes to see Hiram. She compliments him on the antiques restoration he's been doing. She asks if they can discuss their plan for escape further, and they agree to meet in an hour. While Hiram waits for the meeting, he feels removed from the physical reality around him. Although his body remains at **Lockless**, his heart is already free.

The fact that Hiram chooses to do antiques restoration during this period is poignant. Not only does this task allow him to use his talent, intelligence, and creativity, it also connects him to the past. Indeed, the purpose of antiques restoration is to ensure that an old object retains functionality and longevity while also remaining true to its original form.

When Hiram meets Sophia, he explains that he imagines Georgie can't really talk about what he knows about escaping, but that he trusts him. Hiram mentions the Underground, which he believes is another world in the swamps where black people can live free. Sophia mentions that she just needs help getting out, and then she can take care of herself. Noticing Hiram's reaction, she explains that she won't get free only to be attached to Hiram like she's attached to Nathaniel. To her, that isn't freedom. Hiram admits that he hopes one day they will be together, but that he wants it to be her choice.

It is obvious from this passage that Coates is playing close attention to the gender politics that existed in this period of time in order to evoke the particular perspective of a woman like Sophia, who is chained to her enslaver in a system of sexual bondage. The book suggests that this experience is so harrowing that it puts her off the idea of being married at all, even if it occurs in a nonviolent, consensual way.

Hiram talks about his dreams of freedom, and he and Sophia spend a while in silent contemplation. Then Sophia leaves and Hiram runs into Thena. He suddenly feels very different from Thena and the other older people at **Lockless**, who have permanently given up any hope of freedom. Thena follows him back to his quarters and asks if he's still sick, because she can't understand why else he would be walking around with "Nathaniel Walker's girl." An argument ensues, and Hiram regrets the furious glare he directs at her. Thena warns Hiram that he will come to regret his actions, but in this moment, nothing can distract him from his fixation on seeking freedom.

Hiram's assumption that Thena and the other older people at Lockless have given up on freedom should perhaps be met with some scrutiny. Of course, in order to survive a lifetime of enslavement, it is likely necessary to learn to control the yearning for freedom that all enslaved people naturally have. Yet Hiram's assumption that he is different due to the intensity of his desire for freedom may be misguided and naïve.

The day finally comes when Hiram is due to meet Georgie. In the morning he passes Pete, seeing him for the last time ever. He watches Thena doing laundry, and feels angry and indignant toward her. He watches the sun rise over **Lockless** and thinks about the unknown adventure lying before him. He speaks briefly with Howell, who has assigned him to start working in the kitchen starting the next day, and thus tells Hiram that he has "One last day of freedom." Hiram retreats to his quarters.

There is an obvious irony in Howell's use of the phrase "one last day of freedom." It is absurd to use the word freedom to describe any aspect of life as an enslaved person, even if that person has had a break from forced labor like Hiram. As the book has shown, slavery denies a person freedom in a far more holistic, totalizing manner than simply by forcing them to work.

When the evening finally comes, Hiram walks with Sophia to meet Georgie. They discuss what they are going to do when they get to the Underground, and joke about wanting to get away from each other. As they walk, the hear the sounds of footsteps and conversation; Georgie's voice is among the chorus. Hiram sees Georgie smiling. Five white men are with him, one of whom is holding a rope. Sophia moans, "No, no, no," and the white men congratulate Georgie for what he has done.

Georgie's betrayal highlights an uncomfortable reality about slavery: there always existed black people who collaborated with white enslavers to harm other black people. There are many reasons why people did this, and many were more or less forced into this position. At the same time, this does not mean Georgie's actions should be excused.

CHAPTER 9

The white men are Ryland's Hounds. Having tied Hiram and Sophia up with the rope, they march them to the jail at gunpoint. Here, they are chained by the neck, wrists, and ankles. Hiram apologizes to Sophia, but she says nothing. His despair over what has happened is so intense that he wishes he had some means of killing himself. With difficulty, Sophia drags herself closer to Hiram. She gives him a "tender" look, but then turns her gaze to look out toward Freetown. Hiram can tell that she dreams of killing herself in this moment too. She leans against him, and he is relieved by the warmth of her body.

The fact that Hiram and Sophia manage to find a moment of tender intimacy in the midst of a scene of abject misery is poignant. Indeed, it highlights one of the novel's main messages: that even in situations of utter degradation and brutality, enslaved people never lost the sense of their own humanity expressed by loving one another.

CHAPTER 10

The next day, Sophia is taken away, though Hiram doesn't know where. She may have been returned to Nathaniel, sent to Natchez, or sold into "the fancy trade." He remembers the hatred of Georgie that radiated from Sophia, a hatred he also feels himself. In jail, Hiram is forced to exercise and wash every day, then taken out to be displayed to Natchez slave traders. These are white men who come from low class backgrounds yet who have grown wealthy from slavery and tend to have vulgar mannerisms. They take sadistic pleasure in invasively probing Hiram's body, demonstrating the total power they have over him.

As Hiram pointed out earlier in the novel, the position he occupied at Lockless would be seen as comparatively enviable by almost all enslaved people. Although he was still made to suffer many of the humiliations and brutalities of slavery, he at least had relative privileges such as his lessons with Mr. Fields and the fact that he worked in the house, rather than the field. It is almost a guarantee that wherever he is sold will be significantly worse.

Hiram shares a jail cell with others, one of whom is a boy of no more than 12 who cries at night. The boy's mother comes to visit, and from her clothes Hiram guesses that she is free. During her visits they sit silently, holding hands through the bars. Hiram finds the scene "achingly familiar." The other person in the cell is an old man who, because of his age, is not monetarily valuable and is thus subjected to horrifying treatment. The prison guards make him do humiliating performances for them and whip or beat him. Unable to help the man, Hiram feels consumed by shame.

In the prison cell, Hiram is confronted with the two heartbreaking ends of life as an enslaved person. On one hand, the young boy (like Hiram) is separated from his mother and left to fend for himself in a system of utter brutality. Meanwhile, the old man has lost his financial value to enslavers due to his age and is thus tortured simply for the sadistic pleasure of white people.

One night, the old man says that Hiram reminds him of his son. He says he dreams of his son, who was also betrayed. They speak about their backgrounds, and the old man predicts that Hiram will be sold, while he himself will die in prison. He notes that the world is changing. In the old times, when things were better in Virginia, enslaved people could at least have the stability of remaining united with their families throughout their lives. His own grandfather was brought over from Africa. Hiram has heard stories like this before, and although he appreciates that things were better then, it is important to remember that "solace is not freedom."

The point Hiram makes here is an important one. When considering slavery, it can be difficult to know how to assess relative comforts and privileges (such as the ones Hiram receives at Lockless, or memory of the old days when family separation was less common). The fact that a situation is relatively better than it could be does not detract from the fact that it takes place within a system inherently built on dehumanization.

Hiram asks the old man his name, but the man replies that it doesn't matter. He says that when he was younger, he was married to a woman he loved, with whom he had a son. The son was liked and respected by everyone and was fiercely intelligent. The old man's wife died of fever, but before she did, she made the old man promised to keep their son safe. For a while, he managed to do so. His son got married and had three children, although two of them died in infancy. One day, the headman on his plantation apologetically told the old man that his son was being sold. The headman explained that he would send the son's wife and child along with him, but that there was nothing more he could do.

The fact that the old man says his name doesn't matter indicates that he feels his humanity has been erased so totally that he doesn't even have a sense of his own identity. Indeed, perhaps the cruel humiliations he is forced to endure at the hands of the prison guards instill in him a shame so great that it makes him not want to have an identity at all.

The old man sank into a deep despair. When his son was taken, he remained stoic, promising that he and his father would meet again in the afterlife. However, the old man then found out that his son's wife had been left behind. He and his daughter-in-law were both "crazed" with despair. He believed that she was going to try to set fire to the cookhouse in revenge and stopped her from doing so. The old man ended up getting together with his daughter-in-law himself. He tells Hiram that he "will not disavow it." Years later, the old man's son returned, and in order to "atone" for what he had done, the old man set fire to the cookhouse himself.

The old man's decision to couple up with his daughter-in-law might seem shocking or even reprehensible, but in a system of extreme degradation and brutality, it can be difficult to judge such acts. Moreover, this part of the novel serves as an important reminder that enslaved people do not have to be morally perfect or even upstanding victims in order to see the profound immorality of the dehumanization to which they were subjected.

The old man begins to cry, wondering what how his wife will greet him in the afterlife. Hiram doesn't know what to say. He listens as the man cries himself to sleep. After this incident, the boy is removed from their cell to be sold. Hiram watches as the boy's mother walks along with her son, who is chained, and then screams curses at the enslavers who are taking him, calling them "child-killers." Hiram is moved by her emotion, reasoning that there is no point in trying to maintain a respectable appearance when one's children are being ripped away. She attacks Ryland and is quickly torn away and beaten by a group of men, but not before causing Ryland serious harm.

This passage further emphasizes the point that it is ridiculous to demand respectable behavior from a group of people so brutally harmed, with no access to justice or redress. Indeed, in the case of the boy's mother, the only power she has is the limited capacity of her physical body and the moral judgment of her words.

One night, after the guards take the old man for their "amusements," he never returns. Hiram wonders if he has finally gone to "his reward." Hiram himself remains in the cell for three weeks. He faces terrible starvation and thirst and is forced to perform intensive manual labor. However, eventually Hiram is taken out of his chains, blindfolded, and gagged. He listens to the conversation between Ryland and the person who is buying him. Then, after being taken away from the jail, his blindfold is lifted, and his arms are freed. Unsteady on his feet, Hiram realizes that he is in a pit—a pit so dark that it is "a kind of death." He has heard about whites who buy black people just to enact sadistic fantasies and experiments, and he is sure that this is what has happened to him now.

Hiram's experiences in this part of the novel underline why slavery was often characterized as a form of living hell. Each time it seems as if his torment could not get any worse, it does, and the fact that he has no foreknowledge or control over his fate makes this even more painful. Indeed, being taken to the pit which he compares to a kind of death shows how Hiram is being pushed to the brink of his physical and psychological limits.

CHAPTER 11

In the dark pit, Hiram loses all sense of time, unable to distinguish between night and day or detect how much time has passed. He starts hallucinating and has one vision that he eventually comes to realize is not an illusion, but his own memory. He is young; it is the first year he is assigned to work for Maynard. Maynard asked Hiram to gather together a large group of Tasked; he then told them that they were due to race each other for Maynard's entertainment. The "humiliation" of this got even worse when, to Hiram's surprise, Maynard informed him that he was supposed to race too. Hiram ran faster than all the others but tripped over a rock, leaving him unable to walk properly for three weeks.

This passage further emphasizes the idea that part of what makes Hiram's life so extraordinarily painful is the fact that he at times had the false impression that he was of a different social status than was really the case. Because he is related to them, he feels an affinity with Howell and Maynard, a feeling that is not returned. Of course, it is arguably true that no enslaved person believed that they deserved to be treated as less than human, and in this sense, Hiram is typical, not exceptional.

Back in the pit, a long, formless amount of time passes, before Hiram sees a light suddenly appear. A ladder is thrown down to him, and a voice tells him to come out. Hiram climbs out and stands in front of an "ordinary" man, the person who bought him. They stand in a clearing in the woods and, strangely, the man has placed two wooden chairs and table there. The man throws Hiram a package containing some bread, which Hiram eats. After doing so Hiram suddenly feels the intensity of his own hunger, and without asking devours more packages of bread and drinks from a jar of water.

There is a surreal, dream-like quality to this part of the novel. The presence of this unfamiliar man, the lack of conversation, the strange fact that there are a table and chairs placed in the middle of the forest, all make it seem as if this passage does not quite take place in reality. Of course, Hiram's tormented state of mind could affect how he is perceiving the scene, making it seem even more surreal than is actually the case.

There is a light in the distance, and as it comes nearer Hiram realizes it is a wagon. As it approaches them, the ordinary man tells Hiram to get inside. The other black men in the wagon are not wearing chains, but look "broken." They drive for an hour, and Hiram thinks about the fact that the black men in the wagon outnumber the ordinary man, who is the only white person there. However, Hiram reasons that "white men in Virginia are never really alone." Eventually, the wagon pulls up alongside three other carriages.

Hiram's observation about the black men outnumbering the white man is important. It was usually the case that enslaved people physically outnumbered enslavers, and this was one of many reasons why enslavers were constantly afraid of uprisings. As a result, they constructed an elaborate system of control in order to maintain their total supremacy.

A group of low white men get out of the carriages, and Hiram feels a sense of horror as he thinks of the familiar brutality of this class of men. The ordinary man gets up and begins listing the "crimes" of the black men in the wagon, which include trying to kill their enslavers, trying to run away, and beating someone who stole from them. He says that they are now in the care of "these Virginia gentlemen" (the low whites), but that they will be given a head start to run. If the black men can outrun the low whites, they will be granted their freedom. However, if they are caught, they will be at the mercy of the low whites.

One of the ways in which enslaved people were dissuaded from rebelling was that any sign of infraction or disobedience, no matter how minor, was used as an excuse for horrifically sadistic punishments. This sent a message to other enslaved people that if they were anything less than totally subservient, they would be brutally punished.

The ordinary man drives off in his wagon. The black men are left frozen with shock and fear. One of the low whites walks over to the black men and whacks one of them over the head with a cudgel, telling the others to start running. They do so, going alone in different directions. Hiram wonders what he is running toward; he feels that the North is no more than a "word," whereas the Underground was clearly a myth invented by Georgie. Yet despite everything he has gone through, his desire for freedom remains powerful, and propels him forward. As he runs, he hears a shot in the distance, which is perhaps the sound of one of the other men being killed.

