Crossing the River Study Guide

Crossing the River by Caryl Phillips

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Plot Summary

The first section of *Crossing the River* is a novella, "The Pagan Coast," the tale of an ill-fated project of the American Colonization Society to educate slaves in Christian ways and then ship them to Liberia where they will carry the Gospel to the pagans in the interior of Africa. The central characters are Nash and Edward Williams. Edward is a well-meaning but naive slave owner in Virginia, and Nash is his slave, whom he adopts into his family at an early age. When Nash is a young man, groomed for the task and on fire for the mission, Edward sends him to Liberia, where he faithfully sets out to civilize the savages. Gradually - and due in part to a breakdown in communications, which prevents Edward from receiving his letters - Nash becomes disillusioned with the ways of the white man and the notion that white civilization will work in Africa. The life in Africa is harsh, and many of the transported former slaves die from fever and other diseases. Eventually, Edward travels to Africa to find Nash. By the time Edward reaches the village that Nash established, however, his former slave is dead, and all that remains of his work is a village of lethargic blacks living in the same squalor as the other natives. The shock is too much for the self-righteous Edward, and he goes mad.

The second work in the collection, "West," is a short vignette involving an old escaped slave named Martha, who is abandoned by fellow blacks in a doorway in Denver, Colorado during a winter blizzard. The abandonment is not an act of cruelty, but necessity. She was attached to a wagon train of blacks headed for California in the mid-1800s and grew too ill to continue. Martha is near death, and in her fevered hallucinations, she relives segments of her past. She, her husband and their only child, a daughter, are sold to different owners when their original master dies. Martha escapes from her new owners and flees to Dodge City, Kansas. There, as a free black, she falls in love with a black cowboy and opens a restaurant. When her cowboy is killed in a gunfight, she moves to Leavenworth, Kansas and opens a laundry. There she meets the wagon master, who agrees to take her west with his train. While she is shivering in the Denver doorway, a mysterious white woman discovers her and takes her to an unheated cabin, where Martha dies in the night. When the white woman returns to find the corpse in the morning, she realizes that she never asked Martha's name, and she frets over the necessity to give her a Christian name, so that she might receive a Christian burial.

The third work bears the same title as the novel, "Crossing the River," and takes the form of a ship's log. Captained by Englishman James Hamilton, the ship sets sail from Bristol in August of 1752, bound for the Gold Coast of Africa to take on a cargo of slaves. Through his truncated entries in his log, Hamilton emerges as an intelligent merchant and competent seaman, stern but fair with his crew and aware at a visceral level of the inconsistency between his Christian beliefs and the inhumanity of the trade that he has inherited from his recently deceased father. Yet, he goes about the business of dealing in human bondage with what is referred to as "commercial detachment" from the misery to which he is contributing. The prevailing attitude is that business is business. Cargo is cargo, and while gentlemen must deal with their colleagues and peers ethically and morally, such niceties do not extend to cargo.

Phillips paints a picture of the Gold Coast slave trade as something that is no particular group's fault. Ultimately, the original sellers of slaves are black men, though there may be white intermediaries between the various points of sale. It is not a racial or moral issue; it is business. Hamilton's more-refined nature emerges in two adolescent letters to his bride back in England, extolling her purity and pledging his undying fidelity. He sees the horrors he encounters in the slave business as enabling the idyllic and genteel future he sees for his wife, himself and the proper English family they will produce. In his mind, that noble end seems to justify the barbaric means.

Hamilton is haunted by the mysterious circumstances surrounding his father's death on his final voyage to Africa. A trader named Ellis knows the secret, but he will not reveal the details. He states, however, that no man associated with James's father should call himself a Christian. James knows that his father battled with the dichotomy of trying to maintain Christian beliefs while dealing in slaves, and the implication is that the conflict drove him mad.

"Somewhere in England" is the final independent work within the novel *Crossing the River.* The action takes place between 1936 and 1945, with a brief interlude looking forward to 1963 at the end. The novella-length piece is presented in a journal or diary form in the voice of Joyce, a young woman during the years leading up to and through World War II. Consistent with the title, the small town and smaller village from which Joyce observes wartime England remain unnamed. Joyce is not a happy 1ass, continually nagged by her neurotic mother who has never gotten over the death of her military husband in the First World War and has taken refuge in religious zealotry. Joyce marries a shopkeeper named Len from a small village near the town where she lives with her mother. Len is a bit of a dolt, and Joyce knows almost immediately that the marriage is a mistake, following as it does on the heels of an earlier romance-gone-bad that ended in an abortion.

Len eventually goes to prison for dealing in the black market during the war, leaving Joyce to run the village shop. The U.S. Army stations a detachment of black soldiers near the village where Joyce lives, and she falls in love with one of the officers named Travis. She becomes pregnant by Travis just before he is shipped off to Italy. He is able to return on leave to marry Joyce - whose divorce from Len is finally settled - just days before the birth of their baby, Greer. Travis is killed in Italy, and Joyce is forced to give Greer up to the county as a war orphan. The only time she sees him again is in 1963, when he comes as a young man to visit her in a new life. Joyce secretly continues to love Travis, even in her new life, and she is portrayed as a good person, caught up in bigotry and circumstances beyond her control.

Section 1 "The Pagan Coast"

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Crossing the River is a novel that consists of four smaller independent works woven together by a common theme. The book begins with a brief lyrical treatment of the African diaspora and concludes with a similar treatment in the same voice, even repeating some of the phrases of introductory piece. The two lyrical treatments serve nicely to tie the four independent works together. The four shorter works are displaced in time, ranging from the mid-1700s to 1963. The action proceeds back and forth in time in a non-linear fashion, lending a timeless ambiance to the work. No characters from one section interact with those of another, but all sections carry a message of the misery and resilience of Africans displaced by international slave trade.

A page-and-a-half lyrical prologue in the Voice of Africa itself precedes the first novella. The voice bemoans the past 250 years of the black oppression in which its peoples were sold into slavery by their own kind and driven into ships for the perilous journey to a foreign land. Heartbroken, the continent awaits the return of its children.

The tale of *Crossing the River* begins in the American South in 1841. Edward Williams receives a letter presented by a liveried servant on a silver tray. The letter is from the American Colonization Society, a missionary group dedicated to repatriating Christian slaves back to Africa. The letter informs Edward that the society has lost contact with Nash Williams, Edward's former slave and the most successful missionary they have yet sent to Africa. Fewer than two hundred African heathens have been converted to Christ in the twenty years of the society's existence, and in the seven years he has been in Liberia, Nash has been responsible for fully fifty of those conversions.

As Edward is considering the circumstances of the letter, and fearing the worst possible fate for his adopted black son, he reflects on the first days of his repatriation. Unlike most of the former slaves repatriated to their ancestral continent, Nash does not linger in the city of Monrovia to become lazy and corrupted by alcohol and other vices. He remains true to his commission to carry the Gospel of Jesus Christ into the hinterlands to save the souls of his heathen brethren. If anything, Nash is *too* driven, endangering his life and health with hard work and dedication. Neither Nash's wife nor his only son survives the one-year "weathering in" period during which most of the emigrants sponsored by the society succumb to African Fever (malaria) or the other hazards of their harsh new home. Nash, in spite of the hardships he encounters, considers his selection for the repatriation program a mark of extreme trust, an honor and a distinction. This is the prevailing sentiment among slaves, even though most of those selected do not survive the first year.

During Nash's first days in Africa, he wrote occasional letters to his adopted father, but there has been nothing for a long time.

In his last letter, Nash told Edward that he was cutting off all communications and never wanted to hear from the white man again. In other letters, Nash asked for assistance in setting up the mission school, requesting such things as seeds, reading books for the children and building materials. Perhaps not assigning sufficient significance to these requests, Elliot thinks of them as "childish." Elliot fears that Nash may have fallen into ill health because of too much work. On one occasion, Elliot wrote a letter to Nash, scolding him for working too hard while recovering from The Fever, but Amelia, Edward's deceased wife, intercepted the missive. It was never delivered. These are some of the thoughts that cross Edward's mind as he considers what he sees as his only honorable course of action: to go to Africa to find the missing Nash.

On November 3, 1841, Edward Williams sets out on the evening tide from New York Harbor aboard the Mercury, bound for the British settlement of Freetown on Sierra Leone, en route to Liberia. It is a perilous voyage, plagued by storms from the first day well into the second week. Edward is quickly stricken by The Fever, and he is too sick even to help in the emergency when a squall de-masts the schooner and the ship is nearly abandoned. A deathly calm follows the storms, and the ship wallows in the doldrums under a scorching sun, while Edward suffers below decks with alternate chills and fever. The ship limps into port at Freetown on December 14, with Edward Williams teetering between life and death. Thanks to the ministrations of other white missionaries in Sierra Leone, Edward survives, but he is in a highly weakened state. While he was ill, the American-flagged Mercury sailed without him. While Edward was incommunicado with his illness, a trade dispute developed between Liberia and Sierra Leone, and Americans became unwelcome in the British colony. Faced with the choice between waiting for the trade squabble to resolve itself to get sea passage to his destination and making a dangerous overland trek to his destination, Edward spurns the advice of more experienced African missionaries and opts for the hike.

In an interlude without introduction or explanation, the reader encounters three dated letters, written over the past years by Nash to his adopted father.

Monrovia, Sept. 1834: Nash, whom Edward financed through college, writes in a formal and erudite style. He reports that he and his family enjoyed a fortunate passage of only seventeen days and that he is filled with gratitude both to God and his adopted father. His young son York, however, fell ill with seasickness and has not yet regained his health on shore. The several other slaves that Edward sent along on the voyage survived with only two other serious cases of seasickness, but now most of them have the fever, and one man has died leaving a wife and small child. Nash is effusive in his praise for Edward, the kind father who has been so generous.

The new resident of Liberia extols the virtues of his new home, proclaiming the tolerance that allows a black man to live with all others as an equal, without the slightest hint of bigotry. Although the former slave expresses great love for his father and a strong desire to see his face again, he says that now that he has found freedom in Liberia, he could never be convinced to return to America. Although he reports that a black man may sit under the palms and enjoy his freedom just as the white man does in America, he acknowledges that some of the freed slaves are less than industrious. They

become lazy, choosing to linger in the city living by stealing rather than carrying the Gospel to the heathens in the bush. In this lifestyle, they fall prey to drunkenness and other sins. He also reports that Mr. Grey, who was supposed to give Nash some money that Edward left with him, denies any knowledge of the obligation. Nash praises his father and his Christian upbringing for delivering him from the ignorance of the other blacks and expresses his confidence that he will receive the assistance from the society that he will need to fulfill his mission of carrying the word into the interior of Africa.

St. Paul's River, Liberia, Oct. 1835: Still weak from a bout with the fever, Nash reports that things are not going as well as they might. In spite of the hardships, the ever-industrious Nash has managed to clear some fifteen to twenty acres in the jungle and bring it under cultivation, a new concept for the natives amidst whom he has chosen to make his home. His main crops consist of coffee trees, cotton and cassava. He also raises some vegetables, both European and native. Nash is beginning to speak some of the local dialect, but he seems most proud of the crude school building he has built with native help. Here, he will teach the children to write (presumably English), do arithmetic, study the Bible and learn geography. On Sunday, Nash transforms the school into a Baptist church for services.

Nash tells of curious animals, including a leopard that has been raiding the goats and a snake he killed that was fifteen feet long. The pioneer enters a plea for assistance - the things Edward earlier referred to as childish desires - in the form of trade goods, such as fabric, molasses, tobacco and flour. He asks also for nails to continue his building projects. Nash reflects that America is the land of milk and honey, where people do not want for things, but in his newfound African freedom, he is coming to value simple material things that are taken for granted in his former country. Almost matter-of-factly, Nash notes that both Sally and York, his wife and son, have moved on to heaven, where he hopes to rejoin them. He complains of an old hip injury he got when he was thrown from a horse in America, an indication of the way his health is failing with age in his harsh new home.

In spite of the hardships, however, Nash continues to extol the virtues of Liberia. He claims that any man who is willing to leave the sin and pestilence of Monrovia and move to the interior can lead a good, free life. One of the reasons a man can thrive in the wild interior, Nash claims, is because, "...a man's spirit and wholesomeness is more pleasantly watered and nourished among the heathen natives...for one can daily observe the evidence of Christian work which marks out the superiority of the American life over the African." Nash sends his love to his natural mother and thanks Edward for taking him away from her and moving him to the white man's house where he gained the benefits of a genteel life. He also pleads for books for his school and indicates that he would be pleased to learn his true age.

St. Paul's River, Liberia, Mar. 1839: Nash thanks Edward for a letter he received on February 5, the first he has seen from his adopted father since his arrival in Africa five years previously. In a self-deprecating voice, which may reflect more sarcasm and disillusionment than sincerity, Nash speculates that the reason his other letters went unanswered is because he has done something to offend his adopted father or that they

were too stupidly expressed to warrant reply. He reports on the tendency of both the whites and blacks familiar to Edward to lose sight of their lofty religious ideals and to indulge in immoral and drunken behavior as the Dark Continent works on them. In some cases, this departure from Christian morality is attributable to the loss of loved ones, claimed by the diseases of the harsh climate. Of course malaria, an indigenous malady, is the big killer, but small pox begins to work its way into the picture as well.

Nash reports that he has now re-established his mission school up-river on the St. Paul River and has fourteen boys and two girls enrolled, most of whom he rescued from a Congo slaver. He says that he brought another recent emigrant up from Monrovia to serve as a teacher in the school, but she quickly fell victim to the African climate. Amidst matter-of-fact accounts of both sudden and lingering deaths among the natives, Nash also reports the intrusion of other Christian missionaries from other denominations trying to steal his converts. It seems the Presbyterians, Methodists and Baptists are locked in competition for the soul of Africa and are not above poaching on territory already claimed by opposing denominations.

Several such preachers invaded Nash's settlement under the guise of fellow messengers of the Gospel and then spread lies among his flock about imagined improprieties and liberties Nash had taken with the native women. Shortly after Nash banned the interlopers from his settlement, a boy in the village became sick and died within a few hours. Interpreting the death as an omen, several of Nash's young scholars bolted into the arms of their tribe's chief shaman, as was their traditional practice. Nash then comments on the native justice system, noting that in such cases the shaman will identify the person who placed the curse on the one who died, and that culprit will then meet his own death by way of a mysterious poison. Nash observes that, "This appears to me not an entirely unjust method of administering justice, and one from which we of the so-called civilized world might learn something valuable."

