Betsey Brown Study Guide

Betsey Brown by Ntozake Shange

BOOKRAGS

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Author Biography

Shange, originally named Paulette Williams, was born on October 18, 1948, in Trenton, New Jersey. She was the oldest of four children growing up in a materially comfortable, intellectually stimulating, and politically aware household. Her father, a surgeon, and her mother, a psychiatric social worker, were friends with some of the most notable African-American artists of the day. Jazz giant Miles Davis and race leader and educator W. E. B. DuBois were among the luminaries who were guests at the Williams home.

Shange's parents were what "used to be called 'race people.' Life was dedicated to the betterment of the race," Shange explained in an interview with Serena Anderlini in the *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism.* However, they were not radicals. Their aspirations for her included going to college and marrying a doctor.

Shange's family moved from Trenton to St. Louis, Missouri, when Shange was eight. There she was bused to a German-American school, where she faced the rejection of white classmates and gained a new firsthand understanding of racism. Shange fell back on the strength of her family's personal and intellectual support and eventually formed a strong bond with the city. When Shange was thirteen, the family returned to Trenton.

Shange married young and began Barnard College at age eighteen. The following year, having separated from her law-student husband, she made her first in a series of attempts to commit suicide. During radical times in the country, Shange felt ashamed of her middle-class background and, at the same time, was frustrated and alienated by the double discrimination she experienced as a black woman. Soon she began expressing her rage outwardly through her writing rather than directing it toward herself. She finished her B.A. at Barnard in 1970 and earned an M. A. in American studies from the University of Southern California in 1973. While there, she assumed her African name, which means "she who comes with her own things" and "she who walks like a lion."

After teaching, performing poetry, and dancing for a few years, Shange went back to New York, where her first play, *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf,* was produced in 1975. The show's long Broadway run established Shange as a young artist to watch. It remains her best known and most highly acclaimed work. She has continued to teach while writing prolifically in the genres of drama, poetry, and fiction. She is the recipient of many awards, including an Obie Award for drama and a Pushcart Prize for fiction.

Shange had a second marriage which also ended in divorce. She has one daughter. A practicing Methodist Episcopalian, she also follows Santeria, a new-world hybrid of Catholic and Yoruba spirituality. She identifies herself not as an American, but as a "child of the new world" - that is, of the African diaspora. She told Anderlini, "Where there are black people, I know how to dance, I know the rhythms, I know the food, I know how to have camaraderie, and I can talk and sing."

Plot Summary

Set in 1959, *Betsey Brown* tells the story of a black thirteen-year-old as she confronts racial identity and inequality, developing sexuality, and family life in a middle-class African-American neighborhood of St. Louis. The novel opens by introducing the family and describing the rambling Victorian house where they live. The Brown family - including parents Jane and Greer, grandmother Vida, four children, and cousin Charlie - get ready for a day of school and work. Betsey, Jane's oldest and favorite daughter, practices a poem by the famous black poet Paul Laurence Dun-bar for an elocution contest at school. As the chaotic morning ends and the children go off to their all-black school, Vida airs her disapproval of the rising integration movement and cherishes the fact that her family lives in its "own world."

Betsey arrives at school and overhears two girls talking about Eugene Boyd, an older boy Betsey has a crush on. Though she is flustered when she arrives at class, she rises to the occasion and wins her elocution contest. After school she and two of her schoolmates go the house of a poor white friend. When one of her schoolmates leaves because the white girl's mother is racist, this triggers Betsey's thoughts about the integration crisis taking place in Little Rock, Arkansas.

That day Jane comes home from work and is met by police escorting Charlie and her son, Allard, who had been caught on the grounds of a local Catholic school. Jane is worried about the boys and angry with Greer for not being home to help her with the conflict. This precipitates a fight about how much Greer works. Chaos reigns in the house. Just then, a bedraggled woman, Bernice, approaches the house asking for work. She reveals Betsey's treetop hiding place in order to win Jane's favor, instead provoking Betsey's wrath.

Betsey retaliates by getting all of the children to wreak havoc the next morning, and Jane fires the woman.

At school Betsey is eager to tell her friends about her victory, but one of them, Veejay, reveals that her own mother works as a nanny for a white family and shames Betsey about her actions. Betsey returns home, eager to take the blame for the morning's misdoings, but it is too late - Bernice is already gone. Betsey goes to her tree and falls asleep. She is awakened by Charlie and his schoolmate, Eugene Boyd, throwing a basketball up at the tree.Eugene starts to flirt with Betsey and she goes inside to change her clothes. They spend the afternoon together and Betsey accepts her first kiss.

