Gem of the Ocean

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF AUGUST WILSON

Wilson and his five siblings were raised in a poor, predominately Black neighborhood of Pittsburgh. After his mother and father divorced in the 1950s, Wilson and his family moved to Hazelwood—a mostly white, working-class section of Pittsburgh. They faced overt bigotry in this community, as racist white people threw bricks through the windows of the Wilsons' new home. Wilson himself dropped out of high school during his sophomore year because he was falsely accused of plagiarizing an essay about Napoleon I. At this point, he started working odd jobs and made great use of Pittsburgh's Carnegie Library, which eventually gave him an honorary high school diploma because of how much time he spent reading in the stacks. Best known for his plays *Fences*, *The Piano Lesson*, *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, and *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, Wilson once said that his work was most influenced by "four B's": blues music, the writers Jorge Luis Borges and Amiri Baraka, and the painter Romare Bearden. Wilson wrote 16 plays, 10 of which make up what's known as his Pittsburgh Cycle—a cycle in which nine of the ten plays take place in the Pittsburgh's Hill District. Wilson died in Seattle at the age of 60, leaving behind a legacy as one of most important playwrights of the 20th century.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

The play is set shortly before what's known as the Great Migration, which began in 1916 and refers to the mass exodus of Black Americans from the South. Between 1916 and 1970, millions of Black people traveled north in search of better economic opportunities and racial equality (or at least something closer to equality than the South's segregated society). Although *Gem of the Ocean* is set in 1904—about 12 years before the Great Migration—it explores the attitudes that ended up inspiring many Black people to leave the South. The majority of the play's characters are originally from the South but now live in the North, and Citizen Barlow's storyline is particularly aligned with the experience many Black people faced during the Great Migration—after all, he comes to Pittsburgh because racist white southerners were making it impossible for him to establish a good life in the South. And yet, he ends up encountering different forms of discrimination in the North, since systemic racism was still quite common in the North during the early- to mid-20th century. On another note, the play also references the large boats that were used to bring enslaved Africans to America in the 1600s. In fact, Aunt Ester claims to be 285 years old, meaning that her life began in 1619, which was the year that the first slave ship set sail for Jamestown, Virginia.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

Although it was the second-to-last play that August Wilson wrote, *Gem of the Ocean* is—chronologically speaking—the first play in his *Pittsburgh Cycle*, which included ten plays that explored the Black American experience in the 20th century. The most famous of these plays were *Fences*, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, and *The Piano Lesson*. Although each play has its own unique concerns, all of them (except *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*) take place in Pittsburgh's Hill District, and they all deal with themes related to racism, freedom, and exploitation. On a broader level, Wilson was deeply influenced by famous Black American authors like Ralph Ellison, whose novel *Invisible Man* is similar to *Gem of the Ocean* insofar as both works feature characters who travel north expecting to find more opportunities but end up facing racist discrimination. The playwright Suzanne Lori-Parks's *Topdog/Underdog* is also worth mentioning alongside *Gem of the Ocean*, since it examines how young Black men deal with the legacy of racism and the abolition of slavery.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Gem of the Ocean
- **When Published:** The play premiered on April 28, 2003
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Drama
- **Setting:** Pittsburgh's Hill District in 1904
- **Climax:** Caesar bursts into Aunt Ester's house and tries to place Solly under arrest for burning down the mill, but Solly smacks him in the knee with his walking stick and runs away.
- **Antagonist:** Caesar—or, more broadly, the continued oppression and exploitation of Black Americans in the early 20th century.

EXTRA CREDIT

Nominations. The 2004 and 2005 Broadway production of *Gem of the Ocean* was nominated for five Tony Awards, including Best Play and Best Actress.

1839 Wylie Avenue. In 2019, the Pittsburgh Playwrights Theater Company put on a production of *Gem of the Ocean* at 1839 Wylie Avenue, where the play itself takes place.

PLOT SUMMARY

On a Friday night in 1904, a young man named Citizen Barlow visits Aunt Ester's house. Aunt Ester is a "spiritual advisor" in the Black community of Pittsburgh's Hill District, but Eli—who oversees her daily life—doesn't let Citizen speak to her. He can come back Tuesday, he tells Citizen, who becomes rowdy. He's desperate to speak to Aunt Ester because he's heard that she "washes" souls. As he grapples with Eli, Aunt Ester enters and repeats what Eli said: Citizen can come back Tuesday. Her words have a calming effect on Citizen, who finally leaves.

But Citizen doesn't *really* leave. He stands outside, hoping to find a chance to talk to Aunt Ester. The next morning, Eli complains about Citizen to Black Mary, who is Aunt Ester's protégé and housekeeper. Black Mary assures Eli that Citizen will leave at some point, probably joining the crowd living under a nearby bridge. There has been a growing number of people under that bridge because of Black Mary's brother, Caesar, who works as the town's constable (an official with limited powers to enforce the law). Caesar owns a boarding house and is strict about rent payments. He has been evicting so many tenants that Black Mary and Eli think the streets will soon be full of people with nowhere to go.

A traveling salesman named Rutherford Selig stops by the house. He says that the local mill is shut down. Eli tells him that a man named Garret Brown was accused of stealing a bucket of nails, and when Caesar tried to arrest him, he jumped into the nearby river. Everyone thought he'd come out, but he stayed in the water and drowned. Black Mary says he could have gotten out and served 30 days in jail; instead, he died to avoid punishment.

Solly, an old friend of Aunt Ester's, visits the house and joins the conversation. He makes a living collecting dog poop and selling it to local shoemakers, who use it while working with leather. Black Mary hates when he brings dog poop into the house, but she still agrees to read aloud a letter he has received from his sister in Alabama. The letter says that life for Black people in the South is quite dangerous, as racist white people are using violence to keep Black people from traveling north in search of better lives. Solly's sister wants to come north, so he decides to make a trip back down to Alabama.

Solly and Eli go to Garret Brown's funeral while Black Mary goes downtown. With nobody watching, Citizen Barlow sneaks in an open window and creeps into the kitchen, where he stuffs his face with food. Aunt Ester catches him, but she isn't angry. He insists that he isn't there to steal anything—he just needs her help. They sit down and she offers him some cornbread. She talks about Garret Brown while Citizen eats, and when Citizen notes that Garret could have gotten out of the water, Aunt Ester disagrees: Garret made the noble choice to die an innocent man instead of living in false guilt.

Conversation turns to Citizen's life. He's from Alabama and has only been in the North for four days. He found a job at the mill, which promised to pay him $2 per day. But then they downgraded him to $1.50. They also promised him room and board but then overcharged him and didn't provide food. When he got his first paycheck, it was much less than he'd been told, so he couldn't pay rent. Now the mill says he can't leave to work anywhere else because he has to pay off his debt. Citizen was preparing to run away, but then he wound up killing someone, which is why he needs Aunt Ester to "wash" his soul—he feels horrible inside, as if there's a hole in him. Although Ester doesn't cleanse him right away, she tells him everything will be all right, and then she says he can stay at her house and help Eli build a wall in the backyard.

A riot breaks out at the mill later that day. Solly comes to Aunt Ester's house and says he's almost ready to travel south. He talks to Citizen about the meaning of freedom, both of them agreeing that freedom is nothing more than "what you make it." Solly asks Citizen to help him by coming to Alabama, but Citizen doesn't want to because he just came north. Their conversation gets interrupted when Caesar comes over and complains about the riot. Seeing Citizen for the first time, he peppers him with questions, wanting to know if he has a job and a place to live. His questions are laced with suspicion, and he subtly threatens to arrest Citizen if he steps out of line. As Solly leaves the house, Caesar says he can't carry around the walking stick he's been using for decades—it is, Caesar claims, a weapon.

When everyone else leaves, Caesar talks to Black Mary. He wishes she'd stop hanging around Aunt Ester's house and instead work with him. They used to work together as siblings, but she has no interest in doing that anymore. After all, Caesar shot and killed a young man for stealing a loaf of bread. Black Mary doesn't like that kind of behavior, and though she accepts Caesar as a brother, she doesn't approve of his decisions. He then goes on a long rant about his past. He used to sell food in poor neighborhoods, but the law shut his operation down because he didn't have a license. When he finally got a license and started up again, he grew frustrated that his customers always wanted bigger servings, so he decided to open a boarding house—except, the bank wouldn't lend money to him unless he put up some kind of collateral. He didn't have anything of value, so he opened an illegal gambling business. He ended up shooting a few people while running this business and was eventually put in jail. While serving time, he realized he could prosper by working against his fellow inmates. His ability to put down a prison rebellion impressed the mayor, who freed him and made him a constable. He then used his badge and gun as collateral and bought a house. He now enforces the law in the Hill District and thinks everyone in his community resents him because he's powerful. What really pains him, though, is that Black Mary resents him.

That night, Aunt Ester sits with Citizen and asks why he wanted

to speak to her. He explains that he was the one who stole the nails and that he let Garret Brown take the blame. She agrees to help, saying she'll show him how to travel to the City of Bones. First, though, he has to find two pennies lying next to each other. He also has to find a man named Jilson Grant, who will have something for him. Citizen strikes out right away. When Black Mary asks about the two pennies, Ester admits that they have no special power—the only thing that matters is whether or not Citizen *believes* they have power. Once he finds the pennies, he'll feel ready to undergo great change.

The next day, Selig visits the house and says that everyone is talking about a fire that happened the previous night at the mill. The white people in the surrounding areas are furious, and some are even saying they would gladly fight another Civil War to bring back slavery. When Selig leaves, Citizen bursts into the kitchen and announces that he found the two pennies. He couldn't find Jilson Grant, but Aunt Ester says he'll have to make do with just the pennies. She explains that Citizen will be traveling to the City of Bones in a boat, which she makes out of a **Bill of Sale**. The city is a gleaming metropolis in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean. It's made entirely of bones and is inhabited by the souls of African people who didn't make it across the ocean on the slave ships. She goes to her room to prepare. Meanwhile, Citizen drinks whiskey with Solly and Eli. Solly talks about his experience as an enslaved person. He managed to escape, but when he reached Canada, he had to turn back because he couldn't enjoy his freedom while everyone he loved remained in slavery. He joined the Underground Railroad and worked with Eli to free enslaved people.

When Ester returns, she hands Citizen the slave ship made from a Bill of Sale. She describes what it's like on the ship, and Citizen gets so swept up in her words that he starts to feel as if he's really on the boat. Eli, Solly, and Black Mary sing in the background while Aunt Ester narrates Citizen's experience. At a certain point she tells him to go below deck, where he realizes he's surrounded by thousands of people chained to the boat. They all have his face, he yells, and then two enslavers start whipping him. By undergoing this harrowing experience, Citizen gains access to the City of Bones. It's one of the most beautiful places he's ever seen. Before he can enter, though, he has to confront one of its 12 gatekeepers. And the gatekeeper he encounters is none other than Garret Brown. Ester tells him to be honest with Garret, so he confesses to stealing the bucket of nails. Hearing his confession, Garret Brown lets him pass. Citizen enters the city and feels completely reborn.

Caesar busts into the house and tells Solly that he's under arrest: somebody saw him set fire to the mill. Solly hits Caesar in the knee with his walking stick and runs away. After Caesar rushes out to track him down, Aunt Ester tells Citizen to find Selig. Citizen quickly brings Selig back, and Aunt Ester asks him to smuggle Solly to safety in his wagon, at which point Solly comes out of the back room and says that he did, indeed, burn down the mill. Because Caesar will surely kill him if he catches him, Solly will have to leave town undetected and travel south. Hearing this, Citizen steps forward and says he'll join Solly and Selig on their journey.

Caesar returns, so Solly and Citizen sneak out the back. Caesar tells Selig how to get out of town without encountering the roadblocks that have been set up to find Solly. Thanking him, Selig leaves. Caesar then places Aunt Ester under arrest for harboring Solly, though she challenges his authority by saying that his warrant means nothing—she, too, has a piece of paper: it's a Bill of Sale from when an enslaver sold her as a child. The Bill of Sale says she's legal property, but she knows that's untrue. Similarly, she has no respect for Caesar's warrant. Still, she goes with him to the station.

When Aunt Ester comes home after posting bail, Selig rushes into the kitchen and says that Caesar shot Solly. Citizen comes in with Solly and lies him out on the table. As Aunt Ester tends to his wounds, Citizen and Selig explain that they were out of town when Solly said they had to turn back: he couldn't escape while the mill workers who rioted against their oppressors remained in jail. He planned to break them out and burn down the jail. But on the way back they encountered Caesar, who shot Solly. Solly dies shortly after arriving at Aunt Ester's house. When Citizen hears Caesar approaching, he runs out the back. Caesar enters and says he thinks that Solly and Citizen stole Selig's wagon. Black Mary angrily addresses Caesar, informing him that she no longer sees him as her brother. Struck to his core, Caesar silently leaves, at which point Citizen comes out of hiding. Eli raises a toast to Solly as Citizen puts on Solly's hat and takes his walking stick. He finds the letter from Solly's sister, looks at it for a moment, and then leaves.

CHARACTERS

Aunt Ester – Aunt Ester is an old woman who is widely respected as a "spiritual advisor" in the Black community of Pittsburgh's Hill District. She was formerly enslaved, though she seems to have escaped. She tells her protégé, Black Mary, that she's 285 years old—a fact that suggests she possesses spiritual or supernatural powers, though she implies at one point that she mainly helps people by helping them make peace with themselves, which doesn't necessarily require supernatural intervention. Still, people in the Hill District say she's capable of "washing" souls (or cleansing people who aren't "right" with themselves). Citizen Barlow seeks her out for this reason, hoping she'll be able to help him feel better about letting Garret Brown take the blame for stealing a bucket of nails. Although her overseer, Eli, is skeptical of Citizen at first, Aunt Ester takes him in and gives him a place to sleep, thus demonstrating her kindness and willingness to help people in need. In order to "wash" his soul, she tells him that she'll show him how to reach the City of Bones, a metropolis in the middle

of the ocean inhabited by the many enslaved Africans who didn't make it across the Atlantic on the slave ships. The entire ceremony of "washing" Citizen's soul blends metaphor with a kind of magical realism, playing with the idea of Aunt Ester's powers by further blurring the distinction between mystical abilities and a simple understanding of human nature. Either way, she gives Citizen the chance to experience the shared suffering of his enslaved ancestors, thus putting him in touch with his roots and showing him that he's not alone in his anguish. She also helps Solly escape from Caesar after he burns the mill, once again demonstrating her eagerness to help people in need.

