Celia, a Slave

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF MELTON MCLAURIN

Melton McLaurin grew up in North Carolina and later attended college at East Carolina University. He received an MA in history, and later a Ph.D. from the University of South Carolina, where his research focused on the Southern cotton industry during the Reconstruction era. In the late '60s and early '70s, he worked as an instructor at the University of South Carolina and the Virginia Polytechnic Institute. He joined the faculty at the University of North Carolina in Wilmington in 1977, and was made a professor emeritus in 2004. He's published many well-received books, including *Knights of Labor in the South* (1978), about the union movement, and *The Marines of Montford Point* (2007), about the history of black marines.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Celia, A Slave revolves around the history of slavery in the United States, especially in the 1840s and 1850s. While there are too many historical events in the book to name, McLaurin notes the Missouri Compromise of 1820 and the Bleeding Kansas riots of the 1850s as being particularly important. The Missouri Compromise of 1820 was a political agreement whereby Missouri was admitted to the Union as a slave state, on the condition that Maine be admitted as a free state. The compromise was seen as a major victory for supporters of slavery, because it established a political precedent for admitting slave states to the Union. Three decades later, the situation in Missouri and neighboring Kansas had become violent. Supporters and opponents of slavery demonstrated and in some cases rioted to protest what they saw as the other side's unfair tactics and immoral views. The situation showed that slavery had become a highly controversial issue, over which Americans refused to compromise. In this way, Bleeding Kansas foreshadowed the beginning of the Civil War a couple years later.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

There are many masterpieces of American literature that portray slavery from the perspective of female slaves. Two of the most notable are *Uncle Tom's Cabin* by Harriet Beecher Stowe (1852) and *Beloved* by Toni Morrison (1988), which features many flashbacks to the antebellum period. Readers who are curious about the history of slavery in the U.S. should consult Steven Hahn's excellent *A Nation Under Our Feet* (2003), a history of slavery that discusses the personal experiences of slaves as well as the political and ideological sides of slavery.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** Celia, A Slave: A True Story
- **When Written:** 1989-1991
- **Where Written:** Wilmington, North Carolina
- **When Published:** Fall 1991
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Historical nonfiction
- **Setting:** Callaway County, Missouri, 1850s
- **Climax:** Celia is sentenced to death for killing Robert Newsom
- **Antagonist:** Robert Newsom / the institution of slavery
- **Point of View:** Third person omniscient

EXTRA CREDIT

A distinguished academic. Professor McLaurin has received many prestigious fellowships and awards for his research, including the Southern Humanities Council grant, the Teaching Excellence Award from UNC Wilmington, and the Randall Library Scholar Award.

Busy guy. McLaurin hasn't slowed down in the last ten years; he's currently working on a book on the history of Southern autobiography.

PLOT SUMMARY

In the year 1850, a prosperous Missouri farmer named Robert Newsom buys a teenaged slave named Celia. Very little is known about Celia's life before she lived on Newsom's property, but it's known that when Newsom bought her, she was fourteen years old. Robert Newsom is in many ways typical of his Missouri community. He's a farmer who migrated westward to seek fertile, cheap land. He has a large family, with many sons and daughters, two of whom, Virginia and Mary, still live with him.

Robert buys Celia because his wife has died, and he wants a sexual partner. The same night that Robert buys Celia, he rapes her. This pattern continues for years. Celia is utterly helpless to defend against Robert's sexual aggression. She's Robert's property, and has no legal rights to refuse him.

At the same time that Robert purchases Celia, there's an intense debate about slavery going on throughout America. The abolition movement, which supports the unequivocal banning of slavery, has been gaining strength for many years. Furthermore, there are many northern politicians who believe

that slavery shouldn't be allowed to expand into the western territory America has acquired in the Mexican-American War. After much debate in Congress, the territory of Missouri is admitted to the Union as a slave state. This is a major victory to pro-slavery politicians, because it sets a precedent for adding new slave states to the Union, and requires the federal government to recognize the institution of slavery.

Celia's life on Newsom's farm is miserable and lonely. She has no friends, either among the slaves or the white residents of the farm. It's likely that Virginia and Mary know about their father's relationship with Celia, but regard Celia as a sexual predator, blaming her for "seducing" their father.

In the early 1850s, Celia begins a romantic relationship with another slave, George. George becomes furious when he finds out that Celia and Newsom have an "affair." The situation finally becomes critical in early 1855, when Celia finds out that she's pregnant, either with Robert Newsom's child or George's. Furious, and too frightened to confront Newsom directly, George gives Celia an ultimatum: either break off the "affair" with Robert, or he'll never speak to her again.

Celia has been put in a frightening position. She knows she has no power to stop Robert from raping her, but she doesn't want to lose George. She first tries to appeal to Virginia and Mary, telling them that she's been sick from her pregnancy, and can't stand Robert's advances right now. She also hints that if Robert tries to have sex with her again, she'll have no choice but to defend herself with force. Virginia and Mary seem to do nothing in response to Celia's request. Most likely, they rationalize their inaction by telling each other that Celia is a "seductress."

On the night of June 23, 1855, Robert Newsom sneaks out of his bedroom, as is his custom, and enters Celia's cabin. There, Celia warns Robert to stay away from her. When Robert ignores her, she strikes him with a heavy stick, and then, when he staggers back, she strikes him again, killing him. Celia is understandably frightened: she knows that she'll probably be hanged for killing her owner. She decides to hide the body by burning it in the **fireplace**. By dawn, she's successfully burned Newsom's body to ashes.

The next morning, Robert's family and neighbors begin a search party to find him. William Powell, Robert's neighbor, questions Celia and eventually learns the truth: Celia killed Robert. Celia is placed in custody and a trial is scheduled for October.

At the time, white America is terrified of slave uprisings. In living memory, slaves have staged a successful uprising in Haiti, expelling the French colonialists, and more recently, the slave preacher Nat Turner has a led a failed, but destructive, uprising in Virginia. So it seems like that Celia will be punished to the full extent of the law.

Judge William Augustus Hall appoints a man named John Jameson to defend Celia in the trial. Jameson is a jovial, charismatic lawyer with a great reputation in his community. With his two legal aides, Jameson proceeds to build a case for his client. Jameson is a deeply religious man, meaning that he's probably more sympathetic toward slaves than the average person in Missouri at the time. He plans to argue that Celia has the legal right to defend herself against rape from her master—he cites a statute in Missouri law that gives women the right to use deadly force to defend their "honor." Making this argument, however, will require him to convince a judge that the law applies to slaves, who are legally considered property, not people.

The national debate over slavery has become bloody in the 1850s. The influential senator Stephen Douglas has passed the Kansas-Nebraska Act, allowing the residents of new western territories to vote on whether or not slavery should be allowed in their state. In Missouri, the influential politician and slavery advocate David R. Atchinson engineers a series of measures designed to make Kansas a slave state. He sends "border ruffians" into Kansas to ensure that the population is predominately in favor of slavery. Meanwhile, the Free Soil party, which wants Kansas to become a free state, sends thousands of people out west to ensure that Kansas *doesn't* vote for slavery. The conflict in Kansas quickly becomes violent. Riots and demonstrations break out throughout the region, showing how contentious the issue of slavery has become.

At Celia's trial, Jameson mounts a brilliant defense, based on the fact that Celia has the legal right to defend herself from rape. He also manages to use his cross-examinations of prosecution witnesses to prove that Celia was being sexually assaulted by Robert Newsom—an unpleasant fact that most of the witnesses try to hide. However, the prosecution successfully objects to many of Jameson's points and witnesses.

The most important part of the trial is jury instruction—the defense and prosecution must convince Judge Hall to guide the jurors in a way that will help their side win. Robert tries to convince Hall to instruct the jurors to interpret Missouri law to allow a slave to defend herself from rape. But Hall refuses to do so, and as a result, Celia is found guilty and sentenced to death.

Later in the month, Jameson and his aides go beyond their original plan and draft an appeal to the Missouri Supreme Court. The Court doesn't reply, however. Just days before her execution, Celia is freed from jail, for reasons that have been lost to history. However, it is known that she's returned to captivity shortly after the day of her execution passes, and she's sentenced to be executed in December. Tragically, the Missouri Supreme Court rules against Jameson's appeal and upholds the jury's initial decision. This ruling is consistent with the Supreme Court of the United States' ruling in the Dred Scott case earlier that year: at the time, the American legal system defines slaves as the property of their masters, meaning that slaves have no legal or human rights.

Celia is hanged at the end of December. Her life is a testament to the tragedies of slavery, particularly for female slaves, who often had to endure sexual assault from their male owners. A few years after Celia's death, civil war breaks out in the country, proving that the evils of slavery cannot be remedied with peaceful means.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Celia – Celia is a teenaged slave living in Missouri, and is the protagonist and title character of the book. Yet very little is known about her: no historical records survive explaining where she was born or where she lived before Robert Newsom bought her in the 1850s. Historians do know that Celia kills Robert Newsom, her owner, after Newsom begins raping her regularly, and that she's eventually executed for this "crime," despite the vigorous and at times brilliant defense that John Jameson gives her. As with many of the central characters in *Celia, A Slave*, very little information about Celia's character is offered: she's the central character in the book, yet readers don't know much about her. Nevertheless, her life and, tragically, her death are important to remember because of what they reveal about the racism and sexual politics of antebellum American society.

Robert Newsom – Robert Newsom is a prosperous farmer living in Callaway County, Missouri, in the 1850s. He's typical of the Callaway community: he's a farmer, he's migrated to Missouri from the eastern United States, and he owns a small number of slaves. Robert is also a cruel and brutal man: after the death of his wife, he purchases a teenaged slave named Celia, and begins raping her regularly. Disturbingly, Robert's behavior was all-too common during the antebellum period: slave owners enjoyed virtually unchecked power over their slaves, who were, legally speaking, their property. Frightened of Robert, and unwilling to endure more sexual assault, Celia kills Robert one night, setting in motion the events of McLaurin's book.

John Jameson – John Jameson is a successful lawyer and well-liked resident of Callaway County, Missouri, and in 1855 he's appointed to defend Celia from the charge of homicide. As with many of the other main characters in the book, McLaurin gives little information about Jameson's personality and character. However, it's clear that Jameson, while not a genius by any means, is an energetic and hard-working man, with a good instinct for character and a knack for influencing others. Jameson is also, considering his contribution to Celia's trial, an unusually moral person. Though many in the community believe that Celia is unambiguously guilty and evil, Jameson goes far beyond his duties as Celia's lawyer and presents a brilliant defense of her actions that cuts through the contradictions and hypocrisies of antebellum slave society.

George – George is a slave, owned by Robert Newsom, who embarks on a romantic relationship with Celia while Robert is still regularly raping Celia. Frustrated, George threatens to break off his relationship with Celia unless Celia ends *her* sexual "relationship" with Newsom. Celia's inability to do so peacefully (since, of course, Newsom owns her and believes that he can do whatever he wants with her) leads directly to Robert's death. George, it could certainly be argued, is a cowardly character: he knows that if he were to confront Robert directly, he'd be risking his own life; thus, he passes off his responsibility to Celia. But George's behavior is also forgivable, considering how terrifying it must have been living as a slave on Newsom's property.

Dred Scott – Missouri slave whose escape, capture, and trial became infamous in American history. Scott's attorneys argued, first before the Missouri courts and later before the Supreme Court of the United States, that Scott had become a free man by virtue of fleeing to a free state. In 1857, however, the Supreme Court ruled that Scott was still the legal property of his owner—a decision often considered one of the worst in the Court's history.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Virginia Newsom Waynescot – The daughter of Robert Newsom.

Harry Newsom – The eldest son of Robert Newsom.

James Coffee Warnescot – Child of Virginia Newsome Waynescot, and the grandson of Robert Newsom.

David Newsom – The teenaged son of Robert Newsom.

Amelia – Daughter of Virginia Newsome Waynescot, and the granddaughter of Robert Newsom.

Thomas – Child of Virginia Newsome Waynescot, and the grandson of Robert Newsom.

Billy – Child of Virginia Newsome Waynescot, and the grandson of Robert Newsom.

Mary – Youngest daughter of Robert Newsom.

Susan Jameson – Daughter of John Jameson.

John H. Jameson – Son of John Jameson.

John C. Calhoun – South Carolina senator (and later vice president of the United states) who was instrumental in supporting the expansion of slavery in the United States' new western territory.

David R. Atchinson – Missouri senator and slavery supporter whose dirty tactics and aggressive style of leadership were an important factor in the outbreak of violence in Missouri and Kansas in the 1850s.

Thomas Hart Benton – Missouri senator and opponent of the

expansion of slavery, who feuded with David R. Atchinson throughout the 1840s and '50s.

William Powell – One of Robert Newsom's neighbors, who leads the search party on the morning following Robert's death.

D. M. Whyte – Justice of the peace who, with Isaac Howe, leads the inquest into Robert Newsom's death.

Isaac P. Howe – Justice of the peace who, with D. M. Whyte, leads the inquest into Robert Newsom's death.

Toussaint L'Ouverture – Haitian slave who led a successful slave revolt against the French colonial state, leading to Haiti becoming a democracy at the end of the 18th century.

Nat Turner – Virginia slave preacher who led a failed slave revolt that resulted in dozens of deaths.

Thomas Shoatman – Resident of Callaway County, who, along with Jefferson Jones, leads Celia's interrogation leading up to her trial.

Jefferson Jones – Resident of Callaway County, who, along with Thomas Shoatman, leads Celia's interrogation leading up to her trial.

Stephen Douglas – Influential Illinois politician who supported the Kansas-Nebraska Act, which allowed new territories to vote on the legality of slavery.

James Shannon – President of the University of Missouri, and a notable supporter of slavery.

Governor Andrew Reeder – First governor of the territory of Kansas.

President Franklin Pierce – The 14th president of the United States of America.

Governor William Shannon – Second governor of the territory of Kansas, following the abrupt dismissal of Governor Andrew Reeder.

Judge William Augustus Hall – Judge during Celia's trial for murder.

Nathan Chapman Kouns – One of the two attorneys, along with Isaac M. Boulware, selected to assist John Jameson with Celia's defense in 1855.

Isaac M. Boulware – One of the two attorneys, along with Nathan Chapman Kouns, selected to assist John Jameson with Celia's defense in 1855.