Bernice is soon replaced by Regina, a fun and sexy young woman from the poor side of town. Charlie has a crush on Regina, and gets her fired for kissing her boyfriend, Roscoe, in front of the children. Jane is upset to lose Regina, in part because this happens at the same time as laws enforcing school integration go into effect. "The neighborhood had saved them" - Jane and Greer - and now the children must venture out into the broader white culture where they all fear that they will be met with hostility.

The first day of school goes relatively smoothly for Betsey. She feels isolated, but is cheered when she knows all the answers to a geography lesson about Africa. Charlie fares less well; he returns home with a black eye, having fought with five Italian boys. Greer says he will go to school with Charlie the next day. Jane is agitated. Greer takes Jane upstairs to bed for sex, even though it is before dinnertime.

Betsey misses going to her old school and feels put upon by her new white classmates. One evening she makes a hopscotch board filled with racial slurs against whites. The neighborhood is outraged, and Betsey does not admit to the act, but offers to wash it away. This is a tense time in the Brown family, between the political stresses of enforced integration and the personal stresses of family life. Jane and Greer argue.

Betsey feels isolated and misunderstood - confused about her racial identity and her budding sexuality. One night, while dancing to the radio and fantasizing about a famous husband, she resolves to run away.

The place Betsey heads is Mrs. Maureen's hair salon, a shop in a rough part of town where all of the middle-class black women get their hair done. She arrives there at dawn and is shocked to find that by night Mrs. Maureen runs a brothel. She is even more shocked to discover that Regina is living there and is pregnant. Roscoe has moved to Chicago and promised to send for her, but that seems doubtful.Regina reassures Betsey and affirms that she is special.Regina and Mrs. Maureen pamper her, doing her hair and make-up, before sending her home with cab fare. But Betsey instead takes a cab downtown, where she feels like she is the queen of the city.

Back at home the family waits anxiously for Betsey's return. Greer and Jane argue because Greer refuses to pray, choosing instead to go out and look for Betsey. He stops by the hospital to do his rounds, and there he finds Betsey, who had been taken there at her request by the police. Greer feels a connection to Betsey through their shared impulses toward black culture. He brings her home, where she is received joyously. Jane too feels a connection to Betsey, seeing in her a version of a younger self who wanted to "be somebody." The next morning Greer announces that the children will participate with him in a Civil Rights demonstration. Jane objects strenuously to placing her children at risk. He maintains his position, so Jane packs her bags and leaves.

In Jane's absence, a new housekeeper named Carrie comes to help the Browns. She is a rustic but wise country woman who organizes the household and teaches the children the value of work. They all pitch in to keep the house in order. Carrie takes up with the neighborhood gardener, Mr. Jeff, who courts her by bringing her flowers and alcoholic drinks, to which Vida strongly objects. One day Betsey comes home from school upset that her white teacher had never heard of Dunbar or other prominent black poets. Carrie confesses to never having heard of them either, then goes on to advise Betsey to "call her out" - that is, to "fight the teacher," not with her fists, but with her knowledge and words.

One day Jane returns home. The family celebrates her homecoming with a party and singing. Jane is uncomfortable with Carrie's behavior and confronts her in a

conversation that Betsey overhears. Then Jane gives her three daughters a "facts of life" talk advising strict modesty, which makes Betsey wonder about her kisses with Eugene. Later, Carrie advises Betsey to "enjoy bein a girl," but, at the same time, to be careful. This makes Betsey feel better.

The Brown house goes on in relative harmony. Jane and Greer have time to rekindle their love as Carrie runs the house like a tight ship, with the children working together and taking pride in their chores. One Monday morning Carrie doesn't show up for work, and almost immediately chaos starts to break out again. Carrie calls from jail; she had knifed a friend of hers. Jane promptly fires Carrie. Betsey doesn't tell her mother how sad she is to lose Carrie, but instead carries on, doing things as Carrie would have done them. The novel ends with Betsey contemplating the issues that she has struggled with. Betsey "lingered over her city, making decisions and discoveries about herself that would change the world. In one way or another . . . [she] was surely going to have her way."

Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary

This story begins in a middle-class neighborhood in St. Louis in the fall of 1959. From the moment we meet the precocious, passionate and saucy yet sensitive title character, thirteen-year-old Betsey Brown, we know she feels "different" from her family: the oldest of four children, she has staked out the secrets spaces of the house where she can watch the sunrise in peace or just keep herself apart from the hubbub of the house.

We meet the Brown family as they assemble to start a new day, with the parents off to work and the children off to school. The two younger, Margot and Sharon, squabble over bathroom privileges and clothes. The youngest, Allard, wails about spooks in the shadows and, as usual, decides to solve the problem by setting a fire. Cousin Charlie, who has come to stay with the family after having been kicked out of a school up North, teases and bickers with everyone.