Citizen Barlow – Citizen Barlow is a young man from Alabama. He escapes his home state and travels north in the hopes of finding a better life, but the odds are stacked against him. He settles in the Hill District but quickly falls prey to the local mill's exploitative tactics, suddenly finding himself in debt to the mill. Unsure of what to do, he steals a bucket of nails—a crime that Caesar (the town constable) blames on a man named Garret Brown, who ends up dying to prove his own innocence. Citizen feels unspeakably guilty about letting Garret take the blame, so he seeks out Aunt Ester because he has heard she can cleanse people who aren't "right" with themselves. At his core, then, Citizen is a desperate man who yearns to atone for the mistakes he's made. Aunt Ester eventually teaches him that the only way to respond to what happened is by owning up to what he did and then moving on, making the most of his life while also engaging with his community of fellow Black Americans. Feeling "reborn" after his experience with Aunt Ester, he offers to help Solly go to Alabama to help Solly's sister escape racist violence, thus putting himself in danger because he has come to recognize the importance of community and mutual support. Solly acts as a role model to him throughout the play, telling him about his experiences helping escapees on the Underground Railroad and talking about how freedom means nothing if other people are still living under oppression. When Caesar shoots and kills Solly, then, Citizen puts on Solly's hat and grabs his walking stick, and the implication is that he's going to devote himself to living like Solly did, working hard to liberate anyone facing oppression.

Solly Two Kings – Solly is an older man who often visits Aunt Ester's house. He talks about wanting to devote himself to Aunt Ester as her lover, but they never actually get together. He was enslaved as a young man but managed to escape. When he reached Canada, though, he couldn't enjoy his freedom because he knew so many people were still living in enslavement, so he turned around and devoted himself to freeing people by working on the Underground Railroad with Eli. His decision demonstrates his deeply principled outlook on life and his beliefs about freedom, which he thinks is essentially meaningless unless it applies to everyone. He also recognizes that freedom is largely useless if it's not accompanied by opportunities to improve one's life—an idea he outlines by suggesting that the abolition of slavery was like giving Black people a row of farmland but none of the necessary tools or seeds to grow a successful crop. When he receives word from his sister in Alabama that it's becoming increasingly dangerous for Black people to live in the South, he decides to go to Alabama in the hopes of rescuing her and bringing her to Philadelphia. But before he leaves, he burns down the local mill in an act of solidarity with the workers who have been arrested for striking. Caesar tries to arrest Solly for setting the fire, but Solly hits him in the knee with his walking stick—which he has been carrying since his time on the Underground Railroad—and runs away. Organized by Aunt Ester, Selig and Citizen help him escape town, but he decides to turn around because he wants to free the mill workers who have been imprisoned, yet again revealing his unwillingness to take freedom for himself when others continue to face oppression. When he heads back to the Hill District, Caesar shoots him in the chest, and he later dies on the table in Aunt Ester's kitchen.

Caesar Wilks – Caesar Wilks is a domineering but not very powerful member of the Hill District's law enforcement. Unlike his sister, Black Mary, he thinks only of himself and is skeptical of Aunt Ester's ability to spiritually help people. Although he used to break the law rather frequently, he learned in jail that he could get ahead by helping powerful white people enforce various rules. His willingness to betray his fellow inmates in jail earned him the attention of the mayor and helped him get out of jail after just six months, at which point he started working as the constable (a low-level official tasked with keeping order) in his neighborhood. He also runs a boarding house, where he mercilessly evicts tenants as soon as they fall behind on rent. Black Mary wishes he didn't care so much about the law and about his own success, but he doesn't listen to her. The only thing that bothers him is the idea that she resents him like everyone else in the Hill District does, since he *does* care about maintaining family bonds. Because he values family so much, he's very hurt when Black Mary disowns him after he shoots and kills Solly for burning down the mill. Although he achieves his goal of catching Solly, the final image of him in the play is rather pitiful and sad, as he quietly leaves Aunt Ester's house after Black Mary says she wants nothing to do with him. The play therefore implies that his individualistic attitude and his devotion to the law isolates him and leads him to an empty, lonely life.

Black Mary – Black Mary is Aunt Ester's housekeeper and protégé. A young woman whose brother, Caesar, is a domineering official in the Hill District, she cooks for Aunt Ester and generally keeps the house running. In exchange, Aunt Ester shares her wisdom with her, hoping Black Mary will take on her name when she dies, presumably wanting Black Mary to continue to serve the community as a spiritual advisor. But Black Mary eventually gets annoyed at Aunt Ester for always

telling her to do things in a particular way. When she snaps and says she can do the chores however she wants, Aunt Ester doesn't get mad—rather, she asks what took Black Mary so long, implying that she has been testing the young woman and waiting for her to stand up for herself (perhaps a sign that she's ready to step into Aunt Ester's role. While Citizen stays at Aunt Ester's house, he and Black Mary have several romantically charged encounters—encounters in which Black Mary gives him subtle life advice about how to be "right" with himself. In the end, they both decide that they're "right" with themselves and that Citizen should come pay Black Mary a visit when he's back from Alabama, suggesting that they intend to begin a romantic relationship. In contrast, Black Mary disowns Caesar after he shoots Solly, telling him once and for all that she wants nothing to do with him.

Eli – Eli oversees Aunt Ester's day-to-day life as a spiritual advisor. When Citizen comes to see Aunt Ester, for instance, Eli tells him to come back on a different day, not wanting to wake Ester because she's old and needs her rest. Eli is also close friends with Solly, having worked with him on the Underground Railroad to help people escape enslavement. When Caesar comes to arrest Aunt Ester for harboring Solly after he burned down the mill, Eli points a shotgun at Caesar and tells him to leave. But Aunt Ester instructs him to lower the weapon, so he obliges—a sign of how loyal he is (and how closely he listens) to the people he loves.

Rutherford Selig – Rutherford Selig is a traveling salesman who often visits Aunt Ester's house. He frequently tells the people in Aunt Ester's household about what's going on in the community, giving them updates on the latest gossip and events. When Caesar comes after Solly for burning down the mill, Aunt Ester asks Selig to smuggle Solly to Alabama in his wagon. Because he trusts Aunt Ester so much and thinks she's always in the right, he agrees to transport Solly, putting himself at risk in order to carry out Aunt Ester's request.

Garret Brown – Garret Brown is a worker at the local mill in the Hill District. When Citizen steals a bucket of nails, Garret is the one who gets blamed. Caesar tries to arrest him, but Garret jumps in the nearby river, which is extremely cold. Instead of coming out of the river and letting Caesar arrest him for a crime he didn't commit, Garret stays in the water until he drowns—a decision Aunt Ester later says was a way of "dying in truth" instead of living under a sense of undeserved guilt. Citizen is haunted by the entire ordeal, feeling extremely guilty and out of sorts until he comes face to face with Garret Brown in the City of Bones, where he confesses to what he did—an act that seems to cleanse his soul and settle his conscience.

Jilson Grant – Aunt Ester tells Citizen to visit Jilson Grant in preparation for his trip to the City of Bones. She says that Jilson Grant has to give him a piece of iron before he makes the journey. But Citizen doesn't find him. Whether or not Jilson Grant is even a real person remains unclear in the play—it's possible that Aunt Ester simply wanted Citizen to feel slightly underprepared for the experience, perhaps to put him on his guard and infuse the entire process with a slight sense of fear. In the end, Solly gives him a chain link from his days of enslavement, which he says brings good luck.

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.

THE MEANING OF FREEDOM

In *Gem of the Ocean*, the meaning of "freedom" is in dispute. While none of the play's characters are legally enslaved, they struggle to understand whether they're actually free. In the most literal sense, this means economic freedom. Citizen Barlow shows this best; the local mill intentionally saddles him with debt so that he has to work to make up for it, effectively forcing him to provide free labor. Structurally, this isn't all that different from enslavement. But simply breaking out of this debt cycle isn't enough for the characters to feel free. For example, Solly's own freedom means nothing to him if those around him still suffer. After he escaped enslavement, he realized he couldn't enjoy his life because his loved ones were still enslaved, so he devoted himself to freeing people by working on the Underground Railroad. And later, he gives his life to free striking mill workers from jail, implying that his life wasn't worth living while others weren't free. For him to experience freedom, then, *everyone* must also experience it, not just a lucky few.

The play also examines a more spiritual kind of freedom by suggesting that people have to be "right with themselves" in order to lead happy and rewarding lives. What it means to be "right" with oneself remains ambiguous, but it seems related to integrity and "living in truth." When Garret Brown dies in order to prove he didn't steal a bucket of nails, for instance, Citizen—who *actually* stole the nails—feels tormented by his own guilt. He's technically a free man, but it's as if he has been imprisoned by his own remorse over what happened with Garret Brown; he is not, in other words, "living in truth." It isn't until he owns up to what he did that he can finally move on, indicating that there's an emotional element to freedom: there's literal freedom, which has to do with leading a life free of exploitation and oppression, and then there's spiritual freedom, which has to do with emotionally liberating oneself by living honestly and acting with responsibility.

ECONOMIC EXPLOITATION

The many financial hardships that the play's Black characters face make it nearly impossible for them to prosper. For example, the local mill in Pittsburgh's Hill District takes advantage of its Black employees by offering room and board and then overcharging for rent. What's more, the mill pays its workers less than it originally promised, ensuring that they'll get behind on rent and go into debt. In this way, the mill traps Black workers in an exploitative job; they can't leave until they're out of debt, but they can't pay their debt on the mill's paltry wages. Without the freedom to use their labor how they please, the play's characters aren't that much better off than they were when they were enslaved.

This lack of economic opportunity is a defining feature of Black oppression in the decades after emancipation. As Solly notes, Black people can't benefit from owning farmland if they don't have a plow. In other words, how meaningful is "freedom" if Black Americans don't actually have the resources and opportunities to prosper? Caesar Wilks's story illustrates this conundrum: he tried to make an honest living selling food, but he got shut down for being unlicensed, and then he tried to buy a boardinghouse, but he couldn't get a loan because he had nothing to use as collateral. Of course, Caesar didn't have collateral because the economic system made it so hard for Black people to obtain anything valuable in the first place. Caught in this dilemma, he started a gambling ring, wound up in jail, and then decided that the only way to get ahead was to help white people oppress Black people. If this is what "opportunity" looks like, then it seems that Black people have no way to thrive. Given this, it's significant that Solly eventually burns down the mill in a show of solidarity with striking workers. This is an example of the violence and desperation that economic exploitation causes, suggesting that this economic system is inherently unstable. As the characters come to an increasing awareness of the exploitation that they and their community face, they push back harder, showing that such a society is bound to eventually collapse.

THE VALUE OF COMMUNITY

Gem of the Ocean suggests that belonging to a strong community adds meaning and worth to a person's life. For Solly, community seems more important than his own existence. For example, after he escapes enslavement, he returns to the South to help free the people he cares about. It seems he cannot enjoy his own happiness and safety unless his community has those things, too. Solly also gives his life for his community; he burns down the mill to help the exploited workers who are on strike, and then he returns to try to free the workers who were jailed. Solly is shot while returning, which he knew was a possibility. This suggests that his own life is less valuable than the wellbeing of his community, and that he cannot live while those around him suffer.

Likewise, Citizen Barlow comes to Aunt Ester to be cleansed of his sins, and she does so by spiritually connecting him with thousands of enslaved Africans, essentially giving him an opportunity to experience a shared sense of suffering. Becoming embedded in this community causes Citizen to feel reborn, and from then on, he shares Solly's moral commitment to risking his life for others. Citizen finally feels "right" with himself, suggesting that he couldn't fully accept himself without first feeling like a part of a community. This contrasts with Caesar's storyline, as Caesar advances himself at the expense of his community's safety and happiness. And yet, his power and wealth mean practically nothing because nobody respects him or cares for him. His sister, Black Mary, even disowns him after he shoots Solly for burning down the mill. As a result, the prevailing sense at the end of the play is that people who turn their back on their community end up isolating themselves, while those who give their lives for their community find connection and meaning.

HISTORY AND TRAUMA

The history of slavery in the United States is painfully alive in *Gem of The Ocean*. After all, characters like Solly and Aunt Ester were enslaved themselves, and the memory of that terrible experience is still fresh in their minds. Solly also worked on the Underground Railroad and vividly remembers what it was like to smuggle escapees to freedom. What's more, the play's title itself refers to a boat that forcefully took thousands of Africans across the Atlantic Ocean to be enslaved in America—a boat that Aunt Ester (who says she's 285 years old) implies she was on. Serving as a spiritual guide of sorts, Aunt Ester helps Citizen Barlow make peace with himself by enabling him to take a metaphorical ride on the *Gem of the Ocean* to a mystical city called the **City of Bones**. The city itself is populated by the many Africans who didn't make it across the ocean on the slave ships.

Although the City of Bones sounds like a harrowing and depressing place, the characters in the play all talk about it as if it's a beautiful kind of paradise, implying that there's something significant about acknowledging even the most painful parts of history. When Citizen makes his metaphorical journey to the City of Bones, he comes back feeling happier and more at ease with himself. It's not exactly clear why spiritually visiting a city of dead enslaved people makes Citizen feel better, except that perhaps engaging with the trauma of slavery is better than trying to ignore it. Citizen himself was never enslaved, but he has dealt with racism for his entire life. The idea of a beautiful city-like afterlife for oppressed people is therefore oddly appealing, perhaps giving him hope that the horrors of racism won't be able to reach this otherworldly realm of shared

suffering. Of course, the exact meaning of Citizen's trip to the City of Bones remains ambiguous. What's quite clear, however, is the play's suggestion that slavery isn't just a fleeting part of some long-forgotten past—rather, the history and trauma of such horrific oppression reverberates into the present.

THE POWER OF BELIEF

Gem of the Ocean shows that, in the right circumstances, a strong sense of belief has the power to transform a person's life. As the community's "spiritual adviser," Aunt Ester takes it upon herself to "wash souls," which is to say that she spiritually cleanses people. However, it's unclear in the play whether or not the impact she has on people is actually related to her supernatural talents. She says that she's 285 years old and that she crossed the Atlantic Ocean on one of the first slave ships bound for America—a detail that suggests she is, indeed, capable of supernatural or spiritual wonders, given her unheard of age. At the same time, though, it's quite possible that her greatest power is actually her ability to give other people a sense of meaning in life, which isn't necessarily magical or supernatural.

For instance, when Aunt Ester agrees to "wash" Citizen's soul, she tells him to prepare by finding two pennies lying right next to each other. This assignment sounds mysterious and full of meaning, but after Citizen leaves, Aunt Ester admits to Black Mary that the pennies have no purpose in and of themselves; they don't have any mystical power. "He think there a power in them two pennies," she says. "He think when he find them all his trouble will be over. But he need to think that before he can come face to face with himself." In other words, Aunt Ester recognizes that simply believing in something is, in many cases, all that matters. When Citizen comes back with two pennies, he feels like he has accomplished something and that this accomplishment has prepared him for a meaningful change in his life. In reality, nothing is different except for his outlook. But this change in perspective is deeply transformative, enabling him to wholeheartedly invest himself in the rest of Aunt Ester's "soul washing" process. Whether or not Aunt Ester has supernatural powers is therefore beside the point, since what really matters is her ability to help people believe in themselves and their capacity to change.

SYMBOLS

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

THE BILL OF SALE

The Bill of Sale, which is a record of Aunt Ester's former enslavement, symbolizes the gap between what's moral and what's legal. The Bill of Sale—a legal document—says that Aunt Ester was sold from one enslaver to another for $607, which implies that she is a piece of property, not a person. Of course, this is wrong; Aunt Ester is now a free person, and she always should have been free, which is why she tells Caesar that despite what the law says, has *always* known that nobody had any right to treat her like property. Unlike Aunt Ester, Caesar has a hard time seeing that what's legal isn't always moral, and he enforces racist laws in ways that hurt his family and community. She shows Caesar the Bill of Sale as a way of helping him see that the law isn't something that he should unquestioningly follow or uphold, since enforcing immoral laws is itself immoral.