Alexander Campbell – Religious leader of the Disciples of Christ, a Presbyterian movement.

R. G. Prewitt – A young, relatively inexperienced attorney who prosecutes Celia in 1855. While Prewitt is of obvious importance to the story of Celia's trial, McLaurin offers very little information about his life, character, or legal actions.

Dr. James M. Martin – Prominent Missouri doctor who testifies for the defense during Celia's trial.

Abiel Leonard – One of the three attorneys on the Missouri State Supreme Court.

William Scott – One of the three attorneys on the Missouri State Supreme Court.

John F. Ryland – One of the three attorneys on the Missouri State Supreme Court.

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.

HISTORICAL SILENCE

The reader may be surprised to find that, despite its being an otherwise rigorous, nonfictional, and historical account of the experiences of a slave, *Celia, A Slave* contains a great deal of speculation about the events it depicts. On nearly every page, McLaurin encounters gaps in the historical record and attempts to fill them with educated guesswork. Guesswork is of course important in the study of history, but in this case it may seem exaggerated. Examples of these speculations abound in the book, but to give a few notable ones: McLaurin hypothesizes that Newsom likely raped Celia immediately upon purchasing her. He also suggests that Celia's defense team broke her out of jail after her sentencing, despite there being no definitive proof of this, only a few scraps of evidence. McLaurin also tries to imagine the private emotional landscapes of the historical characters he is tracking, which are irrevocably lost to history.

To be sure, McLaurin is not a lazy historian. He does not speculate for lack of research. Rather, McLaurin is confronting one of the greatest problems in the telling of American history: the deafening "silence" of slavery. In the antebellum (pre-Civil-War) American South, where slavery was widespread, there was no reason for slave owners to keep anything but the most rudimentary records of their slaves. What we now know of the incalculable human cost of slavery comes from those few slaves who managed to escape, or lived through emancipation. These constitute a tiny percentage of the total victims of slavery, the vast majority of whose stories are forever lost.

Celia presents an interesting case. Because she was tried and executed for murdering her master, a substantial amount of information about her life has been preserved in legal and historical records. However, the information is not enough to paint a full portrait of Celia; notably, there is no account of her life written in her own words, nor, for that matter, is there any information about the first fourteen years of her life. McLaurin thus faces a problem. Celia's story is of great interest, for one

because it opens a window into the lives of people, women especially, who suffered under the institution of slavery, and also because it aligns with some of the larger historical events of the period. At the same time, her story seems almost impossible to tell in full. In a situation such as this, does a historian try anyway, guessing when he can't know for sure? Or does he simply give up? McLaurin bravely chooses the former option. That McLaurin lacks the details to complete his history of Celia is a testament to the fact that the institution of slavery, while arguably the most painful, ugly, and indelible mark on American history, is also perhaps the most invisible and silent, in that the lives of slaves are fundamentally unknowable. That McLaurin chooses to speculate highlights his conviction that it is of crucial importance to try to know them.

THE POLITICAL AND THE PERSONAL

Celia, A Slave might be called a micro-history—that is, an historical account that covers the life of an ordinary person, someone considered inconsequential by both historians and her contemporaries. For McLaurin, this unconventional approach to history can prove particularly illuminating. He says as much in his introduction, writing, "the lives of lesser figures, men and women who lived and died in virtual anonymity, often better illustrate certain aspects of the major issues of a particular period than do the lives of those who, through significant achievement, the appeal of the orator, or the skill of the polemicist, achieve national prominence."

Celia's story is by most standards self-contained and highly personal. Her trial did not receive anything close to national attention. The verdict was expected, and though it seems her defense hoped to set a legal precedent that would undermine the entire institution of slavery in Missouri, they failed to win the case. The murder of Robert Newsom and Celia's subsequent trial had almost no broader political repercussions, and the whole affair was quickly forgotten by those not directly involved.

However, the story demonstrates how the personal and the political are never quite separable. Celia's utter powerlessness—first in the face of continual abuse by her slave owner, then in the face of the American justice system (she was forbidden by law to testify)—was a consequence of the political order in the antebellum American south, which was more or less based in the systematic oppression of black people.

Perhaps more importantly, McLaurin demonstrates how Celia's story aligns with the broader historical trends of the era. Primarily, he points out that, around the time of Celia's trial, Missouri and neighboring Kansas (then just a territory) were becoming the foremost battlegrounds for the increasingly contentious issue of slavery. He suggests that the tumultuous political climate led Celia's lawyers to see her case as potentially influential in the ongoing debate about the future of slavery in America. Further, he suggests that everyone involved in the case—judge, jury, prosecution, and defense—made individual, personal decisions that were "also a judgment on the morality of the institution of slavery itself."

While McLaurin's account does not show that Celia's case had any real lasting political repercussions, it does show that the political conditions of the day completely saturated Celia's life. In this way, her story illustrates how the moral dilemma of slavery—which may today seem abstract—expressed itself concretely, in the lives of real people. For Celia, her lawyers, and her prosecutors, the personal was inevitably political, the political inevitably personal.

SLAVERY AND SEXUAL EXPLOITATION

Celia, A Slave depicts an instance in which the brutality and moral depravity of the institution of slavery impacted the life of an individual slave. In this way the book's approach was somewhat novel when it was first published, as previous accounts of slavery had focused primarily on the larger, more abstract qualities of the institution. In particular, few historians had yet focused so exclusively on the toll slavery took on black women.

As Celia's case demonstrates, slave women were left completely vulnerable to sexual violence, from both their masters and other slave men. Celia apparently suffered repeated rape at the hands of her master, Robert Newsom. When she finally succeeded in defending herself against his attacks—by killing him—she had nothing in the way of legal recourse to justify her actions. For one, she couldn't testify during the trial proceedings, as Missouri slave law—a separate set of laws applying only to slaves—did not permit slaves to testify against their masters. Because there was no sympathetic third party to witness the attempted rape (such a situation would be unheard of) there was no way Celia could directly present, let alone bolster, her claims.

Secondly, while Missouri slave law allowed slaves to defend themselves against their masters if their lives were in danger, the law was silent when it came to slave women defending themselves against sexual violence. Such legal conditions, which were widespread across the South, allowed for the systematic sexual exploitation of perhaps millions of people. It was an issue that received almost no attention at the time, and very little attention in many major historical accounts of slavery. *Celia, A Slave* just hints at the widespread sexual exploitation of slaves, the full scale of which is unknowable.

REFORM VS. RESISTANCE

The events of *Celia, A Slave* occur against the backdrop of an increasingly untenable, increasingly violent debate over the future of slavery in America, which took place in the 1840s and '50s and paved the

way for the outbreak of the Civil War in 1860. For those determined to abolish slavery, or at least prevent its spread into Kansas and the other western territories of the United States, the question of how best to oppose the institution was a crucial one. On the one hand, many opponents of slavery tried to contain its spread and call for its abolition through legal pathways. In the first half of the nineteenth century, congressmen introduced over a hundred bills calling for the end of slavery, all of which were shot down.

There are many examples of similar (and similarly futile) attempts at peaceful reform within *Celia, A Slave*. The anti-slavery "free-soilers" in Kansas encouraged migrants to establish family-based farmsteads (without slaves) in the Kansas territory, hoping that the influx of likeminded anti-slavery farmers would create an anti-slavery majority in the territory, meaning that when Kansas applied for statehood, it would be admitted into the union as a free state. (An earlier bill, the Kansas-Nebraska Act, had called for "popular sovereignty" in Kansas, leaving the question of whether the state should support slavery up to the people who lived there.) Similarly, Celia's lawyers appear to have attempted to undermine the institution of slavery by arguing that Celia had a right to defend herself against sexual violence, and trying to instruct the jury to reach a verdict with that in consideration. Such an argument, if accepted by the judge and then confirmed by the jury, would have established the full personhood of slaves with unprecedented clarity, and would have, as a legal precedent, proved disastrous for the institution of slavery. When the judge did not accept the lawyers' instructions, the lawyers then appealed to the Missouri Supreme Court, a last ditch effort.

Other opponents of slavery, seeing that trying to reform slavery from within the legal system was a losing game, resorted to more extreme forms of resistance. McLaurin notes the perennial violence in Kansas (which eventually became known as as "Bleeding Kansas") committed mostly by proslavery "border ruffians," but also by abolitionists. McLaurin also comments on the slave rebellions of the era, namely Nat Turner's rebellion and the Haitian Revolution. In both instances, slaves took up arms against their masters (successfully so in Haiti).

On the "micro" level, McLaurin insinuates that Celia's lawyers helped break her out of jail when they discovered the judge would not grant her a stay order (i.e. would not postpone her execution date, even though her case was awaiting consideration from the Supreme Court). While not violent, this act certainly constituted an illegal form of resistance. Then, there is Celia's own personal act of resistance: her killing of Robert Newsom. While she did so in self-defense, and so likely did not consciously understand the act as political, the implications of the killing were unambiguously political. In killing Newsom, Celia stood up for her personhood and her right to consent—an act that by definition challenged the institution of slavery.

The impending Civil War looms heavily over the events of *Celia, A Slave*. In 1855, when the book is set, there were very few Americans who genuinely *wanted* to fight a civil war over their political convictions. But American slaveholders were so opposed to compromise that peaceful, legal attempts at reform did very little to improve the human rights situation for millions of black slaves. Slaves, and the free whites who supported their liberation, faced a difficult choice. They could either try legal, gradualist means of fighting slavery—means which were usually futile—or they could take the law into their own hands and opt for radical, often violent means. McLaurin suggests that the latter, radical form of resistance was the most moral approach, both during the events dramatized in *Celia, A Slave* and in the Civil War itself.

SYMBOLS

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

THE FIREPLACE

As a serious historical text, there are relatively few symbols in *Celia, A Slave*. One notable exception is the fireplace in which Celia disposes of the body of her owner and rapist, Robert Newsom, shortly after she kills him in self-defense. By the end of the night, all that's left of Robert's body are a few bones and fragments of clothing. It could be argued that the fireplace is an apt symbol for the process of history itself. Over time, the historical record deteriorates: given enough time, it becomes almost impossible for historians like McLaurin to know the full truth about Celia's life and trial. Therefore, it becomes necessary for McLaurin to speculate on what really happened. The "fireplace of history" eliminates concrete evidence of the truth; it's up to historians to reconstruction the truth from the fragments that survive.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Avon Books edition of *Celia, a Slave* published in 1999.

Chapter 1 Quotes

❝ Many journeyed by foot, plodding mile after mile along widened footpaths that hardly deserved to be called roads. Seekers and dreamers all, they hoped to reach the western promised land, a land said to flow with milk and honey, a land such as their God had promised, and delivered, to the ancient Israelites.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 5

Explanation and Analysis

In the first chapter of *Celia, A Slave*, we're introduced to Robert Newsom, arguably the villain of the book. On the surface, Robert isn't very different from the other farmers in his community in Callaway County, Missouri. He's journeyed across America in search of fertile land, so that he can become prosperous and provide for his children. His life's story, one could even argue, is the archetypal story of the American Dream: a hardworking citizen who overcomes the odds to win great success. McLaurin emphasizes the archetypal, even mythical nature of Robert's story by using Biblical language, such as "milk and honey." Robert and his peers are like the Israelites fleeing Egypt in search of the promised land. But as McLaurin will soon show, Robert isn't as virtuous and wholesome as his story suggests. He's a slave owner, and a brutal rapist, a fact that speaks volumes about the archetype of the proud American farmer. The American Dream, one could certainly argue, was built on the backs of black slaves.

Throughout the antebellum era, while Callaway County's promise to settlers such as Robert Newsom of a better life in a relatively egalitarian white society was fulfilled, it would have been obvious to Newsom and others that the promise was more amply fulfilled for those who held slaves than for those who did not.

Related Characters: Robert Newsom

Related Themes:

Page Number: 8

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, McLaurin elaborates on a central theme: the prosperity and independence of the American farmer was built on the backs of slaves. In Callaway County, Missouri, there were many slaves—indeed, the county had one of the highest populations of slaves in the state. Furthermore, owning slaves was a sign of status: a farmer who could afford slaves probably had more property and disposable income than a farmer who couldn't afford slaves.

McLaurin arrives at one of the fundamental paradoxes of life in the early United States: the freedom, independence, and prosperity of the American farmer (and, in some ways, the free American citizen in general) were founded on a system of slavery. African slaves who'd been kidnapped from their homes and moved to the U.S. were forced to work American farmers' land, relieving the farmers of the obligation to pay their workers, and in the long run making them debt-free. Too often, Americans pay lip service to the proud American tradition of freedom and self-sufficiency, without thinking about how these things came to exist.

She was the slave Celia, who, when she arrived in 1850, was approximately fourteen years old, about the same age as Newsom's daughter Mary. Practically nothing is known about Celia's life before her arrival at the Newsom farm.

Related Characters: Robert Newsom, Celia

Related Themes:

Page Number: 11

Explanation and Analysis

Here, McLaurin introduces us to Celia, a teenaged slave who Robert Newsom purchases in 1850. Celia is a house slave, not a field slave: she's been trained as a cook, and she has no experience working farmland.

Beyond a few facts, McLaurin tells readers almost nothing about Celia, and there's a very good reason: historians have almost no information about her. Celia's situation is typical of slaves living in America at the time: there are records showing when she was purchased and when she died, but no historical records giving a sense for her personality or her "inner life." Because Celia herself couldn't read or write, there are no first-person accounts of her experiences in Missouri.

In this way, McLaurin has to face a conundrum. He's writing a story about Celia for which there's relatively little historical information. At times, McLaurin is forced to fill in the blanks in order to tell a lively, entertaining story. However, McLaurin *doesn't* try to fill in the blanks with regard to Celia's personality. As a result, Celia is a mysterious absence at the heart of the book: the book is structured around her, but readers know almost nothing about her.

Chapter 2 Quotes

In this national crisis the desire to preserve the Union proved stronger than the sectional differences over slavery, and a compromise was negotiated. In 1821 Missouri was admitted to the Union as a slave state, Maine as a free state, and slavery's expansion into the Louisiana Territory was limited to that area south of Missouri.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 18

Explanation and Analysis

In *Celia, A Slave*, McLaurin tells the tale of Celia, and how she came to kill Robert Newsom, her owner and rapist. But McLaurin doesn't simply focus on Celia. His book is about the state of slavery in the Union itself. Indeed, it's impossible to understand Celia's story fully without first understanding a few things about the history of slavery. To this end, McLaurin includes chapters that provide the necessary background information.

