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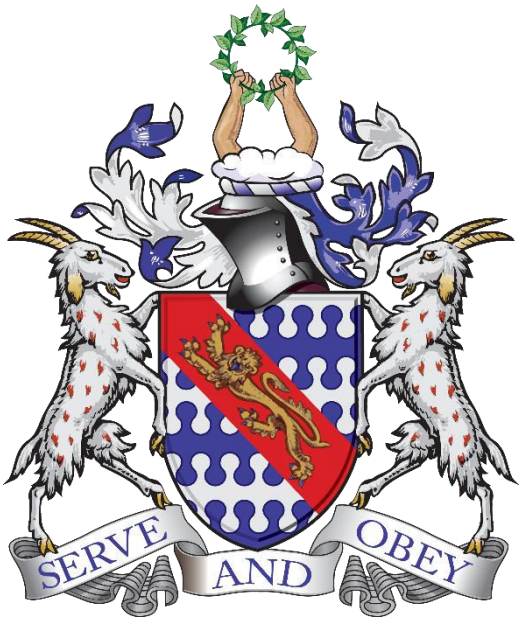

Occasional Paper Number Forty-One

A Critical Appreciation and Analysis of Andrea Levy's *The Long Song*

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November 2020

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Abstract: This essay analyses *The Long Song* by Andrea Levy. It provides a summary of its plot and characters and reflects upon its social commentary about life in Jamaica in the second quarter of the nineteenth century, under British rule. Though ostensibly an account of a young woman caught up in the snares of slavery and the further moral entanglements of life as a black woman in the wake of Abolition, the *Long Song* contains a powerful, if not explicitly stated, Biblical resonance of a people kept in captivity, awaiting a saviour to lead them out of slavery back to their homeland. Freedom comes to the slaves of Jamaica, but of a restricted kind, and the hope of a return to Africa can only exist in the heart, as the sugar plantations of Jamaica is all they have left. The Hebrews of the Bible were led out of slavery in Egypt to an ancestral homeland by a spiritual and military leader, Moses, who broke the golden shackles of privilege binding him to the old Pharaonic power. In contrast, the people of Jamaica encounter no deliverer apart from their own Pharaoh, the King of England, by whose royal edict they exchange one form of slavery for another, which is wage slavery under international capitalism. For them, the land of milk and honey is not Africa but a new and better world, where divisions of race are overridden, and all will be treated fairly. The heroine, July, sees her fighting spirit crushed by the fetters of racial bigotry, but the unexpected deliverer, the *deus ex machina*, is her long-lost son Thomas, who appears from England many years later to deliver her from an unfair judgment at the hands of a Jamaican court, and carry her to freedom.

The Long Song is the imaginary autobiography of a black woman, known to the reader simply as July, who spends her early life as a slave on Jamaica. Its narrator is always referred to in the third person, though her account bears signs of later editorial intervention at the hands of her illegitimate son Thomas, fathered by a black freedman, named Nimrod, and adopted by a Non-Conformist English preacher, who takes him to England. Years later, long after the end of slavery in the Caribbean, Thomas Kinsman, surnamed after his adoptive father, returns to

Jamaica to discover his long-lost mother, now an old and decrepit woman, on trial on a charge of illegal squatting and theft. Thomas, by now, is a businessman in possession of a large printing firm, well-educated, respected, and wealthy. On entering the courtroom where his mother is being held and tried, the audience is aghast to see a man with jet-black skin speak, dress, and comport himself like an English gentleman, and there are even subversive mutterings heard around the court that the man standing before them is, mockingly, impersonating a member of a foreign gentry to which he visibly does not belong. Yet it is also clear to the court that the man who speaks is a man of influence and respectability. The charges against July are soon dropped, whereupon she is brought into the house of her son Thomas, his wife Lillian, and their three young, feisty, argumentative children, where she spends the rest of her days sipping sugary tea, sweetened by the blood and sweat of two hundred and thirty-nine years of human trafficking, enslavement, incarceration, lynching, beating, flogging, rape, insults, spitting, degradation, and exploitation. July is the chief narrator, but her handwritten account, dribbled in pen-and-ink, is requisitioned by her printer son Thomas, who appends the narrative with a pleading afterword, asking after the whereabouts of his lost half-sister, Emily Goodwin, fathered by a white plantation owner who, though Abolitionist by self-proclamation, treated his mother with lofty contempt, only to take their illegitimate child back to England with his wife of a loveless marriage, Caroline (née Howarth, later Mortimer by first marriage).

The narrative begins in the sugar plantations of Jamaica, in the years leading up to the Abolition Act of 1833. July's mother, Kitty, is of pure African heritage, a tall mountain of a woman, with a sturdy frame, born and bred - as the plantation owner, John Howarth, callously remarks to his sister Caroline - for a life of toil hacking sugar canes. July's strange and almost unbelievable account of her 'birth upon a cane piece' (meaning a sugar plantation) gives the narrative a curious cyclical structure, as the later account of how she spent her remaining life, after Abolition, is similarly infused with fantasy. Between the outer layers of childlike make-believe which frame the narrative, the main body of July's account is a gritty, grimy, blood-soaked tale of violence, conflict and struggle, ending in the triumphant blow for Emancipation but equally in the moral failure of July to free herself from the intellectual shackles of human bondage. The first telling of July's birth has all the implausibility of the old tale about being discovered under a gooseberry bush, as if she fell peacefully, without a struggle, upon a bed of cane rubble (termed 'trash'). The crueller reality is that Kitty was raped by a white overseer of Scottish heritage, Tam Dewar, who had forced himself while she was bending to gather cane stalks and, nine months later, bursts into the barn where an illegitimate birth can secretly be hidden, to beat the woman he raped into silent submission, as she delivers the shameful fruit of the indignity, clawing its way like a wild animal into the world beyond. Kitty is aided by a fellow slave Rose, a short, dwarfed woman no more than four-foot tall, who dabs her face with droplets of water and pleads with the overseer not to visit upon the poor woman another blow. Tam laments that the unendurable wailing has made his head pound, but the likelier explanation is that what, through shame, has been kept out of sight cannot be kept out of mind for all the wailing and screaming. July is born in a stable, to an assaulted mother, without the balm even of the most primitive medical care available at that time, in the domain of Amity, the sugar plantation owned by John Howarth.