THE CITY OF BONES

The mystical City of Bones—which is inhabited by the souls of enslaved Africans who died on slave ships—symbolizes the unexpected benefits of uniting with others in a sense of shared suffering. When Aunt Ester helps Citizen Barlow visit the City of Bones, he has a chance to experience the horror that many enslaved Africans underwent on the slave ships. He looks around at one point and realizes that everyone around him in the hold of a slave ship bound for the City of Bones has his own face—a symbolic representation of the fact that he's witnessing his own history, or at least the history of something that has a direct impact on his life in the present. Although he himself has never been enslaved, he has experienced racism and discrimination that is directly tied to the lasting effects of slavery in the United States. Interestingly enough, his terrifying journey to the City of Bones ends up helping him immensely, making him feel at peace with himself. Part of this has to do with the fact that he confronts Garret Brown in the City of Bones, thus owning up to his guilt about having wronged him. But another element of his sudden transformation has to do with the experience of communing with people who have gone through much more intense suffering than he himself has encountered. By contextualizing his own hardship, then, he manages to move forward with his life, and the City of Bones itself comes to represent how helpful it can be to engage with one's own cultural history.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Theatre Communications Group edition of *Gem of the Ocean* published in 2006.

Act 1, Scene 1 Quotes

They gonna have some more the way Caesar keep evicting people. He put out two more families yesterday. He charging by the week. They get one week behind and he put them out. He don't ask no questions. He just gather up what little bit of stuff they got and sit it out on the street. Then he arrest them for being out there.

Related Characters: Eli (speaker), Caesar Wilks

Related Themes:

Page Number: 10

Explanation and Analysis

After Eli tells Citizen Barlow to come back on Tuesday, Citizen stands outside Aunt Ester's house and waits. Looking out the window, Eli and Black Mary talk about how he'll probably take shelter soon under a nearby bridge, where many people have recently been flocking because they have nowhere else to go. Eli points out that this increase in the number houseless people is due to Caesar's strict and unfair practices as a landlord at the local boarding house. Caesar doesn't show any patience or empathy when his tenants get behind on rent. Instead of helping his fellow community members by putting them on payment plans and allowing them to slowly catch up on rent, he immediately "put[s] them out" on the streets. In fact, he doesn't even open up a conversation about *why* his tenants are unable to pay the rent or when they'll be able to settle up—instead, he simply puts all of their belongings out on the street, demonstrating that he cares more about money than he cares about treating people with kindness. Worse, he then arrests his evicted tenants for loitering, approaching his position as a low-level member of law enforcement with the same impatience and harsh formality with which he approaches his position as a landlord. In turn, it's easy to see that he actively works against the people in his own neighborhood instead of supporting and empowering them.

They had a man down in Kentucky was accused of stealing a horse. He said he didn't do it. Turned him into an outlaw. Made him the biggest horse thief in Kentucky. He lived to steal horses. He must of stole five hundred horses. And every one he sent back word: I stole that one but I didn't steal the first one. I stole that one but I didn't steal the first one. They never did catch him. He died and the horse thieving stopped.

Related Characters: Rutherford Selig (speaker), Garret Brown

Related Themes:

Page Number: 12

Explanation and Analysis

Selig tells this story in a conversation about Garret Brown, who died to prove that he didn't steal a bucket of nails. Selig's story highlights that wrongful accusations can actually turn innocent people into criminals. The man accused of stealing a horse wasn't guilty at first, but then he found himself in the ironic position of *needing* to steal horses so that he could protect his own innocence, since he had no other way of running from unfair punishment. And once he started stealing horses, he actually became the very thing he was wrongfully accused of in the first place. The story shows that unfair forms of law enforcement can drive people to commit crimes, but it also suggests that people often break the law out of necessity or desperation. In a way, the Kentucky horse thief most likely felt justified in his decision to steal horses, since he was only doing so to avoid unfair punishment. And yet, that doesn't change the fact that he ended up stealing, which ultimately gave the authorities a legitimate reason to pursue him. The entire tale implies that over-policing and unjust law enforcement are often counterproductive, ultimately leading to more crime.

Act 1, Scene 2 Quotes

CITIZEN: He could have come out the river.

AUNT ESTER: That's the only way he had to say he was innocent. It must have meant an awful lot for him to say that. He was willing to die to say that.

CITIZEN: I was standing there. I seen him. I thought he was gonna come out. I told myself he was gonna come out. […]

AUNT ESTER: Jesus Christ was falsely accused. He died a bitter death on the cross. This man was like Jesus. He say he would rather die innocent than to live guilty.

Related Characters: Citizen Barlow, Aunt Ester (speaker), Garret Brown

Related Themes:

Page Number: 21

Explanation and Analysis

When Citizen talks to Aunt Ester for the first time, they have a conversation about Garret Brown's death. Citizen

notes that Garret could have simply gotten out of the water—a point he most likely makes to help himself feel better about what happened. After all, Citizen was the one who stole the bucket of nails that Garret was accused of stealing, so he undoubtedly feels guilty about what happened. By arguing that Garret behaved irrationally by remaining in the water, Citizen tries to alleviate his own guilt: if he sees Garret's decision to drown as foolish, then he might not have to feel quite so bad about having put the man in such a miserable position in the first place.

But Aunt Ester challenges the idea that Garret should have gotten out of the water. She respects Garret's decision to drown, since "that's the only way he had to say he was innocent." She believes that people should never accept undeserved punishment, which she implies would be like disrespecting oneself. There's integrity, she suggests, in remaining true to oneself—even if that means dying to prove a point. Considering that she herself was once enslaved, it makes sense that she frowns on the idea of accepting wrongful punishment, which is really just a way of submitting to oneself. In order to be truly free, she implies, people must stay true to themselves in even the most frightening and dangerous circumstances.

❝ They say they was paying two dollars a day but when we got there they say a dollar fifty. Then they say we got to pay two dollars room and board. They sent us over to a place the man say we got to put two dollars on top of that. Then he put two men to a room with one bed. […] I asked one fellow what board meant. He say they supposed to give you something to eat. They ain't give us nothing. I say okay. I can't make them give me nothing. What I'm gonna do? I got to eat. I bought a loaf of bread for a dime. A bowl of soup cost ten cents around the corner. I wasn't desperate. I had sixty-five cents to make it payday. I ate half the bread and say I would get a bowl of soup tomorrow. Come payday they give me three dollars say the rest go on my bill. I had to give the man what own the house two dollars. What I'm gonna do, Miss Tyler? I told the people at the mill I was gonna get another job. They said I couldn't do that 'cause I still owed them money and they was gonna get the police on me. I was gonna go to another city but then before I had a chance I killed a man.

Related Characters: Citizen Barlow (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 23

Explanation and Analysis

In his first conversation with Aunt Ester, Citizen Barlow talks about how he ran into trouble after arriving in Pittsburgh. More specifically, he sheds light on the mill's exploitative practices, explaining that his employers promised to pay him more than they actually ended up giving him. They also overcharged him for room and board, but they didn't even give him any food. As a result, he had to find out a way to feed himself while also somehow paying his overpriced rent—which, of course, brought him back to the problematic fact that the mill didn't pay him as much as they originally promised. His predicament essentially boils down to simple math: the mill charges him a higher amount for rent than it pays him for his labor, so there's nothing he can do to avoid going into debt. The situation is so clear, in fact, that the mill must have *intentionally* driven him into debt. What's more, his employers tell him that he can't find another job until he pays up, essentially forcing him into a situation in which he has to labor without making any money for himself. In this way, the mill's exploitative tactics are directly linked to the unjust practices of slavery, which was organized around forcefully extracting free labor from Black people.

Act 1, Scene 3 Quotes

❝ ELI: Freedom is what you make it.

SOLLY: That's what I'm saying. You got to fight to make it mean something. All it mean is you got a long row to hoe and ain't got no plow. Ain't got no seed. Ain't got no mule. What good is freedom if you can't do nothing with it? I seen many a man die for freedom but he didn't know what he was getting. If he had known he might have thought twice about it.

Related Characters: Solly Two Kings, Eli (speaker), Citizen Barlow

Related Themes:

Page Number: 28

Explanation and Analysis

In a conversation with Citizen Barlow, both Eli and Solly suggest that legal freedom isn't necessarily meaningful or valuable in and of itself. They believe that "freedom is what you make it," indicating that people have to actively work toward true liberty even when they're already "free" from enslavement. Solly presents a metaphor that compares legal freedom to trying to farm without any equipment or seeds. Of course, being able to own land as a Black American is significant in and of itself, since such a thing was unheard of

during slavery. But there's not much point in owning farmland if it's impossible to *do* anything with that land. This metaphor addresses the lack of opportunity in the United States for Black people, suggesting that it was incredibly difficult for Black people living in the early 1900s to use their legal freedom to improve their lives. What's more, Solly's comparison doesn't even take into account how challenging it was to obtain land in the first place. Although it was legal for Black people to own land, the entire economic system was rigged so that this rarely happened, as evidenced by Caesar's story about the bank refusing to loan him money.

> CAESAR: Are you a troublemaker, Citizen Barlow? You ever been in jail?
>
> CITIZEN: I ain't never been in jail.
>
> CAESAR: That's where you heading. You got to have visible means of support around here. If I see you standing around looking to steal something and you ain't got two dollars in your pocket you going to jail. You understand? Get you a job and stay out of trouble. Stay off the streets.

Related Characters: Caesar Wilks, Citizen Barlow (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 31

Explanation and Analysis

When Caesar meets Citizen Barlow for the first time, he grills him with questions. Right away, it's obvious that Caesar doesn't trust Citizen, clearly thinking that he's a "troublemaker" who will surely commit crimes and generally corrupt the community. And yet, he has no real reason to think this, since he doesn't even know Citizen. When he asks if Citizen has ever been in jail, Citizen informs him that he hasn't—and yet, Caesar decides that the young man is surely "headed" in that direction. This comment shows that Caesar has some preconceived notions about the kind of person Citizen is and the life he'll surely lead: simply put, Caesar views any young Black man as someone who is "heading" toward jail. In a somewhat ironic way, he's actually right, since prejudiced officials like himself are so eager to arrest and punish innocent young Black men. If Citizen is "heading" toward jail, then, it's not because he's a criminal, it's because people like Caesar are constantly looking for ways to punish him. Caesar himself even outlines just how easily Citizen might find himself in trouble with the law, saying that he could go to jail simply for "standing around" and not having two dollars in his pocket, which would—to Caesar—indicate that he's "looking to steal something." In other words, Citizen can hardly do anything without attracting the law's racist suspicion.

> It wasn't much but it was twenty-five cents more than he had. He took and threw it away. He can't see past his nose. He can't see it's all set up for him to do anything he want. See, he could have took and bought him a can of shoe polish and got him a rag. If he could see that far he'd look up and find twenty-five dollars in his pocket. Twenty-five dollars buys you an opportunity.

Related Characters: Caesar Wilks (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 32

Explanation and Analysis

Caesar offers Citizen Barlow a quarter. He explains that he often gives young Black men a quarter and tells them to put it to good use. But, he says, most people waste the quarter, thinking it's not enough money to really benefit them in any tangible way. Caesar, however, believes that it's possible to attain new economic opportunities by wisely putting a quarter to good use. If, for instance, a Black man bought some shoeshine with the quarter, he could then set to work polishing shoes, eventually earning $25. From there, he could continue finding new ways of making money.

Caesar's implication is that a little bit of money can go a long way if a person works hard and spends it wisely. And yet, Caesar's belief that the economy is "all set up" for Black people to "do anything [they] want" is misguided. In reality, the American economy is set up to benefit *white* people, often at the expense of a Black person's well-being. For instance, the mill actively exploits Black workers like Citizen by pushing them into debt and then extracting free labor from them. Caesar's ideas about upward mobility are therefore unrealistic and out of touch with the current societal circumstances. He of all people should know that hard, honest work doesn't always pay off for Black people living in a racist society, since he himself was unable to make any money without breaking the law. It wasn't until he started working for the government and turning against his fellow Black community members that he became successful, so his insistence that prosperity only requires

diligence and hard work is completely unfounded.

I'll tell you whose fault it is. It's Abraham Lincoln's fault. He ain't had no idea what he was doing. He didn't know like I know. Some of these niggers was better off in slavery. They don't know how to act otherwise. You try and do something nice for niggers and it'll backfire on you every time. You try and give them an opportunity by giving them a job and they take and throw it away. Talking about they ain't going to work.

Related Characters: Caesar Wilks (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 34

Explanation and Analysis

Caesar angrily complains that workers at the mill are going on strike and refusing to work. Rather than seeing this as a legitimate way of rallying for positive change, Caesar sides with the exploitative owners of the mill. He essentially turns his back on the people in his own community, especially when he suggests that some Black people would be "better off in slavery." He comes to this conclusion because he thinks that many Black Americans are incapable of using the opportunity the country has given them to improve their lives. However, what he doesn't acknowledge is that the country hasn't, in truth, given Black Americans many tangible opportunities to attain prosperity. Caesar thinks that giving Black people a job is enough to help them establish a good and rewarding life, but that's clearly not the case if the job itself is exploitative. Working at the mill, for example, isn't much of an "opportunity," since the mill manipulates its workers, purposefully drives them into debt, and forces them into providing free labor. Therefore, Caesar's outlook is flawed and unrealistic. On an even more basic level, his callous suggestion that some Black people were better "better off" in slavery illustrates the extent to which he has turned on his fellow community members, ultimately internalizing the racist ideas that are so prevalent in the United States.

You don't understand I give the people hope when they ain't got nothing else. They take that loaf of bread and make it last twice as long. They wouldn't do that if they didn't pay one and a half times for it. I'm helping people.

Related Characters: Caesar Wilks (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 36

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Caesar defends his greedy business practices. Black Mary has just accused him of selling "magic bread," saying that she doesn't want to go work for her brother because she doesn't approve of his dishonest and unfair behavior. Caesar, however, claims that overcharging people for bread is actually a way of *helping* them. Although there's nothing special about the bread itself, he tells customers (presumably at his boardinghouse) that eating one piece of it will make them twice as full. He therefore charges more for the bread, and he insists that the mere suggestion of sustenance and superiority helps people ration their food. If customers didn't believe the bread was so filling, they would eat it faster. His argument implies that he understands the power of suggestion: if people come to believe something, they're capable of convincing themselves that it's true even when it's not. At the same time, though, Caesar's rationalization of his greedy business practices also illustrates something a bit more straightforward—namely, that he's skilled at justifying otherwise inexcusable behavior.

Went down to the bank to borrow some money. They told me I needed some collateral. Say you need something to borrow money against. I say all right, I'll get me some collateral. I opened me up a gambling joint in the back of the barbershop. Sold whiskey. The police closed it down. I had to put some bullet holes in a couple of niggers and the police arrested me. Put me on the county farm.