Hiram's decision to run despite the fact that he is not going toward any particular direction is a significant metaphor. It represents the way in which the desire for freedom continued to live inside the hearts of enslaved people, despite the fact that they had no realistic reason to hope that they would ever experience it.

Hiram falls into mud and feels a kind of relief that he doesn't have to keep running. Voices around him tell him to get up, but he then feels a club come down hard on his back. While he is beaten, Hiram leaves his body, disappearing into his own memories. He is brought back to the ordinary man, bound and blindfolded, and put in the wagon again. He is placed in the pit again and forced to participate in the "hunt" over and over. He wonders if he has died and is in hell. At the same time, being forced to run every night is making him stronger. In a strange way, it also gives him a taste of freedom.

Again, this whole section of the novel could be read as a metaphor for the way that enslaved people managed to endure horrific brutality and keep surviving even though the goal of this survival was unclear. While the enslaved had no reason to expect that they would ever be free, the desire for freedom remained, and this in itself was a source of profound power.

Hiram also grows more skilled at making it difficult for the hunters to find him, particularly by using his extraordinary memory. Yet ultimately, this is not enough. He is running, but what he really needs to do is "fly." He thinks about the times when he has been able to move through space after seeing the blue light. He knows that each of these times has been connected to memory, and in particular to the memory of Rose. He wonders if the power is "in some way related to the block in [his] memory," and thus focuses as hard as he can on his memories of Rose as he runs.

This passage further explores the idea that the enslaved possessed mystical, extraordinary powers that were somehow connected to the extreme degradation they were forced to endure. Indeed, everything about this passage is exaggerated, surreal, and mysterious, somewhat like a religious myth.

Hiram can hear the voices of the men pursuing him, and as he runs his foot catches on something, sending him flying to the ground. He calls out the lyrics of a song he remembers from his days at **Lockless**, singing not to the men around him but to someone else. As he sings, the woods "fold[…] back on themselves," and Hiram experiences a sudden vision his childhood. He sees himself as a child and wants to comfort that little boy. He tries to stand, but the pain in his ankle is unbearable. Men surround him, but not the men he thought. Hawkins is standing above him, telling him to stop shouting so loud.

Once again, here Hiram taps into the power of memory in order to help save him in a moment of utter abjection and despair. Simply recalling the lyrics of a song he remembers from childhood reminds him of his own humanity and his own history, and in doing so provides him strength and hope to keep going.

CHAPTER 12

For the first time in weeks, Hiram opens his eyes and sees daylight. He realizes that he has been washed and put in proper clothes, and wonders if he has finally escaped hell and reached his "reward." However, his painful ankle convinces him he is still in the mortal world. He is lying in a bed, and Hawkins and Corrine are looking at him. Corrine welcomes Hiram and asks if he knows where he is. When Hiram tries to call her "Miss Corrine," she tells him not to use "Miss." She asks that he be totally honest with her. Hawkins apologizes that he had to experience the pit and the hunt.

Corrine and Hawkins's involvement with the hunt is never made totally clear. It is not specified if they orchestrated it themselves (this seems unlikely), if they bided their time in order to find the right moment to save Hiram from it, or if they rescued him as soon as they found out he was there. Corrine's apology could theoretically accommodate any of these possibilities.

Corrine now explains that regardless of whether Hiram meant to, in killing Maynard he destroyed plans that had been a long tie in the making. She and Hawkins smoke a tobacco pipe, passing it back and forth between them. Corrine reflects that Hiam is a "scientist," and adds that there is more genius to be found in the enslaved people of the country than "these Jeffersons, these Madisons, these Walkers." She then notes that the "Conduction" which allowed Hiram to escape drowning in the **Goose** is the same power Santi Bess possessed, and that the story of her saving almost 50 people by taking them down into the water is true. Before Santi Bess, the Freetown where Georgie lives didn't exist.

Corrine's behavior in this passage immediately reveals that she is not what she seems. The fact that she is sharing a pipe with Hawkins, that she claims that enslaved people have more genius than whites, and that she knows about (and believes) the story of Santi Bess suggest that she is an ally to black people. Indeed, it is becoming clear that Corrine may secretly be an abolitionist.

Hiram thinks about Georgie and wonders if his wife, Amber, knew about his betrayal. Corrine now hands him a document and explains that Hiram's escape humiliated Howell, who sold him to Corrine. She then explains, "But you are not mine […] You are not a slave." Instead of being joyous, Hiram feels confused. Corrine then explains that she and Hawkins work for the Underground. She knows that he had been trying to find it, but that going to Georgie was a mistake. Hiram asks where Sophia is, but Corrine indicates that they weren't able to save her. Angrily, Hiram asks why they let him be imprisoned and hunted, and Corrine explains that they had to test to see if he had indeed inherited the power of Conduction.

It is understandable that Hiram is reluctant to trust Corrine despite being told that he is free and that she and the others work for the Underground. His lack of trust is even more understandable given the torture he has just endured. Corrine's words indicate that while she may not have been responsible for setting up this torture, she deliberately decided not to intervene in order to test Hiram's powers, which is a dynamic reminiscent of that between enslavers and the enslaved.

Corrine continues that they suspected Hiram might have conducted himself back to **Lockless**, and had agents waiting to see if he showed up there. She says she will explain everything in time, and that although Hiram is no longer a slave, he "shall serve."

This final passage emphasizes that although Corrine is an abolitionist, there are some creeping similarities between her mindset and that of an enslaver.

CHAPTER 13

That evening, Hiram smells food cooking and comes downstairs to find Corrine, Hawkins, Amy, Mr. Fields, and three unknown black people. Seeing Hiram, Corrine invites him to join them. The food is extravagant, "the most indulgent meal" Hiram has ever eaten. After, he is shocked to see Corrine help clear the table with everyone else. The group then go to the parlor to play a game of blind man's bluff; Hiram suspects that they are celebrating something. The next morning, Hiram sleeps late and eats two muffins for breakfast. He then walks outside and, surveying the landscape, concludes that they are somewhere around Virginia's border.

In a sense, Hiram has awoken to find himself in a kind of utopia, where all the rules, brutalities, and injustices of life at Lockless have disappeared. At the same time, the lack of control he has over being brought here and the lack of information he has about his whereabouts remains reminiscent of slavery.

Hiram watches two white people come out of the woods in the distance, seemingly a father and son. The son greets him with a nod, but then they disappear. Hiram falls asleep and dreams of all the things he has undergone recently. He is awoken by Amy coming out onto the porch. She says she knows that Hiram probably has lots of questions, but also understands that he doesn't want to talk much. She confirms that they are at Corrine's property, Bryceton. As an only child, she inherited the estate after her parents died. Influenced by ideas from the North, Corrine is opposed to slavery, and Bryceton is a station on the Underground Railroad. Everyone who lives and works there is an Underground Agent.

Amy's explanation reveals how difficult it is to operate as an abolitionist in Virginia. Corrine is only able to do what she does because she is extremely wealthy, and she doesn't have any living immediate family members. Furthermore, as a woman, Corrine is in an extremely vulnerable position. Unmarried women could exercise relatively little power at the time, even if they were, like Corrine, very wealthy.

Being an agent takes many different forms. Some devote themselves to "paperwork," a vital element of securing people's freedom. Others work on gathering information through "gossip" and media. Amy says that she and Hawkins used to be enslaved by the "meanest man in the world." That man married Corrine, and now he is dead. Amy explains that the "field agents" of the Underground are those who actually assist in whisking enslaved people off of plantations. She herself is a field agent, a position that helps her remember her own freedom.

As Amy's words make clear, the Underground is not the swamp world that Hiram imagined. Rather, it is a network of people actively working to furtively free people from slavery. The Underground is not a place at all, but rather an action, or rather a group of actions coming together in service of one ideal.

At Bryceton, Hiram is trained to be an agent. He also spends time working on furniture. Every night he completes a training regime, which includes running a distance of six or seven miles in an hour. The men who lead the agents through this training regime are all white, some Quality and some Low. Meanwhile, Hiram also resumes his studies with Mr. Fields, picking up where they left off as if no time has passed at all. Hiram is able to browse through the library and pick up any books he wants; he also starts writing, recording his thoughts and experiences.

The act of writing down one's own experiences has as very important role for enslaved people. Slave narratives not only helped advance the cause of abolition but provided a sense of justice through testimony. Although almost none of the huge number of people who committed brutalities against enslaved people were ever punished, a measure of justice could be found in recording them.

After a month of life at Bryceton, Hiram comes to meet Mr. Fields and finds Corrine there instead. Hiram is impressed by Corrine, but also intimidated. He feels that he recognizes some of his own loneliness in her. She reflects that as a woman of Quality, she was encouraged to have an education, but that any knowledge she gained was supposed to be "ornamental." She places a package in front of Hiram: it is a bundle of documents, including letters, authorizations, and bills of sale. She says that Hiram may keep them for a week in order to memorize their characteristics. They belong to an enslaver, an educated man, and Hiram must memorize their contents as well as learn to recreate their style.

Corrine's reflection about her own education shows that she has developed a desire to be of use to the world, rather than simply a pretty ornament for white men to admire. In a sense, there is a connection to the fact that Hiram's instruction by Mr. Fields was meant to help make him a more impressive and useful object—his knowledge was never supposed to be used for his own ends. This has all changed, of course, now that he has entered the Underground.

Hiram spends a week studying the documents before meeting Corrine, who "rigorously" questions him about the details of the enslaver's life. These interrogations take place over several nights. On the last night, Corrine mentions a jockey owned by the enslaver called Levity Williams. Hiram must fake documents for him, including "a day-pass for the road," "a letter of introduction" and, eventually, free papers. Hiram does so, although he never finds out if Williams is successfully freed. Still, writing these fake documents makes him feel powerful, and this soon becomes his main role at Bryceton. Every few weeks, Corrine brings him a new bundle of documents to memorize.

Whereas before Hiram's intelligence and extraordinary memory were used in service of enslavers, he is finally now able to put them to use in order to advance the cause of freedom. Indeed, Hiram's particular skills make him a uniquely advantageous asset for the Underground.

Hiram finds it surprisingly moving to learn such intimate details about the lives of enslavers. At night, he dreams about Sophia or has nightmares about the time he spent in jail. Over time, he learns about another person in the Underground who also has the power of Conduction. She is "beloved and famed" all over the North and has been granted the nickname Moses. Although those in the Virginia Underground know that she is capable of Conduction, they don't know *how* she does it, and thus they launch a series of experiments in order to see how Hiram can make himself conduct. Trying to summon his memories doesn't work.

As some readers may know, Moses was the nickname given to the legendary abolitionist leader and agent of the Underground Railroad Harriet Tubman. She was nicknamed as such because, like the Biblical figure, she led an extraordinary number of her own people out from slavery, to the point that seems practically miraculous. In Coates's rewriting of Tubman's story, her power is literally *miraculous and magical.*

One day, after another failed experiment, Corrine tells Hiram that his training is nearly complete; he is almost ready to go out into the field as an agent. She says that before they brought Hiram to Bryceton, they knew he was educated and intelligent, with a fiercely powerful memory. However, they desperately need him to be able to master his power of Conduction. The current techniques they possess are not enough to rescue people from the "**coffin**" of slavery in the Deep South. Hiram asks what will happen if he is never able to use Conduction in service of the Underground, imagining he will be forced to do forgeries forever. However, Corrine emphasizes that he is free and can do whatever he wants. Growing indignant, Hiram asks to meet the people whom the Underground is saving. Corrine agrees to show him.

Although Hiram's resentment and suspicion of Corrine might seem surprising, given the relief that it would theoretically be to be liberated from slavery via the Underground, his feelings are also very understandable. Corrine's statement that Hiram is free does not cohere with the reality of his experience at Bryceton. He was brought there without his knowledge and has been put to work. Furthermore, the reality is that even if Corrine let him walk off the property, he would not make it far before being seized by slavecatchers. He remains trapped.

CHAPTER 14

In order to allow Hiram access to the deepest circle of the Underground, Corrine has to trust him completely, and in order to test his trustworthiness, she demands "the destruction of Georgie Parks." She tells Hiram that Georgie has betrayed many others before him. She wants to frame him for betrayal—not a betrayal of the Tasked, but of his Taskmasters. As punishment, he will be killed or re-enslaved, his family brutally broken up. The Underground cannot kill him themselves, because this would draw too much attention. Yet by framing him to the enslavers who employ him, they are still killing him—just in a more indirect (and likely more brutal) way.

Paradoxical as it may seem, it would actually be more merciful for the Underground to kill Georgie directly. At least they could try to do this in a clean, quick manner—and could even help Amber and the baby reach safety. Yet because this would likely endanger their cause, Corrine decides to frame Georgie. This means physical torture not just of Georgie but likely of Amber too, as well as the destruction of their family.

Hiram feels uncertain, but Corrine reminds him that Georgie effectively tried to kill him. Sending people to the South is a fate worse than death. Yet Hiram sees how slavery traps everyone, and wonders if Corrine should be allowed to judge Georgie in this way. Nevertheless, he knows that ultimately, he has little choice when it comes to getting revenge on Georgie. A month later, Hawkins tells Hiram to take two nights off from work to rest. When they meet up to complete the assignment, Hawkins indicates that Hiram is about to pass a point of no return.

