

## MARGARET GARNER

### Synopsis

#### Act I, Scene 1 -- Kentucky, April 1856

The opera begins in total darkness, without any sense of location or time period. A large group of slaves gradually becomes visible, shackled and caged on a trading block. In a call-and-response song, the slaves, led by Margaret Garner, beg for deliverance from their suffering.

The scene shifts to the lively town square in Richmond Station, Kentucky; it is April 1856. In preparation for an auction, members of slave families are separated from each other, so that they can be sold individually. The local townfolks bid enthusiastically for these "picknies and mammies and breeders and bucks," even though they consider them nothing more than personal burdens in need of civilizing.

In the crowd of onlookers is a handsome, genteel man named Edward Gaines, accompanied by his daughter Caroline. He interrupts the auction when an "old estate rich in history" is brought to the block, asserting that this property, Maplewood Plantation, belonged to his deceased brother and therefore cannot be sold. As no one disputes the claim, Gaines acquires Maplewood. However, the self-assured Gaines, a native of the region but absent for twenty years, is dismayed to learn that none of the townfolks remembers him, only his well-respected older brother. The younger Gaines informs them that he has survived life's challenges; once happily married, he now is a widower with a child to raise. He grandiosely proclaims that he will fill Maplewood with a multitude of possessions, and announces that he intends to retain all the plantation's "goods and property" -- i.e., its slaves. Those slaves who were waiting to be auctioned therefore are reunited happily with their families.

As Gaines signs the ownership papers for Maplewood Plantation, the slaves celebrate their good fortune with dance and music. He notices, and is intrigued by, Margaret Garner, an attractive young slave who sings a solo song. After the crowd disperses, Gaines discovers, and takes, a red scarf that Margaret had dropped on the ground. He nostalgically recalls his childhood, even though he had been forced to leave town under purportedly disreputable circumstances. He promises himself that the townfolks will not forget him this time.

### **Act I, Scene 2 -- Harvest time, about six months later**

Singing a wry, somewhat defiant work song, the slaves head back to their quarters after a day toiling in the fields. Cilla, the mother of Margaret's husband, Robert, joins the couple for supper; their spirits are light-hearted while they prepare the evening meal. After saying grace, however, Margaret insists upon seeing her baby immediately. Cilla, warm-hearted yet world-wise, cautions her against such an intense attachment to the child, but Margaret persists. She sings a Lullaby to the baby while Robert and his mother eat dinner. Casey, the treacherous foreman at Maplewood Plantation, unexpectedly appears at the cabin and delivers shocking news: Robert is being sent away that night to another plantation. Margaret is to remain at Maplewood, but now will work in the plantation's main house. When Casey tosses a fancy dress at Margaret, it is clear that Gaines expects sexual favors from her. Robert voices his anger, but Margaret reassures him of her faithfulness, and the two pledge their love.

Later that evening, after Margaret has been delivered to Maplewood, Gaines delights at the thought of taking her sexually. Relaxing in the plantation's parlor, he becomes slightly inebriated on a fine whiskey, and starts musing aloud about life and human nature. His daughter Caroline inadvertently witnesses and hears everything - - and she is troubled greatly by the discovery of a disturbing side to her father's personality.

### **Act I, Scene 3 -- in Edward Gaines's parlor, in the early summer of 1858**

At Maplewood Plantation, a wedding reception is being held to celebrate the marriage of Caroline Gaines to George Hancock. The guests include the local townspeople, whom Edward is very eager to impress as he seeks their approval. A discussion about the nature of love develops at the party; not surprisingly, Gaines expresses views markedly different from those of the young lovers. A heated disagreement quickly erupts between Edward and George.

To break the tension, the newlyweds begin the reception's traditional "first dance." The guests quickly join in the waltz; ironically, only Gaines is without a partner. When the dance concludes, Gaines graciously toasts the couple. But then Caroline accidentally makes matters worse again by asking Margaret, now the house servant, for her opinions on love. The guests are outraged that a person of "quality"

would ask a slave for her opinion. To show their disapproval of Gaines, and the social manners he seemingly allows at Maplewood, the haughty guests leave the party abruptly. Distressed by their rudeness, Gaines lashes out at Caroline, who ruined what he had hoped would be a proud moment; now, he claims, his neighbors have "more reason to gossip and despise" him. He dismisses her attempts to mollify him, yet watches wistfully as the newlyweds leave for their honeymoon.