July's life begins in struggle, as might be expected of an unplanned and unwanted child born to a female slave raped, insulted, and disgraced by an uncouth, self-regarding partisan of the oppressive system in which she is involuntarily trapped. The struggle, we are told, is worse than any her mother might have endured under the lash of the whip in the cane field. But there is a further resonance to the tale of her birth. Her own son Thomas is a freethinker, unbounded by theological or religious doctrine, though brought up by his puritanical adoptive father, an Evangelical missionary of Baptist persuasion, on a sober and sour diet of Biblical recitation and Non-Conformist hymnody. Thomas prides himself upon rejection of all religion, especially the Christian one, which though fuelling the Abolitionist movement had, in the Established Church, been the religion of the slave owners themselves. The spiritual resonance at the start of the novel is of crucial relevance because, like most dubious births, where the truth is difficult to discern from the fiction which encases it, this carries in it a messianic possibility. Two of the four gospels narrate the Virgin Birth of the Messiah who came into the world, according to the Church's later formulations, by a miracle. Yet the scriptures are equally unclear about this, as two of the four extant gospels omit the Virgin Birth, and St Paul, one of the Church's earliest converts, opined that Christ had been born in natural way, according to the law of Moses. At one point in the Gospel, Christ himself is questioned about his parentage, and from an early stage a counter-tradition had rumbled that Mary, the mother of Christ, had been impregnated by an illegitimate father. But the point of the resonance is this, that the slaves of Jamaica, like the Jews of Biblical times in captivity, are waiting for a Messiah to set them free.

Birth in a stable is a suitable context for illegitimate childbirth, as are the fabulous tales told subsequently, to veil a child's eyes from its own bastardy and to hide the mother's disgrace in society. The tale of July's birth is no exception, replete as it is with embellished fabrications of tigers and of other exotic creatures, gracing her entrance into the world. The reader is left to speculate who is the originator of which version. Evidently, Kitty had told her birthchild, July, a web of fantasies about the circumstances of her birth, which July may later have imparted to her son. Does Thomas, the editor, set the record straight about his mother's entry into life? The opening chapters are deceptive, starting with childhood fantasy and then, abruptly, and boldly, sliding into harsh reality. Ostensibly, it is July who rectifies the account for the benefit of her reader, but, like the Gospel narrative, the relationship between the original account and its secondary telling is open-ended. How much of the tale of July's heroic life has been adapted by her wiser, more literate, and better educated son, Thomas, is never made clear in the novel. The resonances of a theological dispute might have a deeper significance. A people, held in captivity, is about to be set free and is awaiting the arrival of a messianic figure who will carry it to freedom. The Jews in Egypt, once freed from the bitter yoke of Pharaoh, were led across the parted sea to the Promised Land by Moses and Aaron. Centuries later, after a second captivity in Babylon, they were led back to their homeland after Cyrus the Great of Persia, hailed even as the Messiah, sacked the enslaving city. Could it be that the long-awaited deliverer of the black slaves, kept in servitude in Jamaica, their own Egypt or Babylon, will be a female, born to an illiterate slave woman in the cane field? This is, at best, a hint of a possibility, though in the end unfulfilled, because Abolition in Jamaica is achieved not by a social uprising, nor by the heroic accomplishments of a messianic figurehead, but by the edict

of the newly enthroned British monarch, Queen Victoria, who sits enthroned atop a pyramid of continuing economic and racial exploitation. The messianic hope, hints of which speckle the embellished tale of July's wondrous birth, is dashed as the novel unfolds, because her people in the end exchanges one type of servitude for another, which is wage slavery under the machinery of international capitalism, the economic steam-room of the British Empire.

There is, however, a further sense in which the messianic longings of the Jamaican slaves for a liberator are dismantled, and that lies in the moral failure of the hero of the novel, July, to achieve self-emancipation. As we later discover, she spends the emancipated portions of her later life addicted to the fantasy of being in love with a white man, to whom she refers as her 'husband' long after he has abandoned her. Though the concrete slab of physical slavery has been lifted, the intangible and spiritual bond of servitude to an ideological system, which regards white people as ineffably superior to black, weighs on July's neck like the fetter under which a slave woman languished in the dread dungeon into which Caroline Mortimer, sister of the dead plantation owner, John Howarth, ventured in the immediate wake of the Abolition Act. July is half white, half black, and, in the racial hierarchy into which she is born, that means that she is of higher status than her black mother, but lowlier status than her white father. As the child of a slave, she is born a slave also, the property of the plantation proprietor, John Howarth, and his Creole wife Agnes, who dies shortly thereafter in childbirth, leaving her widowed husband a grieving, self-pitying, drunken wreck. Shortly before the loss of his wife, John is visited by his widowed sister, Caroline Mortimer, who journeys from England to take up permanent residence at Amity. A spoilt frump of a woman, Caroline lives in a world of lace and petticoats, and whose understanding of suffering amounts to boredom, loss of familiar human company, the excruciating midday heat of the Jamaican sun, a rough ocean voyage, and the wearisome noise of slaves whose dialect she barely understands, chanting and labouring on the sugar plantation to sustain the extravagant appetites of white owners, who know nothing of their pains. Unwittingly, July inches her way into the affections of this contemptible newcomer, for no other reason that she holds a bouquet of flowers in front of her nostrils as she approaches Amity in a horse-drawn gig. At this point, John Howarth, her brother, reveals the crudeness of his character as he instructs July's mother, Kitty, to lift her skirt to display her muscular legs to his sister. Caroline, who seems never to have laid eyes on a black woman before, is unsure at first if she is indeed looking at a woman at all, and expresses disbelief that such an unsightly creature could have brought so dear a child as July into the world. She upbraids her brother for his crudeness and drives on to the house, to let Kitty and her child go about their daily business.