McLaurin begins by talking about the Missouri Compromise, one of the key pieces of legislation in American history. The Missouri Compromise admitted Missouri to the Union as a slave state, on the condition that Maine, a free state, be admitted to the Union at the same time. In this way, the Union retained an equal number of free and slave states. In the long term, however, the Compromise was seen as a sweeping victory for slaveholders and their politicians. The Southern, pro-slavery advocates of the Missouri Compromise had created a federal precedent for admitting slave states to the Union, and they'd gotten the federal government to recognize and legitimize the institution of slavery. In short, the Missouri Compromise is the quintessential example of a peaceful but unsustainable means to dealing with the slavery controversy: by deferring the controversy, appeasing both sides in the short term. In forty years, the controversy over slavery became even fiercer than it was in the 1820s, to the point where there could be no peaceful solution to the problem.

A healthy sixty years of age, Newsom needed more than a hostess and manager of household affairs; he required a sexual partner. Newsom seems to have deliberately chosen to purchase a young slave girl to fulfill this role, a choice made the more convenient by the ability to present the girl as a domestic servant purchased for the benefit of his daughters.

Related Characters: Virginia Newsom Waynescot, Mary, Robert Newsom, Celia

Related Themes:

Page Number: 21

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, we learn the real reason why Robert Newsom has purchased Celia, a young female slave. Robert's wife of many years has passed away, and Robert is lonely. He needs someone to cook for him, but he also wants a sexual partner. In short, Robert purchases Celia in order to use her as a sex slave. Celia has no legal power to resist Robert: Celia is Robert's property, according to Missouri state law.

The passage encapsulates the horrors of slavery in America, but also the contradictions. To begin with, it's nightmarish that human beings were bought and sold to others, and that their owners could rape them with impunity. The question of how common it was for owners to rape their slaves is still controversial. However, the passage also emphasizes the contradictions in the Southern defense of slavery. Slavery advocates loved to argue that slaves were property, not people—meaning that slaves' owners could do whatever they wanted with their "possessions." However, the passage also makes it clear that Robert *doesn't* just think of his slave as his property: he buys Celia as a sexual partner and replacement for his wife, suggesting that on some level he recognizes her as a human being.

Anger and resentment was a characteristic response of white women in slaveholding households when faced with the possibility of a relationship between a male in the household and a female slave. Frequently, however, southern white women were powerless to prevent the actions of male family members, a circumstance that sometimes led them to vent their anger at white males upon the slave. Certainly neither Mary nor Virginia was in a position to change her father's conduct toward his slave, even had she so desired. Mary was still an adolescent herself, totally dependent upon her father, and Virginia had three children of her own to consider.

Related Characters: Virginia Newsom Waynescot, Mary, Robert Newsom, Celia

Related Themes:

Page Number: 26

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, McLaurin conveys the utter, nightmarish hopelessness of Celia's situation while she was living on Robert Newsom's farm. Robert Newsom purchased Celia to be his sexual partner: in short, he raped her with impunity whenever he felt like it. Celia has no way of fighting back or protesting Robert's behavior. Furthermore, Celia is utterly alone on Robert's farm. The other slaves dislike her and, as McLaurin shows here, Celia has no allies among the white women of the Newsom house. Robert has two daughters, Virginia and May, but neither one of them seems to have any power to change Celia's predicament. In a way, Virginia and May also "belong" to Robert: they're entirely dependent upon him for food, shelter, money, and the privileges of travel and marriage.

Celia, A Slave takes place during an era of American history in which white women were, in many senses, the property of their fathers and husbands. In some cases, this led white women to become enthusiastic advocates of abolitionism. But in Virginia and May's case, the sexist norms of the times prevented them from doing anything to protect Celia from Robert (even if they'd wanted to protect Celia in the first place, which it doesn't seem they did).

❝ Perhaps they escaped their dilemma through a process of rationalization, as a historian of slavery recently has suggested many plantation women did, viewing Celia as the dark, sensual temptress who seduced their father.

Related Characters: Celia, Robert Newsom, Virginia Newsom Waynescot, Mary

Related Themes:

Page Number: 33

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, McLaurin portrays the process of rationalization. Celia, who's become pregnant, can't stand to be raped by Robert Newsom any more—she refuses to remain passive any longer. Celia knows that fighting back could cost her her life, so she opts for a different strategy. She speaks to Virginia and May, Robert's daughters, in the hope that they'll sympathize with her situation and do something to change their father's behavior. Tragically, Virginia and May seemingly do nothing to help Celia. It's unclear if they believe what Celia is saying or not. In all likelihood, McLaurin argues, they convince themselves that Celia is lying, and that she's "seduced" their father.

The passage is exemplary of the concept of cognitive dissonance. Faced with a "dissonance" between two contradictory ideas—that their father is a good, kind man and that their father is a vicious rapist—Virginia and May resolve the dissonance by opting for a flimsy and fictional explanation, that Celia is really to blame for her own misfortune.

❝ Afraid that an angered Newsom would harm her, Celia raised the club with both hands and once again brought it crashing down on Newsom's skull. With the second blow the old man fell, dead, to the floor.

Related Characters: Robert Newsom, Celia

Related Themes:

Page Number: 35

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Celia finally lashes out against Robert Newsom, having warned him not to rape her again. When Robert refuses to listen to Celia's warnings, Celia strikes him with a heavy stick, and then—because she's frightened that Robert might try to fight back and kill her—she strikes him again, killing him.

This is one of the few passages in the book in which McLaurin speculates on the course of events without explicitly saying that he's speculating. Readers have no way of knowing for sure what happened in Celia's cabin on the night of Robert's death. Celia could have had help from George, a slave who was also Celia's lover. Or she could have killed Robert simply because she wanted to get revenge on a brutal rapist (not because she was concerned that Robert would fight back). For the most part, McLaurin is upfront when he's filling in the holes in the historical record. Here, however, he doesn't characterize his guesses as guesses, in order to create a more vivid, dramatic scene.

Chapter 3 Quotes

❝ The response of the six inquest jurors to the testimony presented was predictable. After hearing the witnesses, the jurors quickly arrived at the finding that there was probable cause to arrest Celia and charge her with the murder of Robert Newsom.

Related Characters: Robert Newsom, Celia

Related Themes:

Page Number: 50

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, the inquest surrounding the death of Robert Newsom concludes. Celia is arrested on suspicion of murder, and over the course of the inquest, it's decided that Celia is responsible for the killing—something that Celia herself doesn't deny.

Even though there's no ambiguity about the fact that Celia killed Robert Newsom, there's also no sign that the inquest jurors (most, if not all, of whom are slaveholders) sympathize with Celia's predicament. She explains that she acted out of self-defense, and yet the jurors don't regard self-defense as a serious justification for murder. Even though women in the state of Missouri are legally permitted to defend their lives and their "honor" from male aggressors, the jurors take very little time to argue about Celia's guilt—they regard it as obvious. This might suggest that the jurors don't really regard Celia as a "woman" at all—like many slaveholders of the era, they consider her a piece of property.

> The threat of slave violence and possible insurrection was a specter that constantly haunted the white population of the antebellum South, and the residents of Callaway County were no exception.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 54

Explanation and Analysis

In Chapter Three, McLaurin provides more background information about the state of slavery in the Union during Celia's arrest and trial. For decades leading up to the trial, American slaveholders had lived in fear of a major slave uprising in their own country. There had been a successful slave uprising in Haiti in the late 18th century, leading to the establishment of a democracy in the country, and Nat Turner had led his own bloody, failed slave uprising, leading to the murder of more than fifty white men, women, and children.

In short, slaveholders in the United States feared—and, quite frankly, had reason to fear—their slaves. American slaves constituted a significant portion of the American population, and they were completely justified in despising their masters. So when Celia was tried for murdering her master (and rapist), the state of Missouri had a strong incentive to punish her to the full extent of the law, setting a clear example to any other Missouri slaves who might be contemplating resisting their masters.

> Whether Celia's fourth, and emphatic, denial convinced Jefferson Jones that neither George nor anyone else had helped her kill Newsom cannot be ascertained from the evidence. What is clear is that Jones stopped his questioning at this point, probably convinced either that Celia was telling the truth or that it was unlikely that she would implicate George or anyone else under any circumstances.

Related Characters: Jefferson Jones, George, Robert Newsom, Celia

Related Themes:

Page Number: 60

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, McLaurin discusses some of the ambiguities surrounding the murder of Robert Newsom. While it seems incontrovertible that Celia was responsible for killing Robert, it's unclear if she acted alone. During an inquest interview, Jefferson Jones, a local farmer, asks Celia whether she had any accomplices. Celia denies this. Even when Jones accuses Celia of being in cahoots with George, another slave with whom Celia had a romantic relationship, Celia still claims to have acted alone. Jones tries to make Celia come clean one final time, by explaining that George has run away from Newsom's farm and is nowhere to be found. Even after Celia learns this (and thus seemingly has no further incentive to protect George), she repeats her original story: she acted alone.

The problem with Celia's account of the events is that it doesn't seem to make sense with the timeline. To believe that Celia murdered Robert all by herself, one would have to believe that a sick, pregnant, teenaged girl beat an older, stronger man with a stick, and then burned his entire body in a tiny fire, in less than seven hours. This is by no means impossible, but there are good, logistical reasons to believe that it's unlikely.

Whatever his reasons, Harry Newsom's response to the *Republican*, with its emphasis upon facts and its total disregard for motive, anticipated the approach the prosecuting attorney would adopt during Celia's trial.

Related Characters: Celia, Harry Newsom

Related Themes:

Page Number: 61

Explanation and Analysis

After the death of Robert Newsom, the local newspapers circulate the story of his murder. While some of the newspapers elsewhere in the country take a sympathetic view of Celia, most of the Missouri newspapers portray Celia as a vicious murderer who ended the life of a beloved old grandfather. No mention is made of Robert's rape, or of the fact that Celia claimed to be acting in self-defense.

Robert's son, Harry, is outraged when he reads a story about his father in the local newspaper and sees that the journalist has misrepresented the facts: the story claims that Robert was killed in a kitchen, rather than a cabin. It's darkly ironic that Harry would find such a trivial detail to be important, but wouldn't have any problem with the fact that the story misrepresented other important facts about the case (such as the fact that Celia claims to have acted in self-defense).

Chapter 4 Quotes

To enhance its chance of adoption, Douglas championed a bill that repealed the old Missouri Compromise and allowed the possibility of the expansion of slavery into the new federal territories of Kansas and Nebraska, which the proposed legislation would create.

Related Characters: Stephen Douglas

Related Themes:

Page Number: 63

Explanation and Analysis

Chapter Four provides some much-needed background information. In the 1850s, tensions over slavery were at an all-time high. Southern politicians continued to support the expansion of the institution into the western territory the U.S. had just acquired in the Mexican American War. However, there were many Northern politicians who argued that slavery should be banned or at least forbidden from expanding into the new territories—in part because they objected to slavery for moral reasons, and in part because they didn't want slaveholding states to outnumber free states in Congress.

The Kansas-Nebraska Act of 1854 was the "last hurrah" of compromising over slavery. The senator Stephen Douglas supported the bill, which would allow each new territory to vote on the legality of slavery. The problem with such a measure, which quickly became obvious, is that slaveholders and abolitionists began to migrate out to the new western territories in order to ensure that their side was in the majority. The result was that the western territories quickly became the most politically polarized—and violent—places in the country: most of the people who lived there were either diehard abolitionists or diehard slaveholders.

Determined to retain his Senate seat, Atchinson immediately set about to enhance his reputation as Missouri's leading proslavery advocate by using his supporters to control territorial elections in Kansas. Border ruffians from Missouri had streamed into Kansas in November of 1854 for the election of the territory's congressional delegate.

Related Characters: David R. Atchinson

Related Themes:

Page Number: 66

Explanation and Analysis

Here, McLaurin introduces readers to David R. Atchinson, one of the shadiest characters in the book. Atchinson was one of the senators from the state of Missouri, and he supported the expansion of slavery into the western territories. Atchinson's political career is indicative of how brash, and lawless, the debate over slavery had become. Atchinson regularly tried to take the law into his own hands in order to skew election results to favor his side—for example, he sent some of his supporters into the state of Kansas to vote in elections, ensuring that the state of Kansas would become a slave state. In short, Atchinson's behavior suggests that America's politicians—and America's people—were tired of addressing the slavery question through legal means: they were beginning to gravitate toward illegal and even violent means of getting what they wanted.

Far from being the evil abolitionists claimed, slavery was "sanctioned alike by the Bible, the Laws of Nature, and the Constitution of the United States," and Congress had neither the authority nor the right to "impair a vested interest in slaves in the territories, the District of Columbia, or anywhere on earth."

Related Characters: James Shannon (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 70

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, we're introduced to another prominent slavery advocate of 1850s Missouri, James Shannon. Shannon was the president of the University of Missouri, and he used his position to make speeches and teach classes in which he argued that slavery is not only legal, but also a right protected in the Bible. He cited passages in the Bible, as well as the Constitution, that respected and honored the right to own slaves as property.

Shannon isn't wrong to argue that there are passages in the Bible (especially the Book of Leviticus) that seem to condone slavery. Nor is he wrong to say that the Constitution makes references to slavery, again condoning the practice. (Of course, whether the Bible and the Constitution are *correct* to condone slavery is an entirely different question.) In the antebellum era, the Bible was often used as a justification for slavery; however, many of the abolitionists who risked their lives to free slaves were also pious Christians, and argued that religion justified their *anti*-slavery beliefs.

"Unless the swelling tide of anti-slavery fanaticism be beaten back," Shannon predicted with prescient accuracy, the bonds of Union would break within five years.

Related Characters: James Shannon (speaker)

Related Themes:  

Page Number: 70

Explanation and Analysis

James Shannon was a contemptible man who argued that the Bible and the Constitution justified the expansion of slavery into the western territories of the United States. But he wasn't far off when he claimed, in 1855, that in the next five years the Union would commence a war over slavery. Shannon was one year off: the Civil War began in 1861, and is often regarded as a war over the future of slavery in the United States (with the Southern states seceding from the Union in order to ensure the survival of slavery within their territory).