After the party, when Gaines notices Margaret returning to clear the glasses, he lingers to observe her. Unaware of his presence, she continues to reflect upon the nature of love. Edward emerges from his hiding place and accosts her. She resists his advances and begins to struggle vehemently. But Edward is determined to have his way; he overpowers her and drags her forcibly from the parlor.

**-- End of Act One --**

## **Act II: Scene 1**

### **Maplewood Plantation; Sunday, February 24, 1861, in the early evening**

Anticipating a visit from Robert, who has been meeting her secretly on Sunday nights, Margaret goes to Cilla's cabin. Upon arriving there, she is puzzled to find Cilla packing a carpetbag; she becomes highly agitated when she notices that her children aren't there, and that Cilla is folding their clothing. As Margaret has seen Casey lurking nearby, she fears the worst – that he is coming for the children and plans to sell them. Cilla tries to reassure Margaret that all is well: Robert is attending to the final details for an escape attempt that night.

Margaret, whose life has been sustained by her quest for freedom, is overcome when Robert arrives and confirms that they are scheduled to leave in just three hours. A man of great courage and strength, Robert attempts to reassure Margaret and calm her anxieties. Suddenly, Margaret notices that Cilla is not packing any of her own things. In spite of Margaret's pleas to join them, Cilla proclaims that she is too old to begin a new life; her joy is simply to see her son's family safe and living elsewhere. Although sympathetic with Margaret and Robert's dreams for a free life, Cilla has made peace with her own, and sings of her reliance upon God.

Footsteps are heard approaching, and Cilla and Margaret are terrified when Casey storms into the cabin. At the same time, Robert inadvertently walks into the trap when he returns with the children. Casey pulls out a pistol, and Robert impulsively attacks him. A violent struggle ensues, but Robert hesitates and cannot bring himself to shoot Casey. Yet when a heated exchange ends with Casey calling Margaret a "black slut," Robert shoots Casey to death. Cilla instantly understands that Robert's action has doomed the family, and she and Margaret beg him to run, regardless of any personal danger they might be in. Cilla drags Casey's body away; Robert and Margaret sing of their love and make plans to meet later.

## **Act II: Scene 2 – In the Free State of Ohio, three weeks later**

After successfully escaping their masters, Robert and Margaret have crossed the Ohio River and reached Cincinnati, a city in the Free State of Ohio. Now both outlaws, they live with their children in an underground shed to avoid recapture. Standing outside underneath a huge elm tree as a storm threatens, Robert and Margaret discuss speculation about the country's new president. Margaret shudders

when she hears of Lincoln's belief that the "Union is Sacred" and that "A House Divided Cannot Stand," for she knows that means war is inevitable.

Ever hopeful, and sharing Margaret's dream for a better future, Robert asserts that freedom is nearly theirs – after all, they now live in a state whose name means "beautiful"! Here, their children will be able to grow up with dignity, and their own marriage will be respected as sacred. He will protect Margaret always, just as the elm tree always protects them. Margaret caresses Robert's face with a leaf from the tree, around which they dance a teasing "catch-me dance".

Only moments after Robert insists they return to the shed because of the potential dangers facing them outside, Edward Gaines arrives, accompanied by slave catchers. He pounds on the shed door, promising that no harm will be done; he just wants to claim his property. Intoxicated, Gaines breaks down the shed door. An exchange of gunfire leaves neither man hurt, but the slave catchers tie up Robert. As Robert is being dragged outside, Gaines grabs Margaret. He laments that his bed is cold; he wants her to heat it up, just as she once did with hot coals. Breaking loose, Margaret recklessly plunges her bare hands into the fire and grabs several pieces of coal; she lunges at Gaines, attempting to burn him. Gaines yells that she can pretend to be as crazy as she likes, he doesn't care even if she mangles herself in the process. Margaret sees Robert outside, standing on a tall box underneath the elm tree. A noose has been placed around his neck, and he is surrounded by fiery torches planted in the ground. His cries of love to her are cut off when one of Gaines's men kicks the box away. In the sudden stillness, Margaret pulls from her hair the leaf Robert had placed there only moments before. She holds it in her scorched hands, weeping.