The encounter along the path to Amity heralds the start of a relationship between the four characters which grows more complex as the tale proceeds. Because July is light-skinned, though not as light-skinned as her rival Clara, the housemaid on the rival plantation called Prosperity, whose pretensions to being whiter than she haunt her for the duration of her life, Caroline begets the self-important notion that July belongs not with the 'monster' who bore her, but with her, as her chambermaid, at Amity. The ugly unspoken truth of July's illegitimate conception, through the agency of a Scottish father, the insolent Tam Dewar, seems not to have occurred to Caroline, who struggles with the idea that Kitty, with skin darker than any she has ever beheld, could even have belonged to the human species. July is snatched away from the

embraces of her natural birth mother to be adopted into the 'gentler' company of the proprietors of Amity, where she waits upon Caroline and amuses her with her youthful company. July's physical wrenching from Kitty, her mother, is a tragedy which carries symbolic importance, as it tells a familiar tale of cultural disinheritance and forced adoption by an alien culture, which looks down upon the so-called 'beneficiaries' of that imposed adoption, masquerading as a self-sacrificial initiative to civilise those torn from birthlands and ancestries. Though better than the lives of children raised in gangs to work the sugar fields, July's life with Caroline, her owner's sister, is hardly auspicious, as she endures sadistic beatings and even needles driven into her arms and hands, when she lies to her female patron about a hole in a cross-stitch pattern, which she had left unfinished so that she could venture out into the village to look for her bereft mother, Kitty, whose voice she can still hear calling to her, over the long years of separation. To add to her obstacles, there is Godfrey, the foreman and butler of Amity, who, broken by years of servitude into an attitude of steadfast obedience to its owners, chases July with whips and dogs, threatening to have her sent back to the fields if she continues to misbehave. Though unwavering in loyalty, Godfrey is not lacking in human solidarity, however, and befriends July.

As for the character of the heroine of the novel, July, these early chapters represent the high watermark, where a disinherited young black girl searches for her roots at the risk of losing everything. The nine-year-old July is high-spirited, resistant to danger, and willing to sacrifice her situation at Amity in quest of her own cherished identity. This is the mirror image of July as an older woman, by which time she has become a shamed ghost of her former self, clinging on to notions of racial superiority over those with skin blacker than her own, but enslaved still to an outmoded ideological system which had kept black men and women in bondage for generations. In her early years, July ascends as the champion of Black Defiance against White Oppression. Even when made to show contrition at the feet of Caroline, who comports herself as if July's adoptive mother, giving her a different name, Marguerite, neither she nor Godfrey are genuinely afraid or repentant before their overweening patron. At this point, there is hope that July will overcome the oppressive regime into which she has been forced. Like Moses, once adopted into the house of Pharaoh and reared on all the sweet privileges denied to his Hebrew kinsmen and kinswomen languishing under the burden of slavery, she might one day renounce her privilege, bring low the oppressor, and return to her people. In her acts of defiance at Amity, July not only transforms herself as a fearless Stoic in the face of whatever indignity Caroline throws at her but, in turn, has a transformative effect upon her older friend and ally, Godfrey. Sometime later, at the fateful Christmas party, at the time of the eruption of the great slave uprising on Jamaica, Godfrey conspires with July in a childish ruse to replace coveted Irish linen with a soiled bedsheet, as a tablecloth, in the hall of their master, whose sister Caroline has invited the proprietors of the neighbouring plantation to a lavish dinner, with the sole objective of outdoing her neighbours with displays of wealth and finery. Little does July know that Jamaica is on the eve of a social revolution which will overturn the pillar of slavery upon which the wealth of Amity rests from its foundations, and send it crashing down into penury and eventual abandonment, as its profitability and viability dry up.

The Jamaican Uprising of 1832 dealt a deathblow to slavery in the Caribbean. Slave gangs rose to confront their oppressors and to demand freedom from the yoke of bondage in

which they, and their ancestors, had been held for generations. Many plantation owners fled for their lives, either returning to England or seeking refuge in the urban capitals of Jamaica, where they could nestle under the protection of the British militia. The cry for liberty was, in some quarters, also a cry for blood. From its earliest origins, slavery had been an abomination on an unimaginable and unprecedented scale, and its victims were, in many cases, not content with its abolition but, in addition, demanded justice and recompense. The white slave owners whose long-held power in Jamaica was being challenged had centuries of brutality on their consciences. Understandably, many cowered in the face of the turning tide, as their farms were ransacked by rebels who outnumbered them exponentially. Eventually, the uprising was put down, its ringleaders rounded up and executed. Reprisals were severe; many black rebels were executed, while others died of gangrenous wounds inflicted by five hundred lashes apiece from ox-hide whips. Yet the clouds of oppression which still loomed large and heavy had a silver lining, for Parliament had proclaimed a termination to slavery throughout the British Empire. At long last, the yearning for freedom had come to fruition, and many of the former slaves of Jamaica exulted in their youthful liberty. Yet, the future which awaited them was never going to be rosy because, as many discovered to their disappointment and cost, their lives of toil on the sugar plantations of Jamaica were not at an end. With liberty came the need to survive, and, like many of their emancipated kinsmen two decades later, after the end of the American Civil War in 1865, those men and women who had danced in their new-found freedom found that the alternative to work for their former masters was hunger and dispossession.