Adding a strong, energetic rhythm to this mostly joyful noise is Betsey's father, Dr. Greer Brown, who keeps the house jumping with music, words and art he considers important: Tina Turner, W.E.B. DuBois, Dizzy Gillespie, Gauguin. He is "one of just five thousand Negro doctors in the whole country," a job he holds with pride, but what he truly values is his contribution to the Race; he gathers his children together in the morning with a conga drum and Negro chant for a family quiz.

Betsey's mother, Jane, a psychiatric social worker, provides a more delicate counterpoint to Dr. Brown's steady drumbeat. She longs for quiet, refined, predictability of their early years together, and retreats often into the calming world of solitaire and highballs, or to Greer's comforting embrace. Her mother, Vida, who shares the house, longs more openly for the traditional past. She thinks Greer is too dark and too "kinky headed," especially compared with her dead husband, Frank, whose diction and articulation were so fine, to her recollection, that "no one could even tell he was a Negro."

Amidst this chaos we find Betsey, calmly and completely focused on her goal for the day: First Place in Mrs. Mitchell's elocution contest for Class 7B. While the maelstrom swirls around her, Betsey reaches into parts of her experience searching for just the right voice to use when she recites Paul Laurence Dunbar: "Speak up, Ike, an 'spress yo'se'f." While her siblings are fighting, she is trying on for herself the sultry passion of the two girls she knows who were fighting over a boy, the unshakeable love of her grandmother, and her own thoughts about love.

Chapter 1 Analysis

It is important to note that this story takes place in the span of years that court-ordered school integration affected almost every American's life in some way. While the

landmark decision to integrate public schools, Brown v. Board of Education, was handed down in 1954, nearly five years before the start of the story, actual implementation of the concept was still far from complete. The U.S. Supreme Court declared unanimously "in the field of public education the doctrine of 'separate but equal' has no place." At the same time, though, it stated that the dismantling of separate school systems for blacks and whites could proceed with "all deliberate speed"—a phrase whose vagueness pleased no one as it made possible dozens of different strategies of resistance to the decision.

The Southern states were particularly slow to abide by the rulings. In fact, Congressional representatives of ten Southern states issued a "Declaration of Constitutional Principles," also known as the Southern Manifesto, charging that the judges of the Supreme Court had "exercised their naked judicial power and substituted their personal and social ideas for the established law of the land." They asked voters and other members of Congress not to be "provoked by agitators and troublemakers invading our States." Among the signatories were the two Senators and six members of the House of Representatives from the state of Arkansas. This gesture of defiance set the stage for a dramatic conflict that marked a turning point in the integration process. At the beginning of the 1957 school year, the governor of Arkansas, whose actions reflected the views of his predominantly white constituency, sent the state National Guard to Central High School in Little Rock, where nine black students were officially enrolled and were attempting to go to school. The National Guard did nothing to quell the angry crowd of spectators hurling both threats and solid objects at the frightened but determined children. In response, President Dwight D. Eisenhower called up members of the 101st Airborne Division so that each of the "Little Rock Nine," as journalists dubbed them, would have an army escort and bodyguard. Eight of the nine students eventually graduated from the school; the one that did not, Minnijean Brown, was expelled for calling a physically abusive girl "white trash." She later became an activist and crusader for civil rights.

By telling Betsey Brown's story from a third-person omniscient point of view, Ntozake Shange allows us some important insights into the thoughts of the people around her who all play a crucial role in this tale of coming of age in the midst of class conflict and cultural estrangement. It allows us a "grown-up" look at the setting, a neighborhood filled with middle-class non-White families. Vida likes the neighborhood—she sees nothing at all wrong with the concept of separate but equal, and in fact prefers it to any "trouble"—and Jane is likewise content. But the foreshadowing in our introduction to the chaotic Brown household tells us that as Betsey begins to grapple in earnest with issues of racial identity, class inequality and her own developing sexuality, along with the stresses of everyday adolescent life, the simmering pots of emotion will soon boil over.

Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary

Determined to win First Prize in the elocution contest, Betsey concentrates on reciting her lines all the way to class, but a series of accidents and distractions causes her to arrive sweaty, out of breath, self-conscious and off-balance. Then she watches two "fast" girls recite a racy poem, and remembers listening in on their discussions about "It," that special something people in love give each other—whatever "It" might be—and thinks about the basketball star she has a crush on, Eugene Boyd. She delivers a strong performance and captures the prize, a bunch of red roses from Mrs. Mitchell's garden.

