

Intimate Apparel



INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF LYNN NOTTAGE

Lynn Nottage wrote her first play when she was eight years old. As a young adult, she attended Brown University and went on to receive her MFA in playwriting from Yale. She spent several years as an international press officer for Amnesty International before transitioning to writing full-time in the 1990s. Her first full-length play to garner attention was *Crumbs from the Table of Joy*, which she wrote in 1995. *Intimate Apparel* is one of her best-known plays. After its California premiere, the play opened off-Broadway starring Viola Davis. It has since become one of the most produced plays in America. Her 2015 play *Sweat* gave Nottage her Broadway debut in 2017. In addition to writing plays, Nottage has participated in multimedia installations, written for television, and co-founded the production company Market Road Films. She lives in Brooklyn, New York with her husband and two children.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Intimate Apparel touches on a number of events and social movements happening around the turn of the century. It mentions the construction of the Panama Canal by the U.S., which began in 1904 and took eleven years to complete. Work on the canal was a deadly prospect, especially for a black person like George. An estimated 4,500 black workers died of tropical diseases after 1904, and under French control between 1881 and 1903, more than 22,000 workers died. Around 1905, New York passed housing and sanitation laws attempting to crack down on sex workers like Mayme, while all the play's black characters would've been subject to the 1896 ruling in *Plessy v. Ferguson* that upheld "separate but equal" public facilities as legal. Mrs. Van Buren in particular embodies the "Gibson girl," one of the competing images of ideal femininity of the time. The Gibson girl was fashionable, flighty, romantic, and didn't think highly of men—but, as Mrs. Van Buren so carefully points out, she also wasn't interested in suffrage or stepping outside the traditional sphere, positions that were instead taken up by the "New Woman." The turn of the 20th century saw the beginning of the rise of ready-to-wear clothing, which included mass-produced undergarments, but ladies with means still ordered custom garments from seamstresses like Esther. Finally, Mr. Marks was likely a part of the influx of Jewish immigrants beginning in 1881, especially from Russia and eastern European countries. With this mass immigration came a rise in anti-Semitic and anti-immigration sentiment among white Americans.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

The draw of New York as a city of opportunity for immigrants is one that authors and playwrights have explored for years. The 1902 novel by Paul Laurence Dunbar, *The Sport of the Gods*, explores the breakdown of a black family from the American South as they move to New York and find their dreams of success slowly vanquished. [A Tree Grows in Brooklyn](#) is a semi-autobiographical novel about second- and third-generation immigrants in Williamsburg, Brooklyn. Even contemporary young adult novels like Nicola Yoon's *The Sun Is Also a Star* deal closely with questions of what the American dream means for immigrants and whether or not it's attainable. In 2004, Nottage wrote *Fabulation*, a companion play to *Intimate Apparel* that reimagines Esther as a contemporary public relations employee in Manhattan. Nottage's body of work primarily tackles the African American experience in a variety of time periods and situations. Though she's best known for *Intimate Apparel*, her other award-winning plays include *By the Way*, *Meet Vera Stark* and *Ruined*.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** *Intimate Apparel*
- **When Written:** 2003
- **Where Written:** Brooklyn, NY
- **When Published:** The play was first performed in 2003; the script was published in 2005
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Dramatic stage play
- **Setting:** New York City, 1905
- **Climax:** Esther and Mayme refuse to open the door for George
- **Antagonist:** George; racism, sexism, and poverty

EXTRA CREDIT

Got Your Back. The kinds of corsets that Esther would've made are known as s-bend or swan-bill corsets, and they were originally marketed as a "healthier" alternative to the hourglass-shaped Victorian styles. This claim, however, was questionable: while it may have put less pressure on the stomach, it forced wearers' backs into unnatural and dangerous positions. For this reason, many contemporary costume designers on *Intimate Apparel* choose to either use corsets that aren't 100% historically accurate, or they choose to use accurate corsets from a few years earlier or later than 1905.

Just Add Music. *Intimate Apparel* has been commissioned to be

adapted into an opera with music by Ricky Ian Gordon, while Lynn Nottage is involved in the project to adapt Sue Monk Kidd's novel [The Secret Life of Bees](#) into a musical.



PLOT SUMMARY

The year is 1905 in New York City. It opens in Esther's bedroom, where she's sewing a camisole while a party goes on downstairs. Mrs. Dickson comes upstairs to convince Esther to join the party and dance with Mr. Charles, an eligible bachelor. Esther isn't interested in Mr. Charles and, furthermore, is jealous of Corinna Mae, the recipient of the party, as this party celebrates her engagement. Esther has been in the boardinghouse for 18 years and in those years, she's watched 22 girls get married. Esther desperately wants to be married and resents those girls. Mrs. Dickson encourages Esther to marry a man with an income and assures her that her time will come. As she leaves, she gives Esther a letter from a man named George, but refuses to read the letter out loud. George appears and recites his letter: he's working on the Panama Canal and a coworker told him about Esther. He'd like to begin a correspondence.

Esther visits the boudoir of Mrs. Van Buren, a wealthy white lady, to deliver a new corset that's extremely low-cut. Mrs. Van Buren asked for one like the sex workers wear and she's very self-conscious about how she looks in it, but thinks it's the only way to regain her husband's attention. As Esther adjusts the corset, Mrs. Van Buren tenses at the touch. Mrs. Van Buren laments that she has to go to a ball later this evening, where everyone will ask her when she and her husband are going to have a baby. They've been trying, but in a whisper, Mrs. Van Buren confesses that she's not sure she can have children. Esther assures Mrs. Van Buren that she's too beautiful for her husband to stray, and they discuss if it's socially acceptable for a woman to be single. Mrs. Van Buren admits that if she were brave, she'd leave her husband. Esther says that she's received a letter from a man in Panama, but she can't respond because she's illiterate. Mrs. Van Buren excitedly helps Esther draft a letter and George writes again to Esther. He says that the Panama Canal seems like a crazy dream and while he loves the stories his coworkers tell, he now hears Esther's sewing machine in his head.

Esther visits Mr. Marks's flat to buy fabric. He talks her into buying beautiful Japanese silk and suggests she make it into a **smoking jacket** for her gentleman. They tease each other, discuss the silk, and Mr. Marks compliments Esther's taste in fabric and her skill at sewing. Esther says that the alternative was being a maid, and in her happiness about the fabric, she grabs Mr. Marks's hand. He pulls away. Esther is shocked and offended, but Mr. Marks says that because he's Jewish, he can only touch women who are his wife or relatives. He admits that he's engaged to a woman in Romania whom he's never met.

Mayme, a black sex worker, sits angrily at her piano and Esther lets herself in. A man just tore Mayme's robe and she spits that she hates the way the men touch her. Esther shows her the corset she brought: it's blue, but it looks just like the one she made for Mrs. Van Buren. As Esther laces Mayme into it, she remarks that Mrs. Van Buren and Mayme each want what the other has. When Esther mentions Mr. Marks, Mayme teases her about having a crush, but Esther brings up George. Mayme is dismissive at first, but kindly tells Esther that it's okay to dream. They play-act that they're fancy ladies in Europe. Mayme says that she's a pianist, and Esther says she owns a beauty shop for black ladies. Esther admits truthfully that she has money saved in her **crazy quilt** to actually start her beauty shop, but Mayme encourages Esther to abandon this dream. She says that dreams are fun to have, but they're not real. They discuss George's most recent letter and Mayme writes Esther's reply. George writes back that he's been thinking about New York and the suit he'll wear when he meets Esther.

Back in Esther's bedroom, Mrs. Dickson brings in a letter from George. She opened it and read it already. Mrs. Dickson believes that George will take advantage of Esther, but Esther retorts that she doesn't need approval and isn't going to settle for someone like Mr. Charles: she has means and will open her beauty parlor, man or no man. Mrs. Dickson rips up the letter. George starts a letter to Esther, but the scene moves to Mr. Marks's apartment. He and Esther wrap themselves in beautiful blue and magenta silk, and Esther asks why he always wears black. He explains that it's how he shows devotion to God, and he says that his old suit was his father's and connects him to his ancestors. As he turns to wrap up the silk, Esther touches his collar.

In her boudoir, Mrs. Van Buren wears her new corset of magenta silk. She complains about having to go to the opera, and reveals that when she started her period earlier, her husband spat at her. Mrs. Van Buren expresses interest in seeing "a colored show" as Esther adjusts her breasts in the corset. She asks Esther to take her but giggles when Esther asks if she could go to the opera in return. Esther admits that she's afraid that George is falling in love with her, and the women admit secret things that they've done: Mrs. Van Buren has smoked opium, while Esther touched Mr. Marks. In George's next letter, he asks Esther to marry him and confesses his love. Esther tells Mayme about it later. She suggests that this is her only chance to marry and asks Mayme to witness the ceremony, but Mayme refuses. Later, as Mrs. Dickson helps Esther pack, she refuses to let Esther take a frumpy dress and gives her marriage "advice": to attend to George's sexual needs however she must to get him to stay home, and to not let him beat her. She tells Esther that she doesn't need to get married and explains how her own mother forced her to marry up rather than marry for love so she wouldn't have to be a laundress. Her husband was addicted to opium, but she got the

boardinghouse out of the deal.

Esther stops in at Mr. Marks's shop and asks for fabric for a wedding dress. She asks for his plainest fabric, which he suggests is for an older woman, and he's embarrassed when he realizes that Esther is the bride. He gifts her his finest wedding fabric and she weeps into it. Mayme, Mrs. Van Buren, Mr. Marks, and Mrs. Dickson appear onstage. Esther and George enter in their wedding attire and as they meet, a camera flashes and a caption reading "Unidentified Negro Couple ca. 1905" appears. George and Esther stand on either side of their bed. George carelessly begins to take off his suit, which Esther carefully folds, and Esther sits with him, shaking. Esther states that she's not beautiful, but she's honest. George removes her dress and touches her, but Esther gets up and offers George a smoking jacket that she made out of Japanese silk. He puts it on, but he's uncomfortable and roughly takes it off. Esther wants to talk before they consummate their marriage and tells him her family history. George isn't interested; his parents were slaves and he doesn't want to tell their stories. Mayme and Mrs. Van Buren appear after Esther and George have sex to help Esther dress.

Several months later, George prepares to go out in a frayed suit, despite Esther's protests that it's Sunday and they've been invited to a church social and Mrs. Dickson's. George is uninterested in going to either and asks for money for a new hat. Esther pulls money out of her crazy quilt for him and asks him to let her mend his shirt before he goes out—people will say bad things about her if he goes out unkempt. Frustrated, George talks about how he can't find work. He gives Esther a letter that a boss gave him and Esther pretends to read it. George finally gives Esther his shirt and lies down. Esther makes a final plea to go to the church social, since she's only been invited to things since they got married. George refuses and says that he feels inadequate since Esther has a job. He mentions that he knows a man who's trying to sell twelve draft horses and asks for the money in Esther's crazy quilt to buy them. Esther refuses, reminding George of her beauty parlor, but George laughs that Esther's looks make her unfit to run a beauty parlor. He tries to tell her that she'd be pretty with lipstick, but she refuses to wear it. George puts on his unfinished shirt and tells Esther where he's going. She says the place is "notorious," and they argue about how unhappy George is in America and in their marriage. Later, Esther goes to Mr. Marks to buy Scottish wool for a suit for George. Mr. Marks tries to sell her lace as well, and Esther insists she can't come anymore.

When Esther visits Mrs. Van Buren next, the white woman is unusually cheerful: her husband went to Europe and will be gone for months. Esther is distracted and sad, which vexes Mrs. Van Buren. Esther admits that George isn't happy and asks Mrs. Van Buren to pay her. Mrs. Van Buren reminisces about writing the letters to George, which makes Esther snap at her.

Esther sobs that she lies to George, and Mrs. Van Buren kisses Esther. Esther jerks away as Mrs. Van Buren explains that she loves Esther and that they can still be friends. Angry, Esther says they can't be friends when she can't enter through the front door, even if she's the only person who makes Mrs. Van Buren happy. As Mrs. Van Buren pays Esther, George enters Mayme's bedroom, puts money on her piano, and sits behind her.

Esther visits Mayme, who's thrilled because a man she calls "Songbird" has been coming regularly. He complains about his rich wife. She pulls out the smoking jacket that Esther gave George, which she says that Songbird—George—gave her. Esther tries to convince Mayme to think about the wives of the men she sees, but Mayme is hurt at Esther's lack of support and refuses. Later, Esther pins the pants on George's new suit. He refuses to let her hem them and says he needs to wear them out tonight. In an attempt to keep George at home, Esther puts on lipstick and acts sexy, but George is disgusted. He accuses her of wanting to subjugate him and of not believing in him, since she won't let him buy the draft horses. He kisses her roughly and promises that if he can buy the draft horses, he'll fund her beauty parlor and come home every night. Esther gives George all her money. She admits that she's illiterate, and says that she suspects George is too. George confirms this, and Esther says that they know each other less now than they did when they got married. George promises to bring back horses.

Esther bursts into Mayme's room. She admits that George left her and is cheating on her. She shares that she gave George the money for her beauty parlor and asks if Mayme knows where George is—she's wearing his smoking jacket. Mayme is horrified to learn that Songbird is George, but says that George came in in a new suit last night, threw dice, and used all the money. Mayme hands over the smoking jacket, and Esther forces Mayme to not open the door for George when he knocks. The next day, Esther stops in to see Mr. Marks and gifts him the smoking jacket. He's touched, puts the colorful garment on, and allows Esther to straighten it. Esther returns to Mrs. Dickson's boardinghouse and the older woman agrees to accept Esther back and not ask questions. Esther sits at her sewing machine and the scene turns into a photograph labeled "Unidentified Negro Seamstress, ca. 1905."



CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Esther – The protagonist of the play; a black seamstress in New York who sews intimate apparel for ladies of all levels of society. Esther is 35, unmarried, and is described by herself and others as being a plain and unattractive woman. What she lacks in looks, Esther makes up for in kindness and skill—she's a very talented seamstress who can craft beautiful undergarments,

whether they're for sex workers or high society ladies. She's extremely kind to and open with all of her clients, as part of her job entails cultivating a level of intimacy with them given the nature of her work. In this line of work, Esther is also privy to a number of her clients' secrets and deepest desires, information that the play suggests that these women don't discuss with anyone else. Esther is very involved with her church and her community to the extent that she can be as a single woman. She desperately wants to marry so that she can better participate in social events, but her looks and her pragmatic nature have kept her from doing so. Marrying and combining finances also would, in her mind, allow her to open a beauty shop that caters to black women. Esther has been saving for her beauty shop since she moved to New York eighteen years ago. Esther adores fabric and stories, which feeds her attraction to her Jewish fabric seller, Mr. Marks. Her love of stories also causes her to abandon her practical sensibilities and strike up a correspondence with George, a Caribbean man working on the Panama Canal whose letters draw her in and make her feel loved and cared for. Her decision to marry George, however, has disastrous consequences: he refuses to join Esther at social events or church, is disinterested in having sex with her, and ultimately betrays her trust by taking her money and spending it on gambling and sex workers, including Esther's friend and client, Mayme. Esther finally asserts her independence and her right to control her future by returning to her former boardinghouse and resuming work on intimate apparel to rebuild her savings, without a husband.

George – A handsome Barbadian man working on the Panama Canal. He hears about Esther from one of his coworkers and begins a correspondence with her. In his letters, George appears just as interested in stories and language as Esther is, and according to Mrs. Van Buren, his handwriting is wonderful. Though he's well aware that he's little more than a body on the Panama Canal, he also loves the tropics and feels as though he has a sense of purpose there. He appears to be an upstanding Christian man and betrays none of his vices until after he arrives in New York to marry Esther. Though George is gentle with Esther on their wedding night, it soon becomes apparent that he's not at all who Esther thought he was. He's dismissive of the beautiful **smoking jacket** she makes for him, and he laughs about her dream of opening up a beauty parlor. New York itself is extremely disappointing for him, as he sees that it will be very difficult for him to do anything besides carry luggage in hotels or shine shoes. He's also disappointed by Esther's looks and her desire to attend church events and socials, which George finds tedious. Instead, George spends his time in bars and, Esther later discovers, in Mayme's saloon with Mayme herself. Worst of all for Esther, George gives Mayme the smoking jacket and steals her heart completely. Despite these red flags, Esther gives George her life savings so that he can buy twelve draft horses and become a successful businessman. Instead, George wastes the money gambling and

drinking, though Esther stops Mayme from allowing George to continue to hire her. George disappears after Mayme refuses to let him in, having used up all of Esther's money.