The tumultuous events of December 1832 provide the backdrop of the rift between July and Clara, chambermaid to Elizabeth Wyndham, the wife of the proprietor of Prosperity, the neighbouring plantation of Amity. Like July, Clara is the offspring of a Scots father and a mother of African origin but, unlike July, has much lighter skin and is very pretty. To add insult to injury, Clara, who lacks July's intelligence, has been spoilt by her mistress with silk stockings and a satin shawl. As the rolling tide of rebellion laps upon the boundaries of Amity, whose owner, John Howarth, together with his sister, Caroline Mortimer, entertains the proud and vile owner of Prosperity, James Wyndham, and his wife at a lavish Christmas dinner, July seems less preoccupied with the gathering storm outside the window of the kitchen than with her opposite number from the nearby plantation. Freedom from slavery is now in reaching proximity, but the fighting spirit of July, now a teenaged girl on the cusp of womanhood, is turned in an unexpected direction, at the pretty and indulged Clara, who appears to gloat in her superior situation as the lighter of the two, belonging to a mistress of superior character and station than the contemptible Caroline Mortimer. What results is a sparring match between July and Clara, the one heaping insult upon the other's mistress, as if to bring the other down a social notch thereby. At one level, this is comical, as the great events unfolding outside, which will bring an end to the abominable institution which has kept both women in a condition of bondage, is presently being dwarfed by a petty, irrelevant, but heated exchange in the kitchen between two young slave women, each jealous of the other, over muslin. At another level, it is also tragic, because in this exchange the reader witnesses a crucial development in the character of July. Rather than joining the struggle for emancipation, for the first time she is seen to cling on to a social hierarchy in which she knows her place at the feet of her masters, but at the same

time in which she knows that, compared to the baying rebels outside, hers is a position of comfort and privilege in the protective cocoon of Amity. July is both rebel and collaborator, conspiring with fellow slaves in the kitchen to gorge upon the wholesome fare left on the dining room table after the owners have fallen into drunken slumber, but knowing also that, outside, danger looms. The pathos of contradiction increases when one of the masters, of Windsor Hall, spies July stealing from the table and calls her to give account, only to run his fingers into the openings of her skirt and fondle her while other guests are too drunk to notice. For all this, July is less interested in running out to join her own people, than in bickering with a neighbour rival.

In this extraordinary turn of events, the seeds of a very tragic tale are sown. In all those long years when slavery appeared an unalterable reality, July resisted it to the best of her wits and ability, even to the point of lying to Caroline Mortimer about the health of sick slaves in the inspection line-outs, whose sickness, if confirmed, would have been their death-knell. Now, for the first time, as the old certainties are coming under fire, July is transformed from defiance to collaboration. Here, we get as readers a glimpse into the psychology of slavery itself, which is more than just an institution imposed by brute physical force, as if that were not enough. To enforce slavery as a permanent feature on the social landscape, it is necessary, beyond placing its victims in manacles, to enslave their minds, souls, and identities. This is achieved when an internal social hierarchy among the slave population is imposed, where slaves know who they are and where they belong within a superimposed social pecking order. Caroline Mortimer has one crucial insight, that in order to bring July into complete obeisance, it is required that she sever all ties with her birth mother, so as to eradicate any sense of identity that could compete with the new identity forced upon her. When the physical shackles which keep July bound to Amity are cleft asunder, the mental fetters forged in the smithy of slavery will keep her ever bound to the plantation, its memories, and its ideological baggage, from which she can never escape. Moving on from slavery into a world of promised freedom must involve more than breaking physical and legal bonds. To find true freedom, the sullied bathwater of mental slavery must be emptied. The challenge for July is to do just that. Yet, she does not. At that crucial moment during the Christmas party, when owners are drunk and hungry gangs of rebellious slaves stand outside, clamouring for freedom, July's allegiance is not to the people outside, but to the enslavers. When the unwelcome news is brought that the proprietors of Amity should vacate the estate, Caroline and her brother make for safety, but not before Caroline has a chance to weep, not over the loss of position, but because she has finally grasped the joke played upon her, that the tablecloth was not Irish linen but a bedsheet.

Amity is now almost vacant, but for the presence of some slaves who remain behind to look after the estate in their masters' absence, and Caroline Mortimer who bids Godfrey to convey her to safety in the town. July has sworn loyal allegiance to Caroline Mortimer, vowing to defend her and her property with her fists, come what may. Inside the empty house are plates, glasses, and the remains of the unconsumed feast which the white owners have left behind, though some of which the slaves in the kitchen have already pilfered. As Caroline hugs July in a parting embrace, a mysterious figure of a man approaches the door of the house, which July does not recognise. It is that of Nimrod Freeman, a former slave who purchased freedom from a very stupid owner who had not realised that his slave was stealing from him. Self-reliant and

