The America Play, and Other Works Study Guide

The America Play, and Other Works by Suzan-Lori Parks

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BOOKRAGS

Contents

Plot Summary

This collection of plays and essays, by innovative playwright Suzan-Lori Parks, explores issues fundamentally tied to the experience of being an African American. As she experiments with language and structure in a series of metaphor-rich theatrical narratives, she explores issues relating to individual and racial identity and the necessity to transcend both internalized and external forms of oppression.

The collection begins with a series of three short essays written by the author and introducing her primary thematic and narrative concerns - the idea of owning (possessing) identity, the value of finding an individual creative voice during the process of creating theatre, and the dangers of living within the essentially white-defined experience of being African American.

The first play in the collection is, in fact, a series of short plays themselves collected under the title of "Imperceptible Mutabilities in the Third Kingdom." In the first play, "Snails," a group of friends/roommates struggle to define their place in the world while being observed and commented upon by a scientist. Next, two parts of a play called "Third Kingdom," in which a group of characters look towards a future where their identities are clear and freely self-defined, bracket another play, this one called "Open House." An older African American woman first takes care of, and then is rejected by, a pair of young people eventually driven to leave all the unsavory aspects of their past behind. The fourth and final part of this series is "Greeks, or The Slugs" in which an African American military officer and his socially ambitious wife struggle not only to advance their status, but in fact simply maintain it.

"Imperceptible Mutabilities" is followed by two short plays. The first, "Betting on the Dust Commander," dramatizes the near-abusive relationship between gambler Lucius and his long suffering wife Mare, who is desperate for independence. The emotional and personal patterns in which the two characters are locked are also evoked by the play's structure, in which the characters play out the same scene twice, with only minor variations in content and form. The next play in the collection is "Pickling," a monologue for a character named Miss Miss, whose memories of an attractive man named Charles seem inextricably tied to her memories of life in her mother's kitchen—specifically her pickled beets.

"The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World" is next, its title and situation based on one of the author's dreams according to the essays at the beginning of the collection. Characters with names representing both the oppressive and the positive aspects of African American history—admittedly more of the negative aspects than the positive—recall and dramatize an incident related to the lynching of a particular black man.

The final play in the collection is "The America Play," arguably the best known play in the collection. Its action and thematic considerations center around the experience of a character called "The Foundling Father," who made his living impersonating Abraham

Lincoln, even to the point of recreating the shooting that took Lincoln's life. The first act explores The Foundling Father's history and experience, while the second act explores the attitudes and relationships of his ex-wife and son to both his experiences and that of Lincoln himself.

Section 1, Essays

Section 1, Essays Summary

"Possession"

The essay begins with a definition of possession, "the holding or having of something of one's own." The author refers to a half-waking dream she had of a phrase ("this is the death of the last negro man in the whole entire world") that became the title of a play (see Section 5). She also discusses her process of writing (see "Quotes," p. 3), and why she writes, referring specifically to what writing for the theatre means to her (see "Quotes," p. 4).

"Elements of Style"

In this collection of mini-essays, the author offers impressions of contemporary theatre (see "Quotes," p. 6), suggests that every playwright begin by asking why a story needs to be expressed in the form of a play, and comments that form defines content and vice versa, using her own identity as an illustration (see "Quotes," p. 8). She discusses her application of musical techniques, particularly those associated with jazz, to her work, the nature of time (see "Quotes," p. 10), and the value of words (see "Quotes," p. 12). She incorporates diagrams illustrating how some of her works function as mathematical equations, and also calls for artists to resist the temptation to demonize critics of the art form (see "Quotes," p. 15 - 2). She urges playwrights to consider the value of history, of dance, of humor, of finding action in the lines of the characters, and of taking a rest sometimes in the midst of the action. Finally, she incorporates a mini-dictionary of sounds and revised words that she has put into her plays, and suggests that the use of language involves the entire body.

"An Equation for Black People Onstage"

The essay begins with a simple statement. "The bulk of relationships Black people are engaged in onstage," the author contends, "is the relationship between the Black and the White other." This equation, she suggests, "reduces 'Blackness' to merely a state of 'non-Whiteness'." She argues that there is much, much more to explore about the experience of being black than these fundamental terms allow for (see "Quotes," p. 21), and calls for African-Americans to recognize that this perspective is essentially a trap to "reduce" the experience to a particular, and limited, way of being. Finally, she calls for African-Americans "to show the world and ourselves our beautiful and powerfully infinite variety."

Section 1, Essays Analysis

Suzan-Lori Parks has, in the relatively few years she has been writing plays (eleven at the time these essays were written), become known as one of the most innovative and

individual voices writing contemporary theatre. She has also become known as a theatrical advocate for telling a fuller range of African-American stories, a creative perspective clearly defined in the third of these essays. What she essentially proposes in this introductory section is that contemporary writers recognize and honor the theatrical ways of the past while, at the same time, also recognizing and honoring both the ways of contemporary society and new ways of mirroring/displaying that society on stage and, specifically, the lives and stories and experiences of African Americans. Her commentary in "Elements of Style" highlights ways in which she has done both (i.e. explored new ways of working and new African-American stories). Two specific examples are her use of jazz, generally regarded as having its origins in the African-American musical experience, and of language, which can be seen as reflecting and/or manifesting what has come to be known as "ebonics," a style of speaking defined by African-American perspectives, vocabulary, slang, and communicative techniques. In short, these essays introduce the theory behind her work. The plays that follow are examples of how she puts that theory into practice, and how she seems to believe other playwrights, not only African-American ones, might do the same.

Section 2, Imperceptible Mutabilities in the Third Kingdom, Part 1

Section 2, Imperceptible Mutabilities in the Third Kingdom, Part 1 Summary

NB All the characters in "Snails" speak in the author's revised language except where noted.

"Snails"

" A" Molly tells Charlene that she's been fired from her job because she defied her boss's efforts to get her to speak properly, and that she's worried she will go "splat." Charlene speaks of developing an unusual friendship with a robber who repeatedly came to her house and looked through it but never actually took anything. She adds that she was told his name, but that it turned out to not be real. Molly insistently asks Charlene where the paper's want ads are. Charlene says she put garbage into them. Molly says "splat."

"B" A Naturalist standing at a podium explains, in more formal language, the concept of the "fly," an "apparatus" used by scientists to disguise their presence so they can observe animals in their natural environment without being noticed, "much like the 'fly on the wall.'" The Naturalist shows the audience the "fly" used in the process of observing Molly and Charlene - a cockroach made of cardboard.

"C" Molly announces her decision to not make a career out of being down and out. Charlene discusses the problem of the apartment's cockroach infestation, planning to call an exterminator named Lutzky. Molly worries that one of the cockroaches is watching them.

"D" The Naturalist, again speaking in more formal language, discusses how the subjects of her observations should be accommodated in the modern world, referring to their history (see "Quotes," p. 29) and suggesting that "they" need help. "They" at first appears to refer to Molly and Charlene, but the Naturalist's comments reveal that she's really discussing the cockroaches.

"E" As the scene plays, a Robber comes into the apartment and steals the cockroach. Meanwhile Charlene, now called Chona, returns home to Verona who was previously known as Veronica. They discuss how upset Mona, previously Molly, has become and discuss how to get rid of the cockroaches. As Verona watches "Wild Kingdom" on television, the exterminator Lutzky arrives, looking for the person with the cockroach bites. As Verona comments on what she sees on the TV referring specifically to the gun being used by the host, Lutzky gets out his gun and prepares to squirt bite treatment over Mona. The switch in names confuses Lutzky, who eventually ends up spraying

Chona as well as Mona. Lutzky asks for payment, and as Mona repeats the word "splat," Lutzky asks whether the women "felt" his gun. As he goes, Mona says she wants someone to tuck her in.

"F" Speaking in the play's more formal language and standing at the Naturalist's podium, Verona discusses her regular childhood habit of watching "Wild Kingdom" and how she patterned her relationships with animals on the relationships on display in that program. Switching to revised language, she tells the story of how she once mistreated a disobedient dog that eventually ran away. Switching back to formal language, she says she's now a veterinary assistant specializing in euthanasia. She tells of how a stray came in and spoke nastily to her like her own dog, and of how she killed and dissected it to see if she could find the origins of its attitude. She concludes by saying nothing is different, and that everything is in its place.

Section 2, Imperceptible Mutabilities in the Third Kingdom, Part 1 Analysis

This is the first of four short plays anthologized under one title, said title referring to minutely sized ("imperceptible") opportunities for change or transformation ("mutabilities") in a world defined by the desire and dreams for such change ("the third kingdom - see Section 2 below). Given the author's intention, expressed in the essays in Section 1, to focus her work at least in part on the experience of being African-American, the title "Imperceptible Mutabilities in the Third Kingdom, Part I" can be seen as a commentary on the potential for change in that experience - specifically, from being oppressed to being free. Here, it's important to note that as the author herself suggests, "oppression" can result from the actions and/or intentions of others, or from an internalization of that oppression leading to self-oppression. For further consideration of the issue of oppression in "Imperceptible Mutabilties" and, indeed, throughout the collection, see both "Themes - Transcending Oppression" and "Topics for Discussion - Discuss how oppression ..."