In the 1839 letter, Nash further laments the degradation of his fellow former slaves by noting that once in Africa, many choose to support themselves by finding ways to torment and exploit the primitive natives, who are unaware and unwary of the white man's ways. In Africa, says Nash, he and the other ymigrys are called white men, an epithet obviously coined not from color but behavior. He notes that the whites in Africa are extremely polite, and they too refer to the black ymigrys as white men. When he meets whites on the streets of Monrovia, says Nash, they address him as Mr. Elliot - not "boy," as he was called in America. For his part, Nash refers to the Caucasians as masters.

Some of the masters, however, are not as polite as the ones Nash meets on the streets of Monrovia. For the first time, he describes an emerging political contest between white settlers and black natives that often erupts into violence. The largest village in his region was just recently attacked and burned by white settlers, who routed the natives and chased them off into the wilderness. The settlers raided the village in retaliation for some horrible mayhem the natives had previously inflicted on the settlers in what appears to be an on-going feud. Nash explains that it is the way of the native culture to mete out bloody and gory punishment when they perceive they have the advantage.

Although he does not state as much, Nash implies that such behavior terrorizes the whites, intensifying their revenge. He goes on to report that the tribes also war among themselves, but for the past few months, things have been relatively calm with no great talk of war.

On a personal note, Nash informs his adopted father that he has gone to Monrovia, met another freed slave from Pennsylvania, taken her back to his Christian settlement and plans to marry her shortly. He asks Edward for some sort of gift to help set him up in marriage. He explains that things are difficult for him economically because he insists on doing all business in an ethical and Christian fashion, and this puts him at a great disadvantage to those who choose to enslave others and otherwise exploit the natives. He also asks for one bonnet, an umbrella and enough white cloth to make a smock - presumably for his wife-to-be. For his school, he asks for books, paper and quills or pens. For sustenance and expansion, he requests flour, pork, a hoe, an axe and some trowels and hammers. In a surprise turnabout, Nash states that he has been in Africa for a long time, and he is eager to return to America. He makes it clear, however, that this would be only for a visit, as the freedom in Liberia is far superior to his life in America.

St. Paul's River, Liberia, Oct. 1840: Nash begins this letter by expressing confusion at why Edward has turned against him, never answering his letters and never sending him the goods he asks for. He also voices his wish that he might see his benefactor one more time before he dies. Nash also tells Edward that he has married a native girl and that he has a new son. He further implores Edward to send books, quills and other goods, as well as $300 to help raise and educate his son. He also renews his plea for farming tools and American newspapers. Nash reports that the fever epidemic has receded somewhat, which he attributes to increasing civilization and cultivation. He reports that farming is now his primary occupation, and attendance at his school has dropped to nearly nothing. Christianity, he surmises, simply cannot take root in Africa because a man must simply make do with what is there. Survival consumes a man, leaving little for the practice of esoteric rites.

Nash returns to his lament that Edward has turned against him, asking if someone has been poisoning the older man's mind against him. He notes that he is also becoming somewhat embittered with America, because their ships unfurl the Star Spangled Banner as loaded slave ships leave the ports, preventing the anti-slavery elements in Liberia from freeing the cargo. He calls the practice a disgrace to dignity and a stain on America. He concludes that his best course of action will be to totally withdraw to his native home on the river and occupy himself solely with the business of farming and raising his family. Nonetheless, Nash expresses profound gratitude for the liberty he has been given in Liberia and firmly believes it to be the best place in the world for a black man.

Back in Sierra Leone in 1842, a weakened Edward is fighting off yet another attack of the fever. He is a troubled man, tormented by guilt and demons and a vague sense that somewhere he has gone seriously wrong. The hostilities between Liberia and Sierra Leone have ceased, and he is now free to travel by ship to Monrovia. He has sent ahead a letter to Madison, his other adopted and subsequently freed slave, who seems

to be quite well set up in the Liberian capital. He does not know, however, if the letter has reached its intended recipient. For that matter, he is not positive that Madison will even receive him, let alone help him find Nash. Madison became quite bitter when Nash supplanted him as the object of the Master's affection. A man of some pride, he moved out of the house and back to the slave quarters of his own volition, where he schooled himself until he felt adequate to request emancipation and transportation to Liberia.

Edward's arrival in Monrovia is an awakening. He is appalled by the sights and stench of poverty, which simply reinforce his ethnocentric white values. He engages a young black named Charles to run errands and carry his bags for him and commissions him to locate Madison. Their first attempt to contact Madison fails. A servant informs Charles that Mr. Williams (Madison) is away on a trip for a few days but says that he will inform Mr. Williams of Edward's arrival when he returns. As he observes the wretched condition of both the natives and the freed slaves around him, Edward comes to believe that the goals of the American Colonization Society may not be as wise as he at first thought. It occurs to him that it is not realistic to ask men to engage with a past (i.e., life in Africa) that is not truly theirs.

Stranded for a few days in the seemingly total blackness of Monrovia, lonely and intimidated, Edward seeks the company of other Christian white men. He learns of a club some distance away and treks there to be refused admittance by a liveried black man. He explains his situation, and the butler leaves him standing outside while he goes to seek advice from the members. Edward experiences a sense of rising rage as he realizes that this is the first time in his life that he has ever had to ask permission do something from a black man. Ultimately, Edward is admitted as a visitor to the club, only to discover that it is the Liberian headquarters of the American Colonization Society. He spends a pleasant afternoon in conversation with his peers over lunch and a bit more wine than he is accustomed to.

The next morning, in the midst of a hangover, Edward falls into a troubled sleep. He has morbid dreams of his deceased wife, Amelia, suffering from wet, open sores in which flies lay their eggs. He recognizes the dreams as emerging from subconscious spite, growing out of his inability to forgive her. In his prayer for forgiveness, Edward reveals that Amelia sabotaged his relationship with Nash. She had an insane loathing for all things African and intercepted Nash's letters to Edward, so he was never able to nurture and assist Nash in his new African home. Eventually Amelia left Edward, withdrew into insanity and committed suicide. The incident has left a serious stain on his reputation in the up-scale Christian community in America, and apparently, news has traveled to Africa as well. When Edward returns to the American Colonization Society clubhouse, the same black man who so chagrined him on his last visit refuses him admittance. When he asks to speak to an officer of the club, he is informed that the officers called an extraordinary session after Edward left on the previous day and voted that Edward would henceforth be unwelcome as either guest or permanent member. The irony that the liveried black man happens to be one of the freed slaves transported to Africa by the society is obvious, but not stated.

When Edward returns home, he finds Charles waiting with a travel-weary Madison. Madison does not seem to be still nurturing the grudge he has held toward Edward since he left the house for the slave quarters. Edward's former slave bears the sad news that Nash finally succumbed to the fever and has just recently died in his village by the river. Weeping, Edward falls into a trance-like state, staring off into space. Madison leaves but returns the next day to find his former master in the same position. He is even more mentally deteriorated. Madison pulls a letter from his shirt, telling Edward that Nash gave it to him with the admonishment that he deliver it directly to Edward's hand, even if it meant a trip to America. Once having read the letter, Edward declares that he must go to the village where Nash lived and died.

St. Paul's River, October 1842: Nash sharpens his sarcastic tone in his Swan Song letter to Edward. He announces without shame that he has taken three native wives, and although he makes apologies to Edward for offending his white Christian sensitivities, he conveys by mood and tone that he really doesn't give a damn what Edward thinks about it. He also reports that he now (at the time of his death) has six children and is considering a fourth wife as soon as he can afford her. He reports that two open sores are consuming his left leg (perhaps leprosy) and that his wives do all they can to ease the pain and care for him in all ways.

Nash laments the fate of the freed slaves still arriving from America, lauding the harsh country of Liberia as still vastly superior to America because it allows freedom for the black man. He condemns with faint praise the nonchalant manner with which the do-good white men ignore the plight of the slaves they send back to Africa where they are dumped on totally alien shores without further aid. He talks about the process he has gone through to escape the ignorance - the Christianity and high-minded white morality - that has enslaved him most of his life. The former slave claims to still love Christ, but he has had to suspend his faith in the light of the harsh necessity of survival in Africa. He reports that his school is no more, implying the irrelevance and perhaps even evil nature of western education in Africa, and declares that a school will never play a significant part in any community in which he lives.

Nash ends his last letter to Edward on a note of chastisement and bitterness. He accuses his former master of breaking the promises he made when he sent him to Africa and says that if he should meet him in the hereafter, perhaps Edward would be so kind as to enlighten him as to why he abused his loyal adopted son for his own purposes and then expelled him to "...this Liberian paradise." Nash declares that his faith in his father is broken, and although Edward sowed the seed of Christianity in Nash's young mind and it sprouted with vigor, it ultimately withered and died for want of care and attention. Nash announces that, with his total disaffection, Edward's work is now complete. He urges Edward to stay in America and not visit Liberia.

Edward leaves that very day for Nash's settlement on the river, disregarding the advice of Madison. Nonetheless, Madison accompanies him, along with a black boatman and guide. The journey is too long for a single afternoon, so the party spends the night in a village along the way, a small settlement peopled by English-speaking former slaves freed by the society. Edward is appalled by the squalor and filth of the village, and

confused that these well-brought-up blacks would descend to such primitive conditions once freed on African soil. There is only one inside room available, and when Madison defers to his former master by offering to sleep outside by the natives, Edward insists that they share the one available room. Edward shares with Madison his plan to take Nash's six children back to America to assure that they receive a solid Christian education. When asked if he thinks the children will agree to go, Madison replies with a simple "no."

When the boat reaches Nash's settlement, Edward steps out onto a riverbank littered with rusting farm implements and equipment. As he enters the village, the stench, squalor and lethargy and lassitude of its inhabitants overwhelm him. He tries to plant a phony smile on his face, but he is incapable of disguising his disgust. He receives no relief from Madison, who stands aside with an air of nonchalance, refusing to meet his former master's eye and simply letting the place work its evil magic on him. Rooted in place and realizing that he is completely alone in a completely alien world, Edward lets slip his last feeble grip on sanity. His lips begin to move in the words of a hymn, but no sound emerges from the shattered white man. The villagers, who so disgust him, look on with pity at "a fellow being who has lost both his way and his sense of purpose." The last line in the story is, "Madison turned away."

Section 1 "The Pagan Coast" Analysis

Although "The Pagan Coast" is only the first part of Caryl Phillips' novel, it stands alone as an allegorical novella or long short story. It is rich and full with symbolism and character, while paying abbreviated attention to situational detail. The tale itself serves mainly as a framework for a tapestry of feelings, attitudes, beliefs and institutional ignorance. While some of the characterization is stereotypical, Phillips employs his stereotypes artfully as icons representing predispositions, rather than marketing them as real people.

The protagonists represent two perspectives of the slavery issue in the 1800s. Edward is the do-good white man, infused with Caucasian Christian morals and ideals and well puffed-up by his wealth and self-importance, gained at the expense of slaves. He deigns to pity the poor wretches he owns and attempts to elevate them at least to the appearance of white enlightenment and civilization. Nash is the tragic object of this ethnocentric experiment, a slave who embraces the notion of white civility until he discovers that - other than the formal education he receives - it is of little value in the life of a black African.

Standing on the sideline is Madison, once the master's favorite, who represents one of the emotional casualties created by the offhand and frivolous whims of a slave owner with total control over the lives of his chattel. The American Colonization Society is the hypocritical and inflexible attitude of Christians of that era who pretend charity to the black man but remain appalled at the slightest hint of equality. Amelia, Edward's scheming and increasingly demented wife, is a picture of the darkest attitudes of the antebellum South, which obsessively despised all things black and all things African.

Her suicide may represent the ultimate self-destruction of the antebellum lifestyle, a demise triggered by a refusal to deal rationally with the issue of human bondage. This depiction carries shades of Scarlet O'Hara in *Gone with the Wind*.

Charles and the doorman at the society's Monrovian clubhouse represent the somewhat elevated, but still subservient, freed black man. The lethargic American blacks in Monrovia illustrate the folly of expecting lessons learned in a supposed superior society to automatically assure success in a different culture where such knowledge ignores the native ways. The village where Edward spends the night en route to Nash's settlement displays the irrelevance of polished civility in a harsh, primitive environment in which humans must struggle to attain the most fundamental of human needs. Liberia itself, founded by white men as a free nation for the blacks they had enslaved, illustrates the ethnocentric folly of a colonial culture meddling too heavily in the core culture of other societies.

The latter-day Madison is perhaps the only hero in this tale. He is the one bold black man who dares to set out on his own. He takes what works from his white upbringing, leaves the rhetoric and fluff behind, establishes his own company and, with more work than would be required of a white man, ekes out a marginal existence in a free Liberia. The irony in his success is that to survive he must jettison those things most prized by Edward and the society. There is no audience for proselytizing, no time for teaching white manners and no profit in Christianity. Ironically, Madison survives not by carrying a message of redemption and civilization to the heathen natives in the jungle but by honing his crass commercial skills and applying them in the primitive stink hole of urban Monrovia.

In a couple of places, Phillips misses the mark in terms of geographical and historical accuracy. For example, he sets Edward out on his voyage to Monrovia from New York harbor in late November. A violent storm entraps the ship for two weeks, during which Edward becomes violently seasick. That is understandable, but he also contracts the fever, which Phillips previously defined as malaria. One would be even less likely to find a mosquito - without which one cannot contract malaria - on a sailing ship in a cold tempest than in New York Harbor in late November. Phillips may also have a somewhat unrealistic view of the antebellum South when he writes that Edward sent Nash - who was still a black slave at the time - to a college in Virginia. In a state whose laws forbade teaching blacks to read and write, it is unlikely that Edward's slave could matriculate at a university in Virginia. It was, after all, 1964 - more than 100 years later - before James Meredith integrated Old Miss.

The good news is that Phillips' inaccuracies don't mater. *Crossing the River* makes no claim that it is a historic novel. Rather, it is a near lyrical treatment of the black diaspora, and "The Pagan Coast" is pure allegory. Anachronisms are common in many of Shakespeare's works, but none of them detracts from the power of his imagery. Indeed, these oversights in Phillips' book may have been intentional. The malaria serves as a literary device to illustrate how much more difficult the passage from genteel civilization to the harsh Pagan Coast - symbolically a rite of passage - is for the white master than it was for Nash. Nash's unlikely attendance at a Virginia university prior to the Northern

War of Aggression gives him the erudite voice he needs to communicate on an equal intellectual footing with Edward.

