

Amistad

(Historical Drama) (1997)

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Major Characters

- Cinque.....Djimon Hounsou
An African farmer of the Mende tribe, who is kidnapped from his West African home and sold into slavery. After leading a revolt against the Spanish crew of the slave ship Amistad, he soon finds himself on trial for murder in a small courthouse in the state of Connecticut.
- Roger Baldwin.....Matthew McConaughey
A Connecticut real estate lawyer who agrees to work for Cinque and his fellow slaves by trying to prove in court that they were not born slaves, and therefore could not legally ever become slaves.
- Theodore Joadson.....Morgan Freeman
A former slave who lives in the state of Connecticut and is an official of the American Abolitionist Society, which works for the elimination of slavery in the US.
- John Quincy Adams.....Anthony Hopkins
The sixth President of the US (1825-1829), who was in fact a Congressman from Massachusetts in 1839, who agrees to work for the release of Cinque and his fellow slaves.
- Lewis Tappan.....Stellan Skarsgard
A leader of the American Abolitionist Society.
- Holabird.....Pete Postlewaite
The District Attorney of Hartford Connecticut, who prosecutes Cinque and his fellow slaves for murder, and who wants the slaves returned to the Spanish traders who had bought them (Ruiz and Montes).
- President Van Buren.....Nigel Hawthorne
The 8th President of the United States, and a silly politician who was most concerned that the problems with the Amistad did not lead to his defeat in the election of 1840.
- Secretary of State Forsyth.....David Paymer
Van Buren's Secretary of State, who argues before the Court that the Queen of Spain had a right to the slaves since they were the property of two Spanish citizens (A Secretary of State is responsible for the foreign relations of the US).
- John C. Calhoun.....Arliss Howard

A Southern Senator from South Carolina who warns President Van Buren that if the Amistad slaves were released, then Southern states in the US may go to war in order to protect the institution of slavery.

Judge Juttson.....Alan Rich

The first judge in the Amistad case, who is forced to resign from the case after Van Buren and Forsyth worry that he would free the slaves.

Judge Coglin.....Jeremy Northam

The second judge in the case, personally selected by Forsyth to replace Judge Juttson.

Justice Joseph Story.....Harry Blackmun

A Supreme Court Justice who reads the Amistad decision (Note that Harry Blackmun, who plays Story in this film, was in fact a real Supreme Court Justice from 1970 to 1994).

Plot Summary

This film is based on a true story, that took place in 1839. The Amistad was a Spanish slave-trading ship that was transporting a group of recently kidnapped Africans from Havana Cuba to another port in Cuba. The Africans, led by a powerful man named Cinque, rose up against the Spanish crew of the ship in a violent attempt to escape (Cinque was from the Mende tribe, which lived in West Africa). After they took control of the ship, two Spanish slave traders named Ruiz and Montes said that they would help the ship get back to Africa, but in fact, the Amistad ended up off the coast of the Northern state of Connecticut. American officials immediately arrested the Africans and charged them with murder for the revolt on the ship, and thus Cinque and his fellow Africans soon found themselves at the center of a huge and long legal battle that would decide their own futures as well as further divide the United States over the horribly bitter issue of slavery.

After Cinque and his 43 fellow Africans are arrested and put on trial, a Connecticut real estate lawyer named Roger Baldwin and a former slave named Theodore Joadson decide to do whatever they can to get the Amistad Africans freed. For Baldwin, it's simply a "property issue," and thus if he could prove that Cinque and the others were kidnapped in Africa, he knows he can show a judge that they were not legally slaves, and thus had the right to rebel on the ship. For Joadson, the issue is a moral one, and no matter where Cinque was born, he believes that the Africans must be freed, for indeed, as a member of the Abolitionist society, he is fighting to eliminate slavery itself.

Over time, Baldwin comes to realize that the struggle of Cinque cannot be looked at as just another property issue, but as he fights for their freedom as free human beings, he also realizes that he will not have the legal skills to fight against a system that seems determined to keep the Africans as slaves, if for no other reason than to prevent the United States from moving closer to civil war.

In fact, a lower court judge does decide to free Cinque, but when the federal government appeals the case all the way to the US Supreme Court, Baldwin convinces John Quincy Adams, the ex-President of the US and now a well known anti-slavery Congressman, to present the case for the Africans. In so doing, Adams will do his best to show that in this case, the law and morality are on their side, and thus the Amistad Africans must be freed even if it brings the United States closer to civil war.

A Brief Summary of Legal Positions that were Presented in the Amistad Case:

District Attorney Holabird: He prosecutes Cinque and his colleagues for the murder of the Spanish crew of the Amistad, and he probably would have agreed to have them returned to the Spanish “owners,” Ruiz and Montes.

Ruiz and Montes: They want the slaves returned to their possession.

Lieutenants Gedney and Meade: They were US navy officers who claim possession of the slaves as “salvage,” because they were the ones who brought the Amistad ashore off the coast of Connecticut.

Secretary of State Forsyth: He argues for the President of the United States and the US Government, that the slaves should be returned to the Queen of Spain, in order to protect Spanish-American relations.

Roger Baldwin: He argues that the slaves should be freed, for they were in fact born free in Africa, and therefore could not legally be slaves at all, and thus they had every right to fight back against the Spanish crew of the Amistad.

John Quincy Adams (arguing before the US Supreme Court): He argues that the natural state of man is to be free, and that the Amistad Africans must be freed. He also strongly implies that slavery itself must eventually be eliminated, even if means that it would draw the US closer to civil war.

A Brief Historical Note on Slavery and the Amistad:

In 1808, the importing of slaves to the United States was made illegal (The previous year, in 1807, the transporting of slaves was made illegal throughout the British Empire, including from England’s African colonies). However, slavery itself remained a dominant part of life in the Southern states of the United States (such as Alabama and Mississippi), while it was strongly opposed in the Northern States (such as New York and Connecticut). At the time of the Amistad incident in 1839, there were millions of slaves in the South, but slavery was illegal in the North, where black people lived freely (although still as second class citizens).

It is important to note that the Amistad case was a symbolically important development in American history, in that it showed how bitterly divided the United States was at the time. However, it had no direct impact on either the

course of US history or slavery itself. The United States remained divided over the slavery issue, but it was not until the Civil War of 1861-1865 that slavery was finally eliminated in the US.

Some Words and Expressions that You May not Know

The Amistad Africans rebel against their captors off the coast of Cuba, but soon find themselves in prison in Connecticut, charged with murder.

I have to tack, don't I? [written Spanish]

A rare naval term meaning to change direction.

We have to signal them [written Spanish]

"To signal" is to communicate with sound or action.

He'll run and hide. Then we both start yelling.

"To yell" is to scream or shout.

Lay up. Mr. Packwold. :: Aye, aye, Sir.

To "lay up" is to slow down or stop. "Aye aye" is a very dated way for a sailor to say 'yes.'

Come on, come on!

The most versatile phrasal verb in English, in this case meaning hurry!

Make way for the stinking heathens.

A "heathen" is a very negative word for a person who doesn't belong to one of the major religions such as Christianity or Judaism.