confident, Nimrod has had several love affairs, despite the physical disadvantage of being bow-legged and having jet-black skin. Nimrod and Godfrey seem also to have an ongoing ancient feud, which comes to near blows in the kitchen but for the interventions of several of the slave-girls standing by. Though of lighter skin colour than Nimrod, and therefore higher in the social pecking order, Godfrey is still a slave, for no other reason than that, unlike Nimrod, he has been loyal to his master and not stolen to purchase freedom. But because Nimrod is free, he can speak down to Godfrey, whom he patronises as a fool and a coward. Nimrod brings news of the uprising and the terrible straits in which the white oppressors now find themselves. The sudden and unexpected entrance of this unwanted intruder throws the little world of Amity, with all its petty manners and inherited norms, into confusion, as every ingrained assumption is turned on its head. The slaves in the house have the chance to join the revolt against their oppressors, who currently look as though they are about to lose the war and abandon Jamaica. But they do not do so. Instead, they cling fast to the little world which both enslaves and shelters them, refusing to leave Amity, which gives them their social superiority over Nimrod, though free, for the uncertainty of the world outside descending now into chaos. The point they fail to grasp sufficiently, however, is that without the white owners there to protect them, the light-skinned slaves of Amity are no longer safe or sheltered from the turbulence without. Their world has been penetrated by a new force which they cannot control, driven by rebellious slaves on whom they look down because of the darkness of their skin, but whom they cannot keep from their cocooned existence. At the same time, it is the slaves who give their white owners safe passage to haven, but this time with a twist, as Godfrey demands payment from Caroline Mortimer in return for a carriage into town. The formal end of slavery is unofficially recognised in Godfrey's address to the sister of the owner, but not an end to everything Amity represents.

John Howarth's delirious sister is conveyed out of Amity to safety, and July is left free to consume the neglected delights of the mansion. Yet at the back of her mind, the tormented wraith of Caroline Mortimer cannot leave her thoughts. She has nightmarish visions of the fat Englishwoman being boiled alive in a cask of distilled sugar, not unlike the reports Nimrod has brought back of the punishments meted out by black rebels to former overlords. Even though she may never see her mistress again, the pall which Caroline has cast over the allegiance of her chambermaid is unshakeable. There is the added problem of Nimrod. As July sits at the high table to tuck into the feast which no-one has cleared away, out of nowhere appears the jet-black Nimrod, smiling and simpering as if he has caught July, once again red-handed, in an act of theft and treason. July is startled and launches into a game of social reversal, in which she, a slave, assumes the role of the mistress, giving instructions to a freedman, Nimrod, now in the role of a slave, to fill her wineglass and grace her plate with servings of rich food. In one sense, the social norms continue, in that those of whiter skin treat those with darker skin as slaves and chattel. But in another sense, the norms are now shattered because, in truth, July is still a slave and Nimrod free. Does this signal a world where the roles of slave and free will be reversed, or one in which, despite abolition of slavery with all its barriers and obstacles, the old attitudes which divide people by skin colour will continue? July is frightened of Nimrod and, to fence him off, she plays the part of a slave owner, threatening him with beatings and taking great gulps of wine from the goblet which she has never tasted before. In the process, she becomes

quite drunk and loses sight of Nimrod's ugly deformed frame. They go upstairs together to lie in the bed of July's master, John Howarth, to partake of the delights of forbidden love. History repeats itself in that a slave-woman is preyed upon carnally by a free man, but this time, unlike the awful tale of July's mother, Kitty, brutally raped by a white overseer on a sugar plantation, the man to have his way with her is not whiter than she, but much, much blacker. The history of Kitty replays itself in the tale of her daughter, but this time the male is socially lower.

Outside the mansion, the great events which lead to the end of slavery on Jamaica take their course. The slave rebellion is crushed, but from the white oppressors' view the plantation owners have won a Pyrrhic victory, because with the crushing defeat of the slaves comes the Bill of Abolition which, over the next months and years, is translated into law. The white occupiers are permitted to stay and to continue to profit from the plantations, but from now on they must pay free men and women to work the sugar fields, who will offer their labour freely and voluntarily, in exchange for wages. From the Black perspective, this is a blow for freedom, but it is a shackled type of freedom, as the White Man will remain on Jamaica, and his estates will continue to draw profit from the toil of those whose ancestors in ages past were brought from Africa as slaves. Legal slavery is exchanged for wage slavery, where the sole power which the black Jamaicans can exercise is the power of solidarity through union strike action. John Howarth returns to Amity once order has been restored on the island. Farms have been looted, plantations burnt, and the world which they have known until now is up in smoke. The master is morose, but for none of the reasons we might expect. It turns out that over the course of the suppression, a group of white men dressed up as women in petticoats to torture and humiliate a Baptist preacher accused of inciting the revolt. His lament is not that farms are ruined, or that black people have won their long-desired freedom, but that white men could stoop to the indignity which he has witnessed in the town. As the widowed husband of the now dead Agnes, a Creole woman on whom John would certainly have looked down as an inferior, the former slave owner is a broken man, less because his socio-economic position in the world has been shaken, more because his inbuilt assumptions about White moral superiority have been toppled to the core. In these days, his sister Caroline hears him speaking of suicide, a crime by law and a sin in the eyes of God, according to the doctrines of the Church to which they belong.

When Nimrod and July witness from beneath the bed their master John Howarth blow a hole through the back of the head, there is other company within the house with which he has to contend. He and July have taken refuge under the bed of the master as Tam Dewar, the white overseer and illegitimate father of July, explains to the unbelieving Caroline that her brother has taken his own life. Tam's highly trained nose smells the unwashed scent of Nimrod in the room. Looking under the bed of the master where the freedman and July are both hiding, he grabs Nimrod by the throat from his hiding-place and starts beating him senseless. Caroline, who cannot accept that her brother has committed a crime against the King and a sin against the Almighty, turns on Nimrod and accuses him of the murder of her brother. Tam Dewar, knowing fully that the master has been dead for hours, chooses to fan Caroline's disbelieving fantasy. He instructs her in the story about murder, fabricating a tale in Nimrod's presence, while he is stilling breathing. As the gun is aimed at the back of Nimrod's head, July seizes her opportunity. She bolts from under the bed where she has been hiding and wrestles Tam Dewar,