Section 2 "West"

Section 2 "West" Summary

The second stand-alone vignette in *Crossing the River,* "West," is the richly symbolic story of Martha, an aging black woman in the South during the years of the California Gold Rush. It begins near its ending with Martha huddled and shivering in a Denver doorway during a blizzard. Martha is conscious but hallucinating, drifting from dream to reality. She envisions herself on a warm beach in California, reunited with her daughter Eliza Mae. As she returns to consciousness, however, she realizes the harshness of her reality and bemoans her loss of faith in God. A mysterious visage, which Martha can barely make out through the snow and her delirium, approaches Martha in her freezing doorway and begins fussing over her, inquiring if she has any family nearby or a place to go. The visage turns out to be a white woman, who apparently wants to help her. After determining that there is no one else to help her, the woman helps Martha to her feet and leads her to a rude, unheated cabin. En route, and after the woman leaves her, Martha continues to relive scenes from her past.

Martha recalls the harsh moment when Lucas, her husband, first informed her that their master was dead. Master Randolph was fairly benign, as slave-owners go. Mr. Randolph left the plantation to his son, a banker from back east, who had no interests in Virginia and liquidated the plantation - slaves included - almost immediately. Martha recalls the slave auction. One itinerate slave trader buys Lucas, and another buys Eliza Mae. Martha goes to a small-farm owner named Hoffman. Less than a year later, the Hoffman farm fails. Mr. Hoffman and his wife, Cleo, decide to go west to California. They argue about what to do with Martha and ultimately decide to sell her to "a good Christian Family." Not willing to face another slave auction, Martha flees to Dodge City, Kansas.

Martha first gets the idea of heading to California from her friend Lucy, another former slave with whom Martha runs a laundry business while in Dodge City. To increase revenue for the business, Martha begins serving meals to the frontiersmen who populate the rowdy city. She falls in love with a charming black cowboy-gambler. Chester lives in a store he won from a white man in a poker game, but he does not operate it as a business. Martha moves in with Chester and opens a restaurant in the unused portion. When Chester is killed in a poker dispute, Martha and Lucy move to Leavenworth to do laundry for the soldiers.

Lucy falls in love and gets married. Her husband tells her about new opportunities for black folk in California, and she heads west with her man, beseeching Martha to come and join her. Martha later begs the black wagon master of a group of blacks headed west to take her with them to California, where she will meet Lucy and find her daughter. She agrees to cook for the trail riders and single men in the wagon train in exchange for passage. She does well at first, but she gradually becomes weaker and sicker. Six weeks into the journey, the wagon master is forced to abandon her in Denver. When the mysterious, God-fearing Christian woman returns to the cold cabin in the morning to find

Martha's corpse, she frets over not having learned her name, determined now to give her a Christian name so that she can receive a Christian burial.

Section 2 "West" Analysis

This vignette introduces a completely new set of characters, a new story line and a new location, and it moves the action forward in time to the California Gold Rush. The central themes of white naivety, ethnocentrism, assumed superiority and well-intentioned but misguided Christianity, however, are essentially unchanged from "Pagan Coast." In this case, the mystery woman in the blizzard in Denver, Colorado is another iteration of the philosophies and values of Edward Williams. In both cases, their efforts have the same result; the black person they are trying to help dies. In both cases, the deaths result from half-hearted charitable efforts intended more to assuage white guilt than to ease black misery. Once again, the utterly insane and irreconcilable contradiction of American Christianity and American slavery end with the black beneficiary paying the ultimate price for white complacency.

When the mystery woman takes Martha out of the blizzard into the rude and cold cabin, she makes a half-hearted attempt to get a fire going in the stove, but she exerts insufficient effort to succeed. Rather than taking the black woman into her own house or some other warm place, or perhaps even providing medical attention, she apologizes for her failure, saying she has done her best. She gives Martha another blanket and leaves her alone to die. Obviously, the woman has the wherewithal to provide the things Martha needs that might save her life. She is willing to go to considerable lengths, even to renaming the black woman, to give her a Christian burial. The form, it seems - the genteel ritual - is more important than the substance of Martha's life. The irony implicit in the fact that the woman never bothers to learn Martha's real name while Martha is still living seems to escape the mystery woman.

Phillips has a remarkable talent for making his points, which are fundamentally offensive to white people, without giving offense. He never becomes pedantic, vitriolic or - at least so far - even directly accusatory. He addresses the highly charged emotional issues surrounding the black diaspora not by rhetoric, but by realistic views of the situation from the perspectives of the various characters. The author never downplays or excuses the parts that the black African slave traders play in the tragedy, nor does he judge the whites who assume a condescending role in relation to blacks. He does not portray his white characters as inherently evil but as dangerously naive, and he does not ignore the fact in this vignette, that it was fellow blacks who left Martha in the Denver doorway during a blizzard. This fair and balanced treatment of an incredibly volatile issue provides the open-minded reader - whatever his or her skin color - an opportunity to rationally view the dynamics of bondage from unfamiliar points of view.

Section 3 "Crossing the River"

Section 3 "Crossing the River" Summary

The title section of Caryl Phillips novel of the black diaspora is a truncated journal, written in the manner of a ship's log. It chronicles the journey of the Duke of York, which sets out from Liverpool on August 24, 1752, bound for the coast of Africa to take on a load of slaves for transportation to America. James Hamilton is the master of the Duke of York and the keeper of the ship's log. The only relief from the terse language of the ship's log are two letters Hamilton pens to his newlywed wife in England, which provide a stark contrast between the brutality of the slave trade and the genteel personal life of an English merchant and trader.

The log begins with a list of the twenty-eight members of the York's crew when they weighed anchor in Liverpool in August. Beside each name is the rank or job of each officer and seaman, and in a third column, the disposition of that person if he is no longer with the ship when it leaves the African Coast the following May. Four of the twenty-eight crewmembers are reported as Discharged, while another four, as well as a number of slaves, are reported to have died. Hamilton records the circumstances leading to these events in greater detail in the narrative of the log.

On September 19, Hamilton reports in the log that William Barber, the ship's cooper, is caught stealing brandy by replacing it with water in its cask and is given 12 lashes. On the 29th of that month, the ship reaches the Canary Islands. On October 6th, the carpenter starts setting the ship up to receive its cargo by moving some of the textiles used as trade goods from the hold to the arms locker so that he can mark off the slave's quarters. He sets up the stateroom to use as a shop once they begin trading. The York reaches Sierra Leone on October13. She passes the ship Halifax, which is almost slaved, meaning she will be leaving Africa soon with a full cargo. When Captain Hamilton goes ashore the following day, he returns to find the crew in a near state of insurrection because of harsh treatment by Mr. Davey, the boatswain. Finding the charges just, Hamilton puts Davey in chains. While ashore, he learns that another ship, the Devon, was taken over by her cargo of slaves and run ashore at the cost of several crewmen's, and some slaves', lives.

Hamilton spends the next three-plus months going ashore to buy slaves or receiving native traders who bring them aboard, usually in lots of ten or fewer. He dutifully reports each purchase, numbering the slaves and describing them as men, women, boys, girls, man-boys or woman-girls. He notes their height if children, their robustness and identifying characteristics. He declines one young woman because she is "long breasted." There is a good deal of competition for quality slaves, and the price is exceptionally high. Hamilton worries about his profit, as the heightened demand is depleting the present crop of slaves on the Gold Coast. Davey acts up again while Hamilton is ashore, so he puts him in irons again and turns him over to be impressed in a man-of-war. Two other crewmen steal a boat and escape, even though they too are

already in irons for neglecting duties ashore, getting drunk and fighting. In December, the skipper takes the ship down the coast, where there is greater danger. He makes an agreement of mutual protection against pirates and other villains with the captain of the Fortune, another slaver. After a tornado, the captain of Fortune dies of a heart attack, and Hamilton discharges Pierce, his first mate, to serve as the ship's new captain.

On January 10th, now 1753, Hamilton writes a letter to his wife while he is at sea, sailing down the coast to trade for more slaves. His head, heart and pen are full of love and tenderness for his new wife as he deplores the crude circumstances of his peculiar trade and longs for the clean, pristine and joyful life his profits will bring him with her and their children-to-be. He pledges his faithfulness to her and comments how the men tease him because of his refusal to join them in debauchery. He reveals that he is only twenty-six years old and that some of his officers view him as little more than a gentleman passenger because he inherited the ship from his recently deceased father. There is some mystery surrounding his father's death. He died in Africa, and the circumstances are murky. Hamilton reiterates his love for his wife, confessing that he is almost in tears as he writes, and re-pledges his fidelity. He signs the letter, "Inviolably Yours, James Hamilton."

In January, things begin to grow even more difficult aboard the York. Hamilton receives word of a slave insurrection aboard a New England sloop, in which two crew and twenty-seven slaves are killed. As a wind begins to blow off the shore, crew and slaves alike succumb to malaria and dysentery. Some live. Some don't. A *barricado* protects crew from cargo, and Hamilton orders six swivel blunderbusses fixed to it to discourage insurrection. Matthew Arthur is the first crewmember to die of fever on March 6. Other ships report that they are nearly fully slaved and are preparing to depart. Prices for slaves become even more exorbitant. The local native king is eager to trade with Hamilton. On March 14, the ship's cook dies of fever. On March 25, a longboat comes aboard the ship with two boy slaves and three old women. He orders the women "disposed of." By April, the fever has reached epidemic proportions among the slaves, and ships are leaving with only partial loads. Hamilton discovers and puts down a fledgling rebellion among the slaves, and he confiscates knives and other weapons. He uses thumbscrews to learn the names of the ringleaders. He puts a crewmember in irons for seducing a pregnant slave in full view of the quarterdeck. On April 20, Hamilton buries two more slaves. On April 21, he buries a third and puts a crewman in irons for stealing brandy. Dysentery and fever continue to claim blacks and whites alike.

On April 25, Hamilton writes his second letter to his wife. He expresses his deep love for her and recounts an idyllic dream he had the night before. In the dream, they are walking together, and he relives the moment that he proposes to her. Hamilton expresses how dear the dream and his memories are to him, as they allow him to escape the ugliness of the slaving business into the human tenderness of his other life. He then tells her the reason that he has been having trouble sleeping. There is a man named Ellis, from whom he has been buying slaves, who knows the circumstances of his father's death. He is entirely unwilling to share them with Hamilton, however, implying that Hamilton's father was involved in something dishonorable before he died. He claims the old man developed a passionate hatred for blacks and that he lost his

"commercial detachment" toward them. Hamilton cannot imagine his father hating his slaves, though he does acknowledge that the old man fervently believed that no Christian could indulge in the trade and continue to call himself such. Hamilton surmises that this internal struggle may have hardened - or completely broken - his father's heart on his last voyage to the Gold Coast. As he nears the close of his letter, he reveals that he has had to put down yet another planned insurrection among the slaves and that he expects his second mate to die soon from the fever.

In Hamilton's final few entries to the published portion of his log, he finishes his trading and sets sail for the Americas. Before he quits Africa, Hamilton puts down yet another attempted insurrection and has to bury a fine girl-woman who dies of the fever. On the next day, April 29, he buries a man slave. On May 1, while provisioning the ship with water for the long voyage home, Hamilton buries another girl slave, and on May 6, a boy slave dies. On the same day, Hamilton reports that they have taken on seven tons of rice for the upcoming voyage. Finally, on May 20, Hamilton declares his trading done and sets sail for the Americas. On the same day, he puts down another slave insurrection, which he believes might have been successful if they had still been tied up and some of his men had been ashore. Thirty slaves managed to slip their shackles, and he found knives and other weapons in the men's quarters. The same day, three women slaves die, and are put overboard. On May 21, Hamilton reports a vicious storm the night before, and notes that the air is so cold that the slaves can neither wash nor dance - their only form of exercise - when they are brought up on deck. Hamilton's final words in the published portion of his log are, "We have lost sight of Africa..."

Section 3 "Crossing the River" Analysis

Caryl Phillips possesses a remarkable talent for building vibrant images in his readers' minds with very few words. His characters are not three-dimensional. Indeed, they are almost iconic - mere sketches of real people. In many cases they just pop into the story line for a cameo appearance, and yet they linger in the readers' mind as the stark representatives of a complex, or often convoluted, philosophy involving religious beliefs and bigotry. In some ways, Phillips is reminiscent of the pre-realist school of Epic novelists, writers such as Eugene Sue, whose rendition of the *Wandering Jew* is populated by characters that represent a single virtue or vice.

In "Crossing the River," for example, the author gives the reader no description whatever of the man named Ellis, other than that he was a trading partner of Hamilton's father. Phillips leaves this character shrouded in secrecy and mystery, the sole repository of the secret of the elder Hamilton's death. He claims Mr. Hamilton lost his "commercial detachment" from the slave trade and developed a passionate hatred for black people. Other hints of the elder Hamilton's character, however, suggest just the opposite, that he may have developed a deep Christian compassion for them. Of all the white characters yet to be introduced, Hamilton's father is the only one who seems to have dealt honestly with the rational impossibility of truly endorsing a Christian belief system while dealing in the purchase and sale of human beings.

Phillips continues to develop characters, iconic though they may be, who are entirely believable in their stark contradictions. Hamilton, for instance, is a good man who is virtuous and undyingly faithful to his new bride. He is a fair businessman and considerate skipper of the Duke of York. Yet, thinking nothing of it, he orders his crew to "dispose" of two useless slaves that are brought to him for sale. Later, he throws two dying boys overboard to prevent the spread of disease. Hamilton personifies the notion of "commercial detachment," which has been constant throughout the first three sections but which is first articulated in this one.

Section 4 "Somewhere in England"

Section 4 "Somewhere in England" Summary

As in the beginning, *Crossing the River* ends with a novella, this one in the voice of a young woman in rural England during the build-up to and duration of World War II. The young woman's name is Joyce, although the name is not revealed until near the end of the work, and she tells her story as if writing in a journal. Most of the action takes place in an English village and nearby town, neither of which is ever named. As with the first novella, "The Pagan Coast," the action flits back and forth between years, rather than proceeding in a strict chronological fashion. Thus, the reader first sees what was and then what eventually becomes, before learning the details that connect the two.