Mayme – A black sex worker for whom Esther sews lingerie. Though Esther disapproves of Mayme's line of work, the two are close, genuine friends and often share their dreams with each other. Mayme initially moved to New York in the hope of playing ragtime piano in fancy clubs in Europe; however, these dreams have, as far as Mayme is concerned, proven unattainable. Though she still plays piano for herself and her clients, Mayme believes that dreaming and planning are foolish and, especially in her case, would take away from her ability to do her job. Though she recognizes that she has a relatively good job in a safer saloon, Mayme is also exasperated by her clients, as most of them are rough or overly handsy with her. Many of the clothing items she commissions from Esther are based off of corsets that Esther made for Mrs. Van Buren, the "Fifth Avenue lady," while Mayme laughs to learn that Mrs. Van Buren wants to wear corsets like those commonly worn by sex workers and dancers. Despite Mayme's initial skepticism of George, she helps Esther draft letters to him and, unbeknownst to her, takes him on as a client in the weeks after he comes to New York to marry Esther. George's kindness, gentleness, and generosity—he gives Mayme the **smoking jacket** that Esther made him as a wedding gift—rekindles Mayme's belief in romance and reaffirms her insistence that it's none of her business if her job harms the marriages of the men she sees. She reevaluates this when Esther finally admits that George is her husband. The two women both let George go, thereby asserting their independence.

Mrs. Van Buren – A wealthy white woman in her early 30s for whom Esther sews lingerie. Mrs. Van Buren appears to have it all—she's mostly successful at disguising her Southern roots, is a part of New York high society, and has the money to throw at expensive undergarments—but she's extremely lonely and insecure despite all of this. Much of this has to do with the fact that despite having been married for some time, she and her husband haven't been able to conceive a child and she's asked about it at almost every party she attends. She believes that her husband is losing interest in her and waffles between wanting to rekindle his affections with seductive undergarments and being thrilled when he leaves for months at a time. Mrs. Van Buren relies heavily on Esther's visits and confides in Esther about almost everything. For Mrs. Van Buren, Esther represents an exciting, exotic lifestyle, especially when Esther shares that she wants to write to George but can't, being illiterate. Mrs. Van Buren jumps at the opportunity to write Esther's letters for her and finds them an excellent distraction from her life. She is also sexually attracted to Esther. Things begin to fall apart between Esther and Mrs. Van Buren when Mrs. Van Buren laments that, with Esther's marriage, she's bored without letters to write; kisses Esther; and then insists

that they can "just be friends." She seems not to realize that because of the power imbalance between her and Esther, Esther understands that the two cannot be true friends and that Mrs. Van Buren is using Esther to fill major gaps in her life.

Mr. Marks – A Romanian Jewish fabric seller. It's unclear how long he's been in New York, but he's relatively young and likely immigrated to the U.S. sometime in the last ten years. Mr. Marks is a bright and passionate man; he loves beautiful fabrics and the stories he learns about them. He knows that Esther shares this passion, and he's often able to sell her fabric that she insists she doesn't need by sharing the stories with her. An observant Orthodox Jew, Mr. Marks is dedicated to upholding the rules of his religion and often explains these rules to Esther. For instance, he cannot wear colors aside from black, and cannot touch women who aren't his wife or family members. He also has a fiancée at home in Romania, whom he's never met—but whom he will, in theory, send for when his shop is doing well enough to support a family. This seems an almost impossible goal, however, as Mr. Marks notes that he's losing clients, and he's poor enough to have to sleep in his shop. The cultural differences pose problems for Esther and Mr. Marks, as the two are very attracted to each other but can never be together. After Esther's marriage to George fails, Mr. Marks does accept Esther's gift of the **smoking jacket** she initially made for George, puts on the colorful garment, and allows Esther to touch him and smooth the lapels.

Mrs. Dickson – The stern older woman who owns the boardinghouse where Esther lives. Mrs. Dickson is proper and well to do, and for a widowed black woman, she's doing extremely well for herself. She came into these fortunate circumstances after her husband died, leaving her the boardinghouse. Though Mrs. Dickson recognizes that her marriage was fundamentally flawed—her husband was addicted to opium—she still holds up marriage for sensible reasons as an aspirational ideal, and she wastes no time in cautioning Esther to not marry George for love. Despite, or possibly because of, how long Esther has been at the boardinghouse (and because of Mrs. Dickson's tough love), she and Esther are very close. Esther chooses to return to the boardinghouse after her marriage to George fails. Mrs. Dickson shows that while she might be a nosy busybody at times, she's also a respectful and forgiving friend by agreeing to not question Esther about her marriage and accepting her back with open arms.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Mr. Charles – A man who attends Mrs. Dickson's parties and, according to Mrs. Dickson, is sweet on Esther. Esther isn't interested, as Mr. Charles is overweight and she suspects he's attracted to men.

Corinna Mae – A young woman at Mrs. Dickson's boardinghouse. She's relatively pretty, but not especially smart.

Esther resents her because she's getting married.



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.



INTIMACY AND FRIENDSHIP

Intimate Apparel follows Esther, a black seamstress who sews corsets, camisoles, and other intimate undergarments for ladies in 1905 New York. At 35,

Esther believes that her time to marry is long past, and she spends her days visiting both her clients' homes and Mr. Marks's fabric shop. As the entirety of the play takes place in these domestic and personal spaces—Esther visits her clients in their boudoirs or bedrooms, and Mr. Marks's shop doubles as his living quarters—the play necessarily questions what it means to let someone into one's personal space, romantically or otherwise. By exploring the different kinds of intimacy discussed and displayed by the different characters, *Intimate Apparel* suggests that the deepest intimacy comes not from sexual or romantic relationships, but from one's friendships.

The way that the play's female characters talk about their sexual and marital relationships with men shows outright that physical intimacy is no guarantee of emotional intimacy. Both Mayme, a black sex worker, and Mrs. Van Buren, a wealthy white woman, are sexually engaged with men—Mayme with her clients and Mrs. Van Buren with her husband. But in both cases, the women are clearly detached from their relationships or even derisive of them. Mayme remarks to Esther about "all the pawing and pulling—for a dollar they think they own you," showing clearly that for her, physical encounters with men are by no means fulfilling or even especially intimate. Mrs. Van Buren echoes this sentiment and implies that in her marriage, sex is a means to an end, and a futile one at that. She and her husband have been trying to have a baby for years, and she seems almost as disinterested in actually being intimate with her husband as she suggests that her husband is with her.

This state of affairs, however, doesn't mean that these women don't crave *emotional* intimacy. For the most part, they find it with Esther, one of the few women they have to let into their personal lives simply by virtue of hiring her to sew intimate apparel for them. Esther is paid as much for her discretion with their secrets as she is for her work, and especially with Mrs. Van Buren, the physical contact necessary to fit and adjust the finished garments leaves Mrs. Van Buren with the impression that their relationship is more than that of client and seamstress. Importantly, the relationship between Esther and

Mrs. Van Buren isn't a real friendship because of the combination of their power imbalance and Mrs. Van Buren's desire to essentially use Esther to make up for what she's missing in her relationship with her husband. Esther ultimately recognizes this and asserts her desire for their relationship to not go deeper—as far as Esther is concerned, her job is to sew intimate apparel and keep her clients' secrets, not necessarily to be their lovers, friends, or stand-ins for their spouses. Mayme, on the other hand, is truly friends with Esther—as black women, the two are on more equal footing in society and though Esther disapproves of Mayme's line of work, she still respects Mayme and her autonomy, just as Mayme does for Esther.

Esther, like her clients, deeply desires emotional intimacy, but though she's extremely practical, she lacks the cynicism of both Mayme and Mrs. Van Buren. While she's initially skeptical when she receives a letter from George, a Barbadian man working on the Panama Canal who gets her address from a colleague and asks to begin a correspondence, she quickly falls in love with him. When he asks for her hand in marriage, she wastes no time in accepting. Her desire for intimacy and her fears that George is her only chance make her far more willing than she might otherwise be to trust a man she's never met. Importantly, the closeness that Esther feels with George, whether it's real or not, comes from the fact that their relationship is built on storytelling. This is, incidentally, the same thing that feeds the mutual attraction between Esther and Mr. Marks, her Jewish fabric seller. Esther and Mr. Marks share a love of textiles; Mr. Marks can often convince Esther to buy something if he has a compelling story about where the fabric came from and who designed it. Their delight in the fabric, the stories, and in each other is palpable and made all the more tragic because Mr. Marks has a fiancée at home in Romania and, because of his religious beliefs, cannot touch a woman who isn't his wife or a family member.

Ultimately, Esther is denied true intimacy with either man: George turns out to be as careless as the men that Mayme sees, cares little for stories or Esther's dreams, and in addition to not being interested in sex with her after their wedding night, spends Esther's hard-earned money to buy time with Mayme. He finally leaves with the entirety of her savings, showing her that trusting someone with her heart and her assets is dangerous and, given her experience and the experiences she hears about from her clients, is bound to end poorly.

The most tender and intimate event of the play, meanwhile, happens between Esther and Mr. Marks: when Esther gifts Mr. Marks the beautiful **smoking jacket** she initially made for George, he allows her to touch him and smooth the shoulders and lapels. While this does suggest that Esther may never experience true, positive *sexual* intimacy with a man, the moment is nevertheless extremely intimate. This suggests that

intimacy doesn't have to be sexual in nature—it just needs to come from a place of genuine caring, positive regard, and a desire to share parts of one's life with another person.

Similarly, Esther's return to Mrs. Dickson's boardinghouse offers hope for Esther's friendship with the older woman. Mrs. Dickson agrees to not ask questions about Esther's return and accept her back into her home, something that gives Esther a great deal of comfort. While this is a return to an unhappy normal for Esther in terms of romance, it also suggests that Esther has learned the importance of relying on her trusting, trustworthy, and present friends for emotional intimacy rather than men who are, in her experience, disinterested, untrustworthy, and unavailable.



RACE, CLASS, AND EXPLOITATION

Except for Mrs. Van Buren, the characters in *Intimate Apparel* are by no means wealthy and are overwhelmingly black. Mrs. Dickson, the owner of the boardinghouse where Esther lives, is the only black woman who is truly doing well for herself. Simply by virtue of telling a story that's primarily about people who are members of marginalized groups—black, poor, Jewish, and female—*Intimate Apparel* explores how society's exploitation of these different identities traps characters and keeps them from achieving success in their personal and professional lives. It also goes to great lengths to explore how "low" society—that is, black society—is fetishized, exploited, and turned into entertainment for white people, thereby making the position of someone like Esther even worse.

Intimate Apparel goes to great lengths to show how difficult life is for all its poor characters. Though Mayme fortunately still has a sense of humor, she's resigned to what she believes is her unchangeable fate to work as a sex worker for the foreseeable future, something that pays the bills but does nothing else for her. Esther, meanwhile, has been shut out of any upward mobility because she's unmarried and black, while the Romanian Jewish fabric seller Mr. Marks clearly sleeps in his shop and watches his customers defect to other sellers. For all of these characters, their identities are a major, if not the defining factor of their poverty and their status in society: as a Jewish immigrant and a fabric seller, Mr. Marks would have suffered from widespread anti-Semitism from white Americans upset about immigration and suspicious of Jewish shopkeepers. Esther notes that while she's doing relatively well for herself, she can't expect to do much better on her own as a black woman. Similarly, Mayme can clearly pay the bills, but to do so must embody the stereotype of the hyper-sexualized black woman, and she believes she has no room for advancement. All of this gives the impression that without major change in the lives of any of these characters, they're effectively stuck in the status quo and, for the most part, shut out of reaching their goals and seeing their dreams come true. These marginalized

identities, in other words, keep them from advancing in meaningful ways.

This state of affairs becomes especially apparent in George's case, as his letters to Esther allow the reader or viewer to get a more complete sense of how his life and his perception of his identity change after coming to New York to marry Esther. While George admits that in Panama he was treated like an animal and as though he was expendable, he also notes after coming to New York that there was dignity afforded to him in Panama that he can't achieve in the U.S. In New York, he understands that aspiring to do more than carry luggage or shine shoes makes him "uppity" and above his station as a black man in a society that's racist in a different and, for George, less bearable way than Panama was. Just as with Esther and Mayme, George is denied any possibilities for advancement because of his skin color, making it seem to him as though his only options are to gamble and see sex workers, including Mayme, to attempt to recreate some of the agency and control he for which he feels nostalgic.

Mrs. Van Buren, the white woman Esther sews for, demonstrates a variety of ways in which affluent white society fetishizes and idealizes lower-class, black society for its own entertainment. In her boredom and desire for intimacy of some sort, Mrs. Van Buren helps Esther—who is illiterate—write love letters to George. Though it's important to keep in mind that Esther truly seems to enjoy her job and especially loves the fabric she works with, through these letters, Mrs. Van Buren helps to further idealize Esther's job as a seamstress, thereby glossing over the less savory facts of Esther's life, such as her poverty and her marginalized position as a black woman and a spinster. Further, Mrs. Van Buren also orders corsets modeled on those that Esther makes for Mayme. For Mrs. Van Buren, wearing "naughty," sexy corsets like those that sex workers wear is something exciting and a thing she can do from the safety of her lavishly furnished boudoir, without having to grapple with what it's actually like to be involved in sex work.

The stage notes also make it clear that Mrs. Van Buren, in her loneliness, has romantic feelings for Esther, which culminates in attempting to kiss Esther during Esther's final visit to her home. When Esther rejects this advance, Mrs. Van Buren insists that the two of them can still "just be friends," a suggestion that Esther says is indicative of all the ways in which Mrs. Van Buren isn't actually her friend and has no idea what Esther's life is like—in Mrs. Van Buren's eyes, Esther is paid entertainment and emotional fulfillment, not a friend on equal footing.

Esther then returns to Mrs. Dickson's boardinghouse, having presumably lost Mrs. Van Buren as a customer and George to gambling. This may mean that Esther is returning to a life in which she continues to have few prospects for upward mobility, but by refusing to allow Mrs. Van Buren to fetishize her, Esther is able to create a sense of dignity and control over her situation, something the play suggests is all she can reasonably

expect.



GENDER AND EXPECTATIONS

Despite the very different lifestyles that the four female characters lead, it's important to note that none of them are fully achieving what Esther suggests is the pinnacle of womanhood, which she defines as being a married lady who is closely involved in her church community and society at large. By comparing the ways that the play's female characters collectively fail at this idealized vision of womanhood, the play ultimately proposes that this vision is fundamentally flawed. While Esther's trajectory in particular can be read as tragic proof that she and her counterparts are destined to fail at society's idea of proper womanhood, it's also possible to argue that it's simply not useful for a woman to tie her success to a man. Independence and rejecting the expectations of femininity, the play proposes, can be freeing and generally lead to better success.

Mrs. Van Buren is held up as the pinnacle of perfect, successful femininity. She's beautiful, has money to throw at exquisite undergarments to entice her husband, and is a part of New York's high society—a "Fifth Avenue lady," as the play's poorer characters call her, and both Mayme and Esther aim to emulate her mannerisms, lifestyle, and fashion. Mrs. Van Buren's "success," however, is shown to be a front almost immediately: while she may have successfully transformed herself from a Southern belle to a cosmopolitan socialite, her husband is disappointed with her because they haven't been able to conceive a child—which is, according to her husband, Mrs. Van Buren's fault. As far as Mrs. Van Buren is concerned, she's not a good wife or a good woman, and she's reminded regularly of her "failure" when, at parties, people ask over and over again when she and her husband are going to have a baby. This is proof for her that being a perfect woman isn't just achieving class status—it also means properly using one's body to both serve one's husband (even if the husband in question isn't interested, as Mrs. Van Buren says is the case) and subsequently becoming a mother.

Like Mrs. Van Buren, Esther sees success as a woman as something that's tied to her relationships with men and not necessarily to her own actions or skills. The play introduces Esther as she feverishly sews a camisole for a young woman from the boardinghouse who just got married. Esther is extremely sensitive about the wedding festivities going on downstairs, since she's the only woman who hasn't yet gotten married and moved out in her eighteen years at the boardinghouse. Other women, whom Esther suggests are flighty, desperate, or easily hoodwinked, have gotten married left and right.

It's worth noting, however, that Esther idealizes married life to an extreme degree; there's no room in her fantasy for a man who isn't a regular churchgoer, interested in the same things

she is, or is unwilling to work for their marriage. Because of this, George proves himself a major disappointment for Esther. She questions his Christian beliefs when she learns that he's been seeing Mayme, and when he expresses interest in clothing styles worn by "dandies," he belittles her dreams for the beauty shop and he to get a job and support either himself or Esther. George's failures to behave "properly" mean that Esther fails at being a wife by association, as they seldom have sex and George refuses to accompany Esther to church or to social events—events which is only receiving invites to because she's now a "proper," married lady, no matter how dysfunctional her marriage is behind closed doors.