After school Betsey and her friends Charlotte Anne and Veejay have ice cream sodas while watching the High School boys catch the trolley, and then the girls go up the street to Susan Linda's house to play double-dutch and watch Susan Linda's brothers work on their motorcycles. Susan Linda's family is what Vida, Betsey's grandmother, calls "po' white trash," but because the mother works all day and is not there to scold them, the girls like to go there and talk about and show off all the strange things that are happening to their bodies, such the number and color of pubic or underarm hairs. All explorations have to stop when it is time for the mother to return home, though, since the mother does not allow "niggahs" in the house. It takes Veejay to point out to Betsey that the hurtfulness in that is called *prejudice*, which she narrowly defines as "when white folks don't like Negroes." Although she knows that Negroes in Montgomery are boycotting whites and their services for not treating them right, Betsey just is not ready to give up her friendship with Susan Linda over prejudice just yet.

From the vantage point of her private hiding place in a huge oak tree outside her bedroom window, Betsey watches as two white policemen lead Charlie and Allard up the driveway. The boys are guilty of a double crime: not only did they trespass on Catholic Church property, defiantly joyriding amongst the statues of the Virgin Mary and the rows of nuns on their way to chapel, but they were Colored kids who did so. While Jane quietly "Yes, sirs," and "No, sirs," her way through an exchange with the police officers, secretly harboring the urge to beat them with a porch post for their insensitivity and condescension, Betsey listens from her perch. The officers say they will let the boys off with just a warning this time since clearly the Brown family is special, not from around there. Jane grows angry with Greer for not being home when this happens.

Chapter 2 Analysis

As the first innocent stirrings of her own sexuality start to surface, Betsey finds a way to tap into them to find her voice for the elocution contest in much the same way that later on many of the book's characters will need to call upon their own reservoirs of strength to make themselves heard—including Betsey. Betsey's dreams of the prize as

something as exotic as a trip to Paris or even as special as a Paul Robeson record shows that she wants a life outside the confines of her safe, middle class home. Yet when the prize turns out to be red roses fresh from the white teacher's garden, there's something sweetly satisfying in that: red roses have often stood for love or passion, and the teacher's colorblindness reaffirms Betsey's own belief that she is meant for bigger things.

When she's confronted with her friend Susan Linda's prejudice, she still can't equate it with the photos she sees the daily newspapers of Negro children in Little Rock being surrounded by armed guards as they pass though the gauntlet of screaming "crackers" no different from Susan Linda's mother. Shange chooses to have Betsey reflect on this—and later to see Charlie and Allard escorted home by the police—from the safe remove of her treetop perch, to remind us that Betsey does not yet see herself as closely connected to these matters of race relations or prejudice. She does not want to feel connected to them; just watching the protests at Little Rock is enough to make her ill. Greer has said that a "struggle will make you not afraid," since belief in your cause and defending your rights can give you strength, but Betsey is not convinced she is ready.

When the policemen return Allard and Charlie, Jane, shaken by the knowledge of what other white policemen in other cities have done to other "nigra" boys, reaches for her calming anchors of tradition. She sets the table with heirloom candlesticks and complains to herself that the fathers of the family are supposed to deal with matters of discipline and order, and she channels her frustration at her husband Greer.

Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary

Jane confronts Greer angrily over what she sees as his shirking his duty as a father by not having been home when the police arrived. Dr. Greer explains that he was with a patient, but neither is able to empathize with the other's view. Jane feels that her life and family are spinning out of her control, that her husband cares more about poor families cares for than about his own family. Greer feels that for all her intelligence, his wife has no foresight, and believes she doesn't realize how hard he works to give his family the life it has. He wishes that she could understand that in seeing to the medical needs the poor colored people who have nowhere else to turn, he is not only helping his people now, but building up his clientele for his real practice one day. She turns to her game of solitaire, he to the latest issue of *MD magazine*.

As the parents continue their stubborn feud, the rest of the Brown house shakes once again with its daily tumult: Charlie bounces a basketball down the stairway walls until Vida confiscates it, Margot and Sharon tussle over a game of jacks, and Allard sets a small fire on the third floor to get back at Charlie. Betsey puts out the fire and gets things under control, then climbs into her tree. From there, she spies a woman singing to herself about making a brand new start in St. Louis. The woman hears the commotion at the Brown house and rings the bell, offering her services as someone to tend to the children.

Jane is delighted by Bernice Calhoun's offer, and sees her as a gift of providence. But the minute Bernice tries to ingratiate herself with Jane by showing just how perceptive she is—giving away the secret of Betsey's treetop retreat—Betsey and the other Brown children begin making plans to be rid of Miss Calhoun. Sure enough, when it's time for the children to get ready for school the next day, Betsey "helps" Miss Calhoun keep things running smoothly. Before long the blinds are crooked, the parlor curtains are torn down, there are chandelier crystals on the floor, nobody has eaten a bite of breakfast or gotten his or her hair combed out, and there is chicken grease everywhere. Betsey warns her grandmother Vida to be careful since "Bernice" has carelessly spilled chicken grease on the floor, and offers her arm so Vida won't slip and fall, for which kindness her grandmother thanks Betsey profusely. Jane fires Bernice Calhoun on the spot. As she sits down amidst the wreckage with a cup of coffee and deals herself a hand of solitaire, she feels grateful to her daughter Betsey, her one child with a head on her shoulders, for having kept everything for going completely out of control.