Shannon's remarks emphasize just how violent and polarized America had become in 1855. People were rioting in order to ensure the survival of their views on slavery. Even politicians like Atchinson were breaking the law to ensure that Kansas became a slave state. So it was obvious to many people, not just Shannon, that America was about to fall into outright war over the slavery question.

Free state forces were prepared to draft a constitution and apply for entrance into the Union as a free state while the Pierce administration continued to recognize the proslavery territorial government.

Related Characters: President Franklin Pierce

Related Themes: 

Page Number: 78

Explanation and Analysis

In October of 1855, supporters of abolition in Kansas congregated in Topeka to form their own government. These people—the Free State Party, as they called themselves—made the case that the existing government of Kansas was illegitimate. They pointed to David R. Atchinson's electoral fraud and claimed that the senators and representatives currently serving in their territory were falsely elected. Therefore, they felt themselves justified in forming an entirely new government, which represented the will of the majority of the people. However, the federal government, led by President Franklin Pierce, continued to recognize the existing government in Kansas.

The passage is especially important because it conveys some of the rhetorical strategies that both sides used during the debates over slavery. Even though both sides arguably broke the laws (the Free State Party formed a rogue government), they presented themselves as being traditional, moral, and following the rules. In this way, the Free State Party argued that it was actually *more* legitimate than the existing Kansas leadership, since the existing leadership had been elected fraudulently.

Chapter 5 Quotes

[John Jameson's] serious interest in religion raised the possibility that he might decide to mount something beyond the usual defense on behalf of a client, who, though a slave, appeared to be morally, if not legally, innocent of the crime with which she was charged.

Related Characters: Celia, John Jameson

Related Themes:

Page Number: 90

Explanation and Analysis

John Jameson is a local attorney and politician who's appointed to be Celia's defender in her murder trial. Jameson is well liked in his community, and he's widely seen as an honest, charismatic, and talented man. Therefore, he's the perfect advocate for Celia: nobody can claim that Celia has been denied adequate representation in court.

But Jameson isn't just a likeable figure in Callaway County. He's also an unusually religious man, and he has two teenaged daughters. Therefore, McLaurin suggests, he's more likely to examine the larger moral repercussions of Celia's case, rather than the strictly legal aspects. And because Celia seems to be morally but not legally innocent, Jameson is perhaps more likely to sympathize with her and fight hard for her case. Jameson is a slave owner, it's true—but at the same time, McLaurin implies, he probably disapproves of the way Newsom treated his slaves, even if he has no objection to the principle of slavery itself.

From the perspective of the defense, the jury was about as good as could be expected.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 95

Explanation and Analysis

Celia's trial jury is largely composed of slaveholders. However, most of these jurors aren't particularly wealthy. Therefore, they're probably less likely to sympathize with Robert Newsom, a prominent member of the community, than a jury made up of prosperous farmers would be. McLaurin sums up the situation by arguing that Celia's jury, while hardly unbiased (most of them own slaves, suggesting that they're supportive of the institution and its expansion into the western territories), are "about as good as could be expected." Put another way, McLaurin is suggesting that the odds are stacked against Celia from the start: her entire society is opposed to her interests in this trial. The point isn't that Celia gets a fair trial, then (it would be almost impossible for Celia to receive a fair trial in America in 1855)—the point is that her trial is probably "less unfair" than it could be.

Jameson's cross-examination quickly established a key element of a planned defense that became fully evident only after all testimony had been heard. He immediately focused on the sexual nature of the relationship between Celia and Newsom, forcing Jones to admit that Celia had told him that Newsom had raped her on the return trip from Audrain County immediately after his purchase of her, that he had continued to demand sexual favors of her throughout the years she resided on the Newsom farm, and that he had fathered her children.

Related Characters: Robert Newsom, Celia, Jefferson Jones, John Jameson

Related Themes:

Page Number: 96

Explanation and Analysis

The trial begins, and the prosecution calls Jefferson Jones (who is John Jameson's nephew—but McLaurin doesn't have anything more to say about this apparent coincidence) to the stand. Jones, who interviewed Celia shortly after the inquest, testifies that Celia admitted to Robert Newsom's murder. However, when Jameson cross-examines his nephew (something that would probably not be allowed by 21st century standards), Jones is forced to admit that Celia told him that Robert Newsom had raped her repeatedly.

In extracting this information, Jameson accomplishes two important things. First, he makes the prosecution look devious and secretive for hiding such an important piece of information. Second, and even more importantly, Jameson begins to establish a motive for Celia's actions. In the state of Missouri, women are allowed to use deadly force to protect their honor, and therefore Celia could conceivably be acquitted on the argument that she was defending herself from a male aggressor.

Chapter 6 Quotes

The defense's contention that slave women had a legal right to protect their honor, that the term "any woman" in Missouri's general statutes applied to slaves was a truly radical notion, threatening both a fundamental concept of slave law and the everyday operations of slavery.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 111

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, McLaurin analyzes the legal defense that John Jameson and his legal aides developed in the hopes of freeing Celia. Jameson argued that Celia had the legal right to defend herself from Robert Newsom's sexual advances, even if she used deadly force to do so. He cited a statue of Missouri state law that gave women the right to defend themselves. For the jurors to believe Jameson's argument, McLaurin shows, they would have had to believe that slaves are women. In other words, they would have had to disagree with the legions of Southern slave owners who insisted that their slaves were property, not people.

McLaurin praises Jameson's defense for its vision of equality. While his defense wasn't successful (the jurors agreed to hang Celia for the crime of murdering Robert Newsom, and the trial judge refused to accept Jameson's interpretation of self-defense law), Jameson was ahead of his time. The notion that slaves—and all people—merit equal protection under the law became a fundamental part of American law following the passage of the Fourteenth Amendment. History, one might say, was on his side.

While acknowledging that slave women were used by masters for sexual favors, state studies of slavery, including Missouri's, fail to record charges against whites for rape of a female slave. Of course, the lack of such charges merely reflects that the law provided no protection to slave women against rape. If the courts would not convict black males of raping slaves, then such a charge against a white male was ludicrous. Thus, in the antebellum South the rape of slave women by white men, if not expected, was condoned by the law or, more precisely, by the lack of it.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 114

Explanation and Analysis

One reason why the jury refused to accept John Jameson's arguments for Celia's acquittal, McLaurin suggests, is that the current laws in America refused to recognize that there was such a thing as slave rape. In the history of antebellum court cases involving slavery, McLaurin finds a shockingly small number involving rape. Of course, this doesn't mean that slaveholders didn't rape their slaves: rather, it means that American courts refused to acknowledge that slaveholders were doing so. Slave rape was a nasty secret: as McLaurin has already shown, many people knew that it was happening (even Newsom's own children), but they found ways of rationalizing their silence, and refused to acknowledge slave rape or even think about it.

The arguments of the defense threatened not only the social assumptions under which slavery operated but the economics of slavery as well. The fertility of slave women was of obvious economic value, since their offspring became assets of the mother's master. Although scholars contend over the degree to which owners interfered in the sex lives of their slaves to insure high fertility rates, that masters were concerned with fertility rates is beyond dispute. By granting slave women the legal right to use force to repel unwanted sexual advances, the defense's instructions would have interfered to some degree with what owners saw as a property right.

Related Themes:

Page Number: 118

Explanation and Analysis

McLaurin continues to analyze the legal ramifications of John Jameson's legal argument. I order to acquit Celia, Jameson argued that she was justified in using deadly force to defend herself from Robert Newsom's sexual advances. He cites a Missouri statute giving "all women" the right to protect themselves.

One reason that Jameson's defense failed was that it was simply too radical for a slave-owning, Missouri jury in 1855. To agree with Jameson's defense, the jurors would have had to accept that a slave has control over who she has sex with. And by implying as much, Jameson was challenging the slave economy itself. Slaveholders often forced their female slaves to have children with other slaves in order to perpetuate the slave population. Tragically, it's no wonder that the jury refused to buy Jameson's argument: Jameson's

points contradicted the logistics of the institution of slavery itself.

Chapter 7 Quotes

❝ In whatever language the appeal was couched, Judge Hall's failure to issue a stay of execution order rendered it of no avail unless the supreme court acted quickly. As the defense waited for an answer from the supreme court, Celia's execution date drew nearer.

Related Characters: Celia, Judge William Augustus Hall

Related Themes:

Page Number: 123

Explanation and Analysis

Celia has been sentenced to death for the murder of Robert Newsom, her master. However, her attorneys don't give up yet. Even though they've fulfilled their duties as Celia's defenders, they drafted an appeal to the Missouri State Supreme Court, arguing that Celia's conviction should be thrown out, on the grounds that Judge William Augustus Hall made a series of bad rulings. The clock is ticking, however: Celia's execution is scheduled for later in the year, and the Supreme Court of Missouri takes a long time to respond to appeals of any kind, no matter how urgent.

The passage establishes the urgency of the situation: Celia risks losing her life unless the justices of the court make a ruling. But the passage also conveys the extent to which Jameson and his peers have come to sympathize with Celia. They've satisfied their duties, but they feel an obligation to do more for Celia. That's why they continue fighting for her acquittal.

❝ The evidence suggests that Celia's benefactors were not prepared to ignore Missouri law totally, so once her original execution date had passed and it appeared that the supreme court would have an opportunity to hear her appeal, Celia was returned to jail.

Related Characters: Celia

Related Themes:

Page Number: 126

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, McLaurin once again comes up against the limits of the historical record. It's clear that Celia escaped from jail some time between her conviction and her first execution date. It's also clear that Celia returned to prison some time after her first execution date had passed. Beyond that, it's anybody's guess how Celia escaped, who helped her, or how she came to return to prison. McLaurin speculates that Celia escaped with the help of local abolitionist activists who wanted to make sure that Celia's case was heard before the Missouri Supreme Court before her execution took place. This seems like a reasonable guess, and it would mean that her allies returned her to jail voluntarily after the date of her execution had passed. At the end of the day, McLaurin is forced to make many similar guesses about the subjects of his book. The historical record is thin, and so—as with any good historian—McLaurin must make reasonable assumptions about what really happened, without pretending that these assumptions are anything more than they are.

Chapter 8 Quotes

❝ Those events also suggest that the psychic cost to whites of the defense of slavery, though paid, was high, just as they suggest that the psychic cost to blacks, though paid, was incalculable and enduring.

Related Characters: Celia

Related Themes:

Page Number: 143

Explanation and Analysis

McLaurin concludes by discussing the total costs of slavery for Americans of the 19th century. To state the painfully obvious, slavery devastated millions of black people's lives. Slaves grew up in a state of fear, and even after the 13th Amendment illegalized slavery, the legacy of involuntary servitude continued to challenge African Americans on a daily basis. But McLaurin doesn't stop there. Even if black slaves were the principle victims of slavery, white slaveholders were also, in a way, "victims" of slavery. As McLaurin has shown, white slave owners had to engage in some elaborate and unwieldy rationalizations in order to convince themselves that they were doing the right thing. They claimed that slaves were property—at least until it suited them to claim that slaves were people. The total "psychic cost" of all this hypocrisy and cognitive dissonance, McLaurin argues, was high.

This is an interesting and somewhat unexpected note on

which to end the book. Throughout the book, McLaurin has been perfectly (and painfully) clear about the devastation that slavery caused to slaves themselves—but here, he notes that slavery hurt free whites as well, if mostly on a psychological level. Perhaps in emphasizing this point, McLaurin is trying to reiterate one of the central claims of his book: in antebellum America, slavery was everybody's problem.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

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

CHAPTER 1: BEGINNINGS

The year is 1850, and Robert Newsom is a farmer living in Callaway County, Missouri. He's a father and a proud, financially independent farmer. In the early 19th century, he moved his family—a wife, her name lost to history, a son named Harry Newsom, another son named David Newsom, and a daughter named Virginia—from Virginia out to Missouri, in search of better land. The journey from Virginia to Missouri was probably hard, and the family probably traveled by canoe up the Missouri river.

When McLaurin first introduces him, Newsom seems like a quintessential American archetype: the proud, independent farmer, a man who's traveled the country in search of a better life. By studying Newsom's relationship to slavery, however, McLaurin will reveal the ugly side of this archetype. Note also how McLaurin admits from the start that there are large holes in the historical record, and that he has to use educated guesswork to fill in the gaps of his story.

By 1822, Robert Newsom and his family were living in Callaway County, Missouri. Newsom purchased fertile land near a creek, and set to work building a successful farm. Newsom's story is typical of America at the time, McLaurin says. Many families moved west in search of better land and a better quality of life. They risked their safety to travel across the country at a time when the way was long and uncertain.

In the early 19th century, "going West" was seen as a heroic and even holy undertaking, reflecting the optimism and ambition of the United States at the time. To this day, America celebrates its own legacy of exploration. And yet, as McLaurin will show, this legacy was built on the backs of slaves.

Life in Callaway County can't have been easy. Salt was hard to come by, and almost all families were forced to hunt for some of their food. Many forest creatures were dangerous, and plants could be poisonous. But over the course of the century, the people of Callaway subdued the wilderness and cleared the land for themselves. They founded churches and city centers, organized militias and schools, and voted in presidential elections. Most of the people in Callaway were humble farmers, who lived off the land and knew how to take care of herds of sheep and cattle.

McLaurin emphasizes the people of Callaway's hard work and dedication to building a better life for themselves. He's depicting these people as all-American: brave explorers who risked their own safety to give their children a better life.

The people of Callaway aren't wealthy, but they're proud and prosperous. And many of them own slaves. Slave owners tend to be the wealthiest people in the area, and their lands tend to be the most productive by far. Robert Newsom went to Missouri in search of a better life. Every single day he spends in Callaway, it's obvious to him that owning slaves is a path to a better, more prosperous life.

Here McLaurin punctures the "heroic" image of the Missouri farmer by noting a simple fact: most of these farmers owned slaves. The parasitic relationship between financial independence and slavery is a stain on American history. Even Thomas Jefferson once wrote that American farmers could only remain proud and independent if they were allowed to own slaves.

By 1855, Robert Newsom is a successful man. He owns hundreds of acres, and sells his crops at good prices. He's also the owner of five slaves, which he's purchased in 1850. It's unlikely that Robert feels guilty about owning slaves: he grew up in Virginia, surrounded by slaves, and the laws of the land condone slave owning.