Esther's choice to trust George with her life's savings so he can buy twelve draft horses shows just how desperate she is to make her marriage work and somehow end up with a husband of whom she can be proud. He tells her that with the draft horses, he'll be able to find work and make a name for himself. In actuality, Esther ends up not just giving away her dream of a beauty shop along with her money, she also gives up George and everything he represented in terms of her ticket to acceptable womanhood, as he wastes the money gambling and drinking, and ultimately leaves her.

While this certainly represents a setback for Esther in a variety of important ways, it also offers some hope that Esther can take the lessons she learned from her marriage to George and carry them into the future in which she begins to recognize her successes for what they are and focus more on that than on the places where she believes she's lacking. Though marriage and a family may not be in the cards for Esther, the play leaves room for Esther to rebuild her savings doing a job she enjoys, unencumbered by a man who doesn't take her work or her aspirations seriously. Alone, the play suggests, Esther may not embody society's ideal woman, but she has the potential to be a far more successful and personally fulfilled one.



THE AMERICAN DREAM

None of the characters in *Intimate Apparel* are New York City natives, and yet all of them came to the city years prior to the start of the play in the hopes

of achieving their dreams of success. For all of them, they define this as experiencing financial success and personal fulfillment, whether their dreams include opening a beauty shop, as in the case of Esther, or being the epitome of the perfect wife, as Mrs. Van Buren aspires to be. For a variety of reasons, however, the play suggests that the American dream is mostly unattainable for its characters, and the most that any of them can ask for or expect is survival.

Early on in the play, Esther confides in Mayme that she'd like to one day open a beauty shop that will serve black women and will be the kind of shop where her clients can feel pampered, beautiful, and fancy. Esther has spent the last eighteen years she's been in New York saving for this dream, and as such, she

has a stash of money hidden in her **crazy quilt**. She says she doesn't yet have enough to open her beauty shop, but implies that she's well on her way. While hearing that Esther has this dream isn't shocking for Mayme, hearing that Esther is actively saving and planning for her shop is. Mayme, after working in the sex industry for years, has become extremely cynical about the ability of black women in particular to be able to move up in the world, and she long ago gave up on her dream of playing ragtime piano in fancy European clubs. Mayme is the first to introduce the idea that dreams like these can be dangerous. She tells Esther that "so many wonderful ideas been conjured in this room. They just get left right in that bed there, or on this piano bench. They are scattered all over this room." As far as Mayme is concerned, dwelling on her dreams takes away from her ability to do her job and earn enough money to make a living.

For the play's male characters, their versions of the American dream seem just as far away as Mayme's dream of playing piano does. While Mr. Marks is still doing business, he implies that he doesn't yet have enough money to bring his fiancée to America and furthermore, is losing customers and income, making it increasingly unlikely that he'll be able to send for her anytime soon. Because the reader can see how George thinks of the U.S. before he arrives in New York, it's even easier to see the American dream at work for him. Having seen white American men make their fortunes in Panama, George believes that he'll be able to emulate them by moving to their place of origin—something that ultimately proves impossible for him. As immigrants, Mr. Marks and George truly encapsulate the impossibility of the American dream for most people: they both gave up their homes abroad in the hope of making a better life for themselves in the U.S., but what they find is arguably just as dead-end and unfulfilling for them as what they left behind.

That this appears to hold true for all the characters who came to New York to chase their dreams, regardless of race or gender, suggests that the imagined ideal of the American dream is truly impossible for the vast majority of people. Instead, barring objective failure like George's eventual descent into gambling and debauchery, the most that anyone can hope to actually achieve is the opportunity to simply make enough of a living to survive—and to recognize that one's far-fetched dreams, while motivating, are more successful as entertainment than as actual plans for the future. In short, the play presents the pessimistic view that while America and New York may promise a bright future for everyone, in reality they can only deliver crushing reality and a dose of cynicism to anyone who doesn't already have the means to ensure their success.



SYMBOLS

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

Analysis sections of this LitChart.



THE SMOKING JACKET

As a wedding gift for George, Esther sews a smoking jacket—a lavish, tuxedo-style jacket intended to be worn after dinner while men smoked—made with beautiful, hand-painted silk she bought from Mr. Marks. The jacket, even before it's made, comes to represent the many different forms of intimacy between men and women that the play explores. Esther buys the fabric to begin with because Mr. Marks tells her a compelling story about the Japanese artist who created it for Japanese royalty; Esther hopes to pass along this sense of intimacy to George by giving him the jacket and sharing the fabric's story. George's dismissiveness and lack of appreciation for the gift, however, encapsulates how dismissive he is of Esther. Just as he neglects her and abuses her trust, he carelessly gives away the smoking jacket to Mayme. When Mr. Marks agrees to accept the smoking jacket from Esther and allows her to straighten it on him, it suggests that intimacy can only emerge when people trust each other and regard the other sensitively and positively.



THE CRAZY QUILT

Esther stores her life's savings in a seam of her crazy quilt. Crazy quilts, which became popular in the last twenty years of the 19th century, were intricate, lavish quilts made most often from scraps of silk, velvet, and wool that were then heavily embroidered. Both because of the intensive man-hours that went into making the quilt and because it also contains eighteen years' worth of savings, the quilt becomes a symbol for the laborious effort required to achieve the American dream. In the end, Esther's choice to give George her savings to purchase draft horses (though she later learns that, in truth, he spent the money on gambling, alcohol, and sex workers) represents Esther's move to abandon her original, unattainable version of the American dream. That dream itself may be beautiful and carefully constructed, just like the quilt, but it ultimately wasn't able to stand up to the true test of reality, emotions, and other people who are fundamentally unpredictable.



QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Dramatists Play Service edition of *Intimate Apparel* published in 2005.

Act 1, Scene 2 Quotes

☝☝ Mrs. Van Buren: Oh God, I look ridiculous, and I'm behaving absolutely foolishly, but I'm not sure what else to do. Look at me. I've spent a fortune on feathers and every manner of accouterment. They've written positively splendid things about me in the columns this season. [...] But does it matter? Has he spent an evening at home? Or even noticed that I've painted the damn boudoir vermillion red?

Related Characters: Mrs. Van Buren (speaker), Esther

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 11

Explanation and Analysis

During a fitting with Esther, Mrs. Van Buren laments that while outwardly, she's making it and properly performing womanhood, her husband still isn't interested. In this moment, Mrs. Van Buren sees her new corset—which is modeled after ones that sex workers wear, and is far sexier and more revealing than anything a well-to-do white lady would normally wear—as indicative of all the ways in which she's failing to attract her husband. While nobody else but Esther (and, hopefully, Mrs. Van Buren's husband) can or will ever see that Mrs. Van Buren is wearing a corset like this, Mrs. Van Buren knows that she's only being pushed to these lengths because in this one, very meaningful way, she's not actually performing womanhood successfully.

☝☝ Mrs. Van Buren: I've given him no children. (*Whispered.*) I'm afraid I can't. It's not for the lack of trying. One takes these things for granted, you assume when it comes time that it will happen, and when it doesn't who is to blame? They think it's vanity that's kept me childless, I've heard the women whispering. If only I were that vain. But it's like he's given up.

Related Characters: Mrs. Van Buren (speaker), Esther

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 13

Explanation and Analysis

During her fitting, Mrs. Van Buren confides in Esther that she's afraid that she can't have children. This brings Mrs. Van Buren's perceived failure as a woman to the forefront, as she suggests here that until she properly uses her body to bear children, she's less of a woman in both her

husband's eyes and in the eyes of society. With this, the play begins to draw out the ways in which even white, wealthy, and beautiful women like Mrs. Van Buren walk a very fine line when it comes to embodying womanhood—nobody, it suggests, is actually doing it perfectly.

The way that Mrs. Van Buren talks about the rumors that her vanity is keeping her from having children also shows that while society expects white women to be beautiful, there's a limit: that focus on making oneself beautiful shouldn't, per the logic of society, interfere with Mrs. Van Buren's willingness to bear children. Again, Mrs. Van Buren can't win; the very things that society celebrates her for are also the things that make her less of a successful, proper woman.

●● Esther: Do you think there's something wrong with a woman alone?

Mrs. Van Buren: What I think is of little consequence. If I were (*whispered.*) brave I'd collect my things right now and find a small clean room someplace on the other side of the park. No, further in fact. And I'd...But it isn't a possibility, is it?

Related Characters: Mrs. Van Buren, Esther (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 13

Explanation and Analysis

When the topic of marriage versus being single comes up, Mrs. Van Buren again confides in Esther that she'd rather be single. First, this is one of the moments in which the emotional intimacy between Esther and Mrs. Van Buren deepens. This confession is, presumably, not anything that Mrs. Van Buren can share with anyone else, especially her husband with whom, she suggests, should be the most intimate with. Esther, meanwhile, represents a safe and non-judgmental space for Mrs. Van Buren to air these truths and feel as though someone sees her and accepts her for who and what she is, which is a woman who feels stifled by the expectations that society has thrust upon her.

When Mrs. Van Buren mentions that what she thinks doesn't matter, she speaks to the idea that as an individual woman, she can't do anything to change how society feels about single women (which, given Esther's desire to marry and no longer be a spinster, isn't especially kindly). However, it's also worth keeping in mind that by telling herself that what she wants doesn't matter, Mrs. Van Buren deprives herself of some of her own power and agency. While she

may not feel able to pick up and move out in any circumstances, were she willing to give her opinions more time and thought, she may be more willing to take a stand against her husband's poor treatment of her.

Act 1, Scene 4 Quotes

●● Mayme: All the pawing and pulling. For a dollar they think they own you.

Related Characters: Mayme (speaker), Mrs. Van Buren, Esther

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 18

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Mayme angrily shows Esther her ripped silk robe and complains about how her clients treat her roughly and without consideration. As a sex worker, Mayme is physically intimate with men every day that she works, but the way that she talks about sex indicates that it's not fulfilling or emotionally compelling for her. This sets up the idea that simply having sexual contact with someone doesn't mean that the experience is imbued with true intimacy, and it therefore shifts the play's hierarchy of intimacy to suggest that far more important than physical contact is emotional intimacy. Notably, this is something that even Mrs. Van Buren supports through the way that she talks: she and her husband aren't close even though they have sex, which is why Mrs. Van Buren turns to Esther to fulfill her emotional needs.

●● Esther: You know that white lady I talk about sometime, hold on...She keep asking me what they be wearing up in the Tenderloin. All that money and high breeding and she want what you wearing.

Mayme: No kidding?

Esther: What she got, you want, what you got, she want.

Related Characters: Mayme, Esther (speaker), Mrs. Van Buren

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 19-20

Explanation and Analysis

As Esther laces Mayme into her new corset—which is modeled after one Esther made for Mrs. Van Buren—she notes that each woman wants what the other has. The fact that Mrs. Van Buren wants what Mayme has speaks to the way in which affluent white people, like Mrs. Van Buren, idealize and fetishize lower class, and in this case specifically black culture. For Mrs. Van Buren, it's safe and fun to dress like a sex worker, given that she never has to grapple with what it actually entails to do that kind of work. In Mayme's case, Mrs. Van Buren represents an ideal that Mayme would like to recreate, as it allows her to embody more of the respectability tied up with whiteness and with having the kind of money that Mrs. Van Buren does. For both of these women, the fact that they want to dress and look like the other points to the ways in which each is trying to properly embody femininity.

☝ Mayme: Let me tell you, so many wonderful ideas been conjured in this room. They just get left right in that bed there, or on this piano bench. They are scattered all over this room. Esther, I ain't waiting for anybody to rescue me. My Panama man come and gone long time now. It sweet that he write you but, my dear, it ain't real.

Related Characters: Mayme (speaker), George, Esther

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 22

Explanation and Analysis

When Esther confides in Mayme that she's been saving money in her crazy quilt to open a beauty parlor for black ladies and mentions that George wrote her again, Mayme encourages Esther to see both of those dreams as the impossible dreams that she believes they are. For Mayme, she's spent her life dreaming about what she could do with her life beyond sex work, but her experience has taught her that those dreams are more effective as amusement to pass the time than as actual goals for the future. She sees that dwelling on how to make those dreams come true takes away from her ability to do her job or be happy with her lot in life, things that are important for her to not question too much if she wants to be able to make a living. By trying to pass this wisdom on to Esther, Mayme quietly encourages Esther to be happy with what she has and to embrace the

success that she's already experienced, rather than strive for dreams that, in Mayme's opinion, are impossible.

Act 1, Scene 5 Quotes

☝☝ Esther: DON'T! This quilt is filled with my hard work, one hundred dollars for every year I been seated at that sewing machine. It's my beauty parlor. So you see I don't need Mr. Charles for his good job and position.

Related Characters: Esther (speaker), George, Mr. Charles, Mrs. Dickson

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 25

Explanation and Analysis

When Mrs. Dickson delivers another letter from George and expresses her disapproval, Esther insists that she has every right to dream and follow her own path. Specifically, Mrs. Dickson reminds Esther that Mr. Charles, an eligible yet unappealing bachelor, is still available. For Esther, Mr. Charles represents settling in the worst sense of the word: choosing to marry him would, in her mind, negate the years that she spent working for herself, given that he has a steady income and would immediately catapult Esther into the societally approved world of being a married lady.

At this point, Esther is leaning into her independence, both in her love life and in her professional life. She's learning to be proud of the fact that she's saved so much money (in today's dollars, Esther has saved more than \$50,000) and to stand up for her own wishes and wants, something she never felt like she had the right to do before this. This moment then showcases Esther at her best and most confident: she's happy and in love, and she's confident in her own abilities. In both of these regards, Esther begins to shift what it means to be a proper woman, given that she's eschewing marriage and the accompanying guaranteed paycheck to instead stand on her own two feet.

●● Esther: But this is a new country.

Marks: But we come with our pockets stuffed, yes. We don't throw away nothing for fear we might need it later...I wear my father's suit. It is old, I know, but this simple black fabric is my most favorite. Why? Because when I wear it, it reminds me that I live every day with a relationship to my ancestors and to God.

Related Characters: Mr. Marks, Esther (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 26

Explanation and Analysis

As Esther and Mr. Marks discuss the ways in which Mr. Marks is choosing to follow the conventions of his Orthodox Jewish faith and upbringing, despite the promises of being in America, Mr. Marks explains that he takes great comfort in leaning into those conventions and traditions. Through this, Mr. Marks introduces Esther to a different kind of intimacy, which is the intimacy that Mr. Marks feels between himself and his religion, which also connects him to his deceased family members and fellow Jewish people. That he thinks of this intimacy as being connected to his clothing choices reinforces the play's insistence that clothing can be a powerful tool with which to build intimacy or give it away. For Mr. Marks, the American dream means that he keeps these old traditions alive, but that he does so in a new country that, in theory at least, presents more opportunities for economic advancement.

●● Mrs. Van Buren: By the way, I bled this morning, and when I delivered the news to Harry, he spat at me. This civilized creature of society. We all bleed, Esther. And yet I actually felt guilt, as though a young girl again apologizing for becoming a woman.

Related Characters: Mrs. Van Buren (speaker), Esther

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 27

Explanation and Analysis

During a fitting, Mrs. Van Buren confides in Esther that when she mentioned to her husband that she started her period—and therefore isn't pregnant—he treated her with scorn. With this, Mrs. Van Buren shows how much her success as a woman is tied to whether or not she can have a baby with her husband. With a baby being up in the air at

this point, Mrs. Van Buren is also not able to feel any closeness to her husband. By drawing this out, the play illustrates how, especially for a woman like Mrs. Van Buren, making it as a woman and embodying perfect femininity allows a woman to both be accepted and celebrated in society, as well as allows her to experience a more functional relationship with her husband. While it's possible that a baby wouldn't fix the issues in the Van Burens' marriage, a baby would, in Mrs. Van Buren's understanding, at least make it so that she can pretend that she and her husband are closer than they are. This shows how much pressure societal expectations put on a marriage, and how in many cases, it's the women who suffer the most from those expectations.

●● Mrs. Van Buren: I should like to see one for myself. You must take me to one of your shows.

Esther: And will you take me to the opera next time you go?

Mrs. Van Buren: I would, if I could. It would be marvelously scandalous, just the sort of thing to perk up this humdrum season. It is so easy to be with you. Your visits are just about the only thing I look forward to these days. You, and our letters to George, of course. Shall we write something dazzling to him? Something delicious.