June 1942: The novella begins with the arrival of a detachment of American soldiers in a small village in the English countryside. Although it is not immediately stated overtly, the reactions of the villagers, which are not hostile, but somewhat confused, suggest that the GIs are black. The villagers gather to gawk at this phenomenon as the trucks rumble through their settlement. Joyce sees the Yank soldiers as fearful boys, for they are indeed very young and in an alien place. As she leaves the village square, Joyce comments that she too is an object of curiosity and that some of the villagers are staring at her as she steps back into the shop.

June 1939: Joyce is working as a clerk in a warehouse in the unnamed town. A man, whose name is later revealed as Len, is a regular customer. He seldom says anything, but this time he asks Joyce out for a drink. She goes out with him and begins the courting process. She anticipates her mother's disapproval and paints a picture of her mother as a somewhat bitter old woman who was widowed during the First World War, has become a religious zealot and has always been strict and restrictive with her lonely daughter. Joyce idolizes her father, but she knows him only as a picture of handsome man in a military uniform. As her relationship with Len continues, he stops asking her about her life and begins talking only about himself. He makes a point of telling her that there are not many lasses up in the village where he owns a shop.

August 1939: When Joyce's mother learns of her plans to wed Len, she stops talking to her. She warns her that a war is coming and that he will be called up. No woman should marry a soldier, she warns, lest she become a widow like her. Joyce informs her mother that Len has black lung from working in the mines, and he is not eligible for military service.

June, July, and August 1942: The villagers grumble about how unlucky they are that their village was chosen for the soldiers, but the objection is more cultural than racial. They complain about what they call "Yank arrogance," which Joyce reads as timidity and uncertainty about how to behave in their new environment. For the most part, the GIs keep to themselves. They have their own newspapers and radio broadcasts. Joyce, though, sees more of them than most of the villagers. They sometimes gather in twos

and threes in her shop, which she is running now by herself because Len is in prison for some unspecified offense. The villagers also visit in her shop and make no pretenses about looking down their noses at her. The villagers resent her because they believe she didn't stand by her man when Len went to jail and because, as a shopkeeper, she is responsible for enforcing the hated war-rationing regulations and collecting their coupons for restricted items. Joyce has taken to going down to the pub for a drink in the evenings. To the chagrin of the regulars, she has carved out a corner for herself. From time to time, she has to fend off advances, pointing out that she's not looking for anyone, but just having a drink. She secretly makes fun of the local Home Guard members, who meet in the tavern to play soldier. They talk about building tank traps and preventing German parachutists and gliders from landing in the nearby fields, but for the most part, they drink beer and play at being soldiers. She discerns an underlying sense of guilt about not being in the real Army.

September 1939: Joyce and Len get married at the Registrar's office, one of many wartime marriages as young people hurry to formalize their relationships before the war tears them apart. At the wedding, Joyce's mother warns her that the war is imminent and that they have already been to the town recruiting air-raid wardens. Remembering the First World War, she has already begun hoarding critical supplies. Joyce and Len go off to Wales for their honeymoon, where women of greater means who are vacationing there shun Joyce. They look askance at Len, who emerges as something of a dunce with crude personal habits. On the way back to the village, Len gets lost because all road signs have been removed to foil potential German spies and invaders. They have to spend the night in a stranger's house, where Len embarrasses Joyce with his crude manners. Already, she is regretting her decision to marry him. When they return to the village, they are greeted by a group of refugee children from an unnamed country that has fallen to Hitler. The government pays citizens to take the waifs in, but the villagers complain that it's not enough and say the government should send them back where they came from. Len refuses to let Joyce take in one of the children. By decree of the government, the church bells in England may no longer be rung.

September 1942 through February 1943: A Yank officer named Travis (although he is not actually named until several chapters later) comes into the shop and very timidly strikes up a conversation with Joyce. He explains that the boys in his detachment are timid about mingling with the villagers because they treat them as equals, and they are not used to that. They've been in the village for three months, and it is taking them a while to get used to the customs of the English countryside. Later, on a Sunday, Joyce is standing outside and hears the Yanks singing their Gospel songs and clapping their hands. She notes that no one in England sings that way, as if they really felt what they were singing or as if they really believed it. Joyce no longer attends church, having been smothered by her mother's pompous zealotry.

As the war develops, Joyce is forced to raise the ration points on more and more commodities in the shop, increasing the active dislike the villagers already exhibit toward her. The London papers bemoan the demise of proper standards of behavior as civilians adjust to the hardships of war. In January, Joyce receives a letter from Len stating that when he is released he will sell the shop and that they will move north

where he will take a job. She resolves that she will not go with him. She will stay in the village, even though she doesn't like it there. At least it is a familiar environment where she can eke out a living. In February, two Yank soldiers come into the shop and invite Joyce to a dance they are having at their base. At first she demurs, but eventually she decides to go.

October 1939: Joyce reflects that she has made a terrible mistake by isolating herself in what she refers to as "...a silly little village that is all full of itself." She has been married less than a month and is miserable. Her only respite is to take the once-a-day bus down to the town and visit her mother. Although her mother is distant and unkind, uninterested in Joyce's affairs, but she is at least someone to talk to. She warns with great foreboding about the coming war, assuring Joyce that they will soon be bringing the boys home in boxes, just like the last one. In a rare moment of irony and humor, Joyce's mother puns that no one will be hanging out laundry on the Siegfried Line. She assures Joyce that there will be horrible shortages for those who are left at home.

December 1939 through May 1940: Joyce makes a new friend, Sandra, a village lass whose husband has already been called off to war. She used to work for Len at the shop, but she got pregnant and then married, in that order. She now has a baby boy named Tommy. Joyce wonders if the only reason Len came after her was because he needed someone to work at the shop while he was off at the pub. Sandra is in her early twenties, the same age as Joyce. She notes that most of the other girls have gone off, either to work at the factories or join the military. Joyce remains because the shop provides an essential service, and Sandra stays because she is a new mother.

On New Year's Day of 1940, Joyce rides into the town with Len and one of his cronies to see her mother. Len claims to be traveling on business to justify the use of petrol, but Joyce knows that it's for a binge. As she is walking back into town from her mother's, she notes that all of the metal rails have been torn up for scrap metal to make fighter planes. Another sign of the war is a program that collects pots and pans, which the officials puncture at the moment they are collected to assure that they are not recycled for other than military purposes. Standing around in the cold, shivering and waiting for Len, who is late, Joyce reflects that it is not the first time she has been humiliated by being abandoned.

In March, Joyce notes that Sandra is looking worn and bedraggled. She says it is because her milk has dried up because of worry, but she finally confesses that she is pregnant. The prospective father is one of Len's cronies, a farmer named Terry. A perverse part of Joyce wishes that it were Len. Sandra refuses to consider an alley abortion, and Joyce advises her to write to her husband so that it won't be a surprise when he comes home. Sandra agrees that is the best idea. Joyce remarks on the increasing harshness of the war on civilians, as she has now been ordered to start rationing meat. Later in the month, Joyce reports that Len beat her. She halfway excuses him, thinking it is his frustration at not being in uniform, something she calls "Civvie Street" guilt. She tells him that if he ever raises a hand again, it will be the last time, no matter what the reason, drunk or sober. In May, France falls to Hitler. The government prepares the civilian population for the inevitable invasion. They instruct

people not to run out into the street, or they will be machine-gunned from the air as the Belgians were. The government warns the civilians not to supply the Germans with food, petrol or maps. Joyce thinks the government warnings are silly and transparent.

February 1943: Joyce laments that she has nothing to wear to the dance, and lacks the money to buy something new. She decides a plain dress and flat shoes will do. When she stands in front of the mirror and smiles, she notice that it takes the smile lines a little less time to set and that they linger longer. The soldiers are billeted at the estate of the well-to-do Toff family, which has moved on for the duration of the war. It is a stately surrounding for the dance, and the Yanks have done a creditable job of decorating. The first thing Joyce sees is the food, a veritable cornucopia of scarce delicacies. There are chocolates, lemons, grapefruit, beefsteaks, salami and canned peaches. At first everyone is nervous. The girls all sit on one side of the hall, and the boys stand on the other. No one dances through the gramophone prelude, but when the band begins to play, Joyce breaks the ice by walking across the hall and asking the yet-to-be-identified Travis to dance. The others follow suit. The other girls are from the town, either factory workers, Army or Home Guard. The dance is a huge success, and when the girls leave, the Yanks give them chocolate and fruit without realizing how precious such treasures are to English civilians living under strict rationing regulations. Joyce describes the treats as "lumps of gold."

June 1940: The British soldiers begin to rotate home after a tour on the frontlines, with faces drawn and defeated. Joyce notices how young they are, just boys, tattered and in shirtsleeves instead of uniforms. They are returning from Dunkirk, and Joyce curses Churchill as a fat bastard for trying to turn it into some sort of great victory. She is listening to the wireless with Len. She condemns it all as propaganda and wants to turn it off, but Len is under the same "Winnie Spell" as the rest of England. Joyce prides herself on being able to tell the difference between the official stories and the facts before her eyes.

March 1943: Joyce finds herself wondering about Travis, who has not been by the shop since the dance. She reflects that the Yanks have no idea how much the gifts of chocolate, cigarettes and fruit meant to the girls who went to the dance. The morning after the dance Joyce wakes up thinking of Travis, and now she chides herself for wondering why he hasn't been by. Later that day, however, he comes into the shop, and all is well. He brings her a bouquet of daffodils that he picked along the way.

June 1940: Joyce suspects that Len is trying to impress her when he joins the Local Defense Volunteers (LDV), which villagers and participants alike refer to as Look, Duck and Vanish. An Army instructor comes to the village to teach the volunteers how to say "hands up!" in German and identify different types of aircraft. One day, while serving Land Army girls in the shop, Joyce hears a shot. She knows immediately what has happened. Returning from the war to find his wife pregnant by another man, Sandra's husband has killed her with a hunting rifle. She is on the floor in a pool of blood, while her husband is dumbfounded and senseless. He goes without resistance with the policemen. Later that evening, Joyce sees Len sitting in the pub with his friend Terry, the farmer, the man Joyce reasons Sandra's husband should have shot. When invited to

join them, Sandra refuses to drink in Terry's presence. She decides at that moment that she never wants Len near her again, ever.

July 1940: A month after Sandra dies, Joyce and Len are in the shop when the police inspector shows up. Len panics and orders Joyce to go out the back, taking all of the eggs with her. She does as she is told, running into the woods with the contraband. Instead of hiding the illegal eggs, however, she delightfully throws them into the stream one by one, laughing all the time. The government has passed an edict that no one in England shall eat eggs. All eggs are to be used only for hatching to increase the meat supply during the war. There is a thriving black market in fresh eggs, but Len takes the effort to the extreme, forming a conspiracy between growers, himself and his customers. Later that night, Joyce sees Len in the pub and tells him what she did with the eggs. He thinks she is joking and laughs along with her, but she knows he'll want to punish her when he discovers she is telling the truth. Joyce decides that she would be better off leaving Len and going down to work in a factory or joining the women's Army.

September 1940: The battle of Britain is still raging in London. The popular sentiment is that England is losing the war. Even Len, a Churchill supporter, thinks the government is not telling the people how bad it really is. The newspapers and radio heavily satirize Hitler, trying to keep spirits up.

November 1940: Chamberlain dies. Joyce is mending the shop's blackout curtains after being warned by the village bobby that light is leaking out at night. While mending, she comes across a sock doll she was making for Tommy, Sandra's little boy, and decides to finish it.

December 1940: On a Thursday night, a popular going-out night in the village, the Germans bomb the town as the villagers stand on a ridge and watch the fireworks. The anti-aircraft guns open up, trying to prevent the bombers from reaching the steelworks in the town. Soon the bombs start falling, and the town is ablaze. On the Ridge in the village, the vicar says a prayer, which Joyce sees as insipid and cowardly. She is not friendly toward Christian doctrine, feeling that God has abandoned her and does not care about her. The day after the bombing, Joyce goes down to the town to look after her mother. On the way to her mother's house, she witnesses the wreckage of the town with all of the familiar landmarks destroyed or changed. She sees people wandering in a state of shock, including a woman with a birdcage wandering and singing "It's a Long, Long Way to Tipperary." The house where Joyce's mother lived has collapsed. She is dead and has been taken with others to an emergency morgue. Rescue workers are still looking for bodies and survivors, and a warden known to Joyce tells her that her mother refused to go to a shelter, claiming this was the first war in which she had a front row seat and that she wasn't going to miss it. Joyce's mother is buried in a common grave with two others on Christmas Eve.

January and February 1941: Joyce reads in the newspaper that the King and Queen visited the town and talked with the survivors. All she can remember is the smell of chemical toilets and the destruction. In February, Len, who never attended the funeral, accuses Joyce of being responsible for her mother's death by abandoning her to come

and live in the village with him. Joyce vows to play daughter from that point on, going to visit her mother's grave on the first Sunday of every month.

July 1936: Having been forced to quit school to go to work in a factory by her mother, Joyce laments that everyone else she works with is going off somewhere for the summer vacation. Joyce's only escape from loneliness and her mother's harping is reading, and her mother is constantly harping at her about that. She says that Joyce should be reading only the Bible and that all else is a waste of time. Joyce believes that her coworkers think she is coy because she's not very good looking, but it is really because of her mother that she doesn't go anywhere.

Christmas 1936: Joyce is working at a theater tearing tickets in addition to her job at the factory, mainly to keep her out of the house a bit longer each day. She meets Herbert, an actor - an older man - and begins going out with him.

April and May 1937: When Herbert returns to London, he soon stops answering Joyce's letters. She discovers that she is pregnant. One night, her mother hears her crying and comes into the room to see what the noise is. She doesn't even ask her daughter what the problem is. She is just curious about the noise. Joyce says she would have told her mother, if she's asked, but she didn't. The desperately lonely girl, at the time eighteen years old, procures a back-alley abortion. After the ordeal, she starts going to church with her mother, but she finds no solace in Christianity.

Christmas 1937: Joyce flees the town where her mother lives for London in pursuit of Herbert, whom she loves desperately. She tracks him down at a London theater where he is working. After the show, they go to a pub, where he confesses that he is married and has two children. He buys her a couple of drinks and then goes to the bar to fetch some confection. He never returns. Joyce sits quietly in the corner crying until the pub closes.