Meanwhile, it's important to note that in this play, and indeed throughout the collection, the author tends to explore her themes primarily in metaphor or through non-literal playing out of action, intention, transformation, and other experiences associated with her primary thematic concerns. In this play, for example, both the cockroach and the Naturalist can be seen as metaphorical / symbolic representations of a sort of watchful oppressiveness. Verona's assumption of the Naturalist's position at the podium at the play's conclusion can be seen as a similarly metaphoric representation of internalized oppression; in her case, the oppression is manifest as violence. In other words, Verona exhibits what is coming to be recognized as a pervasive societal pattern of the bully (in Verona's case, someone who bullies animals) who has him/herself been bullied by judgmental attitudes and actions such as those of the Naturalist.

It's important to note, however, that there is a very strong sense about this play, and indeed about all the plays in the collection, that the author wants the reader and/or audience member to come to their own conclusions about what most, if not all, the

metaphors and/or images mean. For example, do the Naturalist's words in "D" deliberately compare Molly and Charlene and, by symbolic extension, African-Americans to cockroaches? And, if so, what are the implications of that metaphoric comparison? Then, what are the thematic implications of the various name changes? What are the implications of the Exterminator? The point here is not to evade discussion of possibilities, but rather to suggest that while many playwrights and, indeed, other writers in the past seem to clearly suggest how their metaphors are to be interpreted, the author of these plays leaves meaning more than slightly undefined. In other words, she seems to be avoiding the trap that she suggests, in Part 1's "An Equation," many/most African-Americans fall into - "reducing" the experience of being African-American to one easily quantifiable, perhaps even simplistic way of perceiving, thinking, and believing.

Section 2, Imperceptible Mutabilities in the Third Kingdom, Part 2

Section 2, Imperceptible Mutabilities in the Third Kingdom, Part 2 Summary

NB All the characters in this section speak in the author's revised language except where noted.

"Third Kingdom"

This short play features five speakers - Shark-Seer, Kin-Seer, Us-Seer, Soul-Seer, and Over-Seer who reveal aspects of their dreams, many of which refer to an other Self different from their own selves (see "Quotes," p. 39), a Self they see but are unable to reach. They also discuss being thrown off their boat , and how they find themselves between two different places (see "Quotes," p. 39 - 2). The play concludes with Over-Seer, speaking in more formal language, telling the others to line up and calling out "Land Ho"!

"Open House"

"A" Slides of the characters with increasingly broad smiles are projected as the characters speak. Aretha urges Blanca and Anglor to smile, but they are too worried about who will take care of their dolls when Aretha leaves. Aretha tells a man named Charles to be patient, then comments to Blanca and Anglor that their mother will have to take care of the dolls.

"B" Miss Faith, speaking in more formal language, works with Aretha who speaks in the author's revised language, on the calculations for how many slaves can fit in the bottom of a transport ship. Meanwhile, Aretha speaks in a combination of revised and Biblical languages of how the Lord is looking down on her and Charles, saying their place in his kingdom is "secure.".

"C" As Blanca and Anglor hum in the background, Aretha imagines an encounter with a bureaucrat, given the name Charles in the script, in which she is asked about her marital status to a man named Charles Saxon, about the fact she has "expired," and that her place has been "secured." The conversation concludes with Charles, who speaks in formal language, telling her to move on.

"D" As Miss Faith, speaking in formal language, prepares to extract Aretha's teeth, she says that extraction is necessary to make room for what is coming in, in the same way as the old die off to make room for the young. Aretha speaks in Biblical style about her encounter with a slave-master named Charles. Miss Faith reminds Aretha that she is due to expire on a particular date, a date she relates to the date that slaves in Texas

were finally set free following the enactment of the Emancipation Proclamation (see "Objects/ Places").

"E" Charles appears as a dream, speaking in formal language to Aretha about the importance of memory (see "Quotes," p. 48).

"F" Miss Faith, in the character of a real estate agent, shows the now adult Blanca and Anglor through an apartment, saying that the now toothless Aretha, the current tenant, will leave before they come in. She is being "extracted." Blanca and Anglor, speaking in formal language, discuss how they find Aretha familiar, their incestuous marriage, and whether they should keep Aretha on as a nursemaid to their children. Aretha urges Miss Faith to make "the amendment" and Miss Faith eventually does, proclaiming Amendment 13 which, a footnote explains, is the amendment to the American Constitution that bans slavery. Aretha waves goodbye to Blanca and Anglor and goes.

"G" Charles again appears as a dream, commenting on how much of Aretha has been obliterated. Aretha urges him to smile for the camera, adding that she's going to her place with "the most high." Whether he's smiling or not, she says, she's going to remember him.

"Third Kingdom, Reprise"

The characters from "Third Kingdom" (see above) return, speaking about their strange dreams and about finding their new Self, a "3rd Self made by thuh space in between" (see "Quotes," p. 56). Again, Over-Seer calls out "Land Ho" and wonders what the others are doing. Kin-Seer responds by saying he (?) is throwing kisses.

Section 2, Imperceptible Mutabilities in the Third Kingdom, Part 2 Analysis

The two parts of "Third Kingdom" that appear at the beginning and the end of this section metaphorically represent one of the collection's key themes - the possibility of, and hope for, transformation. All the Seers are in the process of looking beyond their current terms of existence to a new life (a new land?) and identity filled with hope, freedom, and possibility. This new life, or at least the dream of it, fuels, to one degree or another, the actions and intentions of virtually every character in every play in this collection (see "Topics for Discussion - Discuss the various ways ..."). Meanwhile, Kin-Seer's comment about "blowing kisses" foreshadows events and/or commentary in the following section, in which a character refers to blowing kisses to his children across a vast gulf of time and space.

"Open House," meanwhile, can be seen as a metaphoric expression of a darker side of that transformation and of the hope for it. This is the idea that the experiences of older African-Americans, and particularly older African-American women like Aretha, are being "extracted" from the memory, the experience, and the passion of younger African-Americans. The implication here is that younger African-Americans like Blanca and

Anglor are deliberately leaving behind awareness of important situations and circumstances like slavery, like the civil rights movement, and the various Amendments to the United States Constitution that have played a fundamental role, whether they want to admit it or not, in defining what their lives have become. In other words, the play is essentially urging contemporary African-Americans to at least respectfully remember the past even while they're "moving into" their new future. This idea is reinforced by the naming of the realtor character Miss Faith, faith being the driving force behind both that movement into the future and the suffering of the past (i.e. faith that that suffering will result in a better future). In short, the action of the play can be seen as quite ironic - the suffering of older African-Americans eventually resulted in greater freedoms for the younger generations, but that suffering is being forgotten, "extracted" from the social context from which those younger African-Americans are emerging.

Section 2, Imperceptible Mutabilities in the Third Kingdom, Part 3

Section 2, Imperceptible Mutabilities in the Third Kingdom, Part 3 Summary

NB Throughout this play, all characters speak in the author's revised language.

"Greeks (or the Slugs)"

" A" Happily anticipating a military promotion, which he calls a "Distinction," Mr. Sergeant Smith poses for a series of photographs at a desk, concerned that he looks "distinguished" even while he refers to hiding under the desk like a turtle at the first sign of danger.

"B" Mrs. Sergeant Smith listens as her daughter Buffy worries about how to take care of the dresses of her two dolls. Mrs. Smith describes how important it is for everyone in the family to have a clean, pressed appearance, how she wants to have a big family, how Mr. Sergeant Smith has a furlough coming up, and how she needs Buffy to keep her father's desk clean.

"C" Mr. Sergeant Smith says, in a letter to Buffy, that he's been posted to a small island, and that if he does a good job he will get his Distinction. He promises to wave at Buffy from across the ocean and to blow her kisses, and urges her to do the same for him.

"D" As Buffy writes a letter to Mr. Sergeant Smith encouraging him to keep pursuing his Distinction, her sister Muffy worries that her father doesn't like her and kisses his desk to show how much she loves him. Mrs. Sergeant Smith warns her to be careful, conversation revealing that his posting is an entire time zone away. She also says that Mr. Sergeant Smith is going to get another furlough soon, asking the girls whether they would like a brother.

"E" Mr. Sergeant Smith writes of his realization of the time overlap he has with his family (see "Quotes," p. 65) and says he's finally got his Distinction - he's saved a life.

"F" Buffy mothers Muffy and their little brother Duffy as Mrs. Sergeant Smith responds to Duffy's questions about whether turtles and Mr. Sergeant Smith are mammals. She says there is an "overlap" between the two sorts of animals, and that an overlap is a "gap." She also says she saw a man fall through the sky from another planet. She and the children then prepare for the arrival of Mr. Sergeant Smith, who returns and greets his children, but is surprised to see that his wife has lost her eyes, something she says happened years ago. His family, meanwhile, is pleased to see he has his Distinction, gained, he says, after catching a man falling from the sky, but they are surprised to see

that he has lost his legs after stepping on a land mine. As Duffy asks whether everyone in the family is a turtle, Mr. Sergeant Smith says they're all slugs.

"G" Mr. Sergeant Smith speaks of having wanted his whole life to do something meaningful, and describes how he caught the man falling out of the sky, a man that he thought was a star . He says he made a wish for his whole family, caught the man who, he says, was flying too close to the sun, saved his life, and got his Distinction. He again says the members of his family aren't turtles, but slugs.