In the 1850s, there were many in America who opposed slavery unequivocally. But there were also millions who tolerated slavery or believed that it was their right to own slaves: they'd grown up around the institution of slavery, and accepted it as an uncontroversial part of their lives.

At the time, Robert lives with his daughter Virginia, for reasons that have been lost to history, though it's most likely that her husband, a man named Waynescot, has died. Virginia lives with her father and serves as the "mistress of the Newsom home." Virginia's three children also live with their grandfather: James Coffee, Amelia, and Thomas. (Virginia has a fourth child named Billy, but it's unclear where he lives, though he was born after Virginia moved in with her father). Robert's youngest daughter, Mary, also lives with him.

Robert is, by all appearances, a loving father. He seems to see no contradiction between setting a good example for his children and owning slaves: to his mind, he's morally justified in owning other human beings. Notice, also, that McLaurin is forced to make some educated guesses about the characters. "Possible" is McLaurin's favorite word: the historical record surrounding Robert Newsom is pretty thin, and so McLaurin gives a sense for the historical ambiguities surrounding Robert's life.

The final resident of the Newsom house is a fourteen-year-old slave named Celia. Little is known about Celia's life before she begins living at the Newsom house. She appears to have received training as a cook, but it's unclear where she lived or who owned her before Robert.

Celia is, pretty clearly, the main character in this book. And yet McLaurin knows almost nothing about her. At the time, thorough records of slaves' lives were very rare, because they served little practical purpose for the slaves' owners. Furthermore, Celia was unable to write, meaning that she couldn't narrate the details of her own life. Paradoxically, the entire book revolves around Celia, but Celia herself remains a mystery.

At the time when Celia is living with Robert, Callaway has become a large community. There's an influential Presbyterian church located in the county, twenty stores, and the Missouri state school for the deaf. One of the main beneficiaries of the growth of the Callaway community is a man named John Jameson. Jameson has lived in the community since 1825, when he tried to find work as a miller. He later becomes a successful lawyer, and then successfully runs for the Missouri General Assembly. After retiring from politics, Jameson returns to practicing law, and his reputation helps make him one of the state's leading attorneys. Like Robert, Jameson has invested in slaves: he owns four of them.

John Jameson is one of the most important characters in the book: he's the lawyer chosen to defend Celia in her trial. Notice that Jameson has close ties to the political institutions of Missouri, meaning that he's keenly aware of the political ramifications of his actions as a lawyer. On the surface of things, Jameson isn't much different from Newsom, however—the fact that he owns slaves would suggest that he doesn't see any moral problem with owning human beings.

John Jameson is among the most respected people living in Callaway. In 1839, he's elected to serve in the Missouri House of Representatives, and in 1842 again serves in the General Assembly. By 1855, Jameson, now aged 53, has a lovely family, a successful legal practice, and a stellar reputation. He has a wife named Susan, and also a son and three daughters. In his spare time, Jameson is busy trying to obtain ordinance as a Christian minister.

Jameson is a pillar of his community, and a notable success in three fields of human endeavor: family, law, and politics. But Jameson is also a deeply religious man, a fact that (as McLaurin explains it) foreshadows the sympathy he later expresses for Celia and other mistreated slaves.

John Jameson and Robert Newsom are two prosperous, happy men, who seem to be pillars of their community. But "only one was what he seemed."

The passage ends on a note of suspense. From McLaurin's description, it's genuinely unclear which man isn't what he seems. Both men seem roughly the same: well-to-do, respected farmers who nonetheless have no problem with owning slaves, and in some ways depend on slaves for their economic independence.

CHAPTER 2: THE CRIME

Controversy over slavery is a familiar theme in Missouri's history. In the early 19th century, the territory was in the process of being admitted to the Union as a state, but there was a passionate debate over whether slavery should be legal there or not. Representatives in New York introduced a resolution accepting Missouri into the Union only if all slaves were freed by their twenty-fifth birthday, and all further slavery was banned. South Carolina responded with its own measure, proposing that slavery be permitted. Congressmen worked frantically to develop a compromise that would be acceptable both to Southern politicians, who generally endorsed slavery, and Northern politicians, some of whom opposed the expansion of slavery. In Missouri itself, the vast majority of landowners supported slavery.

McLaurin alternates between chapters that tell the story of Celia's life and chapters that provide useful background information that informs Celia's story. In the early decades of the 19th century, slavery was a controversial institution, but for the most part, America's political leaders supported peaceful means of resolving the controversy. These political means often took the form of a legal compromise, reflecting the fact that many Americans supported slavery, many others opposed slavery, and still others were neutral on the issue.

In 1821, Missouri was admitted to the Union as a slave state, on the condition that Maine be admitted as a free state, and slavery be banned in all future territories north of Missouri. Southern politicians scored a huge victory: they created a process whereby slave states could be admitted into the Union, and pressured the federal government to give a slave state formal recognition.

The Missouri Compromise was, in many ways, an outright victory for supporters of slavery. In the short term, the admission of Missouri to the Union was balanced out by the admission of Maine. But in the long-term, the Compromise benefitted Southern slaveholders by giving them credibility and paving the way for future slave states.

By the 1840s, Callaway was one of the leading slave counties in the state. By 1850, slaves made up nearly half of the Callaway population. Farmers invested money in purchasing slaves—and Robert Newsom was no exception.

The Missouri Compromise had immediate ramifications for the population of Missouri. Farmers migrated west, knowing that they could make their fortunes with the help of slaves. As a result, there was a massive influx of slaves in Missouri.

Of Robert's five slaves, one is a young boy. It's unclear why Robert purchases the child, but it's possible that the boy is related to one of the other slaves he buys. He purchases Celia in a neighboring county. He doesn't want Celia to help with fieldwork; rather, he wants a replacement for his dead wife. He wants someone who can cook and keep him company, and he wants a sexual partner, too.

Here, it becomes clear that McLaurin was referring to Newsom at the end of the last chapter. Newsom isn't a fine, upstanding farmer: he's a vicious rapist who believes he's entitled to have sex with an underage girl he purchases at an auction, whether she consents (or is even able to consent, due to her age and enslaved status) or not.

At the time when Robert buys Celia, Missouri is engaged in another bitter debate over the expansion of slavery. Southerners, led by John C. Calhoun, support the expansion of slavery into the territory the U.S. has gained in the Mexican American War. This time, Missouri is divided on the issue: one of the state's two senators, David R. Atchinson, supports the expansion while the other, Thomas Hart Benton, does not.

The Missouri Compromise had lessened the controversy over slavery's expansion. But within a few decades, tensions flared up once more, since there were still many more territories to settle—and therefore, more potential slave states to admit to the Union.

Robert Newsom buys Celia when she's fourteen years old. As soon as he's brought her back to his home, he rapes her. It's clear enough that he feels no remorse for his act—he repeats it again and again, and he considers Celia his property. Robert's behavior isn't uncommon for male slave owners at the time, many of whom rape and abuse their female slaves.

Robert's behavior is terrifying, in part because Celia has no good way of fighting back and in part because Robert believes that he's not doing anything wrong. The passage is also disturbing because it suggests that thousands or even millions of female slaves had to endure similar patterns of assault from their owners.

Undoubtedly, Celia is devastated by Robert's savage sexual acts. Modern research suggests that rape victims go through many different responses to their rape, including fear, anger, and a deep sense of helplessness. In Celia's case, the sense of despair must be overpowering: unlike other unfortunate rape victims, Celia faces the terrifying fact that Robert will rape her again and again with impunity. Between 1850 and 1855, Celia gives birth to two children, both probably fathered by Robert.

Celia is a helpless victim of Robert's cruelty. Notice that, by emphasizing Celia's emotions, the passage makes nonsense of slaveholders' claims that slaves were property, not people. Furthermore, the fact that Robert bought Celia with the express purpose of "replacing" his wife suggests that he recognized that Celia was a person, even if he denied this to others (and himself).

Celia probably doesn't have any friends. She lives with Virginia and Mary, but scholarship suggests that white women often expressed resentment toward black slaves, largely because of the "possibility of a relationship between a male in the household and a female slave." Robert's son, David Newsom, who's just married, and lives nearby, may have hoped to rape Celia, too—again, it wasn't uncommon for slave owners' sons to rape their fathers' slaves. However, Robert's eldest son Harry conceivably may have objected to his father's behavior. But no matter what he felt, it's unlikely that Harry would have expressed his disapproval directly. Historians don't know much about how Celia gets along with the other slaves on Robert's property, but it is known that Robert rewards Celia with presents, something that quite probably alienates Celia from the other slaves, and makes them jealous of her.

Even by the standards of antebellum slaves, Celia's situation is horrible. Like all slaves, she has no control over her own life. But unlike other slaves, who at the very least have the ability to befriend other slaves or form alliances with their white masters, Celia is on her own. Other slaves, and Robert's family members, despise her. One of the most disturbing points this passage makes it that there were dozens of people in the Newsom house who knew about Celia's rape and did nothing about it—either because they were afraid of angering Robert or because they disliked Celia—a classic case of "blaming the victim."

In the years leading up to 1855, Celia begins a romantic relationship with another slave, George. Although Celia stays in a special cabin at night, George often sleeps with her in the cabin. At some point, George tells Celia that she has to break off her "affair" with Robert.

Celia and George's relationship appears to have been consensual. However, George seems not to understand Celia's dire situation: he pressures her to end the relationship with Robert, even though it should be obvious to him that she has no control over whether or not Robert rapes her.

In the early months of 1855, Celia becomes pregnant with another child. However, she's unsure whether the child is George's or Robert's. Therefore, George faces a challenge. He can confront Robert and tell him to stop raping Celia, who George seems to regard as his wife. But this could cost George his life. Instead, George angrily tells Celia to break off her relationship with Robert, or else he'll never speak to her again.

George's behavior is sympathetic, and yet cowardly. Instead of risking his own life to protect Celia from Robert's aggression, he passes the burden on to Celia, knowing that she faces a difficult, almost impossible decision (the same decision he's chosen not to make).

Celia now faces her own challenge. She has no power whatsoever over Robert Newsom, and she has no contacts outside the farm. Whatever she does—even if she does nothing—she'll be placing herself in jeopardy. Eventually, she decides to appeal to Robert's family—most likely Virginia and Mary. She explains that she is pregnant and sick, and begs them to influence Robert to leave her alone. She even claims that she'll be forced to hurt Robert if he keeps raping her.

Left with no better choice, Celia asks Virginia and May for help, gambling that they'll be sympathetic and prevent their father from raping her. Notice that Celia doesn't *say that Robert has no right to rape her (perhaps because she knows Virginia and May, as the daughters of a slaveholder, wouldn't agree). Instead, she makes a less controversial point that, she prays, Virginia and May will agree with.*

It's highly unlikely that either Newsom woman speaks to Robert—after all, they're almost as dependent on Robert as Celia is. Most likely, they choose to do nothing, and rationalize their passivity by telling each other that Celia is really the source of the problem—a "dark, sensual temptress who seduced their father." Robert continues raping Celia.

Celia overestimates the influence that Virginia and May have over their father—in many ways, they're Robert's slaves, too, since they depend on him for money, food, and the little freedom they have. The passage is a painful example of the psychological principle of cognitive dissonance. Faced with two contradictory thoughts—that Robert is a rapist, and that Robert is their beloved father—Virginia and May "resolve" the dissonance by callously blaming Celia for her own rape.

Some time shortly before June 23, 1855, Celia confronts Robert Newsom directly. She tells him that he must stop raping her, but doesn't say that she's in a relationship with George—instead, she tells Robert that she's been sick because of her pregnancy, and doesn't want to have sex. Robert brushes aside Celia's plea, and informs her that he'll continue having sex with her.

Again, notice that Celia doesn't tell Robert that he has no right to rape her; she only says that he shouldn't have sex with her right now, since she's pregnant. But even this milder, less provocative point doesn't sway Robert: he considers Celia his property and refuses to respect her wishes.

On the evening of June 23, 1855, the Newsom women retire to their bedrooms, wishing their father goodnight before they do. Around ten pm, Robert Newsom walks over to Celia's cabin, where Celia is sleeping with her children. What happens next is unclear. Almost certainly, Robert tries to have sex with Celia. It's likely that they exchange words of some kind. Following this, Celia attacks Robert with a stick. She beats Robert over the head, two times, since she's afraid that if she hesitates, he'll attack her. Robert crumples to the floor, dead.

McLaurin acknowledges that he doesn't know how Robert died. Therefore, he's forced to make some deductive leaps: for example, he can't say for certain if Celia hits Robert because she's afraid that he'll attack her—perhaps she's just enjoying her revenge (very understandably so). By being upfront about his uncertainties, McLaurin avoids misleading the reader while still managing to tell a gripping story.

Celia's first reaction is probably to panic—she knows she'll probably be hanged for killing Robert Newsom. But then, she decides on a plan: she'll burn Robert's body in her **fireplace**, destroying any evidence that she killed him. Over the course of the night, Celia burns Robert's body, crushing his bones into tiny pieces. By dawn, Robert's body is nothing but ashes.

Again, McLaurin doesn't know for sure how Celia gets rid of the body, but he chooses to believe Celia's own testimony and conclude that Celia disposes of the body by herself. Nevertheless, there are some major reasons to question this testimony—for example, the idea that a sick, pregnant woman could get rid of a heavy corpse in just a few hours, with only a small fire to help her, seems pretty questionable.

The next morning, the Newsom family finds that Robert is missing. Celia notices Robert's grandson, James Coffee Waynescot, and says she'll give him a present if he carries the ashes out of her **fireplace**. This act, McLaurin says, clearly demonstrates the depths of Celia's hatred for Robert.

Skillfully, McLaurin uses the historical record to paint a picture of Celia's personality. She obviously despises Robert: therefore, she finds satisfaction in the macabre sight of a little boy disposing of his own grandfather's remains.

CHAPTER 3: INQUISITION

On the morning on June 24, 1855, Virginia Newsom and Mary Newsom notice that Robert Newsom is missing. They search around the farm and find nothing. Then they call their neighbors for help. By noon, Robert's friends and neighbors are hunting in vain for any trace of him. As the search proceeds, someone suggests that George might know something about Robert's disappearance.

Celia has disposed of Robert's body without attracting any attention, which is why Robert's family spends the next morning searching for him.