Related Characters: Caesar Wilks (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 37-8

Explanation and Analysis

Explaining his own backstory, Caesar talks about what his life was like before he started working as a constable, back when he was "on the other side of the law," as Black Mary puts it at one point. He originally got his start selling hoecakes, but he soon got tired of how picky his customers were. Hoping to find a more lucrative line of work, he decided to open a boardinghouse. The bank, however,

refused to lend him money, so he couldn't buy any property. This kind of refusal was quite common in the 20th century, as many banks wouldn't lend money to Black people. What's interesting about Caesar's story, though, is that the bank didn't flat-out deny him based on his race—after all, it was technically legal for Black Americans living in the early 1900s to own land. Instead of rejecting him outright, the bank insisted that he needed to put up collateral, which is a way for lenders to make sure the loan is repaid (if it isn't, the lender keeps the collateral). Because Black Americans didn't have any viable economic opportunities in the decades after slavery, it was all but certain that the average Black person wanting to buy property wouldn't be able to provide collateral on a loan. The banks knew this and used it to their advantage, making it essentially impossible for Black people to qualify for loans. In Caesar's case, this pushed him to break the law, thus demonstrating that unfair economic conditions create a sense of necessity that often drives people to engage in illegal behavior.

Act 1, Scene 5 Quotes

I got memories go way back. I'm carrying them for a lot of folk. All the old-timey folks. I'm carrying their memories and I'm carrying my own. If you don't want it I got to find somebody else. I'm getting old. Going on three hundred years now. That's what Miss Tyler told me. Two hundred eighty-five by my count.

Related Characters: Aunt Ester (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 43

Explanation and Analysis

Aunt Ester reveals in a conversation with Black Mary that she's 285 years old. Because the play is set in 1904, her age indicates that she was born in 1619—the year that the first slave ship set sail for Jamestown, Virginia. In a way, then, Aunt Ester herself is a very symbolic character who represents the centuries-long suffering that Black people have endured at the hands of white enslavers in America. She hints at this when she says that she has memories that "go way back," adding that she's "carrying them for a lot of folk." In other words, she embodies an entire cultural history of Black people living in America.

Although most scholars, audiences, and critics tend to interpret Aunt Ester's words literally when she says that she's 285 years old, it's worth noting that she could mean this in a more figurative way. It's possible that she's truly that old, but it's *also* possible that she simply sees herself as someone who's part of the legacy of Black people in America—someone who has helped the legacy of the first enslaved Africans live on almost 300 years after they were initially imprisoned and taken across the ocean. Under this interpretation, Aunt Ester's engagement with history emphasizes the importance of keeping the past alive, since doing so helps people contextualize their own lives in the present.

He didn't care if anybody else knew if he did it or not. He knew. He didn't do it for the people standing around watching. He did it for himself. He say I'd rather die in truth than to live a lie. That way he can say that his life is worth more than a bucket of nails. What is your life worth, Mr. Citizen? That's what you got to find out. You got to find a way to live in truth.

Related Characters: Aunt Ester (speaker), Citizen Barlow, Garret Brown

Related Themes:

Page Number: 45

Explanation and Analysis

Aunt Ester says this to Citizen Barlow after he tells her that he's responsible for Garret Brown's death. She asks him if he knows why Garret Brown decided to drown instead of accepting punishment, and Citizen suggests that Garret didn't want everyone around him to think he was a thief. But Aunt Ester disagrees. Garret didn't *care* what other people thought, since he knew he was innocent. The real reason he died instead of accepting undeserved punishment was that he'd "rather die in truth than [] live a lie." The idea here is that people should treat themselves with respect. Garret Brown knew that his own life was "worth more than a bucket of nails," but the only way to really prove this to himself was by dying instead of taking on a false sense of guilt. Staying true to oneself, then, is worth dying for—a bold viewpoint that aligns with Aunt Ester's own experiences in life, since she used to be enslaved and therefore disapproves of submitting to injustice, no matter the cost.

BLACK MARY: What's the two pennies for? Why he got to find two pennies?

AUNT ESTER: That's only to give him something to do. He think there a power in them two pennies. He think when he find them all his trouble will be over. But he need to think that before he can come face to face with himself. Ain't nothing special about the two pennies. Only thing special about them is he think they special. He find them two pennies then he think he done something. But, he ain't done nothing but find two pennies.

Related Characters: Black Mary, Aunt Ester (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 47

Explanation and Analysis

Before she "washes" Citizen's soul, Aunt Ester tells him to find two pennies lying side by side. They have to be right next to each other, she says, adding that he can't find a penny on one street and another on a different street. Her instructions seem mysterious and full of meaning, but she later reveals to Black Mary that there's "nothing special" about the pennies. The only reason the pennies are significant or special is that Citizen will *think* they are. In turn, he'll suddenly feel as if he's about to undergo a magical process—a process in which he'll come "face to face with himself" in ways he couldn't if he didn't believe something powerful and spiritual had already taken place. By giving Citizen a simple task that will open his mind, then, Aunt Ester shows her solid understanding of just how much a strong sense of faith or belief can transform people. The only thing that matters, she knows, is that Citizen *believes* he's capable of change.

Act 2, Scene 1 Quotes

They talking about keeping the colored out of Pennsylvania. Say, "What do we need them for?" One man say they ought to send them back down South. I come on past the general store in Rankin and they was talking about, "Why can't we have slavery again?" One man said 'cause of the law. And somebody said change the law. The man asked him, "Would you fight another war?" And he said, "Hell yeah."

Related Characters: Rutherford Selig (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 49

Explanation and Analysis

After the mill burns down in the wake of protests and riots, Selig overhears several racist conversations in the surrounding area. He reports back to Aunt Ester's house, saying that white people in the vicinity are upset about the unrest at the mill—so upset, it seems, that they're talking about taking drastic measures to keep Black people in a state of oppression. In particular, the conversation he overhears—in which a white man says he wants to bring back slavery helps—demonstrates the hypocritical way that many racists approach the law. On the one hand, they insist that Black Americans have to follow strict, unforgiving laws or else face extreme punishment. On the other hand, though, they suddenly decide they want to "change the law" as soon as it suits them. Whereas Black Americans live in fear of a domineering legal system, then, white people feel empowered to manipulate it as they see fit.

Act 2, Scene 2 Quotes

I was in Canada in 1857. I stood right there in Freedomland. That's what they called it. Freedomland. I asked myself, "What I'm gonna do?" I looked around. I didn't see nothing for me, I tried to feel different but I couldn't. I started crying. I hadn't cried since my daddy knocked me down for crying when I was ten years old. I breathed in real deep to taste the air. It didn't taste no different. The man what brought us over the border tried to talk with me. I just sat right down on the ground and started crying. I told him say, "I don't feel right." It didn't feel right being in freedom and my mama and all the other people still in bondage. Told him, "I'm going back with you." I stopped crying soon as I said that. I joined the Underground Railroad.

Related Characters: Solly Two Kings (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 57

Explanation and Analysis

As Solly tells Citizen about what it was like to escape enslavement, he talks about the disorienting feeling of attaining freedom. Reaching Canada, he says, didn't immediately transform the way he felt. Although he was technically free, nothing seemed different. When he says that he "breathed in real deep to taste the air," it's implied that he assumed life would feel fundamentally different as a free man—so different, it seems, that he thought even the air would taste different. But this wasn't the case. Instead, all he could think about was how his loved ones were still

enslaved. Any sort of personal freedom suddenly seemed meaningless compared to the suffering that so many Black Americans still had to endure. For Solly, then, freedom lacks significance on an individual level—it's only when *everyone* is free that freedom itself takes on any kind of meaning, which is why he decided to join the Underground Railroad.

If you gonna do it…do it right! They wave the law on one end and hit you with a billy club with the other. I told myself I can't just sit around and collect dog shit while the people drowning. The people drowning in sorrow and grief. That's a mighty big ocean. They got the law tied to their toe. Every time they try and swim the law pull them under.

Related Characters: Solly Two Kings (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 60

Explanation and Analysis

When Solly talks to Citizen about the abolition of slavery, he points out that the process of freeing Black Americans from enslavement wasn't handled well. The Union fought and won the Civil War, but there weren't many measures in place to ensure Black Americans would be able to make use of their newfound freedom. Plus, racism continued to run rampant in the United States long after the end of slavery, and the country didn't do much to address the extreme bigotry Black Americans faced as they tried to make lives for themselves in such oppressive conditions. When he says, "They wave the law on one end and hit you with a billy club with the other," he highlights how the power structures in American society work against Black Americans. Citizen's experience at the mill is a perfect example of what Solly means, since he tried his hardest to make an honest living for himself by working at the mill, which subsequently took advantage of him, intentionally plunged him in debt, and tried to force him into providing free labor—all of which drove him to steal a bucket of nails, committing a crime that would have landed him in jail if Garret Brown hadn't been blamed for it. No matter what Black Americans do, then, they find themselves facing hardship of one kind or another, with dismal economic conditions plunging them into "sorrow and grief" while the law threatens to "pull them under" if they do anything to alleviate that grief.

SOLLY: […] It's dangerous out here. People walking around hunting each other. If you ain't careful you could lose your eye or your arm. I seen that. I seen a man grab hold to a fellow and cut off his arm. Cut it off at the shoulder. He had to work at it a while…but he cut it clean off. The man looked down saw his arm gone and started crying. After that he more dangerous with that one arm than the other man is with two. He got less to lose. There's a lot of one-arm men walking around.

ELI: That's what Caesar can't understand. He can't see the people ain't got nothing to lose.

Related Characters: Solly Two Kings, Eli (speaker), Caesar Wilks

Related Themes:

Page Number: 60

Explanation and Analysis

Solly and Eli talk to Citizen about how difficult it is for Black people to live in the oppressive conditions of American society. When Solly tells the story about seeing a man cut of another man's arm, he illustrates two things. First, the story shows Citizen that difficult economic circumstances push people into ruthless competition, suddenly pitting community members against each other as if they're "walking around hunting each other." Second, his story sheds light on how desperation creates a sense of reckless abandon. When people have "less to lose," they become even more likely to behave dangerously. Therefore, it's in society's best interest for the legal and economic power structures to *empower* otherwise disadvantaged groups, since giving people opportunities to live better lives inspires them to work hard and follow the laws. Conversely, disempowering people by making it impossible for them to succeed leads to chaos and danger, which his exactly what Caesar helps create by over-policing his own community.

SOLLY: […] I knew all them guns wasn't on account of me. I figured they was fighting for themselves. And if that would help them that would help us.

ELI: They never said *they* was gonna help us. They said the war was gonna help us. After that it be every man for himself.

SOLLY: I told them you get what's in it for you and I'll get what's in it for me. You get yours and I'll get mine and we'll settle the difference later. We still settling it.

Related Characters: Solly Two Kings, Eli (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 61

Explanation and Analysis

Discussing the Civil War, Solly and Eli agree that the Union Army didn't just fight the Confederacy to free the many enslaved Black people in the South. Although that was one of the matters at stake in the war, there was also the issue of the Confederacy wanting to secede from the Union, meaning that there were political reasons for the Union to fight in the Civil War. Still, Solly accepted that the Union's specific motivations didn't necessarily matter in the moment, as long as the end result was the abolition of slavery. At the same time, though, he recognized that something would have to be done to address the country's racism in the aftermath of the Civil War. This is what he means when he says "we'll settle the difference later," implying that ending slavery wasn't enough—the country still owed Black Americans quite a bit, considering the centuries of oppression it inflicted on Black people. Unfortunately, though, Solly is still waiting for the United States to finish making up for the travesty of slavery.

Act 2, Scene 4 Quotes

CITIZEN: I don't know. Sometimes I lay awake at night when I be lonely and ask myself what I would say to her. Sometimes I tell her to stop being lonely. I tell her it's something she doing to herself. But then I'm laying there lonely too and I have to ask myself was it something I was doing to myself? I don't know. I ain't lonely now. I ain't got no woman but I still don't feel lonely. I feel all filled up inside. That's something I done to myself. So maybe I did make myself lonely.

BLACK MARY: You got to be right with yourself before you can be right with anybody else.

Related Characters: Citizen Barlow, Black Mary (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 73

Explanation and Analysis

In this conversation between Citizen and Black Mary, Citizen talks about a woman he once spent the night with. She caught his eye on a dance floor because she was wearing a beautiful blue dress, and after they danced for a while, they went home together. Everything went well, but Citizen awoke the next morning to find the woman in tears. Ever since then, he has often stayed awake at night thinking about what he'd say to her if he ever saw her again.

As he tells Black Mary about this experience, Citizen admits that thinking about the woman in blue used to make him lonely. However, he no longer feels that way, which is noteworthy because this change suggests that his experience in the City of Bones has transformed him. Whereas he used to hope that other people would help him feel less alone, he now feels "all filled up inside." In other words, he feels a sense of self-assurance, as if he himself is all he needs. Black Mary suggests that this kind of self-sufficiency is what it means to be "right" with oneself, implying that people need to come to terms with their own emotions and recognize that they're the only ones who can control how they feel. And yet, the mere fact that she helps Citizen realize how to be "right" with himself suggests that, though everyone is on their own journey, having support from others often helps people contextualize and make sense of their problems.

Yeah, I burned it down! The people might get mad but freedom got a high price. You got to pay. No matter what it cost. You got to pay. I didn't mind settling up the difference after the war. But I didn't know they was gonna settle like this. I got older I see where I'm gonna die and everything gonna be the same. I say well at least goddamn it they gonna know I was here! The people gonna know about Solly Two Kings!

Related Characters: Solly Two Kings (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 75

Explanation and Analysis

When Caesar tries to arrest Solly for burning down the mill, it's unclear whether or not Solly *actually* did it. In this scene, though, Solly bursts out of Aunt Ester's bedroom—where he has been hiding—and admits that he did it (Caesar isn't there to hear this). He says that he burned the mill as a way of showing people that "freedom got a high price." What he means is that powerful white people can't pat themselves on the back for granting Black Americans freedom and then continue to oppress them through other means. The mill was an exploitative institution that took advantage of disempowered Black laborers, so Solly burned it down as a way of showing white oppressors that they have to actually make good on their promise to work toward racial equality.

When he says that he "didn't mind settling up the difference after the war," he means that he was willing to wait for a little while for true equality to come about in the aftermath of the Civil War. But he's been waiting for so long that he now fears he might *never* see true freedom—a point that emphasizes just how far off the country is from actually doing what it said it would when it ended slavery.

> You see, Mr. Caesar, you can put the law on the paper but that don't make it right. That piece of paper say I was property. Say anybody could buy or sell me. The law say I needed a piece of paper to say I was a free woman. But I didn't need no piece of paper to tell me that. Do you need a piece of paper, Mr. Caesar?