Related Characters: Esther, Mrs. Van Buren (speaker), George

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 27-28

Explanation and Analysis

Mrs. Van Buren and Esther discuss the respective merits of opera and of "colored shows" (Esther specifically mentions having seen a young woman singing spirituals), and they discuss whether or not they could each go to the other's shows. In this exchange, the power difference between Mrs. Van Buren and Esther comes into sharp relief: while Mrs. Van Buren and women like her could've gotten away with attending all manner of shows, thanks to their skin color and their affluence, it's clearly unthinkable that Esther, a black woman, would be able to go to the opera. Further, even if Esther could somehow go to the opera, she wouldn't be there to enjoy it—instead, she'd almost be entertainment herself, given how unthinkable it would be for a black woman to dress up and go to the opera.

The way that Mrs. Van Buren speaks about this shows how much she's coming to rely on Esther for emotional

fulfillment and for entertainment. For her, writing letters to George is a fun pastime, while for Esther, those letters mean something and have a major influence on her life. In short, while Mrs. Van Buren looks at Esther and her life as a form of fun, consequence-free entertainment, in reality, Esther is living a life that's difficult and in which people like Mrs. Van Buren think less of her because of the color of her skin.

Act 1, Scene 6 Quotes

☛☛ Mayme: And do you love him?

Esther: As much as you can love a man you ain't seen. I'm thirty-five, Mayme, and he wants to marry me. And there ain't gonna be no more opportunities I'm afraid. I've told him yes.

Related Characters: Esther, Mayme (speaker), George

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 30

Explanation and Analysis

Here, Esther explains her reasoning for accepting George's marriage proposal. The way that Esther frames this shows clearly that as far as she's concerned, 35 is the end of the road for her, and if she doesn't marry now, she'll never get an opportunity. The truth of this is called into question later, when Mrs. Dickson admits that she married her husband at age 37. However, it's telling that Esther seems to truly believe that there won't be any more opportunities for her, and her belief that this is the way it's bound to be shows how trapped she is in society's idea of what constitutes proper femininity, and just how important she believes it is to attain that status. In this moment, then, Esther is forgetting that while she's still relatively poor, she has a reasonably good job that allows her to make a living and save money, even if she is living in a boardinghouse. In other words, Esther forgets that she has so much else going for her even without getting married, and because of this, she's willing to compromise on all of those good things in order to attain this one facet of proper womanhood.

☛☛ Mrs. Dickson: Bless his broken-down soul. He had fine suits and perfect diction, and was too high on opium to notice that he was married. But I would not be a washerwoman if it killed me. And I have absolutely marvelous hands to prove it.

Related Characters: Mrs. Dickson (speaker), George,

Esther

Related Themes:    

Page Number: 33

Explanation and Analysis

While Mrs. Dickson helps Esther pack for her impending move and marriage, they discuss Mrs. Dickson's husband, her reasons for marrying, and what she got out of the deal. Mrs. Dickson makes it very clear that she married because she was taught to believe that she needed to marry a well-off man so that she could reap the financial and social benefits from having done so. Despite the fact that Mr. Dickson was addicted to opium and hardly remembered he was married, Mrs. Dickson still sees that marrying him was the smart thing to do: in addition to inheriting the boardinghouse when he died, she also was able to follow through on her mother's dream for her and not have to work as a washerwoman.

Mrs. Dickson shares this in part because she believes that Esther should be thinking more carefully about whom she marries. She sees George as a questionable investment, since he doesn't have a job in New York and since Esther hasn't met him and therefore, hasn't had time to figure out whether or not George is trustworthy. In this way, Mrs. Dickson makes the case for accepting marriages that make financial sense rather than emotional sense, given that vulnerable women, such as herself and Esther, will end up better off in the end.

Act 2, Scene 1 Quotes

☛☛ George: What is it?

Esther: It's Japanese silk. Put it on. (*George clumsily pulls the smoking jacket around his muscular body. He clearly isn't comfortable with the delicacy of the garment.*) Careful. (*George explores the jacket with his weather-worn fingers.*) It ain't too small?

George: Nah. But I afraid, I soil it. (*George removes the jacket and tosses it on the bed.*)

Related Characters: Esther, George (speaker), Mr. Marks

Related Themes: 

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 38

Explanation and Analysis

When Esther gives George the beautiful smoking jacket that she made him as a wedding gift, George accepts it but is very dismissive of the fine garment. In dismissing the smoking jacket, George is also dismissing Esther in a way. Esther takes great comfort from the fine fabrics she handles and sees them as an extension of herself, especially in a situation like this when the smoking jacket is a way for her to show George how much she cares about him and their marriage. When George roughly takes of the jacket and tosses it aside, it throws into sharp relief how differently he and Esther think about both fabric and the intimacy that the fabrics represent.

Act 2, Scene 2 Quotes

☞☞ Esther: But it Sunday. I'll put on some tea, and sit, let me mend your shirt. You can't go out with a hole in your shirt. (*Esther touches the hole in his shirt.*) What will they say about your wife? I won't hear the end of it from Mrs. Dickson.

Related Characters: Esther (speaker), Mrs. Dickson, George

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 41

Explanation and Analysis

A few months after their wedding, George insists on going out on a Sunday afternoon and Esther takes issue with this for a variety of reasons, including that his clothing is worn and has holes in it. When Esther mentions that she's the one who's going to be blamed for the hole in George's shirt, the play illustrates how in a marriage like this, it's considered the wife's duty to make sure her husband looks presentable. Esther is the one who's going to suffer because George doesn't care about his clothing, while the worst that will happen to George is that he has to hear Mrs. Dickson, whom he doesn't like much, nag him about not having a job.

The fact that Esther recognizes the ways in which she's still failing at being a proper, perfect woman, even after marriage, begins to introduce her to the possibility that she's not going to be able to achieve perfect womanhood, married or not.

☞☞ Esther: Please, I ain't been to a social. I sat up in Saint Martin's for years, and didn't none of them church ladies bother with me until I walked in on your arm, and suddenly they want Mrs. Armstrong over for tea.

Related Characters: Esther (speaker), George

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 42

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Esther makes one final attempt to convince George to attend the church social with her, noting that she's only started getting invitations to the socials since she got married. With this, Esther highlights the differences between how the wider world looks at her marriage, and how her marriage actually is to someone on the inside. As a member of the marriage, Esther isn't particularly happy: George isn't attentive, he's uninterested in church or participating in any church-adjacent activities, and he doesn't like Esther's friends, like Mrs. Dickson. All of this together suggests that their marriage isn't happy, and it's worth noting that George isn't pleased with this state of affairs either. He feels stifled and underappreciated, and so he refuses to go to things like this even more strongly than he might otherwise. Despite the dysfunction, however, the ladies at church still want to reward Esther for marrying and doing what she's supposed to do as a woman. To them, it doesn't matter how dysfunctional the marriage actually is: Esther is still succeeding in their understanding.

Act 2, Scene 3 Quotes

☞☞ Mrs. Van Buren: Please. We will forget this and continue to be friends.

Esther: Friends? How we friends? When I ain't never been through your front door. You love me? What of me do you love?

Mrs. Van Buren: Esther, you are the only one who's been in my boudoir in all these months. And honestly, it's only in here with you that I feel...happy. Please, I want us to be friends?

Related Characters: Esther, Mrs. Van Buren (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 47

Explanation and Analysis

After Mrs. Van Buren kisses Esther on the lips, she apologizes and says that they can still be friends. For Esther,

this makes it very clear that she and Mrs. Van Buren aren't actually friends: while Mrs. Van Buren's reasoning for kissing Esther suggests that she kissed her for Esther's sake, Esther instead sees the kiss as just one more way that Mrs. Van Buren is taking advantage of Esther to make up for what she's missing in her marriage and in her friendships. Specifically, this is encapsulated when Esther mentions that she's never been through Mrs. Van Buren's front door, something that she knows Mrs. Van Buren's friends do. By drawing out the differences between going through the front door and being in Mrs. Van Buren's boudoir, Esther again shows that physical intimacy—including this kiss, as well as seeing Mrs. Van Buren in her undergarments and touching her body during fittings—isn't inherently intimate. Anyone can sit in Mrs. Van Buren's boudoir, Esther suggests, but a true friend is someone that Mrs. Van Buren will invite in her front door for reasons other than purchasing undergarments and, importantly, is someone whom Mrs. Van Buren isn't ashamed to be seen with in public.

Act 2, Scene 4 Quotes

●● Esther: How you know she ain't a good person? And he just saying what you want to hear. That his words are a smooth tonic to make you give out what ain't free. How you know his wife ain't good?

Mayme: I don't know. But do it matter?

Esther: Yeah it do. You ever think about where they go after they leave here? Who washes their britches after they been soiled in your bed?

Related Characters: Mayme, Esther (speaker), George

Related Themes:  

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 49

Explanation and Analysis

Once Esther figures out that the man called "Songbird" that Mayme has been seeing is George, she changes tack and encourages Mayme to think more critically about what she's doing and the women who suffer because their husbands hire her. For Mayme, this request essentially asks her to humanize a swath of society that, in order to do her job and be able to sleep at night, she can't: worrying about how wives feel about her would hinder her ability to do her job

and make a living. While Esther has, for the most part, been able to ignore this, learning that George is seeing Mayme makes it feel extremely real that Mayme is, possibly, destroying marriages, just like she's contributing to the destruction of Esther's own marriage right now.

●● George: 'Least in Panama a man know where 'e stand. 'E know 'e chattel. That as long as 'e have a goat 'e happy. 'E know when 'e drunk, 'e drunk and there ain' no judgment if so. But then 'e drink in words of this woman. She tell 'e about the pretty avenues, she tell 'e plentiful. She fill up 'e head so it 'ave no taste for goat milk. She offer 'e the city stroke by stroke. She tantalize 'e with Yankee words. But 'e not find she. Only this woman 'ere, that say, touch me, George.

Related Characters: George (speaker), Esther

Related Themes:   

Page Number: 51

Explanation and Analysis

Angrily, George tells Esther in this passage how he feels that she hoodwinked him and tricked him into coming to New York and marrying her. Though George doesn't directly say so here, one of the things that he touches on is the fact that while Panama is still a racist and oppressive place to live, it's racist in a different way than New York is—and for George, Panama was far more comfortable and he could live with that kind of racism, while New York presents challenges that wear on George and make life far less livable.

George is also reacting to the fact that while his and Esther's letters may have been flowery and created the sense that they were close and in love, the intimacy they had when their relationship existed only in letters hasn't translated to their in-person relationship. This shows that while George may be turning to physical intimacy exclusively by hiring Mayme, he did desire emotional intimacy, just like Esther.

●● Esther: I ain't really Mrs. Armstrong, am I? I been holding on to that, and that woman ain't real. We more strangers now than on the eve of our wedding. At least I knew who I was back then. But I ain't gonna let you hurt that woman. No! She's a good decent woman and worthy. Worthy!

Related Characters: Esther (speaker), George

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 53

Explanation and Analysis

After Esther and George admit that neither of them wrote their letters, Esther suggests that their entire marriage has been a lie, just like the letters. It's especially telling that Esther now thinks so highly of the woman she was before she got married. Prior to her marriage, Esther didn't think highly of herself, as she was too caught up in focusing on the fact that she wasn't married and, therefore, was failing at womanhood. However, Esther now sees that marriage doesn't actually make her a better woman. While being unmarried may have made Esther lesser in the eyes of some other people in society, she also had the opportunity to make her own way, support herself, and take pride in her work, none of which she's been able to do proudly in her marriage.

Act 2, Scene 5 Quotes

☝☝ Mayme: The world changing and he wants big strong horses. He made me laugh. He promised to take me out someplace special, but I didn't have nothing nice to wear. And honestly it made me think about how long it been since I done something for myself. Gone someplace like you said, where a colored woman could go to put up her feet and get treated good for a change. And I see the dice rolling, and I think Lord, God, wouldn't a place like that be wonderful. But every time the dice roll, that place is a little further away. Until it all gone.

Related Characters: Mayme (speaker), Esther, George

Related Themes:   

Related Symbols: 

Page Number: 55

Explanation and Analysis

Once Mayme and Esther are on the same page about George and Mayme realizes that she's been seeing him, Mayme shares her account of how George spent all the

money that Esther had saved in her crazy quilt last night. Mayme's assessment of how silly it is that George wanted draft horses in a changing world suggests that George's version of success isn't something that's even attainable in the characters' world: the draft horses may look powerful and make George feel powerful, but Mayme understands that within a few years, they'll be empty and useless symbols of power.

Then, when Mayme thinks about Esther's beauty parlor, it shows that she's beginning to understand the necessity and the power of choosing to take the initiative and support other black women, like Esther, in doing things that will help them and make them happy, rather than leaning on men to perform that task. George appears to have never been particularly interested in making either Esther or Mayme happy; giving Mayme the smoking jacket was a nice gesture, but it wasn't anything that George had to think about or work hard to carry out. Actually backing a woman's project or supporting her dreams, however, is far more difficult and, the play suggests, far more meaningful than empty gifts.

☝☝ Esther: LET HIM GO! Let him go. He ain't real, he a duppy, a spirit. We be chasing him forever.

Related Characters: Esther (speaker), Mayme, George

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 55

Explanation and Analysis

When George knocks on the door for his appointment with Mayme, Esther shouts at Mayme to let George go. Esther has finally learned that she allowed George to run away with her heart, her trust, and her life savings—because of George, she's lost everything. Counseling Mayme to let George go, too, allows Esther to pass on to Mayme what she's learned and hopefully, save Mayme from the same fate. This, the play suggests, is one of the most important things that friends can do for each other. In this way, Esther's advice here mirrors Mayme's advice from the first act, in which she encouraged Esther to not put too much stock in George or her beauty parlor and instead, concentrate on the things that she does have going for her.



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.

ACT 1, SCENE 1

In a small upstairs bedroom, Esther sits at her sewing machine sewing lace onto a camisole while a party takes place downstairs. Mrs. Dickson, the owner of the boardinghouse, teases someone and then enters Esther's room, laughing. She tells Esther that Mr. Charles is very taken with Esther's bread pudding. Esther is uninterested in accepting the compliment, but Mrs. Dickson persists and says that Mr. Charles is "most available" and was just promoted to head bellman at a fine hotel. Esther is unimpressed that Mr. Charles still carries luggage, but Mrs. Dickson says that high-class luggage is better than regular luggage. She remarks on the beautiful suit that Mr. Charles is wearing and both women laugh as they agree that any man can talk, but only sensible men buy nice suits.

Mrs. Dickson compliments the camisole Esther is making. Esther explains that she's making it for Corinna Mae, the honored guest downstairs who is soon to be married. Mrs. Dickson insists that Esther join the party before it ends so she can dance, but Esther refuses: nobody is interested in dancing with her. Taking a serious tone, Mrs. Dickson asks what's wrong with Esther. Tightly, Esther says that she turned 35 last week. After a moment of silence, Mrs. Dickson apologizes for forgetting about Esther amidst all the excitement and gives Esther a big hug. Esther suggests that she's been here long enough that she's a forgettable fixture, but Mrs. Dickson assures her this isn't the case: she's been a godsend since she arrived at 17.

Esther laments that since she arrived, 22 fellow boardinghouse girls have gotten married and she's had to act excited at every party. Esther knows she should be happy for them, but she keeps wondering why it's not her turn. She says that Corinna Mae isn't smart or all that pretty. When Mrs. Dickson assures Esther that she'll get her turn, Esther says that she knows it's wrong but she hates how happy Corinna Mae is and doesn't want Corinna Mae to pick up on this. Mrs. Dickson again suggests that Esther consider Mr. Charles. The women joke about how overweight he is, but then Esther seriously says that she's not sure if Mr. Charles is actually after women. She says that Mrs. Dickson thinks that she's lucky to attract his attention, but declares she won't give up that easily.

The way that Mrs. Dickson talks about Mr. Charles shows that her views on marriage and what makes an eligible bachelor pertain mostly to whether a man dresses well and whether or not he has a job. The specific note that Mr. Charles carries luggage also speaks to the fact that at this point in time, black men had very few opportunities to move up in the world; this was one of the best jobs. Unlike Mrs. Dickson, Esther aspires for more than a man with a paycheck, suggesting that she's still somewhat idealistic.