William Powell, one of Robert Newsom's neighbors, and the self-appointed leader of the search party, finds George and demands information. Powell is, in many ways, like Robert: both came westward in search of cheap farmland, both have children around the same age, and both own slaves.

William Powell is like Robert in many ways (though it's not clear if, like Robert, he rapes his female slaves). This suggests that, like Robert, he's strongly biased against slaves and in favor of slave owners, and is likely to be especially unsympathetic to Celia's situation.

George is understandably frightened when Powell demands information about Robert Newsom. He wants to protect Celia, but he also fears for his own safety. George probably knows that Celia has threatened to hurt Robert if he rapes her again. Frightened, George tells Powell what he knows, immediately making Celia the prime suspect in Robert's disappearance.

George endangers Celia's life in order to protect his own—just as he's already done. As before, his behavior is cowardly but also understandable: George faces the strong possibility of being executed for playing some part in Robert's death, and wants to avoid this grim fate.

William Powell finds Celia and immediately confronts her about Robert's disappearance. To his disappointment, Celia doesn't crack under pressure: she claims she knows nothing about her master's whereabouts. Furious, Powell begins to threaten Celia's life, and the lives of her children. Terrified, Celia tells half the truth: Robert entered her cabin, where Celia struck him with a stick. However, Celia claims that Robert, still alive, staggered out of the cabin.

Notice that Celia puts up a good fight against Powell's questioning. She has a lot to lose—if she confesses to the murder, then she's as good as dead. Only when she realizes that she needs to protect her children's lives (since, tragically, she has no real power or rights in the situation) does she begin to reveal some of the truth.

Powell isn't satisfied by Celia's explanation. He continues to yell at her and threaten her children's lives. Celia is frightened, but she knows she has nothing to lose: if she tells the truth, the Newsoms could kill her on the spot. Fearing for her children, however, Celia promises Powell that she'll tell the complete truth, on the condition that the Newsoms leave the room. Celia then proceeds to explain what she did. Powell investigates the ashes in the fire, and confirms that a body has been burned. Among the ashes, Virginia finds small objects that belonged to her father, confirming Celia's gruesome story.

Celia believes that her best chance of surviving is to confess her crime to Powell, rather than the Newsoms—she trusts Powell to be fairer than Robert's two daughters. Afterwards, Powell confirms Celia's story by examining the fire. However, it's still unclear how Celia disposed of an entire body in one night with one small fire, without arousing any suspicion.

The next morning, June 25, the case of *State of Missouri v. Celia, a Slave* begins. The inquest is conducted by two justices of the peace: D. M. Whyte and Isaac P. Howe. Howe is a landowner and a slave owner, and while the historical record isn't conclusive, it's very likely that Whyte is, too.

The legal process is strongly biased against Celia, because virtually all of the people who conduct the investigation are slave owners, and seem to think of slavery as a normal part of life.

That morning, Whyte and Howe issue a warrant for Celia's arrest, and summon witnesses. The inquest jury consists of local Callaway farmers, all of whom own land and slaves, and all of whom have migrated to Missouri in search of fertile land. It's likely that most or all of these jurors knew Robert Newsom personally.

The inquest jury is also heavily biased against Celia: they're unlikely to be sympathetic to her behavior because they accept slavery as a part of life (and also because some of them know Robert).

The first inquest witness is William Powell, who explains interrogating Celia on the morning after the killing. James Coffee Waynescot testifies that he moves the ashes from Celia's fire. No other member of Robert Newsom's family testifies. Celia testifies that she killed Robert and burned the body. However, she insists that she wasn't trying to kill him, and was defending herself. The inquest jurors quickly arrive at a decision: they urge the county constable to arrest Celia and charge her with murder. Celia is placed in the county jail, where she'll await her trial.

Celia's defense—that she was defending herself—falls on deaf ears. The inquest jury seems unwavering in its belief that a slaveholder may do whatever he pleases with his property—and therefore, the jury convicts Celia almost as soon as it's heard the evidence.

The local newspapers describe Robert Newsom's murder as a horrific crime: Robert is characterized as an old man who lives alone. Many of the accounts are factually inaccurate: one report says the murder took place in a kitchen. This report also claims that Celia may have had help from another slave, George, and that she killed "without any sufficient cause." Many newspapers pick up the story of Robert's murder, reflecting the widespread fear of slave uprisings in the white community.

The newspapers unapologetically take Robert's side: instead of telling the full truth about Celia's motives for the crime (which she clearly expressed at the inquest), they characterize Celia as a remorseless killer who murdered a gentle old man in cold blood. Slaveholders are already frightened of slave uprisings, and the newspapers appeal to those fears by characterizing slaves as untrustworthy and violent (and selling more newspapers in the process).

George is in a precarious situation. Even though Celia has confessed, the Newsom family suspects him of killing Robert. His survival is dependent on Celia taking sole blame for the murder. But he knows that Celia is going to be subjected to aggressive questioning from white authorities, and might change her story. Afraid that he could be charged with a crime, George flees the farm. This makes reporters conclude that he *was* involved in the murder.

McLaurin suggests that George flees the farm because, even though he's innocent, the Newsoms suspect him of killing Robert. However, McLaurin has already acknowledged that there are some big holes in Celia's story, meaning that it's possible that George really did have some role in Robert's murder. As with so much about Celia's trial, it's impossible to be sure of what happened.

Slave violence was seen as a constant threat in early white America, especially in the antebellum South. In 1789, Toussaint L'Ouverture led a successful slave uprising in Haiti and slaughtered thousands of white slave owners. Later, during the debate over Missouri statehood, politicians on both sides voiced their fear that slaves would one day outnumber whites in Missouri, leading to an uprising. Then, in 1831, Nat Turner led a slave uprising in Virginia that resulted in the killing of more than fifty white men, women, and children. And as recently as 1850, thirty Missouri slaves were caught arming themselves with knives and guns and plotting an escape—a crime for which their leader was shot.

The frequent slave uprisings in the New World reflected, first, the massive number of slaves: in many states in the U.S., for example, slaves came close to outnumbering whites. In some cases, slaveholders argued that they had a duty to treat their slaves cruelly in order to prevent them from rising up. But of course, slaveholders' cruelty was one of the reasons why slaves tried to organize uprisings in the first place.

There's strong circumstantial evidence that Celia *didn't* act alone, considering that Celia is a young teenager and Robert was a grown man. Furthermore, some reporters find it unlikely that Celia could have disposed of Robert's body all by herself, since she was sick and pregnant.

McLaurin acknowledges some of the implausibilities in Celia's story but doesn't seriously pursue them, because there's not enough evidence available to him. Even though Celia's story seems questionable, McLaurin has no better option than to take her at her word and point out these inconsistencies to the reader.

The Callaway sheriff arranges for two men, Thomas Shoatman and Jefferson Jones, to interrogate Celia about having accomplices. The two men are very different: Shoatman is relatively poor, and owns no property or slaves. Jones, on the other hand, is wealthy, and is one of the county's leading attorneys. He owns many slaves. Jones takes the leading role during Celia's questioning.

Although Shoatman isn't a slaveholder (meaning that he doesn't share the inquest jurors' bias), Jones is, and he takes the more active role during question. This again reflects the one-sided nature of the investigation: many of the key investigators take it for granted that slaveholders have the right to do whatever they want with their slaves.

During the investigation, Jefferson Jones asks Celia to tell the whole truth. Celia explains that Robert Newsom regularly raped her, and that she'd threatened to hurt him if he proceeded to do so. She insists that she had no help in killing him. Jones tells Celia that George has run away, hoping that she'll implicate him in her crime. Even so, Celia sticks to her story, and reiterates that George wasn't involved. There are thus two possibilities: first, Celia is telling the truth; second, Celia and George *did* kill Robert together, but Celia is still fiercely loyal to George.

The most convincing reason to believe that Celia acted alone is that, even after Jefferson Jones tells her that George has run away, she doesn't say anything to implicate him in her crime.

In the weeks following the killing, Harry Newsom becomes furious with the local newspapers for misreporting the details of the story. He writes an angry letter to the *Republican*, a popular newspaper, pointing out that the murder didn't take place in a kitchen. However, he doesn't correct the single biggest error in the *Republican*'s account: that Celia killed without cause. His reason is very simple: he doesn't want to broadcast the fact that his father was raping his slave. In short, Harry focuses on the facts but ignores the motive altogether, setting the tone for Celia's trial.

Harry's reaction to the newspapers' account of his father's death is hypocritical and even darkly ironic. Newsom has no problem with reading about how his father owned slaves, and he seems to have no problem with the fact that the newspapers omit any explanation of why Celia might have wanted to kill Robert—but he's livid that they got the location *of the murder wrong. Harry is a hypocrite, who pretends to be an upstanding member of Missouri society, even though he condones rape with his silence.*

CHAPTER 4: BACKDROP

Celia's trial is set to begin in October 1855. Around this time, a vigorous debate raged across America, concerning the morality of slavery. The previous year, Senator Stephen Douglas of Illinois lent his support to the Kansas-Nebraska Act, which would allow slavery to expand into new federal territories, provided that a majority of the residents vote for it. The proposed act arouses opposition in the Northern states, where many citizens believe that slavery is both immoral and opposed to their economic interests. Nevertheless, strong Democratic support leads to the passage of the Kansas-Nebraska Act.

In the years leading up to the Civil War, the Kansas-Nebraska was arguably the "last hurrah" for the strategy of political compromise. Douglas believed that he could solve the controversy over slavery by allowing people to vote, state-by-state, on whether they'd allow slavery or not. The problem with this idea, however, was that the Supreme Court had already ruled on the legality of the Fugitive Slave Act, undercutting the idea that slavery could be legal in one place and illegal in another.

To ensure that a majority of people in the new territories support abolition, abolitionists migrate out west in record numbers. David R. Atchinson, a Missouri politician and supporter of slavery, argues that slaveholders must migrate to Kansas and defend their lifestyle with force, if necessary. He sponsors "self-protection" societies for slaveholders, and publicly smears his abolitionist opponents. In 1854, he's instrumental in sending thousands of "border ruffians" into neighboring Kansas to vote in elections, leading to the election of a pro-slavery congressman in Kansas.

Atchinson was one of the most influential political proponents of slavery in the years leading up to the Civil War. An ingenious, if diabolical, politician, Atchinson helped slaveholders and white supremacists consolidate their power while claiming that he was defending slaveholders' rights.

In April 1855, members of the Blue Lodge, one of the self-protection societies founded by Atchinson, travel to Parkville to "protest" a local paper that has criticized Atchinson's electoral tampering. An angry mob runs the editors of the paper out of town. This leads many Northern papers to condemn Atchinson for his bully tactics.

Atchinson's "self-protection" societies were effective in intimidating their opponents in Missouri and Kansas, but they outraged powerful politicians and journalists in other parts of the country. This emphasizes that slavery really had become a national issue, rather than a regional one (as Douglas had hoped)—the legality of slavery in one state affected people around the country.

In the middle of 1855, tensions regarding the future of Kansas remain high. Residents of Western Missouri vigorously support slavery in Kansas. In June, Atchinson's supporters announce a special convention to discuss how to protect their property against the aggression of Kansas abolitionists.

Notice that Atchinson's supporters stressed their rights to property (and the preservation of property), while the abolitionists emphasized the moral aspects of slavery. Slaveholders considered their slaves to be their property, while abolitionists recognized slaves as human beings wrongly being treated *as property.*

In July, James Shannon, the pro-slavery president of the University of Missouri, makes a speech in which he attacks the abolitionist cause and praises Atchinson for his heroism. He defends slavery on the grounds that it's justified in "the Bible, the Laws of Nature, and the Constitution." Shannon also predicts that the slavery debate will break up the Union within five years.

Shannon wasn't the only influential American to use religion to try to justify slavery. For centuries, the Bible (particularly passages in Leviticus and other books of the Old Testament) has been used to justify the morality of slavery. (A chilling scene in the Oscar-winning film Twelve Years a Slave *hammered home this point.) However, many abolitionists who risked their lives to oppose slavery were also pious Christians. Finally, it's worth noting that Shannon predicted that the Union would dissolve over slavery by the 1860s—a prediction that came true in 1861 when seven Southern states seceded from the Union, signaling the outbreak of the Civil War.*

On July 12, pro-slavery supporters of Atchinson from around the state meet to discuss their position. James Shannon delivers the opening address in which he emphasizes the Biblical justifications for slavery. Convention speakers attack abolitionism in the most withering terms. In newspapers, some call Atchinson's supporters treasonous, and accuse them of trying to start a civil war in America. Afterwards, Shannon embarks on a statewide speaking tour to defend his views. In December, however, Shannon is severely weakened when the state senate passes a measure, proposed by Thomas Hart Benton, an opponent of slavery, to reduce Shannon's salary unless he devote more time to his university duties.

As the situation in Kansas and Missouri grew more dangerous, both sides became more hostile in their criticisms, and began using "dirty tricks" to neutralize their opposition. The escalating tensions in Kansas reflected the national controversy surrounding slavery, and in some ways foreshadowed the Civil War.

Vigilante groups arise across Missouri. Pro-slavery advocates organize militias to keep their slaves imprisoned and fight off abolitionists. Violence breaks out almost every day. Sometimes, pro-slavery advocates raid churches that are known to denounce slavery, and threaten to end the ministers' lives.

Pro-slavery forces in Missouri almost always portrayed themselves as traditional and defensive—they weren't attacking anything; rather, they were just defending their property and their rights to be independent farmers. But of course, many of these militia groups did *attack their opponents, even threatening religious leaders (and slavery by its very nature, of course, is an attack on an individual's rights and freedom).*

In neighboring Kansas, slavery is the central issue. In July of 1855, the governor of Kansas, Andrew Reeder, announces that new elections will be held in Kansas—there's overwhelming evidence of electoral fraud the previous year. In the new elections, "free state" advocates (i.e., opponents of slavery) win seats. However, later in the summer, the pro-slavery Kansas legislature expels these newly elected advocates, defying Reeder's orders. The legislature then proceeds to pass laws that mirror the Missouri slave codes. Soon afterwards, President Franklin Pierce replaces Reeder with the pro-slavery William Shannon.

By July, it's become clear that the rule of law is under threat in the territory of Kansas: there's widespread evidence of electoral tampering, and as a result, a large portion of the population refuses to recognize certain "elected" officials. That President Pierce intervenes in the situation in Kansas again emphasizes that slavery has become a national crisis, not a state-by-state issue, as Stephen Douglas wanted.