Chapter 3 Analysis

Like a microcosm of the attitudes of the country during the civil rights era, the Brown household teems with different forces of resistance to and catalysts for change. For Dr. Brown, change cannot come soon enough, but so far his is the lone voice of activism in

the Brown household. Vida dislikes Bernice Calhoun on sight simply because of her hair; as a staunch traditionalist, in matters of social change, too, she cannot see that change could be anything but bad.

Jane is open to change, on her own terms. She realizes that her life expanded when she met Greer—she saw Paris and Havana, they mingled with musicians and artists—but she is afraid of anything that might endanger her insular, secure, predictable world. She feels threatened by her husband's larger worldview. Jane is so eager to have someone restore some order in her life that she reaches out to the first person to offer her hope, as long as she herself does not have to be involved. In doing so, she blinds herself to her own daughter's underground revolution.

Betsey hides in her private oak tree and imagines she's a bird singing a colored child's bird song, a colored child's blues song or a hot jump and rag song. Often in literature, birds and flight are symbols of the human spirit. When Bernice exposes Betsey's previously private space in the tree to public knowledge, Betsey loses more than a quiet refuge: she loses a little bit of freedom, as well as the protective distance between her idealized, largely interior world and the real and very physical world on the ground below. In some ways, she becomes grounded. It is not a change she welcomes. Still, it is only one tiny step closer to adulthood, and she lashes out at her betrayer with the pure glee of a child who doesn't quite understand what she's done.

Chapter 4

Chapter 4 Summary

Betsey is so pleased with herself over the success of her plan to oust Miss Calhoun that she can hardly wait to tell her friends every detail. To her dismay, her friend Veejay does not congratulate her but instead becomes angry and hurt. For the first time, Betsey learns that Veejay's mother takes care of white children for a living. Based on her treatment of Miss Calhoun, Veejay believes that looks down on her mother for doing day work and looking after white children while her own wait anxiously at the door for her to come home, and breaks off their friendship. For Betsey, it is a harsh lesson in social awareness, and she feels ashamed.

Betsey runs home hoping to catch Bernice Calhoun in time to make amends and tell her mother the truth about what happened, but Miss Calhoun is long gone. She tries to apologize to her mother. Jane misunderstands and the opportunity is lost. Betsey falls asleep in her tree and awakens to find the boy of her dreams, Eugene Boyd, shooting a basketball over her sleeping body in a made-up game against Betsey's cousin Charlie. She overcomes her embarrassment long enough to ask him to wait downstairs, then rushes inside though her window, changes into her Sunday best, and meets him on the porch, where they continue to talk while he dribbles the basketball around and near her. He finally admits that she is the reason he came by in the first place, not Charlie, and gives her a quick kiss—her first ever from a boy.

Vida eventually shoos Eugene away, and despite Betsey's protests to her and to herself that Eugene was just there to see Charlie, they both know better. Betsey wanders up to her room to daydream, but she is summoned to Jane's room to talk. Though that is the last thing Betsey feels like doing at the moment, she goes, and Jane cannot help but notice the happy smile and blush to Betsey's face. Saying nothing about the kiss, she simply says she had a wonderful day, but when her mother asks her to help keep the house straight and the children off Vida's nerves until Jane can find reliable help, Betsey is reminded again of Miss Calhoun, and of her own role in costing the woman her job, and her good mood fades.

Chapter 4 Analysis

The barriers between the real world and Betsey's childhood vision of life are dropping away more quickly now. Not only has she seen a touch of racial prejudice up close, she has now seen class prejudice in herself. Until now, Betsey has not spent much time thinking about her friends' families lives, and the realization that Veejay is poor comes as a bit of a shock to her. The shame she feels is intense, and inspires in her a need to make things right with Bernice Calhoun, as well as with her mother. Social and cultural awareness is often the first step toward reform. Many of the Civil Rights era reforms and organizations that sprang up in the 1950s and 1960s were powered at least in part by

the guilt-fed energy of those "well-meaning white people" who realized, often with just as much of a shock as Betsey's, that they had been "busy seeing to themselves," and were ready to help make things right.

Betsey's first kiss from Eugene Boyd sweeps her finally and forever across the threshold of pure childhood into that complex world of adolescent romance. For better or for worse, she has allowed herself to move from the world of fantasy into reality. She is on firm ground, not in her tree looking down from afar, when she receives her first kiss.

