

Amazing Grace

Characters

John Newton: An older man (late 70s, early 80s) who recently became blind. A kind man who has lost his way because his blindness makes him concentrate on his past instead of his present.

Elizabeth Cunningham: Mr. Newton's niece who was adopted by him after her parents' death. She loves Newton with all her heart and is devastated by the turn he has taken. She continues to try to cheer him up but is unsuccessful. She does occasionally get impatient with him, however, because she truly doesn't understand his mood.

Nigel Bremley: An administrative assistant to William Wilberforce. He is a committed abolitionist and, as such, greatly admires Mr. Newton.

Setting

Elizabeth Cunningham's home, where John Newton resides, in the early 1800s. The vast majority of the play takes place in Mr. Newton's bedroom. He is not really bedridden, but is too depressed to get out of bed. The room indicates wealth. There should be a bed, a chair near the bed, and a small table next to the chair with a couple of books on it. There should be delineation between his room and the rest of the house, as there is some action that takes place at the home's front door. However, the door need not be seen. It just needs to be clear when someone enters the house, and it also needs to be clear when someone is in Newton's bedroom as opposed to the rest of the house.

Costuming

Because he is in bed, Newton wears a dressing gown, but the audience sees only his head, arms, and chest, as he stays under the covers throughout the play. He wears the same thing throughout the play.

Elizabeth is in her home with her father (and presumably husband). As such, her attire can be simple for the time, as can be her hairdo. The play takes place on two separate days (not consecutive), but she needn't have two separate outfits, because she is at home the entire time. Something simple could be done to make a small change, but it must be simple, as she is on stage at the end of the first day and the beginning of the next day.

Nigel Bremley first comes to the Newton home right after a meeting of Parliament, so he is dressed in business attire for the time. On the next day, he has come from church. He could wear the same clothes in both, perhaps with a different hat and ascot/bowtie.

(Lights come up on John Newton, in bed but propped up into a sitting position. He has a bed tray that contains a glass, a bowl of soup with a spoon, and a small vase with at least one flower in it. He is not paying attention to the food at all. Elizabeth enters and is visibly annoyed that Newton has not touched his food or drink. She comes over to him, acting like an impatient mother who can't get her son to do what is best for him.)

Elizabeth: (fussing with the bed tray) Father, you haven't touched your soup.

John: (gruff) not hungry

Elizabeth: What's the matter?

John: A man like me does not deserve to eat

Elizabeth: (sighing – she has heard this before and while understanding, has had enough of it) Father, we've been through this a hundred times. You are a wonderful man who deserves wonderful things.

John: I wish I could make you understand.

Elizabeth: Here's what I understand: I probably wouldn't be alive if it weren't for your loving kindness. What would have become of me and dear Eliza (God rest her soul) had you not adopted us when our parents died? We would have been left to fend for ourselves on the street. You have sheltered me, cared for me, and filled my every day with love. (Pause – a bit teary, but trying to be all business) That alone is worth some soup.

(She tries to feed him a spoonful. He refuses. She gives up.)

Father, whatever am I going to do with you?

(There is a persistent knocking on the door)

Who could that be? Are we expecting someone?

John: No.

(She crosses to the door, opens it. We only hear Mr. Bremley.)

Bremley: (Excited) Is this the home of John Newton?

Elizabeth: Mr. Newton lives here, yes. May I ask who is calling?

Bremley: (embarrassed) Oh dear, I am terribly sorry. I am Mr. Bremley. I have wonderful news for Mr. Newton. It comes straight from Mr. Wilberforce.

Elizabeth: (Brightens) Excellent! Mr. Newton could use a bit of good news today. Please come in. (Bremley enters. He is in business attire). I am Elizabeth Cunningham, Mr. Newton's daughter (a small curtsy).

Bremley: (takes off his hat and hands it to her) Thank you so much, and it is a sincere pleasure to meet you Mrs. Cunningham.