Your Royal Highness. [written Spanish]

A formal way to address a queen.

God bless you all!

A typical (religious) way to express good luck.

There are 3-4,000,000 negros in this country;

Why on earth should I concern myself with these 44?

An interesting addition to WH questions to show emotion such as surprise or frustration.

It's too small to be a transatlantic slaver.

An old word for a ship that transported slaves.

They're plantation slaves, West Indies.

A “plantation” was a large farm in which many slaves worked the fields to grow crops such as cotton. The “West Indies” refers to the islands of the Caribbean Sea.

They don’t look it; Not from the glimpse I caught of them.

“To catch a glimpse” of something is to be able to look at it for just a second or two.

They have these scars.

A “scar” is a mark on the skin that is left from a cut or injury.

They were first detained by officers of a salvage brig off the coast of Long Island.

“To detain” a person is to hold them or prevent them from leaving.

A “salvage brig” is a boat that tries to save property that has been lost or damaged at sea. Long Island is a famous island by New York City.

They were conveyed to New Haven, under what authority

I don’t know, and given over to the local constabulary.

In this case, “to convey” a person is to transport or move them.

New Haven is the capital of the state of Connecticut. To do something “under the authority” of somebody is to do it with their official power or approval, and a “constabulary” is an old word for a local government official who was responsible for certain court functions.

The arraignment is the day after tomorrow.

A legal word for the process in a courtroom where a person is officially charged with a crime.

Perhaps a writ for illegal arrest and detainment to stall things.

A “writ” is an official paper written by a judge ordering a person to do something (In this case, ordering the release of a prisoner). “To stall” something is to try and delay it until later.

Make sure they have good counsel.

An official word for lawyer or attorney.

The Emancipator.

This was a very famous anti-slavery newspaper (“To emancipate” is to free or liberate).

Here ye, hear ye...

A very dated way of calling a group of people to attention.

In the matter of the district court of the United States of America, in this, the year of our Lord, 1839, the honorable Andrew T. Judson presiding.

A “district court” is the lowest level federal (national) court, as opposed to a state court. A judge is often referred to as “honorable” as a way of showing respect. “To preside” over a courtroom is to rule or direct it.

If it pleases your honor. :: The bench recognizes district attorney Holabird.
 “Your honor” is a respectful way of referring to judges (which is still used today!) The “bench” is a common way of referring to a judge, and a “district attorney” is a government lawyer who is often responsible for prosecuting accused criminals.

I would like to present to the court, your honor,
 charges of piracy and murder....against the accused.
 “The court” is a very common way of referring to a judge (or group of judges). “Piracy” is the act of stealing or illegally taking control of a ship.
 The “accused” is a person who has been charged with a crime.

Your honor, I have a petition for a writ of habeas corpus.
 In this case, a “petition” is an official document signed by a judge or government official. A “writ of habeas corpus” is a legal phrase for a judge’s order demanding that a person in jail or prison be released.

You were reading charges, which whatever they might be, will be rendered moot by this writ.
 If something is “rendered moot,” it is no longer considered relevant or important.

It isn’t moot...until an actual writ by some higher court, by some miracle, is granted.
 A slangy way of referring to something that is totally unexpected.

Please kindly refrain from impersonating a lawyer, which you patently are not!
 “To refrain” from something is to stop oneself from doing it. “Patently” is a powerful adverb meaning obviously or clearly.

I am here on behalf of the President of the United States;
 U.S. Secretary of State John Forsyth....
 To do something “on behalf of” a person is to do it for them. In the US, the “Secretary of State” is responsible for the nation’s relations with foreign countries.

....representing the claims of her majesty Queen Isabelle of Spain,
 as concerns out mutual treaty of the high seas of 1795.
 In this case, “claims” are legal demands concerning property. “Her majesty” is a respectful way of referring to a queen. A “mutual treaty” is a legal agreement signed by two or more countries.

These slaves are by rights the property of Spain, and as such, under Article 9 of said treaty, are to be returned posthaste.
 Note that treaties are usually divided into “articles” or sections.

“Said” is a very dated demonstrative pronoun meaning this or that, and “posthaste” is also an archaic legal word, meaning immediately.

Said treaty taking precedence over all other claims and jurisdictions.

“To take precedence” over something is to come before it, or be more important or powerful than it. A “jurisdiction” refers to the physical or political area that a court has power over (such as a state or country).

These slaves belong to me and my mate, your majesty.
A still used word for friend or colleague.

We as private officers, do hereby claim salvage on the high seas, the Spanish ship La Armistad, and all her cargo.

In this case, an “officer” is member of the US Navy. “Hereby” means therefore or thus. To “claim salvage” is to insist on legal ownership of property that was found at sea.

Where was she when we were fighting the winds to bring this vessel in?
Another word for a ship or boat.

Here are the owners of these slaves. On their behalf, I am in possession of a receipt for purchase executed in Havana, Cuba.

A “receipt for purchase” is a fancy way of referring to a receipt or proof of sale. “To execute” a legal contract is to sign it (though this is rare).

I do hereby call on this court to immediately surrender these goods... and that ship out there to my clients Jose Ruiz and Pedro Montes.

A lawyer’s “clients” are the people he represents in law or business (Note that the slaves are referred to as “goods,” just like furniture).

Attorney Roger Baldwin sees just another “property” case, but is willing to work on it if properly paid.

My name is Roger Baldwin, attorney at law...

An official and common alternative way of referring to a lawyer.

Real Estate attorney?! :: Real Estate, inventories and other contestable assets.

“Real Estate” refers to houses, buildings and land that can be bought and sold. “Inventories” are the goods that a business has in stock, often in a warehouse or other building. If something is “contestable,” two or more people may claim to own it, and “assets” are anything of value that can be owned, from a house to stock in a company.

All of the claims here speak to the issue of ownership.

This is Roger's way of saying the legal case is only concerned with who the real owners of the slaves are.

I'm afraid what's needed here is a criminal attorney. A trial lawyer.
A lawyer who argues before a judge or jury at a trial.

If that were the way to go, quite **frankly**,
I wouldn't have bothered coming down here.
A common way of saying honestly or truthfully.

I call upon our distinguished colleague from Massachusetts, John Quincy Adams...to reweigh his unmet and unprecedented attempt....
"Distinguished" means well respected or accomplished. A "colleague" is a fellow worker in a profession. In this case, to "reweigh" is to reconsider, and if something is "unprecedented," nothing like it has ever happened before.

....to convert this eccentric bequest of...a bunch of junk...
into a so-called institute of national treasure.
"To convert" something is to change it from one thing to another.
If something (someone) is "eccentric," it is truly unusual and strange, often in a very unpredictable way. A "bequest" is a legal term for a will or the giving of property. "Junk" is a great word for useless things or garbage, and "so-called" is a way of implying that something is not what it is claimed to be.

Perhaps Mr. Adams is meditating on his response.
"To mediate" on something is to think about it carefully.