February 1938: After the ordeal in London, Joyce returns to her mother's house and takes a new job in a food warehouse that imports goods from all over England and abroad. Her job is to greet people and talk them up so they will buy more. She hates the public relations aspect of the job, and she is not doing well because she doesn't enjoy talking to others. She is trying to get back into books, but she is finding it difficult to read. This is her situation when she meets Len.

September 1941: Joyce has now been married to Len for two years, and she is dismally unhappy living in the village. She resigns herself to the fact that she will never like living there, but she takes some solace in not pretending. She comments that Len never talks about his parents, until one night in the pub he goes on about them until he is on the verge of tears. He doesn't cry, however, and comes home later talking nonsense. Joyce knows that she and Len are not really married, and they never will be.

December 1941: Len is in prison now for his activities in the black market. He went into the illegal egg business on too grand a scale for the authorities to ignore. His farmer friend Terry also goes to prison with him. Joyce is relieved that now she knows she will

never have to share her bed again with Len. Joyce is also relieved that she will not have to go into the military. The authorities were about to classify her as mobile, declaring that Len could take care of the shop on his own.

April through July 1943:Travis happens into the shop bearing daffodils on the first Sunday of April, just as Joyce is preparing to go visit her mother's grave in the town. He accepts her invitation to join her, taking the flowers for the grave. Travis tells Joyce a little about himself, but she is reluctant to ask questions because she knows very little about Yanks and even less about the people that the English term "coloureds." At the grave, Joyce declines to say a prayer, but she doesn't mind that Travis says one. Joyce begins to really enjoy herself and invites Travis to go to the pictures with her. They are late and miss the once-a-day bus back to the village. They begin walking and are picked up by some Yank MPs. They drop Joyce off at the shop and then take Travis out of sight where they beat him badly with their batons. When they take him back to the camp, they report that he was drunk and disorderly. Later Joyce finds herself dreaming about her new friend, and she becomes worried when he doesn't stop by the shop.

When Joyce learns that Travis is being punished and restricted to base, she charges up to the compound and demands to see the commanding officer. She makes an impassioned case that Travis is being punished for something that he didn't do and that, in any case, was her fault. In June, when Travis comes into the shop, Joyce lets out a little scream of delight. Travis tells her how grateful he is for her support with the authorities. He tells her that the Army only likes to use the colored troops for cleaning and dirty details. She invites Travis to the pub with her, and after watching the sunset, they retire to her room above the shop. After they have tea, he leaves, and Joyce is enamored of his lingering scent and other subtle evidence of his recent presence. In July, the allies arrest Mussolini, and the Yank soldiers learn they'll probably have to go to Italy to clean up. The landlord brings out the monthly ration of whiskey to celebrate the good news in Italy and comments that he will miss the Yanks.

December 1943: Len comes home from prison and announces that he is going to sell the shop and take them north where he has a job. Joyce stands up to him and says that the shop is half hers, and she will not agree to sell it. Len tells Joyce that he has heard that she has a Yank friend, and she acknowledges that indeed she does. In fact, she says, she was hoping he would find out. He orders her not to see him anymore, nor any of the other Yanks. She tells him to bugger off, and he beats her. Later, Joyce goes down to the pub. Len is there with his cronies, and Travis is there with his friends. Joyce pointedly walks over to Travis and sits with him, and she casts a glare at Len. Then, she tenderly touches Travis' hand and leaves. Travis has figured out that the strange man in the pub is Joyce's husband. Joyce's face is battered, and the only thing she says to Travis is that she just wanted him to know.

February and March 1944: Len attacks Joyce in public and begins punching her. Suddenly Travis is there and punches Len to the ground. He gets up, but Travis knocks him down again. Then, Travis' friends are pulling him away from Len, saying that is enough. Len continues to spew out epithets and ugly words, trying to appear brave, but it is clear that he is no match for Travis. Len finally agrees to a divorce and moves north

to a new job. He says that Joyce may continue to run the shop, but she must send him a share of the profits. Before he leaves, Len tells Joyce that she is a traitor to her own kind and no better than a common slut. Everyone in the village seems to agree with Len.

July 1944: Travis and Joyce agree to marry as soon as Joyce's divorce is final. Travis goes off to war in Italy. Joyce confirms with the doctor that she is pregnant. She reflects that this condition will allow her to draw extra rations, including three eggs per week, an additional pint of milk per day, free cod-liver oil and chocolate-covered vitamin tablets. Of course, she will also have a baby.

May 8 1945: The war is over in England. Joyce names her son Greer, and he sleeps through the celebration. Churchill claims that it is a "people's victory," but Joyce knows that it is Churchill's victory.

1963: Joyce stares at Greer, a fine, handsome young man. This is the first time she has seen him since right after the war, when the woman from the County Council comes to take him away to be raised as a war orphan. Travis is dead in Italy. Len returns from the north and puts Joyce out. She is penniless and the mother of one of many babies fathered by Yankee soldiers - both white and black - who have either died or returned to America. As she stares at her son, she reflects that she no longer has even a picture of her father. She destroyed everything when she met her current husband, Alan. She apologizes silently to Travis, whom she still loves, and longs to pull her son to her and hug him, but she hasn't that right. Greer's presence in her life now - a life in which she has two other younger children - would be awkward. They both know it, and he seems to accept it.

New Year's Day 1945: New Year's of 1945 is the only time Joyce sees Travis after he goes to Italy. The Army gives him compassionate leave just one week before Greer is born, and the doctor tells them that Joyce is having both a baby and a breakdown. The couple is wed in a simple ceremony in front of a registrar. A condition of the Army's permission for Travis to wed is that he will not take her back to the U.S. with him. Mixed marriages are not appropriate there.

The Voice of Africa speaks again, as it does at the beginning of the novel *Crossing the River*. Africa surveys her children, cast to the far reaches of the earth, in a lyrical voice, to the background rhythm of a beating drum coming from the far side of the river. As Africa listens, "...a many-tongued chorus of common memory begins to swell." Africa acknowledges Joyce as one of her own and notes that the other survivors will not face Captain Hamilton's thumbscrews and neck-yokes unless they panic. Africa makes note of the addicted mother in Brooklyn who has lost her benefits and lives without the comfort of religion, electricity or money. She, Africa, recognizes the young man who does his last fix and dies in an Oakland project. She acknowledges her children in Sao Palo and Santa Domingo and watches as an eleven-year-old girl prepares herself for another night of prostitution. She revisits the characters of the novel: Nash, Martha, Travis and Joyce. She listens to the many strains of black music around the world, jazz and reggae. For two hundred and fifty years, Africa has listened to the voices of Papa

Doc and Baby Doc and has heard sketches of Spain in Harlem. She has listened to Martin Luther King and his dream. In despair, Africa concedes that her children will not be coming home - back across the river.

Section 4 "Somewhere in England" Analysis

In the novella "Somewhere in England," Caryl Phillips paints a picture of World War II and the few years preceding it from the prospective of a nondescript, lower-middleclass young woman. Joyce is bright but depressed and curious but oppressed by a stuffy English caste system and a disinterested, domineering, self-involved and pompous mother. Her spirit is trapped in a system that lures her into desperate attempts to escape through tawdry romantic adventures, in which she is badly used by immature and self-serving men. She tastes happiness only for a moment, when she falls in love with a black American soldier, who has been used even more cruelly than she has. This touching love story ends as it begins, in tragedy and complacency with a fundamentally cruel social order. Joyce's spirit becomes African through her love for Travis, and she is welcomed into the fold of survivors by the ethereal voice that introduces and concludes the novel.

The most persistent theme throughout *Crossing the River* seems to be the irrelevance of Christianity to the very people it is supposed to comfort, the meek and the humble. This final section generalizes that theme, separating it from the sub-theme of the inhumanity of the African slave trade and its aftermath. Unlike the other three sections, the most pitiable victim is not black, but white. Turning the table on the previous victim-characters, Phillips paints Joyce as the napf, while Travis is worldly and knowledgeable. He has already learned the cruelty of small-minded white men, as evidenced in his encounters with the MPs who beat him and his condescending white superiors in the U.S. Army. Travis knows that he will never be able to take his war bride home with him, for official America does not condone mixed marriages, at least not black and white mixed marriages. Joyce, though, is ignorant of such ingrained bigotry, and she takes little notice of Travis' blackness until she learns of American attitudes from him. Indeed, Joyce and the other villagers are initially put off, not by the fact that the GIs are black, but because they are Yanks. What they interpret as arrogance and standoffishness is in fact timidity and trepidation at being treated as equals by whites.

When taken piece by piece, *Crossing the River* might almost be considered an anthology of works, turned out by the author at odd moments. Indeed, Phillips may have created each piece as a separate entity, without the immediate intent of someday weaving them together into a novel. Nonetheless, it seems likely that at some level - perhaps subconsciously at first - the author knew that each of these short works was but a sub-component of a much grander creation. The sum is markedly greater than the whole. Having finished the work, the reader is left with a sense of the entire African diaspora, which spans more than 250 years and continues today. None of the black characters know any of the other characters from the other three sections. They live in different times, in different generations and in different countries on different continents. Yet they are all related, perhaps by blood, but certainly by spirit, experience and genetic

knowledge. They are all oppressed, betrayed and strong in the face of barely imaginable hardship.

Perhaps Caryl Phillips' greatest achievement is that in this work he condemns an entire system of human bondage and oppression without playing favorites. Although hatred of whites may manifest itself to some degree in some of Phillips' characters, it does not spill over into editorial vitriol. Phillips is a black man, but he does not fall into the role of victim. The white characters he draws are portrayed without bias. Even the slave trader, Hamilton, in an earlier section is not portrayed as a mean and vicious man, but as very moral and proper in all matters except the commerce of bondage. He is a victim of the same system as the blacks from whom he buys blacks and the blacks whom he buys. His physical condition is better, of course, adorned with the niceties of English society, but the fate of his father foreshadows great emotional guilt and sorrow if he continues in his trade. Phillips cleverly reverses that condition in "Somewhere in England," in which the black Yank soldiers become the ones who are rich in material goods when contrasted against the stark shortages of an England at war. The point he makes is that it is not goods and luxuries that measure happiness, but freedom, equality and respect.

Phillips does not outwardly condemn whites for their part in slavery, any more than he condemns the Africans involved on the selling end of the trade. He does condemn the religious belief system, however, that allows men to practice a trade so clearly contradictory to its own core values. Actually, he does not condemn the doctrine itself. In fact, he lauds it in places, but he does condemn the practice of it. He seems to conclude that, as practiced, white Christianity fails utterly as a system of maintaining equitable social order in any society that defines itself by establishing various classes of citizens.

Characters

The Voice of Africa

Crossing the River opens and closes with a very brief but highly lyrical narration from the shore of the River, which is actually the Atlantic Ocean. In the opening, the voice ostensibly emanates from an old man who is forced to sell his children into slavery, but as the narration develops, it becomes clear that it is the continent itself that is pondering the diaspora of its many children to many far places over many years. In the final narration, it is clear that the diaspora continues but that the strong descendents of Africa's Children will survive - as long as they don't panic.

Edward Williams

Edward is the rich owner of a 300-slave tobacco plantation who, moved by his Christian values, is involved in a scheme to liberate selected slaves who display an aptitude for education and Christian values and repatriate them to the American colony of Liberia. Born in 1780, Edward is a devout man. He has known nothing but a society built on the system human bondage, the key economic underpinning of the antebellum South. He views his slaves and the entire black race from a kind but condescending perspective. He recognizes blacks as humans and decries the cruelty of slavery, but he participates in it even as he is protesting it. Edward has fallen under the spell of the American Colonization Society, which is the operational agency of the effort to transport former slaves to Liberia. Perhaps founded by well-meaning Christians, the society has slipped into corruption and complacency, especially among its representatives in Africa.

When Edward first becomes involved with the society, he "adopts" a boy named Madison from the slave quarters. He brings him into his house to raise up as a genteel Christian. Apparently, to prove his sincerity, Edward gives the boy the last name of Williams. In his first display of what seems to be a capricious disregard for the humanity of the blacks he seeks to improve, Edward soon supplants Madison with Nash, a younger and even more promising slave boy. Stung by his master's favoritism for Nash, Madison returns to the slave quarters and proceeds to educate himself without his master's help.

When Nash is grown, Edward sends him to Liberia as a Christian missionary, where he is to carry the Gospel into the interior, establish a mission and found a Christian school. Edward fails to respond to Nash's many letters from Africa, however, which plead for tools, seeds, books and other materials he needs to westernize the tribal natives he is working with. Edward's wife Amelia, however, is unbalanced and conniving. She intercepts all but one of Nash's letters to his former master, so he never sees them. Nash, as a result, reasons that he has been abandoned and turns to native ways, condemning the white man's religion as irrelevant to blacks. Edward eventually travels to Africa, where Nash dies a few days before Edward gets to his village. Edward is left

speechless and dumbstruck by the utter failure of his grandiose and well-intentioned efforts.

Nash Williams

Nash is Edward's favorite adopted slave, whom Edward removes from his parents at an early age and integrates into the Williams household. Edward assumes that natural maternal ties between Nash and his mother are irrelevant, compared to the glory of being raised in a white Christian household. For his part, Nash has little opportunity to assume any attitude other than one of near-worship of his master who, in defiance of white society's conventions, raises him to such an elevated status as the adopted son of the master. The reader first meets Nash in a series of letters from Liberia, during which his faith in the Christian God and in his good master gradually diminishes to sarcasm and resentment. Even during his worst days of disillusionment, however, Nash remains erudite in his use of the language and grateful for the college education Edward provided for him. Up until the last, Nash longs to visit America one more time, to visit his benefactor, his natural mother and the friends he left behind. In the end, however, he dies embittered, commanding Edward not to visit Africa.

Nash's disillusionment begins the moment he sets foot in Monrovia, the capital of Liberia. Edward was to have left money with an agent there to help get Nash started, but the man denies any knowledge of it. Nash looks around him in this new land of black liberty and observes that those of the society's charges who remained in the city have fallen into drunkenness, theft and general debauchery. Determined to succeed in his mission for the sake of his benefactor, Nash sets out up the river to establish a Christian settlement. In all but his last letters to Edward, Nash expresses a strong faith in Jesus and a determination to carry through with the assignment he has been given. Unbeknownst to Nash, Edward's sinister wife is intercepting all of his correspondence, so Edward never reads the letters. Nash eventually interprets this silence as abandonment. In the end, Nash dies an ignoble death, a victim of Edward's self-serving charity and his own naivety.