her biological father, to the floor, crashing into Caroline who falls down in a tangled heap with Tam, whereupon July helps Nimrod limp to the fields beyond. As July escapes, she encounters Rose, the midget woman who had succoured Kitty in childbirth, who recognises July as 'Miss Kitty's pickney' (or child). Kitty by now lives elsewhere. Now a freedwoman, she makes a living working the cane fields of Virgo. Rose seeks her out to inform her that the master of Amity, John Howarth, has been shot and that her long-lost daughter, July, has returned. Kitty, meanwhile, is hunted down by Tam Dewar, who suspects her of housing their daughter. In a great tussle, Tam catches up with July and is about to strike her, when Kitty intervenes. The narrator, whether July or her son Thomas, suggests various possibilities as to how Tam met his end, but when his lifeless corpse is discovered lying in a mill yard, Kitty is put on trial. July in the days that follow witnesses her mother hanged at the gallows for the murder of Tam Dewar.

July by now is pregnant with Nimrod's child. When she gives birth, she takes the infant to a Baptist minister named James Kinsman and his wife, Jane. There follows in the narrative a reflection on the adoption of July's child by white benefactors. At this point it is July telling the tale, not her editing son, because the narrator states that were it down to the tale of her son, the adoptive parents would be referred to as saintly people. July through penury cannot support her new-born baby and hands him over to adoptive parents of strict Christian morals, who look upon the adoption as an act of kindness and patronage, even publishing in the Baptist journal a paper detailing the effects of a Christian upbringing on a 'negro foundling'. There can be no doubt that the child, who is christened Thomas after one of the Twelve Disciples, benefits from his adopted upbringing, as he is taken to England, educated among the white middle classes, and later becomes a self-made businessman. But the question remains as to what to make of his cultural disinheritance. Just as Kitty grieved the loss of her daughter, July, to the patronage of white people who, admittedly, gave her a better existence than what she might have had had she remained among the slaves in the village, so July laments the loss of her precious son to a white patron, in whose understanding an act of Christian charity has been performed, lifting 'the negro' from a condition of savagery to one of literacy, social respectability, and ultimately, spiritual salvation. Two worldviews jar together, one of the White Man, who understands his burden in life to liberate the Black Man from physical and spiritual bondage, the other of the Black Man, who understands his adoption into the world of white Europeans as an annihilation of his identity. With prescient irony, July's illegitimate child receives the name Thomas, after the disciple who most doubted the Resurrection. Is it Thomas's goal in life to doubt all he has been taught by his moral and spiritual preceptors, about having been rescued and 'civilised'? Importantly, July's apostrophising to the reader is not edited away, which would indicate that Thomas, the secondary narrator of the tale, has chosen not to obliterate the cry for identity.

After Howarth's death, the estate at Amity falls into ruin, along with many of the other estates which are leased out to black tenants. Caroline Mortimer, his bereft sister, becomes the sole proprietor at Amity, refusing stubbornly to submit to the humiliation of a return to England where tittle-tattle of her brother's suicide would no doubt have haunted her. Caroline, who has always lived in a world of fantasy, seems to refuse to accept that her brother shot himself and remains convinced of the official story, that John Howarth was murdered by Nimrod. Her lack of reality extends to the conviction that she can return the estate at Amity to its erstwhile glory,

as if nothing has happened. She hires a series of overseers to replace the deceased Tam Dewar, but none of them is competent, and the estate falls into further disrepair. Meanwhile July, now robbed of mother and child, returns to Amity to tend on Caroline, boasting that in compensation for her freedom Caroline received thirty-one pounds. July, who until now has been the example of bravery and freedom-fighting, begins to falter morally and spiritually. Though she is now independent, can read and write at a rudimentary level, and can sustain herself as a modest businesswoman, she finds herself enthralled to the clueless Caroline, whose fantasy world will not acknowledge the reality of her impoverished, and dependent, position. Knowing the awful predicament of her former mistress, July, now a young woman, attaches herself to Amity as the *de facto* steward to its proprietor, Caroline Mortimer, advising her on financial matters, combing her hair, and even taking her to the infamous dungeon where misbehaving slaves were once taken and then subjected to the worst of indignities. Caroline's visual encounter with the interior of the dungeon has enormous symbolic meaning, because she is forced to look squarely at the appalling crimes of her own race against former slaves. When she gives instructions to have the dungeon sealed up, figuratively speaking she blots out history so that her fantasy view of the world in which she continues to hold a privileged position can continue undisturbed. In this episode, the echoes of more recent political debates about keeping memorials of the slave trade alive have a special resonance. How is history best dealt with, by denial, or by keeping the mementoes, however unsightly and gruesome, visible? Does a better future lie with the obliteration of history, or with its memory? Just as her brother John could not face up to the reality that white men might behave like savages, Caroline would rather not accept that the world in which she has lived, and in which she continues to hold a high stake, is built on the blood and toil of other human beings, brought to Jamaica against their will and forced to work on the plantations of masters who beat, flogged, and raped them. But Caroline is not the only character who fails morally. July, who now has the power and position to reject Amity and the horrors for which it stands, by her own will enslaves herself to it, even finding her self-worth in the price for which her liberty was compensated to her former mistress, Caroline Mortimer.