Had I thought your remarks worthy of any kind of riposte, Representative Pickney, be assured you would have heard from me an hour ago.
A "remark" is a comment. If something is "worthy of" attention, it is deserving of it. A "riposte" is a rare word for a strong reply. In this case, a "Representative" is a Congressman in the House of Representatives.

Mr. Tappan...requests an audience...
A formal way of saying "would like to speak with..."

You've met him on countless occasions.
Another way of saying many times.

This case has great **significance**; Our Secretary of State has already deemed it worthy.
If something has great "significance," it is considered truly important.
"To deem" something worthy is to judge it deserving of some action.

The leaves on the maple trees were all gone...and the fact that the president is not there on Pennsylvania Avenue....

“Maple” is a much loved sweet liquid from certain trees that is used for making pancake syrup. The address of the White House is 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue.

There are two ways of knowing without consulting a calendar.

“To consult” a calendar is to look at it in order to get information.

You think Van Buren cares about the whims of an 11 year old girl who wears a tiara?

The “whims” of a person are their sudden desires or wishes, which are often not reasonable (A “tiara” is a Spanish word for a crown or head band worn by a queen).

Being all things to all people, meaning of course, nothing to no one.

This is Adams’ way of saying that Van Buren is trying to please everyone, and therefore he won’t be able to satisfy anybody.

As an advocate for the abolition of slavery, will you help us?

An “advocate” is a person who fights for a political or moral cause.

The “abolition” of something is the elimination of it.

I’m neither a friend nor a foe to the abolitionist cause.

A “foe” is another word for enemy.

You, in turn, have devoted your whole life to refining that noble invention.

“To devote” yourself to something is to spend as much time as necessary to accomplish it. “To refine” something is to try and make it better by changing it little by little. In this case, if something is “noble,” it is deserving of great respect.

There remains one vital task...the founding fathers left to their sons... before the 13 colonies could precisely be called United States.

If something is “vital,” it is extremely important. A “task” is a job or goal. In the US, the “founding fathers” refers to the historic leaders who led the US to independence in the 1770s and 1780s (Washington, Jefferson, etc). A “colony” is a group of people who settle far from their homeland. “Precisely” means exactly.

And that task, Sir, as you well know, is crushing slavery.

“To crush” something is to destroy it, often by pressing with great weight or force so as to flatten its natural shape.

You’re quite the scholar, Mr. Joadson, aren’t you?

A “scholar” is a person who studies seriously (If a person is “quite the scholar,” they are a very good scholar).

Without an accompanying mastery of at least 1/10th of its measure of grace, such erudition is worthless.

A “mastery” of a skill is the ability to use it effectively.

“Erudition” is an educated word for high learning or education, and if something is “worthless,” it has no value to anyone. All of this is Adams’ way of criticizing Joadson for not being more modest.

We aimed high coming to see you, Sir.

“To aim” is to point in a certain direction. This is Joadson’s way of telling Adams it would be an honor to be able to work with him.

Find yourself someone whose inspiration blossoms the more you lose.

“Inspiration” is an emotion or desire to produce something good or beautiful. If something “blossoms,” it grows out like a flower.

If these two lieutenants prevail, they’ll most likely sell them to Spain...and they’ll be executed.

A lieutenant is a rank or level of power in the military. “To prevail” at something is to be successful at it. If a person is “executed,” they are usually shot to death for having committed a crime.

The case is simple. It’s like anything, land, livestock, heirlooms, what have you.

“Livestock” are farm animals such as cows, and “heirlooms” are possessions such as jewelry that are passed down in a family, from one generation to the next.

The only way one may sell or purchase slaves is if they are born slaves, as on the plantation.

“To purchase” something is to buy it.

If they are slaves, they are possessions...and no more deserving of a criminal trial than a bookcase or plow.

A “possession” is anything that is owned by a person. A “plow” is a tool used on farms to turn over the soil for planting seeds.

Forget mutiny, piracy, and all the rest.

These are subsequent, irrelevant occurrences.

“Mutiny” is the act of taking power away from the captain of a ship.

“Subsequent” means later, and an “occurrence” is an event.

Ignore everything but the preeminent issue at hand; The wrongful transfer of stolen goods.

“Preeminent” is a powerful adjective that means most important.

Sir, this war must be waged on the battlefield of righteousness.

“To wage” a war is to fight it. “Righteousness” refers to that which is lawful and morally good.

It would be against everything I stand for to let this deteriorate into vagaries of legal minutia.

“To stand for” a political cause is to support it and even come to be a symbol of it. If something “deteriorates,” it starts to decay and fall apart. “Vagaries” are unpredictable or random occurrences, and “minutia” are very small details or facts.

It is our destiny as abolitionists and Christians to save these people.

A person’s “destiny” is their fate or inevitable future, perhaps already determined by God. An “abolitionist” was a person who worked to end slavery.

Did Christ hire a lawyer to get him off on technicalities?

When a lawyer “gets a person off,” they get the state to release him and drop charges against him. A legal “technicality” is a small detail or rule that often allows a person to escape punishment (For example, a person may be guilty of a crime, but allowed to go free if the police acted improperly).

No, he went to the cross, nobly...to make a statement.

The “cross” is the post with a bar across it, like that on which Jesus was killed (And thus it is a symbol of Christianity). To do something “nobly” is to do it with great dignity.

In order to do a better job than the attorney who represented the son of God, I’ll require two and a half dollars a day.

This is Roger’s way of saying that Jesus did not have a good lawyer, and to be a good lawyer, he (Roger) needs to be paid.

The Amistad Africans face murder charges, but Roger soon shows that they were in fact free men from Africa, and thus had a right to fight back.

Amazing grace...that saved a wretch like me. [Song]

“Grace” is great kindness and mercy, and a “wretch” is a desperately poor and unhappy person.

This is Professor Gibbs, a linguist.

A person who studies languages.

I could kill you before you raise that sword shoulder high! [Native language]

A “sword” is a large steel blade that was used as a weapon.

I didn’t understand a word of it. It’s gibberish. [Translated from Mende]

“Gibberish” is a great word meaning words that are nonsense.

He reminds me of the one who hires himself out to scrape elephant dung from the crop rows. [Translated from Mende]

“To scrape” is to remove from a surface by repeated rubbing.
 “Dung” is a gentle word for shit. A “crop” is a food that is planted in the ground, such as wheat or corn.

He’s an **idiot**. He just likes to hear himself speak.

A common word for a stupid person, or a moron, fool, jerk, etc...

The West Indies.

The small islands of the Caribbean.

Emancipation! It’s God’s way.

This is Lewis’ way of saying God would want all slaves freed.

Tar and feather the black murderers!

“To tar and feather” a person is to punish them by rubbing black tar (a type of thick coal-like substance for making roads) and then bird feathers on them. Fortunately, this is no longer done!

Slavery is tyranny!

“Tyranny” is the act of repressing an entire population through terror.

After the Spaniards were deep in virtuous sleep, the savages broke loose their collars and stole out the deck like creatures of pray....

“Virtuous” means honorable or noble, and thus is a silly way to describe sleep. A “savage” is an uncivilized or barbaric person who acts like an animal. In this case, a “collar” is a metal holder that is forced around the slaves’ necks. “To steal out on the deck” is a dated way of saying they went on the ship’s deck (which is the outdoor area on top of the ship), and “creatures of prey” is a poetic way of saying hunters.