Madison Williams

Madison is the first slave Edward adopts as a boy and brings into his household for a Christian education and upbringing. Madison is devoted to Edward until the slave owner brings Nash into the house and begins favoring him, unmindful that he is hurting Madison. A proud young man, Madison elects to take what he has been taught of genteel ways in the big house and return to the slave quarters of his own volition. There, he applies an industrious mind to learning those things he has to know to qualify for passage to Liberia. When he feels himself ready, he presents himself to Edward who, still baffled by Madison's return to the slave quarters, grants him what he wants.

Although Nash is a far more central character in "The Pagan Coast," Madison is the more successful. Rather than going into the interior to proselytize to disinterested

natives, Madison stays in the capital city, Monrovia, and builds up a modest trading business. The unspoken message seems to be that Madison, who chooses to learn and develop his knowledge and skills of white commerce and economics is far better equipped to survive in a white-controlled black world than Nash is among the pagans.

Amelia Williams

Amelia is Edward's deceased wife, who sabotages Edward's relationship with Nash by intercepting and destroying the former slave's letters. She appears only in Edward's memories and Nash's greetings in the unread letters he writes to Edward. In spite of her ethereal presence, Amelia plays a strong symbolic role in "The Pagan Coast." She is the icon of the shallow antebellum belle - a creature with little substance, driven by appearances and make-believe. Amelia hates all things black, and she is shamed by Edward's involvement with the American Colonization Society. Eventually, Amelia goes totally 'round the bend, leaves Edward, isolates herself from everyone and eventually commits suicide. In his days of fevered delirium in Africa, Edward is still unable to forgive her and has satisfying dreams of Amelia suffering terribly. Then, he prays for forgiveness when he awakens.

Charles

Charles is another former slave, freed by the society, who has become a bondsman in Monrovia. Edward engages Charles to carry his baggage, run errands and locate Madison, who is Edward's eventual link with Nash. Charles serves as another icon of former slaves who have been liberated to menial existence in Liberia.

Sierra Leone's Unnamed British Surgeon

The cameo character of the British surgeon, who nurses Edward through two bouts of malaria as he is acclimating to Africa, provides insights into the tenuous relationship between England and the U.S. in this period between the War of 1812 and the American Civil War. Ignoring the frosty relations between England and the United States, the surgeon befriends Edward - English-speaking gentlemen thrown together on a barbarian shore, bound by their white civility. England has banished slavery within the empire and yet still freely trades in human cargo with the Americans, Spanish, Portuguese and Arabs.

Martha Randolph

Martha is an old runaway slave when the reader first meets her huddled in a Denver shop doorway during a blizzard. She is sick and dying, having been deposited in her current situation by other free blacks headed from Kansas to California during the Gold Rush in the mid-1800s. During the last hours of her life, she recalls the highlights and tragedies of her life in her increasingly demented mind.

Martha relives the horrible day when she, her husband and daughter are sold at auction in Virginia. The family's first master is kind to them and treats them as decently as a slave-owner might treat his slaves. When he dies, he leaves the plantation to his son from the east, who is a banker and cares nothing for the South or the ways of Southern people. He is interested only in getting rid of the plantation, taking as much money as he can get for it and getting on about his business. Because of this, the slaves are sold separately from the farm. Martha goes to a couple who owns a small farm, while her husband goes "downriver," where he will likely be worked to death in a few years. Her daughter is sold to a slave trader.

When Martha's new owners' farm fails, they decide to sell Martha again. Rather than going on the block again, Martha flees to Dodge City, where she meets up with Lucy, another runaway who runs a laundry in that wild boomtown. Martha falls in love with a black cowboy and goes to live with him in a store he wins in a poker game. She turns the store into a successful cafy for weary cowboys, and she is making a decent life for herself until Chester, her man, is gunned down in a gambling dispute. Martha and Lucy flee to Leavenworth, a less boisterous and more civilized city, and go back into business together.

Lucy falls in love and goes off to California with her new husband, and Martha slowly retreats into her memories and imagination. She develops the idea that her daughter, Eliza Mae, is living happily in California and determines to follow Lucy there. By this time she is growing old and weak. She begs her way onto a wagon train of blacks headed west, and she does relatively well cooking and laundering for the single men. After six weeks, she is abandoned in the Denver doorway, where a mystery white woman finds her and takes her to the rude cabin where she dies.

The Mystery Woman

A white woman, who fancies herself a righteous Christian, finds Martha huddled in a doorway during a blizzard in Denver, where the men from the wagon train have abandoned her. Martha never gets a clear look at this mystery Samaritan through the driving snow and her dementia, but at times she believes the woman is Eliza Mae. This mystery woman leads Martha to a rude, cold shelter, making only a half-hearted and futile attempt to get a fire going in the stove. The woman returns in the morning to discover Martha's corpse. She feels something akin to pity for the black woman she tried to help, and she is perplexed that she never bothered to learn her name. She wonders what the old slave's name might have been and concludes that she must come up with a "Christian name" so that she that "...we can give her a Christian burial." Thus, Martha attains a status in white eyes with her death that she never achieved in life.

Chester

Chester is a flashy, charming black cowboy and gambler who sweeps Martha off her feet in Dodge City. Martha moves in with Chester, who lives in a store he won from a

white man in a poker game. Chester is a good man, and they have a good life until three white men gun Chester down, settling an old grudge. Some months before his death, Chester catches the three men and one of their friends cheating at cards. In the original conflict, Chester kills the fourth man. The marshal rules that Chester acted in self-defense, and he does not charge Chester with a crime. The original victim's three partners return to Dodge, however, to even the score. After Chester's death, Martha goes to Leavenworth to start over.

Lucy

Lucy is never described in much detail, and she is in the segment merely as a sounding board off which Martha is able to reflect her story. Clearly, though, she is a good woman, kind and giving, and she feels some guilt about leaving Martha to pursue happiness on her own with her new husband. She strongly encourages Martha to follow them to the Golden State.

Cleo Hoffman

The wife of Martha's second owner is another do-good Christian who fancies herself a friend of the Negro. She is not such a friend, however, that she will not sell Martha to help finance the family's trek to California.

Eliza Mae

Eliza Mae is Martha's daughter, who was separated from her the first time Martha was sold and whom Martha believes - without any rational evidence - to be living in California.

James Hamilton

Master of the trade ship the Duke of York, James Hamilton is an upstanding young English merchant who deals in human bondage. He is bound by keen business scruples and Christian ethics in all of his civilized dealings. He is aware of the inconsistency between this trade and his Christian beliefs, something that drove his father mad and was eventually responsible for his death. However, the inner conflict is not yet mature enough to dissuade James from his business. In 1752, Hamilton sets out from Liverpool for the Gold Coast of Africa to fill his ship with slaves for resale in the Americas. He keeps a meticulous log of events, and his entries constitute the bulk of the title section of Phillips' novel.

Hamilton describes a treacherous voyage hampered by heavy weather and torturous sun. Most of his monologue occurs while the ship is off the shore of Africa, which consumes the bulk of its nine-month absence from England. The time and energies of Hamilton and the crew are spent largely on the task of procuring slaves. Black slave

traders bring some cargo out to the ship in canoes, where they barter with Hamilton. Other times, the crew travels inland by river to deal with tribal potentates. It is a seller's market in Africa that year, and prices are high.

As time progresses, more and more whites and blacks fall ill of the deadly fever and die. Hamilton is occupied, not only by business, but also by maintaining order among the crew. He must deal with drunkenness, debauchery and desertions. He must also deal with major modifications to the ship to handle the human cargo in the hold. The constant threat of slave rebellion looms over the ship, and James manages to stop several before they develop into bloodshed. Hamilton is young, and he does not yet have the respect of his crew. He will not join them in drink or debauchery, and they see this as youthful weakness. The only relief from the terse and often harsh entries Hamilton makes in his log are the two letters he writes to his wife, expressing a pure love and undying fidelity that belie the nature of his task.

The Crew of the Duke of York

Although Hamilton spends a good deal of time describing the actions of his crew in his log, he provides few details that define them as individuals. These details taken together, however, tend to describe a single character of many parts - "the crew." Hamilton describes some as trustworthy and others as conniving. Some are hard workers, while others are malingerers. Some are sober, but more are drunken. Their names are mentioned in the log, but only briefly and in connection with specific incidents.

Several men steal alcohol, which renders them clapped in irons and flogged. One crewman, the boatswain named George Davy, is particularly troublesome. Whenever Hamilton goes ashore and leaves the ship in Davy's charge, the boatswain abuses the crew, creating a mutinous atmosphere. The second time Davy does this, Hamilton claps him in irons until he encounters a British Ship of the Line. Hamilton turns Davy over to that ship and its strict military discipline. John Pierce, the first mate, is another notable crewman. He is loyal and efficient, but when the skipper of another slave ship dies of a heart attack, Hamilton gives Pierce up to captain that ship back to England.

The Slaves on the Duke of York

As with the crew, Hamilton deals with slaves as part of the ship's operation, specifically, the cargo. Curiously, he seldom writes the word "slave" in his log, referring to them in such terms as man child, woman child, girl, boy, man and woman, usually accompanied with some notation of their physical condition, such as tall, short, hardy, young or old. Some slaves are black while others are brown, and he refuses to buy one woman because she is "long-breasted." Once purchased, each slave is assigned a number, and if they make their way into the log - by dying, for example - that is how they are designated. When Hamilton uses thumbscrews to elicit information about an attempted rebellion, he does not designate the victims even by number, but simply as participants.

Captain Jackson

Captain Jackson is the old and ailing master of the Fortune, who was a friend and colleague of Hamilton's father. He is also anchored off the Gold coast, "slaving up" for the return trip to England. He is almost fully slaved when Hamilton meets up with him, but there is little cargo available in the part of the coast they are working. They form a mutual protection pact to move further down the coast, where there is great danger from pirates and black insurrection, but where it is rumored that more slaves are available. Captain Jackson dies of a heart attack during a ferocious storm and is replaced by Hamilton's first mate, John Pierce.

Mr. Ellis

Mr. Ellis is a white man of questionable repute, an African-based slave broker who has dealt with Hamilton's father in the past. He promises to fill out Hamilton's cargo if he will linger near his base of operations down the coast from where he began trading, but he is slow to deliver. His value to the story is not so much that he is a slave dealer but that he knows the carefully guarded secret of the death of Hamilton's father some months previously. Ellis refuses to reveal the secret to the young man, which Hamilton views as a slight because of his youth and napvety. He implies in strong terms, however, that Hamilton's father died in shameful circumstances and that no man with the name Hamilton could be considered a Christian by righteous folk. He says that the young man's father lost his commercial detachment from the slave trade and developed a passionate hatred for all blacks. Hamilton doubts this interpretation, however, since his father was always conscious and vocal about the impossibility of maintaining a true Christian life and continuing to deal in the commerce of human bondage.

Joyce

Joyce is a simple English country girl living with her neurotic mother, who seeks refuge in religion as a means of dealing with the loss of Joyce's father in the First World War. In her grief, Joyce's mother is self-possessed and, although restrictive and domineering, pays little attention to Joyce other than to chastise her. Joyce is not a happy young woman. She is bright and loves to read, but her mother forces her to leave high school before graduation to go to work in a factory. Joyce's mother never allows her daughter to go out with her coworkers or go off on summer vacation when they do. Joyce isolates herself from others and escapes into her reading.

In 1936, when Joyce is eighteen years old, she takes a second job collecting tickets at a local theater. She falls in love with one of the actors, who turns out to be a cad and abandons her, pregnant, when he returns to London. She follows him to London, where her lover leaves her sitting in a bar. She procures a back-alley abortion and returns to live with her mother more devastated than ever. She wins her mother's favor by going to church with her and takes a new job in a food-import warehouse, where she writes

orders for the retailers who buy goods there. She meets Len, who owns a shop in a nearby village, and begins to date him.

Eventually, Joyce marries Len and goes to live in his village. There is an encampment of black American GIs nearby, and she meets some of them working in Len's shop. Len is not a good husband. He is rather slow and abusive. He is arrested and goes to prison for dealing in the black market during World War II. While Len is locked up, Joyce befriends Travis, a black officer from the American camp. When Len comes home, Joyce divorces him and marries Travis. She is near-term pregnant by the time the divorce is final, when she is able to wed. She has been running the village shop while Len worked at a job further north, where he went when he was released from prison. After her marriage to Travis, Joyce gives birth to Greer. Travis is killed in action in Italy, and Len comes back to the village to claim his shop. The children's authority in England takes Greer away from Joyce as a war orphan. In the near-final lines of *Crossing the River,* Greer, an eighteen-year-old young man, visits Joyce, who is now married to a proper Englishman.

Len

Len is a bit of a simpleton who has black lung disease and is therefore ineligible for military service. He is self-conscious about the fact that he is not in uniform, and he is always posturing as the tough guy with his cronies. They too are exempt from the military, owing to their essential civilian occupations. Len used to employ a girl named Sandy at his shop, who quit when she became pregnant and married, in that order. Shortly thereafter, Len begins courting Joyce, whom he meets at the warehouse when he picks up goods for his shop. After Joyce meets Sandy, her only female friend in the village, she suspects that Len came courting because he needed someone to work in the shop.

From the beginning, Len is an inept and inattentive husband. He gets lost returning from Wales on their honeymoon and then embarrasses Joyce in front of the lady who is kind enough to put them up for the night when he tries to pay her with ration coupons. Len quickly falls into a pattern of ignoring Joyce and running off to the pub to drink away the day and evening while she minds the shop. Eventually, he becomes abusive, and on two occasions, he beats Joyce in a drunken rage. Len goes to prison for dealing on the black market through his shop. When he returns from prison to learn that Joyce has taken up with Travis, he attacks Travis and suffers a humiliating defeat.