Even while the government of Kansas remains pro-slavery, the population of the regions is staunchly in favor of "free soil" (i.e., no slavery in Kansas). Locals organize militias to protect themselves against "border ruffians" and pro-slavery groups. In the second half of 1855, the Free Soil population in Kansas arms itself in preparation for violence.

By 1855, the population of Kansas was largely made up of people who'd moved across the country to ensure that Kansas become a free or slave state. For this reason, the political controversy in Kansas was especially strong. (For more information, see the historian Eric Foner's excellent book, Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men, *which touches on the 1850s Kansas controversy.)*

In the fall of 1855, opponents of slavery, calling themselves the Free State party, hold a convention in which they declare their own state constitution. Thus, Kansas now has two governments, each one claiming to represent a majority of the people.

The Free State convention encapsulated the controversy surrounding slavery in the 1850s: both sides believed themselves to be legitimate and law-abiding. But of course, the two sides subscribed to two different sets of laws, one emphasizing property, the other emphasizing the immorality of bondage.

Because of all this, on the eve of Celia's trial, which is scheduled for October 9, 1855, slavery is rapidly becoming a violent political issue—not only in Kansas and Missouri, but throughout the country.

One can't understand Celia's trial without understanding how dire the situation had become in Missouri in the weeks leading up to the trial. Celia's trial had statewide—and in some ways, national—significance.

CHAPTER 5: THE TRIAL

The judge at Celia's trial is a man named William Augustus Hall. Judge Hall grew up in Virginia and later attended Yale. He studied law and was admitted to the Missouri bar in 1841. He served as a circuit court judge, and became an important Democratic ally. While it's unclear what, exactly, Hall believed about slavery, Hall must have realized that the results of the trial would reverberate throughout the country. In all probability, he would have wanted the trial to end as "decorously as possible," to avoid an outbreak of further violence in Missouri and Kansas.

Like many officials in Missouri at the time, Hall's priority was to preserve law and order in his state. While the situation in Missouri was becoming increasingly violent in 1855, neither side particularly wanted *violence; rather, they wanted the government to protect their rights and enforce the laws (though, of course, both sides disagreed about which laws should be protected).*

The defense attorney for Celia is John Jameson, the uncle of Jefferson Jones. He's a respected figure in the county, not just as a community leader but as a gregarious, fun-loving fellow. He's served in the Missouri House of Representatives, but failed to distinguish himself as a great politician. In general, Missouri politicians think of him as a likeable and fair-minded man, even if he's no genius.

McLaurin characterizes John Jameson as a likeable, average guy—sort of the 19th century version of college fraternity president. By emphasizing, again and again, that Jameson is not a particularly extraordinary person, McLaurin humanizes Jameson and arguably makes him a more sympathetic and interesting character.

Politically speaking, John Jameson supports the expansion of the United States. As a lawyer, he's not a brilliant scholar, but he's a persuasive rhetorician and a shrewd judge of character. Hall is also a slave owner, though there's no evidence that he supports the expansion of slavery. By appointing James as Celia's attorney, Hall has made a clever move: nobody can deny that Celia has been given adequate representation.

Jameson is, in many ways, typical of the population of the United States at the time. He's moderate on a lot of political issues: he doesn't believe slavery is inherently wrong, but he also finds himself inclined to sympathize with slaves. In this way, Hall ensures that Celia's defender is a neutral, unbiased figure (or at least as unbiased as it's possible for a Missouri slave owner to be in 1855).

Hall appoints two additional attorneys to the defense, to assist Jameson with research. The first is Nathan Chapman Kouns, the son of a prominent Missouri slave owner. Nathan is a young man, and this is his first trial. The second is Isaac M. Boulware, also a young, inexperienced attorney. He's the son of a prominent Baptist preacher, admitted to the Missouri bar just months before being assigned Celia's case.

Kouns and Boulware are fairly minor characters in this book: they're instrumental in helping Jameson with his case, but McLaurin has little to say about their personalities.

Two other factors make Jameson's appointment to Celia's case somewhat unusual. First, there's the fact that Jameson has two daughters of about Celia's age. Second, Jameson is one of the Disciples of Christ (a Presbyterian movement), and has been studying religion seriously for years. Therefore, Jameson is perhaps unusually likely to develop sympathy for Celia, and to consider the moral aspects of the case. Whether Hall considers these two factors when appointing Jameson isn't known.

In some ways, Jameson is likely to sympathize with Celia because of his family and his religion. The passage further suggests a connection between Christianity (or at least certain sects of Christianity) and the abolitionist cause. While Christianity was used to justify slavery for centuries, it was also instrumental in inspiring people to fight against slavery.

At the time, the Disciples of Christ are divided on the issue of slavery. In the South, most of the Disciples see no contradiction between their faith and owning slaves. In the North, some abolitionists identify with the Disciples. Out west, the Disciples tend to be moderate on the issue of slavery, but believe that slaveholders have a moral obligation to treat their slaves kindly. One of the key leaders of the Disciples of Christ, Alexander Campbell, argues that slavery is a political issue, not a religious one, meaning that the Disciples can make up their own minds.

For some Americans, Christianity was a political tool, used to justify both slavery and abolitionism. But for many other Americans, Christianity and slavery were entirely unrelated: many Christian leaders stressed that Christians should make up their own minds about owning slaves (much as Stephen Douglas argued that states could make up their own minds about legalizing slavery).

It's impossible to know what Jameson thinks personally about Celia's innocence. However, he and his aides prepare Celia's defense. By late September, he's arranged for his witnesses to come to the trial in October. The lead attorney for the prosecution is a circuit attorney named R. G. Prewitt, who's served in this capacity for less than two years.

At first it's unclear how sympathetic Jameson is to Celia. The passage also introduces R. G. Prewitt. Although Prewitt is obviously important to Celia's trial, he's a minor character in the book, and McLaurin only mentions his name a few more times.

The trial begins with the jurors—who, following the laws of the time, are exclusively white and male—taking their oaths. Only one of the jurors is from Missouri—the rest have migrated west in search of a better life. All have been married and have children, and none are particularly wealthy. At least four jurors own slaves. "From the perspective of the defense," McLaurin concludes, "the jury was about as good as could be expected."

At every step of the process, the investigation into Robert Newsom's killing is absurdly unfair. White male jurors, some of whom own slaves, could hardly be considered neutral parties in this case. But as McLaurin points out, the jury is probably as unbiased as it could be, considering the time and place.

The defense begins by pleading Celia not guilty to the charge of murder. The next day, the prosecution calls its first witness, Jefferson Jones. Jones reports that, during his interview with Celia, Celia claimed she'd had "sexual intercourse" with Robert Newsom, and that she'd tried to end the sexual relationship with Newsom. When Jameson cross-examines his nephew, he focuses on the sexual relationship between Celia and Robert. On further questioning, Jones admits that Celia claimed Robert raped her many times. He gives evasive answers, trying to foil Jameson's attempts to portray Robert "as a fiend."

Surprisingly, McLaurin doesn't elaborate on the fact that Jameson and Jones were related (conceivably, this fact would have had some effect on the trial, and by contemporary standards it could have been sufficient cause for Jameson to recuse himself). Jameson suggests that Jones is being dishonest and evasive with the court, deliberately hiding valuable evidence about Robert's sexual history with Celia. Of course, Jameson isn't just trying to portray Newsom as a fiend: he's trying to establish Celia's motive for killing Newsom.

The next witness for the prosecution is Virginia Newsom Waynescot. She explains how she searched for her father's body for hours, and again the prosecution focuses on the facts of the murder, rather than asking questions about *why* Celia would kill Robert Newsom. In cross-examination, Jameson presses Virginia to admit that Celia was pregnant and sick in the months leading up to the killing. He does not, however, ask Virginia about her father's rape—to do so would be a violation of "Victorian sexual mores."

Jameson is caught in a dilemma: he desperately needs to establish that Robert raped Celia, and Virginia would be the ideal witness to testify to this effect. But he also doesn't want to offend Virginia and alienate the jury by forcing Virginia to talk about her father's sexual behavior. While it seems odd by modern standards that Jameson would ignore such an important line of questioning, Jameson does so in order to remain in the jury's good graces.

The next witness is James Coffee Waynescot. He explains how, horrifically, he gathered the ashes of his own grandfather. Jameson's cross-examination is quick, and doesn't mention Robert Newsom's rape.

James Coffee's gruesome testimony is instrumental in portraying Celia as a wicked, vengeful woman.

The next witness, William Powell, describes how Robert Newsom's bones were discovered the day after the killing. In cross-examination, Jameson asks Powell if he knew whether Robert had slept in his own bed on the night of the murder. Under pressure, Powell admits that Celia told him about how Robert repeatedly raped her. Powell also admits that Celia stressed that she was acting defensively.

Again and again, Jameson is able to establish that Robert Newsom was having sex with Celia; he's also able to make the prosecution look evasive by showing that witnesses are concealing important evidence.

The final two witnesses for the state are doctors who confirm that the ashes found in Celia's **fireplace** most likely belonged to Robert Newsom. The state introduces into evidence Celia's signed confession of the murder, and the prosecution rests its case.

The prosecution concludes its case, meaning that it's time for Jameson to begin his defense.

The defense calls its first witness, Dr. James M. Martin. The very fact that Martin, a prominent doctor in the county, would testify for the defense suggests that many people sympathize with Celia. Martin testifies that it's possible, but extremely difficult, to burn a human body in one night. When Jameson asks more specific questions, however, the state objects, and Hall sustains the objections. Jameson is forced to dismiss his witness.

While there are many slave owners in Missouri, there's also a sizeable chunk of the population that sympathizes with Celia. Many of the issues that Martin raises in this section McLaurin himself is never able to address—he can't really explain how a sick, pregnant woman got rid of an adult body. In raising legitimate questions about the logistics of the killing, Jameson is able to establish doubt that Celia really committed the crime of which she's accused.

The next witness for the defense is Thomas Shoatman, the man who accompanied Jefferson Jones to Celia's interrogation. Shoatman testifies that Celia claimed to have feared for her life. This is a crucial point for the defense, since there's a robust legal precedent for slaves using deadly force for self-preservation. Shoatman also testifies that Celia struck Robert Newsom to stop him from raping her, not to kill him. This testimony is stricken from the record, but Jameson makes sure the jury hears it.

Jameson scores a mixed victory here: he makes sure the jurors know that Celia may have been acting defensively, but because the testimony is stricken from the record, it's highly unlikely that the judge will bring it up during jury instructions (meaning that the issue of self-defense probably won't have much of an impact on the jury's decision).

In all, Jameson does a spectacular job in the trial. He presents compelling evidence that Celia acted on the legal right to repel her master's sexual advances, and that Robert Newsom regularly raped her. The energy and inventiveness with which James has presented his case suggests that he not only believes all slaves are entitled to a fair trial; he believes that Celia is innocent.

Although McLaurin doesn't have a lot of insight into Jameson's character, he argues that Jameson went above and beyond his duties as a defense attorney, which would further suggest that he sympathizes with Celia—as do many people in the state of Missouri.

CHAPTER 6: THE VERDICT

The trial has entered "the determination of jury instructions." In Missouri, the defense and the prosecution must draft their own requests for jury instructions, which the judge will express, or choose not to express, to the jurors after hearing both sides' instructions. Jameson, no great legal researcher, probably delegates most or all of the work on jury instructions to his two aides, Kouns and Boulware.

Jury instruction is one of the most important parts of the trial process. By controlling how the judge instructs the jurors to make their decision, skilled attorneys can all but ensure a victory for their side.

One of most important parts of the defense's legal instructions is that the jury must reach a verdict of not guilty unless it can conclude beyond a reasonable doubt that Celia willfully killed Robert Newsom. Furthermore, the defense argues that Robert's legal ownership of Celia didn't entitle him to have sex with her. Finally, the defense argues that the jurors must acquit if they can conclude that Newsom was attempting to compel Celia to have sex against her will at the time of his death.

The defense makes a series of bold, even radical, points in its jury instructions. While their arguments seem uncontroversial and even conservative by contemporary standards, in 1855 it was groundbreaking for lawyers to argue that slaves had the right to defend themselves from sexual predation.

To bolster its claims, the defense cites a precedent in Missouri state law allowing for "any woman"—including, the defense argues, slaves—to use deadly force to protect her "honor." In advancing this precedent, the defense raises some complicated questions about the legality of slavery itself: "the issue of who controlled sexual access to female slaves held tremendous economic … significance." Predictably, the prosecution objects to the defense's interpretation of the law, forcing Hall to choose between the defense and the prosecution's sets of juror instructions.

The core of the defense's argument is that slaves have rights under Missouri law—or, put another way, that slaves qualify as human beings. This point, of course, is precisely what slaveholders in the U.S. were disputing at the time: they argued that slaves qualified as property and nothing more. Therefore, the defense's case was essentially an attack on the institution of slavery itself.

The defense objects to all but one of the prosecution's instructions: that the jury acquit only if it can conclude that Celia "acted in self-defense." However, the prosecution has already requested that the jurors be instructed that Robert Newsom made no threats to Celia's life, meaning that its instruction on self-defense is a deliberate dead-end.

While McLaurin doesn't say very much about the prosecution, it's clear that Prewitt, the chief prosecutor, is a savvy lawyer. Here, he skews the jury instructions in such a way that he seems fair-minded and open to the possibility of a self-defense argument, while he's already neutralized such arguments from the defense.

Judge William Hall now faces a tough decision: he must weigh both sides' legal instructions, knowing that the case largely comes down to how he presents these instructions to the jurors. In the end, he favors the prosecution, delivering every one of the state's instructions and ignoring all but three of the defense's instructions. Legal precedent in Missouri is, for the most part, on the prosecution's side. In prior cases, judges have refused to acknowledge that there is such a thing as the rape of a slave. Furthermore, Hall disagrees with the defense's interpretation of the phrase "any woman" in Missouri state law—he argues that this phrase doesn't apply to female slaves.

Hall makes a series of decisions that uphold the existing interpretations of Missouri law and hold that slaves are not, contrary to the defense's argument, people. Hall's interpretation of the law effectively destroys the defense's case: if Celia isn't a person, then she doesn't have any rights to defend her life or her honor against Robert Newsom, her owner.