Finally, a new overseer appears from England, a self-righteous zealot of stern Christian morals, named Robert Goodwin, a rising young capitalist twelve years the mistress's junior, who prides himself upon his Abolitionist convictions. Goodwin is admittedly far better than the string of useless employees whom Caroline Mortimer has hitherto employed on the estate, and certainly more upstanding than the remorseless Tam Dewar, now deceased. It comes as a surprise to the labourers on arrival that he does not conduct himself with the moral abandon of his predecessors but respects the dignity of their bodies and speaks to them as members of the same human race. Yet Robert Goodwin, whose father in England keeps a watchful eye on his doings abroad, emerges as a moral hypocrite. As he ingratiates himself to the servants at Amity, as well as to its mistress, he forms an attachment to July who, aside from being light-skinned, is clever and, in her own way, elegant. Goodwin knows well that, as a black woman, marriage to July would never be acceptable to his father. But, at the same time, he becomes aware of the surge of feeling he has for her. Unlike the vile Tam Dewar, whose actions were driven by pure lust and cruelty, Goodwin desires July for more than her body, recognising in her a woman he secretly and passionately loves. Yet, though slavery has now been swept aside, colour bigotry

looms large in the newly emancipated world of Jamaica. Robert Goodwin, who will for certain have imbibed the false teaching that God created the races to be separate, could never hold marriage between man and woman of different races to be anything but an abomination in the eyes of the Creator, and the offspring of such unions bastards. Though tormented by love for July which he cannot deny to himself, in his worldview he has been cursed by the smart of a love pang that dare not speak its name. Goodwin's affections for July are reciprocated, because unlike Nimrod, who was bow-legged, black-skinned, and physically repugnant, the man who gazes at her with bright blue eyes is fair-skinned and extremely handsome. At several points in the narrative, Goodwin seizes July with the intent of making love to her, only to throw her aside afterwards once his sense of what is right and holy finds mastery over his inner passions.

In the face of the love advances of Robert Goodwin, July encounters dilemma. Herself the offspring of a forbidden union between a black mother and white father, she knows that in a world where the races are socially and economically divided, there can be no hope of a lawful union with a man who, in every other respect, has much to recommend him. Of course, she has the power to reject him and even denounce him but does not do so. Added to this, her ancient rival, Clara, the pretty offspring of a Scottish man and a black slave, attempts to claw her way into the affections of this handsome new arrival from England, whose descent on the paternal line from the same island from which Goodwin comes she does all she can to magnify in her self-recommendation. July is stung by a fierce jealousy and seeks to outdo the social climbing of a former slave-girl who, like her, has a Scots father, but who is lighter-skinned and considerably prettier. Is July truly in love with Goodwin? This question remains unanswered. Goodwin seems kind, unlike most of the white men with whom July has had past dealings, is handsome, educated, religious, dutiful, and has an Abolitionist background. Yet, his white skin places him well out of reach. July knows that she cannot have him, but despite that knowledge competes in his affections with Clara, for no reason other than that she wants to outdo the one woman in Jamaica whom she detests most thoroughly. The greater temptation for July is not that she can ever win Goodwin, or even that he is handsome and rich, but that in the world of fantasy which the silly Clara has constructed, July can nevertheless win. And so, on both sides of the gender divide develops a web of deceit. On Goodwin's side, this involves marrying the mistress of the estate, Caroline Mortimer, so that he can be near the one he truly loves. On July's side, it implies the deluded notion that the man who, married legally to a woman he cannot love, is her real 'husband'. July becomes pregnant with a second illegitimate child, this time by a white man, and though Caroline can see evidence of her husband's infidelity in the swollen belly of a black attendant, she persists in the fond belief that none of it is real. Caroline Goodwin's new-found fantasy is that her husband truly loves her, and when the child is finally born and adopted into the family, that it is hers. The child is eventually abducted by Robert and Caroline Goodwin, when they realise that their number in Jamaica is up and depart for England, with the baby lovechild of the husband, christened Emily, which they steal from the birthmother, July, in secret.

During her second pregnancy, July starts to treat her former mistress, to whom the man of her affections is lawfully wedded, with hatred and contempt, as if Robert Goodwin were her own husband and Caroline a live-in prostitute. The lonely fantasy of being married to Robert

Goodwin never leaves July, even after he and his lawful wife have left Jamaica, never to be seen or heard of again. With the departure of Caroline Goodwin from Amity comes the end of White Oppression, but July cannot disengage mentally or emotionally from the past. Now, she has every opportunity to start over, independent of the patronage of white people. But she cannot do it. Nearby looms the sardonic figure of Clara, who boasts about having a white husband, who in fact is a sexual adventurer with a wife and children back in England. The tragedy consists in that July has not only the intelligence and ability but also the firm grounding in the real world to rise above such trivial conceits if she were to choose to do so. But the snare of slavery is ever upon her, as she continues to define herself according to the social hierarchy of prejudice, which sees white people as better than black. If she had wanted, July might have made a life for herself that was rid of all the irrational prejudices of Amity, the plantation on which her mother had been flogged and raped, and in which she had been held in bondage as a young girl. But, of her own volition, she decides that that is not what she wants. Ironically, a antasy which July has the wisdom and self-knowledge to dismiss, should she decide, becomes the normative edifice by which she lives her life. When in slavery, July saw through the conceits of her masters. Now, in freedom, she finds herself both unable and unwilling to see reality. Caroline Goodwin's ultimate triumph is that she has turned July into a replica of herself, living out fictitious lies, vying with neighbourly rivals in petty contests of who owns what, and placing a monetary value even upon her own freedom, if only to outdo the boasts of the silly Clara, who 'marries' an ugly Englishman with a wife and children.