Section 2, Imperceptible Mutabilities in the Third Kingdom, Part 3 Analysis

There are several important points to note about the story of the Smith family. First, there is the ongoing sense that Mr. Smith's dream of "distinction" is, in fact, a delusion - the narrative makes it very clear that he is being profoundly oppressed by his superiors, in spite of his best efforts to please them and/or assimilate with their society. These efforts, in turn, can be seen as manifesting in the names of his children, since Buffy and Muffy are stereotypical names given to spoiled rich white girls (Duffy not so much, but the point of his name, it seems, has more to do with completing the joke about the rhyming names than anything else). Second, there is the sense of distance between the older and younger Smiths, both physical and emotional, a distance that has echoes of the distance between old self and new self enacted in "Third Kingdom," said echoes being reinforced by the fact that both Kin Seer in the earlier play and Mr. Smith here blow kisses to their children. This sense of distance also manifests, albeit on a more social and cultural level, in a similar way to the distance placed between older and younger generations in "Open House." In that play, Blanca (whose name, incidentally, is a variant on "blanche," with its implications of whiteness) and Anglor strive to distance themselves from their past , metaphorically represented by Aretha, in order to fully embrace their future. In this play, the Smith children become distant from the life of oppressed struggle lived by their father and manifest in their mother's obsession with making just the right impression.

Then there is Mr. Smith's description of the man who flew too close to the sun, a clear and direct reference to the classical Greek myth of Icarus. This, it seems, is the source of this play's title. Icarus, along with his scientist father Daedalus, was imprisoned by a tyrannical king. Daedalus created wings of feathers and wax that he and his son could use to escape, and warned the impulsive and arrogant Icarus not to fly too close to the sun, since that would make the wax melt and the wings fail. Icarus ignored his father's advice and flew too close to the sun. The wax melted, the feathers caught fire, and Icarus plunged to his death, blazing with light. Mr. Smith's reference here to catching the man who fell out of the sky clearly implies that the man, while perhaps not actually Icarus, got caught up in thoughtless over-ambition and crashed to earth. The metaphoric implication here is that Mr. Smith himself, in so desperately pursuing his "Distinction" himself got caught up in too much ambition (i.e. tried to rise above his station, as so many African-Americans were, and in some cases still are, accused of doing) and ended up himself crashing to earth. This last situation is metaphorically

expressed in his injury, and is also expressed in the blindness of his wife who, in her own way, sought "distinction" for herself and for her children.

Finally, there is Mr. Smith's reference to his family as "slugs." One point to note here is the relationship between the title of this play and the title of the first, "Snails." Biologically, snails are slugs with shells. For other, metaphorical aspects of both titles, see "Topics for Discussion - What are the implications ..."

Section 3, Betting on the Dust Commander

Section 3, Betting on the Dust Commander Summary

NB Throughout this play, both characters speak in the author's revised language.

"A" Slides of Lucius and Mare getting married are shown on onstage screens as their voices, filtered through offstage microphones, discuss Mare's use of expensive plastic flowers instead of real ones. Lucius worries about what people will say, and then starts sneezing, as though he's got some kind of allergy. He asks Mare to say "bless you," and she does.

"B" Lucius prepares to go out to the races where he plans to bet on the horses. Mare urges him to stay home, at one point bursting into tears. He beats her with a riding crop, and as she weeps, refers to his successfully betting on a horse named Dust Commander. She also suggests they should have a baby, saying that children don't have either fur or feathers, to which Lucius seems to be allergic. Lucius criticizes her for not wiping her tears properly, telling her she doesn't pay enough attention to the little things, comparing them to dust (see "Quotes," p. 79), to which he also seems to be allergic. As he prepares to leave, Mare complains about how he's always going to the track, and Lucius tells her that his favorite horse, Dust Commander, is always eager to race. As Mare comments on how dusty and dirty the house is, Lucius proposes to place a small bet on Dust Commander, which he thinks will win, and hopes that one day he'll win as well. He also talks about being well known for wearing the same Bermuda shorts every day, and how a woman at church asked him how he lived day to day in the same shorts with the stuck zipper. Mare tries to unzip the zipper but Lucius pulls away from her, planning to go to the track to bet on the horses. At that point, exactly the same dialogue and action play out, starting with Mare's weeping, continuing with the riding crop, the reference to dust, the commentary on Dust Commander, and the story woman at church. The one significant difference is that the second time around, conversation also refers to pictures of their wedding, taken a year ago, and to the fact that the flowers are still fresh. The scene ends with Lucius having a sneezing fit.

"C" This scene is an exact repeat of Scene "A," again ending with Lucius sneezing and asking Mare to say "bless you," which she again does.

Section 3, Betting on the Dust Commander Analysis

In its repetitive structure, "Betting on the Dust Commander" makes a metaphoric comment about routine and how repetitive thinking tends to reinforce itself. This relates to the overall themes of the collection, particularly its consideration of hope for transformation and freedom from oppression, by showing an aspect of existence,

specifically African-American existence, that perpetuates oppression and restrains transformation. In other words, in the same way as Lucius and Mare are stuck in a narrative routine, repeating the same events over and over, they are also stuck in an intellectual, spiritual and emotional routine, a self-destructive pattern of thinking about themselves and their relationship that prevents them both from moving on.

The inhibiting and ultimately self-defeating aspects of this pattern manifest in several ways, perhaps most vividly in the violence between Lucius and Mare. Mare's name, which is also the term for a female horse, can be seen as metaphorically echoing Lucius' apparent belief that she is both essentially animalistic and that he is "betting on" her doing as he wants. There is also reference to artificial flowers, the falseness of which represent the "falseness" of the pattern of thinking in which Lucius and Mare find themselves, and to Lucius' allergies. He is, in a sense, "allergic" to, and/or debilitated by, this self-destructive pattern of behavior. The authorial thematic comment here is that African-Americans can, and often do, find themselves trapped in self-destructive patterns of thought and behavior that prevent them from moving forward into the kind of future envisioned by, for example, the Seers of the Third Kingdom, and dreamed of by the Smiths and just about every other character in the collection. Finally, there are the references to Lucius' Bermuda shorts, to his habit/routine of wearing only them, another reference to a debilitating routine, and to the zipper being stuck, another reference to being "stuck" in a routine.

Section 4, Pickling

Section 4, Pickling Summary

NB The character in this play speaks in the author's revised language.

Miss Miss sings a short song about wiping a man's brow, about having the handkerchief she used ripped in two and giving the half she was given to someone else. She then recalls her relationship with a physically powerful, strong and attractive man named Charles, referring to his taut arms, powerful biceps, how attractive he looked in a muscle shirt, how he once saved her life, how he lived next door to her and her mother, and how he came by during the summer to eat their beets. Her recollections occur in a linear fashion, but are interrupted by various stream-of-consciousness thoughts - her wondering what happened to her icebox, considering how mother's milk never comes clean, celebrating her singing and her ability to accompany herself on jars, and how Charles liked the photograph of her mother even though it only showed part of her. She also discusses how her mother colored her hair, how she preserved her mother's gums in a jar, pickled just like the beets, which Charles ate and stained his arms and hands.

The extended monologue concludes with Miss Miss commenting on how, ultimately, there's no place to go at the end of life but into death.

Section 4, Pickling Analysis

Pickling is literally a form of preserving food so that it doesn't rot and is still tasty days, weeks, months, or years later. Miss Miss, throughout this monologue, recalls "tasty" experiences in her past. In other words, pickling in this context is a metaphor for memory.

Primary among Miss Miss's memories is her attraction to Charles and how they both acted on that attraction, but also her memories of her mother. Those memories are defined by images that suggest her mother was neither true to herself since she dyed her hair nor fully aware of herself because half of her is missing from the photo. These images also evoke, however, the idea that Miss Miss's mother, like the African-Americans referred to in the author's introduction, didn't seem to have either a full sense of herself, or a desire to have such a sense.

The monologue's final moments suggest that, at least for Miss Miss, even positive memories, such as hers of Charles, are not enough to stave off the inevitability of death. This suggestion, within the context of the collection and its over-arching themes, can be seen as a further evocation of the idea that a life defined only by the past is ultimately pointless. There are different sorts of "past" at work in this collection including memory here, routine as in "Dust Commander," delusion as in "Greeks," limited self-perception as in "Slugs," idealization as in "The America Play." In any/all of these cases, living a life defined by the past, in either its positive or negative aspects, is ultimately self

destructive; only a life defined by hope for the future, as shown in "Third Kingdom" as opposed to the blind hope in "Open House" and "Greeks", where the past is respected, is true and appropriate.

Section 5, The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World

Section 5, The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World Summary

NB The characters in this play speak in the author's revised language.

"Overture"

The characters (see "Characters - The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World") introduce themselves, and announce that the last black man fell 23 floors to his death on the pavement below. They suggest that the black man moved his hands when the world was flat, "before Columbus," and refer to how the black man burst into flames, laughing out loud. They also discuss how the younger characters should listen to the older ones tell the story of what happened, write it down and preserve it (see "Quotes," p.104).

"Panel I: Thou Holy Ghost"

Black Man tells Black Woman that he's been accused of stealing, wondering who set him up. Black Woman considers how much things have changed since the last time he sat in his chair, her thoughts leading her to consideration of the traveling electric chair into which Black Man was placed earlier, in the middle of the city. Conversation reveals that Black Man got away, but that his hands were damaged and that he wants Black Woman to dig a mass grave, since there will be more people following him.