Related Characters: Aunt Ester (speaker), Caesar Wilks

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 78

Explanation and Analysis

Because of Aunt Ester's association with Solly, Caesar arrives at her house with a warrant for her arrest after Solly burns down the mill. However, Aunt Ester challenges the authority of the law by highlighting how absurd it is to invest so much meaning and importance in a mere piece of paper. To really emphasize this absurdity, she references a different piece of paper: the Bill of Sale from when she was enslaved and sold from one enslaver to another. "That piece of paper say I was property," she says, underscoring just how ridiculous it is to follow immoral laws simply because they've been written into the legal system. Both she and Caesar know that she's *not* "property," but in order for her to become a "free woman" in the eyes of the law, she needed to obtain yet another piece of paper that granted her legal freedom. "But I didn't need no piece of paper to tell me that," she says, once again spotlighting a simple fact: namely, that it's very easy to know whether or not something is morally right, regardless of what the law says. Similarly, Caesar should know that Aunt Ester doesn't deserve to be arrested for associating with someone who burned down an exploitative, oppressive institution like the mill.

> These ain't slavery times no more, Miss Tyler. You living in the past. All that done changed. The law done changed and I'm a custodian of the law. Now you know, Miss Tyler, you got to have rule of law otherwise there'd be chaos. Nobody wants to live in chaos.

Related Characters: Caesar Wilks (speaker), Aunt Ester

Related Themes:

Page Number: 78

Explanation and Analysis

After Aunt Ester argues that the warrant Caesar has for her arrest is meaningless to her, Caesar makes a counterargument. He disregards the point she makes about the Bill of Sale from when she was sold from one enslaver to another, saying that her argument is irrelevant because it's no longer "slavery times" and that she's "living in the past." By saying these things, he proves just how unquestioningly he follows the law; although Aunt Ester has made a very compelling point about how he shouldn't need the law to tell him what's right and what's wrong, he *still* goes through with her arrest, insisting that he has to do it because he's a "custodian of the law"—a phrase that makes him sound very self-important, suggesting that he takes pride in the idea of himself as a powerful member of law enforcement who can force even the most influential people in his community (like Aunt Ester) to do what he says.

Act 2, Scene 5 Quotes

> They laid him low. Put him in the cold ground. David and Solomon. Two kings in the cold ground. Solly never did find his freedom. He always believed he was gonna find it. The battlefield is always bloody. Blood here. Blood there. Blood over yonder. Everybody bleeding. Everybody been cut and most of them don't even know it. But they bleeding just the same. It's all you can do sometime just to stand up. Solly stood up and walked.
>
> He lived in truth and he died in truth. He died on the battlefield. You live right you die right.

Related Characters: Eli (speaker), Solly Two Kings

Related Themes:

Page Number: 83

Explanation and Analysis

Eli delivers this eulogy after Solly bleeds to death in Aunt Ester's kitchen. He highlights that Solly fought for freedom for his entire life, always putting himself on the line without any regard for his own physical safety. What Eli says about people bleeding everywhere harkens back to something Solly himself mentioned when he was telling Citizen about his experience on the Underground Railroad—namely, that he didn't mind getting wounded by attack dogs because he realized it wasn't such a big deal to bleed. The implication here is that he would rather lose blood than stand idly by while his fellow Black Americans suffered in enslavement. Eli now complicates this idea by saying that *everyone* is bleeding, even if they don't know it. This idea suggests that racism and oppression have seriously wounded the entire country, and though white people might not think their own racist behavior has a negative impact on them, they're wrong: hatred hurts everyone involved, holding the country back and leading to nothing but turmoil and discontent.

❝ Caesar, I gave you everything. Even when I didn't have to give you. I made every way for you. I turned my eyes away. I figured if I didn't see it I couldn't hold fault. If I held fault I couldn't hold on to my love for you. But now you standing in the light and I can't turn away no more. I remember you when you was on the other side of the law. That's my brother. The one who used to get out of bed to take me to school. The one who believed everybody had the same right to life…the same right to whatever there was in life they could find useful. That's my brother. I don't know who you are. But you not my brother. You hear me, Caesar? You not my brother.

Related Characters: Black Mary (speaker), Caesar Wilks

Related Themes:

Page Number: 84

Explanation and Analysis

After Caesar kills Solly, Black Mary finally disowns him as her brother. She tells him that she can no longer stay quiet while he terrorizes everyone around him. He has committed himself to upholding the law, but it's clear that he has lost sight of what really matters in life, and Black Mary can't overlook the negative impact he's had on their community. What's most interesting about her monologue is that she says she misses when he used to believe that "everybody had the same right to life." These days, it seems, he only thinks that people who suffer silently under the oppressive confines of the law deserve to have good lives—and yet, quietly tolerating exploitative and oppressive conditions makes it *impossible* to lead a rewarding life. Therefore, Caesar's unyielding devotion to the law ends up making it harder for anyone who might want to take a stand against oppressive power structures. By caring more about enforcing the law than anything else, Caesar has alienated himself from everyone in the Hill District, including Black Mary. The play thus indicates that turning against one's own community leads to complete social isolation.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

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

PROLOGUE

Eli is in the kitchen of Aunt Ester's home when a frantic knock sounds at the door. It's late at night, but the knocking is loud and insistent. When Eli opens the door, he informs the person standing outside that this is a peaceful house. Citizen Barlow ignores him and insists on seeing Aunt Ester—people have told him to come see her, and he won't take no for answer. But Eli tells him to come back on Tuesday, leading to a small fight as Citizen tries to push his way into the house. Awakened by the commotion, Aunt Ester emerges from her bedroom. Citizen suddenly calms down, and Ester tells him to return on Tuesday. Listening to her, he puts on his hat and peacefully leaves.

It's not yet clear why Citizen Barlow is so eager to speak with Aunt Ester, but it's evident that he sees her as some kind of benevolent figure—as somebody who can help him. The fact that he immediately calms down when she enters the room suggests that he places quite a bit of significance in her powers. As the play progresses, his belief in her power will become quite meaningful, as the play implies that simply having faith in something spiritual or mystical is often all a person needs in order to transform.

ACT 1, SCENE 1

Eli has just finished eating breakfast in Aunt Ester's kitchen with Black Mary, who is Ester's housekeeper and protégé. Peering out the window, Eli notes that Citizen is standing outside. He has been waiting out there since he left the house the night before. Black Mary notes that he'll most likely go find a place to sleep under a nearby bridge at some point, though there are already a lot of people doing that. And there will be even *more* people seeking refuge under the bridge, since Black Mary's brother, Caesar, keeps evicting people. If his tenants fall behind in their rent by just one week, he turns them out on the streets.

Eli and Black Mary's conversation about Caesar highlights the negative impact that greedy, individualistic mindsets can have on a community. Instead of showing his tenants compassion when they get behind on rent, Caesar immediately evicts them. The result is that the neighborhood gradually fills with homeless people who have nothing to turn to, ultimately infusing the neighborhood with a sense of desperation that will inevitably lead to turmoil and unrest.

A traveling salesman named Selig comes by Aunt Ester's house to deliver some stones to Eli and to sell a frying pan to Black Mary. He mentions that the town's mill is shut down, and Eli tells him that a man named Garret Brown jumped in the river and drowned. He'd been accused of stealing a bucket of nails, so Caesar—the town constable—chased him into the river while trying to arrest him. Garret refused to get out of the water, insisting that he was innocent, so he eventually drowned. His funeral was supposed to be yesterday, but Caesar stopped the burial by saying it was against the law, so now the funeral is going to be held at a different church. Eli thinks Caesar was just mad he didn't have a chance to punish Garret Brown.

As the town constable (a low-ranking official tasked with enforcing the law), Caesar only seems to care about punishing people who step out of line. Garret Brown, however, refused to submit to him, thus testing just how far he would go to uphold the law. It turns out that Caesar will go to great lengths to carry out his job, considering that he let Garret Brown die over a measly bucket of nails—a good indication that Caesar cares more about having power than about his fellow community members.

Black Mary subtly defends her brother's behavior, suggesting that Caesar only would have arrested Garret Brown and that the judge would have simply given him 30 days in jail. But Selig points out that Garret probably didn't steal the nails—if he was so committed to staying in the cold, dangerous water, he was most likely innocent. He then tells a story about a man in Kentucky. The man was accused of stealing a horse, so he went on the run. Forced to fend for himself, he started stealing horses, but every time he did so, he sent a note back to the owner saying, "I stole that one but I didn't steal the first one."

The story Selig tells about the man in Kentucky highlights that a sense of necessity often drives people to crime. Although the man didn't steal the first horse, he was later forced to steal multiple *horses simply because he had no other way of avoiding punishment for something he didn't do. The story hints at the ways in which unfair power structures often end up creating crime even as they try to do the opposite.*

Solly, a good friend and suitor of Aunt Ester's, knocks on the door and enters the kitchen singing about his involvement with the Underground Railroad. He tells the others that the millworkers are refusing to go back to work. But Black Mary changes the subject by telling him to keep his basket of dog poop outside. "It's pure!" he says. "It's called pure!" He explains that people have been collecting dog poop for centuries and selling it to shoemakers, who use it while working with leather. Still, though, she's unhappy about him bringing poop into the house.

Throughout Gem of the Ocean, *events at the local mill play out in the background, creating an ominous and somewhat chaotic backdrop for the rest of the play. While Black Mary and Solly argue about "pure" (which leatherworkers really did use to soften leather), unrest breaks out at the mill over what happened with Garret Brown. The struggle between the workers and their powerful employers becomes emblematic of the many economic struggles Black Americans faced in the decades after slavery.*

Before Selig takes his leave, Eli thanks him for the stones he brought. He then asks Solly to help him build a wall—he wants to build it as a way of keeping Caesar out. If he keeps behaving the way he has been, Eli says, he'll eventually put *everyone* in jail. Solly agrees that Caesar is the kind of person enslavers would want to help them keep enslaved people "in line."

Eli's comment about Caesar indicates that the members of the Black community see him as a threat, despite the fact that he himself is part *of that community. Similarly, Solly's suggestion that Caesar would have been a valued worker in the slavery system suggests that he's something of a traitor—someone who will gladly work against his community if it helps him get ahead.*

Solly has received a letter from his sister, who lives in Alabama. He asks Black Mary to read it aloud to him, and she obliges. The letter says that conditions are terrible in the South for Black people, since southern white people won't let anybody migrate north. Many Black southerners have even been beaten to death for trying to leave. Solly's sister wants to come to the North but is too afraid to make an escape, so she asks Solly what she should do.

Gem of the Ocean *is set roughly ten years before what's known as the Great Migration, when millions of Black Americans living in the South traveled north to find better economic opportunities and escape intense racial discrimination. The play explores the years leading up to this mass migration by focusing on the first waves of Black people wanting to run from hardship in the South—a decision that wasn't easy to make, since it often meant facing the possibility of violence from white people who didn't want Black people to leave.*

Solly decides that he has to go to Alabama to help his sister escape to the North. But he's 67 and starting to feel his age, so he knows he needs someone to accompany him. Eli would gladly join him, but he has to stay to care for Aunt Ester, who comes out of her bedroom and says that she's always cold, prompting Eli to worry that she's getting sick. She brushes off Eli's concern and buys some pure from Solly, chastising Black Mary for not wanting to touch the dog poop. In response, Black Mary announces that she has to go into town instead of finishing the laundry she was working on.

Eli's willingness to help others is on display in this scene, as he wishes he could accompany Solly on his journey south. The reason he can't go with Solly, though, is that he has already committed himself to helping Aunt Ester. He is, in other words, a selfless person who has no problem with devoting himself to supporting his fellow community members—a mindset that stands in stark contrast to the highly individualistic way that someone like Caesar moves through the world.

After Black Mary leaves, Solly tells Aunt Ester that he has strong feelings for her, but she says that he probably tells all the other women he's interested in the exact same thing. When he insists that he cares about her more than anyone else, she calls his bluff by suggesting that they get married. She then relates a dream she had in which Solly had a boat full of men and promised to help her get "back across the ocean" by parting the water. But first he had to go finish something else. When he returned, all the men had drowned and his boat was slowly sinking, so he promised to come back once again—but then, still in the dream, he walked away and said he was going to Alabama.

Solly hasn't told Aunt Ester yet that he has to travel to Alabama to save his sister from racist violence. Therefore, the dream she has—in which he says he has to go to Alabama—suggests that she has certain powers of premonition. The play never exactly clarifies whether or not she possesses mystical or supernatural powers, but moments like this one certainly infuse her behavior with a certain aura of mystery and magic, which later plays into her ability to help Citizen Barlow.

Solly admits that he was ready to devote himself to Aunt Ester until he received word from his sister. But now he has to leave for Alabama. It will most likely be his last trip to the South, since he's getting old. After he tells Aunt Ester about his impending trip to Alabama, he and Eli leave for Garret Brown's funeral, though Ester tells him to come back afterwards to eat pig feet. He wants a lot more than pig feet, he jokes, but he doesn't think she'll give it to him—she calls him a "rascal" and tells him to leave.

Solly makes his desire for Aunt Ester clear, and it seems like she reciprocates his feelings—to a certain extent, at least. But he won't let himself commit to a relationship with her right now because he feels a responsibility to go to Alabama to help his sister. It's apparent, then, that he prioritizes other people over his own wants and needs, never letting himself do something for his own benefit when he could help someone else instead.

ACT 1, SCENE 2

When everyone but Aunt Ester has left the house, Citizen Barlow sneaks in through the upstairs window. He makes his way into the kitchen and eats some food, though he swears when Aunt Ester catches him that he's not interested in stealing—he just can't wait until Tuesday to see her. He has been told that she "wash[es] people's souls," but she points out that only God can do that.

Citizen's desperation to see Aunt Ester drives him to do whatever it takes to get into the house. The fact that he thinks she can cleanse a person's soul suggests that he has something eating at him—something so painful and devastating that he can't wait a few extra days to address it. And yet, Aunt Ester says that only God can cleanse people, thus throwing into question whether or not she actually has spiritual powers.

Giving Citizen some cornbread, Aunt Ester asks him to sit with her, since she sometimes gets lonely. She talks about Garret Brown, noting that he died a lonely death. When Citizen points out that he simply could have gotten out of the water, she says she understands why he didn't: staying in was the only way to prove his innocence. He would rather die an innocent man than lead the life of a guilty man.

Aunt Ester implies that there's something admirable about Garret Brown's decision to die in order to prove his innocence. He knew he didn't steal the bucket of nails, and it took a great amount of integrity to stand by his own innocence instead of giving in to the unjust and domineering influence of the law.

Aunt Ester asks Citizen about his life. He tells her that he's from Alabama and that he has only been in the North for a month. He had to escape the South, slipping through roadblocks set up by white people trying to keep Black people from leaving. When he arrived here, in the Hill District of Pittsburgh, he got a job at the mill, since it offered to pay workers $2 per day. But by the time he started work, they said it would only be $1.50 per day. He didn't put up a fight, and then the mill said that he had to pay $2 for room and board.

The mill's dishonesty as an employer is quite glaring. The mere fact that it promised to pay Citizen $2 per day but then only gives him $1.50 demonstrates its desire to take advantage of its workers. What's more, by charging him room and board that is more expensive than his income, it puts him in a position of vulnerability, making it inevitable that he won't be able to keep up with rent payments.