...where they fell upon the unsuspecting crew with sabers and cane knives.

In this case, the “unsuspecting crew” were the captain and his assistants on the Amistad, who had no idea the Africans were going to fight back. A “saber” is a long knife used as a weapon, and “cane” is a type of plant from which sugar is produced.

Have you figured out who he is?

To “figure out” something is to find the answer, or understand it.

I cannot overstate the savagery, the bloodshed.

“To overstate” something is to exaggerate it.

“Savagery” is great cruelty or brutality.

Unsated by the mere deaths of their victims, they went on to mutilate at least one of them, to dismember him.

If a person is “unsated,” they are not yet satisfied. “To mutilate” a person is to cut up their body, and to “dismember” them is to specifically cut off their arms and legs.

The simple look, a Creole, their own kind.

A “Creole” is a person of both European and African background.

But for the bravery of Senior Ruiz and Montes....under constant threat of like fate, we might never have heard of this massacre, this bloodbath.

“But for” is a common way of saying “If it were not for...”

In this case, “of like fate” is a poetic way of saying the same fate, which is another word for destiny or a person’s probable future. A “massacre” is a horribly violent act in which many people are killed by others.

But for their bravery, these villains most certainly would’ve escaped justice.

A “villain” is a much loved word for an evil or bad person.

This case isn’t about murder, mayhem or massacres.

“Mayhem” is another word for great destruction or violence.

Did he learn this on some Cuban plantation? This decorative effect.

If something is “decorative,” it is made up in such a way as to be celebratory or pleasing to the eye.

Levantete!

This is the Spanish word for “stand up” (Not used in English)

On Spanish plantations, slaves always choose to live surrounded by their own ways and simple languages.

An interesting line which shows how ignorant people were about the cultures and languages of non-European people.

Pray tell, what need they know of Spanish? Fetch? Carry? Stop?

“Pray tell” is a dated way of saying “My God...” “To fetch” something is to go out and grab it, and then bring it back, like a dog does.

Gestures suffice for slaves, as indeed, for any other beast of burden.

A “gesture” is a way of communicating, usually made with one’s hands or facial expressions. If something “suffices,” it is good enough. “Indeed” is a British way of saying in fact. A “beast of burden” is any animal that is used for physical labor.

I have a bill of sale issued in Havana for the purchase of slaves.

A legal way of referring to a receipt.

On behalf of my clients, I submit this document to the court.

“To submit” a document is to officially give it over (Remember that “the court” is the actual judge).

You proffered to this court, a good deal of ...circumstantial evidence.

“To proffer” something is to agree to hand it over. “Circumstantial evidence” is a legal term for those facts which suggest that a person may

be guilty, although there is no physical proof or eyewitness testimony of such guilt.

Have you...actual documentation that might refute this...
and in doing so, more compellingly support your claims?

“Documentation” refers to any official papers or records. “To refute” a statement is to claim that it is not true. If something is “compelling,” it is powerful or strong. Here, a “claim” is a statement or testimony.

I could manufacture some...if that would suffice.

“To manufacture” a product is to make or produce it, usually by the use of machines.

This is a court order granting us permission to board and search the vessel for evidential purposes.

A “court order” is a legal order written by a judge telling a person to do something. “To grant” means to give or allow. “To board” a ship is to go on to it, and a “vessel” is a ship or boat. In this case, for “evidential purposes” means in order to find physical evidence such as ship records that may help prove where the slaves are from.

They needed to obtain one of these. An authentic one.

“To obtain” something is to physically take possession of it. If something is “authentic,” it is truly what it is claimed to be (as opposed to imitation or fake, like a fake Picasso painting).

These papers...are portions of a ship’s manifest that I retrieved from the Amistad yesterday eve.

A “portion” is a part or section of something.
A ship’s “manifest” is its list of passengers or cargo.

At first glance, they may appear to bolster the prosecution’s case.

“At first glance” is a way of saying when first seen or thought about. “To bolster” an argument is to make it stronger, and the “prosecution’s case” is the government’s evidence that they will use to prove their claims to a judge.

They lost cargo...bearing the Spanish names that Ruiz and Montes insist represent my clients, hand scrawled in the margins.

“Cargo” is the physical goods transported by a ship or plane. If something “bears” a person’s name, that name is written on it. If a name is “hand scrawled,” it is written by hand, and the “margins” of a piece of paper are the blank parts near the edge of the paper.

This is the cargo manifest of a Portuguese vessel, the notorious transatlantic slave ship, the Tecora.

If something is “notorious,” it is extremely bad or evil.

I can bring you as many witnesses as you wish to corroborate this.

A “witness” is a person who has seen something happen who often tells what they’ve seen at a trial. “To corroborate” a story or testimony is to claim that the story or testimony is true.

Sierra Leone is a protectorate of the British Crown.

It’s principal port has been rechristened Freetown.

Sierra Leone is now a country in West Africa, but as a “protectorate of the British Crown,” it was part of the British empire. A “port” is a harbor, and if a city is “rechristened,” it is renamed.

How can they engage in the slave trade in these waters? :: I’ll tell you how! Illegally!

“To engage” in a job or profession is to participate in it.

My client’s journey did not begin in Havana as they claim and keep claiming more and more emphatically.

A “journey” is a trip or voyage. To claim something “emphatically” is to do it with great force or emotion.

I underestimated you, Sir.

“To underestimate” a person is to think that they are not as skilled, strong or good as they really are.

I should take that as a compliment

A “compliment” is an expression of praise or respect.

I wish you to act promptly before this matter of the Africans becomes a weight on our two countries.

To do something “promptly” is to do it immediately, or in a timely manner. This is Queen Isabelle’s way of saying she doesn’t want the case of the Amistad slaves to damage Spanish-American relations.

Slavery is our pillar of commerce to the new world.

A “pillar” is a foundation or physical support.

“Commerce” is another word for trade or business.

Without it...our good will and excellent trade relations should be imperiled.

“Good will” means emotional support or friendship. If something is “imperiled,” it is in great danger of being harmed or destroyed.

Without it, we might have been denied the glory of aiding you in your virtuous rebellion against the British.

“Virtuous” means admirable or noble. A “rebellion” is an organized fight against a government or other authority. This is Queen Isabelle’s ridiculous way of saying slavery was what allowed Spain to help the Americans gain independence from England.

We must together stand firm.

“To stand firm” for something is strongly support it.

I am not about to bend to the will of some pubescent queen.

To “bend to the will” of a person is to agree to do what they want even though you don’t really want to. “Pubescent” is an official word for a teenager.

You need to concern yourself with what this matter means here, not an ocean away.

Another word for issue, subject, or perhaps situation.

John Calhoun paid me a visit to explain to me why this case is of great import, much greater symbolism, to the South than to the North.

If an issue is “of great import,” it is considered extremely important.

“Symbolism” is the use of images or facts to represent a general idea (For the South, the Amistad case was symbolic of a threat to slavery).