Elizabeth: Mr. Newton is in his bed. He is not feeling well at the moment, but if your news is good enough, perhaps that will change.

Bremley: I cannot imagine better news. I honestly cannot.

Elizabeth: (happy) Excellent! Please follow me. (They move towards the bedroom. As they get close, she stops and says in a low voice) Perhaps you don't know that my father is blind. Please do not let that upset you.

Bremley: Thank you for telling me, but Mr. Wilberforce informed me of this. He said that I should not let his apparent lack of attention concern me.

Elizabeth: Mr. Wilberforce is very kind, and he is a dear friend. Please pass on my greeting when you see him again.

Bremley: Of course.

(They enter the bedroom)

Elizabeth: Father, Mr. Bremley is here to see you.

John: (gruff) I don't know any Bremley

Elizabeth: (Bremley is about to speak, but Elizabeth raises her hand to stop him) He comes directly from Mr. Wilberforce.

John: Tell him that I am happy to entertain a friend of Mr. Wilberforce, but now is not a good time.

Elizabeth: Please, father. He says he has good news. I for one could use a bit of good news today. Will you allow him to deliver his message for my sake?

John: (softens) For you, my dear, I would allow nearly anything. Please send him in.

(Elizabeth suddenly realizes that she has allowed Bremley into the room without Newton's permission. Bremley realizes it, too. They look at each other in panick, then Elizabeth turns to the door.)

Elizabeth: (loudly, as if Bremley is in the next room) Mr. Bremley, you may come in now.

Bremley: (At the urging of Elizabeth, he awkwardly walks in place for a time and then moves to the other side of the bed) Mr. Newton. It is an honor to meet you. My name is Nigel Bremely, and I have some news from Mr. Wilberforce.

John: (noncommittal) And what is this news?

Bremley: (Trying hard not to shout with joy). It passed sir....it passed! The Slave Trade Act is now law throughout the entire British Empire!

(There is a pause. Elizabeth is clearly overjoyed, but John makes no visible reaction. Bremley obviously expected exuberance. He gives a questioning look to Elizabeth, who once again holds up her hand to silence him. There is another pause)

John: So there will be no more slave *trade* in Britain?

Bremley: (Disappointed in the reaction, trying for more) Or any of her colonies throughout the world!

John: (sighs) I suppose it's a start.

Bremley: (confused) I don't understand, sir. I thought you would be overjoyed. I swear on my mother's grave that Mr. Wilberforce actually danced a jig when the final vote was tallied.

Elizabeth: (To Bremley) You will find, Mr. Bremley, that while my father and Mr. Wilberforce have the same goals, they have decidedly different temperaments, especially these days. (To John – almost like a mother would tell a child) Father, don't you have something to say to Mr. Bremley?

John: (almost reluctantly) Of course. My manners are not what they should be, but it seems my daughter has manners enough for the both of us. Thank you for the excellent news Mr. Bremley. While it is not all that I hoped for, perhaps this act will eventually lead to the abolition of slavery itself, not just the practice of trading slaves.

Bremley: (Excited) Oh it most certainly will, sir. You know how Parliament acts. It cannot produce sweeping reforms. As Mr. Wilberforce has told me time and time again, "Baby steps, Bremley. Baby Steps. Members of Parliament can't be expected to walk as adults!"

John: (a bit of a smile) Or think as adults, either.

Elizabeth: (shocked at an insult to the members of Parliament) Father!

Bremley: (chuckling) Hear hear. (A pause) Mr. Newton, I must confess that I asked for the honor of delivering this message to you in person.

John: And why would you ask for such a thing?

Bremley: Please do not think of me as some mindless child sir, but I have always admired you.

John: (back to the same mood at the beginning of the play) You should admire men who are worthy, sir. (Elizabeth sighs and rolls her eyes)

Bremley: (taken aback) And you are certainly such a man.

John: I am decidedly not, sir.

Elizabeth: Father...