This is one of several points in which the novel explores the idea that while slavery erodes white people's humanity, it does not have the same effect on black people. Corrine's merciless judgment of Georgie suggests that she is not able to feel empathy and take into account the contextual factors that led him to betray Hiram. Hiram is more understanding despite the fact that he was the actual victim.

Hiram, Hawkins, and Mr. Fields drink three cups of hard cider to prepare themselves. Hawkins tells the others about a local enslaved man named Parnel Johns who was stealing crops from his master and selling it to low whites. The master responded by punishing all the enslaved people on his plantation as a group, leading them to resent Johns. Johns is not desperate to get out. He is "something of a genius" who plays the violin. Hiram protests the idea of granting freedom to someone relatively undeserving, but Mr. Fields says he doesn't understand. He tells Hiram that his real name is Micajah Bland, and in doing so has placed his life in Hiram's hands. He asks that Hiram trust them in return.

The passage further explores the idea that Hiram has a more innocent, principled sense of morality than the other Underground agents. He believes that freedom should be given to the most morally deserving first, yet of course, this is difficult to implement in reality. In a sense, it also contradicts Hiram's previous thoughts about Georgie, which emphasized the fact that slavery can corrupt black people's ability to act morally by placing them in impossible situations.

The three of them set off on foot through the woods. After walking for six hours, they meet Johns, holding his forged documents. On Johns's signal, a 17-year-old girl emerges from the woods and joins him. Johns explains that she is his daughter, Lucy. Hawkins is furious, but reluctantly agrees to take her with them. Th group of them walk for many more hours, before eventually resting in a cave. While Hiram is on lookout, Lucy comes out to join him. She indicates that she isn't Johns's daughter, but his lover, although he also has a wife and two children back on the plantation. She says that people say Johns is a "scoundrel," but the truth is that he just can't accept the life he has been given.

The story of Johns and Lucy evokes the narrative told by the old man in the prison cell. Johns pretends that Lucy is his daughter because he thinks this will make him look more morally upstanding and thus deserving of freedom than if he told the truth, which is that she is his young mistress.

Lucy explains that she caught Johns fleeing and demanded that he take her with him. The journey continues, until they eventually reach a cabin where Hawkins announces their arrival with a special whistle. An old white woman comes out, and after helping her restart her fire, the Underground agents leave Johns and Lucy with her.

This passage illustrates the way the Underground works: agents help runaways flee the plantation and help safely transport them through the network of safehouses, until they (hopefully) reach freedom in the North.

After successfully completing this mission, it is decided that Hiram should be sent north, to Philadelphia. He is given a new identity as a formerly enslaved man who had bought his freedom. He keeps the same name, but with the addition of the surname Walker. He, Hawkins, and Bland will travel by train, with Hawkins posing as an enslaved man owned by Bland. Hiram has forged papers proving his free status, and there is extra security in the form of Bland, who can confirm Hiram's identity. Hawkins advises Hiram to "act like a freeman," and when they set off Hiram repeats to himself, "*I am free.*"

The fact that Hiram is "given" the last name Walker is poignant, considering Hiram is the son of Howell and thus, if he were white, would automatically inherit his surname. In general, enslaved people did not have surnames, and so were known by their first name only (which was, in turn, usually chosen by their enslaver). By being given the surname Walker, Hiram symbolically becomes free yet also becomes more tightly tied to his former enslaver.

CHAPTER 15

Four months after arriving at Bryceton, Hiram leaves. He, Hawkins, and Bland set off, planning to take a slightly longer route in order to avoid areas where Ryland's Hounds are known to be particularly active. They board a train, which at that time does not have a separate car for black people. This is because "The Quality [keep] their Tasked ones close the way a lady keeps her clutch, closer even." The journey takes two days. When they arrive in Philadelphia, a black man greets Hiram, introducing himself as Raymond White. They drive away in a carriage. Hiram looks at Raymond, whose dress is "impeccable" yet who carries a profound sadness in his expression.

The detail about there not being racial segregation on trains in this period is significant. Prior to Emancipation, there was more proximity and intimacy between white and black people, even if this proximity and intimacy was characterized by brutal exploitation. In the haze of racist panic that followed abolition, segregation was used to maintain white supremacy in the absence of slavery.

Hiram gazes at the people in the city. Although most of the rich are white and most of the poor are black, Hiram is stunned to see that this is not always the case, and that there are black people dressed in more luxury than he'd ever seen on Howell. They arrive at a house where Bland and Hawkins are already waiting, drinking coffee with another black man who Hiram immediately sees must be related to Raymond. He introduces himself as Otha White. Hawkins instructs the White brothers to take care of Hiram, whom he calls "the genuine article." He explains that Hiram "don't know nothing," and they will have to teach him. Hawkins says goodbye, noting that he and Hiram may never see each other again.

The other Underground agents treat Hiram with a curious mix of admiration and patronizing belittlement, as shown by Hawkins's statements that Hiram is the "genuine article" but also that he "don't know nothing." Indeed, this blend of two contradictory attitudes is not dissimilar to the mix of respect and dismissal Hiram received from white people while he was enslaved at Lockless.

Otha takes Hiram to his bedroom, which he feels is a kind of "heaven." Later, they have dinner at a local tavern. Otha lives in the same house as Hiram, whereas Raymond lives with his wife and children. Hiram wakes early the next morning to wander around the city. He goes into a bakery owned by a friendly black man who introduces himself as Mars. Mars says that he can tell Hiram is new and guesses that he is staying with Otha. Hiram is suspicious, but Mars gives him a piece of gingerbread for free, telling him they are "family."

Hiram's suspicious attitude toward Mars indicates that it will not be easy for him to shed the ways of thinking and acting he has inherited from life under slavery. There is an ease, dignity, and trust to life in Philadelphia that is still very unfamiliar to Hiram. It may take him a while to be able to trust others, even kind black people like Mars.

Hiram keeps walking. It occurs to him that if he wanted to, he could "abandon the Underground and disappear into the city." He sits down to read the newspaper and keep eating the gingerbread, but as he takes a bite he is gripped by a sudden memory, transported all the way back to **Lockless**. He is in the kitchen in the house, and a woman asks him why he is always so quiet. She gives him a piece of gingerbread even though she is making it for Howell, explaining, "Family got to watch out for each other [...] And furthermost, as I see it, all of this belongs to you anyway." Hiram cannot remember who the woman is but can picture her smile with utmost clarity. The memory dissolves.

This scene is reminiscent of one of the most well-known moments in literary history, from Marcel Proust's In Search of Lost Time. *In this novel, the narrator bites into a madeleine (a traditional French dessert) and this sensation triggers an involuntary memory from his childhood. The exact same thing happens to Hiram here, evoking memory's capacity to transport a person through time and space.*

CHAPTER 16

Hiram realizes that what he just experienced was Conduction. Yet he doesn't want to try it again, because every time he conducts it leaves him exhausted. Back at the house, he finds Otha and Raymond, who summon him to accompany them. Walking through the city streets, Raymond says that the law in Pennsylvania means that any enslaved person there must automatically be granted their freedom. Yet many who come do not know this, because their enslavers keep the law secret or lie to them about what will happen if they try to get free.

One thing that becomes clear after Hiram moves to the North is that there is a tension between what is legal and what actually allowed to take place. This is, of course, also true in the South, where white people have total impunity to subject black people to whatever torments and injustices they want. Although there is theoretically more legal equality in the North, this does not always work out in practice.

It is Saturday, and very hot. In the two days Hiram has been in the city, he has seen a few enslaved people. Although they tend to be dressed well, he can tell their status by their manner. They see a well-dressed black woman, held on one arm by a tall white man and on the other by a young boy. Raymond approaches her, addressing her as Mary Bronson and saying that he knows she's "made a request" regarding her freedom. The white man angrily pulls Mary away, saying, "I mean to return with my property to my home country." By now a small crowd has gathered, and Mary defiantly takes her child and stands behind Raymond, ignoring the white man's demands that she follow him.

This scene demonstrates how the law does actually change the way that people behave in the North. For an enslaved woman to defy her enslaver in this way would be unthinkable in the South and being defended by three black men would not help (in fact, it would almost certainly make it even worse). Yet because the Underground agents in Philadelphia have the law on their side, they are empowered to act in a bolder way than would be possible in the South.

The white man tells Raymond that if he was home he would "break [him] good." Triumphantly, Raymond reminds him that he is not home. After, Hiram and the brothers take Mary and her son back to the house, where they serve Mary coffee and give her son wooden toys to play with. Hiram goes back to Mars's bakery and apologizes for being rude the day before; he meets Mars's wife, Hannah, and is given two free loaves of bread. Back at the house, Hiram serves the bread with cheese and spreads. Mary says her son is called Octavius, a name chosen by her former enslaver. While she tells them about her life, Hiram writes down her answers.

Here the importance of enslaved people's testimony about their lives becomes apparent again. The Underground not only works to liberate black people from slavery, but also to record their stories, such that there is an account of the experiences and injustices that occur under slavery. Simply wanting to know Mary's story is a powerful way of acknowledging her humanity.

Mary has a husband and another son in addition to Octavius. She was a cook. Her first master treated her with some appreciation because he liked her food, allowing her to work part-time for wages, but after he died a low white enslaver (the tall man) took over and started beating her. He eventually sold her husband and other son. She has been North before and thought about fleeing but has never actually done it until now. Mary starts crying and Otha embraces her, comforting her. He promises to find somewhere for her and Octavius to live within a few days. However, Mary says she doesn't want any help, unless it is finding her husband and other son. She says she owes it to Octavius.

Mary's initial reluctance to seek her freedom in the North and her refusal of Otha's offer for help shows that the work of the Underground can be difficult. Perhaps, like Hiram, Mary still struggles to trust people—even the people who are her liberators. Another interpretation could be that she feels such a profound sense of guilt to be free while her husband and other son are enslaved that she cannot bear to accept any further help for herself.

On Monday Hiram takes a job in a woodworking shop, spending three days a week at work there and another three working for the Underground. He likes walking around the city but feels lonely. He identifies with Mary's sentiment that freedom means nothing if a person is cut off from their loved ones. One day, Otha invites Hiram to have dinner at his mother's house. Hiram travels by ferry across the Delaware River to get there. Just as he is arriving at the house, he experiences a vivid memory of Rose, and when he returns back to the present, Raymond and Otha's mother, Viola, tells him he looks like he's "seen the devil himself."

Hiram's time in Philadelphia is defined by a mix of relief and lingering guilt, horror, and loneliness. Considering what Hiram has gone through, this is hardly surprising. It also illustrates a difficult paradox in the lives of those who manage to escape from slavery. While none want to return to the brutality and degradation of their previous life, they might still long for their former homes because their loved ones remain there.

The house is full of family members, including Mars and Hannah. Happy to be in this company, Hiram feels the emotional barriers within him begin to fall. he notices that the love here is different to the love that existed on the Street, which was always colored by the cruelty and degradation surrounding it. After dinner, one of the girls plays the piano, and her whole family watches her with intense pride. Hiram thinks about all the enslaved children whose talents are never encouraged this way, but instead stolen from them. Hiram keeps hearing the names Lambert and Lydia, and later, Otha tells him that Lambert was his brother and Lydia his wife. Lambert is dead, and Lydia still enslaved.

The White family may seem happy, whole, and thriving, but the mention of Lambert and Lydia serves as a reminder that they, too, are a family broken by slavery. The loss of Lambert means that the family will never be truly whole, while the agony of knowing that Lydia is still enslaved while the rest of the family are free likely produces the same sense of guilt in Otha that both Hiram and Mary have been experiencing.

Otha and Lydia have three children. Otha was born into slavery, but both his parents managed to escape separately and then reunite in the North. In addition to Raymond and Lambert, he has one sister, Patsy. The first time Viola escaped, she, Otha, and Lambert were caught and brought back. However, she managed to escape punishment by blaming the whole thing on her husband (who remained free), and eventually fled again, this time leaving Lambert and Otha behind. They were both sold South, which is where Lambert died and where Otha met Lydia. For a long time, Otha resented and even hated Violet.

This passage explores one of the most traumatic ways in which the ability of enslaved people to act according to their principles was limited. With four children, Viola was faced with an impossible choice: she would not be able to escape with all four, and thus would have to choose to keep her family together in slavery or flee with only some of her children.

Otha himself managed to flee and came to Philadelphia in search of his family. When he was reunited with Raymond, they didn't even recognize each other. It took time for them to discover that they were brothers. Now, he thinks back on why Viola only took the younger children when she fled for the second time, leaving behind her older boys. She'd told them, "I can only carry so many, and them only so far."

Family reunification remains little more than a dream for the vast majority of those whose relatives have been torn from them by slavery. Yet even in the rare cases where families are able to reunite, this process unearths deeply difficult traumas, as demonstrated by the story of the White family.

CHAPTER 17

Hiram starts conducting more frequently. He realizes that the woman who sneakily gave him the gingerbread was Emma. He feels he is beginning to understand something, but also finds Conduction difficult, as each time it leaves him filled with sadness. He is beginning to no longer feel free, and one day decides to leave the Underground. He walks to the docks and stands near the sailors, who seem the freest of anyone in the city. He hopes one of them will approach him and offer him work, but they don't. He keeps wandering around until it gets dark, when he realizes he has no plan or resources. Resigning himself to life in the Underground, Hiram heads home, but is struck on the head by a white man and passes out.

Hiram's fascination with the sailors is significant, as their way of life is defined by a form of freedom that involves moving across bodies of water. As has been made clear thus far, water, movement, and freedom are connected in a powerful way for Hiram, as well as for enslaved people more generally. This is in part because one of the most significant forms of rebellion by enslaved people involved jumping from slave ships into the water.