The defense has made a radical interpretation of Missouri slave law—far more radical, even, than the one advanced by the attorneys for Dred Scott in 1852 before the Missouri Supreme Court. Dred Scott is a runaway Missouri slave who flees to a free state. Scott's attorneys argue that Scott has earned his freedom by entering a free state, but Missouri courts advance the more traditional interpretation of slave law, that slaves are their masters' property regardless of where they go. This is the same legal interpretation that the Supreme Court infamously advances while ruling on the Dred Scott Case in 1857.

Although the defense isn't successful in convincing Hall of its points, its case is impressive because it radically rethinks Missouri law. Nevertheless, the fact remains that legal precedent at the time is firmly on the side of American slave owners. Even the Supreme Court of the United States has officially ruled that slaveholders have the right to treat their slaves as property, undercutting Jameson's ambitious arguments about slaves' human rights.

The defense's arguments pose a serious threat to slaveholders, and had they been accepted by Judge William Hall, they could have been used to dismantle the institution of slavery. Antebellum compendia of legal cases involving slaves include no cases—not one—of white owners raping female slaves. Of course, this isn't because white owners didn't rape their slaves, but because the law didn't acknowledge such a crime. To acknowledge such a crime would mean acknowledging that slaves have certain rights that they can use against their owners, and that they have control over their own lives.

In effect, legal precedent in the United States in 1855 denies that there is such a thing as slave rape. A slave, the Supreme Court has recently decided, is a piece of property. For a court to recognize "slave rape," then, would mean that slaves are legally considered human beings, with the right to control their lives and sexual partners. Tragically, such a point contradicts the very definition of slavery.

The sexual abuse of female slaves by white owners was a terrifying reality during the antebellum period. It partly explains why white women were among the most notable critics of slavery: white male rape of slave women "threatened the stability of the white family and emphasized the fact that in many respects married white women were little more than the property of their husbands."

Earlier in the book, McLaurin argues that Virginia and Mary remain silent about their father's rape because, as white women, they themselves are virtually powerless. Here, McLaurin flips this point on its head, arguing that it's precisely because *white women were powerless in antebellum society that they could be more likely to empathize with female slaves' situation.*

The defense's arguments didn't only threaten the core concept of slavery; they also threatened the economic practicalities of the institution. A law giving a slave woman the right to defend herself from rape could have been further interpreted to allow the slave woman to control who she married and whether she had children, thereby interfering with the master's desire to produce a new generation of slave children.

Jameson's arguments challenged the principle that a slave owner can control who a slave has sex with—a principle that lay at the core of the institution of slavery itself. In some cases, slaveholders would force slaves to breed with one another in order to ensure the birth of additional slaves.

The defense's arguments posed one final challenge to antebellum society: they questioned the concept of the white man as a woman's protector. At the time, white men were seen as the protectors of their families; furthermore, white slave owners were often expected to treat their slaves with a measure of respect. What this "respect" meant was difficult to define, but there was an unwritten rule, especially in the South, that property owners behave honorably to their entire "extended household." The defense's points about rape would have undermined the image of the white landowner as a wise, honorable father figure.

On a more abstract level, Jameson's arguments posed a radical threat to slaveholders in antebellum America, because he made clear what slaves already knew: slaveholders weren't honorable, magnanimous father figures. They were cruel tyrants who abused their power by owning other human beings, and in some cases sexually assaulting them.

On October 11, Jameson and his two aides appear before the court and move to "grant a new trial" on the grounds that Judge William Hall has been unfair in his rulings and interpretations. Hall doesn't respond to the motion, but delays the reading of the verdict. On October 13, however, he reads the jury's verdict: Celia will be hanged to death as punishment for murdering Robert Newsom.

Jameson is smart enough to realize that his case is finished: because of Hall's interpretation of the jury instructions, he has no chance of convincing the jury to side with him. With nothing further to lose, Jameson moves (in vain) to grant Celia a new trial.

McLaurin then emphasizes a historical ambiguity: it's unclear if Celia was still pregnant during her sentencing. However, it's known that Celia delivered a stillborn baby sometime during her incarceration, either before or after the trial.

Celia's life seems to consist of one tragedy after another—here, she loses her child soon after being sentenced to death.

Celia is sentenced to be hanged on November 16. Her only hope is that the Missouri Supreme Court will intervene on her behalf, some time before her execution.

The chapter ends on a note of uncertainty. Celia's life is now in the hands of her defense attorneys—and the judges on the state Supreme Court.

CHAPTER 7: FINAL DISPOSITION

Celia's defense team drafts an appeal to the Missouri Supreme Court, but its exact contents aren't known. What is known is that by early December, the Supreme Court hasn't made any reply to the appeal. Jameson realizes that Celia stands a very high likelihood of being executed before the Supreme Court responds.

In this chapter, McLaurin comes up against the limits of historical knowledge: he doesn't know what legal strategies the defense uses in its appeal, and he doesn't know how the Supreme Court responds.

On the night of November 11, Celia and a fellow slave escape from jail. Shortly afterwards, she's recaptured, and the state sets a new execution date: December 21.

Similarly, McLaurin offers frustratingly little information about Celia's escape—how she escaped, or who helped her, is a mystery.

In response to Celia's upcoming execution, Jameson and his two aides draft a remarkable letter to Abiel Leonard, a circuit court attorney, in which they express their personal feelings on the case. They write that they're highly sympathetic to Celia, and add that the issue of Celia's trail has divided the white community in Missouri. They beg Leonard and the circuit court to reexamine the trial record, which they insist shows that Judge William Hall gave illegal jury instructions and refused to make fair rulings for the defense.

By this point, it's become clear that Jameson sympathizes with Celia and actively wants to acquit her of murder. In the letter, Jameson shows a savvy awareness of the political ramifications of the court's decision: he knows that tensions are high in Missouri at the time, meaning that the Court has an incentive to be fair and honor the rule of law—which is precisely what Judge Hall has failed to do, at least according to the defense.

It's unclear how, exactly, Celia escapes from jail. But it's possible that white abolitionists, knowing that Celia is going to be executed soon, conspire to "Remove her from the county jail." Furthermore, once it appeared that the Missouri Supreme Court would have the opportunity to hear Celia's appeal after all (because the original date of the execution passed), Celia's allies may have returned her to jail, rather than violate further laws by moving her to a free state.

Here, McLaurin engages in some speculation. Left with no historical evidence for Celia's escape, he guesses that abolitionists may have been responsible for the prison break. While McLaurin's speculations can be frustrating, they're useful in conveying the uncertainty inherent to the study of history, in a way that longer, more authoritative works of history often don't.

At the time when the defense filed its appeal, another intense debate about slavery was underway. On October 23, Free State party delegates met in Topeka to draft a new state constitution. The Free State delegation formally applied to Congress to have Kansas admitted to the Union as a free state, with a constitution designed to prevent the expansion of slavery. These actions constituted a direct challenge to the authority of the pro-slavery Governor William Shannon.

The Free State party believed itself to be the rightful political party, because it refused to accept the results of the most recent elections (which, the party claimed, had been contaminated by Atchinson's cronies). The party argued that it had a moral duty to prevent the expansion of slavery, while also portraying itself as a party that respected legitimate elections and rule of law.

In response to the Topeka Convention, supporters of slavery in Missouri and Kansas formed the "Law and Order party," and passed a resolution claiming that civil war would break out if Congress recognized the Free State party's constitution.

Not for the last time in American history, a group of white supremacists organized themselves under the guise of protecting "law and order." But even though the Law and Order party presented itself as being conservative and law-abiding, it demonstrated otherwise by threatening violence if Congress recognized the Free State party.

By November, tensions between the two new political parties had reached their peak. Both sides armed themselves in preparation for war. Then, on November 21, a pro-slavery settler shot and killed a free state settler in the city of Lawrence, Kansas. The next day, the Free State party staged protests in the streets. David R. Atchinson sent armed men to confront the protesters in Lawrence, supposedly to "sustain the law."

In November, violence finally breaks out in Kansas, showing that the issue of slavery is beyond compromise. (This episode is often called "Bleeding Kansas.") Peaceful, political solutions have failed, meaning that violence and radicalism seem to be the only means of change left. Notice that Atchinson, ever the crafty politician, presented himself as being a defender of law and order, even though he was clearly fortifying his side.

By December 7, fighting had broken out in the city of Lawrence. Armed Missourians sent by David R. Atchinson had burned buildings and destroyed the building out of which the Free State party-affiliated newspaper operated. Both sides experienced heavy casualties, and soon both political parties agreed to negotiations.

At least in McLaurin's depiction of the events, the pro-slavery factions in Kansas are more aggressive and violent than their political opponents: they're the ones who burn down buildings and threaten journalists. However, both sides resort to violence (hence both sides sustaining casualties).

By December 9, the Free State and Law and Order parties had reached a compromise, the Treaty of Lawrence. As part of the treaty, Atchinson's supporters left Lawrence. In part, Atchinson may have agreed to the treaty because he recognized that the fighting posed a long-term threat to his own political career, as well as the pro-slavery cause.

The compromise between the pro-slavery and abolitionist forces in Kansas suggests that Americans could still reach a compromise on the issue of slavery, at least in the short term. But by 1860, it was clear that, in the long term, the issue of slavery could only be addressed through radical and violent means of change.

In late November, at a time when the state seemed to be on the verge of civil war, the Missouri Supreme Court met in St. Louis to address Celia's case. The three justices, William Scott, John F. Ryland, and Abiel Leonard, have all ruled against Dred Scott in 1852, suggesting that they'll most likely affirm the decision from Celia's trial.

The outlook doesn't look good for Celia: the justices on the court have shown themselves to believe that slaves are their masters' property, and therefore don't enjoy the rights afforded to human beings.

On December 14, the Missouri Supreme Court rules on Celia's appeal. The court upholds the original decision and orders that Celia's execution be performed as ordered, at the end of the month. Jameson is out of legal means of preventing Celia's execution. It's clear that he considers Celia's conviction a "travesty of justice."

Over the course of his defense, Jameson seems to have changed from a moderate slaveholder into a supporter of slaves' rights (and, arguably, an opponent of slavery itself). The struggle for justice has transformed him.

On December 20, the night before her execution, Celia is interrogated one final time. For the last time, she denies that she had any assistance in the killing of Robert Newsom. However, she elaborates on her earlier answers and says that "the devil got into me" after hitting him once on the head.

The fact that Celia sticks to her story even after she's going to die makes it especially unlikely that she was lying about having killed Robert Newsom on her own.

The next day, Celia is executed. It's likely that many people witness her hanging. One of these people is a reporter for the *Telegraph*, who believes Celia to be a vile murderer. Ironically, he writes of Celia's hanging, "Thus closed one of the most horrible tragedies ever enacted in our country." Historians don't know where Celia's remains are buried—just as the early events of her life are unknown, so are her final whereabouts. Robert Newsom is interred in the family cemetery, next to his wife, and his grave still stands over a century later.

While the Telegraph *reporter means that Robert's death was a great tragedy, his words could be interpreted to mean that Celia's* execution *was the horrible tragedy—surely a more accurate statement. Celia's remains are lost, symbolizing the historical ambiguity surrounding her entire life. Meanwhile, Robert, as a wealthy white man in the 19th century, enjoys a more permanent form of burial.*

CHAPTER 8: CONCLUSIONS

The rape of female slaves was all-too common during the antebellum period. Female slaves whose masters raped them often had no way of retaliating. They couldn't band together with other slaves, meaning that whatever retaliation they *could* muster had to be individual.

In this chapter, McLaurin emphasizes the scale of the tragedy: Celia's rape was just a drop in the bucket compared to the aggregate cruelty and abuse that female slaves had to endure from their masters.

During the antebellum period, the vast majority of white women from slave-owning families tolerated the rape of female slaves. White women were themselves their husbands' property, and weren't in a position where they could easily oppose the rape of slaves.

McLaurin has already established that some white women felt a sense of kinship with female slaves, and opposed slavery because they knew what it was like to be powerless before a white man. However, many more white women tolerated slavery precisely because they were powerless to change their husbands' behavior.

The case of Celia's life also touches upon another tragedy of the antebellum period: the helplessness of male slaves to help female slaves. When faced with a choice of protecting himself and protecting Celia, George chose to protect himself, and the jealous tensions between George and Celia were, in all likelihood, typical of the relationship between male and female slaves.

As McLaurin has shown already, George's decision to protect his own life, rather than risk it by confronting Robert Newsom, is both cowardly and completely understandable. Faced with a "cognitive dissonance"—first, that he had feelings for Celia and second, that he knew Robert Newsom was abusing Celia—George chose to resolve the dissonance by taking out his jealousy and frustration on Celia, in effect passing on the burden of resolving the situation to her.

Celia's case also raises some important points about antebellum law. Southern laws recognized slave owners' right to own slaves as property. And yet other Southern laws recognized that slaves were people, who had the right to live. When these two sets of laws came into conflict with each other, the American legal establishment almost always favored the property rights of the master over the human rights of the slave.

From a philosophical perspective, slavery in the antebellum South was a mess of contradictions. Slaveholders insisted that their slaves weren't human beings—they were just property. But of course, there was abundant evidence that slaves were human beings—even Robert Newsom acknowledged as much when he bought Celia to replace his deceased wife. In short, antebellum slave owners were hypocrites, treating their slaves as people or property whenever it suited them.

Above all, Celia's case raises the fundamental problem with slavery. Abolitionists argued that slavery was an evil institution, and that slave owners knew, whether they admitted it or not, that it was evil to own another human being. In order to avoid the truth, slave owners hid behind various rationalizations: most notably that slaves were property, not people. It's impossible to calculate "the psychic cost" of those rationalizations, both for black and white Americans. For white slave owners, the psychic costs of justifying slavery were high. For black slaves, the costs were "incalculable and enduring."

Throughout the book, McLaurin has been highly critical of the behavior of antebellum slaveholders, calling them hypocrites and monsters. But he's not without some sympathy for them: it must have been psychologically exhausting, he allows, for slaveholders to come up with elaborate rationalizations for owning human beings. However, the greatest costs of slavery in the United States were, of course, the lives and dignity of the millions of enslaved people. After decades of attempting to address the slavery controversy through peaceful political compromises, Americans finally reached a point where the only solution left was civil war.

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