Bremley: (interrupting, and getting more forceful as he speaks) Mr. Newton, I did not come here to start an argument, but I must tell you that every member of Parliament had your pamphlet on his desk. When the final vote was tallied, most of them raised your pamphlet in celebration. You, sir, were instrumental in making this historic act pass. As such, you deserve the admiration of every man, woman, and child in the British Empire.

(an uncomfortable pause)

John: Tell me, sir. Have you read my pamphlet?

Bremley: (fumbling) Actually, Mr. Newton, I have not. I have been working so hard on the political issues surrounding this act... (trails off, not knowing what to say)

John: Very well, sir. I thank you for your work and for your message. As you say, this act is historic. Now... if you truly wish to admire me, I ask that you read my pamphlet. Once you are through, if you still think that I am worthy of admiration, you can come back and tell me why.

Bremley: But...

John: (raises his hand in a way very similar to which Elizabeth had) There are no buts, sir. Read the pamphlet.

Elizabeth: (sighs) Mr. Bremley, I am sorry to say that it is time for you to leave. (She shows him out. Once outside, she continues) Please forgive my father. He is a very kind, loving man, but he is given to moods of melancholy. This one has lasted longer than most. I do hope that your wonderful news – and let me tell you, sir, it is the best news I have heard in quite some time – sinks in. If it does, perhaps it will help lift this terrible mood from him.

Bremley: I must admit that I am at a loss, Mrs. Cunningham. Why would a man like Mr. Newton be melancholy? Is it his blindness?

Elizabeth: (a small smile) That is part of the reason. I wish you could have met my father even just a year ago, Mr. Bremley. He is a very loving soul, and he use to enjoy life so much. I

remember when I first came to live with him, he would laugh and giggle with me and my sister as if he were a schoolgirl himself...

Bremley: I am sorry, madam...Since you came to live with him?

Elizabeth: (another smile) Of course. You don't know. My father is actually my uncle. He adopted me and my sister when our parents...passed.

Bremley: (a bit amazed) I must admit, madam, I would never have guessed that you are adopted. You are so tender towards him, and he towards you. I rarely see that kind of tenderness in...well if you excuse the expression...natural families.

Elizabeth: From the moment we came to live with him, he treated me and my sister with the most tender fatherly love. There has never been any question in my mind that I am his daughter, in every sense of the word.

Bremley: That is, indeed, most wonderful.

Elizabeth: And Father is, indeed, most wonderful. He is, in fact, one of the greatest men who has ever lived. He has simply...lost sight of that fact. Since he went blind, he has been haunted by his memories. He told me once that while he had sight, he could look upon my face and the faces of others he held dear and concentrate on his current life. That gave him nothing but joy. Now that he is blind, however, he cannot hold at bay the memories of the past.

Bremley: And his past is that terrible?

Elizabeth: Perhaps you should read his pamphlet. (opens the door for him to leave)

Bremley: Very well. It was a sincere pleasure to meet you Mrs. Cunningham. Please have a pleasant day. (He leaves)

Elizabeth: (through the door) And a pleasant day to you as well.

(blackout)

(The lights come up on John in his bed. A few days have passed. Elizabeth is sitting next to him, reading from a book.)

Elizabeth: ... So that whether our present doctrine be right or wrong, it is however the same which we taught from the beginning. (Closes book) I think that's quite enough John Wesley for one day, wouldn't you agree, Father? (She sets the book on the table next to the chair.)

John: What time is it, dearest?

(a knock at the door)

Elizabeth: Time for an unannounced visitor, it seems. (She goes to the door.) Mr. Bremley! It is such a pleasure to see you again! Please come in.

Bremley: It is my pleasure, Mrs. Cunningham. Please understand that it is not my custom to arrive unannounced. However, I was on my way back home from church, and I thought that your father's challenge to me served as a standing invitation. Was I incorrect?

Elizabeth: Not at all, sir, as long as you have read his pamphlet.

Bremley: Indeed I have, Madam. I would like to speak to him about it, if I may.