In the fantasy world erected by July and Clara lies a social commentary on the world of Jamaica post-slavery which, though nominally free, remains indentured to a wider world of commerce and empire in which its status remains lowly and diminished. The Goodwins leave for England once they realise that, as proprietors of Amity, they cannot persuade the freed ex-slaves to work the plantation at the level needed to maintain its profitability. Reality eventually triumphs in the fictional self-conceits of the White Man, who sooner or later comes to recognise that there is no future in Jamaica. But for those, like July, left behind, the long shadow of Amity casts its ugly pall over the cottage of an aging squatter who chooses to live in its shadow, long after the estate has been dissolved and re-apportioned. Slavery continues in the mind, if not in the eyes of the law. As the narrative draws to a close, the narrator tells of her life happily ever after, manufacturing jams and running a hostelry business for white visitors to Jamaica. Like the story of her birth, this fantasy account is interrupted by a dose of correction, perhaps at the hands of her editor son, the printer Thomas Kinsman, who as we discover comes back to Jamaica to find his lost mother. In fact, July spends the next several decades scraping a living on the former plantation, squatting for no rent and scavenging for scraps of food to keep her alive. She has no preserve-making business to outrival Clara, whose own reputation as a self-made businesswoman almost certainly is also fictitious, and, in her wretched state as an aging woman, is nothing but a pathetic shadow of her former self. As a free woman, she delights in telling white men and women that she is not black but 'maroon', and that she is a level above the rest of the black population on the island. Her slavery is no longer to white people, but to the shackles of unreality which she has forged in her own mind. Her whole identity as a black woman, longing for freedom and re-birth, has been shattered by the grinding yoke of slavery.

The novel poses the timely question, if things can ever be different. The ray of hope, as we find at the end of the narrative, is not July but her illegitimate son, Thomas Kinsman, whose surname carries with it all the pungent irony of being unrelated to the man who christened him. Like his mother before him, Thomas goes in quest not only of his mother and half-sister, Emily Goodwin, but of his Black Identity. He is like a promised saviour, gathering the scattered fragments of the lost children of shattered Israel to take them to the land where milk and honey flow. July was not the Messiah in whom the enslaved people of Jamaica had placed their hope. But was she the woman chosen to give birth to a messianic figure, fathered by a mysterious force which appeared out of nowhere in her virgin life and simply vanished, as if she had been announced to by an angel? The man who raised Thomas was a dutiful man of sound religious convictions, who could make no claims to be his real father, and who brought him up with an education, to debate the Scribes and Pharisees of the Jamaican court. Yet, Thomas is also a man who rejects received religious teaching, with all its hypocritical and self-righteous values, just as the Jesus of the New Testament confronts the priestly rogues who rule Judea under the punitive yoke of Rome, which rules the people of Israel through its Temple culture and all the oppressive religious manacles which that priestly civilisation embodies. There the parallels end, because Thomas is not a suffering Messiah. The tale of suffering belongs to his mother July, who ends her life in the care of her united son and his young family, her body aching from the tribulation of a life spent in the thrall of slavery. The life of July, born a black girl in slavery and spending her dotage under the protection of a man who is much blacker than she, is both a triumph and a failure. She triumphs in that, by chance, she is rescued from her self-forged manacles by a son who left Jamaica behind, along with its oppressive value system, but she also fails in that her adult life sees her fighting, self-emancipating spirit crushed. To all readers, black and white, the novel pitches the challenge of freedom, freedom from self-conceit, from the affliction of false values, of materialism, racial hatred, and exploitation. Freedom is won, finally, when the manacles of the mind are broken, and we realise who we are.

A further question which the novel raises is the status of religion in world where there is so much unspeakable suffering, and whether the claims of Christianity can have any meaning in the struggle for Black Emancipation. The emancipator in this story is a character whose role in the main thrust of the narrative is minimal, Thomas Kinsman, taken away from Jamaica as a baby and raised in privileged circumstances under the tutelage of an adoptive family. Thomas rejects religion and looks to a world where reason, in lieu of the irrational hatreds and bigotries of the past, will reign. A twenty-first-century reader might well react with wistful poignancy, in the light of the yet unknown horrors of the looming century to which Thomas, whose account of his mother's life is published in 1898, looks forward. Yet, though Thomas explicitly rejects Christian religion and its various statements about Divine Presence in the world, the Biblical resonances of the narrative, from start to finish, cannot escape notice. The bizarre story of July's entry into life bears all the disputatious absurdity of the Virgin Birth. Though she fails to be a messianic light for her people, her son Thomas, who enters the narrative unexpectedly at the very end, approaches his mother in the courtroom with redemptive power. But if his status is quasi-messianic, the Christian analogy can only be imperfect, because the brunt of the suffering is borne not by Thomas Kinsman, but by his mother July and grandmother Kitty. In

his mother there is something of the Israelites, dispossessed of their ancestry and homeland, struggling to find their roots, but turning away from their true selves at the lure of false idols. In his grandmother is a Christlike figure, who suffers every kind of mutilation at the hands of the authorities and, though innocent of any real crime, is hanged at the gallows on a trumped-up charge of killing a white man. The unjust execution of Kitty is vindicated in a form of quasi-resurrection, embodied in the re-emergence of July's son who, like his grandmother, has black skin but whose life and body have been transformed into an image of great power and authority, which trumps the provincial powers of Jamaica. Just as the resurrected Christ asks the puzzled women, weeping at the tomb, if they recognise who He is, so Thomas after encountering her in the dock asks his mother about his identity. Thomas Kinsman, as his name indicates, is the kinsman of all black people in exile, who collectively suffer, like Israel in Egypt, and who collectively endure the crucifying experience of slavery. Thomas embodies the Black Man resurrected to glory through the operation of Divine Grace, which his rationalist self will not recognise. Even if the Bible can only be read allegorically, its vivid reality is experienced in the story of July, her mother, her son, and in the cries for justice from the plantations of Jamaica.