Travis

Little is said about Travis's background other than that he is a black officer in the U.S. Army serving in England. He first appears in the shop while Joyce is on duty. Like all of the black soldiers, he is shy and standoffish, something that is first viewed as Yankee arrogance. Travis explains to Joyce, however, that the uneasiness comes from being treated as equals by whites. The boys - for that's what they are, mostly in their late

teens - look to the ground when dealing with whites rather than making eye contact because that is how they are taught to behave in the U.S. As to Travis' physical appearance, Joyce notices only his tightly knit hair and a gap in his lower teeth. Travis is kind and considerate to Joyce, and he values her friendship and companionship. This is a huge change for Joyce, and she finds herself falling in love early in their relationship.

Joyce's Mother

Joyce's mother still grieves the loss of her military husband in World War I, and she finds escape in religious zealotry. She has a tenuous grip on the reality that surrounds her, and she seems unable to cope with the horrors of yet another English war. This war, she declares, will be a "Civvie war." Joyce's father died while she was still a babe, so her mother had already begun her slide into semi-dementia by the time Joyce became aware. The only life the girl came to know was one of strict adherence to the rules of a religion she does not accept as her own. Joyce's mother finally dies in an air raid on the town, refusing to go to the safety of a bomb shelter. She tells the air raid warden that this is her first chance at a front-row seat to a war and that she is not going to miss it.

Sandra

Sandra is married, and her husband is in uniform, fighting in North Africa. She has an infant son named Tommy, so she is not required to work in the factories as other young women her age are. She befriends Joyce, who as the sole shopkeeper while Len is in prison, is considered to be performing an essential service. Sandra used to work for Len at the shop but quit when she married her husband. Joyce visits Sandra frequently for tea and chitchat. Eventually, Sandra becomes pregnant by another man while her husband is off to war. The other man, a farmer, is one of Len's drinking cronies. Sandra refuses to consider an abortion, and Joyce advises her to tell her husband of the pregnancy, so it will not hit him as a shock when he comes home. Sandra agrees, but she procrastinates. When Sandra's husband does come home on leave, Joyce is working in the shop. Joyce hears a shot and runs to her pregnant friend's house to find her dead in a pool of blood. He husband is being taken off by the police. Later that night, Joyce confronts Len and the farmer drinking in the pub.

Objects/Places

American Colonization Society

The Baptist mission group called the American Colonization Society is ostensibly dedicated to repatriating former American slaves to Liberia, where they are to become industrious and bring the message of Christ to the African heathens. The society officially recognizes that getting rid of the slaves also helps relieve social stress in America, but they claim that is a secondary benefit. At the time, Liberia is an American colony, established specifically for this purpose. Although the white American founders of, and participants in, the society perceive themselves as good Christians trying to right the wrongs of American slavery, in fact they have created a system that condemns most of the former slaves they liberate to death by the African fever (malaria). Most of the former slaves who do survive the passage in wooden boats to Africa and the first year of exposure to strange illnesses sink into drunkenness and debauchery in the capital city of Monrovia.

Some former slaves, such as the bondsman Edward employs to run his errands, survive by performing slave-like duties for more prosperous black tradesmen or the few whites who have settled there. Very few carry through with the society's stated goals of carrying the Gospel inland to native blacks. The society itself in Liberia has become little more than an elite, corrupt men's club. The society's infrastructure fails to supply Nash with the money Edward left to help him get started and offers no further assistance to the blacks once they reach African shores. The members of the society gather to drink in congenial surroundings, served by freed slaves, at an estate some distance from Monrovia. The society offers no help to Edward in locating Nash in the interior, and after one visit to their club, they ban him from their presence. The reader is left with the impression that Edward is the society's dupe - perhaps one of many napfs - helping finance the society members' decadent and hypocritical lifestyle.

Monrovia

The capital city of Liberia is a place of great squalor in the 1700s. There are no real roads, waterworks or sewers. Bushes grow up in the middle of what passes for roads, and livestock runs untethered throughout the settlement. Wild jungle animals are frequently seen in the town. A few actual white men, slaves who have been freed from America and natives who have come from the interior to occupy the lowest niche in the pecking order populate the town. The disparity between cultures is so great that the term "white men" includes all men from America or Europe, regardless of their skin color. The white men with pale skins are referred to as masters. Monrovia is a port and therefore a trading hub, and it is frequented by the unsavory transients who typically accompany commerce in port cities. Although the society colonized Liberia for freed slaves and slavery is not practiced within the colony, the trade does play a part in Monrovia. In one of his letters, Nash points out to Edward that American warships

accompany slave ships from other countries to protect them from attempts by other blacks to free their cargoes.

St. Paul River

The St. Paul River flows to the sea near Monrovia and is the gateway to the interior of Liberia. It is on this river that Nash futilely attempts to establish first one settlement then another with the aim of "civilizing" the natives and bringing them into the Christian fold. This is not the river, however, that is referred to in the title *Crossing the River.* That river is actually the Atlantic Ocean.

Freetown

The settlement of Freetown is the British outpost in the Crown Colony of Sierra Leone where Nash and other repatriating American slaves stop en route to Liberia. When Edward follows Nash to Africa, he endures two bouts of malaria that nearly kill him and is nursed back to health by a companionable British surgeon at a British mission in Monrovia. England and the U.S. are sometimes at odds during this post-revolutionary period, but there is little evidence of that riff between the fellow white men of both nations thrown together on black shores. A trading squabble between British Sierra Leone and American Liberia delays Edward's trip to Monrovia, but it has been resolved by the time he recovers from his second bout with malaria.

Mercury

In 1841, the ship Mercury carries Edward Williams, in search of Nash, to Sierra Leone, where he is taken ashore to recover from malaria. The Mercury sails for Liberia without Edward because of a trade dispute between Sierra Leone, a British Colony, and American Liberia, which renders the American ship unwelcome in the British port. Regardless of Edward's significant standing, the ship has to sail without him.

Denver, Colorado

Denver is the spot where the escaped slave Martha is left to die, huddled in a shop doorway during a blizzard. The wagon train leader who makes the decision to abandon her does so, not out of malice, but out of necessity. She is ill. She cannot complete the crossing of the Rocky Mountains to California, and she is slowing down the other black pioneers in their pursuit of their dreams in the far west. Denver is the only real locale in the vignette "West." All other action occurs in Martha's delirium and imagination. Denver is also the location of the rude hut where Martha plays out parts of her life in her mind and finally succumbs to the hardships she has endured.

Dodge City

When Martha runs away from owners in Virginia, who are going to sell her so that they can move west to California, she flees to the frontier town of Dodge City, Kansas. There, Martha meets Joyce, another former slave, befriends her and goes into business doing laundry for the cattlemen who populate the wild city. In Dodge, Martha meets Chester and opens a restaurant in a shop he has won in a poker game. When Chester is killed in a gunfight, Martha moves to Leavenworth with Joyce.

Martha's Restaurant

Martha opens her restaurant in Dodge City on the ground floor of the shop Chester won in a poker game. The couple lives together upstairs. There are a good many black cowboys in Dodge, as many of the whites have gone west in search of gold in California. These black frontiersmen make up a large portion of Martha's trade.

Leavenworth

After Chester is killed in a gunfight over an old gambling dispute, Martha moves to Leavenworth with Joyce, where the pair opens a laundry. Joyce meets a man there whom she eventually marries and goes off with to California. Joyce implores Martha to follow her and promises to help her get started on the West Coast. Later, Martha is doing laundry for the leader of a wagon train of blacks headed for California, and she begs him to let her do laundry and cooking in exchange for passage. The man reluctantly agrees, but Martha is able to make it for only six weeks before she is abandoned in Denver.

Virginia

Martha begins her life in Virginia as a slave. She marries a man there and has a daughter, Eliza Mae. When the master of the plantation dies, his son inherits the plantation and sells the family of slaves off at auction - each to a different buyer. Later, when another Virginia family is preparing to sell Martha again so that they can go to California, Martha runs away to Dodge City.

California

The story is set in the time of the gold rush, and just about everyone - white and black alike - seems to think they will find their dreams in California. Although Martha has not even a hint of real evidence, she is convinced that Eliza Mae, her daughter from whom she was separated at a slave auction, has made her way there to lead a happy and prosperous life. This dream drives the aging Martha to join a California-bound wagon train.

The Duke of York

James Hamilton commands the merchant ship the Duke of York out of Bristol on a voyage to the southern African coast to procure a cargo of slaves for sale in the Americas. The York is the scene for most of the action that occurs in the journal of the voyage, and all other events occur nearby on shore or on other vessels. Even as the vessel is outward bound from Bristol, the carpenter and other tradesmen on board busy themselves with converting the ship from a regular merchantman to a ship suitable for hauling human cargo - a slaver. They make gratings to cover the holds for the men's and women's quarters, build a shop where shackles may be attached and build a barricade that will protect the crew in the not-unlikely event of a slave insurrection.

South African Coast

Once the York reaches Africa, she anchors out and fires a three-gun salute when she is ready to begin trade. Black and white traders alike come off the shore onto the ship to peddle their slaves. When the supply of human cargo dwindles, parties made up of crewmembers take smaller boats up the various rivers to trade with others further upstream. When that supply dwindles, the ship weighs anchor and moves south down the coast to repeat the process until she is "fully slaved."

Various Small Boats

Black native traders from the shore come out in dugout canoes with a few slaves to trade, while the bigger traders use larger vessels. The ship owns its own flotilla of small boats, some powered by oar and others by sail, which they use to travel upriver to trade. When one of these boats is taken out of commission for maintenance or other reasons, it slows trade, delaying departure from the coast. All delays increase the death toll from the fever and provide greater opportunities for insurrection.

Shackles

All slaves are numbered and fitted with shackles as soon as they are entered into the ship's inventory. Even though the shackles are forged of metal, some slaves are able to get loose from their shackles to incite insurrection.

Barricade

Perhaps the most important modification to the York, so far as the safety of the crew is involved, is a stout barricade that protects the foredeck from the holds. As the story progresses and the numbers of slaves gradually increases, the barricade must be strengthened and raised.

Blunderbusses

Blunderbusses are a murderous sort of cannon that will fire shot, chain or scrap metal - nearly anything - with deadly force. They are particularly effective at close range for riot and crowd control, and the crew mounts several of them atop the barricade on the slave ship to protect against insurrection.

Thumbscrews

Thumbscrews are a medieval torture device, used by Captain Hamilton in one instance to learn the identities of the leaders of a thwarted slave insurrection.

The Fortune

The Fortune is another slave ship, captained by an old trading partner of Captain Hamilton's father. Captain Hamilton enters into a mutual-protection pact with the skipper of the Fortune as they venture further south to complete their slave purchases. The captain of the Fortune dies of a heart attack and is replaced by Hamilton's first mate.

Commercial Detachment

Commercial detachment is a convenient attitude that allows supposedly God-fearing white men to participate in the slave trade while ostensibly maintaining their Christian beliefs.

The Town

The title "Somewhere in England" is entirely appropriate as Caryl Phillips chooses to leave both the town and the village where most of the action occurs unnamed. The town is small, remote from London and considered by its residents to be isolated. It houses a factory and a food import business, as well as theaters and pubs. This is the town in which Joyce grows up under the thumb of her mother, who never quite gets over the death of her husband in World War I. The town is important enough, however, to attract a Nazi air raid near the end of the war. Joyce's mother is killed in that raid, and afterward, her grave becomes a place of tenderness between Joyce and Travis, her black lover and eventual husband.

The Village

If the town is small, then the village is tiny. This is where Len has his shop, and he takes Joyce to the village after he woos and weds her. It is a place of great sadness and depression for Joyce, as she quickly comes to realize her mistake in marrying Len. The village grows even more dismal until Len is arrested for black market trading and sent to

prison, leaving Joyce free to operate the shop on her own. Although an outcast after Len goes to prison, Joyce finds solace in a girlfriend named Sandra and later in her lover and future husband, Travis.

Len's Shop

Len's shop becomes a gathering place at times for some of the villagers and the black GIs alike. It is also the site of much unhappiness for Joyce, as it is where she must endure Len and where he beats her on two occasions. She also first meets Travis here, and she notices the gap in his lower teeth. She is standing in Len's shop when she hears the shot that kills Sandra, and it is the home she is put out of after the war when she must surrender Greer to the children's welfare agency.

The Warehouse

The food warehouse is in the same town as the factory where Joyce worked before she ran off to London in pursuit of her actor boyfriend. She dislikes her job at the warehouse because she must interact with customers and cannot retreat into her familiar isolation. Len and his remote shop in a remote village offer her an escape both from her unpleasant job and her mother.

The Encampment

Joyce visits the estate where the black GIs are encamped on two occasions. The first occasion is a dance where she and some girls from town are received as honored guests and treated to lavish foods and luxuries that are unattainable in war-rationed England. The second time she visits the encampment is when Travis is being unfairly punished for being late coming back from a date with her. She learns later that he was taken off and beaten with nightsticks by white MPs using their batons because he was out with a white woman. She defends him and pleads for justice with his commanding officer.

Themes

Failed Christianity

Virtually all of the white men in Caryl Phillips' *Crossing the River* are professed Christians, and yet all except the contemporaries in the final journal, "Somewhere in England," are involved in the commerce of slavery. The inconsistencies between these two realities create the dynamic that drives both Edward Williams and Captain Hamilton's father to madness. Phillips' indictment of the faith, however, is not of the doctrine itself, but rather of the way certain white characters in his novel practice it.

Although Phillips condemns the practice of slavery by those white men who profess to be Christian, his work is not full of vitriol and hatred, as are the works of some modern black writers lamenting the tragedy of the black diaspora. He does not rant and rave but seems to have divined a deep insight into the workings of the white psychic that allowed men such as Edward Williams and Captain Hamilton to praise God while enslaving their fellow men. He does not condemn them as individuals, but rather he sees them trapped within a twisted ecclesiastical interpretation of their professed beliefs. Phillips does not even single out whites - or specifically American whites - as the sole perpetrators of the travesty of human bondage. He recognizes the antiquity of the practice of slavery, and he is no less critical of the blacks involved in the trade than of the whites. He does not paint the United States as the key villain in the slave trade, but he recognizes the ubiquity of European participation in the commercial aspects of the business and all of the Americas, not just the U.S., as a market for human chattel. All of the whites involved in the trade, however, have one thing in common: their Christianity.