Elizabeth: I will see if he is amiable to the visit.

(They walk into the room)

Elizabeth: Father, Mr. Bremley has returned. It seems he has read your pamphlet and would like to discuss it with you.

John: Fair enough. I would tell you to invite him in, but he does a very poor job of acting. (To Bremley) Since you are already in my room, Mr. Bremley, you should come and sit.

Bremley: (embarrassed, he crosses to the chair and sits) Thank you, sir.

Elizabeth: I will leave you both to your conversation. (she exits)

John: And how did you find the contents of my pamphlet?

Bremley: I must admit that they were alarming.

John: Now you understand why I said that you should reserve your admiration for others who are more worthy.

Bremley: With all due respect, Mr. Newton, I understand why you *said* that, but I do not agree with it.

John: (puzzled) Are you certain you read my pamphlet?

Bremley: Oh quite certain.

(Throughout these next few lines, John's self-loathing increases. It reaches a climax at the italics)

John: Perhaps you skimmed over some key passages. Do you recall that I mentioned how slaves were sentenced to unmerciful whippings? Whippings that caused so much pain and agony that the poor souls didn't even have the power left to groan?

Bremley: Yes. I recall it vividly.

John: And the discussion of how they would suffer for days under the thumbscrew, one of the most hideous torture machines invented?

Bremley: Indeed. The passage was most shocking.

John: And what of the passage regarding how the women slaves were treated? Do you recall that they were brought on the ship naked and trembling? Do you recall that the crew used them to satisfy their most craven yearnings?

Bremley: I admit, I had to take quite a long respite from the pamphlet after reading those words.

John: Did you read the fact that the slaves are laid out like books on a shelf with almost no room to move so as to maximize the number of slaves that are transported?

Bremley: Yes.

John: And what was my estimate of the number of slaves that die each year on English slave ships?

Bremley: 15,000.

John: And did you not understand that as Captain of a trade ship, *I was responsible not only for the atrocities that I committed but for ALL the atrocities committed by all the men under my command? That I was responsible for each and every death that occurred on my ship?*

Bremley: It did occur to me.

John: Are you a vile enough man that you admire such actions?

Bremley: Of course not.

John: Then how can you possibly say that I deserve your admiration? I have caused more suffering and agony than you can begin to fathom. (He grows very quiet now). It haunts me, sir. It haunts me.

Bremley: Of that, I have no doubt. (Pause) You have asked me several questions. Might I ask you some now?

John: Of course.

Bremley: Were you a Christian when you entered the slave trade?

John: No, I was not. I was a bawdy sailor. While my good mother tried to raise me as a Christian, my sinful desires got the best of me for much of my adult life. I remember the captain

of the first ship to which I was assigned. He was a Christian, and he often quoted passages of Scripture. Despite the fact that I was his subordinate, I ridiculed him for it. In fact, I wasn't even a good sailor. I was expelled from a ship for insubordination. I was left to rot on an island until another ship came to rescue me.

Bremley: When was it that you became a Christian?

John: I recall that night as if it were yesterday. A fierce storm had struck my ship. I had been a sailor most of my life, and I had experienced many storms, but none as furious as this one. The ship was tossed about like a leaf in the wind. The ship's contents were being flung into the deep, and I thought it only a matter of time before we would be flung there as well. I remember recalling certain Bible verses my mother taught me as a child, and in desperation I cried, "Lord, have mercy on us." Immediately, however, I wondered how He could ever have mercy on a wretch like me. I begged the Lord for forgiveness right then and there. When we got through the storm, I found a Bible and began to read.

Bremley: And as you read the Bible, you began to realize how wrong your profession was?

John: (sighs)

Bremley: (prompting) And as you read the Bible, you began to realize how wrong your profession was?

John: (sighs again) If only that were true, Mr. Bremley. Even though I claimed I was a Christian, I did not see my profession for what it was. I know this is hard for a gentleman like yourself to understand, but I did not see my "cargo" as people. They were cattle. They existed for my pleasure and the pleasure of my employers. They were not children of God.