Chapter 5

Chapter 5 Summary

One of Greer's patient families has a granddaughter, Regina, who has finished high school and needs a job. Regina comes to take care of the Brown children, which she manages quite well. Charlie has a crush on her, so he does anything she asks. Betsey wants to learn all Regina knows about boys, and loves to watch Regina with Roscoe, her high school beau who has big plans for the two of them. The children all watch intently the romantic kiss between the two—except, that is, for the jealous Charlie, who calls Vida to the scene. Regina is promptly dismissed.

Jane learns that after enough stalling, the city finally intends to begin busing her children, and others like them, to white schools around St. Louis. She's devastated, having been perfectly satisfied with the whole concept of "separate but equal," as long as it keeps her kids together and close to her. She wonders about sending them to a Catholic school, or about home schooling them on Greer's salary alone, and works herself into frantic state. Greer brings her a highball and a deck of cards. He contends that there are thousands of lives that depend on their children having the courage to go where they have never been accepted or wanted, and a right to the best education their taxes pay for. Jane is doubtful, and still frightened, and makes Greer promise that at the first sign of trouble they will place the children in a Catholic school. They both understand the dangers, having been brought up on lynching, riots and "No Colored Allowed" signs everywhere.

Betsey wonders why it is that she must take three different buses to learn the same things with white children that she learned with colored children, and how she will maintain her friendships with everyone off at different schools. Why, she asks, don't the white children have to get up at dawn to take a trillion different trolleys; why, she wonders, did the Negroes always have to do everything the hard way? She crawls out onto her special tree limb under the moon and stars and wonders if white kids also search the skies for beauty and answers to wishes. She knows she will see the sun rise while the stars and moon are still visible, "that peculiar mingling of past and tomorrows."

Chapter 5 Analysis

One purpose of this chapter is to introduce Regina, who will play an important part later. Even in this chapter, her character points out an interesting dynamic in the Brown family. Part of her appeal to the children is that while she is barely older than they are, as someone who is independent she can dress in tight skirts and wear bras that accentuate rather than hide her breasts, and wear makeup whenever she chooses. Thus, she is exotic enough to keep them all fascinated, energetic enough to keep them involved and out of trouble, and culturally in tune enough to be "one of them." These are

the very things about Regina that frighten Vida, of course. She is "change," and change, to Vida, is bad.

The other important thing we learn in this chapter is just how differently Greer and Jane view the school integration issue. To Jane, it's a dangerous intrusion into her safety zone; she has "kept her world as colored as she could" to protect herself and her family, and now the government is going to change all that by exposing her precious babies to thin-lipped rednecks throwing tomatoes and bottles. To Greer, it is a matter of great importance, something affecting not only his children but also children everywhere—now and in generations to come. While they agree that the neighborhood somehow protects them—the Negro-owned businesses, the teachers, even the physical separation—from the outside "white" world, their differing approaches to life, family and community continue to help drive the story.

This chapter also gives us several thoughts about love, including a theme that recurs throughout the book, the puzzling notion, first broached by Eugene, that when you are really in love, there's never enough to go around. Betsey believes Roscoe and Regina's must be true love based purely on the way the kiss. She has never seen her parents kiss that way, but believes they are in love by her mama's eyes and her papa's easy grin.

Chapter 6

Chapter 6 Summary

Getting the children ready to go off on their separate buses to their new schools creates even more confusion than usual in the early morning Brown household. Eventually they find their buses. When Betsey arrives at her new school, the Dewey School, she notices that while the white children do not have red necks, neither do they speak or smile or even seem to see her. The only person to address her at all is her teacher. The geography lesson on Africa goes well, with Betsey able to name emerging states learned through Greer's morning quizzes and impress the children with the romantic sounds of words like Sierra Leone and Senegal. On the playground, one white girl even asks Betsey to teach her how to jump double-dutch, but by day's end Betsey still aches for home and her real friends, two of whom she finds waiting for her at the trolley stop: Veejay and Eugene. Eugene promises to wait for Betsey whenever he can, and makes her promise to tell him if any of the white boys gives her trouble. She thanks him for caring.

At the Brown residence, the children trickle in from their far-flung schools. Allard comes home jubilant at not having been killed as he was convinced he would be. Margot and Sharon, who were sent to the same school, arrive looking as though they have had a perfectly normal day playing. Then Charlie walks in with a torn shirt and a black eye, and the mood changes. He explains that "those dirty guineas…five greasy-headed wop bastards…callt him a niggah," and says he had no choice but to fight back and defend himself. Jane berates him for his language, Greer for his tactics.

When Charlie says he's not going back, Greer asks why he bothered to stand up for himself if he intended to back down on his next move, and vows to take Charlie to school the next day, "two men together." Betsey considers herself lucky that the worst she encountered was silence. Allard vows to burn up anybody who bothers him, and send them up in flames of glory, which prompts a spat between Jane and Vida. Greer spirits her away upstairs for a little romance to take her mind off the stress of the day. Betsey, listening in as they pass by, ponders the thought that "there's never enough when you're really in love."