Hiram wakes up chained, blindfolded, and gagged in the back of a moving cart. He is sure that he has been caught by some of the Hounds who live up North and kidnap black people on the street in order to sell them into slavery. He can hear men laughing and a girl next to him crying. After driving or a while, they stop and Hiram is made to sit against a tree, still blindfolded, while the white men eat by a campfire. However, suddenly shots ring out, and Hiram is freed from his chains by Micajah Bland. Two other men stand with him. Hiram is overcome with a sudden, uncontrollable fury, and kicks the corpses of the dead white man until he is too exhausted to kick anymore.

The uncontrollable rage Hiram feels toward the white man who kidnapped him comes as no surprise. Having experienced freedom, Hiram knows exactly how much he has to lose by being captured and re-enslaved. The terrible reality was that this was a fairly common occurrence for free black people in both the North and South. Kidnapping black people, even those who were "officially" free, was a highly lucrative business.

Hiram now realizes that the voice inside him that told him to flee the Underground has always been within him. It is a desire for freedom, but a selfish one. Now it is overtaken by a commitment to family. Led by Bland, they walk toward a woman who checks that Hiram is ok. She asks him what kind of agent lets himself be seized by hounds like that. After the woman walks away, one of the men Hiram doesn't know asks if he knows who she was, and then tells him it was Moses.

The horror of slavery is so intense than no one could be blamed for wanting to preserve their own freedom at all costs after having escaped it. Indeed, this is what makes the work of the formerly enslaved Underground Railroad agents so admirable. Having successfully escaped slavery themselves, they had the courage and selflessness to go back to rescue others.

Moses has other nicknames, including The General, The Night, and the Vanisher. She is the "living master of Conduction." As they drive back toward Philadelphia, Bland tells Hiram that by shooting the men who kidnapped him, they will "send a message" to others who do the same thing. Suddenly, Hiram admits to Bland that he was in love with Sophia, and that he often thinks she should have become the Underground agent instead of him. He cries, saying that Sophia deserved better. Bland says that the pain Hiram feels now is the pain of a whole world of black people whose lives have been torn apart by slavery. Hiram thanks Bland for saving him, but Bland says there's no need—the Underground gives his life meaning.

Bland is the only white person in the novel who appears in a truly admirable light. This reflects the reality that in this period of time, the vast majority white people were either complicit with or actively perpetrating slavery and racism. Even many abolitionists, like Corrine, had slightly suspicious motivations and methods even while they helped advance the cause of freedom. For a white person to act in the genuinely noble and altruistic manner of Bland was extremely rare.

The next morning, Raymond notes that although he trusts Bland deeply, he doesn't approve of his vengeful murders of the white men who kidnapped Hiram. He believes that Bland owes Hiram an apology. Raymond then admits that he knows where Sophia is: **Lockless**. Corrine persuaded Howell to take Sophia back. The Underground has not gone to rescue her yet because of its "rules," but that they are not going to leave her there. In fact, they have already determined a method for getting her out.

One of the most important aspects of the novel's depiction of the Underground Railroad is its emphasis on the fact that the Railroad was not a coherent, consistent organization, but rather something of a mess of conflicting ideologies, methods, and positions.

CHAPTER 18

Over the next few days, Hiram's mind remains fixated on Sophia. He fantasizes about her being in Philadelphia and experiencing life there with him. Two weeks after his kidnapping and rescue, he goes to meet Raymond, who is alone at his home. Raymond shows Hiram two crates of documents, including intelligence reports and letters. Hiram is stunned—it seems as if practically everyone who has ever been rescued by the Philadelphia Underground has their story documented in there. Raymond says that Hiram deserves to be reunited with Sophia and reiterates that they have a plan involving Bland to get her out. However, the timing is bad, as they are also working on rescuing Lydia from Alabama.

While the Underground's delay in rescuing Sophia might seem unbearable to Hiram, Raymond's words illustrate why it is not as callous as it might seem. Hiram's focus is understandably on Sophia, but the reality is that everyone in the Underground has relatives who they want to rescue from slavery. Each of these cases is the very definition of urgent, and thus it becomes difficult to figure out how to prioritize the Underground's limited resources.

Raymond says that someone needs to help Bland get to Alabama in good time, but the mission is so dangerous that no one will force Hiram to do it. Sophia will be rescued regardless. Hiram says he will do it. Raymond smiles, and permits Hiram to spend the rest of the day looking through the documents, a pursuit Hiram finds as thrilling as reading a novel. He eats dinner with Raymond's family and stays the night. He is inspired by the documents and understands why Raymond has devoted his entire life to the pursuit of freedom. He also understands why the Underground is so bold: because there are always people who have been bolder and succeeded.

This passage explores another reason why the testimonies of enslaved people are so important. The thought of escaping a plantation might seem impossible to most people, and indeed, there is a whole brutal structure in place to convince enslaved people that they could never successfully escape. Yet the testimonies of those who have successfully done so—and the courage and ingenuity required—refutes this idea of impossibility.

Hiram is thrilled by all the stories of rebellion, from the most minor to the most daring. He sees "magic" contained with all of them. The stories are miraculous testaments to the courage, determination, and ingenuity of the many who have seized their own freedom. The next day, Hiram goes to Bland's house. The kidnapping has left him nervous about traveling through the city. On the way, he walks past a family of poor black people. He remembers Otha warning those freed by the Underground that without proper support, they will likely end up destitute the people in front of Hiram here.

One of the most terrible truths about the absence of slavery (both in the North in this period and in the whole country following Emancipation) is that it did not necessarily guarantee freedom. While black people may not have been literally enslaved, economic destitution could end up as little more than slavery by another name. Moreover, racism actively worked to keep free black people in a state of financial ruin.

Bland's sister Laura answers the door. Hiram immediately begins discussing the missions that lie before them. Bland says that rescuing Sophia will be straightforward, because Corrine will help them. Hiram suddenly feels a powerful surge of anger at Corrine, who left Sophia in the "**coffin**" and pretended not to know where she was. This anger brings on the blue light of Conduction, but before long Hiram resurfaces in Bland's house, albeit feeling "disorientated." Hiram eats dinner with Bland and Laura, then joins Bland for a walk around the city.

While Conduction is theoretically something that could allow Hiram to travel through space in service of the Underground, at the moment it is more of a hindrance than an asset. Hiram certainly has extraordinary powers, but without mastery of these powers, it is as if he remains a tool of someone else's control.

Hiram asks why Moses isn't going down South to save Lydia, considering she has greater control over her Conduction, but Bland explains that Moses "has her own promises to keep." He then explains that he met Corrine while she was only a teenager and living in New York for her schooling. She would sneak out and attend abolitionist lectures, which is where she and Bland met. Bland notes that Corrine has made enormous "sacrifices" for the abolitionist cause. If her betrayal of her class was ever revealed, she would be subjected to unimaginably brutal punishment. They stop outside Hiram's house, and Hiram realizes that Bland has walked him home. Bland puts his arm around Hiram, and they laugh together.

Corrine's commitment to the Underground is measured in the sacrifices (both actual and potential) that she makes for it. Bland's, meanwhile, is measured by the devotion and generosity with which he acts toward other agents, in additions to the sacrifices he makes. The contrast between them shows that the Underground works by combining a variety of people with different approaches and motivations.

CHAPTER 19

That night, Hiram realizes that he will need to talk to Moses if he is ever going to be able to properly understand—and gain control over—Conduction. The next day, he, Bland, Otha, and Raymond discuss the preparations for Lydia's rescue. Bland explains that they need extremely precise passes for Lydia and the children. Hiram wants to see a sample document from Lydia's enslaver, Daniel McKiernan, but there is none available. However, there is another option. The son of the man who once enslaved the entire White family, named Elon Simpson, lives part-time in Philadelphia. Elon is respected within Philadelphia society, yet still does business with McKiernan.

Shifting attitudes toward the slave trade are not the main focus of the novel, but continually play an important role in the background of the main narrative. At this point in American history, opinion had shifted in the North to the point that it was considered a mark against one's respectability to be involved with slavery. However, this does not necessarily mean that "respectable" gentlemen like Simpson ceased to profit from it—they just kept it secret.

That night, Bland takes Hiram to Simpson's house in Washington Square. This fancy neighborhood is built on the mass grave of enslaved people who died of fever, back in the days when slavery was still legal in Pennsylvania. Hiram asks Bland how he came to be involved in the Underground, and Bland explains that as a younger man, he went to the South and fought in the Seminole War, where he witnessed horrifying atrocities. He realized that whatever problems he had were "dwarfed by even greater struggles."

The fact that the wealthy neighborhood of Washington Square is literally built on the bodies of dead enslaved people is almost too neat a metaphor. Yet the reality is that it is not even a literary invention, but a true part of Philadelphia's history.

A white servant whom Bland addresses as Chalmers comes out of the house. He hands a package of documents to Bland, who insists that they go inside to check them. Chalmers refuses, but Bland threatens him, and Chalmers reluctantly agrees. Inside, Bland says that the papers aren't good enough and that they need more. On Bland's indication, Hiram begins looking through Chalmers's desk, but can find no correspondence with McKiernan. Eventually he and Bland realize that Simpson keeps his correspondence with enslavers in a separate, locked chest. Hiram uses the letters with McKiernan to forge the passes, and Bland sets off for Alabama shortly after.

The separate chest within which Simpson keeps his correspondence with enslavers is very telling. It is possible that Simpson is worried about someone finding this correspondence (with good reason, as evidenced by Bland and Hiram's presence in his house). Yet it is also possible that this separate chest is a manifestation of Simpson's own guilty conscience and his efforts to assuage it.

This is "the most daring rescue anyone in Philadelphia ha[s] ever undertaken." The journey into Alabama and back again will be winding and long, and the fact that it is August doesn't help, as it is better for the Underground to work during winter, when the nights are longer. However, rumor has it that McKiernan is in financial trouble and is selling off enslaved people, so they have no choice but to act immediately.

The constant (and intensifying) threat of enslaved people being sold adds a terrifying urgency to everything that the Underground does. It is also a reminder of their ultimate powerlessness against the whims of enslavers.

CHAPTER 20

While waiting for updates on the mission, Raymond, Otha, and Hiram set off for the big meeting of abolitionists in New York. This is one of the only occasions when members of the Underground meet with those working on the official, legal fight to end slavery. During their journey to New York, Moses joins them. Seeing her, Hiram is so awed that he can barely speak. Raymond calls her Harriet, and apparently this is the name she likes best. The next day they arrive in the campsite near the Canadian border where the convention is being held.

The convention depicted here seemingly does not represent a particular historical occurrence so much as an amalgamation of several similar events. These conventions were important sites in the history of radical social movements in the US, including abolition, racial equality, feminism, and labor rights.

Walking through the convention, Hiram hears orators speaking about the rights of women, indigenous people, and child laborers. One person speaks in favor of trade unions, another in favor of communes where marriage is replaced by "free love." Feeling overwhelmed, he sits against a tree, until a woman a little older than him comes up to him and greets him by name. She introduces herself as Kessiah, saying that she also used to live at **Lockless** and that Rose used to leave Hiram with her to look after. She is Thena's daughter. She and Hiram walk together, and she recalls happy memories of growing up with Thena and Big John, back when the family was still together.

Although Hiram has not been reunited with Rose, he is able to access parts of her through encounters with other people who knew her. The fact that Kessiah used to look after Hiram and is also the daughter of Hiram's surrogate mother Thena movingly illustrates the ways in which enslaved people formed improvised familial structures in the wake of family separation.

Kessiah recalls that Hiram was "always different," always watching people, just like he was just then when she found him at the convention. She says it is strange to think of her time growing up in slavery and remember being happy, but that this is how she felt. Everything changed when Big John came down with a fever and died. At least Thena and her children could comfort each other, but when they were separated even that solace was taken away. Hiram tells Kessiah that Thena looked after him, adding, "For me, Thena was the best part of **Lockless**."

Kessiah and Hiram's reunion is, unsurprisingly, bittersweet. As we have seen throughout the novel, reencounters with loved ones following separation can be a joyous relief but is also an inherent reminder of all that has been lost and destroyed.

Kessiah cries and tells Hiram that after she and her siblings were sold off, she never saw them again. Most of the siblings were taken toward Natchez, but she was brought to Maryland. There, she met a freeman who began working toward buying her freedom. However, their plans fell through when they were both taken to be sold at auction. Moses saved Kessiah, and she has been travelling with her ever since. This is how she heard about Hiram. Kessiah embraces Hiram warmly and asks how Rose is doing.

Kessiah's story highlights the horribly unpredictable and chaotic nature of life as an enslaved person, one in which all dreams and plans can be thwarted on an enslaver's whim. While she was fortunate that Moses rescued her, the vast majority of enslaved people obviously did not have the same luck.

Hiram keeps walking, this time past jugglers and acrobats. During dinner, a group of black people get together around a campfire and start singing "the songs that could only be made down in the **coffin**." Hiram thinks about how slavery is the root of all evil, as revealed by the orators comparing factory work, alcohol consumption, and childrearing to slavery. Ending slavery is thus a chance to "remake" the whole world. A messenger approaches Hiram and hands him a letter from Bland. Hiram brings it to Otha. The letter states that Bland has Lydia and the children; they have escaped Alabama and are currently in Indiana. Otha is awestruck.

Hiram's belief that the end of slavery would be a chance to "remake" the world reflects the optimism felt by many 19th-century abolitionists. However, the fact that so many of the people at the convention compare other evils to slavery could be interpreted in a different light. Arguably, these comparisons betray a trivialization of slavery and a re-centering of non-enslaved white people where the primary focus should be on the enslaved.