"Panel II: First Chorus"

A broadcaster announces the death of Gamble Major, "the absolutely last living Negro man in the whole entire known world." As one of the other characters cries out for straps to be taken off him so he can move his hands, the other characters repeat, with variations, aspects of their identity and purpose as they relate to Black Man's escape from execution. Among other things, conversation refers to the time "Before Columbus," and concludes with a cry that new land has been spotted.

"Panel III: Thuh Lonesome 3Some"

Conversation between Black Man and Black Woman reveals that Black Man has been lynched, hung in a noose from a tree, and that the lynching took place after he escaped from the electric chair and was caught. He also reveals that after he died he was cut down and let go, since he wasn't needed any more.

"Panel IV: Second Chorus"

As the broadcaster repeats the news of the death of the last black man, Ham speaks, in language similar to that of the Bible's Old Testament, of Black Man's family history. As the other characters interject comments, Ham becomes more and more upset, eventually crying out that it's not his fault Black Man died. As Ham and the other characters build their stories to a climax, they are suddenly reminded by a single voice that "this is the death of the last black man in the whole entire world."

"Panel V: In thuh Garden of Hoodoo It"

As she tries to feed Black Man, Black Woman muses on how something is not quite right. Meanwhile, Black Man remembers his needing her to dig a large grave and prepares to move on, even while she is urging him to stay. He, in turn, urges her to remember him whole and healthy.

"Final Chorus"

Many of the images from earlier in the play return, spoken of and/or commented upon by the other characters. These include the fact the black man fell 23 stories, the Black Man urging the Black Woman to remember him, and the quote from p. 104 on how important it is to record the black man's history. At the same time, characters interject the comment that "the page" is both "burnin" and "turnin." After all the characters join in a chorus of loud laughter, the Black Woman comments that the last black man moved his hands.

Section 5, The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World Analysis

There are several points to note about this complex, multi-layered play. The first is how the characters are named - see "Characters." The second is structural, in that how the play's events unfold through the narrative of Black Man and Black Woman and are commented upon by the other characters is similar to the earliest structures of theatre, as defined by the Ancient Greeks. In this context, the characters, other than Black Man and Black Woman, function similarly to a traditional, classical Greek chorus, observing and/or commenting on the action rather than entering directly into it. The third noteworthy point is the way this play reiterates several themes / elements that appear throughout the collection. These include the references to retaining memory of the past, explored through the action of "Open House" in Section 2, and the cry that new land has been spotted (an echo of the two parts of "Third Kingdom" in Section 3). A related point is how these two aspects of the characters' experience, respect for the past and hope for the future, actually entwine in this play.

Also important to note are the specific references to aspects of the historical experience of African-Americans ,especially to lynchings, which are a form of racially motivated murder disguised, at least in the minds of those who practiced it, as "justice", and to the traveling electric chair (see "Objects/Places"). Both suggest that the ultimate end of any African American was a violent, unjust death.

Finally, there are the piece's many metaphors. The idea of moving hands can be seen as an expression of the black man's desire for freedom even while oppressed, while the reference to the time "before Columbus" can be seen as a reference to the time and the societies / cultures that existed before the white man colonized the world. The references to the future need for a mass grave refers to Black Man's awareness that there will be many more after him who fight for freedom in the same way as he does, and who will be persecuted just as fatally. The references to fire can be seen as evoking images of the Ku Klux Klan, an organization of white supremacists who, over the many decades since the Civil War, have practiced not only lynchings but the burning of crosses in protest of the black rights movement.

The question of what exactly is meant by the author's evoking the image of the death of the last black man is not answered directly in the play, but the various images and experiences portrayed by the narrative, particularly those of Black Man, suggest that the title and image are, again, metaphorical. The narrative is not, perhaps, literally talking about the death of the last black man, but symbolically talking about the death of the way black men and women have been treated. It's not so much the death of the last black man to which the play refers, but the death of the last black slave and not so much to the white masters of the pre-Civil War South but to the racism that is the still-existing legacy of those masters.

Section 6, Devotees in the Garden of Love

Section 6, Devotees in the Garden of Love Summary

NB Lily and George speak in the author's revised language, while Madame Odelia Pandahr speaks in more formal language.

"A" The elderly Lily uses a pair of binoculars to watch a conflict down below while her daughter George practices her French. Conversation reveals that George went to a finishing school run by Madame Odelia Pandahr, whose guidance about marriage and relationships George refers to repeatedly as she discusses her forthcoming marriage. She refers to how her relationship is built on "devotion" and later brings out her hope chest (see "Objects/Places") for Lily's inspection. Lily recalls her "old ways" of having relationships and marriages, while George refers again and again to what Madame Odelia Pandahr has told her about behavior and what to expect from a marriage.

"B" In the style of a television sports commentator, Madame Odelia Pandahr describes the scene between the two combatants (ThisOne and ThatOne) in the fight being watched by Lily and George, her narration revealing that the fight is between two rivals for George's love. She comments that, throughout the violence, the one word to describe the reason for the battle is devotion.

"C" Conversation between George and Lily reveals that Madame Odelia Pandahr has been taking items from George's hope chest to give to the combatants below. As Lily refers to how important it used to be for a bride to have a well set table, Madame Odelia Pandahr comes up and asks for more contributions. The unhappy George resists, but Madame Odelia Pandahr eventually leaves with several of George's belongings saying she'll be offering more commentary soon.

"D" Madame Odelia Pandahr comments from the battlefield on how silence has fallen, how intense the battle has become, and how the winner can look forward to comfort from George, while the loser will remain in the valley, which has been "renamed ... Miss George's Valley." In a few moments, she adds, combat will resume.

"E" George wonders why Lily gave her the name she did, saying she'd prefer to be called Patty, because it has a happier ending, and trying to get Lily to let her change it. Meanwhile, Madame Odelia Pandahr turns up with good news; the battle is over and the victor has been declared. Patty becomes excited, ready to be a bride, but is quickly disappointed when Madame Odelia Pandahr reveals the only part of him that's left after the fight - his head on a platter. Madame Odelia Pandahr confesses that many people don't really know which of the combatants won, since they looked so much alike, but she is sure it is ThatOne - her son. She then convinces the reluctant, repulsed Patty to

listen for words of love from the head's mouth. Patty hears it say "Be mine" and reacts happily.

"F" Speaking in revised language but in the style of a television commentator similar to that used by Madame Odelia Pandahr, Patty tells how, shortly after marriage, a man who always said "be mine" to his beloved eventually lost the means to communicate in his usual way. The beloved, Patty says, went to France, learned French, came back, where the man had been waiting, and taught him French as well. Their marriage, she adds, became a successful one, concluding by referring to herself as being "at the front," just as Madame Odelia Pandahr did.

Section 6, Devotees in the Garden of Love Analysis

Of all the plays in this collection, "Devotees in the Garden of Love" seems to be the least concerned with questions of race, instead apparently focusing on more universal, broadly experienced issues around love, marriage, relationships, and individual identity within each of those circumstances. The three characters - Lily, George, Madame Odelia Pandahr (see also "Characters") - are essentially archetypal, in that their needs and actions transcend aspects of race and are instead integrated into and defined by experiences of being mother, daughter, and matchmaker. In other words this is, at its core, a love story.

Upon deeper consideration, however, it can be seen that the characters are, in fact, playing out a narrative with clear echoes to the more racially defined narratives in the other plays in the collection. In the same way as the characters in the other plays struggle with aspects of identity as defined by race, George struggles with questions of identity as defined by marital status and by her name; the struggle is the same, but the context within which that struggle takes place changes. In the same way as characters in "Open House," for example, struggle to define the relationship between past and present, George struggles to define her life in terms of her own desires, rather than those of her mother and her past. Is there all that much difference, therefore, between George's desire for both a marriage, not to mention her delusion that the head is not only speaking to her but asking for her to be his, and a new name and Mr. Smith's deluded desire for his "Distinction"? In the same vein, is there much difference between George / Patty's desire and Mrs. Smith's desire to be well regarded? Black Man's desire to be free? Or, perhaps most tellingly, the longings of the Seers in "Third Kingdom" for the new self?

Meanwhile, in the same way as there is wordplay in the names of the characters in "The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World," which carry with them other implied meanings, there is wordplay here as well. For example, "pander" is essentially another name for "pimp," someone who profits from making arrangements for sexual contact between two individuals. Thus, the last name of the Madame Olivia character can be seen as evoking the idea that she is less interested in engineering an emotionally fulfilling relationship for George/Patty than she is in engineering a relationship at all. Then there is the phrase Miss George's Valley which, in the sexually

and emotionally charged context of the play, can clearly be seen as having sexual implications (i.e. Miss George's Valley = her vagina).

Finally, there is the arrival of the winner's head, presented to George/Patty on a platter. The image here is a clear echo of the story of the Biblical prophet John the Baptist. Jailed because of his radical religious and political beliefs and hated by a powerful woman whom he had condemned for marrying her dead husband's brother, the Baptist was executed when the woman's daughter, promised a reward for her beautiful dancing and prompted by her mother, asked for his head on a platter. The image evokes a sense of righteousness destroyed and manipulated by human desire; in short, in the same way as the Baptist lost his life as the result of a desire for revenge, George/Patty's potential suitor lost his life as the result of her desire for both love and social acceptance. The implied message in both narratives is that unchecked, inappropriate desire leads to destruction of goodness.