Bremley: (a bit shocked) So you continued in the slave trade, even while calling yourself a Christian?

John: For many years. The devil is so insidious. He can make us blind to so many things, even when the light is shining in our eyes. I was reading the Bible every day. Every day, I tell you. And every day I was inflicting untold misery on those it commanded me to love.

Bremley: But eventually, you came to see that slavery was not something with which a Christian should be involved?

John: Of course, but as I said, that was years later. How could I have been so blind for so long?

Bremley: (looking at the book that Elizabeth put down) I see your daughter is reading Wesley to you. He believes that after becoming a Christian, it is possible for you to live a completely sinless life. Do you agree with that?

John: I am not sure. I am not exactly a theologian.

Bremley: Well, neither am I. However, let's assume for a moment that Wesley is correct. I doubt it, but let's go ahead and assume so. Do you recall what he says about when a Christian can live a sinless life? Is it right after becoming a Christian?

John: Of course not. Wesley says that the Holy Spirit must work in you over a long period of time. The Spirit must show you all the sin in your life, and as time goes on, you are able to use the Spirit's guidance to wash it all from you.

Bremley: It seems to me that this is exactly what happened in your case, Mr. Newton. Forgive me for saying so, but I assume there were quite a few sins a "bawdy sailor" like yourself needed guidance on. I suspect it just took time for the Spirit to work through all of them with you.

John: I appreciate what you are trying to say, but to assume that I can follow the guidance of the Spirit is senseless. I am the most wretched of men, Mr. Bremley. I can no better follow the Spirit's guidance than I can accept someone's admiration.

Bremley: And yet your daughter admires you.

John: She loves me, because I am her father.

Bremley: I have no doubt that she loves you, sir. Even the first day I visited you, when you and your daughter were strangers to me, it was clear the tender love that you both share. However, I had a chance to speak with her after I left your room, and she made it clear that in addition to her love, you hold her deepest admiration. She said, and I quote as near as I am able, "And father is, indeed, most wonderful. He is, in fact, one of the greatest men who ever lived."

John: The words of a child blinded by love for her father. They are wonderful words for me to hear, but they must be taken for what they are.

Bremley: And where did this love come from?

John: What do you mean? She is my daughter.

Bremley: Indeed, in *almost* every sense of the word. I know who she really is, Mr. Newton. She told me herself. She is your niece. You are her uncle.

John: (firmly) She is my daughter. I am her father.

Bremley: She *became* your daughter. And why? Because you loved her. You loved her the way a father should love a child. You had no...biological...reason to do so. You did it because she needed someone to love her. That, sir, is not the act of a wretched man.

John: (softer) Of course you are right, Mr. Bremley. She is a shining light in an otherwise dark and miserable life. But one act of kindness does not kick the beam. The balance of my life is loaded down with wretched acts.

Bremley: And you are certainly right on that point, Mr. Newton. However, there is more than one act of kindness in your life. As I recall, you estimate in your pamphlet that the British slave trade is responsible for trafficking 60,000 slaves each year. Is that correct?

John: Yes. And 15,000 of them die every year.

Bremley: It seems to me, then, now that the Slave Trade Act has passed, you will be responsible for 60,000 acts of kindness each and every year.

John: Except that because Great Britain is no longer trafficking in slaves, other countries will simply pick up the slack.

Bremley: Or other countries will follow the Empire's good example.

John: That, sir, is only speculation, and it is not particularly well-founded. My charge still stands. While I might have done some good in my life, it can never hope to balance the atrocities I have committed.

Bremley: You are quite right, sir.

John: Of course I am. So you now admit that I am not worthy of your admiration.

Bremley: On the contrary. I admit no such thing.

John: (exasperated) You refuse to see reason, sir. The facts are there in my pamphlet. I am the most wretched of men. I deserve nothing good from anyone.