CHAPTER 21

The Underground has given a sense of purpose to Hiram's life. In the evening on the second day of the convention, Hiram sees Moses sitting on a rock. She greets him, and he goes to join her. Moses says she often goes back to her home in Maryland through her work as an Underground agent, and vows to one day go back there to live openly and freely. Usually she works alone, but she has a particular job where she needs "a man who runs at least as well as he writes." Surprised, Hiram mentions some of the stories he has heard about Moses and her powers, and she laughs.

As this passage illustrates, Harriet Tubman was a legendary figure in her own time as well as after her death. Yet Coates's decision to endow her with actual magic powers is controversial. Some might argue that the supernatural element diminishes Tubman's extraordinary achievements, which in reality are all the more impressive considering she executed them as a disabled, self-emancipated woman, not a mystical figure.

Moses then says she keeps her methods secret, and that the rumors about her powers don't originate with her. She adds that the only name she answers to is Harriet. Hiram brings up Conduction, but Harriet brushes it off, asking if he is ready to take the job with her. Hiram confirms that he is, and Harriet says it will begin "soon enough." The next morning, Hiram wakes to the sound of "commotion." Otha is in a state of extreme distress. Hiram finds him wailing into Raymond's shoulder, hardly able to stay standing. He announces that Bland is dead, and Lydia is back in the "**coffin**." Raymond and some other men take Otha away, trying to calm him.

The terrible reality is that much of the work the Underground Railroad attempted—like most escape attempts in general—failed. The odds were so stacked against those trying to flee slavery that the fact that anyone succeeded was extremely unlikely. This devastating turn of events is reflective of an awful historical truth.

Hiram finds a nearby satchel with newspaper articles containing the story of what happened, along with a letter from an Indiana-based Underground agent confirming the sad news. Hiram takes the papers back to Raymond, who is now sitting near Harriet and Corrine. Hiram rests for a while, and when he wakes up Otha is sitting by him in the tent. Hiram expresses his sincere apologies, and with great sadness Otha says that Bland was his "brother." Although Otha's heart has repeatedly been broken by being separated from his family, he thinks it's important to always remain open to love.

In addition to crushing disappointment and fear, Otha is likely afflicted with a terrible sense of guilt in this moment. His insistence that Bland was his brother to him is a moving reversal of the usual situation in which the ties between actual blood relatives of different races were severed by racism.

Otha says that he has noticed Hiram struggling to gain control over his Conduction and wants to tell him a story that he hopes might help. He says that he met Lydia while he was in the depths of despair following Lambert's death. A few days before the wedding, Otha found Lydia in a great deal of pain. The headman had tried to have sex with her, and after she resisted, he whipped her brutally. Otha vowed to kill the headman, but Lydia refused to let him. She told him that they couldn't lose sight of their hopes for the future, could not let themselves die like this. In saying this, Lydia saved him. Otha stands up and resolutely repeats, "My Lydia will be free."

It might not be immediately clear how Otha's story will help Hiram gain control over Conduction. Yet the story is important insofar as it demonstrates how Otha is able to keep going in the midst of so much disappointment, grief, and uncertainty. Inspired by Lydia, he knows that there is no other choice but to keep fighting. He cannot afford to be discouraged; he must believe Lydia will be free.

CHAPTER 22

The convention ends the next morning, and Hiram watches as the campsite is packed up. Kessiah sees Hiram and expresses her condolences, saying that she knows Bland meant something to him. Hiram feels comforted, and senses that Kessiah is the older sister he always needed. Hiram then goes to see Raymond and Otha, who are talking with Corrine, Hawkins, and Amy. Everyone is tenderly embracing Otha and sharing soothing words. During the journey back to Philadelphia, Hiram has a dream about Bland and wakes up feeling tormented with guilt that, because he forged the papers, Bland's death and Lydia's recapture must be his fault.

The behavior of the Underground agents in the wake of the news about Bland and Lydia is deeply moving. Their shared commitment to one another and to the cause of freedom creates an intense, familial bond between all of them. It is through this love and support that they are able to keep going in the midst of so much tragedy and horror.

The group is staying overnight at a tavern to break up the journey back to Philadelphia. Hiram finds Hawkins, Amy, and Corrine smoking cigars together and sharing memories of Bland. Hiram joins them and confesses that he is to blame for Bland's death. However, Hawkins and Amy assured him that it had nothing to do with the papers Hiram forged. In reality, Bland, Lydia, and the children had almost made it to Philadelphia when one of the children got sick. A suspicious local white man stopped them and took Lydia and the children to a police station to enquire if there were reports of any runaways in the area. Bland could have left them but refused. Hawkins says sending Bland into the "**coffin**" to get "some babies" was foolish.

As is clear by now, Corrine, Amy, and Hawkins have a different attitude toward their work as Underground agents than members of the Philadelphia station. They tend to be less sentimental and more ruthless than the other agents (and particularly Hiram). To them, fighting for freedom is more like a war than a struggle for justice, and this fight encapsulates messy ethics like any other war.

CHAPTER 23

Having returned to Philadelphia, Hiram goes back to his old routine. He starts to see Kessiah regularly. At the beginning of October, Harriet asks to meet with him. When Hiram tells her that he is not coping well with Bland's death, she reminds him that they are involved in a war, and that Bland was ready to sacrifice his life because he could not bear to live in the world the way it is. She adds that they will all have to die someday, although she prays that her death will not be at the hands of enslavers. She confesses that she doesn't believe in her "own miracles," but that she has seen others—not just Conduction, but even one man who "self-resurrected."

Like Corrine's crew, Harriet also sees the fight for freedom as a war. However, her take is a little more philosophical than Hawkins's seems to be. For Harriet, freedom is a goal so important and noble that it goes without saying that one would be prepared to sacrifice one's life for it—particularly considering that everyone is mortal, and death is inevitable. This seems to be a useful compromise between Corrine's harsh position and Hiram's more sentimental one.

Hiram and Harriet then discuss their upcoming mission in Maryland. She needs passes for two people, then a letter written by an enslaved person that contains a special signal. She tells Hiram to send the letter tomorrow, and that they will set off in two weeks. She says the journey will take one night, which leaves Hiram confused, but Harriet only smiles.

The Underground works through combining the skills and resources of many different people from vastly different walks of life. This is well illustrated in the collaboration between Hiram and Harriet.

Two weeks later, Hiram meets Harriet in the middle of the night. Harriet looks out over the river and says, "For Micajah Bland." Then she keeps walking, leaning on her walking stick. She tells Hiram that they must always remember, and that memory is the route from slavery to freedom. Suddenly Hiram realizes that they are in the water, or rather, almost hovering over it. Harriet assures him that everything will be fine, saying, "It's just like dancing." A powerful "chain of memory" materializes between them, connecting them in a way Hiram doesn't fully understand. He looks out and sees spirits on the river, including a boy who he somehow knows is named Abe.

This is the most explicit, detailed depiction of Conduction that has occurred thus far in the novel, and this helps the reader to understand what Conduction actually is. At the same time, Coates's description of Conduction remains so lyrical that trying to delineate how it actually works seems beside the point. The most important part of this passage is what Harriet says about the importance of memory, and the fact that she links Conduction to dancing.

Harriet remarks that Hiram never knew Abe, but will know him now, through Conduction. She recalls how she was sent to trap varmints in the swamps at only seven years old. When she was nine, she was taken to work in the house, and was beaten daily for any mistakes she made. Abe grew up an orphan; his mother died in childhood and his father was sold when he was very young. He was a natural rebel, and Harriet learned Conduction from him. Enslavers and low whites would try to restrain him, but Abe always escaped, humiliating them. A white man told Harriet to help catch Abe and then threw a rock at him, but Abe dodged the rock and it hit Harriet instead.

Conduction is a way of moving through space, but it also involves moving through time. During this Conduction, Harriet evokes images of the past such that they are present in some phantasmatic, half-real and half-spiritual manner. This reflects the way in which people's own histories are always real and not real at the same time. A person's history makes them who they are, but will always have a mythical, intangible quality, accessible only through recollection.

Harriet is now burning with powerful green light, and Hiram cannot see the water anymore. After being struck, Harriet had powerful, disturbing visions about slavery, and saw a whole "legion of Abes" ready to go to war. When she awoke, she saw her mother crying, and she learned that she had been unconscious for months. It took a long time for her to recover, but she did with a determination to destroy slavery forever. Harriet addresses Abe now, telling him he was the first person who inspired her to fight for freedom. The green light fades, and where the sky had been cloudy it is now clear, with the North Star glowing brightly above. They tumble to the ground, to a field surrounded by enslaved people.

The story of young Harriet being hit by a weight that an enslaver aimed to throw at another enslaved person attempting to run away is true. She did not receive proper medical treatment and the injury permanently disabled her, leaving her with health problems that affected her throughout her life. Perhaps significantly, these problems are not mentioned in the novel.

CHAPTER 24

In Maryland, the sun is rising. Hiram knows they might not be safe out in the field, so he picks up Harriet and runs into the woods with her. He finds a safe place to leave her then runs deeper into the woods, planning to find her again later. He spends the day completely still, watching. He sees two low whites going out for a hunt, and a mix of Quality and Tasked children playing together. Once night falls, he goes back to greet Harriet, who apologizes for collapsing after the Conduction. She says she has made that journey many times and doesn't know why this time had such a strong impact on her.

The exhaustion and weakness that both Harriet and Hiram experience after Conduction can be seen as a metaphor for the costs associated with remembering. Although memory is depicted as having an awesome power in the novel, it is also very painful. Accessing the past can be draining and traumatic—yet this difficulty does not mean that people should shy away from it.

They walk through the woods until they see a cabin in the distance, which Harriet calls "our place." She says it would be best to answer any questions Hiram has before going there, because there likely won't be time after. Hiram says that his grandmother, Santi Bess, was "a pure-blood African" with a talent for storytelling. One day, Bess told Rose that she was going somewhere Rose couldn't follow. That night, she disappeared, taking 48 enslaved people with her. All of them were "pure-bloods" like her. Hiram has mixed feelings about the story, because Rose was left behind and sold off.

The new detail in the story of Santi Bess—that all the people she liberated from Lockless were "pure-blood" Africans—emphasizes the idea that Conduction is a spiritual power passed down to enslaved people from their African ancestors. At the same time, "pure-blood" is an interesting term, particularly considering that captives would not have thought of themselves as one African race, but rather a jumble of very different nations and peoples.

Harriet likens Conduction to the ability to see bridges between islands that others can't, and to journey across those bridges. She says she's heard that captives of slave ships would leap into the water and be conducted back to their homes in Africa. Hiram admits that he struggles to remember his childhood, and Harriet asks if he's ever thought that he might be stopping himself from remembering. Hiram doesn't think so, but Harriet says that she herself sometimes feels the temptation to forget. Ultimately, however, she "cannot help but remember." It took her time to gain control over all the visions and voices she sees.

Again, the novel emphasizes that memory is not easy, but deeply challenging and painful. The fact that even Harriet struggles with her memories emphasizes that it can take an enormous amount of strength and willpower to face the past. Yet again, this difficulty does not mean it is not worth it. In fact, it is actually part of why memory is so important.

Hiram admits that he feels Conduction is "chancy," and he can't predict when it will happen or where it will take him. However, Harriet points out that every time Hiram has experienced Conduction it has involved water. Hiram is stunned. He asks Harriet why she didn't use Conduction to save Lydia. She explains that she can't use it to travel to places where she's never been, and she has never been to Alabama.

This passage provides several crucial details that help fill out the novel's depiction of Conduction. Indeed, it is important that these details are limitations—it would be a little too easy if Harriet and Hiram were simply able to travel wherever they wanted in an instant.

Harriet and Hiram go into the cabin; there are enslaved people waiting inside. Harriet introduces Hiram to their "host," then to her brothers, Ben and Henry. The fourth person present is Henry's wife, a woman with shaved hair named Jane. Hiram is struck by the way they all laugh, which is very different to how enslaved people normally laugh. He thinks that it is like they are in the North already. Harriet says that there is a "tradition" in her rescues that *"none shall turn back."* She gives instructions to those present, saying that they will depart the following night. She tells Hiram that her other brother, Robert, will also be coming, but that he wants as much time as possible to spend with his pregnant wife before he joins them.

One of the most famous details about Harriet Tubman is that, on at least one occasion, she was transporting a group of enslaved people to freedom when one of the men grew terrified and tried to return to the plantation. Harriet pointed a gun at him and told him, "You go on or die." This incident is alluded to with the phrase she uses here, "None shall turn back."

Hiram will be responsible for getting Robert. He walks back through the woods, reaching Robert's cabin before sunrise. He waits outside for Robert's signal, and when it comes, approaches Robert and asks him in coded language if he is ready to depart. Robert says he is. Hiram tells him to meet back in the same place at nightfall. However, when he returns, Robert does not come. Hiram knows that he should probably just leave, but ever since Bland's death he can't bear the idea of leaving anyone behind. He enters the cabin, and finds a woman, Mary, yelling at Robert, accusing him of running off to a social with another woman.

The scene inside Robert's cabin provides an important reminder that even in the midst of the terrifying drama of an escape attempt enslaved people were just that: people. Like all humans, they experienced insecurity, pettiness, jealousy, and resentment, as demonstrated by Mary's paranoia that Robert is trying to go to a social with another woman.