If the Africans are executed, the abolitionists will make good use of it and they will make some converts.

A “convert” is a person who is convinced to believe in a particular religion or political cause (Here, abolitionism, or the end of slavery).

If they are freed, the Southern States will so ally themselves against you that you can forget about reelection.

“To ally oneself against” a particular person is to fight against them (To ally oneself *with* a person is to support them).

Calhoun believes....this could take us all one step closer to civil war.

A “civil war” is a war between people who live in the same country, as opposed to a war between countries.

This?! :: Yes, Mr. President.

Note that the President of the U.S. is always addressed as “Mr., President,” even after he has left office!

The jury appears disposed toward freeing them, but juries can be dismissed.

If a person is “disposed toward” doing something, they are likely to want to do it. If a jury is “dismissed,” it is officially broken up and relieved of its responsibilities of deciding on a case.

He could be prevailed upon to recuse himself for any number of reasons.

If a person is “prevailed upon” to do something, they are convinced to do it (this is fairly rare). If a judge “recuses himself” from a trial, he agrees to take himself off the case.

I’ve taken the liberty of exploring several possible replacements.

If a person “takes the liberty” of doing something, they go out and do it without getting official approval first.

He's young....which means he has yet to feel the hankering of magnanimous last gestures for the sake of posterity.

“Hankering” is a strong desire, but this word is rarely used.

A “magnanimous” act is done with a generous spirit. In this case, a “gesture” is a symbolic or meaningful action, and if something is done “for the sake of posterity,” it is done for all future generations.

His grandfather is Catholic, which young Mr. Coglin has striven all his days to keep quiet.

“To strive” to do something is to try as seriously as possible to do it (Note the interesting past participle)

***Roger learns to see the Amistad slaves as more than property,
and soon convinces a new judge that the law does as well.***

I've been reading in the papers of the continuing saga of the Amistad.

A “saga” is a good little word for a story of great adventure and trouble.

This is why I came to Massachusetts and imposed on you. :: No imposition, really.

“To impose” on a person is to ask them for assistance even it presents a problem for them (If a request is an “imposition,” it is problematic).

How did that young lawyer take the news? :: In stride, Sir.

To take bad news “in stride” is to accept it without being too emotionally upset by it.

Rumor has it that that our next judge was hand-picked by Van Buren himself.

A “rumor” is a piece of information that spreads from person to person (or through the media), although it is not clear that it is actually true.

I was under the misconception that our executive and judicial branches were separate.

A person who has a “misconception” is mistaken in their beliefs about something. The “executive branch” of the US government refers to the President, and the “judicial branch” refers to the Courts (judges).

As a young lawyer, I realized after much trial and error that in a court room, whoever tells the best story wins.

“Trial and error” is the process of trying something over and over until you do it just right.

In unlaywerly fashion, I give you that scrap of wisdom free of charge.

A “scrap” is a small piece of little value. “Wisdom” is an important word for a combination of good judgement and intelligence.

I'm much obliged for your time, Sir.

To be “much obliged” to a person is to be very grateful to them (old-fashioned, but still occasionally used).

Does that pretty much sum up what you are? A Georgian?

In this case, “to sum up” a person is to describe them, or basically represent their most important features. A “Georgian” is from the Southern State of Georgia.

No, you're an ex-slave whose devoted his life to the abolition of slavery, and overcoming great obstacles and hardships along the way.

“To devote” oneself to a political cause is to spend much of one's time and energy on it. “To overcome” something is to defeat it or move past it, and an “obstacle” is anything that prevents you from achieving what you want.

You and this so-called lawyer have proven you know what they are....what you don't know is who they are.

This is an insulting adjective which implies that the speaker does not think the person they are describing is very good at what they claim to do (Adams doesn't think Roger is a good lawyer).

They have to bury him according to the their beliefs, otherwise his soul will haunt them forever.

The “soul” is the non-physical part of a human that is supposed to live after the body dies. “To haunt” something is to scare or disturb them from the dead (A ghost can haunt a house).

If I were you and I ran this place, I'd set protocol aside and let them bury him.

“Protocol” is the long-standing and expected way that government officials and others are supposed to behave at various occasions. “To set aside” something is to place it elsewhere or ignore it.

I am not a great orator or advisor, Cinque.

An “orator” is a person who makes speeches in public.

They say you alone slew the most terrifying beast anyone has ever seen.

“To slay” an animal is to kill it, usually with a knife or sword. “Terrifying” means extremely scary. A “beast” is a big and often dangerous animal.

I received the gratitude of everyone in the village.

Another word for appreciation or sincere thanks.

The Amistad, Cinque, the insurrection. That, too, was an accident?

An armed attack or rebellion against people in power.

I'll share the profit of my harvest; I'll give you all of it.

A “harvest” is food that is taken from the ground at that time of the year when crops such as wheat or corn are gathered.

Quite a tale; Intrigue, abduction and courage in the face of unspeakable suffering.

A “tale” is a story that is usually not true. “Intrigue” is any story filled with lots of spies, secrets or mystery. An “abduction” is the act of kidnapping a person.

Under what circumstances might one become a slave?

A “circumstance” is a fact, condition or event that can influence a general situation.

How many men are indebted to you?

If a person is “indebted,” they usually owe money.

Mr. Holabird is trying to intimidate my colleague.

“To intimidate” a person is to try and scare them, often by subtle threats.

Fine, Mr. Baldwin. Slavery, indentured servitude, whatever they want to call it. I don’t mind! The concept is the same!

“Indentured servitude” was a legal status in which people who owed others a lot of money were forced to work for them for years at a time. A “concept” is an important word for a general idea.

When you come down to it, it’s all about money, isn’t it?

A common way of saying in the end, or ultimately.

Do your people routinely slaughter the slaves in the manner so vividly described to us?

To do something “routinely” is to do it often or in a consistent pattern. “To slaughter” a group of people is to kill them with great violence or cruelty. To describe something “vividly” is to do so with such great detail that people can clearly imagine it.

Killing your own slave is like burning down your own house, or hut, isn’t it?

A “hut” is a small building made of wood that is used for sleeping.

How do you explain that paradox?

A “paradox” is a statement which seems to be impossible because it says two opposite things (“The older I get, the younger I feel”).

The behavior that you attribute to your tormentersand therefore every other aspect of your testimony makes no sense.

“To attribute” a behavior to somebody is to claim that they have behaved in that way. “To torment” a person is to cause them to suffer either physically or emotionally.

Captain Fritgearld, please explain to us your primary duties in Her Majesty’s Navy.

In this context, a person's "duties" are their responsibilities. "Her Majesty's Navy" is the British navy, under the Queen of England.

To patrol the Ivory Coast for slave ships

...because slavery is banned in British law, Sir.

"To patrol" an area is to watch it carefully for illegal activity. The Ivory Coast was a British colony in West Africa (and is now an independent country). If something is "banned," it is illegal or prohibited.

Yet the abduction of free men from the British protectorate or their illegal transportation to the new world as described by Cinque isn't unheard of, is it?