Forgetting Esther's birthday in the excitement of Corinna Mae's impending nuptials more broadly shows how important marriage is to all the play's characters: it's how these women move up in the world and become proper ladies in society, while getting older just means that marriage is becoming increasingly less likely. That Esther isn't very interested in dancing, which might allow her to find a partner, shows that she may be less idealistic and aspirational than her rejection of Mr. Charles let on.



The jokes about Mr. Charles's appearance again shows that for Mrs. Dickson, a man's looks are less important than pretty much everything else. This also begins to draw out the idea that men are celebrated and judged for what they can do, while women are celebrated and judged for their relationships to men.



Mrs. Dickson praises Esther for this, but cautions her to not be too confident. She reminds Esther of her own late husband. He was almost 60 and addicted to opium when they met, but he had this boardinghouse which, since his death, has helped Mrs. Dickson. She says that she hated the opium and hated that he died, but suggests that one can't be too picky. Esther snaps that she's not going downstairs to be "paraded like some featherless bird" and asks Mrs. Dickson to take the camisole to Corinna Mae. Mrs. Dickson tells Esther to bring the camisole down herself. Before she leaves, she says that Esther is talented, good, and smart, but Corinna Mae deserves a toast.

For as much as Mrs. Dickson pushes marriage on Esther, it's telling how frankly and realistically she talks about her own marriage. As far as she's concerned, marriage is a means to an end; having been married and achieved womanly success means that now, she can reap the benefits and live comfortably in middle and old age. Mrs. Dickson's assertion that Corinna Mae still deserves congratulations suggests that she believes that women need to band together and support each other, in good times and bad.



Esther agrees to go downstairs and Mrs. Dickson remembers that a letter came for Esther from a Mr. George Armstrong. Esther doesn't know any living men by this name and asks Mrs. Dickson to read it to her, but Mrs. Dickson refuses and returns to the party. Esther puts the letter down, and across the stage, George appears in his bunk in Panama. He's muddy but handsome and recites his letter to Esther. He writes that he works in Panama and heard about Esther from her deacon's son. He briefly explains the Panama Canal project: it will allow ships to go from ocean to ocean and is supposedly important, but men are dying left and right. George feels as though the heat is driving people mad. He asks if Esther would agree to receive his letters and begin a correspondence.

That Esther asks Mrs. Dickson to read the letter to her is the first clue that Esther is illiterate. This wouldn't have been surprising at the time; while literacy rates for the whole of the U.S. were relatively low, almost 50% of African Americans at this time were illiterate. This offers one more way in which Esther, as a black woman, faced a much harder time getting ahead. In Panama, George offers more examples of how black people worldwide suffered. He's putting himself in grave danger for an "important" white man's dream.



ACT 1, SCENE 2

Esther sits in an elegant boudoir, inspecting a silver grooming set as Mrs. Van Buren, a beautiful white woman, slides into her new garments behind a screen. In a slightly Southern accent, Mrs. Van Buren worries that she's too exposed in the corset. Esther explains that she can add fabric, but it's supposed to be exposing. Mrs. Van Buren cuts her off and says that if this is what Esther made for "that singer," she wants it. She steps out from behind the screen in a low-cut corset decorated with flowers and though she tries to act confident, she laments that she looks ridiculous.

Mrs. Van Buren's obvious self-consciousness makes it very clear that while she's held up as the ideal woman throughout the play, she's struggling to properly play that part. It's uncomfortable for her to try to be sexy, but it's also important to note that it's relatively safe for her, as a wealthy white woman, to experiment with wearing fashions popularized by women who, in all likelihood, are at least poor if not also black.



As Esther begins to tighten the corset, Mrs. Van Buren says that she's spending so much money on clothing and they've written great things about her in the papers, but her husband still seems disinterested: he hasn't spent an evening at home or noticed that she painted the boudoir bright red. Esther assures Mrs. Van Buren that she looks lovely and that this corset is exactly what she made for the singer. Mrs. Van Buren says she feels like "a tart from Tenderloin," but begins to regard her reflection in the mirror with curiosity.

The fact that Mrs. Van Buren appears to be purchasing this corset in an attempt to woo her husband continues to break down the characters' idealization of marriage: the way she talks about her husband's lack of interest shows that marriage, even for a "proper" lady, isn't all it's cracked up to be, and she's still forced to go to great lengths to fulfill her duties as a woman.



Mrs. Van Buren muses that the French women who started this trend aren't known for modesty and strikes a sexy pose, and Esther says that she's heard that some ladies aren't even wearing corsets in private. Mrs. Van Buren is shocked, but Esther notes that most ladies don't like them and men don't put themselves in pain. At this, Mrs. Van Buren confirms that Esther isn't a suffragette and, as she pours brandy, says she's not interested in getting involved in "men's business." She sighs and wonders what her mother would say if she knew what happened to her Southern daughter in the city. Esther runs her fingers down the seam of the corset, which makes Mrs. Van Buren tense up. They discuss the beaded trim, which makes Mrs. Van Buren giggle: it's fun and "naughty."

Mrs. Van Buren asks if she should wear this corset under her gown tonight for the Gardenia Ball, the event of the season. She says that everyone will be there, and she'll have to be polite when everyone asks when she and her husband are going to have a baby. As usual, she'll tell them that they're working on it and to speak to her husband, which will put him in a foul mood for the next week. She asks Esther if she has children, and Esther admits she's never been married. Mrs. Van Buren confides in her that she's afraid she can't have children. They've been trying, but her husband acts like he's given up, and women gossip that Mrs. Van Buren is too vain to have children. Esther assures Mrs. Van Buren that she's so beautiful, it's hard to imagine that her husband has actually lost interest.

Mrs. Van Buren whispers that her husband has other interests and nervously confirms that this conversation will stay secret—it'd be disastrous if she ended up getting divorced. Esther asks if Mrs. Van Buren thinks there's anything wrong with a woman being alone. In a whisper, Mrs. Van Buren says that her opinion doesn't matter, but if she were brave, she'd pick up and take a room for herself. Esther says she's not sure she'll marry. Mrs. Van Buren assures her that she will once she finds the right man, but Esther says that time is flying by and it seemed like it wasn't meant to be until she received something in the mail. Her curiosity piqued, Mrs. Van Buren asks what Esther got, and Esther says she's too old for such things but received a letter from a man in Panama.

The irony of what Mrs. Van Buren says is that within two decades, she'll be able to vote and corsets will quickly fall out of favor—in other words, what it means to be a proper woman will change dramatically in a short period of time. That both Mrs. Van Buren and Esther came from the South speaks to the draw of New York City at this time and begins to pull out similarities between the two women. Furthermore, Mrs. Van Buren's comment about the "naughty" beaded trim again shows that for her, dressing like a sex worker is fun, safe, and far removed from the reality of the job.



Mrs. Van Buren's confession that she's afraid she can't have children shows again that Mrs. Van Buren believes she is failing at proper womanhood in a major way—and according to society and to her husband, it's her fault that she's not yet a mother. This also shows how as a woman progresses through life, the goalposts that designate proper womanhood continue to move and change, and women must continue to reach for the moving target of those ideals. Esther's assertion that Mrs. Van Buren is too beautiful to have lost her husband's interest is also significant, as it suggests that men are only interested in looks, something other characters will later validate.



Saying that her opinion doesn't matter is a veiled way of Mrs. Van Buren saying that society's opinion does matter. This construction allows Mrs. Van Buren to feel even more like a victim in her own life and not recognize that, were she to choose to use it, she could have far more agency than she might think to make change. With this, the play starts to hint at the possibility that though Esther may want to marry, being single and having an income may make her far more successful and allow her to be happy in a way that marriage might not.



The letter excites Mrs. Van Buren, but Esther says she's not sure if she should answer at all. Esther admits that she's illiterate and offers the letter to Mrs. Van Buren. The white woman comments on George's excellent handwriting and says that Esther should absolutely reply, since George is so far away and, therefore, harmless. Esther says that she can't ask Mrs. Dickson for help, as Mrs. Dickson is a nosy busybody and will lecture Esther. Mrs. Van Buren offers to help. Esther is concerned and says that she can't tell George about her life in a boardinghouse sewing intimate apparel, but Mrs. Van Buren assures Esther that it will be fine. With Mrs. Van Buren's prodding, Esther talks about her weekly schedule and she mentions going weekly to see Mr. Marks, her Jewish fabric seller. Mr. Marks appears with fabric in Esther's reverie.

As Mrs. Van Buren and Esther write the letter, George comes onstage to recite his letter. He says that he's anxious to learn about Esther, and has nothing good to write about the canal project. It seems an impossible dream that crazy white men thought up. George wonders if the black men digging the canal will get to celebrate when it's finished, and he talks about how his crew pulled up a giant Flamboyant tree. He says that it's not all bad: the men have stories to share, and there's a lot of rum. He says that now he hears Esther's sewing machine in his head, and he promises to treasure her letter.

ACT 1, SCENE 3

It's morning in Mr. Marks's cramped tenement flat. He hurries to put on his suit jacket when he hears a knock on the door and quickly folds up his bedroll. He answers the door and excitedly lets Esther in to show her his new fabric. Mr. Marks pulls down a roll of Japanese silk for the lady on Fifth Avenue. Esther agrees that it's lovely, and Mr. Marks tells her that he'll let her have the extra two yards for "next to nothing." Esther insists that that's still too much money and that the silk would be wasted on her, but Mr. Marks suggests that the "Fifth Avenue lady" cover the cost. Esther says that she could make a shawl, and Mr. Marks suggests a **smoking jacket** for Esther's gentleman. Esther shyly brushes this suggestion aside.

Mrs. Van Buren's excitement at Esther's letters shows that she's craving excitement in her life, and this event in Esther's life is a convenient place to find some vicarious fulfillment and entertainment. That Mrs. Dickson doesn't seem to take seriously the very valid risks that come with communicating with a man Esther has never met before speaks again to Mrs. Van Buren's place of privilege. It's likely that she's never experienced much real danger, and her wealth, status, and race means that she has little to worry about in the way of being hoodwinked or tricked.



Flamboyant is another name for flame trees; they produce huge red flowers. George's letters allow him and Esther to build intimacy through storytelling, which is something that the reader or viewer will soon learn is something very important to Esther. In particular, when George mentions that the men he's working with have stories, this suggests to Esther that George values stories in the same way that she does.



That Mr. Marks's apartment doubles as his shop indicates that his finances are tight, which begins to show that immigrants can't all afford to make it in America, no matter what the American dream says. The sexual tension between Esther and Mr. Marks is palpable, and this offers some reasoning for why Esther feels the way she does about Mr. Charles: she has some degree of intimacy with Mr. Marks and thus knows what intimacy feels like, and she's reluctant to settle for a situation in which she knows she won't get this kind of closeness.



Esther runs the fabric across her face and then good-naturedly reprimands Mr. Marks for selling her something she doesn't need. Mr. Marks says he loves sharing quality fabrics with his favorite customers, and he loves that Esther wants different fabrics. They smile warmly at each other until Esther drops her eyes and notices that Mr. Marks is missing a button. He self-consciously returns to talking about the silk. He flirtatiously says that everyone else wants boring wool and points out the gold thread woven through the cloth. He says that he can tell by looking at Esther's hands that she's a gifted seamstress, but Esther says that she didn't have a choice—the alternative was becoming a domestic servant. Mr. Marks says that this is an oversimplification: some people have the hands to sew, while others, like him, do not.

Esther laughs and happily strokes the fabric. She sniffs it and asks if it was made with fruit dye. Delighted, Mr. Marks confirms this and says that it was probably created for an empress. Esther happily agrees to buy the fabric and asks Mr. Marks if he's happy now. He declares that he's happy if Esther is. Esther reaches out and squeezes Mr. Marks's hand, but he pulls it away. Esther is shocked and says that her skin color won't rub off. Mr. Marks explains that his religious beliefs don't allow him to touch a woman that's not his wife or a relative. Esther remarks that Mr. Marks's wife must be a very happy woman, but Mr. Marks admits that his fiancée is in Romania and he's never met her.

ACT 1, SCENE 4

In a bedroom with a canopy bed, Mayme sits at a piano, playing a frenzied rag. She trembles angrily and her silk robe is torn. Esther knocks, but finally lets herself in and takes in the sight of Mayme. Mayme shakily says that the men make her sick and points out the tear in her robe. Esther soothingly says that she can fix it, but Mayme washes her face and genitals in a basin and says that for a dollar, the men think they own her. She stiffly says that she knows Esther doesn't approve, but she doesn't mind. She says that when Esther knocked on the door she was afraid that it was another man, and she's too tired right now.

Esther's insistence that she didn't have much of a choice in becoming a seamstress again speaks to the limited options available to black women in this time period, and Mr. Marks's reply doesn't do much to push back on this. Instead, what Mr. Marks is mostly doing is flirting with Esther and flattering her, which continues to build their friendship and their sense of closeness. Esther's comment, however, also reminds the reader that the American dream as represented by New York isn't especially available to her as an American citizen, either.



Mr. Marks takes great comfort and pride in his religious beliefs and the relationships that they allow him to have, both with God and with fellow Jews. While he can be friendly with Esther and even flirt with her verbally, his beliefs mean that he's never going to be able to give Esther the kind of intimacy that they both appear to desire. That Mr. Marks is going along with this arranged marriage shows how, in some cultures, men are subject to the same kinds of expectations that they may or may not enjoy, just like women are.



The way that Mayme talks about her clients makes it very clear that she doesn't think the sex she has with them is intimate; for her, it's a job, not romance. This sets up the idea that simply being sexually intimate with another person doesn't mean that there's genuine intimacy at play.



Mayme sits back at the piano and plays a slower rag. Esther compliments it, and Mayme says that she wrote it. Mayme says that she once played it at home, and her daddy gave her 12 lashes for doing so. He was a proper man and didn't like "colored" things, so playing ragtime was a crime in his house. Mayme picks up a bottle of moonshine, which Esther suggests is the reason that Mayme is so tired. Mayme brushes this off and asks Esther to show her what she brought. Esther draws out a pale blue corset like the one she made for Mrs. Van Buren. Mayme looks touched, holds it up to her body, and asks to try it on.

Esther assures Mayme that she can try it on and says that she made one for a lady on Fifth Avenue. She points out the flowers as she starts to lace Mayme into the corset. As Esther works, she says that the wealthy white lady keeps asking what sex workers are wearing. She remarks that Mayme wants what the Fifth Avenue lady has, and the Fifth Avenue lady wants what Mayme has. Mayme models the corset, says she can't afford to pay for it, and asks how she looks. Esther deems her "grand" and says that according to Mr. Marks, the silk was made for fine Parisian ladies. He talked her into buying it.

This piques Mayme's interest, and she says that it sounds like Esther is sweet on Mr. Marks. Esther brushes this off by noting that Mr. Marks is Jewish, but Mayme says that she's been with Jewish men and that they're gentle. Esther tries to change the subject and Mayme ascertains that Esther hasn't had sex before. She self-consciously touches the beading as Esther says that George is still courting her. Mayme sighs that Esther is more interested in a man a thousand miles away than a man down the road and asks if she expects George to come to New York. Hurt, Esther says that she doesn't expect anything to come of this, and Mayme gently says that Esther certainly does—they all have dreams.

Mayme sits down on the bed and says that she's pretending to be a concert pianist playing in Prague. She's doing well for herself and says that she takes tea twice weekly with Esther, and asks Esther what her claim to fame is in their fictional European paradise. Esther says that she owns a beauty parlor for black women, where those women can be pampered and treated well. Esther gets into the charade and offers to take Mayme's coat, offers her tea, and then mimes giving her a book of pictures of the latest styles. She invites Mayme to put her feet up and says that in no time, she'll have a whole new look. Mayme sighs that she'd love to pay to be treated like a lady.

The behavior of Mayme's father shows how traditionally black art forms are, to some black people, the very reason why they're not able to get ahead: they're not considered proper, and in order to make it in white society, a black person must affect "white" mannerisms. This is, of course, complicated by the fact that Mrs. Van Buren idealizes black culture; for her as a white woman, it's a fun thing to dabble with, but not damning.



The Fifth Avenue lady is presumably Mrs. Van Buren, though it's also reasonable to expect that Esther has other white clients who also want to dress like Mayme does. This shows how black women specifically are sexualized and commodified for white viewers, while women like Mayme simultaneously want to borrow some of the propriety and class as represented by the luxury items that Mrs. Van Buren can afford to wear.



As far as Esther is concerned, George is more available: they share the same skin color, for one, which means that a relationship wouldn't be subject to the same questions or issues as a relationship with Mr. Marks would. Mayme's kindness when it comes to Esther's dreams of George shows that validating another's dreams is one way that friends can show they care, thereby strengthening their relationship.