Robert claims that he is just going to visit family, but Hiram intervenes and explains that this isn't the truth. He says that Robert is about to be sold, and fleeing is the only way to avoid that fate. He knows that he is violating the rules of the Underground by speaking like this. Yet he continues, saying that thanks to the Underground, there is a chance Robert and Mary will be able to see each other again. He promises, "We will not rest until you and your Robert are brought into reunion." Mary begins moaning in the same way Sophia did when she and Hiram were captured. Hiram tells her his name, and Mary finally relents. She and Robert kiss tenderly.

Hiram's decision to violate the rules of the Underground, while risky, appears to have paid off in this instance. Yet just because Mary is able to understand let Robert go, this does not mean that her knowledge of where he is really going may not thwart either of them later on. Hiram's risk could end up seriously backfiring.

Once Hiram and Robert leave, Robert confesses that he never planned to go back to Mary. They don't really have a child together; if she is pregnant, it is by their enslaver. He says, "I'd be damned if I was gon be raising some white man's child." He admits that when Hiram spoke it reminded him that he really does love Mary, but he can't get over the fact that she is pregnant by another man. Robert laments that enslaved people don't have anything "pure." Hiram points out that white people don't either, but at least black people don't waste time pretending to be pure, when nothing truly pure exists.

Just as Mary's human flaws were revealed earlier in this chapter, now Robert's are as well. His struggle to deal with the fact that Mary is pregnant with their enslaver's child could be seen as sympathetic or objectionable, depending on one's position. Of course, it is undeniable that men like Robert were placed in horrible positions. Yet they still had a responsibility to remain supportive of women, like Mary, who were raped by enslavers.

CHAPTER 25

Harriet's parents are free, even though their children are enslaved. Robert says he can't see his mother, Ma Rit, because she isn't good at hiding her emotions, to the point that it would put them in danger. This is why Harriet, who escaped 10 years ago, still hasn't been back to see her. Robert whistles, and his father, Pop Ross, comes out of the house. Harriet and the rest of the group are waiting inside a nearby stable. She embraces Robert tightly. They wait for Ma Rit to go to sleep, and when Pop Ross comes out to speak to them, he is wearing a blindfolded. This way, he can honestly say no if someone asks him if he's seen them.

This passage explores yet another harrowing way in which slavery separated family members. Even those lucky enough to successfully escape could rarely inform their family members of their victory, as this would endanger everyone involved. In securing freedom, Harriet and her siblings are forced to abandon their parents.

The group walk out to the pond, with Henry and Jane leading Pop Ross by the arms. Everyone walks into the water but Pop Ross. Harriet kisses him, and the green light of Conduction erupts, illuminating Pop Ross's tears. Harriet dedicates the journey to John Tubman, Pop Ross, and Ma Rit. She continues to talk about her life almost like a preacher delivering a sermon, and the others concur in a call-and-response pattern. She talks about meeting John, the only man she has ever loved, and about moving North. She concludes, "May you find a love that love you, even in these shackled times," and the others respond, "That's the word."

Harriet's statement about finding love even in "these shackled times" conveys a central message of the novel. Although nothing could redeem enslaved people from the brutalities they suffered, the fact that they managed to sustain loving relationships in the midst of violence, rape, and forced separations is testament to the humanity of those who endured the agonies of slavery.

CHAPTER 26

They arrive back in Philadelphia early the next morning. Henry and Robert help support an exhausted Harriet, and Hiram leads the way to a storehouse where Otha and Kessiah are waiting. Seeing Kessiah, Hiram suddenly realizes that she is his family, a connection back to Virginia and to Rose. He realizes that his old fantasies about inheriting **Lockless** and seeing Howell as his "savior" meant that he had been forgetting Rose. After all he has been through, he is now a better person. Kessiah embraces him and he starts crying, then realizes everyone around him is also holding each other and crying.

As is probably clear, this is a very important turning point for Hiram. Throughout the novel, he has struggled with feelings of resentment and alienation from his white family members and a secret desire to claim the attachment to them that he believes is rightfully his. Now he realizes that this suppressed allegiance has actually led to an internal emotional betrayal of Rose.

Back at the house, the group eat a large breakfast just as the sun is coming up. Robert admits that he feels a duty to go back for Mary, and Hiram says he will speak to Harriet about it, considering it was him who promised to get her in the first place. The new arrivals are advised to stay inside, as there will be Hounds prowling the city looking for them. Raymond hands Hiram a letter from the Virginia station while saying that Hiram no longer owes them anything. Yet Hiram feels that he is now bound to the Underground permanently.

When Hiram was first conscripted into the Underground, there were aspects of the experience that were reminiscent of slavery. However, now he has come to the point where he has actively chosen to be an agent because being in the Underground is what gives his life meaning. This is another highly important turning point for him.

Later, Hiram tells Harriet that he is going back to Virginia, and Harriet warns him not to "let them pull [him] into their schemings." She tells him to write to Kessiah if he ever needs support, because Kessiah and Harriet stick close together. The next day, Hiram wakes up to find Otha, Raymond, and Kessiah talking excitedly at the table. Otha explains that they think they've found a way to get Lydia and the children out. McKiernan wants to sell them; they have communicated with him through an intermediary.

The determination of the Philadelphia Underground to rescue Lydia and the children is moving. It emphasizes the point Otha made to Hiram at the convention: that there is no choice but to keep fighting and insist on success as the only option.

Kessiah hands Hiram a book called *The Kidnapped and the Ransomed*, which contains the story of Otha's flight from slavery. Raymond says that Otha and some others will sell the book around the North, raising money to buy Lydia and the kids. Otha says he regrets having to pay, but at this point he'll do whatever it takes. Hiram notes that he is leaving soon. He tries to explain how being in Philadelphia has changed him but cannot find the words. Otha hugs him and says, "We know."

The tactic of selling testimony by enslaved people to abolitionists as a way of raising money was a real and important part of the work of the Underground Railroad. This is yet another form of power held by such testimonies, which had significant historical, social, and even financial value.

CHAPTER 27

Before going back into the **coffin**, Hiram goes to see Kessiah. She asks how he is doing, and he replies, "Lotta feelings." Kessiah concurs, saying it is difficult to deal with everyone coming. She finds it hard to constantly leave her husband but is grateful that he understands that this is her nature. Hiram mentions bringing Thena up from Virginia. He feels he owes it to her after how she took care of him at **Lockless**. He promises, "I will get her out." Kessiah says she would love to see Thena but will not let herself get her hopes up. Letting go of her mother was painful that it will be difficult to entertain the idea of seeing her again.

Like Sophia, Thena is a "modern" woman who craves independence despite the fact that she loves her husband. Indeed, the novel shows that through work for the Underground Railroad, female characters like Harriet, Kessiah, Corrine, and Amy can overcome the restrictions placed on them due to their gender and pursue the kind of independent life available to few women during this era.

The next morning, Hiram dresses in the style of enslaved people in Philadelphia. Just as he is about to set off, Mars comes running toward him, carrying a bag. Inside is a piece of gingerbread and a bottle of rum. Mars says, "Remember [...] Family." Hiram's train pulls in. A white Underground agent, there to protect Hiram, is waiting onboard. Moving through the country, the presence of slavery weighs heavy on him. However, he resolves that he never wants to "breathe free air" while Sophia and Thena are still enslaved. he knows he will need to persuade Corrine to help free them, which may be a challenge without Bland.

Through his work in the Underground, Hiram is now connected to a vast network of people across the country. The support and love he receives from characters like Raymond, Otha, Harriet, Kessiah, and Mars empowers him and convinces him that his freedom means little if the people he loves remain enslaved.

Taking Sophia will be dangerous because she is Nathaniel's prized possession, while Thena will also be tricky, because the Underground prefers to save younger people. When Hiram goes to meet Corrine and Hawkins, Corrine says that in killing Maynard, Hiram saved her from a terrible marriage, but ruined years of planning. Now that she is "condemned to spinsterhood," she will never secure the power she would have had as a married woman. She then informs Hiram that Roscoe has died, and that Howell wants Hiram to come and take his place. She asks Hiram if he will go to Howell to gather information, and to her surprise, he immediately says yes—on the condition that she help liberate Sophia and Thena.

The way in which Corrine talks about Maynard's death with Hiram shows how manipulative she can be. She flatters Hiram by thanking him for saving her from a terrible marriage, while also making him feel like he is indebted to her because he inadvertently destroyed her plans. This contradictory combination is a classic tactic of emotional manipulation, betraying Corrine's desire to gain control over Hiram.

Corrine and Hawkins are initially highly reluctant, but Hiram insists, and Corrine eventually agrees. The next day, Hiram dons his tasking clothes while Corrine dresses in her mourning outfit. They drive through the town and past the racetrack, and when Hiram asks about race-day Corrine comments that it's not happening this year and may never happen again. They park the horses and go into an inn. As soon as they are inside, Corrine exchanges coded words with the clerk, and Hawkins and two low white men immediately lock the door and draw the blinds. To his astonishment, Hiram realizes that Corrine is operating an Underground station right where he stands.

Corrine is a complicated figure within the novel. In many ways she is presented as admirable and impressive due to her boldness, ingenuity, and vision. At the same time, she seems to possess issues with control. She wants to operate the Underground entirely according to her plans and resents when other people interfere with these plans. This obviously not a good strategy for collaboration and indicates that she is primarily motivated by her own ego.

Over the ensuing hour, several meetings take place. Hiram learns that Freetown has been all but totally destroyed. He walks over and finds Georgie's house burned to the ground; any furniture that remains has been smashed up. He finds bits of pottery and broken pair of glasses. In the corner, Hiram sees the toy horse he carved for Georgie's baby. Feeling a deep sense of shame, he puts the horse in his pocket.

The shame Hiram feels in this passage is understandable, even if the actions taken against Georgie can be justified by the fact that they stopped him betraying more enslaved people. The fact that Hiram feels guilty shows that his humanity remains intact in a way Georgie's wasn't.

CHAPTER 28

The next day, Hiram heads to **Lockless**, feeling overwhelmed with emotion. To his shame, he finds himself praying that Lockless has somehow been spared from the ruin that has taken over the whole of Elm County. When he gets to the plantation, he doesn't recognize any of the small number of enslaved workers laboring in the field. Hiram sees Howell sitting on the porch. He greets him politely and Howell embraces him, crying, repeating the words "My boy." Although Hiram has only been gone a year, Howell looks a whole decade older. Howell makes a horrified remark about Hiram's clothing, saying he can provide some better clothes for him.

Howell's emotional embrace of Hiram suggests that he may have softened in his old age and grief. Howell likely imagined that Hiram would always be around, a faithful and dependable presence in his life. Hiram's absence left Howell totally alone, without any immediate family members. Of course, any sympathy the reader might be inclined to feel for Howell will be heavily curtailed by the fact that he has separated countless enslaved people from their own families.

Howell asks how Hiram is finding it at Corrine's, then adds that, seeing as Roscoe was smaller than Hiram, it might be better if Hiram took some of Maynard's old clothes instead. He also says that Hiram can stay in Maynard's old room. Howell says that everything is very different at **Lockless**, and that in his old age he has become very concerned with finding a suitable heir. He regrets letting Hiram go to work for Corrine. He feels sure that Hiram will do a good job of taking Roscoe's place, but he also wants him to do more, to help oversee the running of the plantation. Hiram agrees, and Howell expresses his relief. He says that his two great regrets in life are letting go of Rose, then letting go of Hiram.

It now becomes clear that this whole time, Howell thought that Hiram was working at Bryceton, which is why he doesn't appear angry at all about Hiram having run away. His desire to dress Hiram in Maynard's clothes, give him Maynard's room, and hand over the management of Lockless to him indicates that he is distressed by the prospect of not having a suitable heir. Yet the fact that Howell has denied Hiram his heritage up until this point again curtails any sympathy for his plight.

That evening, Hiram finds that he doesn't recognize any of the kitchen staff either. They are old, and thus must have been purchased because older enslaved people are the cheapest to buy. Hiram serves dinner and then joins Howell for a drink in his study. He then goes to his old room, which is just as he left it. He hears Thena humming, but when he approaches her, she ignores him. He apologizes to her, saying that he was wrong for how he treated her, particularly considering she is "all the family [he] ha[s]." Thena looks at him suspiciously, and Hiram keeps talking, apologizing ever more profusely. Finally, she takes his hand and squeezes it, before asking him to hand her a piece of fabric for her sewing.

Thena's reluctant and somewhat suspicious display of tenderness is all the more moving given how difficult it evidently is for her to express it. Having lost her children after they were sold, Thena was forced to endure the loss of her surrogate child when Hiram left Lockless, too. Yet she loves him enough to cautiously welcome him back, despite how painful the entire experience must have been for her.

Hiram gathers a few possessions from his old room, including the coin. Then he dresses Howell in his nightclothes and puts him to bed. The next day, Hiram brings Corrine, Amy, and Hawkins over for lunch; Corrine and Howell eat alone. After the guests leave and Hiram has served Howell dinner, he goes down to see Thena. They eat together in silence. Thena asks if Hiram has seen Sophia yet, telling him she's just down on the Street. She doesn't see Nathaniel much, as he is usually in Tennessee. Corrine has made some kind of "arrangement" wherein Sophia is largely left alone to do what she wants.

While Corrine might be condemned for keeping it a secret from Hiram that Sophia was back at Lockless, it is also clear that she has taken measures to make sure that Sophia is alright. Indeed, if Corrine had told Hiram Sophia was here, it is very possible he might have tried to come back to get her, and thus Corrine's actions—as they often are—are both brutal and prudent.