A "protectorate" is a small country governed by a great power. "The new world" is how Europeans referred to North and South America.

What in his account of his ordeal do you find believable?

An "ordeal" is a very painful and difficult experience.

His description of the slave fortress, for one thing.

A "fortress" is a large fort or military building, in this case for the rounding up and holding of slaves.

There is overwhelming evidence that it is real.

If there is "overwhelming evidence" for a statement, there are enough facts established to believe that is almost certainly true.

Cinque describes the cold-blooded murder of a significant portion of people on board the Tecora.

An adjective that implies great cruelty.

Often when slavers are intercepted....they simply throw all their prisoners overboard, and thereby rid themselves of the evidence of their crime.

"Slaver" was the word used for a ship that transported slaves. "To intercept" a ship is to come in front of it or stop it. To "rid oneself" of something is to eliminate it, or more commonly, get rid of it.

It hardly seems like a lucrative business to me, this slave trading.

A "lucrative" business is one that is very profitable.

Going to all that trouble to round them up only to throw them overboard.

"To round up" a group is to go out and find people who are in different places, and then to often imprison them into a single place.

If only we could corroborate Cinque's story, somehow with evidence of some kind.

"To corroborate" a story is to produce a witness or evidence that will show that the story is true. "Evidence" can be any physical object that will help prove that something is true.

The inventory...if you look , there's a notation made on May 10

correcting the number of slaves on board, reducing their number by 50.

An “inventory” is a list of things that a business has (In this case a list of slaves). A “notation” is a small note or description in writing.

If you look at it in conjunction with Cinque’s testimony, I would say that it means this.

To look at a story “in conjunction with” something else is to look at the two as part of a greater whole. “Testimony” are those statements that a witness says during a trial.

The Tecora crew, having greatly underestimated the amount of provisions required by their journey, solved the problem by throwing 50 overboard.

“Provisions” are food, water and other necessities of life.

They reduced the poundage, that is all.

An old-fashioned and never used word for weight.

It’s simple, ghastly arithmetic.

“Ghastly” is a powerful adjective that means horribly violent, cruel or disgusting.

I may need a quill and a parchment and better imagination.

A very old-fashioned pen and paper. No longer used.

And what poundage do you think the entry would refer to, Sir? A mast and sail, perhaps?

In this case, an “entry” is a written notation. A “mast” is a pole that holds a sail, thus allowing the wind to push a ship forward.

Give us free!

Note that the correct English would be “freedom!”

Please instruct the defendant that he cannot disrupt the proceedings with such outbursts.

A “defendant” is a person charged with a crime. “To disrupt” a meeting is to stop it by creating a lot of noise. A “proceeding” is an official legal action such as a trial. An “outburst” is the act of yelling or screaming.

If we are to have any semblance of order in this court, he cannot keep crying out.

“Semblance of order” is the appearance of a controlled or calm process.

Here he is healing people with his hands.

“To heal” a person is to cure them from a disease or injury.

After careful consideration and thorough reflection, I find it impossible to deny the power of the government’s position.

“Thorough reflection” is a way of saying great or serious thought or contemplation. “To deny” something is to claim it isn’t true.

[They]...have all proceeded with the utmost faith in the soundness of their case.

“To proceed” with something is move forward with it.

“Utmost” is an interesting adjective which means the most, or to the greatest degree. “Soundness” is strength or reliability.

Seniors Ruiz and Montes may have misrepresented the origin of the prisoners, an issue which weighs crucially upon their fate....

“To misrepresent” something is to lie about it.

Since the answer to that fundamental question shall so heavily govern every determination of this court, I say it again: Were they born in Africa?

If a question is “fundamental,” it is of critical importance.

In this case, “to govern” a case is to influence or direct it.

As such, her Catholic Majesty’s claims of ownership have no merit. Neither, of course, do those for salvage, made by Lieutenants Mead and Gedway.

“Merit” is value or worth, or the quality of deserving praise.

In this case, ‘salvage’ is the legal claim over lost property.

I hereby order the immediate arrest and detention of Seniors Ruiz and Montes by federal marshals on the charge of slave trading,...

“Hereby” is another way of saying thus or therefore. The “detention” of a person is the physical act of keeping them from moving, often by putting them in jail. A “federal marshal” is a police officer who works for the (national) US government, as opposed to a local government.

....and the release of the Africans, and their conveyance by this government at her earliest convenience and expense back to their homes in Africa.

In this case, “to convey” something is to physically transport it.

John Calhoun threatens a civil war, the government appeals to the Supreme Court, and Roger calls on John Quincy Adams....

What is most bewildering to her majesty is this arrogant independence of the American courts.

If something is “bewildering,” it is shocking or confusing. If a person is “arrogant,” they are snobby or look down upon others (though of course, here, it is the Queen of Spain who is truly arrogant).

After all, if you cannot rule the courts, you cannot rule.

“To rule” over a people is to use power to control them.

You see, Senior Calderon, there’s a growing number of people... that regard us in the South as not only geographically beneath them...

This is Calhoun’s way of saying people in the North look down

on people in the South, both in terms of geography, and culture.

They ignore the fact that slavery is so interwoven into the fabric of this society, that to destroy it would be to destroy us as a people.

If two things are “interwoven,” they are closely tied together.

“Fabric” is cloth (although here it used to mean a basic foundation).

“To destroy” something is to ruin it, or put it out of existence.

We are inferior in one area; We’re not as proficient in the art of gain.

To be “proficient” at something is to be skilled at it. The “art of gain” is Calhoun’s poetic way of referring to the act of making money.

Take away our life’s blood now, well, we all know what happens then, North and South.

“Our life’s blood” is Calhoun’s way of referring to slavery.

He’s not inferior in another area; The art of exaggeration.

“To exaggerate” is to claim something is larger, smarter, better, worse, etc. than it is in reality.

What court wants to be responsible for the spark that ignites the firestorm?

A “spark” is a tiny piece of burning material that can cause a fire.

“To ignite” a fire is to start it or set it off, and a “firestorm” is a huge, deadly fire. Calhoun is warning of the danger of civil war in the US.

What President wants to be in office when it comes crashing down around him?

If a building comes “crashing down,” it falls down or collapses into small broken pieces.

Judge us not too harshly, Sir, and bid her majesty like, because the real determination our courts and our president must make....

“To judge a person harshly” is to look at them very critically or negatively. In this case, “to bid” is to wish, though this entire sentence has dated and even snobby grammar.

.... is not weather this ragtag group of Africans raised swords against the enemy, but rather, must we?

“Ragtag” is a very negative word for those who are poor and dirty. Again, Calhoun is warning of war between the North and South.

Martyrdom, Mr. Joadson. From the dawn of Christianity, we have seen no stronger power for change.

“Martyrdom” is the act of becoming a hero for a political or social cause after being killed while fighting for it. “The dawn” of a movement or religion is its very beginning or birth.

There are some men whose hatred of slavery is stronger than anything, except for the slave himself.

A very powerful sentence, in which Joadson suggests that even abolitionists who hate slavery can still be racists.

If you wish to inspire such hatred in a man, Mr. Joadson, speak to him in that fashion and it may come true.