Chapter 6 Analysis

This chapter focuses on the contrast between the Brown family's ideas about integration and the actual reality of the children leaving something they have known all their lives for something completely foreign. Betsey's own somewhat neutral view of prejudice may have prepared her well. Meeting white children on their own turf is not as frightening to Betsey as it is thrilling and slightly unreal. When the other children seem not to hear or see her, she wonders briefly if she is there at all. Betsey's depth and breadth of knowledge about Africa give her an entrée to the class that a court order could not

ensure, and she manages to make it through the day feeling homesick though not extremely unwanted.

In Charlie, however, we see what happens when one form of prejudice runs hard into another, and likewise what happens when the first response to dealing with it is physical rather than philosophical. As the quintessential angry and frightened young man, he makes a fine metaphor for burgeoning numbers of young people whose movements will splinter into adversarial pacifist and militant groups of the 1960s and 1970s.

It is worth noting that Jane does not hold Greer to his promise to put the children in Catholic school "at the first sign of trouble" ostensibly because she and Greer had a pact not to contradict each other in front of the children, and Greer had already begun tailoring Charlie's proper response when he returned to the school. She is just unnerved enough by the whole episode to let him take over, and is thrilled that he is finally there during a crisis. Nevertheless, she does stand up to Vida's off-the-cuff response to Allard when he exclaims that the white folks didn't kill him. Vida's answers him back by reflex: "Of course not, Allard. They only kill little boys who don't mind." Jane protests that even what happened to Charlie could have happened between Negroes themselves, and that color is not the issue. To her mother, however, it is very much the issue; hers is the hard-line voice of them and us in the household.

The pointed references to Emmet Till remind us that the children understand very well how arbitrary are the rules of engagement between the races. Emmet Till was a fourteen-year-old boy killed in Money, Mississippi, on August 28, 1955. While on vacation from Chicago, he reportedly whistled at a white woman whom he had seen in a store. That night, he was taken from his bed, beaten, shot, and thrown into the Tallahatchie River by two men. An all-white jury later found both men innocent of murder.

Chapter 7

Chapter 7 Summary

Betsey thinks of white folks as gnats on her all the time, making her miss her friends, miss Eugene, miss all the things she used to do, what with having to bus all over and study twice as hard just to make sure she doesn't look dumb in front of the white kids. She wishes she could conjure up some way to get back at the white folks, and wonders if by wishing for this without wanting the Lord's help she is making a deal with Satan, and then decides she doesn't much care one way or the. She finally decides to make a large hopscotch board with squares such as "For Colored Only" and "No Whites" in colorful chalk for the entire neighborhood to see. The neighborhood is outraged. Everyone is angry and astonished and no one takes responsibility. Betsey volunteers to rid the street of the vile creation with a water hose, but secretly she is pleased that for one day, she feels some control.

Jane has been spending more time finding refuge in her cards, sometimes at the Alley Cat Club, saying that since Greer is away from home so often, why shouldn't she be too? Greer's response is to take her in her arms, and for a moment, she feels herself whisked back to the Savoy or Birdland, back where they had courted. While her parents are romantically engaged, Betsey is downstairs adorning herself with curtains and feathers and dancing to what her mother calls "all that nasty colored music" on the radio —Bessie Smith, Etta James, Tina Turner. Jane hollers down several times for her to turn it off, but Betsey is determined to teach herself to dance well in case someone, Eugene in particular, should ask her to dance. Her sisters come down the stairs to tease Betsey and hear a little of the "forbidden" music themselves, and tell her to turn off that "niggah noise."

Enough is enough, Betsey thinks. If she plays music, she is a "niggah." If she mentions Nasser, she is a communist. If she wants to boycott her school, she is rabble-rouser. If she wants to eat at Howard Johnson's, she was giving whites more than is their due. No matter what she says or does, it is not right. She tells herself that the only reasonable thing to do is run away. She even gives herself a grown-up name for the journey: Miss Cora Sue Betsey Anne Calhoun Brown.

Betsey packs her bags carefully—treasured books, art, and mementoes, in case she needs to sell something, and a few clothes for good measure—and heads down the back stairs to the side porch on her way to Miss Maureen's. Betsey knows Miss Maureen's as the place where ladies go to get there heads done, and figures it's somewhere she can learn a decent trade, avoid white folks, and hear all the latest gossip about people like the Shirelles and Dinah Washington. Betsey believes she has a special kinship with Miss Maureen, since the hairdresser once told her that while God had not given Betsey the best head of hair in the world, there was something in it that reminded Miss Maureen of the way hair grew on heads in her home state of Mississippi.