The next day is Sunday, and in the afternoon, Hiram goes down to the Street, which has "fallen into disrepair." According to Thena, Sophia is living in the cabin that Hiram and Thena used to share. When Hiram sees her, she is holding a baby, and he can tell that she is "different." Sophia greets him in a teasing way. When she sees him looking at the baby, she assures him that she isn't his, then says her name is Caroline. Sophia says she worried about Hiram, wondering what had happened to him, and that she talks to Caroline about him.

Of course, one of the most horrifying aspects of family separation is the fact that the loved ones from whom one is separated will likely change in ways that are impossible to predict. This is true of Sophia, who is now a mother and also "different" in some other, fundamental sense. This difference emphasizes the distance that has appeared between her and Hiram.

Sophia tells Hiram about the vast number of people who have been sold from **Lockless**. Looking at Caroline, Hiram sees from the color of her eyes that she must be Nathaniel's daughter. Suddenly, Hiram feels as if he wants to flee from Sophia and never see her again, yet another part of him is horrified by this instinct. Speaking again about all the people who have been sold off, Sophia says, "They are killing us all." She says it is good to see Hiram, who has come back from the dead twice: once after falling into the **Goose**, and once after being captured by Ryland.

This is another reminder that, like all people, Hiram is flawed. His horror at realizing that Caroline is Nathaniel's daughter and his instinct to run away are not exactly commendable, but understandable. Indeed, Hiram must struggle internally to overpower the selfish instincts within himself.

Later that evening, Hiram expresses his hurt that Thena didn't tell him about Caroline. He's realized that Sophia would have been pregnant when she escaped with him, and that this is probably the reason why she chose to come. He claims that he was straightforward with Sophia while she was not with him, but Thena thinks this is a disingenuous interpretation.

Hiram's anger that Sophia misled him by not revealing that she wanted to run away because she was pregnant is clearly caused by feelings of romantic disappointment. He dreamed that Sophia wanted to be with him, but really, her main motivation was Caroline.

CHAPTER 29

Winter comes, bringing a solemn atmosphere. Occasionally Howell's friends will visit, and they will discuss the old days. The person Howell sees most is Corrine, who he still views as a surrogate daughter. Yet Hiram is responsible for "everyday companionship" with his father. After dinner, they sit together and drink. One night, Howell starts talking about Maynard. He says that his own father never loved him and only cared about "station," and Howell wanted to be more liberal with his son. Beginning to cry, Howell says the truth is that Maynard was never suited to the life into which he was born.

There is something disturbing about the contrast between the thoughtful tenderness Howell feels for Maynard (and, to a lesser extent, Hiram) and the brutal cruelties he has inflicted on the enslaved people at Lockless. Indeed, while it would be almost more reassuring to characterize enslavers as straightforwardly evil, the even more horrifying truth is that they were capable of love and care—yet still chose to enact unimaginable horrors on the enslaved.

Howell confesses that he is not a "good man," saying Hiram knows this most of all and that he hasn't forgotten all the wrong he's done to him. Hiram knows that this is the closest to an apology Howell will ever get. He was raised in a world where men like him never have to apologize for anything. Howell says that he was personally never skilled at managing the plantation, and always imagined that Hiram was the person best suited to it. After saying this, Howell falls asleep. Hiram finishes his cider and takes out the ledgers documenting the financial status of **Lockless**. He pours over them until he has them memorized.

In making these late-in-life confessions, it is obvious that Howell is not thinking of Hiram, but rather fixating on his own regrets and guilty conscience. Like Corrine, Howell is capable of sympathy with the enslaved, but this is motivated by egotism, and is thus a thin, and arguably meaningless, gesture.

While Hiram is taking Howell up to bed, Howell says, "I got plans for you, boy." He then begs Hiram to tell him a story, which Hiram does—a story about the esteemed families of Quality in Elm County back in the old days. The next day, Corrine comes for a visit. While she is there, Hiram and Hawkins walk down to the Street. Hiram half hopes to see Sophia, although he has always been keeping her "at arm's length." Hiram mentions looking at the ledgers, which revealed that **Lockless** is deeply in debt. Nathaniel has lent Howell a lot of money over the years, which Howell has never paid back.

Even Howell's use of the word "boy" has two very different meanings based on the two contradictory sides of his and Hiram's relationship. Speaking as a father to his son, "boy" is a term of affection. Yet speaking as a white enslaver to a black enslaved man, it is an insult, a term of degradation. Part of what is so traumatizing about their relationship is that each meaning is haunted by the other.

For some people, the bad fortune of **Lockless** represents an opportunity. Thena has started hiring herself out for laundry work, which will allow her to eventually buy her freedom. One day, while Hiram is driving Thena to one of her laundry clients, they see Sophia standing with Caroline (who is also called "Carrie" for short) on the street. Sophia gets in the carriage, and they drive on. When they get to the destination of Thena's laundry client, all three adults get out and do the laundry together. Once they are back at Lockless, Sophia says goodbye to Thena then angrily turns to Hiram. She says he was "supposed to be better" and know that she didn't belong to any man. Furious, she turns around and walks away.

Sophia is obviously very perceptive and can tell not only that Hiram is avoiding her, but that it is because he can't handle that Carrie is Nathaniel's daughter. Her incisive understanding of Hiram's psychology and willingness to boldly confront him about it underline that she is one of the most admirable characters in the novel—wise, independent, and uncompromising.

After serving Howell dinner, Hiram goes out to the Street to find Sophia. When she sees him she glares at him. He apologizes profusely, for everything he has done to her. He takes her hand and promises that he is trying to be better. Sophia kisses his hand and says she understands that he wants her, but he must learn to understand that she will never belong to any man. Hiram realizes that in all his fantasies about Sophia, she had only ever been an "ornament" to him. Hiram gives Sophia the wooden horse for Carrie, promising that he's "trying."

While Sophia is uncompromising in what she wants from Hiram, she has the graciousness and patience to wait for him grow. This is another aspect of her character that makes her so admirable: she combines strong principles and expectations with sympathy and forgiveness of others.

CHAPTER 30

Hiram, Thena, Sophia, and Carrie are the only enslaved people at **Lockless** who are not in danger of being sold. The four of them form a "unit" with their own "routine." One night, Sophia comments that Thena is old, and is still living a very hard life. She suggests that she and Hiram take over her laundry duties for a while, to give her a break. Thena is reluctant, but eventually agrees to this. After a long day of difficult work, Hiram sits on Sophia's bed while she gets Carrie ready to sleep. They discuss their attempt at running away. Sophia wonders aloud why neither of them was sold toward Natchez, and Hiram pretends not to know.

As has happened several times in the novel before, Hiram, Thena, Sophia, and Carrie have formed an improvised family unit, despite the fact that Sophia and Carrie are the only ones directly related to each other (although, of course, Carrie is strangely actually Hiram's cousin). The pain of family separation is once again softened by the new relations formed in its wake.

Hiram says that he knew that Caroline was Nathaniel's daughter as soon as he saw her. This means that although she is not Hiram's daughter, she is still his relative, because he is a Walker. Sophia gives Hiram Caroline to hold, and he takes her in his arms. He thinks about Howell never held him like this, and how he always wanted him to. Caroline provides hope in the increasingly desolate atmosphere at **Lockless**. Sometimes Thena takes care of her and does so that Sunday. After doing some repair work on Sophia's cabin, Hiram comes inside.

Hiram's touching connection with Caroline suggests that the trauma created by separated families and absent, abusive fathers—while it can never be fully healed—does not have to carry over to the next generation. Having learned the power of parental love from Rose and the pain of not receiving it from Howell, Hiram is determined that Caroline has a better life.

Hiram fetches the rum that Mars gave him from his room in the big house and brings it back to Sophia's cabin. Sophia remarks that he is not "the same man" he was before they ran away. He asks her what happened after they were put in jail, and Sophia tells him that Ryland's Hounds threatened to send her into the fancy trade. She was terrified, but knew she had to be strong for the sake of her unborn baby. She named Caroline after Carolina, the home from which Sophia was taken. While Sophia was in jail, Corrine came to see her and took her out. Corrine said it would be better if Nathaniel never found out that Sophia tried to run away.

The rum Mars gave Hiram before he left Philadelphia is a reminder of the joy, hope, and freedom that Hiram briefly experienced in the North. By drinking it with Sophia, he insists on their right to experience a glimmer of this freedom back at Lockless, and to hope that one day, they will both be able to truly live freely.

After Sophia returned to **Lockless**, Corrine would sometimes come down to the Street and ask her who had been sold and sent toward Natchez. Sophia would ask about Hiram, and Corrine always assured her that he was alright. Sophia says she can't believe Hiram came back to her. Hiram realizes that he has forgotten so much: about how much he missed Sophia, about his life in Philadelphia, and about his own loneliness. Hours later, Hiram and Sophia lie upstairs in bed, marveling at each other. Hiram feels he truly understands Conduction for the first time. He gets dressed, and as he goes Sophia hands him the toy horse, saying Caroline is too young for it still. Hiram bids her goodbye and leaves. He walks to the **Goose**, squeezes the horse, and is enveloped in a "new mist."

Again, while Corrine keeps extremely tight control over her operation and resents interference, it is clear that she acts with thoughtfulness and care. The fact that she hid Sophia's escape from Nathaniel and made an arrangement such that Nathaniel largely left her alone shows that she was protecting Sophia, all the while making it seem like she wasn't.

CHAPTER 31

Hiram has finally mastered Conduction, and this achievement brings him immense joy. He spends his nights with Sophia, theoretically keeping this secret from Thena, until she reveals she knows by telling him she is happy for him. However, more problems come in December with the return of Nathaniel. Hiram is forced to drive Sophia to Nathaniel's house, a task that horrifies him, but which he forces himself to accept. On the way, Sophia asks him about the splendor she imagines at Corrine's house, and he answers vaguely. Sophia says she's heard that Corrine often travels North, and says she assumes Hiram never went there with her.

Sophia's questions about Corrine's house and the North serve as a reminder that, despite how close Hiram and Sophia have now become, he is still keeping an enormous secret from her. Although Hiram is surely planning to reveal this secret at some point, the longer it goes on, the more likely Sophia is to feel betrayed by him not having told her earlier.

Hiram asks Sophia how she got to Nathaniel's while he was away, and to his astonishment, she says she walked. She talks about how degrading this felt, and then expresses the murderous rage she feels against white people. She has often thought about seeking violent revenge, although this changed after she had Caroline. When they get to Nathaniel's, a servant greets them and says that Nathaniel can't see Sophia that day, and that he will send for her when he is able to. Driving away, both Sophia and Hiram are happy about this, but Sophia also remarks that it is strange, as something like it has never happened before. She jokes that somehow Hiram managed to do it.

The change of circumstances at Nathaniel's, while positive, is a reminder of how unpredictable life under slavery is, as well as how totally beyond the control of the enslaved. Sophia's joke that Hiram somehow stopped Nathaniel from seeing her seems almost more like a wish expressed on both their behalves.

Speaking from a future perspective, Hiram reminisces about how happy he is in this moment. They talk about the falling fortunes of Elm County, and Hiram hints that there might be something better for them on the horizon. Sophia says she cannot trust him unless he tells her his entire plan in full. When they get back to **Lockless**, they find Thena with a bandage around her head. When they ask what happened, she says she doesn't remember. After checking that Caroline is fine, Sophia bursts into tears and says, "They took it." Going in himself, Hiram sees that the whole room has been smashed up. All the money that Thena has been saving from her laundry work has been taken.

This cruel turn of events is the kind of thing that happened all too regularly under slavery. Women like Thena had essentially no means of redress. If they were robbed, raped, or beaten—either by enslavers or even by other enslaved people—they had very little chance of receiving justice.

Although enslavers are known to steal from the enslaved, the way that Thena's house has been smashed up proves that the culprits are themselves enslaved. Following the attack, Hiram, Sophia, and Thena all move in together in Thena's cabin, and they make sure Thena is never left alone. Meanwhile, they learn that Nathaniel never actually returned from Tennessee. One night, Sophia mentions that she's heard that in Tennessee, there are different "customs," and sometimes white men take black women as wives. She wonders if this is what Nathaniel is planning.

Hiram, Sophia, and Thena's little family unit had a brief moment of seeming happy and secure, but tragically, such moments are usually not able to last long under slavery. Facing threats from every side—from Nathaniel to the other enslaved people who robbed Thena—the family is in grave danger.

During Christmastime, Corrine comes to stay with **Lockless**, bringing a great number of servants as well as guests with her. This greatly cheers Howell. Hiram knows that in reality, all the servants as well as the guests are actually agents of the Underground. After arriving, she requests that Hiram take her on a tour of the grounds. While they are alone, he tells her it is time to conduct Thena and Sophia to the North. He explains about the attack on Thena's house, and mentions his fears that Nathaniel is going to take Sophia to Tennessee. However, Corrine then says that this won't happen; she has already made a deal with Nathaniel, and in one week, Sophia will become Corrine's property.

Again, Corrine's actions teeter on the edge between commendable and cruel. She has prudently arranged for Sophia to be kept safe from Nathaniel; the fact that she has bought Sophia from him means that within a week, Sophia will essentially be free. At the same time, the fact that she did this without Sophia's consent and kept it hidden from both Sophia and Hiram illustrates her ruthless nature and suggests she might even enjoy the power she has over others.