“To inspire” hatred is to cause it to happen or appear. To speak in a particular “fashion” is to speak with a certain style or attitude.

Our President...has appealed the decision to the Supreme Court.

“To appeal” a case is to ask that a higher court look at it again and overrule the lower court’s decision. The Supreme Court is the highest court in the US legal system.

I know it’s hard to understand. I don’t understand it, for that matter.
A common way of saying “in fact,” or “actually.”

You said there would be a judgement, and if we won the judgement, we’d go free.

Here, a “judgement” is the decision of a judge or court.

To his excellency, John Quincy Adams,
Massachusetts member, House of Representatives.

“To his excellency” is a very formal way of addressing a prominent or important person. The “House of Representatives” and the Senate are the houses which make up the US Congress.

I understand from Mr. Joadson that you’re aquainted with the plight of the Amistad Africans.

To be “acquainted” with a situation is to know the basic facts that are involved. A “plight” refers to a person’s terrible condition or state.

And I’m sure you’re aware, seven of nine of these Supreme Court Justices are themselves Southern slave owners.

Note that the judges on the Supreme Court are called “Justices” (The above is an interesting historical fact).

If ever there was a time for a man to cast aside his daily trappings and array himself for battle, that time has come.

“To cast aside” something is to throw it away. A person’s “daily trappings” are his material possessions, and to “array oneself” for battle is to prepare to fight. All of this is a Roger’s poetic way of telling Adams that he must prepare to fight for a great political cause.

A courageous man, at present in irons in New Haven.

If a person is “courageous,” they are very brave. In this case, to be “in irons” is to be stuck in metal chains (iron is a metal). New Haven is the capital of the state of Connecticut.

Has it occurred it you that I'm all you've got?

A common way of asking "Have you thought that...?"

As it happens, because my practice has completely deteriorated in the last few months, you're all I got.

A lawyer's "practice" is their business. If a business "deteriorates," it becomes worse or even physically falls apart.

More death threats, some of them signed by my own clients, no less!

"Death threats" are serious written or spoken warnings or threats to kill a person for their actions.

There is one more consequence of having no clientele to speak of.

A "consequence" is the result of a situation or series of actions.

A person's "clientele" are their clients or customers.

I am free to sit here as long as it takes for you to acknowledge me.

"To acknowledge" a person is to show that you see or recognize them.

Cicero's appeal was to Julius Caesar, not Claudius.

An "appeal" is a passionate or emotional request for help.

Adams has flirted with the abolitionists for 15 years but has yet to take one home for the dance.

"To flirt" with a person is to be romantically playful with them, although here it means to be slightly involved or supportive.

A way of saying that Adams supported the abolitionist cause, but never so seriously as to get very involved.

I hear he sleeps through 3/4 of the sessions on the hill.

A "session" of Congress is a given day of business, including speeches and debates. "The hill" refers to Capital Hill, where the Capitol building is located.

Let's see. President, slumbering Congressman from Massachusetts, jailhouse lawyer---one waits with great anticipation for what's next.

If a person is "slumbering," they're sleeping. "Anticipation" is excitement or curiosity about the future. This is all a way of noting

Adams has taken jobs of lesser and lesser import since being President.

The only thing John Quincy Adams will be remembered for is his middle name.

A way of noting that Adams' father was the 2nd President, John Adams.

I wonder---is there anybody as pathetic as an ex-President?

An excellent word meaning hopeless, or deserving of total pity.

Chattering in Mende. [written]

"To chatter" is to talk quickly, often about unimportant things.

Cinque has asked me to ask you about the question of jurisdiction.

“Jurisdiction” is a legal term that refers to the area over which a court has power (for example, a state court only has jurisdiction over its own state while the Supreme Court has jurisdiction over all the US).

Since neither America nor Spain owns the sea---how is it that the treaty applies?

In this case, “to apply” a treaty is to use or enforce it.

Tell him the treaty recognizes no jurisdictional limitations.

“Limitations” are borders or limits. This is Adams’ way of saying that the treaty can be applied everywhere in the world.

Does Great Britain have any treaties with West Africa which may override those between Spain and America?

“To override” a treaty or law is to reverse or overrule it, perhaps with the claim that there is another treaty or law that is more powerful.

Does the commonwealth of Connecticut have any treaties with West Africa?

An old English word for English colonies, that is still officially used for some of the Eastern states of the US (States do not make treaties with other countries since only the federal government is allowed to do so).

Unshackle him.

“To unshackle” a person is to take off their chains.

This is an orchid I brought over from China, and this is a primrose from an English garden.

Two types of very pretty flowers.

An African violet; I can’t tell you how difficult that was to come by.

“To come by” is a poetic way of saying to buy or obtain.

I was a chief.

A “chief” is the leader of a native tribe or group, though here Cinque uses it to mean the President.

One tries to govern wisely, strongly...in a way that betters the lives of one’s villagers.

To do something “wisely” is to do it with skill and intelligence.

Note the interesting and rare verb “to better,” which is to improve.

We’re about to bring your case before the highest court in the land and we’re about to do battle with a lion that is threatening to rip our country in two.

“To rip something in two” is to tear it apart. Adams is talking about the threat of civil war because of the emotion about the Amistad slaves.

You didn't ask to be at the center of this historic conflagration....

A "conflagration" is a great fire or disaster that destroys much property.

.....any more than I did, but we find ourselves here nonetheless, by some mysterious set of circumstances, and all the world is watching.

"Some mysterious set of circumstances" is Adams' way of saying that one can never really know why life develops as it does, or why people are brought together in the ways that they are.

What did he just say? :: Sorry, I didn't catch it.

In this case, "to catch" something is to understand it.

We have right on our side. We have righteousness at our side.

This is Adams' way of saying that moral and ethical people, and perhaps even God, are on the side of freeing the slaves.

I will reach back and draw them into me, and they must come, for at this moment, I am the whole reason they existed at all.

This is Cinque's way of describing the importance of his ancestors who are no longer alive, but who still are spiritually helping him through this difficult time.

John Quincy Adams presents the case for freedom....

I derive much consolation from the fact that my colleague has argued the case in so able and competent a manner as to leave me scarcely anything to say.

"To derive" is to receive or get, and "consolation" is comfort or emotional reassurance. A "colleague" is a fellow worker or professional (in this case a lawyer). If a person is "competent," they are skilled or talented at the job they are doing. "Scarcely" is another word for hardly.

How is it that a plain property issue should find itself ennobled as to be argued before the Supreme Court of the United States?

Note that "a plain property issue" is actually about real human beings. To be "ennobled" is to be given great importance or respect, but this is a very rare word.

Is it our great consuming fear of civil war that has allowed us to heap symbolism upon a simple case that never asked for it?

A "consuming fear" is a deep and long lasting fear or nervousness in which a person can think of almost nothing else. "To heap" is to throw more and more stuff on top of a pile, and "symbolism" is the use of symbols or images to represent something else.

The truth has been driven from this case like a slave, flogged from court to court, wretched and destitute.