Section 7, The America Play, Part 1

Section 7, The America Play, Part 1 Summary

The play is set in "a great hole. In the middle of nowhere. The hole is an exact replica of 'The Great Hole of History.'"

"Act One: Lincoln Act"

The Foundling Father tells the story of a man who had been told all his life that he looked a lot like Abraham Lincoln, who is referred to throughout the play as "the Great Man." After referring to this man as "The Lesser Known," the Foundling Father then describes the circumstances of Lincoln's death (see "Objects/Places"), quoting several famous lines from the incident - what was being said in the play being performed at the time of the shooting, the cries of assassin John Wilkes Booth, and the exclamations of Lincoln's wife. The Foundling Father then describes how The Lesser Known built his life around his resemblance to Lincoln (see "Quotes," p. 162), eventually leaving his family, including his wife Lucy, and pursuing success as an impersonator of The Great Man. He had, the Foundling Father says, limited success until he began giving people the opportunity to come and re-enact the shooting. At intermittent intervals during the rest of the act, people come in, pretend to shoot Lincoln, and often quote some of what was said by Booth, by Lincoln, by Mrs. Lincoln, or by others on the scene. Meanwhile, the Foundling Father describes how desperate The Lesser Known became to be identified with Lincoln (see "Quotes," p. 170), eventually commenting, after a few more staged assassinations, that if the Lesser Known hadn't been trying so hard the Greater Man "would have sneaked up behind the Lesser Known unbeknownst and wrestled him to the ground. Stabbed him in the back. In revenge." As a result, the Foundling Father says, the Lesser Man disappears. The first act concludes with a gunshot.

Section 7, The America Play, Part 1 Analysis

There are several important points to note about the first act of "The America Play." First is the play's setting, in a replica of "The Great Hole of History" (see "Topics for Discussion - Given the author's intention ..."). Second is another manifestation of the author's taste for wordplay. Rather than using the more common expression "Founding Father," usually applied to the politicians and philosophers (Washington, Jefferson, Adams, Franklin) who defined the principles upon which America was founded, the author uses the term "foundling," used to describe an abandoned child discovered by someone not his/her family. Taking both these elements into account, the phrase "foundling father" therefore implies a lost child who discovers a sense of self while creating or defining some sort of new world, a new way of being. There are clear resonances here not only with the central character of the play, but with several of the African American characters in the collection, many of whom are in search of a new sense of self. This search, the author suggests in her Essays, is essential for the well

being of African-Americans, as individuals and as members of a cultural community. The Foundling Father, therefore, can be seen as another manifestation or embodiment of one of the author's primary thematic concerns - transforming perspectives on being African American.

In the story of "The Lesser Known," the author repeats a narrative motif or pattern that plays out several times in the collection; a character searches for a new sense of identity within the context of restrictions imposed by history or circumstances. In this sense, the Foundling Father is pursuing a similar path to Mr. and Mrs. Sergeant Smith, the seers in "Third Kingdom," Blanca and Anglor in "Open House," and George/Patty in "Devotees," among others. The particular irony of the Foundling Father's journey is that he finds his identity, or at least seems to, in the guise of the man credited with essentially ending the slavery of black people - Abraham Lincoln. In other words, the Foundling Father, in pursuit of a free present, finds himself enslaved by the past, which he continually recreates - a past defined by the constant presence and evocation of a man who stands for the END of a particularly deadly form of enslavement. The layers of meaning and implication here are quite complex.

Finally, gunshots are a particularly important element of both this act of the play and the second act, evoking as they do a sense of fatal violence, done not only to human life but also to human dreams - spirituality and philosophy as well as physicality and mind. This key aspect of the work is explored further in the play's second, and even more textured, act.

Section 8, The America Play, Part 2

Section 8, The America Play, Part 2 Summary

NB The characters in this part of the play speak in the author's revised language.

"A - Big Bang"

Lucy and her son Brazil dig in "an exact replica of The Great Hole of History." As gunshots fire and echo, Lucy urges Brazil to keep digging, saying it's important to know the difference between "thuh real thing from thuh echo. Thuh truth from thuh hearsay." Brazil comments that if they could find his father's bones they'd know the truth, but Lucy disagrees (see "Quotes," p. 178). Brazil then speaks a lengthy story to the audience about how his father came out west, how he was a natural digger, and how he used to visit the original Great Hole of History when he was back east. He describes how his father became involved in portraying Mr. Lincoln, and suddenly pretends to fall dead when another gunshot is heard. Lucy describes him as a liar, just like his father. Brazil speaks of how his father taught him how to impersonate Lincoln, but then up and left. Lucy digs up a bust of Lincoln, but when Brazil gets excited, she tells him to be quiet and dig.

"B - Echo"

The Foundling Father introduces a scene from "Our American Cousin," the play being performed when Lincoln was shot. A character comments that he can no longer endure the difficulties of his family history falling apart, and vows to commit suicide.

"C - Archaeology"

When Brazil asks whether Lucy hears his father, her response suggests that he is hearing two sorts of echoes - of the sound (i.e. the gunfire) connected with his father's life, and of the words, which themselves echo with other unhappy words. Brazil comments that the hole they're digging is, in fact, their inheritance, and then slips into the manner of a tour guide, referring to relics of Lincoln's life that he and Lucy have found. This leads him to weep and to confess, as Lucy tries to comfort him, that he misses his father.

"D - Echo"

The Foundling Father again introduces a scene from "Our American Cousin," now playing a matron defending her daughter from the advances of a rake who refers to her as a "sockdologizing old man-trap," the line which, according to a footnote in Act One, was the line that triggered the laughter that covered Booth's advancing on Lincoln. Over recorded laughter and applause, the Foundling Father speaks in the character of an actor from the play, thanking the audience, quoting Lincoln's Gettysburg Address, and commenting on how, as he names each of the state capitals, the play was always well

received. He then narrates the death of Lincoln one more time, poetically describing both the cause and the effect of his death (see "Quotes," p. 189).

"E - Spadework"

After continuing the game of naming the state capitals, Lucy comments on how Brazil's father could never get the story of Lincoln out of his mind. Brazil weeps, and Lucy comforts him by saying how alike they look. She helps Brazil imagine his father coming closer, and then urges him to keep digging. She comments that he's a digger just like his father, and then speaks poetically of all the things she gave him.

"F - Echo"

A gunshot is fired, and echoes.

"G - The Great Beyond"

Lucy and Brazil watch a replay of "The Lincoln Act" on television as The Foundling Father joins them. His coffin has appeared, and while Brazil continues to watch television, Lucy tries to convince The Foundling Father to get into it, but he refuses. They discuss the circumstances of his funeral, referring to the gunshots that continue to echo through the scene. Lucy speaks of the history that could be glimpsed in "The Original Great Hole" (see "Quotes," p. 196), again urging The Foundling Father to get into his coffin and refusing him when he asks for a hug. As Lucy tells Brazil how much he cared for the Hole, The Foundling Father speaks a few words of his Lincoln impersonation, and then dies in the way he did in Act One for the paying assassins. Brazil wonders whether it's time to grieve, but Lucy says to "save it for the guests." He begins to repeat the list of relics from "G," but then ends with a repeated reference to "thuh great black hole in thuh great head" (see again "Quotes," p. 189).

Section 8, The America Play, Part 2 Analysis

As is the case with most of the plays in this collection, the action of this second act of "The America Play" unfolds on two levels, the literal and the metaphoric, with the former triggering the latter and the latter illuminating the former. The literal line of action involves Brazil's quest for truth about his long lost father, metaphorically dramatized in the archaeological dig he and his mother are on. The truths he uncovers are metaphorically portrayed through the revealing of the various excavated artifacts, and specifically in the bust of Lincoln. This particular artifact suggests that, in the same way as a bust is only a partial head and shoulders representation of an individual's physical life, the memories unearthed by Lucy and Brazil are only partial representations of Brazil's father's emotional life and identity. On another level, however, this aspect of Brazil and Lucy's personal journey of discovery can be seen as a metaphoric manifestation of one of the author's central intentions. In the same way as Lucy and Brazil have only a partial awareness of their personal past, African Americans, as the author contends in her essays in Section 1, only have a partial awareness of their ethnic and cultural past, a situation also dramatized in "Open House."

Another important metaphoric element of this section of "The America Play" is the frequent recurrence of gunshots. This motif, or recurring image, evokes the specific gunshot that killed Abraham Lincoln, and also evokes the tension between truth and echo referred to by Lucy which, in turn, is also a component of the author's exploration of African-Americans' lack of knowledge (echo) about their past (truth). In fact, the gunshot metaphor here is one of the most complex in the collection. Not only is there the truth/echo element, but there are also metaphoric implications of the gunshot that killed Lincoln itself. That shot was, among other things, an attack on his determination to end slavery - in other words, an attack on the freedom of African-Americans that Lincoln advocated. The truth evoked by the gunshot, therefore (the historical truth of the sort that the author seems to want African Americans to have more fully in their present day consciousness) is the truth of not only violence and oppression, but of the entwining of the two. The echo of that gunshot, the author suggests through the echoes of the gunshot that resound throughout the play, is a metaphoric suggestion that that entwining of violence and oppression continues in contemporary society and culture.