Bremley: The facts are there in your pamphlet, Mr. Newton, and I read each and every one. I was horrified by what I read, and when I got done, I put the pamphlet aside and decided that I would never visit you, because you have committed more atrocities than anyone I have ever met, sir. No amount of good that you have done will ever balance out the evil that your hands have wrought.

John: And yet you are here.

Bremley: I am here because after closing your pamphlet and reflecting on its contents, I then went to church. There were two things that happened at church which I am certain had nothing to do with coincidence. First, the sermon was on 2 Corinthians 5:17. Are you familiar with that passage of Scripture?

John: Of course. "Therefore if any man be in Christ, he is a new creature: old things are passed away; behold, all things are become new."

Bremley: Excellent. You can obviously see where I am going with this. You, sir, are a new creature. You are not the wretch who God saved from that storm.

John: But even after I was saved from the storm, I continued to be a wretch. And to make it worse, I proclaimed the name of Christ as I did so.

Bremley: Very well. The second thing that happened occurred after the sermon. The choir sang a hymn that I had never heard before.

John: (genuinely interested) Oh?

Bremley: It was from a writer of no real stature, at least when it comes to hymns. I am not very qualified to pass judgment on the quality of the hymn, but it meant something to me. I copied the words so that I would not forget them, and I would like to share them with you, if I may.

John: Of course. I have more than a passing interest in hymns.

Bremley: (pulling out the paper) I expect that you do. As my musical ability is less than mediocre, I will simply read it to you. The impact is not as great as if you heard the words sung by someone who could do the song justice, but their meaning remains:

Amazing grace! (how sweet the sound)
That saved a wretch like me!
I once was lost, but now am found,
Was blind, but now I see.

Twas grace that taught my heart to fear,
And grace my fears relieved;
How precious did that grace appear
The hour I first believed!

Through many dangers, toils, and snares,
I have already come;
Tis grace hath brought me safe thus far,
And grace will lead me home.

The Lord has promised good to me,
His word my hope secures;
He will my shield and portion be
As long as life endures.

Yes, when this flesh and heart shall fail,
And mortal life shall cease;
I shall possess, within the veil,
A life of joy and peace.

The earth shall soon dissolve like snow,
The sun forbear to shine;

But God, who called me here below,
Will be forever mine.

(pause) And now, I trust, you understand why it doesn't matter that you were the most wretched of men. Yes, you have done more wicked things in your life than you can ever atone for. But that doesn't matter. It is not the acts of kindness you have done that makes up for your wickedness. It is God's grace. His amazing grace has wiped your slate clean, Mr. Newton. Since then, you have done some truly admirable things. I choose to look at you through God's eyes. He does not see a wretch lying there. He sees a man who He loves and He has forgiven. He sees a man who has taken in two precious children and given them a loving home. He sees a man who has worked hard to make sure that some children of God will no longer be treated like cattle. He sees an admirable man, sir, just as I do.

I do think it is time for me to take my leave. Good day, Mr. Newton. You have my utmost respect and admiration.

John: And you have my thanks.

(Bremley leaves. John holds the paper to his chest and begins to weep. In a moment, Elizabeth enters)

Elizabeth: (delivering the line before entering. She should not see her father until "I hope you didn't") Father, I heard the door open and close. Did Mr. Bremley leave? I hope you didn't...(she was going to say "make him angry," but she sees him clutching the paper and weeping) Father...what's wrong? What did Mr. Bremley say to you?

John: He read me this. (hands her the paper)

Elizabeth: (starts to read, but quickly recognizes) Oh...I remember this. It was among the first poems you ever wrote. I remember it touched me deeply when I first heard it, and not just because you had written it. I can't believe I forgot about it.

John: It seems I had forgotten about it as well. Perhaps you will read it to me from time to time, so that I don't forget again?

Elizabeth: Of course, Father.

John: (Pause – wipes his eyes) So tell me, dear one. What must a man do around here to get a bowl of soup?