In the final analysis, Phillip does not condemn the faith itself. Nash seems to recognize up until the final moments of his life the promise of Christianity, in spite of his bitterness toward Edward and the system that spawned them both. In "Somewhere in England," Joyce hears the black GIs singing their hymns on Sunday and recognizes their genuineness and enthusiasm, compared to the staid performances of the Anglicans. Taken in whole, it would seem that Phillips' complaint against Christianity is not that it is a bad religion, but that Christianity defined and administered by whites has failed to fulfill the spiritual needs of blacks by denying them the full respect and dignity of humanity.

Unconscious Bigotry

Much literature of the antebellum South in particular, and the business of slavery in general, has assumed that such a fundamentally cruel thing could be practiced only by fundamentally cruel people. To be sure, there were many cruel people involved in the slave trade, and no doubt many otherwise good men were jaded and turned cruel through their association with such evil. To simply tar everyone with the same brush is a

simplistic convenience of hindsight, and Caryl Phillips is far too erudite an author for that.

Phillips recognizes that individuals are born into systems of conduct and behavior over which they have no control and that these systems shape their perceptions of the rightness and wrongness of the behaviors they practice. Sometimes these formative perceptions are so deeply etched in the human mind that no amount of rational evidence to the contrary can unlearn that which has been so viscerally inscribed. Perhaps being a black man, who has been raised and educated in sophisticated British surroundings, adds to his keen sense of this reality. Phillips illustrates his deep understanding of this phenomenon best in his two white characters, Edward Williams and Captain James Hamilton.

Edward Williams is a truly devout Christian and is motivated by genuine belief when he chooses to adopt Nash into his household. He genuinely believes that these pagan savages called Negroes can be educated and trained to understand the simple teachings of Christ and that exceptional specimens, such as Nash, can learn enough of the white man's knowledge and ways to teach their child-like brethren. Nowhere in his antebellum psychic, however, lurks the notion that Nash - nor any Negro - will ever be the equal to him or any other white man. This is not bigotry in his mind, but simply the way things are.

Likewise, Captain Hamilton is a good Christian man. He loves his wife, is faithful to her and treats his crew fairly - though sternly - as a good skipper should. He remains sober when surrounded by drunken debauchery and eschews the vices to which most of his colleagues fall prey. Yet, for a living, he buys and sells human beings, subjecting them inhumane conditions and exposing them to the prospects of hideous deaths or lives of misery. He is not totally unaware of the contradiction of his behaviors and beliefs. Indeed, he is aware that his father was driven mad by it. Still, he continues to practice his trade by separating his moral and spiritual being from reality with what he and his kind call "commercial detachment."

Neither Williams nor Hamilton is capable of connecting, much less reconciling, the conflicting components of their psyches. They are both bigots of the highest order, but neither is conscious of it.

The Amorality of Commerce

Caryl Phillips is careful in *Crossing the River* to avoid personal, editorial expressions of racism. His treatment of white oppressors of blacks is benign, casting more blame on the prevailing social and moral environment than on the individual perpetrators of cruelty. He is equally evenhanded with the African blacks who sell their children into slavery and participate in catching and enslaving other African blacks. Phillips is less forgiving, however, when it comes to Christianity and, in much the same way, commerce. Viewed through a political lens, rather than an emotional or human one, *Crossing the River* might be considered a strong anti-capitalist statement. Religion and

commerce are, after all, two of the greatest evils of man espoused in the writings of Karl Marx and targeted by modern socialists of varying degrees of intensity.

If Phillips is in fact promoting a personal socialist agenda at the expense of commerce and capitalism, he deals with this incendiary issue as deftly and masterfully as he handles the equally controversial topic of racism. First, Phillips weaves his spell through iconic characters, which while compelling are somewhat sketchier than full-blown persona. Almost all of his characters - evil, saintly and in-between - assume the classic perspective of the napve observer. No one is really to blame. Blame is not an individual characteristic, but a systemic one. Phillips' characters are neither good nor evil. They are simply the human manifestation of an uncaring system of commerce that distances itself from obvious issues of morality and humanity in an almost religious commitment to the notion that, so long as commerce is played by the rules written by the players, all is well and proper. The strictures of church and civil order simply do not apply.

Style

Point of View

One of Caryl Phillips' great talents is the ability to quickly and credibly change point of view, and he does so in lightning fashion many times in *Crossing the River.* In two of the four stand-alone works ("The Pagan Coast" and "West") that join hands to make the whole, he begins with the omniscient point of view and then quickly segues into the points of view of his characters. In the other two, "Crossing the River" and "Somewhere in England," he tells his tales from the single point of view of a narrator. In one case, the narrator is a sea captain making entries in his ship's log, and in the other, the narrative takes the form of the diary of a young English woman during World War II.

"The Pagan Coast" is perhaps the best example of the author's skill in shifting narrative voice. Phillips switches deftly from the point of view of a slave owner who is trying to repatriate his slaves to Africa to the viewpoint of one of his charges, whom the owner sends across the ocean ill-prepared to thrive. By sharing the thoughts of each, Phillips is able chart the original naivety and ultimate disillusionment of each, by playing one point of view off against the other as they both gradually come to confront reality.

Setting

The main physical settings in "The Pagan Coast" are the antebellum South, where both Nash and Edward Williams begin their separate journeys to Africa; Sierra Leon, the British colony where they linger before continuing to Liberia; and Liberia, an American colony intended for repatriated slaves. "West" takes place in Denver, Colorado. In her death dreams there, though, Martha visits Virginia, where she begins and lives her life as a slave; Dodge City, to which she runs when she escapes; Leavenworth, to which she drifts after her lover is shot in Dodge; and an imaginary California, where she envisions her daughter living a prosperous life. "Crossing the River" records travels by ship from Bristol to the Gold Coast of Africa, where Captain Hamilton buys slaves before sailing for the Americas. Finally, "Somewhere in England" takes place in an unnamed town and village in an unnamed section of the English countryside during and just before World War II. The stories that make up this novel are therefore dispersed throughout time and place, just as the enslaved Africans became dispersed through time and place, from Africa to the American South and from there, throughout the world.

Language and Meaning

Caryl Phillips is a gifted master of language, who has a keen understanding of the subtleties and nuances of the English language. In some ways, he writes like a jazz singer with tremendous range. In the voice of Nash, the educated slave who is sent to Liberia to save heathen souls, he captures both the sophisticate syntax of the presumptuous white scholars who taught him and the satirical undercurrents of a slave

who must speak in cryptic terms of all things white. With equal dexterity, Phillips captures the napve and self-righteous but well-meaning tone of the condescending Edward who assumes himself superior to all he surveys. He does an equally credible job with Martha, the escaped slave, Captain Hamilton, the slave trader, Joyce, the young English woman, and Travis, a 1930s-era American black.

All of Phillips' central characters project a certain ambiance suggesting that what one is reading is not quite real. This is not a flaw in Phillips' prose, but an undertone, like a subtle baseline in a jazz arrangement, perhaps. It continually reminds the reader that these characters do not depict individuals, but that they are iconic. Each character represents, not a real person, but a whole attitude or belief system that in some way contributed to the dynamics of the saga of the black diaspora.

Structure

Crossing the River is in fact an anthology of shorter works, held together by structure and the central theme of the diaspora of the peoples of Africa into a single, grander work. The work begins with a brief structural device - the allegorical voice of an old man, forced by poverty to sell his children to slave traders, as he waits on the shore for 350 years for their return. In allegory, the voice is that of Africa itself, speaking for the entire black race. The reader who ventures to the last page will see that this voice reemerges in the conclusion, like the second bookend holding the middle works together.

Each of the four independent works in *Crossing the River* would read quite well if presented by itself. The first, "The Pagan Coast," is a novella. It has two main characters and a variety of minor and cameo players. Together, however, they contribute to a whole that is greater than the sum. Phillips pays scant attention to physical descriptions of his people, but he focuses intently on their internal mental processes, as expressed in dialogue and correspondence. His descriptions of places are stark and visceral, often recalling the tactile and olfactory senses, which adds to the symbolic nature of the work.

Quotes

"A desperate foolishness. The crops failed. I sold my children. I remember. I led them (two boys and a girl) along weary paths, until we reached the place where the mud flats are populated with crabs and gulls. *Returned across the bar with the yawl, and prayed a while in the factory chapel.*"

"Being chosen for colonization was regarded by most slaves and their masters as reward for faithful service. A skilled worker, who was also a converted Christian with a sound moral base, was considered a prime candidate. But reports from early settlers told stories of great hardships. The initial work of clearing the bush, constructing shelters and building fortifications against native attacks resulted in a heavy toll of life."

"...it was the African fever, or malaria, which most affected the lives of the settlers. The severe chills, producing a sensation of cold as fearful as any American winter, and the accompanying delusions which infected the imagination, combined to introduce a deep misery."

"At last, on the evening of December 14th, 1841, the *Mercury* limped into the harbor at the British settlement of Freetown, Sierra Leone, the Captain having thought it politic to acquire fresh supplies and immediate medical help for those, like Edward, who lay between life and death."

."..Edward raised the brass knocker and struck it three times with force. A black man, clearly of American origin, answered and asked after his business, to which Edward answered that he had been given to believe that this was a Gentleman's Club for white people... Edward was surprised to discover the degree of hostility that this experience occasioned in his soul. Never before had he had to explain or ask anything of a colored man, and to have to do so now, and in order to gain access to the company of other white men, he found extremely difficult."

"Curling herself into a tight fist against the cold, Martha huddled in the doorway and wondered if tonight she might see snow. Beautiful. Lifting her eyes without lifting up her head, she stared at the wide black sky that would once more be her companion. White snow, come quickly."

"The sun is at its highest point. The overseer is looking across at me, so again I bend down and start to pick. Already I have the hands of a woman twice my age, the skin beaten, bloodied and bruised, like worn-out leather. The overseer rides his horse towards me, its legs stepping high, prancing, almost dancing: He looks down at me, the sun behind him, framing his head, forming a halo. He raises his whip and brings it down on my arm."

"I stand with the rest of the Virginia property. Master's nephew, a banker from Washington, is now our new master" He has no interest in plantation life. He holds a handkerchief to his face and looks on with detachment. Everything must be sold. The

lawyer grabs the iron-throated bell and summons the people to attention. Then the auctioneer slaps his gavel against a block of wood."

"*Monday 24th August* At 3 p.m. cast from the pier head at Liverpool, run against the flood. At 7 p.m. moored with the sheet anchor. A light breeze and some rain..."

"*Thursday 12th November* This morning set the punt on shore with Jacob Creed and George Robinson. Instead of returning on board they visited a French schooner and got drunk. Afterwards they returned to shore to fight, which when they were sufficiently tiled of, attempted to come off, but the ebb being strong, and they by now too tired to pull well, they came upon the rocks. I sent Mr. Foster to them, and he was obliged to slip the rope. I gave both of these *gentlemen* a good caning, and would carry them both confined in chains to the Americas but for the consideration of our being a slaving ship..."

"I take a good deal of raillery among the sea-captains, for they *know* I have not a secure knowledge of life, and I *know* they have not. They claim I am melancholy; I tell them they have lost their wits. They say I am a slave to a single woman; I claim they are a slave to hundreds, of all qualities. They wonder at my *lack* of humor, I pity theirs. They declare they can form no idea of my happiness, I counter with knowledge that being pleased with a drunken debauch, or the smile of a prostitute, can never give one such as I pleasure."

"Two of them came into the shop this morning. One tall one. One not so tall one, but he wasn't short either. Far from it. They were both quite stocky, and both of them were polite. After all this time, they still seem surprised at how cheap things are. One woman told me I ought to put up the prices for them. She said Len would have. I said I know. But look where Len is..."

"They both took their caps off. And then they asked me to a dance they're having on Saturday. Asked me politely. Well, I can't dance, I told them. you'll learn, said the tall one. He smiled. We've got our own band, ma'am, said the other one. You hear us play, you can't help but dance. He laughed. So I laughed too. Then we were all laughing. A dance, I said. On Saturday, said the tall one."

"Last night Len beat me. After he came back from the pub. Drunk. Once he's got a mood on, that's it. He'll find a reason. It didn't hurt all that much. It happened so quickly. And I understood why he was doing it. Maybe that's why it didn't hurt all that much. He was just working off the embarrassment of not having a uniform. Not even one of the silly bugger Home Guard uniforms. Civvy Street guilt. He was playing at being a man. Secretly drumming on me behind closed doors. But I told him. The next time he raises his hand to me it'll be the last time. Drunk or sober. It'll be the last time."

"France has gone. It looks like we'll have to fight to the bitter end by ourselves. Everyone's talking of invasion. And what to do. They say you've got to stay at home. If you're out when they come, you mustn't run or you'll be machine-gunned from the air like they did in Holland and Belgium. It says, in the *Star,* that you're not to supply the

Germans with food, petrol or maps. And if you see anything at all suspicious you're to go straight to the police. They sometimes talk to you like you're mental."

"I was serving two Land Army girls. We all heard the shot. I ran straight from the shop up the street, hair flying this way, legs that. I knew she wouldn't tell him. Straight into the house and there she was, lying on the floor, blood spreading. And Tommy screaming. And that bullying bastard sitting there as bold as brass with the rifle in his hands and tears running down his cheeks. He kept repeating himself. Get the police, I've just done in my missus. The dirty bitch."

"Yesterday they arrested Mussolini. The BBC announcer said that Hitler's 'utensil' had fallen off the Axis shelf. I was sitting in the pub by myself when the news came through. The landlord got out the monthly ration of whisky to celebrate what he said looked like the end. He offered me some, but I said no. Then he said that the Yanks would probably have to go over to Italy to clean up. He said he'd miss them. I felt a door closing inside of me. I looked up at him. He asked me again if I wanted a whisky. I nodded."

Topics for Discussion

As portrayed by Phillips, are the white slavers in "Crossing the River" fundamentally evil people, or are they victims of the system in which they live?

Does Phillips condemn slavery as a white institution?

How might a white child growing up in the antebellum South, where he or she is taught that slavery is the natural order of things, come to judge slavery as an evil thing?

How do modern western perceptions differ from those commonly held in England at the time depicted in "The Pagan Coast?"

How do the English perceptions of black people differ in the two novellas, "The Pagan Coast" and "Somewhere in England?"

How significant was the role played by black pioneers, such as Martha, in the development of the American West?

In "West," Phillips portrays the only white character - other than those recalled in Martha's delirium - as a vague, translucent specter. What do you suppose Phillips' intent is in this portrayal?