There are two other metaphors to consider. The first lies within the conflict between Lucy and The Foundling Father over whether the latter can or should get into his coffin. This is a metaphoric reiteration of the author's intention to awaken African Americans to the truth of their past. The Foundling Father, as he pretends to be Lincoln, is a representative of an echo of the true past. By insisting he get into his coffin, Lucy is essentially insisting that such echoes must die, that the true past is more important and more deserves to live than the echo. The second, and final, metaphor, lies within Brazil's comment about "the great black hole in the great head," specifically the hole made by the bullet when Lincoln was shot in the head. The reference here in terms of the specific words is to the author's stage direction setting the action of both acts of "The America Play" near a "replica of the black hole of history." The image suggests that the hole in Lincoln's head (i.e. the cause of his death) is, on some level, similar in function to the black hole of history - truth is no longer possible, dead in the case of the first hole and vanished into the blackness of selective memory in the case of the second. There is a possible second meaning - that a positive relationship between African Americans and their history ended with the appearance of the black hole in Lincoln's head, with the truth of that history being sucked into that second black hole that expanded out of the first. Personal death by gunshot, cultural death by the echo of that gunshot fading into nothingness, as echoes do.

Characters

African Americans

The nature of African American character and identity is central to the collection's narratives and its themes. The author makes this clear in the essays at the beginning of the collection (see Section 1). There she states, in both metaphoric and literal terms, that at least in her perspective and opinion, it is essential for African Americans to develop and own a sense of who they are, as both individuals and as a racial community, free from the long predominant and/or oppressive attitudes of White Americans. Her explorations and dramatizations of that perspective come to life in the central characters in all her plays, all of whom are African American and all of whom deal with individualized variations on what the author contends is the struggle of her people in general - who am I as a person, and who am I as an African American person? Oppressed, the author suggests in both her essays and her plays, as individuals and as a people - oppressed, longing for personal and racial freedom, but too entrenched in centuries-old, white-defined, black-internalized beliefs. These beliefs, the plays variously suggest, are defined by delusion, confusion, and desperation - interestingly, though, not so much by anger. The African Americans in these plays struggle and suffer, but for the most part they do not rage, or mourn, for that matter. They are essentially stuck in what has been believed about them, and in what they have come to believe about themselves. That stuck-ness, the author suggests in her essays and contends through the action of her plays, is spiritually crippling and must be transcended if African Americans, individually and as a community, are to claim a true, empowering sense of who, what, and why they are.

Female Characters (Molly/Mona, Charlene/Chona, Veronica/Vero

The three female characters are all struggling for a sense of personal identity, a struggle manifest in their search for work (Molly/Mona), for freedom from poverty as represented by the cockroach infestation (Charlene/Chona), and for pleasure in violence (Verona who, interestingly enough, never actually appears as Veronica). The Naturalist speaks with what seems to be the voice of an educated white scientist, judgmental and intellectually, but not physically, oppressive. Lutzky, with his white-sounding name, seems to represent the carelessness, insensitivity and crudeness of those outside the African-American experience as represented by the lives of the three female characters.

Seers

The seers in the Third Kingdom all represent the desire and/or intention to "see" beyond the current experience of being African American and into a new, freer future - a new land where everything is fully, freely possible.

Aretha

Aretha is a nanny/housekeeper sort of character, assigned the responsibility of taking care of Blanca and Anglor who, in the play's early scenes, are little children but then mature into financially and socially ambitious adults, eager to distance themselves from Aretha, who represents their past, undesirable in both personal and metaphoric terms. Charles, whose name suggests that he is part of the tradition that saw black slaves named after their white owners, is a dominating patriarchal figure, as controlling and dismissive of Aretha as his apparent children, Blanca and Anglor. The ironically named Miss Faith supports the hope and ambitions of Blanca and Anglor at the same time as she suppresses, and in some ways disables, the hope and/or faith in Aretha.

Mr. Sergeant Smith

Mr. Sergeant Smith is an ambitious army officer, desperate for advancement and approval, which he calls his "Distinction," to the point of being constantly, and deludedly, convinced that it's imminent. Mrs. Sergeant Smith is his wife, focused entirely on propriety and on making sure her children and her husband are perceived in the best possible light. Buffy, Muffy and Duffy are their children, as self-absorbed and as ambitious as their parents and disappointed when neither their father nor their mother turns out to be as heroic and/or as worthy of their admiration as they'd hoped.

Lucius and Mare

Lucius and Mare are a married couple trapped in a cycle of violence, gambling (is it a coincidence that "Mare" is also the term for a female horse?), abuse and self-limitation, a cycle illustrated by the play's repetitive structure and dialogue. They represent and/or manifest the author's contention that African Americans are themselves trapped in a cycle of oppression-triggered self-violence, self-abuse, and again, self-limitation.

Miss Miss

The apparently elderly Miss Miss is lost in her memories, rambling and confused, preparing to leave all that she remembers, dreams and feels behind as she readies herself for death.

Black Man and Black Woman

Black Man and Black Woman are the central characters in "The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World." Both are identified not by name, but by degrading socio-cultural stereotypes associated with African Americans - watermelons and fried chicken. These names are clear metaphoric evocations of the social oppression under which, the author contends, African Americans all live, to one degree or another.

African Americans

The first three characters in this list from "The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World"are also identified not by name, but by negative stereotypes associated with being African American, in particular an obsession with food and with particular sorts of food. Prunes and Prisms evokes a practice employed to encourage clearer speech and diction.

Hatshepsut

The Egyptian and therefore dark skinned Hatshepsut was just what her name implies - once married to a pharaoh who, after his death, assumed the mantle and responsibilities of royalty herself. She is an image not only of an empowered black woman, but of an empowered black person. Her presence is therefore an ironic counterpoint to the more negative and stereotypical presences around her.

Bigger, Voice, Before Columbus

The names of these characters evoke aspects of contemporary African American experience, as opposed to those of the other characters which tend to evoke aspects of the past. "Bigger"evokes the hope and possibility for transcending the centuries-old physical, mental, spiritual, and cultural oppression of slavery. "Voice" evokes how belief systems are defined by what people are told, rather than what they understand or intuit themselves. "Before Columbus" evokes the hope and freedom in black culture and society before the arrival of white people like Columbus.

George/Patty, Lily, Madame Odelia Pandahr

These three female characters are trapped in conceptions and belief systems about love, relationships and marriage that metaphorically and simultaneously evoke conceptions and belief systems about race. George changes her name to Patty in an attempt to avoid the traps placed upon her by Lily and Madame Odelia Pandahr, whose last name means, essentially, the same thing as "pimp," but at the conclusion of the play seems to still be just as trapped.

Abraham Lincoln

Abraham Lincoln was President of the United States at the time of the Civil War, and is credited with having the moral and political courage to end slavery - or to at least initiate the battle to end it. The play regards him as an ambivalent character, idolized and viewed as a hero but not necessarily as great a friend to African Americans as history, and many African Americans, tend to believe.

The Foundling Father

The Foundling Father is a man who, in search of an identity and purpose of his own, instead adopts Abraham Lincoln's, making a name and living by impersonating him even to the point of re-enacting, without actually dying, the assassination that ended Lincoln's life.

Lucy and Brazil

Lucy and Brazil are, respectively, the wife and son of The Foundling Father. As they excavate his literal and metaphorical grave, they discover and debate how his life was, in fact, simply an empty, fading echo of the life of another. Their realization and debate are enactments or manifestations of the playwright's central thematic intention, as stated in her Essays, to encourage African Americans to be aware of how empty so much of their self-perceptions are, and to encourage them to fill that emptiness with an increased, realistic sense of self-worth.

Objects/Places

Theatre

As the author indicates in her essays, theatre is her means of communicating her vision for African American culture and society, and of inspiring her fellow African Americans to take a more past-centric view of the present. In other words, theatre is the means she uses to bring the past into the present.

African-American History

The author contends that many general aspects and specific events in African American history have been downplayed, ignored, or wiped from the consciousness of those who live in America, particularly African Americans. Her plays, she suggests, are a means of bringing awareness of that history into contemporary experience.

The Emancipation Proclamation

In September of 1862, American President Abraham Lincoln proclaimed that all slaves in states still fighting the Civil War (essentially the Southern States) were free. The Proclamation defined the war as a battle against slavery, and was in many ways the early stage of the Civil Rights movement that climaxed in the 1960's with the rise to power of Martin Luther King and other African American leaders.

Cockroach

The cockroach, or rather a surveillance device disguised as a cockroach, can be seen as a metaphoric representation of the attitude of non-black society towards African Americans - as a community or way of life to be academically observed and critically analyzed, rather than compassionately viewed and understood. The use of a cockroach, traditionally associated with poverty and sub-standard housing, also implies that the culture being observed (i.e. African Americans) is of less economic, social, and moral worth than that of those doing the observing - in other words, whites.

Teeth

The teeth of the aging black woman Aretha are extracted over the course of the narrative, an action that parallels that of several characters who wish to distance themselves from the historical circumstances and societal oppression that she represents. The play literally renders her "toothless" and therefore, metaphorically, does the same for her history ... in other words, without real value or impact.

Mr. Sergeant Smith's desk

Mr. Sergeant Smith's desk is a powerful symbol of the status he believes he has and desperately wishes to improve. This is why Mrs. Sergeant Smith is so insistent that it be kept clean, neat, and tidy just like his image and, by association, hers.