### **Act II, scene 3 - On the Banks of the Ohio River, during the first week of April, 1861**

At dawn, after fishing for hours, two rural fishermen begin to pack up their gear. They recount in amazement a recent incident involving some rich men who were enjoying a dissolute life while transporting slaves downriver to sell at the lucrative markets. Details of the event varied upon the storyteller, but its significance was unambiguous and shocking. One of the men, a plantation owner named Edward Gaines, had wagered a slave and her children to cover his gambling losses; when she was unshackled for a moment, however, she tried to escape by jumping

overboard with the children. Alert sailors were able to rescue the slave from the river, but her two children drowned.

A rising fog begins to shroud the river, enhancing the early morning's silence. Eventually, the sound of a country fiddle player is heard in the distance, and a flatboat slowly comes into view. Tied to a pole on the boat's deck is Margaret Garner, the runaway slave purported to have killed her children. Edward Gaines is having her transported back to Kentucky from Ohio, where he captured her. There, she will stand trial for the "destruction" of her two children, considered Gaines's property. Margaret stands absolutely immobile on deck; her hands still are bandaged from the burns she suffered while defending herself against Gaines's unwanted advances. Also onboard is the country fiddle-playing Sheriff, as well as an oarsman who generously shares his bourbon with the guard assigned to watch Margaret. As the boat draws nearer, the fishermen notice the distant, detached gaze on Margaret's face, and deduce that she is losing her grasp on reality. Shaking their heads, they turn from the disturbing sight and slowly walk away. ("Poor little monster. Hell is her only home now.")

In tones reminiscent of moaning, Margaret starts to sing fragments of songs remembered from happier days. Thoughts of Robert, and the life they once dreamed of, overtake her. Margaret's mind suddenly focuses with great clarity, and she becomes keenly aware of the circumstances now governing her life. She embraces her fate ("Darkness, I salute you!") with a quiet acceptance ("Thief of life, my lover now").

#### **Act II, scene 4 - In a Courtroom, the next day**

Margaret Garner sits in the middle of a courtroom, surrounded by militia officers. The courtroom gallery is filled with local citizens who have followed her trial with great interest and curiosity, and now eagerly await her sentencing by the three presiding judges.

In his testimony, Edward Gaines accuses Margaret of theft and the deliberate destruction of his property. Upon questioning, he reveals that these stolen items were Margaret's two children who drowned in the river. Caroline Gaines and her husband try to rationalize with Edward: a mother who *kills* her children cannot be said to *steal* them. Caroline contends that Margaret should properly be charged with murder – the killing of human beings. The judges disagree vehemently. According to the law of the land, Margaret's case concerns "property," and the financial loss

suffered by Gaines, the owner of the stolen goods. Margaret has no legal right or claim to her children; they don't belong to her. A slave owns *nothing*, least of all her master's other slaves. The onlookers concur rowdily, forcing the judges to call for order. When Caroline suggests that Margaret, as a mother, is responsible for her own children until they come of age, the judges laugh cynically at her naiveté. ("Slavery is not a matter for a slave to judge!") Furthermore, they add, the Bible confirms and defends the veracity of their beliefs. The townspeople erupt that Margaret is guilty of *infanticide*, a savage and unnatural crime. The judges merely dismiss George with disdain when he challenges them to condemn the "crime that belittles her crime."

Given the court's intransigence, Caroline senses the hopelessness of the situation. She makes a personal appeal to her father on Margaret's behalf. ("She was more than a mother to me. Now her silence screams a grief we dare not know.") Gaines reiterates that he has committed no crime – society and the law affirm his behavior. Caroline pleads that a man of her father's stature could influence the debate on slavery that is tearing the country apart. Margaret is not the only one guilty of a crime, she believes; everyone bears some of the blame for the discord. At this, the judges declare that Margaret is to be executed – for theft. The onlookers express their relief at this verdict, for it confirms their deeply held conviction that they are superior to Margaret, who is "not like them."

Having sat quietly throughout the proceedings, Margaret now suddenly rises from her chair, and glares at all in the courtroom. She states emphatically that indeed she is *not* like them; she is a unique individual over whom no one present has any power. A melee breaks out in the courtroom, and Margaret's repeated, defiant assertions of autonomy force the militia officers to restrain her. Citing their full legal authority, the judges now officially sentence Margaret to be executed by sunrise. They quickly recess to their chambers, and the condemned prisoner is led from the courtroom, followed by the townspeople. Dismayed by the verdict, Caroline again pleads with her father to urge the court for clemency. "Don't let her die without dignity," George implores. "Don't let her hang for the wrong reason." Betraying no sign of emotion, although secretly disturbed by the trial's proceedings, Edward coolly states that Margaret must suffer the consequences of what she has done. Caroline retorts that her father also must accept responsibility for his actions, and expresses fear for the country's future. ("We are so at odds in the past few years. Our land will not survive this violent test.")