Citizen agreed to pay $2 for room and board, but he found out it didn't include food. Nonetheless, he bought some bread and planned to eat better after payday. But on payday he only received $3, since the mill put the rest toward his "bill." He then had to give $2 to his landlord. Struggling to survive, he decided to look for a new job, but the mill said he couldn't do that because he still owed them money. If he didn't pay up, the mill said, they would call the police. Citizen planned to run away, but before he could do so, he ended up killing a man. He now feels as if he has a gaping hole inside of him, which is why he came to Aunt Ester.

The predicament Citizen finds himself in seems purposefully structured to put him at a severe disadvantage. The mill manipulates him until he has no other choice but to work off his debt. In this way, it forces him into providing free labor. Although he's not technically enslaved, then, his so-called "freedom" has a lot in common with slavery, which was also predicated on forced unpaid labor. The only difference, though, is that powerful white institutions force Black workers like Citizen into free labor by exploiting them economically and threatening them with the law instead of with violence. Although he doesn't clarify what drove him to kill a man, it's quite possible that the desperate situation the mill put him in ended up pushing him to do something drastic and regrettable.

Aunt Ester assures Citizen that everything will work out. She talks about how Jesus Christ was betrayed and mistreated, and she assures Citizen that God is his only judge. Seeing that he has fallen asleep, she sings him a lullaby. When Black Mary returns from town, Ester asks her to make up a bed for Citizen, who will be staying with them while he helps Eli build the wall.

Aunt Ester doesn't do any kind of spiritual work on Citizen to help him address his problems—not yet, at least. What she does do, though, is offer him kindness and reassurance. She also gives him a place to stay, lending him support in a time of great need. She thus reveals her empathy and her willingness to do what she can to help people.

ACT 1, SCENE 3

Black Mary and Eli sit in the kitchen talking about Citizen. Eli wants to know how he got into the house, since Aunt Ester hasn't answered the door herself in 25 years—she also hasn't left the house in decades. He suspects that Citizen came through the open window upstairs, since there's some missing paint on the sill. Although he's glad to have some help with the wall, he doesn't trust Citizen and tells Black Mary to be careful around him.

Eli is somebody who helps the people in his community, which is why he's guarded about Citizen's presence in the house: he wants to protect the people he cares about from anyone who might do them harm, and since he doesn't know Citizen yet, he sees it as his duty to warn people like Black Mary to be careful around the newcomer.

Solly enters and says there's a riot happening at the mill. The police tried to force the striking laborers to go back to work, but the crowd retaliated. At least one person has been seriously trampled by a police horse, but the workers refuse to give up. Solly gives Black Mary a newspaper and asks her to read it aloud. She reads Garret Brown's obituary, which notes that his parents were enslaved when they had him in 1862. He lived his life in poverty but had many close friends and family members—all of whom will miss him and mourn his "unfinished life."

Solly grew up in slavery, which is why he doesn't know how to read. His illiteracy is a good example of how white oppressors actively ensured that Black people would be at a disadvantage in the United States, where literacy is often a necessary skill for upward mobility. Thankfully, though, Solly has people like Black Mary who can help him get the information he needs, underscoring the importance of communal support.

Solly will be leaving shortly for Alabama. He just bought some new shoes, but he unfortunately will have to make the journey alone. Citizen comes inside to take a break from building the wall, and Solly introduces himself, explaining that his real name is Alfred. Everyone called him Uncle Alfred in the time of slavery, but he had to change his name after running away from his enslavers. He chose the name Two Kings, after the biblical figures David and Solomon, but most people just call him Solly. As for Citizen's name, Solly points out that it's quite the burden, since it's "hard to be a citizen," which is something people often have to *fight* to become.

Solly's reason for choosing the name "Two Kings" is never made totally clear, but it's significant that he chose to model himself after both King David and King Solomon. David is perhaps most famous for his battle against Goliath, in which he slayed a giant. Solomon, on the other hand, is considered to be one of the wisest figures in the Bible. Solly thus fashions himself as both a brave warrior and a clever man. The mere fact that he chose his own name suggests that he seized control of his personal liberty, leaving behind his past as an enslaved person—and yet, Solly will later complicate the notion that it's ever possible to fully embrace freedom when so much oppression still exists in the United States.

Solly always carries a walking stick, which he can use to protect himself. Citizen, for his part, has a knife, but Solly says he should get a stick instead. Solly has never killed anyone, largely because he doesn't have a knife. He has beat many people and has come close to killing them, but he's never actually taken a life. Carrying a stick instead of a knife has therefore saved him from doing something he might regret.

Solly's advice to Citizen subtly acknowledges the high possibility of violence that Black men living in the United States face on a daily basis. He has used his walking stick as a means of self-protection in more than just one way: it has protected him from others, but it has also protected him from letting himself get carried away in a moment of self-defense. He implies that it's unfortunately necessary for Black people living in such racist circumstances to carry some kind of protection, but he still tries to lower the possibility that he might kill another person—an indication that he's very moral.

Because he wants someone to accompany him on his journey to Alabama, Solly tells Citizen to get a walking stick (a "bone breaker") and invites him on the trek. But Citizen just came north from Alabama and fears that he won't be able to escape again if he goes back. Instead, he needs to find a job in the North. Solly, for his part, says that Black Americans like to *think* they're free. In fact, freedom is the only thing his own father ever talked about, but he never even got to experience it. Solly is technically free, but he doesn't really know what that means. Eli chimes in and notes that freedom is simply "what you make it."

Solly calls into question what it means to be "free" in a country where racism and oppression are still so prevalent. The implication here is that freedom means a lot more than simply not living in slavery. And yet, Solly points out that many people take their own freedom for granted without actually interrogating what it means and—more importantly—whether or not they truly *have freedom.*

Solly wholeheartedly agrees that freedom is "what you make it." The only thing freedom means right now, he says, is that Black people have their own land but none of the resources to farm it. People obsess over getting freedom, but it's not always as rewarding as they assume it will be.

While freedom might be what people make of it, they must also have access to certain resources that enable them to capitalize on their liberty. Vague ideas about freedom don't mean anything if Black Americans have no way of actually using *that freedom—a point that Solly highlights by suggesting that freedom is like having farmland but not having access to any of the tools or resources needed to actually benefit from that land.*

Caesar knocks on the door. When Eli answers it, he reminds Caesar that this is a peaceful house. Rushing inside, Caesar complains about the striking workers at the mill, saying that they're rioting and vandalizing the mill itself. The city authorities have put him in charge of getting things under control. If the laborers don't go back to work the next day, he says, there's going to be a major problem.

Caesar's negative comments about the strike at the mill stand in stark contrast to what Solly was just saying about freedom. Whereas Solly thinks the country needs to empower Black Americans by giving them legitimate opportunities so that they can make use of their newfound freedom, Caesar helps the country's racist power structures take advantage of the Black community by enforcing exploitative labor policies.

Caesar sees Citizen and assumes that he's yet another person who has come to Aunt Ester to have his "soul washed." He peppers Citizen with questions, saying that he doesn't want to catch him stealing or misbehaving—if he does, he'll promptly put him in jail. According to Caesar, Citizen should find himself a good job and stay out of trouble. In fact, he should go down to the mill and tell them that Caesar sent him. If he doesn't find a way to support himself, Caesar is confident he'll end up in jail. At the same time, he claims to like Citizen, saying that he just wants to give the young man some good advice.

It's obvious that Caesar doesn't trust Citizen, seeing him as a restless young man who will surely cause trouble. Of course, it's true that Citizen has already *caused trouble by stealing the bucket of nails from the mill, but Caesar doesn't know that. As such, his assumption is somewhat unfair, since it's based on nothing but assumptions—assumptions made simply because Citizen is a young Black man. Caesar therefore perpetuates racist ideas even though he himself is Black, suggesting that he has internalized the bigotry that is so deeply ingrained in the country.*

Caesar gives Citizen a quarter. He believes that most young Black men don't think wisely about money. It's important to be entrepreneurial, but most people waste their money on foolish things. And yet, Caesar thinks a quarter can lead to great things. A man can buy shoe polish with a quarter and then make $25 shining shoes. From there, $25 can buy even more opportunity. Citizen, however, is skeptical. He gives Caesar the quarter back and says he doesn't want his charity. When Citizen goes back outside to work on the wall, Caesar tells Eli and Black Mary to keep an eye on him.

Caesar believes that hard work and diligence lead to success. However, there's very little evidence to support this theory, at least for Black people living in the United States at the turn of the 20th century. In fact, Citizen has already tried *to make an honest living by working at the mill, and he has seen that such attempts are futile: the system is rigged to exploit young Black workers who have no other ways of supporting themselves. Caesar's belief in entrepreneurship is therefore misguided and unrealistic.*

Falling into conversation with Solly, Caesar expresses his frustration about the strike happening at the mill. He argues that the country relies on places like the mill to produce tin. If the mill doesn't function, everything will grind to a halt and—as a result—nobody will be able to find jobs for themselves. It angers Caesar that his fellow Black Americans can't see how important it is to keep a sense of order when it comes to such things. He even blames Abraham Lincoln for ending slavery, saying that some people were better off in enslavement, since they don't know how to make use of good opportunities.

Caesar doesn't care about standing in solidarity with his community members. To the contrary, he has sided with the institutions that continue to take advantage of Black people living and working in the Hill District. His unsympathetic views most likely stem from his belief that hard work actually pays off in the United States—something that isn't necessarily true for Black people, since employers like the mill take advantage of the lack of opportunity for Black Americans and make it impossible to succeed. What's more, his belief that some people were better off in enslavement really emphasizes the fact that he has internalized the country's racism.

Solly doesn't say anything in response to Caesar's rant about industry, opportunity, and slavery. Instead, he decides to leave. But Caesar stops him before he's out the door and tells him to stop carrying around his walking stick. He has told him before that the stick counts as a weapon, but Solly won't listen. Both Abraham Lincoln *and* General Grant carried walking sticks, he points out. Cursing the law, he stomps out of the house.

Caesar is so obsessed with upholding the law that he wants to take away Solly's walking stick, which Solly has carried around for years. When he tells Solly to stop using the stick, it becomes quite clear just how petty he is—so petty, it seems, that he wants to control and police even the smallest details.

Once Solly leaves, Eli joins Citizen outside to work on the wall, leaving Caesar alone with his sister. He criticizes Black Mary for being so close and kind to Solly, suggesting that it's a disgrace because he makes his living picking up dog poop. Caesar wishes Black Mary would come back to work for him, but she refuses. She deeply respects Aunt Ester and doesn't want to leave her. Plus, she doesn't approve of the way Caesar takes advantage of people by doing things like selling "magic bread" and overcharging for rent. But Caesar is unashamed, explaining that he tells people his bread will make them twice as full, which is why he charges more for it. His advertising, he claims, gives people the hope and strength to make their bread last longer, so he's really *helping* them.

Caesar most likely sells his "magic bread" in his boarding house. When he claims that he's actually helping people by lying about how filling his bread is, it's easy to see how good he is at rationalizing his greediness. He's obviously not *helping people by overcharging for bread that isn't as hearty or full of sustenance as he advertises, but he's somehow able to convince himself that he's doing everyone a favor by making it easier for them to ration their portions. His ability to deceive himself in this way is also most likely how he justifies over-policing his own community.*

Black Mary used to help Caesar with his business ventures, selling hoecakes with him. He misses the way they used to stick together as a family, but she left because he killed a young boy for stealing. Caesar thinks he was justified—after all, what the boy did was against the law. And the law, he believes, counts more than anything in life. People think that the law exists to "serve them," but Caesar thinks it's the other way around: *people* serve the *law*.

Caesar spells out the fact that he prioritizes the law over everything else. He has devoted himself to the idea of order, believing that everything would crumble if people didn't "serve" the law. This, it seems, is how he justifies turning his back on his own community, clearly thinking he's doing something noble by caring more about unfair fair laws than the people who suffer as a result of those laws.

There was a time when Caesar didn't mind breaking the law himself. He had to make do with what he had in life, but his options weren't great. Slavery was over and he was technically free to do whatever he wanted, so he went to places where Black people were hungry, and he started selling hoecakes and beans. Business was good until a police officer chased him away because he wasn't licensed to sell food. When he finally got licensed, his customers started complaining. They wanted bigger portions or higher quality food, so he stopped cooking and decided to open a boarding house.

Caesar's backstory sheds light on how he became so obsessed with upholding the law. Surprisingly enough, it turns out that he himself used to break the law, but he only seemed to do so in small ways that were necessary for his own survival. After all, selling hoecakes without a license isn't all that immoral, even if it's not technically allowed. His entrepreneurial struggle builds on what Solly pointed out earlier in the play about the lack of opportunity in the United States for Black people—although Caesar was a free man, he had to fight incredibly hard (and even break the law a little bit) to make any money.

To open a boarding house, Caesar needed land and a building. But the bank wouldn't lend him money unless he had collateral to borrow against. So he opened a gambling operation in the back of a barbershop and started selling whiskey. Running this establishment forced him to shoot some customers, which landed him in jail. When a few of his fellow inmates tried to run away, he caught them, figuring that they were just making everyone else's life harder, since the other prisoners would have to work extra hard in their absence.

It's noteworthy that Caesar glosses over the fact that he shot several people while running his gambling business. The casual way that this detail surfaces in his story suggests that he doesn't feel much remorse—he was just trying to get ahead and stay financially afloat, so he doesn't care that he did something immoral. And yet, he has now become strict about enforcing the law, subjecting people to harsh punishment for committing petty crimes in the name of survival. What's more, his willingness to work against his fellow prisoners suggests that he thinks only of himself. He doesn't value community, and his hypocritical lack of remorse about committing crimes himself suggests that he doesn't actually care about the law, either—he only cares about himself.

Caesar also stopped a riot in the prison because he didn't think it would benefit him. In doing so, he attracted the attention of the mayor, who put him in charge of the Third Ward in Pittsburgh, giving him a gun, a badge, and the power to deal with small disturbances in the community. He then took his new gun and badge back to the bank and asked if he could use *those* for collateral. He managed to buy a house from a white man who grossly overcharged him and then skipped town, since the white community wanted to kill him for selling property to a Black man. Because of his success, he says, other Black people resent him—including Black Mary, which upsets him because family is deeply important to him.

Caesar's story about his past reveals that he rose to his position of power by betraying the people around him. He worked against his fellow prisoners simply for his own benefit, and it worked: the mayor singled him out as somebody to put in a powerful role. And once he attained that small amount of power, everything became easier in his life, as it suddenly became possible for him to purchase property. The implication, then, is that opportunity leads to more opportunity. However, the problem is that opportunity is seemingly only available to selfish people willing to work against their community in ways that perpetuate racist hierarchies.

ACT 1, SCENE 4

Black Mary talks to Aunt Ester in the kitchen while washing vegetables. Aunt Ester critiques the way she's washing the vegetables and tells her that the fire she built is too hot. When she leaves, Citizen comes in and tries to flirt with Black Mary. He starts out by telling her that he couldn't wait until Tuesday for Aunt Ester to wash his soul. But Black Mary claims that only God can do such a thing—Aunt Ester can only help him if he's willing to help *himself*. Before he leaves, he asks her to visit his room that night, saying that she must—as a woman—need a man. But she teases him by suggesting that he won't be able to give her anything she hasn't already had.