The Distinction

The Distinction is a combination medal and promotion, a longed for manifestation of the higher status Mr. Sergeant Smith is desperate to achieve.

Dust

Dust in almost every literary or metaphoric situation evokes the past, and specifically an untidy relationship with the past suggesting it hasn't been well regarded, put in its proper place, or respected. In the context of "Betting on the Dust Commander," dust, and incorporating dust into the name of the horse with which Lucius is obsessed, suggests an unhealthy association with the past.

Pickling

As previously discussed, pickling is a metaphoric representation of memory. The fact that Miss Miss recalls her mother pickling beets, and also recalls Charles eating them, is significant in that the color of beets is similar to that of blood. In other words, Miss Miss, her mother and Charles are all metaphorically living off the blood of their past, their memories. They are stuck in what was, and unable to fully engage in what is or look forward to what will or might be.

Traveling Electric Chair

The traveling electric chair was a portable device used to execute criminals, not just African-Americans, in communities where there was neither a jail that could accommodate an execution chamber nor enough crime to warrant the construction of such a chamber. As previously discussed, such a chair serves as a representation of the looming, inevitable threat of violent death that awaited African-Americans struggling for true freedom.

Hope Chest

A hope chest is a trunk or suitcase that has, sometimes for years or even decades, been filled with things a bride would need once she got married, packed in the "hope" of getting married. George's hope chest is a powerful symbol of the intensity of her desire for love, marriage and intimacy, while the fact that it is gradually emptied by the

demands of Madame Olivia Pandahr represents the emptying away of George's hope and the use of that hope to entice and/or manipulate others.

bust of Lincoln

The bust of Lincoln can be seen as a metaphoric representation of the essentially empty, idealized image of Lincoln inhabited and clung to by The Foundling Father and shot by the would-be assassins in "The American Play." In other words, the presence and limited accuracy of the bust parallels and represents the limited accuracy of The Foundling Father's sense of truth about himself.

Gunfire

Gunfire, which appears throughout "The America Play," represents several things - the gunshot that ended Lincoln's life and the deep-seated presence of and perspective on violence ingrained in American society at that time. Perhaps most importantly, though, gunfire represents the ultimate destruction of the sense of identity in not only The Foundling Father but of any of the characters, in the entire collection, whose sense of self is defined by a similarly false, idealized, naïve, even ignorant relationship of the past.

Themes

Transforming Perspectives on Being African-American

The author essentially states, in the Essays in Section 1, her thematic intentions in writing her plays - in particular, her intention to awaken contemporary African Americans to a deeper, more respectful, and more aware relationship with their racial and cultural history. In particular, the essay entitled "An Equation for Black People Onstage" suggests clearly and strongly that, at least in the author's mind, African Americans need to see themselves in light of their own identities, as individuals and as a racial community, rather than solely in relationship to whites. They are not, as she suggests, merely non-white. They are themselves. With each of the plays in this collection, she dramatizes aspects of that struggle, either in terms of striving to free African Americans from that perception or to develop new perceptions. Neither aspect of the struggle is, of course, exclusive of the other. See "Topics for Discussion - Consider each of the plays ..." The point, neither here nor in the author's work, is not made to suggest that the role of whites in defining the African American experience should be forgotten or downplayed. On the contrary, the author tends, thematically and narratively, to make the opposite point - that the role of whites in defining African Americans should be both remembered and emphasized. The point is made, however, to suggest that the role of whites is not the only role, that it should not be viewed as such, and that African Americans have the personal and racial responsibility to ensure that it isn't.

Transcending Racial Oppression

One of the ways, the author suggests in both her essays and her plays, to get out from under the white-defined definition of being African American is to transcend or combat the social, cultural, moral, economic, political, and personal oppressions experienced by African Americans both as individuals and as a racial community. Claim individual and racial identity, the author says both thematically and narratively. Once that identity has been both claimed and defined, oppression and those who practice it will no longer be able to define or control it. Here, it's important to note that for the author, oppression does not only mean that practiced on African Americans by whites, but that practiced by African Americans on THEMSELVES. This, the author contends in the Essays, is the result of accepting, believing and internalizing the values implied by such oppression. In other words, African Americans, as individuals and as a racial/cultural community, have accepted the oppressive definitions of identity imposed upon them so thoroughly, so thoughtlessly and for so long that they have become ingrained. It is that ingraining, the author contends, that African Americans must transcend, and with which many of her characters struggle, either consciously or unconsciously. Such characters include Aretha, Blanca and Anglor in "Open House," and the Smith family in "The Greeks." The struggle to emerge from oppression is particularly apparent in the characters and situations of both "The Death of the Last Black Man in the Whole Entire World," which includes characters whose very names are evocative of that oppression, and "The

America Play" in which characters excavate and ironically celebrate physical and mental relics, both literal and metaphorical, of such oppression.

The Struggle for Individual Identity

At the same time as she explores struggles with racial and cultural identity, the author also explores the struggles of individuals to define, understand, and enact their personal, individual identities. This is, after all, America she is talking about, the land where fulfilled individuality is the ultimate ideal and the ultimate achievement. The characters in "Snails," whose search for identity is, to some degree, defined by the changing of their names, and the character in "Pickling," whose relationship with her self-identity is defined by memory, all struggle with this particular aspect of themselves and their existence. This particular sort of struggle is most apparent, however, in "Devotees in the Garden of Love." There, the central character, George, not only changes her name, like the women in "Snails" do, to the happier-sounding "Patty," but simultaneously and ironically escapes the identity-controlling relationship with her mother only to let herself be absorbed into another with the woman who essentially pimps her out, in the hopes of entering into a third with her yet-to-be determined bridegroom.

The quest and need for individual identity is explored from the opposite, darker perspective in "The America Play," in which the identity of the central character, The Foundling Father, becomes completely submerged in that of the famous historical figure of Abraham Lincoln. Here the struggle for individual identity parallels, and ultimately becomes entwined with, the struggle for cultural identity. The Foundling Father is not only lost as a man, but more particularly as a BLACK man, race being, as the author suggests in her Essays, as much a defining element of individual identity as it is of cultural identity. Here again, her self-observed, self-defining contention that form defines content, content defines form, comes into play.

Style

Point of View

There are two key points to consider in relation to the collection's essential point of view. One is technical or creative and the other is emotional, social, cultural. Both are outlined in the Essays in "Section 1," and both emerge from the author's personal and creative identity - that of a post-civil rights movement African American woman and artist. As she herself suggests, form defines content, and her form defines the content of her writing and her creative point of view.

In terms of the collection's technical and creative points of view, the author makes it clear that in shaping her work as she does, and in giving voice to her characters and their situations in the way that she does, she is both challenging and expanding traditional views and practices of theatre. Her lack of traditionally accepted and practiced realism in action, language and structure emerges from a personal and creative perspective that for African Americans to look at their experience in a new way, they require a new lens, a new means or medium of doing so. Her inventive use of language, character and structure creates and defines that new lens.

The collection's emotional, social and cultural point of view has been touched on here and throughout this analysis. Again, as the author suggests in her essays, African Americans tend to function in the present and move forward into the future without a full, clear sense of what has transpired in the past. Several of the plays dramatize this particular perspective quite powerfully, making the central thematic statement that for the present and future to be fully realized, the past must be fully recalled, understood, and accepted.

Setting

The most important point to note about setting in this collection, a point applicable to all the plays it contains, is that they take place in the United States of America, a country which, in the two hundred and thirty five years since its inception, has struggled with tensions between whites and non-whites. Those tensions are particularly potent when it comes to the question of the relationship between whites and African Americans (or blacks, or Negroes, as African Americans were referred to in history and ARE referred to, at times, in the collection). The particular focus of that struggle, whether African Americans can, should, or will be recognized as full, equal citizens and equal human beings having a valid individual and cultural identity. The struggle for that identity is a fundamental component of the settings in which the various narratives play out. It is, in effect, a cultural and moral setting as much as America is a physical setting.

It's important to note, meanwhile, that there is little or no sense of any of the plays having a setting in TIME. There is a sense of their being contemporary, in that there are

several references to contemporary circumstances. "The America Play," for instance, is clearly post-Civil War, but it's not clear just how FAR post war it is. Its action could easily take place any time from the 1930's on. At the same time, however, there are references to situations and experiences that no longer exist or take place in contemporary society, such as the traveling electric chair in Section 5. The sense throughout the collection, in fact, is that the plays are in many ways timeless, that the situations, characters and relationships they dramatize are archetypal and universal, and that the attitudes, in both Africans Americans and whites, in which those various aspects of narrative are founded exist in both the past and the present.

Language and Meaning

The author's use of language is, by far, one of the most interesting aspects of the collection. In her essays, she comments on her feelings about language (how it has a physical life) and how she uses it (how it needs to be not only a clear and full reflection of the identities of the characters' identities but an accurate reflection of how people both speak and feel). She makes a clear effort to essentially transcribe how language is spoken in all its informality and flexibility, avoiding more formal and/or traditional uses of grammar and sentence structure in all but a few particular situations, evidently chosen with care and purpose. Formal language, in this situation, becomes an element of distance, separating those who use it from the apparently more earthy, more genuine, more FELT language of those who don't.

Also in the Essays, the author comments on her use and application of musical language, specifically the vocabulary of jazz. She does so in two ways by applying the free flowing, stream-of-consciousness sensibility of jazz to the way her characters express their thoughts, and by applying the principles of repetition and improvisation to both those expressions and the essential structures of her plays.