Hiram observes that Corrine is one of the most "fanatical" Underground agents that he has ever met, and that all of these agents have been white. This frenzy lies in the fact that slavery is a personal affront to them, challenging their belief in their own goodness. Hiram demands that both Sophia and Thena be liberated immediately, but Corrine says there is already a plan in place, from which they cannot deviate. If Sophia disappears as soon as she falls into Corrine's possession, it will look suspicious. She insists they need more time. Hiram knows that Corrine is right, but he is still furious. Hiram refuses to comply, but Corrine urges him to "think beyond all [his] guilt" and see sense. She asks him to promise that he will not "doom" them, and he does, though not in the way she means.

This is a crucial passage in the novel, as it explores how a person's motivations can complicate their involvement with liberation work. Hiram describes how Corrine is almost dangerously "fanatical" because her involvement with the Underground is motivated by her own damaged ego. Meanwhile, Corrine herself accuses Hiram of being clouded by his own feelings of guilt in a way that inhibits his ability to make rational decisions. Arguably the accusations they make of each other are both correct.

CHAPTER 32

Forced to work alone, Hiram realizes that he will have to tell the full truth to both Sophia and Thena. He tells Sophia first, while Thena is sleeping. After filling her in on everything that happened with the Underground and Philadelphia, he explains that he is planning to conduct both her and Thena to freedom. Sophia reacts with anger, resentful that Hiram left her down in **Lockless** and unsure if she can trust him. He takes her to the **Goose** and begins reminiscing about the Christmas when the big group sat around the fire and discussed the story of Santi Bess. He squeezes the wooden horse in his pocket while he is talking. Immediately, Sophia jumps, because the Conduction has already begun.

Perhaps Corrine can't be blamed for keeping secrets from Hiram because, as this passage shows, Hiram has done the exact same thing to Sophia and Thena. Furthermore, he has done it for seemingly similar reasons—in order to protect the eventual success of the mission and maintain control. Indeed, maintaining such control has proven to be a vital aspect of being a successful Underground agent.

The people sitting around the fire that Christmas Day appear as visions over the water. Hiram lets go of the horse, and they fall down onto the other side of the riverbank. He tells Sophia, "It's like dancing." He shows her again and again, performing short Conductions to prove how it works. The final vision he summons is of a woman **water dancing**. The next night, Hiram asks Sophia if she'd ever seen someone water dance before. She says she knows where the tradition comes from. An African king was captured and brought onto a slave ship with his people. They revolted, killed the white people, and tried to turn the ship around. However, they were quickly surrounded by a white army, and the king told his people to walk out onto the water, saying the water goddess would bring them home.

This is another crucial passage in the novel, where water dancing's poignant connection to rebellion and freedom is finally revealed. Indeed, it is significant that for most of the narrative, this connection has not been discussed openly. This replicates the manner in which rituals and myths are a part of daily life even when their actual meaning is not always apparent. Learning the meaning of water dancing helps Hiram understand why it is such an important tradition, and how it connects to Conduction. This is therefore a crucial reminder to trace the historical origins of rituals.

Hiram says that Santi Bess didn't *walk* into the water—she danced into it. He says he's learned that the "deeper" the memory he recalls, the farther Conduction takes him. The problem is that he needs an object linked to a memory that was further back in the past. Sophia asks what Hiram will do after he conducts her to the North, and he says that he will set her up somewhere and come and visit when he can. In response, Sophia says that she and Caroline aren't going anywhere without him. She tells Hiram that he is Caroline's father, "more of a daddy than that girl would ever have." Hiram warns her that she is "chaining" herself, but Sophia replies, "Ain't a chain if it is my choosing."

The happy ending to Sophia and Hiram's romantic narrative ties together many of the novel's main themes in a cathartic, redemptive manner. Both Hiram and Sophia heal from the trauma of broken families by making their own, new family unit. Meanwhile, knowing that she has access to a life of freedom allows Sophia to shed her resistance to romantic coupledom and attach herself to Hiram, an attachment that doesn't worry her because he respects her independence and agency.

The next day, Sophia pretends that Caroline is ill so that Thena and Hiram will get time alone together while doing the laundry. While they are working, Hiram tells Thena that he has seen Kessiah. Thena's initial response is to ask, "Who?" Hiram explains that Kessiah lives just outside Philadelphia, free, with a husband who loves her. Thena becomes lost in thought, recalling memories about Kessiah, whom she last saw when she was only a small child. She starts crying and asks if Hiram saw any of her other children. Apologetically, Hiram says he didn't, and Thena grows angry. She asks why he told her this. She starts shouting at him, telling him to leave her alone, and that he is "done" to her. Hiram reflects that he should have expected this reaction.

This is one of the most emotionally disturbing passages in the novel. In an ideal world, the prospect of being reunified with a lost family member would bring instant joy and relief. But the reality is that the psychological scars of separation are so deep that it is essentially a form of harm that cannot be undone. Indeed, Thena obviously feels re-traumatized simply by Hiram reminding her that her children are alive and presenting her with the possibility of reuniting with Kessiah. It is simply too much for her to handle.

CHAPTER 33

The next morning, after serving Howell breakfast, Hiram goes up to Howell's study and writes a brief, coded letter to the Philadelphia Underground. He informs Harriet that he is going to try and get Thena and Sophia out using Conduction. Hiram then helps Howell with his own correspondence and waits for him to have his afternoon nap. While Howell is asleep, Hiram returns to his study and opens an ornate box he has noticed previously. Inside is a shell necklace, which he instantly recognizes as the one around Rose's neck in the visions of her **water dancing**.

The fact that Hiram has chosen to act alone is highly dangerous, although having the Philadelphia Underground's support could prove transformative. The narrative is obviously building to a climactic conclusion, wherein the main characters will either successfully escape to freedom, be re-enslaved, or—perhaps even worse—separated.

Suddenly, all of Hiram's forgetting dissolves, and he is finally gripped by the full memory of his mother. This knowledge makes him want to murder Howell immediately. Instead of doing so, he tucks the necklace under his shirt and walks into the kitchen, remembering that Howell is due to see Corrine that evening. After dinner, Corrine mentions that Hawkins wants to speak with Hiram. Going to see Hawkins, Hiram says he knows that he's going to try to stop him freeing Sophia and Thena, but that he won't succeed. Hawkins offers Hiram a cigar and talks about the profound gratitude he feels for Corrine.

Not only does Hiram have all the usual problems to worry about when attempting to convey people from freedom to slavery, but he is also facing the opposite of the Virginia Underground. Considering that Corrine has thus far proven herself to be the most powerful character in the book, this opposition is distinctly formidable, and threatens to unravel his whole plan.

Yet Hawkins then says that it can be easy to forget that the whole aim of the Underground is to fight for freedom, and that means that a person should be able to do whatever they want. Hiram's plan might not be what Hawkins himself would do, but Hiram is "free and must act according to [his] own sense." The next Sunday, Hiram and Thena load the crates of laundry together in silence. Eventually, Thena begins to cry, and begins speaking about how hard it was for her to love Hiram after her children were taken away. She managed to love him anyway, but then he left, too. Sobbing, she asks what she will say to Kessiah, and what she will do when she looks at her and cannot help but see her "lost ones."

Hawkins's words are very important. He subtly indicates that Corrine may at times lose sight of the fact that the Underground is an organization whose purpose is to fight for freedom. Indeed, considering Hiram's earlier reflections about Corrine, this is likely because freedom doesn't have the same meaning to her as it does for the formerly enslaved. While her own egocentric motivations for fighting take center stage, for Hiram and Hawkins, freedom what matters most.

Hiram knows they cannot wait much longer to get Sophia and Thena out. He waits two weeks for a response from Harriet, but doesn't receive one, and thus knows he must press on alone. He arranges to conduct Thena on a Saturday night. He, Sophia, and Thena eat a "feast" together and then say goodbye; taking Thena first, Hiram tells Sophia to wait for him back in their cabin. Hiram leads Thena to **the River Goose**, and as they walk out the North Star shines brightly above them. Hiram dedicates the Conduction to Rose and to all mothers who have been taken or who have had their loved ones taken for them.

The ritual of dedicating one's Conductions to particular people is moving. It is a reminder that each Conduction is not an individual act, but one involving many people—indeed, a whole world of people. The power of memory is only important because of the way it connects people to one another across space and time. Without this communal element, memory and Conduction wouldn't have the same profound meaning.

Hiram then turns to Thena, and says he is about to tell her something that he has never told her before. He says that for a long time he could not really remember Rose, but now he does. He remembers what she looked like, and that she used to tell him stories about Africa at night, and about their ancestors who now live "in that paradise under the sea." Hiram then recalls when tobacco prices started falling, and the enslaved people of **Lockless** began to be sold off. He remembers that one night, Rose woke him up and carried him away with her. They travelled for three days, sleeping in the daytime and running at night. This was just after Emma had been sold.

This important twist shows that Hiram's desire for flight was shared by Rose, establishing a continuous chain of connection between Santi Bess's escape, Rose's, and Hiram's. Moreover, his memory that Rose used to tell him stories about Africa makes explicitly clear that Hiram's loss of Rose and his memories of her is a metaphor for the loss of Africa and ancestral lineage that happened to all enslaved people and their descendants.

Ryland caught Rose and Hiram and brought them to the jail. Howell came to the jail looking "pained," and asked Rose why she ran. He then grew angry, and Rose immediately knew that he was going to sell her as punishment. Rose took the shell necklace and gave it to Hiram, telling him to "Forget nothing of what you have seen." Shortly after, Hiram was pulled away from her, and she was carried off. Back at **Lockless**, Howell took the necklace from Hiram and Hiram, despairing, fled into the stable. There was a water trough there, and it was via this water that he first experienced Conduction.

Hiram's suppression of the memory that Howell sold Rose out of bitterness is perhaps the product of Hiram's own lingering loyalties to his father despite the fact that Howell betrayed Rose (and Hiram) so terribly. Indeed, Howell's pain upon learning that Rose ran away suggests that he was the victim of his own delusion. He tricked himself into believing that Rose loved him, when in fact she was, of course, his captive.

However, because the memory of all this was so painful, Hiram forgot it. He continues talking until he is no longer able to—Conduction overcomes them, and he is lost in a swirl of visions. A green light appears, and when Thena asks what's happening, a voice replies, "It is Conduction, friend. It is the old ways, which shall and do remain." Harriet is now there, apologizing for the delay. They arrive in Philadelphia, and Kessiah is there, telling Hiram he can go back because Thena is with them, safe.

Harriet's words make it explicitly clear that Conduction is a practice inherited from Africa. Although enslaved people were denied the right to practice their own African religions, cultures, languages, and rituals, they managed to find ways to do so surreptitiously—and hence some of the "old ways" were able to "remain."

CHAPTER 34

Hiram wakes up in an unfamiliar bed. Trying to get up, he falls to the floor. Hawkins appears, and helps him up. He explains that Sophia found Hiram outside her cabin yesterday morning, shivering with fever, and sent word to Corrine for help. It is a good thing that he is there, because Howell knows about Thena's disappearance and is suspicious. By the evening, Hiram is feeling better and goes down to see Corrine, who is in the common room at the Starfall Inn. Corrine says that she "doesn't like" what Hiram did, and that she needs to be able to know the minds of her agents. Hiram points out how this sounds, and Corrine smiles.

As the reader may have noticed, this is the last of several moments when Hiram wakes up in an unfamiliar bed, unsure of what happened to him. Each of these occasions can be seen as a kind of rebirth, a miraculous self-resurrection. Meanwhile, when speaking to Corrine Hiram is able to subtly point to the continuity between Corrine's way of thinking and that of an enslaver. She appears to concede that this might be true.

Corrine asks if Hiram will conduct Sophia, too, and he indicates that he will if he needs to. Corrine replies that in that case, she will make sure there is no need. Over a year passes before Hiram realizes what she means. Howell dies in the fall, with **Lockless** deeply in debt. However, before his death, Corrine arranges to buy it all and make it her property. Lockless therefore ends up becoming like Bryceton: an old Virginia planation on the surface, but in reality, a station of the Underground. All of the enslaved people who remain are whisked off to freedom in the North, and agents take their places. Although Corrine is officially the owner, Hiram assumes control as the true "lord of the manor."

Somewhat unusually for a novel about slavery, The Water Dancer *has a rather triumphant, happy ending. Some readers may interpret this as a misleading representation of life under slavery, which—despite very rare moments of victory and respite—was generally a series of horrors without end. At the same time, the novel's ending isn't perfect for Hiram, either. He does not escape to freedom in the North, but rather remains in the dangers of the South, tirelessly working to secure freedom for others.*

Two days after Hiram conducts Thena to freedom, Hiram deliberately shows Howell that he has the necklace, wanting him to know that he hasn't forgotten what happened when Howell sold Rose. He then goes back to the cabin to reunite with Sophia and Carrie. That night, in the middle of the night, Sophia asks Hiram, "What are we now?" Hiram replies that they are the same as ever: "Underground."

The final passage of the novel suggests that being "Underground" is about more than just the Railroad—it is a state of being defined by the surreptitious seizing of love and freedom, and the ongoing fight for justice.

HOW TO CITE

To cite this LitChart:

MLA

Seresin, Indiana. "*The Water Dancer.*" *LitCharts*. LitCharts LLC, 24 Oct 2019. Web. 21 Apr 2020.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Seresin, Indiana. "*The Water Dancer.*" LitCharts LLC, October 24, 2019. Retrieved April 21, 2020. https://www.litcharts.com/lit/the-water-dancer.

To cite any of the quotes from *The Water Dancer* covered in the Quotes section of this LitChart:

MLA

Coates, Ta-Nehisi. The Water Dancer. One World. 2019.

CHICAGO MANUAL

Coates, Ta-Nehisi. The Water Dancer. New York: One World. 2019.