Caroline and George depart, leaving Edward Gaines alone in the silent courtroom. He contemplates the course of his life, and wonders why he feels so troubled. ("I am approved. Clearly what the world insists I should be. Am I not ... God's blueprint, flawed in merely ordinary ways?") Yet he is also aware that his relationship with Caroline, once so close and loving, has deteriorated badly. ("My only child looks at me with strange eyes; cold appraisal where naked adoration used to live.") He comes to the conclusion that he must choose which model of "humanity" to emulate.

**ACT II, Scene 5 - In the town square of Richmond Station, Kentucky; the next morning, shortly before dawn**

Although only a few hours have passed since Margaret was condemned to death, an executioner's scaffold has been prepared and awaits her in the town square near Maplewood Plantation. The night seems to have passed quickly; traces of sunlight already can be seen on the horizon. Cilla kneels at the base of the scaffold, and quietly sings a spiritual to herself. She is overcome briefly with grief as she contemplates the impending death of her beloved daughter-in-law, but she fights back her tears.

At dawn, the town authorities and a group of local citizens process somberly into the town square. They are accompanying Margaret Garner to her execution, and all are sobered by the imminence of death. Cilla joins some slaves who have been transported from nearby plantations to witness the event. Seemingly, the only person not in the crowded plaza is Edward Gaines.

The hangman brings forth the condemned prisoner. Margaret's hands, still bandaged, have not yet been tied up in preparation for execution. The hangman leads Margaret up the scaffold steps. When they reach the top, he places a noose around her neck and positions her on the gallows' trap door. Scattered about the platform are a number of ropes, which he will use to secure her limbs tightly.

Suddenly, Edward Gaines runs in, excitedly waving a legal document -- the judges have granted Margaret clemency! If she admits and repents her crime, she simply will be returned to Gaines's custody, and all will be well again. Edward looks around the crowd, hoping in vain to see in his neighbors' faces, finally, some sign of approval or appreciation. As a stay of execution would eliminate the need for him to bind Margaret's body, the hangman briefly leaves her side and walks over to accept

the document from Edward for careful review. Caroline is overjoyed and relieved by this turn of events, as well as proud of her father's decision to seek justice.

Upon hearing the judges' decree, Cilla immediately offers words of gratitude and praise to her God, as always. Margaret, still standing on the gallows, expresses her desire to live peacefully in a just world. ("I will live among the cherished. It will be just so... Ringed by a harvest of love. No more brutal days or nights. Goodbye, sorrow...") With the crowd's attention still focused elsewhere, Margaret seizes her opportunity for "freedom" -- she deliberately releases the gallows' trap door and hangs herself. In her mind, it was far better to embrace death than be returned to a life of slavery. Startled by the onlookers' screams, the hangman quickly drops the ropes and other equipment he was putting away. He rushes over and makes a desperate, if futile, attempt to save Margaret, whose limp body is dangling just inches off the ground. The crowd is stunned by her suicide, yet a sense of awe permeates their sorrow. Caroline glances at her father, and notices Margaret's red scarf in his front pocket. She walks over and removes it, then silently ascends the scaffold and reverently ties it around Margaret's waist. Caroline and George leave the square. ("She has swallowed her trouble, and left us to taste our own.") They do not respond when Edward -- as bewildered as anyone by Margaret's deed -- calls after them. ("Unhealed, there is no peace.")

The hangman unties the noose around Margaret's neck, and frees her from the gallows. Holding her body tenderly in his arms, he walks slowly through the crowd as he leaves the square. All of the onlookers -- townspeople and slaves alike -- pray for repentance. ("Have mercy on us. Help us break through the night.") "Soon, soon my bold-hearted girl, I'll be there," proclaims Cilla when Margaret's body passes by -- revealing at once the weariness of her soul and the fragility of her once unshakable trust and reliance on God. As the curtain descends slowly, the crowd in the town square prays that Margaret's final journey home be a peaceful one. ("Let her linger a while, and ride the light.")

-- Mary Lou Humphrey