Both these aspects of the author's work reinforce and, in fact, heighten the relationship between the author's intention to awaken African Americans to their history and identity and her creative technique involving the use of African American idioms of communication, of which jazz is one. In other words, intention triggers the technique, technique realizes intention or, as she herself says, form defines content, content defines form.

Structure

In the same way as the author's use of language reflects and manifests the influences of jazz and of contemporary ways of speaking, so too does her employment of narrative structure. She comments positively in the Essays on the value of traditionally linear narrative structure, but adds that telling a story in that essential way is not necessarily the only way in which a story can or should be told. She suggests this is particularly true if a playwright wants to speak to his/her audience in a way that that the audience can easily, and willingly, understand and engage in. So, in order to reach her intended

audience of African Americans, she structures her narratives with the same near-improvisational sense of free-flow and impulse that shapes her use of language. There are elements of traditionally linear narrative, with cause leading to effect, action leading to reaction leading to action, taking the audience or the reader on a particular journey from a clearly defined beginning to a clearly defined end. But the routes taken by that narrative between beginning and end sometimes take detours, sometimes double back on themselves, sometimes go down dead ends. Meaning, in many cases, is evoked through a collage of words, images and comments rather than through a series of inter-related events, which is the core structure of most traditional linear dramatic narrative. Here, there is a sense of structure imitating both memory and feeling as well as the musical inspiration of jazz, since neither memory nor feeling tends to respond to life, experience or itself in a linear, straightforward way.

Quotes

"Writing I dance around spinning around to 'get out of the way' like Zen sort of, the self simultaneously disappears HIS BONES CANNOT BE FOUND and is revealed ... the relationship between possessor and possessed is, like ownership, is, multidirectional." Section 1, "Possession," p. 3

"A play is a blueprint of an event: a way of creating and rewriting history through the medium of literature ... theatre, for me, is the perfect place to 'make' history - that is, because so much of African-American history has been unrecorded, dismembered, washed out, one of my tasks as a playwright is to ... locate the ancestral burial ground, dig for bones, find bones, hear the bones sing, write it down." Ibid, p. 4

"Theatre seems mired in the interest of stating some point, or tugging some heartstring, or landing a laugh, or making a splash, or wagging a finger ... as a playwright I try to do many things: explore the form, ask questions, make a good show, tell a good story, ask more questions, take nothing for granted. Ibid, "from Elements of Style," p. 6

"It's like this: I am an African-American woman - this is the form I take, my content predicates this form, and this form is inseparable from my content. No way could I be any otherwise." Ibid, p. 8

"Could Time be tricky like the world once was - looking flat from our place on it - and through looking at things beyond the world we found it round? Somehow I think Time could be like this too." Ibid, p. 10

"Words are very old things ... they have a big connection with the what was ... language is a physical act. It's something which involves your entire body - not just your head. Words are spells which an actor consumes and digests - and through digesting creates a performance onstage." Ibid, p. 11

"Don't ask playwrights what their plays mean; rather, tell them what you think and have an exchange of ideas." Ibid, p. 15 (1)

"They too easily become focal points of all evil, allowing the arts community to WILLFULLY IGNORE our own bigotry, our own petty evils, our own intolerance which... will be the death of the arts." Ibid, p. 15 (2)

"Think about laughter and what happens to your body - it's almost the same thing that happens to you when you throw up." Ibid, p. 15 (3)

"As a Black person writing for theatre, what is theatre good for? What can theatre do for us? We can 'tell it like it is'; 'tell it as it was'; 'tell it as it could be'. In my plays I do all 3, and the writing is rich because we are not an impoverished people, but a wealthy people fallen on hard times." Ibid, p. 21

"I ask us to remember that it was almost twenty five whole score ago that our founding father went forth tirelessly crossing a vast expanse of ocean in which there lived dangerous creatures of the most horrible sort tirelessly crossing that sea jungle to find this country and name it. The wilderness was vast and we who came to teach, enlighten and tame were few in number." Section 2, "Imperceptible Immutabilities," p. 29

"My new Self was uh third Self made by thuh space in between. And my new Self wonders: Am I happy? Is my new Self happy in my new-Self shoes" Part 3, Imperceptible Mutabilities, Part 2, p. 39

"Black folks with no clothes. Then all thuh black folks clothed in smiling. In between the folks is a distance that's uh wet space. 2 worlds: Third Kingdom" Ibid, p. 39 (2)

"Memory is a very important thing ... it keeps us in line. It reminds us of who we are, memory. Without it we could be anybody. We would be running about here with no identities. You would not know that you're my - help, you'd just be a regular street and alley heathen. I would not remember myself to be master. There would be chaos, chaos it would be without a knowledge from whence we came." Ibid, Part 3, p. 48

"That's your soul you're looking at. Wonder #9 of my glass bottomed boat. Swallow it, or you'll be jettisoned ... the tale of who we were when we were, who we will be when we will be and who we be now that we iz ..." Ibid, p. 56

"Last night it comed to me: there's four hours every day that I kin say 'today' and you'll know what today I mean. We got us whatcha calls 'uh overlap'. We got us uh overlap of four hours. Times when my days yours - and yours is mines. Them four hours happens real quick and they look just like thuh other twenty-odd so you gotta watch for em real close." Ibid, Part 4, p. 65

"Dust is little bits of dirt, Mare. Little bits of dirt. Separate dirties that - that - fuzzicate theirselves together n make dusts ... you gotta blot em out." Section 3, p. 79-80

"You should write it down because if you dont write it down then they will come along and tell the future that we did not exist. You should write it down and you should hide it under a rock. You should write down the past and you should write down the present and in what in the future you should write it down ... you should hide it all under a rock so that in the future when they come along they will say that the rock did not exist." Section 5, p. 104

"...because all the eyes of the world are on the heart of the bride-who'll-be's heart thuh bride-who'll-bee's heart thus turns inward, is given to reflection and in that way becomes an eye itself. Seeing inward to examine her most deepest thoughts and feelings and seeing outward too tuh give her form and g race thall guide her in her most natural selection, that is, her choice of suitors." Section 6, George, p. 136

"They say love makes yuh blind. Only ever made me sweat." Ibid, Lily, p. 138

"Everyone who has ever walked the earth has a shape around which their entire lives and their posterity shapes itself. The Great Man had his log cabin into which he was born, the distance between the cabin and Big Town multiplied by ... the staying power of his words and image ... the Lesser Known had a favorite hole. A chasm, really. Not a whole he had digged but one he had visited." Section 7, "The America Play," p. 162

"The Great Man lived in the past that is was an inhabitant of time immemorial and the lesser known out West alive a resident of the present ... trying somehow to equal the Great Man in stature, word and deed going forward with his lesser life trying somehow to follow in the Great Mans footsteps footsteps that were of course behind him". Ibid, p. 171

"Whispers dont always come up right away. Takes time sometimes. Whispers could travel different out West than they do back East. Maybe slower. Maybe. Whispers are secrets and often shy." Ibid, Lucy, p. 178

"Thuh freeing of the slaves and thuh great black hole that thuh fatal bullet bored. And how that great head was bleedin. Thuh body stretched crossways across thuh bed. Thuh last words. Thuh last breaths. And how thuh nation mourned." Ibid, The Foundling Father, p. 189

"...son, at thuh Original Great Hole, you could see thuh whole world without goin too far. You could look intuh that Hole and see your entire life pass before you. Not your own life but someones life from history, you know, somebody who killed somebody important, uh face on a postal stamp, you know, someone from History. LIKE you, but NOT you. You know: KNOWN." Ibid, Lucy, p. 196

Topics for Discussion

How do you define theatre? What do the word and the concept mean to you? What do you think theatre should be? What sorts of stories do you think theatre has told in the past, and what kind of stories do you think it should tell in a contemporary culture?

If theatre is a reflection of the social and cultural circumstances in which it is created and performed, what sort of theatre do you think today's social and cultural circumstances could / should produce?

Discuss how oppression, manifest both externally (i.e. in society) and internally (i.e. self-oppression as the result of living with societal oppression), plays either a direct or a metaphorical role in the lives of the characters and their relationships in EACH play in this collection.

Discuss the various ways that hope for / dreams of a better future manifest in and/or define the actions and attitudes of the various characters in the various plays.

In what specific ways does the concept of "imperceptible mutabilities," as defined in "Section 2, Analysis" apply to other plays in this mini-collection ("The Third Kingdom," "Open House," and "Greeks - or, The Slugs")?

What are the implications of the statement made by Mr. Smith in "Greeks ..." that he and his family are slugs? What are the implications of the statement in relation to the events, circumstances, stories and themes - particularly "Snails" - but also the other plays in the collection?

Given the author's intention, stated in Section 1 ("Essays") to explore African-American history and give it its place in contemporary African-American society, culture and perspectives, what are the implications of setting "The America Play" in and around a replica of the Great Hole of History?

Why do you think the author titled the last play in the collection "The America Play"? What aspects of American life and/or identity appear and/or are commented upon in the play?

Consider each of the plays in the collection, and comment on how each one deals with the author's concern (stated in the essays) that African Americans tend to see themselves and/or define themselves in relationship to whites. In what ways do the characters in each play enact and/or manifest the author's intention to free themselves of that perspective?