Esther dreams up this beauty salon because she's well aware that black women aren't pampered and treated like ladies, so she knows that as a black woman, she's the only person willing to honor them like this. Note, however, that this charade is a fun distraction for both women, and Mayme in particular gets very into it. This suggests that Mayme believes that dreaming is also a great way to lift one's spirits, and doing so with friends can be even more effective.



Esther admits that she has some money saved in the lining of her **crazy quilt**. Mayme sighs that the quilt sounds wonderful to a poor woman, but Esther says seriously that she's been saving money since she came to New York and honestly wants to open her beauty parlor. Mayme is shocked. She says that they were just playing; she's never been to Prague and will never get to go. Esther asks Mayme if she still wants to be in this line of work in ten years, but Mayme says she's tried to do better. She says that sex work isn't easy, and she's just lucky to be in this saloon, which is better than most.

Esther suggests that Mayme could try harder with her piano playing, but Mayme cuts her off and says that there are “wonderful ideas” “scattered all over [her] room,” but none of them are going to come true. She tells Esther that George is sweet, but he's not real. Esther pulls a letter out of her pocket and says that George is absolutely real. She offers the letter to Mayme who acts disinterested, but finally snatches it and smiles as she reads. She says that George got a new pair of socks and wants to know what Esther looks like.

Mayme is shocked that Esther hasn't already told George what she looks like, but Esther insists that she's too plain. Mayme says that Esther is the loveliest person she knows, and points out that men don't care about faces—they care about bodies. She strikes a pose and laughs. Esther, scandalized, says it's not Christian to write about that, but Mayme says that George just wants a pretty woman to think about at night. Esther nervously asks Mayme to help her write the letter. Mayme suggests that Esther ask Mrs. Van Buren, but Esther asks Mayme again. Mayme agrees, but declares that it's silly.

George appears and recites his letter to Esther. He says that it's raining, so work is stopped. The rum shop is the only business still going, and many men lose their savings overnight. He says that there are Indian girls selling themselves too, but he craves a gentlewoman. George says that he thinks about the suit he'll wear to meet Esther, and he's been imagining both the streets of New York and Esther sewing with silk thread.

That Mayme is so shocked speaks to how cynical she's become, likely because of her job, her gender, and her skin color: as she sees it, because she and Esther are black women, there's not much room for them to do anything but what they're both doing right now. In particular, Mayme's insistence that she's lucky to be working where she is suggests that she's decided to make the most of what she does have instead of dream about more.



Because of Mayme's line of work, she likely deals with men and their dreams and fantasies every day—it's hard to tell if she's talking about her dreams specifically, or dreams more broadly. Regardless, her cynical and practical tone allows her to tell Esther that dreaming isn't something that she can count on to get her anywhere.



Mayme's insistence that men care about women's bodies echoes Esther's earlier statement to Mrs. Van Buren, in which she suggested that Mrs. Van Buren is too beautiful to have lost her husband's affection. It's worth noting that if men lose interest in Mayme, it's likely far less noticeable or devastating for her than for a monogamous woman who hopes to have children with her husband, which may impact Mayme's advice here.



George's choice to start using some of Esther's imagery and talk about his suit and silk thread shows him mirroring Esther as a way to woo her and make her even more interested in him. In other words, reflecting Esther's reality back to her in this idealized way makes Esther feel seen and therefore, closer to George.



ACT 1, SCENE 5

Esther sits in her bedroom, sewing a silk camisole. Mrs. Dickson enters and gives Esther a letter, saying that she doesn't trust George at all. Esther notices that the letter is open and asks Mrs. Dickson to not open her mail. Mrs. Dickson insists that she's glad she opened it and asks Esther what she plans to do. She says that men like George run away with girls' common sense and says that Esther is too practical for this sort of thing. Esther retorts that she doesn't need Mrs. Dickson's approval and asks what's wrong about expecting something from George. Mrs. Dickson says that Mr. Charles has asked about Esther twice this week, but Esther scathingly says that she's certain that Mr. Charles doesn't even know who she is.

Mrs. Dickson says that Esther is stubborn, particular, and needs to be receptive. Esther spits that she's not silly like the other girls in the boardinghouse, and says that she has every right to exchange letters with George even if nothing comes of it. Mrs. Dickson admits that Esther certainly has the right, but says that her own pride ultimately meant that she had to compromise. She starts to warn Esther, but Esther cuts her off and says that she has \$1,800 saved in her **crazy quilt** to one day open her beauty parlor, so she doesn't need Mr. Charles. Mrs. Dickson derisively says that the money and the beauty parlor won't be enough; Esther will be unhappily making garments for another country girl turned socialite next year. Esther says she wants someone to love, but Mrs. Dickson rips up the letter and storms out.

George appears and begins to recite his letter to Esther. He says that he was surprised when fabric scraps fell out of the envelope last time, and he tucked them into his shirt. The scene transforms, and Mr. Marks unrolls blue and magenta silk for Esther. He eagerly explains that the magenta is hand-dyed. Mr. Marks offers Esther the blue silk and as she touches it, he encourages her to make something for herself with it. Esther says that the ladies will love it and pulls some around her shoulders. Mr. Marks puts the magenta cloth around his own and they laugh.

To diffuse the tension between them, Esther notices again that Mr. Marks is missing a button and offers to sew it on for him. He refuses. She asks why he always wears black when he clearly delights in the colors of the fabrics he sells. He says that it's how he shows devotion to God, and Esther asks if marrying a person he's never met does the same thing. Mr. Marks says that there's a thousand years of history that go into the answer, but Esther suggests that it sounds much simpler than that. She apologizes for her forwardness and asks him to wrap the magenta cloth.

For Mrs. Dickson, the fact that George can make Esther act in ways that aren't normal for her and instill in her this sense of hope and optimism is a red flag; in her experience, it's far more important to marry for convenience and for wealth, not for love. Because of this, Mrs. Dickson still thinks that Mr. Charles is a perfect match for Esther, since he's likely far better off than George is as a laborer.



Although she's trying to help Esther, Mrs. Dickson is damaging her friendship with the young woman here as she invalidates Esther's feelings and stomps on her dreams. Though Esther does seem to value her own worth here when she brings up her money and dreams of the beauty parlor, she doesn't take into account the possibility that a husband like George won't be able to give her what she wants. Her idealization of George and of marriage means that Esther is blind to the fact that this might not work out.



Again, the way that Esther and Mr. Marks interact with each other shows how friendly and how close they are; they can play with each other the same way that Mayme and Esther do, and Mr. Marks encourages Esther to do things that will make her happy. This continues to show that intimacy need not be sexual to be real, even if there is some sexual tension in this moment too.



Here, Mr. Marks confirms that his own style of dress constantly reminds him of his close relationship to God and to the Jewish faith and people more broadly. In not allowing Esther to sew on the button, Mr. Marks is denying her the ability to perform a very intimate act for him.



Mr. Marks says that his family has always married this way, and when Esther points out that he's in a different country now, Mr. Marks explains that his people come with everything they might need. His suit belonged to his father and though it's old, it's his favorite: it reminds him of his relationships to God and his ancestors. As Mr. Marks turns, Esther gently touches his collar. If Mr. Marks notices, he doesn't let on.

The scene shifts. Mrs. Van Buren wears a kimono over a new corset made of hand-dyed magenta silk. She's worried that it's not a popular material, but Esther assures her it'll be popular in the fall. Mrs. Van Buren says she'll slip that into conversation this evening. She says her in-laws, "the frog and the wart," are visiting, and tells Esther that she was forced to sit through a boring opera. She would've rather gone to the electric show at Madison Square Garden, but her husband refuses to let himself be impressed. She adds that she started her period this morning and when she told her husband, he spat at her and it made her feel guilty, even though all women menstruate. She lets her kimono drop and says that maybe she'll run away and be a bohemian.

Esther says that she doesn't understand why Mrs. Van Buren lets her husband treat her this way, but knows she overstepped. Mrs. Van Buren asks Esther if she's ever been to the opera and declares that Esther is lucky when she says she hasn't been. Esther says she's only been to the theater once and saw a blind girl singing spirituals. She asks Mrs. Van Buren to lift her arms so she can adjust the corset. Mrs. Van Buren lifts them seductively and shows Esther where the corset is pinching her. Esther stands behind her client and adjusts one of Mrs. Van Buren's breasts in the corset before tightening the laces.

Mrs. Van Buren says she's never seen a "colored show," but has heard they're excellent. She says she'd like to see one and asks Esther to take her sometime. Esther asks if Mrs. Van Buren will take her to the opera in return, and Mrs. Van Buren says she would if she could. She giggles that it would be "marvelously scandalous" and tenderly touches Esther's hand. Esther diplomatically pulls away as Mrs. Van Buren whispers that it's easy to be with Esther. She says that Esther's visits are all she has to look forward to, and she loves writing the letters to George.

Mr. Marks suggests here that his conception of the American dream has as much to do with keeping his life in Romania alive in a new place as it does with achieving financial success in America. Esther's choice to touch Mr. Marks speaks to the degree to which she craves intimacy with this man who is kind to her.



By using this hand-dyed magenta silk that Esther bought in Mr. Marks's shop, she's trying to pay forward her intimacy with Mr. Marks and give it to Mrs. Van Buren. Mrs. Van Buren exposes her provincial roots by not liking the opera and wanting to see the lower-class electric show, which again draws similarities between her and Esther. However, she feels bound by her status and her marriage to not actually pursue these things she likes, showing again that achieving "perfect" womanhood isn't all it's cracked up to be.



Mrs. Van Buren's behavior toward Esther speaks to the sense of closeness that she feels with her; she seems to feel as though they're becoming something more than client and seamstress, and possibly experiencing romantic attraction. This, however, ignores the fact that touching Mrs. Van Buren's body like this is part of Esther's job, and is likely something she does for all of her clients, not because she's attracted to Mrs. Van Buren.



This exchange begins to pull apart the power imbalance between Mrs. Van Buren and Esther: Esther could probably get away with taking Mrs. Van Buren to a "colored show," but Esther would never be allowed in the opera house. Mrs. Van Buren's confession that she looks forward to seeing Esther and writing the letters shows that she's fetishizing Esther herself as well as Esther's life, and using both as entertainment.



Mrs. Van Buren suggests that they write something exciting to George, but Esther asks if they can write something simple—she believes George is falling in love with her. She says that she doesn't want George to be disappointed, but Mrs. Van Buren reassures her. Esther asks if Mrs. Van Buren can describe the silk of her new corset, and Mrs. Van Buren remarks on what her friends would say if they knew she wrote love letters to a black man. Esther points out that people do all sorts of things they never talk about, and Mrs. Van Buren admits that she once smoked opium with a proper lady. Esther is quiet a moment, but admits that she touched someone she wasn't supposed to. She knows it was wrong, but she wanted to and couldn't help herself.

Sharing these secrets with each other does increase the sense of closeness between Mrs. Van Buren and Esther, but the secrets themselves speak to the ways in which women's deepest desires are forced to stay secrets: Esther cannot openly love Mr. Marks, and Mrs. Van Buren might be able to play at writing love letters to a black man, but for her, it's something totally removed from her reality. These letters have little bearing on Mrs. Van Buren's life, except to give her pleasure, while the budding romance has real consequences for Esther.



George recites his letter to Esther. It's early morning and he imagines Esther far away. He says that they've been writing for six months and so much has changed. A water boy died two nights ago, and the white work chief has said nothing about it except that the new boy isn't as good. George can barely recall the boy's face. He knows that he could die tomorrow, and he says that he once dreamed for nothing more than an ox. Now, he sees American men laughing and knows that they do terrible things, but still, George thinks he wants to see America. He says that he loves Esther and asks if she'll marry him.

George's story about the dead water boy shows how poorly he and his fellow black coworkers are thought of in Panama: they're little more than useful animals that inconveniently die and must be replaced. America, on the other hand, represents something hopeful for George—especially because Esther is there—and the possibility of getting out from under the white bosses in Panama and finding something better.



ACT 1, SCENE 6

Mayme hangs stockings up to dry in her bedroom and asks Esther why she's smiling so much. Esther admits that George asked her to marry him and hands Mayme the letter. She says that she loves him as much as she can, given that she's never met him, and since this is her last chance, she said yes. Mayme congratulates Esther and says that George must be a good man, and Esther thinks that a man who worked this hard to court her must be okay. She notes that George is arriving next month and asks Mayme to witness the ceremony. Mayme is refuses; she says that she and God aren't "on speaking terms." She pulls out a fancy bottle of gin and pours them each a glass. They toast to "one less spinster in New York."

While Esther is smiling and seems excited, she also seems to truly believe that she's never going to have another chance to get married. Asking Mayme to witness the ceremony offers Esther a way to show Mayme that they are truly friends and she genuinely cares about her, and notably, Mayme's refusal to attend doesn't change this. Because the two women are on relatively equal footing, they can say no to things like this without fear of ruining their relationship.



Esther hopes that she's not making a mistake, and Mayme reassures her. Mayme admits that she was engaged once to a mortician's apprentice who hated music. Esther asks if Mayme regrets not following through with it, and Mayme admits that she sometimes does. She lifts her glass and tells Esther that as a married lady, Esther is going to go to all manner of "ridiculous functions," drink lemonade, and stop visiting her. She says it wouldn't be appropriate for Esther to visit, but Esther says they'll continue to be friends. Mayme starts to play piano and the two women sing a song about wanting a man who will take care of her and her home. Esther stops singing and nervously contemplates her decision.

While it's unclear whether Mayme actually thinks that marriage really entails these "ridiculous functions" or not, bringing them up shows that she's willing to support Esther by drawing on an idealized version of marriage rather than getting bogged down in all the ways that Esther's marriage might be less than ideal. Esther's nerves are perfectly understandable, and suggest that she may want to reconsider her assertion that this is her only chance—for one, marriage isn't the only way to exist in the world.



Back in Esther's bedroom, Mrs. Dickson packs Esther's suitcase and moans about losing Esther's company at dinner—the other girls are horrible conversationalists. She holds up one of Esther's dresses and says that under no circumstances can Esther take it: it's so frumpy it will scare George away, and Mrs. Dickson insists that even her very Christian grandmother wouldn't have worn it. Esther tries to defend the dress, but Mrs. Dickson says that Esther can't be a prude if she's going to fulfill her duty to keep George at home. Esther is shocked, but Mrs. Dickson gives more advice: Esther needs to attend to George's needs in order to stay happy, and to do what needs to be done in that regard no matter what the minister says about "decency."

Mrs. Dickson says that Esther also can't allow George to beat her, because it will never be a one-time occurrence. She says that since they're friends and since Esther is "an innocent," she felt it was necessary to share this information. Esther insists that she's going to be fine and agrees to let Mrs. Dickson donate her dress to the church. Mrs. Dickson sits down and seems awed that Esther is actually getting married. Esther asks if Mrs. Dickson really expected her to stay forever, and Mrs. Dickson admits that she did. Esther assures her that a new girl will move in and Mrs. Dickson will move on, but Mrs. Dickson dabs her eyes and says she'll miss Esther. She tells Esther that she doesn't have to go through with this, but Esther says she does: she'll turn to dust otherwise.

Esther says that she's found someone just like Mrs. Dickson found her husband, and Mrs. Dickson says that she married him because he was the only decent black man in New York who would have her. She agrees that they came to love each other, but tells Esther how her mother wanted her to "marry up." Her father was the married minister of their mission and her mother was a washerwoman who didn't want Mrs. Dickson to be ashamed of her hands. Mrs. Dickson would watch her mother put her bleeding hands in gloves and not let her daughter help, and instead insisted that marrying for love was foolish. Mrs. Dickson says that she compromised herself and ended up with the well-furnished boardinghouse.

Esther says that Mrs. Dickson's husband was a good man, and Mrs. Dickson says that he was handsome and spoke well, but he was too addicted to opium to know or care that he was married. She says that regardless, she never had to be a laundress, and her beautiful hands prove it. Mrs. Dickson says that Esther deserves a gentleman and asks why she is going for "a common laborer." Esther says she loves George, and Mrs. Dickson cautions her to make sure to get a piece of George's heart in return. George appears and writes that he's in Havana, waiting for his ship to set sail.

Mrs. Dickson's "advice" is both shocking and comical, as she makes it clear that Esther should do whatever she needs to do sexually to appease her husband, regardless of what the church might have to say on the matter. This suggests that Mrs. Dickson believes that even a Christian marriage may have its quirks, and in order to be intimate in a way that's fulfilling for both partners (though, it seems, especially for the husband), it may be necessary to bend some of the rules governing "appropriate" sexuality.