There's a certain loneliness to Citizen's current situation. He has only been in the North for a handful of days, and he has already started to feel defeated by life. It therefore makes sense that he would seek out Black Mary's company and affection, perhaps hoping that she'll make him feel better about his otherwise lonesome life. But Black Mary is Aunt Ester's protégé, and she seems to take this opportunity to subtly teach Citizen some of the lessons that Aunt Ester herself will later spell out for him: namely, that he needs to come to terms with himself in order to feel better.

As she teases Citizen, Black Mary lets him embrace her. She agrees to come see him in his room that night, but then she points out that they'll both still wake up in the morning, at which point Citizen will realize that his life is the same. He will, she says, "wake up and look at [his] hands and see what [he's] got." In response, he says that he only has himself, and she says, "That ain't never gonna be enough."

Black Mary implies that Citizen needs to find a way to feel at peace with himself; he needs to stop seeking external ways of feeling better about his life. If he keeps trying to soothe himself by turning to other people (like, for instance, Black Mary), he'll never manage to come to terms with his own problems. When he wakes up in the morning after making love, he will feel a sense of hollowness and disappointment, since his problems will still be there, which means he'll still have to deal with them.

ACT 1, SCENE 5

While Black Mary washes Aunt Ester's feet, Aunt Ester talks about life. She tells Black Mary that it's okay to embrace life's many uncertainties. Living is all about having adventures and going on journeys. Aunt Ester herself has been on an adventure ever since she was nine, when her mother sent her to live with a woman named Ester Tyler. Aunt Ester's name was different back then, and she won't tell anyone what it was. She lived with Miss Tyler until the old woman died, at which point she took on her name, figuring that somebody had to keep the name going.

The process of naming is important in Gem of the Ocean, *as characters like Solly and Aunt Ester choose their own names (though Aunt Ester apparently* inherits *hers). There's a subtle implication that leaving behind one's own original name is like embracing a new kind of freedom. In Aunt Ester's case, she's also continuing a certain legacy, as if to honor the woman that took her in and raised her for the majority of her upbringing.*

Aunt Ester notes that some people don't want to remember things, but she herself isn't afraid of remembering *everything*. She's 285 years old and carries not just her own memories but also other people's. If Black Mary doesn't want to take on her name, then Aunt Ester will have to find somebody who will. When Black Mary points out that she never said she didn't want the name, Aunt Ester says that the young woman often acts like it. She then sends her to fetch Citizen Barlow.

Aunt Ester's age suggests that she truly does *have certain mystical or spiritual powers. In a way, she's a living reminder of the entire history of slavery in the United States, since the first slave ship arrived in Jamestown, Virginia in 1619— exactly 285 years before 1904, the year in which* Gem of the Ocean *takes place. For this reason, it's important that Aunt Ester find somebody to continue her legacy, since she's an important part of the Black community in the United States, ultimately keeping people from letting the horrors of slavery slip out of the country's collective consciousness.*

When Citizen comes to sit with Aunt Ester, she asks about the man he killed. He then pulls out a handful of nails and explains that he was the one who stole them from the mill—not Garret Brown. When he saw that everyone was blaming Garret, he told himself that he should come clean, but there were too many distractions. Before he knew it, Garret had drowned. Now he feels like he has a hole inside and that his insides might seep out of it.

When Citizen finally reveals that he was the one to steal the bucket of nails, his unhappiness begins to make a bit more sense. Not only has he faced economic exploitation in an environment in which he has very little support, but he's also racked with guilt. And yet, he clearly stole the nails because he had no other way of getting out of debt with the mill. He doesn't say what he was going to do with the nails, but it's reasonable to assume that he would have sold them in order to pay back what he owed. Considering that the mill took advantage of him by lying about his wages and intentionally saddling him with debt, it seems somewhat understandable that he stole from the institution in order to improve his situation. Unfortunately, though, his theft led to Garret Brown's death, leaving Citizen with nothing but guilt and sorrow.

Aunt Ester tells Citizen that he'll never be able to change what happened. What he should do, then, is figure out why Garret Brown decided to drown instead of simply accepting 30 days in jail. Citizen assumes it's because Garret didn't want people think of him as a thief, but Aunt Ester disagrees. Garret knew he wasn't a thief, and that's all that would have mattered. The *real* reason he decided to drown, Aunt Ester says, is because he'd "rather die in truth" than "live a lie." This decision was the only choice he could have made that would prove his life is worth more than a bunch of nails. With that in mind, Aunt Ester says, Citizen has to figure out how to live his *own* life correctly.

According to Aunt Ester, Garret Brown didn't choose death simply to show everyone around him that he was innocent. Rather, he chose death because that was the only way of preserving his sense of self-worth and integrity. He knew he was innocent, so he couldn't let himself take on undeserved punishment. The main idea here is that it's important for people to be at peace with themselves and with their own decisions. Citizen, however, isn't at peace with himself because he failed to stand up and take the blame for stealing the nails.

Aunt Ester assures Citizen that she's going to help him. She's going to show him a place called **the City of Bones**. First, though, he has to go out and find two pennies lying side by side. He can't find a penny on one street and then another on a different street—they have to be next to each other. When he finds them, he should come right back to Aunt Ester. He quickly goes upstairs to get his coat and hat, at which point Black Mary enters. When Citizen comes downstairs and prepares to leave, Aunt Ester instructs him to look for a man named Jilson Grant, who is supposed to give him something that he should put in a handkerchief with his two pennies.

None of what Aunt Ester says in this conversation makes much sense yet. What becomes clear, though, is her ability to sweep people up in spiritual rituals aimed at helping people overcome their problems, though it remains unclear how, exactly, she'll do this. Nonetheless, the tasks she gives Citizen are infused with meaning simply because they're part of a special ritual.

Citizen rushes off into the night to find two pennies and Jilson Grant. When Black Mary asks what the pennies are for, Aunt Ester simply says that the purpose of the task is simply to give Citizen something to do. All that matters is whether or not he *thinks* the two pennies have meaning and power. Once he finds them, he'll feel as if his life is about to change, which is important if he's going to "come face to face with himself." Right as she finishes talking, Eli rushes in and announces that the mill is on fire.

It's quite possible that Aunt Ester has spiritual or supernatural powers, especially given that she's 285 years old. But it's also possible that she simply has an excellent understanding of human nature. Finding two pennies won't have any sort of magical effect on Citizen, but it will have a psychological *effect. Although he currently feels out of sorts, finding the pennies will make him feel like he's capable of real change, ultimately suggesting that simply believing in something can be powerful and transformative.*

ACT 2, SCENE 1

Selig is in the kitchen telling Black Mary about how everyone is talking about the fire at the mill. Everywhere he goes, he hears people chattering about the mill. Some white people are so incensed that they want to keep Black people out of Pennsylvania. Selig even overheard a man saying that he wished slavery would start again, adding that he would gladly fight another Civil War to make it happen. When Aunt Ester and Eli come in, they all talk about the fire and how it's still burning. Selig then takes his leave, saying he has to go upriver and that he doubts he'll be able to avoid trouble.

It makes sense that the mill was burned down, since it was a huge source of exploitation and oppression in the Hill District's Black community. But burning it down also seems to have ignited the fury of white racists who want Black people to quietly accept injustice and subjugation. The fire thus uncovers the intense racism and unrest lurking just beneath the surface of American society in the North.

Citizen enters and proudly announces that he found two pennies. He didn't, however, find Jilson Grant. Aunt Ester tells Black Mary to bring out a large quilt, upon which there is a map. She points to a part of this map and identifies **the City of Bones**, where everything is made from bone. Aunt Ester has been there. Her mother, her aunt, and three of her uncles live there. She says that the people who created it managed to make a "kingdom out of nothing." These people were the ones who didn't make it across the ocean from Africa the America. Instead of journeying on, they stopped in the ocean and established this gleaming city.

When she talks about the people who didn't make it from Africa to America, Aunt Ester refers to enslaved Africans who were transported in bondage to America on slave ships. The City of Bones is a mythical place, but it stands for the living memory of the many people who died during the long, grueling passage. It's not yet clear what the City of Bones has to do with the process of "washing" Citizen's soul, but it seems that part of the ritual will require him to engage with the history of slavery and the memory of his enslaved ancestors.

Inside **the City of Bones**, Aunt Ester says, the people sing with burning tongues. There are 10,000 people, all of them calling out at the same time in song, their voices reaching out from the ocean. Aunt Ester herself crossed the ocean, weeping because she lost everything in her life. The only thing she had left was her ability to look at the stars, so she named them. When she was on the boat, she wondered why God let the wind fill the sails and push the ship forward. She couldn't answer her own question, and she had no idea where the boat was going, which made the experience even more harrowing.

Aunt Ester reveals that she was brought from Africa to America on a slave ship. Her story invites Citizen to consider the terrible suffering that so many Black people experienced because of slavery, which was so cruel that it caused even the most spiritual people—like Aunt Ester—to question how God could let such a thing happen. Again, it's not yet clear how Aunt Ester's story will help Citizen, except for the possibility that considering the horror of slavery might help him put his own problems into perspective—after all, his difficulties with racist employers all trace back to slavery, suggesting that the cruelty Aunt Ester experienced on the slave ship hasn't gone away. Rather, it has simply changed forms and become less overt.

As she speaks, Aunt Ester makes a small boat out of a **Bill of Sale** she has been holding. She tells Citizen that he's going to take a ride in this boat. If he believes that the tiny boat will take him to **the City of Bones**, then it will. If he wants to have his soul washed, he'll have to go to the City of Bones. He says that he'll do whatever it takes, so Aunt Ester tells him to go prepare by taking a bath, dressing in his nicest clothes, and trying to pray. After he's done all of this, they will go to the City of Bones.

Citizen has to commune with the spirits of his enslaved ancestors in order to cleanse his soul. The play thus hints that engaging with the horrid history of slavery will help Citizen contextualize his own suffering, which in turn will help him feel more at peace with himself.

ACT 2, SCENE 2

While Citizen and Aunt Ester prepare themselves for **the City of Bones**, Eli and Black Mary wait in the kitchen. Solly arrives to say goodbye before heading south, and Eli talks to him about how he should stay away from the cities, since white people have blocked off so many of the metropolitan areas in an attempt to keep Black people from leaving. When Citizen returns, Solly talks to him about the City of Bones—he has been there himself and knows that it's where he's going when he dies.

Solly's knowledge of the City of Bones presents the mystical city as a place that multiple people in the Hill District are familiar with. It is, then, a communal place that isn't necessarily something to fear, even though it's inhabited by the spirits of enslaved Africans who died on slave ships. The fact that Solly thinks he'll end up in the City of Bones when he's dead implies that the city is a place for all *Black people who have suffered racism and oppression, framing it as a safe space where everyone is united in a sense of shared suffering.*

Solly remarks that Citizen no longer has to pay the mill what he owes it. Citizen says that forcing people to owe money is worse than slavery, but Solly vehemently disputes this idea—he was enslaved himself. He pulls out a chain link and explains that he carries it for good luck. It used to be around his ankle, but he managed to escape enslavement. He fled north and made it to Canada in 1857, but as soon as he arrived, he broke down. He knew he'd found freedom, but he didn't know what to do with it. He didn't feel like he could truly embrace freedom while his mother and everyone else was still in bondage, so he told the people who smuggled him north to take him back. From then on, he worked on the Underground Railroad.

Solly sees freedom as meaningless unless everyone *is free. Although he managed to escape enslavement, he couldn't revel in his newfound liberty because he knew that so many Black people were still suffering in bondage. For him, freedom is worthless on an individual level, which is why he's so selfless when it comes to helping other people, as evidenced by his willingness to travel to Alabama to help his sister even though the journey will be treacherous.*

The walking stick Solly carries has 62 notches on it—one for each person he freed. He used to work with Eli to help people come north. The workers on the Underground Railroad were responsible for their own stretch of 200 miles, which they would help escapees navigate. After 200 miles, they would hand the escapees off to the next "conductor." Solly often had to face down bloodthirsty dogs. He shows Citizen scars from fighting the animals off. If he didn't make a living selling "pure," he thinks he'd probably kill every dog he saw.

When Solly shows Citizen his scars, he reveals his willingness to make tangible sacrifices in the name of helping other people. And yet, these intense experiences clearly still impacted him in a major way, burdening him with a certain trauma that he navigates by selling "pure," which is the only way he can avoid taking out his anger on innocent dogs, since he still associates them with racist violence.

Solly soon learned it wasn't such a big deal to bleed. It's possible to lose quite a bit of blood without dying, he says. He got used to that idea, which helped him fight off the dogs. As Solly and Eli talk about the Underground Railroad, Eli pours them all some whiskey, saying that Citizen deserves a drink because he's about to visit **the City of Bones**. As the three men drink, Solly talks about Emancipation, saying that it never actually achieved what it was supposed to achieve. Instead of slavery, the country now uses the law to oppress Black Americans. The current conditions have made it so that many Black people have nothing to lose, which is something Caesar doesn't understand.

The Emancipation Proclamation was signed in 1863, officially granting legal freedom to all enslaved people. However, signing something into law doesn't necessarily make it so, which is what Solly points out when he says that Emancipation failed to bring about true freedom. His ideas highlight the ways in which oppressive practices haven't disappeared in the decades since slavery. Rather, they've simply transformed, as the country's power structures perpetuate racist discrimination in less obvious ways. When Solly suggests that the circumstances in the United States have made it so that Black people have nothing to lose, he hints that the current system is untenable and destined to collapse.

Solly and Eli agree that white people fought the Civil War for their own reasons. Although the Union Army's efforts ultimately put an end to slavery and—in that way—benefited Black people, it was clear that Black Americans would have to fend for themselves after the war. Solly recognized that this would happen from the very start of the war, knowing that the interests of white northerners and Black people would only overlap for a little while.

There's a prominent narrative in the United States that celebrates northern white people for fighting to abolish slavery. It's true that the Union Army did a great thing by fighting the Civil War and putting an end to slavery, but Solly suggests that it's also *true that the Union had other reasons to fight the war—after all, the South wanted to secede, so there were political reasons driving the Union's war efforts. What this suggests, then, is that Black Americans living in the decades after slavery still had to face considerable racism and discrimination, which was still very much alive even in the northern states.*

Aunt Ester enters the kitchen and asks Solly to help Citizen on his journey to **the City of Bones**. Solly is eager to make his way toward his sister in Alabama, but he agrees to help Citizen before he leaves. He won't be the only one helping Citizen; Eli, Black Mary, and Aunt Ester will also be there to guide him as he travels to the City of Bones on the small boat Aunt Ester made out of a **Bill of Sale**. The boat is called the *Gem of the Ocean*, and Aunt Ester says that people can never have "enough help" when they're on it, which is why it's important for Solly and everyone else to be there for Citizen as he makes the journey.