If something is “flogged,” it is beaten or whipped, though here it is used to mean chased away. “Wretched” and “destitute” are both powerful adjectives that mean extremely poor, dirty and pitiful.

And not by any great legal acumen on the part of the opposition.

“Acumen” is skill or talent, and “the opposition” is the person or team that you face in a game, or in this case, in court.

These are transcriptions of letters...and I ask you to accept their perusal as part of your deliberations.

A “transcription” is a written copy. The “perusal” of a letter is the act of reading it very carefully. A judge’s “deliberations” are their careful consideration of all the facts of a case.

The Queen again and again refers to our incompetent courts, the courts that this 11 year old child plays with in her magical kingdom called Spain.

Adams is pointing out the difference between the Spanish courts, which are forced to do what the Queen wants, and American courts, which generally speaking, make their own independent decisions.

A court that can be toyed with like a doll.

To “toy with” a person is to treat them like a child or to possibly bully or manipulate them.

There’s an article written by “a keen mind of the South,” who asserts...

A person who is “keen” is very intelligent or perceptive. “To assert” something is to claim it.

....there has never existed a civilized society in which one segment did not thrive upon the labor of another.

A “segment” of something is a part or section of it, and “to thrive” is to grow strong and healthy. The claim here is that all civilized societies supposedly benefited from slavery.

History bears this out.

“To bear out” something is to prove that it is true.

In Eden, even there, one was pronounced subordinate to the other.

Eden was a place in the bible. If something is “pronounced,” it is proclaimed or forcefully said. If one person is “subordinate” to another, they are under that person’s power and must do what the other one says (Even in the Bible, it is said that Adam had power over Eve).

Slavery has always been with us and is never sinful nor immoral.

If something is “sinful,” it is considered a crime against God or God’s laws. If something is “immoral,” it is considered ethically wrong.

As war and antagonism are the natural state of man, so too slavery is as natural as it is inevitable.

“Antagonism” is anger or fighting between two or more people. If something is “inevitable,” it is almost certainly going to happen in the future and nothing can be done to stop it. This is the philosophy of a typical Southern slave owner.

I must say that I differ with the keen minds of the South.
 “To differ with” a person is to disagree with them.

The proof is in the lengths to which a man, woman or child will go to regain it, once taken.
 In this case, “lengths” refers to great effort or struggle (Adams is talking about the desire for freedom or liberty).

He will break loose his chains, he will decimate his enemies.
 “To decimate” something is to completely destroy it.

If he were white and his enemies were British, he wouldn’t be able to stand, so heavy the weight of the medals and honors we would bestow upon him.
 “Medals” are metal symbols that are often worn around a person’s neck to honor their bravery or heroism. “To bestow” something on a person is to officially give it to them (though this verb is fairly rare).

Our children would know his name as well as they know Patrick Henry.
 Patrick Henry was a hero of the American Revolution (and is known for having said “Give me liberty or give me death”).

What are we to do with that embarrassing, annoying document?
 If something is “annoying,” it is troubling or bothersome (Adams is speaking sarcastically about the Declaration of Independence).

What of its conceits “All men created equal...
Inalienable Rights...Life, Liberty and so on and so forth...”
 In this case, “conceits” are powerful statements. “Inalienable Rights” are liberties that no government can take away. “So on and so forth...” is a way of referring to words that the listener probably already knows.

What on earth are we to do with this? I have a modest suggestion.
 An interesting addition to WH questions that is used to express great emotion such as surprise or anger.

We were at the greenhouse together.
 A building often made of glass where many types of plants are grown.

He invokes his ancestors.
 “To invoke” the name of a person is to call out to them for help (Often one invokes a distant ancestor or other dead person).

The Mende believe that if they can summon the spirit of one’s ancestors, then they have never left.

“To summon the spirit” of a dead person is to call out to their souls in order to communicate with them.

James Madison. Alexander Hamilton. Benjamin Franklin.
Thomas Jefferson. George Washington. John Adams.

America’s most important founding fathers, from the generation that fought the American Revolution against England in the 1770s.

We have long feared asking you for guidance. Perhaps in doing so, we have feared that our individuality, which we so, so revere, is not entirely our own.

“Guidance” is advice or instruction. “Individuality” is the condition of being different from or independent from others. “To revere” something is to deeply love or respect it.

We’ve been made to understand, and embrace the understanding, that who we are, is who we were.

“To embrace” something is to hold it tight, or perhaps accept it with great enthusiasm or support.

We desperately need your strength and wisdom to triumph over our fears, our prejudices, ourselves.

“To triumph” over something is to defeat or crush it.

A person’s “prejudices” are their biases or their attitudes which are based on old ideas or beliefs that should now be challenged.

Give us the courage to do what is right, and if it means civil war, then let it come.

“Courage” is bravery, or the ability to ignore fear.

And let it be, finally, the last battle of the American Revolution.

This is Adams’ way of saying that the battle over slavery is something that should have been finished by his father and that generation, and it is now time to deal with the issue one last time, even if it means war.

Our treaty of 1795 with Spain, on which the prosecution has primarily based its arguments, is inapplicable.

“Primarily” means mostly. If a treaty or law is “inapplicable,” it does not apply to the current set of facts (it is irrelevant).

What is clearly stipulated in Article 9, that, and I quote “seized ships and cargo are to be returned entirely to their proprietary”---the end of quote.

“To stipulate” means to clearly state, usually in the context of an agreement. “To quote” somebody is to use their exact words. If a ship is “seized,” it is physically taken and held, usually against the wishes of the crew. “Proprietary” is a legal word for owner, but it’s rarely used.

We are left with the alternative that they are not slaves and therefore cannot be considered merchandise, but rather are free individuals.....

An “alternative” is a different choice or possibility. “Merchandise” is a general word for any kind of goods or physical objects that can be sold.

.....with certain legal and moral rights,
including the right to engage in insurrection.

“To engage in insurrection” is to fight back against an oppressive government or other power.

Therefore, over one dissent, it is the Court’s judgement that...

A “dissent” is a legal term for the opinion of a judge who disagrees with the majority of other judges on the court.

What words did you use to persuade them?

“To persuade” a person is to convince them of a certain opinion.

All clear, Sir! Fire!

“All clear” means that there is nothing in the way, and “fire” is what an officer yells when he wants his soldiers to shoot their guns.

My Dear Mr. Forsyth...the slave fortress in Sierra Leone does not exist.

A large fort or military building.

In 1864, her hopes of compensation finally collapsed...
with the confederate army’s defeat at Atlanta.

“Compensation” is a legal term for payment that is ordered to be given to a person who has been injured. If something “collapses,” it breaks apart and falls to the ground. The “confederate” army fought for the South during the American Civil War.

Amistad

Possible Topics for ESL Class Discussion

1. How did Roger Baldwin change during the film?
2. How would Cinque have described America to his family back in Africa?
3. How was it possible for slavery to last so long?
4. In this movie, who were the good guys and who were the bad guys?
5. How would you describe John Quincy Adams?
6. How are race relations in the United States today?
Does the legacy of slavery still play a big part in the way things are?
7. What did you like and not like about this movie?