It's interesting that Mrs. Dickson is backpedaling on her insistence that Esther should get married at this point, planting the seed in Esther's mind that she actually doesn't have to go through with this. It seems as though the reality of the situation is finally making Mrs. Dickson see that marriage isn't actually guaranteed to be a positive experience, and she's trying to be as supportive as possible while also attempting to impress upon Esther that she'd be fine as a spinster.



Mrs. Dickson's story about her mother shows how these questionable ideals about what constitutes proper womanhood and acceptable goals get passed down from generation to generation as women draw on their own experiences—good or bad—and influence how the next generation thinks about love and marriage. Her mother also serves as a cautionary tale to Esther, since Esther is marrying for love (which Mrs. Dickson suggests is little different than having an affair born out of love).



Mrs. Dickson's main point seems to be that if a woman is going to marry, it's better to marry a man who's guaranteed to be able to give his wife something, whether that be his heart or his assets. She sees George as a liability, since Esther still hasn't met him and he could very well be lying—and as a laborer, it's possible that he has nowhere near as much money as Esther does.



Esther enters Mr. Marks's shop. Mr. Marks is thrilled to see her and says that he kept checking his competitor's shop, as he's been losing customers. He says that he would've written and asked about her health if he had her address. Esther smiles and says that she's well. Mr. Marks looks away shyly, says that he has something beautiful to show Esther, and hesitantly invites her to have a cup of tea with him. Esther accepts and sits. She smiles at Mr. Marks and he compliments her smile. Esther immediately stops smiling, and, embarrassed, Mr. Marks gets up to fetch the fabric.

Esther says that she's actually here for fabric for a simple wedding gown. Mr. Marks pulls down several bolts and Esther examines them without much excitement. Mr. Marks offers to give Esther one of the popular fabrics for a lower price, but Esther says it's still too expensive. She points to a faded roll, but Mr. Marks says that one is for a much older woman or the mother of the bride. Esther says that she's not young. Mr. Marks is silent and surprised and then confirms that Esther is getting married.

Mr. Marks offers congratulations and pulls out his finest wedding fabric. Esther insists that it's too expensive, but touches the fabric. She closes her eyes, holds the fabric to her face, and weeps. Mr. Marks says that it will be her first wedding gift. He clearly wants to touch her and comfort her. Esther accepts the fabric and they look into each other's eyes, unable to say how they feel about each other. Esther and Mr. Marks leave the stage.

Mayme sits at her piano and Mrs. Van Buren appears in her boudoir, smoking and drinking. Mr. Marks appears in his apartment to sew on his jacket button, while Mrs. Dickson steps up with a wedding veil. George appears in his best suit, which fits him poorly, and Esther enters in her wedding gown. Everyone except George and Esther leaves the stage, and the couple meets nervously. They look out and a camera flashes. The image freezes and a caption appears, reading "Unidentified Negro Couple ca. 1905."

The comment about losing customers emphasizes that Mr. Marks is having a hard time of making it in America. While he may still dream of a better future, the reality is that he's losing business and one of his best customers, Esther, hasn't been in as often as she once was. Inviting her for tea allows Mr. Marks to build on their friendship even more and effectively take their relationship to the next level.



Esther's lack of excitement when it comes to choosing the fabric for her dress is a red flag that Esther isn't excited about her marriage; she's only doing it because she truly believes this is her one chance to embody proper femininity. This shows how the constraints of these ideals trap women in making choices they don't believe in in an attempt to get ahead.



There's no world in which crying on this fine white fabric wouldn't stain or rumple it. This makes it clear on a symbolic level that Esther's marriage is doomed to fail, possibly because of the intimacy she shares with Mr. Marks, as represented by the fabric and their shared love it.



Captioning this "photo" shows how today, photos like this are removed from modern viewers' reality. The play seeks to remedy this by allowing the reader or viewer insight into what may have gone into one of these classic wedding photos, and it encourages viewers to see the people portrayed in these photographs as real people with hopes, dreams, and difficulties.



ACT 2, SCENE 1

Esther and George stand on either side of the bed that's covered in the **crazy quilt**, Esther in her wedding dress and George in his frayed suit. After a moment, Esther remarks that she doesn't feel much different. She says that she doesn't know what else to say. George says they have plenty of time to talk as he takes off his jacket, tosses it over the bed, and loosens his top button. Esther picks up the jacket and glances at the label as she folds it. She offers to fetch a basin so George can bathe, but he kneels on the bed and invites Esther to sit. She sits with her back to him and trembles as he touches her cheek. George asks if Esther is afraid of him, but she says that all of this is just new.

George takes Esther's hand and places it over his crotch. Esther is uncomfortable but allows this. George starts to say what he expected of Esther, and Esther offers that he thought she'd be prettier. She suggests they say what they think now and get it out of the way. She says that in her letters she described her character, and she told the truth. As George starts to unbutton Esther's dress, she moves her hand and says she finds George disarmingly handsome. She admits that she's kissed before, but hasn't had sex. George slips Esther's dress off her shoulders to reveal a beautiful wedding corset. He compliments it, kisses her back, and runs his fingers over her breasts.

Esther quickly stands up to fetch the **smoking jacket**, which she made for George as a wedding gift. She helps him put it on. He's not comfortable in it and says that he'll get it dirty. He shrugs it off and tosses it onto the bed, pulling Esther close. Esther asks if they can wait a little bit, and asks George to tell her about Barbados. She pulls away, picks up the smoking jacket, and says that she came to New York from North Carolina when she was 17. Her mother died of influenza and her father died two years later. He was silent for Esther's entire life, as he was born a slave and had his tongue cut out. When Esther got to New York, an old woman taught her to sew intimate apparel and that was the most valuable gift Esther has ever received.

Esther and George will have sex for the first time in the bed covered in Esther's crazy quilt—which very literally contains her hopes and dreams for the future, as it's the hiding place for her life savings, which she wants to use to open a beauty parlor—thus tying George more firmly to those hopes and dreams. In this way, Esther reaffirms her commitment to becoming a proper lady by marrying and following through with all that brings with it, even when it's scary or uncomfortable for her.



That George doesn't refute Esther's interjection shows that Esther was right—George did want a pretty face and not just a female body. With this, the play suggests that Esther is going to have a harder time being a successful woman, given that she's not able to be the kind of beauty that men seem to expect of her. Instead, she can borrow that beauty and fabricate it by making herself beautiful undergarments.



The smoking jacket symbolizes Esther's hope for intimacy with George; with it, as with Mrs. Van Buren's magenta corset, she tries to transpose Mr. Marks's friendship onto someone else. So casually taking off the jacket and discarding it is another red flag that George doesn't actually share Esther's love of storytelling or of these fine fabrics, even if he said he did in the letters. Esther attempts to kindle some of this intimacy by telling George her family history.



George takes off his shirt as he says that his parents were the children of slaves and slaves themselves, and they all cut sugarcane and died. He says their story isn't worth telling, but he hopes that his story will be different now that he's here. George says he'd like to do what they're supposed to do and have sex, and Esther allows him to pull her onto the bed. The lights fade as Mayme and Mrs. Van Buren, in their matching corsets, come onstage and stand over Esther and George's bed. Mayme asks what George is like as George gets out of bed and dresses. Esther kneels on the bed, wrapped in her **crazy quilt**, and says that George is handsome. Esther gets up and Mayme and Mrs. Van Buren help her get dressed.

Esther says that George didn't say much when he saw her. Mrs. Van Buren says that George must be romantic, and Esther offers that his smell made her both sick and excited. Mrs. Van Buren admits that on her wedding night, she was tipsy, in love with the idea of love, and her husband scared her. Esther says that George is sturdy and handsome, with a musical voice. Mayme and Mrs. Van Buren retreat, and Esther says that after George fell asleep, she put her head on his chest and imagined mango and Flamboyant trees.

ACT 2, SCENE 2

In George and Esther's bedroom, George looks pleased with himself and unconcerned that his suit is worn. Esther watches him out of the corner of her eye, but looks away when he glances at her. Esther asks if she can make him food, but George says he's not hungry. She asks where he's going on a Sunday, since she promised Mrs. Dickson that they'd have dinner after the church social. George says that Mrs. Dickson asks too many questions, but Esther insists that she's being attentive. George grabs his hat, deliberates, and then asks for two dollars: he needs a better hat to find work, as his hat is a farmer's hat. Esther says that two dollars is a lot of money, and reminds George that she's going to make him a smart suit.

Esther agrees to give George money, cuts into her **crazy quilt**, and pulls out two dollars. She asks why George needs to go out, and he says that he promised to meet some men at the bar. Esther asks him to stay so she can mend his shirt. She touches the hole and says that people will say disparaging things about her, especially Mrs. Dickson. Disgusted, George says that Mrs. Dickson is very full of herself. He imitates her asking if he's working, and then says that he has letters from white engineers and the chief in Panama, but nobody will hire him. He has tools and more experience than anyone else, but the bosses choose to hire old European men.

George's unwillingness to play along and share his family history again shows that he's not willing to be intimate in a way that Esther craves; he's here for sex and not much more. Mayme and Mrs. Van Buren appearing to help Esther dress and make sense of this experience re-centers female friendship as the most important and intimate relationship, as Esther is using them to figure out how she feels, rather than drawing on George to provide insight into her friends.



Mrs. Van Buren's comment that George is romantic again show that she's idealizing George and Esther's experiences with him, as this doesn't acknowledge that Esther wasn't entirely thrilled with the experience. Her later confession about her wedding night, however, suggests that for these women, sexual intimacy with men is difficult and not often fulfilling.



The way that George talks about Mrs. Dickson suggests that for all his talk of wanting to know gentlewomen, those gentlewomen aren't proving so attractive in real life. He's also denying Esther the ability to "properly" perform the role of his wife, since he won't let her feed him and seems disinterested in going to these events where Esther is celebrated for being a married lady. Promising to make George a suit shows that Esther still hopes that she can make this work and can still show George her love.



Here, Esther gets at the fact that anything even marginally improper that George does doesn't just make him look bad; it reflects badly on Esther, too, because as his wife, she's responsible for policing his behavior and making sure he goes into public looking nice. The things that George says about his letters suggest that his idealized vision of what life and work were going to be like in America aren't coming true; he's learning that he's still subject to racism of a different kind here that keeps him from reaching his goals.



George says that a boss who interviewed him gave him a letter. He hands it to Esther, who pretends to read it. She carefully says that the boss must mean what he wrote, but George asks if she thinks what the man wrote is true. Esther asks why it wouldn't be. George, frustrated, pulls off his shirt, tosses it to Esther, and throws himself on the bed to smoke. Esther asks if he's tried at the butcher's, as she knows they need help. George answers noncommittally. She suggests that they go to the church social before Mrs. Dickson's, but George says he's not really the churchgoing type. Esther, shocked, asks if George believes and reminds him that he wrote about church in his letters, but George says he wrote lots of things.

Esther returns to her sewing as George feels the **crazy quilt**. She asks him to come to the social. She says she's never been and the ladies at church only started inviting her to things once she got married. George says they're just interested in him because he's a "monkey chaser," but Esther insists that they've just not traveled and the ladies might be willing to help them. George says that he's not interested in porting luggage; he wants to build things. He says that a man in the saloon told him that the only way for a black man in America to get ahead is with his own business. George says that it looks bad that he's jobless while Esther has one. Esther assures him that her earnings are his and asks him to not smoke in bed—that's how the man downstairs died.

George says that there's a man at the saloon who knows someone with a dozen draft horses to sell for cheap. Esther says that this is just "saloon talk" and likely isn't real. George is offended, and to placate him, Esther asks where he's going to get the money for the horses anyway. He strokes her **crazy quilt**, but Esther says that money isn't going anywhere: it's for her beauty parlor. George laughs and says that Esther owning a beauty parlor is funny, since she's not pretty. Esther is hurt and says that she makes pretty things.

George gets up, takes Esther in his arms, and apologizes. He says that she'd look pretty if she put her hair up and painted her lips, but Esther says she's not "that kind of woman." George agrees with her, lets her go, and asks for the money. Esther refuses. George grabs his unfinished shirt and tells Esther where he's going for his drink. She says the place is "notorious," but won't say how she knows. George makes a dismissive noise, and Esther asks why he's so upset with her since she gave him money. He says that he feels inadequate taking money from her. Esther says that *she* built herself up from nothing, but George says that almost two years on the Panama Canal amounts to nearly nothing in America. He says it's depressingly gray here.

Notice that it's unclear here if George himself can read the letter, given that he never notes what the letter says and his answers, like Esther's, can be read as non-answers designed to extract information from the other person. Learning that George doesn't attend church much shakes Esther to the core, as it means that George is in no way the man she thought he was. Due to the way that she idealized marriage especially, there's no room in her vision for a man who's not, in her mind, perfect in every way.



When Esther notes that the ladies at church are only inviting her to things because she's married, it again shows that in Esther's society, she's now achieved feminine perfection by getting married, no matter how dysfunctional that marriage might be behind the scenes. While George is certainly hobbled by his pride when it comes to getting a job, it's worth noting that he takes offense to being unemployed and having an employed wife. This suggests that he wants to feel powerful and, specifically, more powerful than Esther is.



Given the way that Esther described the beauty parlor, it's not actually about beauty. Instead, the parlor is about creating a space where women can feel valued and pampered, and Esther understands that one of the best ways to do that is by serving women in much the same way she does now as a seamstress: by giving them beautiful things and treating them like ladies.



George's comments about not having money, specifically when he mentions how meager his earnings from the Panama Canal are now that he's in America, suggest again that the American dream isn't accessible to him—at least until he gets a job and has income of his own, which he seems to feel he can't do. This leaves room for the possibility that George is shutting himself out of jobs that might help him get ahead and, in other words, making his American dream even less possible for him.



Esther sternly says that she appreciates that he came here, but they promised to take care of each other. She says that she's proud to be with George no matter what his job is, but George says he's tired of taking money from her. He grabs his hat and coat, refuses to let Esther smooth his collar, and says that he'll be home for supper but not the social or for Mrs. Dickson. Esther crumples his work letter.

Esther enters Mr. Marks's apartment. He's humming and she asks if the tune is a rag. He says it's a Romanian song, but he can't remember the words. Esther compliments the new buttons on his jacket, and Mr. Marks pulls out the Scottish wool that Esther ordered. It's heavy, and he tells her that the man who sold it to him told him all about how his mother cared for the sheep like small children. The neighbors laughed until they sheared the sheep and discovered how wonderful the wool was. Esther strokes the fabric with delight.

Mr. Marks fetches some gorgeous lace that he saved for Esther. He playfully drapes the lace around her neck, bringing them too close together, and he calls her by her maiden name. Esther firmly corrects him, and Mr. Marks puts the lace on his cutting board. Esther says that she's only come for suiting. Mr. Marks pulls out his other bolts of drab suiting as Esther touches the lace. He rolls up the lace. Esther starts to say something but, distraught, says that she can't buy from him anymore. She asks for the Scottish wool and says she'll take the lace.

ACT 2, SCENE 3

Mrs. Van Buren sits in her boudoir with a drink, looking unusually cheerful. Esther is distracted. Mrs. Van Buren says that her husband has gone to Europe, brushes off Esther's condolences, and says that it's a relief: she won't have to see him for months. She says that while he's gone she's going to take a trip to see friends and offers to bring Esther along to sew for all of them. Esther declines the offer and drapes the lace she just purchased over the bedpost, saying it'd be perfect for the rose chemise Mrs. Van Buren ordered. Mrs. Van Buren points out that she ordered the chemise weeks ago and says out of character for Esther to take so long. Esther says she's been busy.

Everything that George does here denies Esther the ability to show George that she cares for him, especially when he doesn't let her straighten his clothes. His disinterest in his clothing is likely something that's very offensive to Esther, especially since he seemed so taken by the way she talked about fabrics in her letters.



Once again, the story that Mr. Marks tells about this Scottish wool shows the power of a story to create intimacy in a relationship. The way that Mr. Marks and Esther engage with each other is, notably, far kinder and more positive than the way that George speaks to Esther. This certainly makes this even more difficult for Esther, as she can now see plainly what she's missing in her marriage.



Choosing to go for the Scottish wool suggests that once again, Esther is going to try to pay forward the intimacy she has with Mr. Marks and pass it on to George. Taking the lace, meanwhile, allows Esther to show Mr. Marks that she wants to make him happy and she does share his joy and interest in the fabrics, even if their relationship is going to be untenable going forward.