Solly's willingness to delay his trip to Alabama in order to help Citizen once again spotlights his kindness. He's someone who strongly believes in helping others when they're in need, so he can't turn away from Citizen. To that end, Aunt Ester's suggestion that people can never have "enough help" on the Gem of the Ocean *implies a sense of shared suffering that took place on the slave ships, as enslaved Africans experienced a communal travesty.*

Handing him the paper boat, Aunt Ester tells Citizen to hold onto it tightly. She also gives him the two pennies he found, saying he's going to need them. Jilson Grant was supposed to give him a piece of iron, but Citizen will have to make do without it—but then Solly offers him the lucky chain link he has carried with him since slavery. Once he's ready, everyone except Citizen starts singing a song about going to **the City of Bones**. Over their voices, Aunt Ester speaks vividly about the *Gem of the Ocean*, describing its movements as it's tossed back and forth in the water by a strong wind. Taken in by her words, Citizen suddenly feels as if he's on the boat.

The power of belief is on full display in this scene, as Citizen loses himself in Aunt Ester's words so much that he can actually feel the motions of the slave ship. Whether or not Aunt Ester actually has any mystical or spiritual powers is more or less beside the point, since what really matters is whether or not Citizen believes in the journey she has sent him on—and, of course, he does *believe in that journey.*

Guided by Aunt Ester, Citizen describes what he sees while standing on the *Gem of the Ocean*. The sky is blue, but there are dark clouds on the horizon. Aunt Ester tells him to take refuge from the oncoming weather by going below deck. He follows her directions and finds himself in a dark hold, where he can hear people singing about going to a graveyard (Eli, Solly, and Black Mary sing these words in the background of the scene). The song also suggests to Citizen that the people below deck remember him, and then he realizes he has been chained to the boat (Eli and Solly grab him and constrain him). His eyes adjust to the darkness, and now he can see that the people down there all look like him—they all have his face.

When Citizen looks around and sees that all of the people below deck have his own face, there's a very visceral sense of shared suffering. He seems to realize in this moment his own connection to the horrors of slavery, even though he himself was never enslaved. The problems he faces in his own life, the play implies, are all connected to the horrors and injustices of slavery, which continue to reverberate into the present.

Citizen panics, but Black Mary tries to soothe him by telling him to take a deep breath. He asks her where he is, and she reminds him that he's on a boat headed to **the City of Bones**—a fact that terrifies him. He throws the paper boat on the ground, but Aunt Ester reminds him that he can't go to the City of Bones without it, so he tries his best to crawl toward it, feeling rocked back and forth by a storm. Before he can pick it up, Solly and Eli grab him and whip him (it feels real to him, but they just pantomime the act).

Although Citizen's initial reaction to boarding the Gem of the Ocean *was one of curiosity and confusion, he now becomes terrified. What's more, he experiences real pain and torture, thus putting him in touch with the horrific experience his ancestors underwent on board the slave ships hundreds of years ago.*

Eli and Solly throw Citizen into the hull and slam the hatch shut. He begs for water, but Aunt Ester says there isn't any—all he has is his lucky chain link. The captain of the ship abandoned it and took all its supplies, leaving everyone else to die. However, she says, the people onboard have managed to survive. And because he survived, Citizen should make the most of his life. As Aunt Ester says this, Citizen looks up and sees **the City of Bones**. He's struck by its gleaming beauty.

Oddly enough, the harrowing feeling of riding on a slave ship ends up turning into a beautiful experience for Citizen, who suddenly has a renewed appreciation for his own life. Although he has undergone great hardship, it's unlikely that anything will compare to what it felt like to be whipped by enslavers in the dark, crowded hold of a slave ship.

Citizen goes to one of **the City of Bones**'s 12 gatekeepers and gives him the two pennies, but the gatekeeper won't let him pass. Aunt Ester asks if he knows the gatekeeper, and he's horrified to see that it's Garret Brown. Aunt Ester urges Citizen to tell Garret Brown the truth, so he confesses that he was the one to steal the bucket of nails. The gatekeeper lets him pass. Inside the City of Bones, Citizen is overwhelmed by the beauty and feels like he has been reborn.

In a way, the entire journey to the City of Bones is a way for Citizen to confront the man he wronged: Garret Brown. In doing so, he takes responsibility for his own actions. Whereas Garret Brown "died in truth," Citizen was forced because of his own decisions to live as a dishonest man whose actions led to the death of an innocent person. Now that he has confessed to Garret Brown, though, he can move on with his life. What's more, the trip has put him in touch with the shared suffering of the many Black people who died on the slave ships, showing him that—though life is terribly hard in a racist society—he, too, might eventually experience an afterlife in the City of Bones, where racism and oppression can no longer touch him.

Citizen's journey is over. He looks around and asks where he is, and Black Mary reminds him that he's in Aunt Ester's house. Just then, Caesar enters and informs Solly that he's under arrest, claiming that someone saw him set the mill on fire. But then Solly hits Caesar in the knee with his walking stick and runs out the door. Caesar yells after him, saying that he'll bring Solly to justice soon enough.

Lighting the mill on fire perfectly aligns with Solly's unwillingness to ignore oppression—even when it doesn't impact him directly. He doesn't work at the mill, but he recognized its exploitative practices, so he took it upon himself to fight back. Once again, then, his community-minded worldview is on full display, as he demonstrates that he sees freedom as meaningless unless it applies to everyone.

ACT 2, SCENE 3

It's two hours later, and Citizen is sitting with Black Mary in the kitchen. He wonders if Solly really burned down the mill, but Black Mary says it doesn't matter—Caesar is going to track him down and kill him either way. Changing the subject, Citizen notes that Black Mary is wearing a blue dress that reminds him of a woman he once saw at a dance. They went home together that night. The next morning, he woke up and she was crying, but he didn't ask why—he just let her weep. When he left, he couldn't stop looking back as she stood in the doorframe. He often lies awake at night thinking about what he'd say to her if he ever saw her again.

Citizen's story about the woman in the blue dress hints at the loneliness he has experienced in his life. The fact that he still thinks about this woman suggests that he longs to have somebody to share his life with. Now that he feels reborn after visiting the City of Bones, though, it's apparently possible for him to speak openly about the woman in the blue dress, suggesting that something in his outlook has changed—after all, he used to lie awake tormenting himself with thoughts of the woman in the blue dress, but now he casually brings her up in conversation with Black Mary.

Thinking about the woman in the blue dress usually makes Citizen feel lonely, but he doesn't feel that way now. He doesn't have a woman in his life, but he feels "all filled up inside" now. Black Mary says, "You got to be right with yourself before you can be right with anybody else." Citizen couldn't agree more, deciding that he'd tell the woman in blue exactly what Black Mary just said if he ever saw her again—he thinks she was searching for someone else to help her become "right with herself."

The idea of being "right with yourself" is central to the entire play. Part of what it means to be truly free, the play implies, is being at peace with oneself. There's a sense of self-sufficiency and responsibility to this idea, as if Citizen has finally realized that he has to face his problems on his own before he can engage in meaningful relationships with others. Whereas he used to turn to other people in the hopes that they might help him, he now knows that he has to help himself *by owning his mistakes. Being "right" with oneself is so important, the play intimates, that it's even worth dying for, as evidenced by Garret Brown's decision to drown in order to preserve his integrity; he knew he was in the right, and so nothing—not even death—could convince him to betray his own honor.*

Aunt Ester comes into the kitchen and asks Citizen to go looking for Selig. He should be traveling upriver right now, but she wants Citizen to bring him back before he gets too far. Citizen will have to be careful, since Caesar will most likely follow him if he sees him. Citizen agrees and takes his leave. Aunt Ester tells Black Mary to give her some food, but she also critiques her young protégé for having the fire too hot. Black Mary argues back, saying that she's tired of how much Aunt Ester criticizes her—she has her own way of doing things, and if Aunt Ester doesn't like that, then that's too bad. Instead of chastising her, Aunt Ester simply says, "What took you so long?"

The scene between Aunt Ester and Black Mary suggests that Aunt Ester has been waiting for her protégé to stand up for herself. Aunt Ester has critiqued Black Mary several times throughout the play, and though it has noticeably irked Black Mary, she has never actually put up a fight. Now, though, she insists that she has her own way of doing things. By saying this, she perhaps shows Aunt Ester that she has gained the confidence necessary to someday take Ester's place as a spiritual leader in the community—a role that undoubtedly requires a strong sense of self.

ACT 2, SCENE 4

Citizen comes back with Selig, who informs Aunt Ester that all of the roads out of town are blocked off because Caesar is looking for Solly. Aunt Ester then asks him to smuggle Solly downriver. She doesn't know if he really burned down the mill, but she doesn't care—she just wants to get him to safety. Overhearing their conversation, Solly bursts out of the bedroom and announces that he *did* burn the mill. He did it because he has been waiting for true freedom for too long. He didn't mind waiting a little while after slavery for freedom, but as he got older, he started worrying that he would die before ever experiencing it. At the very least, then, burning the mill will remind everyone that he existed and fought for freedom.

Solly's frustration with the continued oppression of Black Americans finally came to a tipping point when he saw the unrest sparked by the mill's exploitative practices. Standing idly by simply wasn't an option for him, especially since he has been waiting for true, widespread freedom since he himself escaped from slavery—which is to say that he's been waiting for 40 years. By burning the mill, then, he tries to upend a system that otherwise seems content to go on oppressing and exploiting Black laborers forever.

Caesar will kill Solly if he finds him, so he's going to try to flee to Alabama undetected. Citizen decides to go with him; Solly and Eli praise him for making the decision, saying that he's one of them now. Before they leave, Citizen asks Black Mary if she's still "right" with herself. If she is, he'd like to come visit her when he comes back, thinking that perhaps they could be "right" with each other. Thinking for a moment about what he has said, she tells him to come by when he returns. Eli then announces that Caesar is coming down the street, so Solly and Citizen run out the back door.

Citizen's decision to help Solly indicates that his journey to the City of Bones truly changed him. Before the journey, he tended to think mostly about himself and his own needs. For example, he acted selfishly when he let Garret Brown take the blame for stealing the bucket of nails. He also focused on himself when Solly originally asked him to help him travel to Alabama. Now, though, he volunteers to help, making it quite clear that engaging with the shared suffering on the slave ship and in the City of Bones has fundamentally changed him, helping him recognize the value of uniting with his community.

Selig stays in Aunt Ester's house and greets Caesar, who unsuspectingly tells him where to cross the river to avoid the roadblocks. When Selig leaves, Caesar informs Aunt Ester that he has a warrant—but she cuts him off, saying that she, too, has a piece of paper. She's referring to **the Bill of Sale** that she folded into the shape of a boat. Caesar tries to continue what he was saying about his warrant, but Aunt Ester says she doesn't care about what a piece of paper says. To prove her point, she makes Caesar read the Bill of Sale: it's from when she was enslaved, stating that she—a 12-year-old girl at the time—had been sold for $607.

Aunt Ester challenges Caesar's authority by highlighting how absurd it is to invest so much meaning in the law. Just because he has a warrant doesn't mean he's morally justified to do whatever it is he wants to do. By reading him the Bill of Sale, she reminds him that it was once technically legal to sell human beings as if they were livestock. If the law permitted such terrible behavior, then it's not worthy of much respect.

Aunt Ester explains that writing the law on a piece of paper doesn't make it right. The **Bill of Sale** says that she's "property," but both she and Caesar know that's not true. Her point is lost on Caesar, who says that slavery is over and that she needs to abide by the law. And because he has a warrant for her arrest, he has to take her away—she has, after all, aided and abetted in the hiding of Solly, a wanted criminal. For that reason, he has to arrest her. Eli steps out with a shotgun aimed at Caesar, but Aunt Ester tells him to put it away, and Caesar says he's going to overlook the fact that Eli broke the law by threatening him. He then takes Aunt Ester to jail.

Aunt Ester challenges the idea that the law is unequivocally right, but Caesar is too wrapped up in following the rules to give her point much thought. Once again, he demonstrates his tendency to turn against his fellow community members. He wants to succeed as the Hill District's constable, so he unquestioningly enforces the law—even when it's obviously unjust.

ACT 2, SCENE 5

When Aunt Ester comes home after posting bail, she goes straight to her room to lie down. Just as Eli sits down to take a moment to himself, Citizen rushes through the upstairs window and runs downstairs. He informs Eli and Black Mary that Caesar shot Solly. He then runs outside with Eli, and they come back with Solly's body. Aunt Ester appears and tells them to put him on the table. As she sets to work trying to stop his bleeding, Citizen and Selig explain that they had reached West Virginia when Solly noticed a can of kerosene in Selig's wagon. He announced that he wanted to go back and bust all the workers who were arrested during the riot out of jail—and then he wanted to burn the jail itself.

Yet again, Solly demonstrates his unwillingness to accept freedom for himself while others continue to suffer in bondage and oppression. In fact, he doesn't seem to believe he can even experience freedom in the first place if everyone else doesn't have it. For this reason, he won't let himself escape to Alabama while the workers who rioted at the mill remain in jail—even though turning around obviously puts him in danger because Caesar is looking for him.

Solly didn't feel right escaping to freedom when so many others weren't free. On their way back, Caesar saw the wagon and started shooting at it, hitting Solly directly in the chest. Citizen worries that the only reason Solly got shot was because he didn't have his lucky chain link, which he'd lent to Citizen. But Eli says he knows Solly will pull through, since he's so tough. And yet, Solly passes away moments later as Aunt Ester, Black Mary, and Eli sing a hopeful song.

Solly ends up dying as a result of his uncompromising commitment to helping others overcome subjugation. In a way, his death is similar Garret Brown's death, since both men died with integrity because they refused to submit to injustice. His death therefore aligns with Aunt Ester's previous implication that it's honorable to "die in truth," which is like making the ultimate sacrifice to be "right" with oneself.

Citizen puts his two pennies in Solly's lifeless hands. Eli says a few words about his life, noting that he never found the freedom he spent his entire life fighting for. But still, "he lived in truth and he died in truth." After Eli's brief eulogy, Caesar comes to the door and demands to know where Citizen is. Citizen hides before he comes in, and then Caesar addresses Selig, saying that he needs to get a statement from him, since he thinks Solly stole his wagon. He also vows to find Citizen, but then Black Mary jumps in and says she can't stand being his sister anymore, disowning him as her brother—a statement that deeply wounds him and sends him speechless out the door.

Caesar's inability to respond when Black Mary disowns him suggests that his familial bond with her was the only thing he cared about other than himself. However, his selfish willingness to work against his community and even kill people like Solly in order to uphold oppressive laws ultimately made it impossible for Black Mary to justify her relationship with him. In turn, the play implies that fiercely individualistic attitudes end up alienating people from their loved ones.

Once Caesar is gone, Citizen comes back out. Aunt Ester, Eli, and Black Mary sing a burial song as Citizen puts on Solly's coat and grabs his walking stick. He also takes Solly's hat and finds the letter from his sister inside of it. Putting the hat on, he leaves the house as Eli pours a drink and raises a toast to Solly.

At the very end of the play, Citizen symbolically becomes *Solly, putting on his hat and picking up his walking stick in a way that suggests he will take up the old man's legacy—just like Black Mary will someday continue Aunt Ester's legacy. When he looks at the letter from Eli's sister, it's reasonable to assume that he plans to travel down to Alabama to make sure she's all right, thus picking up where Solly left off. He has, then, undergone a total transformation throughout the course of the play, going from someone who thinks mainly of his own well-being to someone who willingly helps others.*

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