Mrs. Van Buren's offer to take Esther along to sew for her friends will be extremely important in a few minutes. Combined with Mrs. Van Buren's apparent glee at being without her husband for a few months, this suggests that Mrs. Van Buren is getting far more out of her relationship with Esther than she was with her husband, though the relationship is still one with a major power imbalance.



Mrs. Van Buren asks how George is. Esther says that he's fine, but there isn't much work to be had and he's prideful. She says that he's also not enjoying New York. Mrs. Van Buren assures Esther that he'll come around and says that it must be wonderful to be in love. Esther answers noncommittally as Mrs. Van Buren looks at the lace and tosses it aside. Esther is offended. Mrs. Van Buren asks if things are alright and says that Esther can't look so sad. Esther asks if they can settle up; Mrs. Van Buren hasn't paid in two months. With a smile, Mrs. Van Buren agrees.

Mrs. Van Buren sighs and says that she misses writing the letters to George and feels purposeless now. Esther snaps that she doesn't want to talk about the letters, surprising Mrs. Van Buren. Esther apologizes, sits to fold the lace, and starts to cry. She admits that she couldn't read the work letter that George offered her and says that she lies to him every day. Mrs. Van Buren takes Esther's hand and says they all do what they have to do.

Esther asks if Mrs. Van Buren loves her husband. Mrs. Van Buren says that the question is too romantic for a married woman. Esther says that her love "belongs someplace else," but won't explain what she means by this. Mrs. Van Buren pulls Esther in and kisses her on the lips. Shocked, Esther pulls away. Mrs. Van Buren apologizes and says that she just wanted Esther to know what it feels like to be treated lovingly. Esther spits that Mrs. Van Buren doesn't love her, and Mrs. Van Buren says that they can move on and just be friends. Esther says they're not friends: she's never come in through the front door. Mrs. Van Buren says that Esther is the only one who's been in her boudoir for months, and she's the only person with whom Mrs. Van Buren can feel happy.

Esther refuses to be friends, and Mrs. Van Buren screams that Esther is a coward. She immediately apologizes and throws a wad of cash on the bed. Esther takes it and says that she's not the coward. In Mayme's boudoir, George enters and sits behind her at the piano after putting money on top of it. He kisses her and touches her breasts. Esther sits alone in her bedroom.

Not having paid Esther in so long suggests that Mrs. Van Buren may be trying to take advantage of Esther in more ways than just emotionally. Her lack of interest in the lace mirrors the lack of interest that George has in Esther's creations, which certainly makes this even more painful for Esther—especially since for her, the lace represents her relationship with Mr. Marks.



Mrs. Van Buren suggests that lying in a marriage is normal, while Esther shows that she doesn't want that version of normalcy—instead, she wants emotional intimacy, openness, and trust, things that she doesn't have with George, not least because she can't read.



Esther presumably is referring to Mr. Marks when she talks about her love needing to be elsewhere, which suggests that she now sees that her marriage with George is never going to give her the emotional fulfillment she gets from her relationship with Mr. Marks. Moving to kiss Esther shows Mrs. Van Buren trying to take advantage of Esther and couching it in an attempt to make Esther feel better. Because Mrs. Van Buren has so much power over Esther, the kiss could never be one between equals: Esther will always have to defer to her employer.



If Mrs. Van Buren weren't so worried about what society at large thought, she could be friends with Esther. As it is, the fact that she's ashamed to be seen with Esther and ashamed of writing the letters to George means that she's not treating Esther like an equal, making genuine friendship impossible.



ACT 2, SCENE 4

Esther enters Mayme's boudoir. Mayme is excited and says that she's been saving up for something new. She wants something that a young woman might wear on her wedding night. Esther jokingly says that Mayme never speaks like this and asks what's going on. Mayme says that they all call him "Songbird," and when they were finished the first night, Mayme didn't want him to leave. She invited him to stay for a drink and didn't mind when he drank her whole bottle. She says that he's gentle, not angry like most black men, and he comes three times per week and always leaves before midnight. Esther says he sounds wonderful.

Mayme admits that this man has a rich wife that causes him trouble, and he talks horribly about her often. Esther says that the wife is probably awful, but Mayme should still be careful. Mayme shushes Esther and then excitedly pulls out the gift that this man recently gave her: the **smoking jacket** that Esther made. Esther is shocked and says that the man must like her a lot. She talks about how fine the fabric is. Mayme says that the man says that she's his girl, and she half hopes that he's telling the truth. Esther asks what Mayme thinks should happen to the wife, but Mayme says she's probably "just a sorry gal." Esther suggests that the wife might be good, and that the man might just be saying things to woo Mayme.

Mayme insists that it doesn't matter. Esther asks Mayme if she ever thinks about the women who wash her clients' underwear and says that there's a woman out there who nervously gets up every five minutes, waiting for her husband to come home— but because she thinks so highly of him, she doesn't ask questions. Mayme isn't interested in listening, but Esther says that this woman thinks her husband is playing cards, and she isn't angry when he comes home because she just wants him next to her. Mayme, exasperated and hurt, reminds Esther that she's complicit in this business and says that she doesn't want to worry about the wives. Esther goes home.

George stands in his brand new suit while Esther pins the hem of the pants. George thinks it makes him look American. He says that it seems like more men are wearing shorter jackets that are more colorful, but Esther says that the men who dress like that aren't gentlemen. She starts to tell him the story that accompanies this Scottish wool, but George cuts her off. Esther finishes pinning and asks him to take them off so she can finish them. George says he needs to wear the pants out this evening, so he'll just wear them pinned. Esther is surprised; she bought pork chops to make the way that George likes, and she has a surprise. She asks George if he wants it now, and he excitedly agrees to close his eyes.

For Mayme, Songbird makes it very clear what she's been missing in terms of intimacy through the course of her work. This man appears respectful, kind, and makes Mayme feel seen in a way that most men can't, as they're interested only in sex. That Mayme is so taken with this man shows that as cynical as she may be, she's also not immune from being hopeful about men, just as Esther was about George.



Seeing the smoking jacket confirms that Songbird is actually George. Esther doesn't say anything to Mayme about this in part because she's so shocked, but also because it's possible that she doesn't want to destroy Mayme's happiness. In this sense, Esther is supporting her friendship with Mayme instead of trying to regain some control over her marriage by saying something that would make Mayme stop seeing George.



Esther is, of course, talking about herself, and she shows here that she still idealizes George and their marriage as much as she possibly can. For Mayme, thinking about her clients' wives, humanizing them, and empathizing with them would make her job impossible to do. This shows how Mayme's job actually encourages her to not cultivate friendships with women who are different than she is.



What George suggests he's attracted to here are suits worn by "dandies," or men who were more interested in being out in society and being seen wearing fancy clothes than anything else. Esther's unwillingness to make George a suit styled like that shows that she wants him to conform to her idea of what a man should be, and that he should be proper husband and allow her to perform proper femininity in return.



Nervously, Esther puts on lipstick and puts a rose in her hair. She pulls off her dress and is wearing a corset much like Mayme's. She strikes an awkward pose and tells George to open his eyes. George is visibly disappointed and chuckles in disgust and amusement. He tells Esther to get dressed, and Esther asks if this isn't what he wants. She puts his hand on her waist and timidly reminds George that he has responsibilities. She asks why he won't touch her. George grabs her and kisses her, and though it's rough, Esther lets him. George pushes Esther away and says that she just wants him to do what she wants so she can feel powerful.

George says that in Panama, he knew where he stood: he had income and nobody judged him. Esther, however, promised all sorts of things in her letters, but none of the things she promised have come to fruition. Now, he says, there are 12 draft horses for sale, and Esther just wants him to "lie down." Esther tells him to stop and George eyes the **crazy quilt**. She refuses to give him the money, saying that it's half of her life. George asks what he's supposed to do when his own wife doesn't believe in him. He knows he can make money with the draft horses and in two years, they can be a fashionable couple, Esther can have her beauty parlor, and he will come home for supper every night and sleep only with Esther.

George touches and kisses Esther again, too roughly. She asks if he's telling the truth and when he assures her he is, she breaks away, rips open her **crazy quilt**, and pulls out the money. She puts the cash in George's hands and seems almost relieved. George looks surprised to have gotten his way and he smiles as he fondles the cash. Esther asks George to put the money back and buy the horses tomorrow, but George ignores her and puts the money in a bag. Esther sits, humiliated, and pulls on her dress. She whispers and asks George if he loves her. He callously says she looks spooked and says that she's his wife.

In a whisper, Esther says she didn't write the letters. George doesn't hear her, and Esther says it again, loudly. She admits that she's been afraid that he'd find out that she lied and retrieves a stack of letters tied with a ribbon. She says that she looks at them every day, but she can't read them and she can't tell if they tell the truth or not. She says she believed from the letters that George loved her, but she knows that George isn't the gentleman he made himself out to be: a gentleman would've thanked her for the money. Yelling, she asks George who wrote his letters.

Esther's attempt to seduce George fails because at this point, George is so disillusioned with Esther and with New York. That Esther is clearly not what he wants to see mirrors the way that New York is unable to live up to his dreams. Putting up with George's rough treatment shows that Esther has gotten to the point where she's willing to sacrifice the particulars of what she wants to get some version of a functional marriage, even if doing so is uncomfortable.



George believes that in Panama, he was afforded a level of dignity that in New York, with Esther pressuring him to behave a certain way, he just can't recreate. Whether the draft horses are real or not, they represent George's desperate desire to look strong and in control of his world, which he believes he doesn't since Esther is the one who controls their family's finances and choices. By characterizing Esther's choice to not hand over her savings as not believing in him, he forces Esther into thinking that this is the only way to save her marriage.



George's response to Esther's question of whether he loves her shows clearly that he doesn't; for him, having a wife doesn't mean that he has to love her, no matter what their letters said about love. Now that Esther has given up her money and with it, her dreams for the future, everything starts to fall apart and Esther is forced to confront the reality that she married a man who will use and demean her to get his way.



Speaking this truth allows Esther to reassert her independence and stand up for what she believes in: trust and open communication which, in reality, she's never had with George and the opportunity for which George squandered by making fun of her dreams early on. He never gave her the safe space to tell the truth, which could've allowed them to build a more honest relationship.



George says that an old man wrote the letters, and that he paid extra for the fancy handwriting. Esther says that she's not really Mrs. Armstrong. She and George are strangers, and at least before they were married, Esther knew that she was a good and decent woman. George reaches for her, but Esther recoils. George says that he's not a thief; he meant what he wrote even if he didn't write the words. He promises to bring her horses and says they can begin again.

Here, Esther suggests that in getting married, she lost herself and the parts of her identity that she prized the most. Marriage now is something that makes Esther even less of a proper woman, as she clearly can't control George and make him behave in a way that would make her look like a good wife.



ACT 2, SCENE 5

Mayme lounges in bed, wrapped in the **smoking jacket**. Someone knocks at the door and Mayme opens it. She's surprised to find Esther and says that she has someone coming soon and Esther needs to leave. Esther gathers herself and says that George left her and has another woman. Mayme asks how Esther knows, and Esther says the woman herself told her. Mayme refers to the woman as a "cruel heartless heifer." Esther says that this isn't true: she intended to hurt this woman, but the woman will find out the truth soon enough. Mayme tries to get Esther to leave, but Esther blurts that she gave George the money for her beauty parlor. Aghast, Mayme asks why Esther did that. Esther says that she wanted to be held.

Mayme has no idea that she's the one who "stole" George away, so it's easy for her to speak disparagingly about Esther's adversary. Esther, however, suggests that there's more to this than just being Mayme's adversary in the fight for George: both of them will find out the truth and have to deal with the consequences of having loved a dishonest man. Esther suggests too that both of them were wrong to trust George; all the money or sex in the world can't make him treat either of them how they actually yearn to be treated.



Esther trails off and then says that she stayed up all night, waiting for him to come home. She asks if Mayme knows where George is, and says that she's wearing the **smoking jacket** that Esther made George. Mayme rips off the jacket and asks why Esther never said anything. Mayme says that Songbird came in last night wearing a new suit and threw dice all night. She laughed when he said he wanted to buy draft horses—"The world [is] changing." He offered to take Mayme out, but Mayme didn't have anything to wear. Mayme says that she thought about Esther's beauty parlor and how nice it'd feel to be pampered, but she saw that dream get further away every time Songbird rolled the dice. When the money was gone, she knew it was George.

Mayme's note that the world is changing in reference to the draft horses shows that George's version of success is even less possible than may have been initially apparent: draft horses won't be useful in the changing modern world before too long, and they represent a vision of the American dream that even in 1905 is long gone. Connecting the dice to Esther's beauty parlor suggests that Mayme is beginning to see the value in a dream like the beauty parlor, as it seeks to elevate black women as a whole—something that can't happen when men fritter away women's money.



Esther asks why Mayme didn't stop George, and Mayme says that George belongs to her too. She hands over the **smoking jacket** and Esther says that she's just a foolish girl from the country. Mayme insists this is false and says that she's not worthy of Esther's forgiveness. She points out that Esther has never treated her like a whore.

This moment speaks volumes about the strength of Esther and Mayme's relationship, and the fact that it's built on true, positive regard for each other. This is why Esther hasn't treated Mayme like she's less than; as black women, they share more in common and Mayme's job doesn't change this.



George knocks on the door, and Esther asks Mayme to not answer it. George knocks and shakes the door, shouting for Mayme. Esther shouts for Mayme to let George go: he's not real, and they'll both spend their lives chasing him. George knocks for a while longer and finally stops. Mayme sits and Esther leaves with the **smoking jacket**.

Urging Mayme to let George go allows Esther to truly admit that George was a dream that's never going to come true for either of them. Attaching their dreams to a man is futile; the only way they can get ahead is on their own.



ACT 2, SCENE 6

Mr. Marks unrolls a roll of bright blue fabric and discovers Esther in his apartment. He's surprised to see her, but they greet each other warmly. Esther says that she's been trying to work up the courage to come in, and reminds him of the special Japanese silk he sold her some months ago. She says that she made it into a **smoking jacket**, per his suggestion, and she wants him to have it. She insists, and Mr. Marks accepts the jacket. Esther turns to leave, but Mr. Marks asks her to wait. He takes off his jacket and puts the smoking jacket on. Esther smiles and says it fits beautifully. She steps towards him, asks permission, and then nervously smooths the shoulders and lapels. They meet each other's eyes and then Esther leaves.

This moment between Mr. Marks and Esther is arguably the most intimate moment of the play, as it shows how meaningful it can be to let someone in, trust them, and show them real care. Though this is as far as Esther and Mr. Marks's relationship will ever go, this impresses upon Esther that friendship, even if there is a sexual undercurrent, is far more fulfilling than marital or sexual relationships like she, Mayme, and Mrs. Van Buren have had with their spouses or sexual partners.



ACT 2, SCENE 7

In Esther's bedroom in Mrs. Dickson's boardinghouse, Mrs. Dickson is folding laundry. Esther steps in. Mrs. Dickson is happy to see her and says that it's been too long. They hug, and Mrs. Dickson complains about the other girls in the house. She says that she just made tea and wants to hear all about what Esther's been up to. Esther abruptly asks if Mrs. Dickson has rented the room yet. She doesn't want to say why, but when Mrs. Dickson says it's still available, Esther asks if she can come for supper this evening. Mrs. Dickson again starts to ask what's going on, but Esther says she's fine and takes Mrs. Dickson's hand. Mrs. Dickson invites Esther downstairs and says that Corinna Mae is already hugely pregnant and talks horribly about her husband.

Esther's unwillingness to talk about what's happened, combined with asking about the room, is her essentially asking Mrs. Dickson to not say "I told you so"—and if Mrs. Dickson chooses to follow Esther's lead, this will be the mark of a true friendship. This again reaffirms Esther's commitment to her female friendships and platonic friendships in general, given that those ones are so much more fulfilling for her. Now, Esther can concentrate on who she is and what she can do, rather than set her sights on a man who will only drag her down.



Esther says that she'd like to sit for a moment before they have tea. Mrs. Dickson says that she'll go fetch more laundry off the line and agrees to meet Esther in the kitchen in a bit. Esther thanks Mrs. Dickson for not asking questions and Mrs. Dickson squeezes Esther's hand. She takes her laundry basket and leaves. Esther touches her belly and then sits down at her sewing machine to begin piecing a new quilt. The lights take on a sepia tone, and a projected title card reads "Unidentified Negro Seamstress. ca. 1905."

Turning the closing scene into a photograph again encourages the reader to think more critically about these classic photographs and the people in them. The women in those photographs, like Esther, were subject to the same racial and classist discrimination that Esther experienced throughout the play, and making this clear brings the history of these women alive for modern viewers.





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