Chapter 7 Analysis

Betsey's daily exposure to the conflicts and confusions of the integration around her has finally forced her out of her neutral corner. She feels put upon by white people, however well meaning those white people may be, and more aware of what she has lost than of what she may have gained. Her reaction is much as it was when Bernice exposes her safe haven: retaliation, which gives her a temporary sense of control. The difference is that while people are shocked by Betsey's discriminatory hopscotch, game no one loses a job or is sent away. In this sense, it is a somewhat more sophisticated, thought-out reaction, and suggests that Betsey may be growing up in many ways.

Nevertheless, it also highlights how extreme her sense of alienation has become. She obviously no longer cares what her neighbors think or feel about white people—her neighbors being other well-to-do Negro, Haitian, East Indian, and the Puerto Rican families—nor even what members of her own family might think or feel. She feels different and isolated. When members of her own family begin calling her "niggah" for being true to herself, rather than change to please them, she decides to leave.

Chapter 8

Chapter 8 Summary

Arriving at Miss Maureen's in the early morning is a far different experience for Betsey than arriving for a hair appointment later in the day. Miss Maureen is a disheveled wreck, and her house seems to be filled with strange women and men putting large piles of money on the table. Strangest of all to Betsey is the appearance of Regina, her sweet friend Regina, who is also adding money to the pile. Regina is clearly pregnant. Roscoe has "gone on ahead to Chicago," and while Miss Maureen does not believe he is truly planning to send for his little family, Regina still clings to hope.

It frightens Betsey to think that two people as in love as Roscoe and Regina appeared to be—after all, she saw that romantic kiss—could wind up with one of them being so sad and alone as Regina is now. Betsey tries to convince Miss Maureen to let her stay until Regina's baby is born to help. Even Regina knows this is a bad idea.

While they listen to Betsey explaining why she ran away, Regina and Miss Maureen give her a manicure, pedicure and a hairstyling. They listen as she complains that Jane wants her to be special, not like everybody else, but admits that although she knows it's best for everyone if she fights the white folks and is so much better than they are, she just feel so much better when she's like everybody else. Miss Maureen observes to herself that what is wrong with the race seems to be that they always leave it up to the next generation to fight the battle with the white man, so it never gets fought.

Regina tells Betsey that even though the two of them are like sisters, Betsey is different from her, and will never be like everybody else—that everyone is different and that their coming together is what makes the world a wonderful place. When Betsey leaves the salon she knows she will never see Regina again, but she also believes that they will never be separate, either: "women who can see over the other side are never far from each other."

On her way home, Betsey pays a Yellow cab to take her to the boulevard where the white folks hold their annual Veiled Prophet Parade. Feeling regal and unafraid for the first time, she declares herself Negro Queen of Veiled Prophet and marches herself as grandly as possible to the middle of the street. When this stops traffic, a police officer asks her name and address and cautions her about the dangers of roaming the city at dusk, but Betsey feels safe and in control.

Chapter 8 Analysis

The naïve Betsey at first does not seem to catch on that Miss Maureen's hair salon is a brothel by night. She knows there is something unseemly going on, but just what it is she cannot say. It is not until she is insulated from the immediacy of the salon by the muffling heat of the hair dryer that she has the epiphany that while there may be all

kinds of Negroes, they all have to go to a part-time bordello to get their beauty treatments done.

Interestingly, while we might expect Miss Maureen's response—she's a little angry that someone who has so much would just leave it all for something so trivial as not fitting in—the big surprise is that the clearest voice of reason, and perhaps the best philosophical summary of the book, comes from the least likely source, Regina:

"Betsey, honey, that's called loneliness. You're gonna be lonely sometimes, sweetie, Cause you are special. Your mama's not makin' that up. You are different and it's not the color of your skin, either. You have a good time the way nobody else can, and you feel things the way nobody else can. There is no such thing as ordinary, Betsey. Nobody's ordinary. Each one of us is special and it's the coming together of alla that that makes the world so fine."

Miss Maureen's seemingly sympathetic comment to herself—that each generation seems to leave the fight to the next in line—rings hollow since she has removed herself completely from any interaction with the white world. Unless it is absolutely necessary, she leaves others to fight whatever battles may arise, while by night she runs a bordello for other non-whites where presumably the sex workers are not getting rich or being treated with any particular care and respect. She not only is helping her people, but also she may be hurting them in some ways.

When Betsey crowns herself Queen of the Veiled Prophet, it is no small thing. This parade remains even today a big part of St. Louis tradition, and this "self-coronation" is a sign that Betsey is beginning to feel that perhaps she can be both a little bit different and a little bit the same, just by being herself. From the mid-1800s on, St. Louis hosted the Agricultural and Mechanical Fair. Although it brought substantial profit to the area for years, interest waned after the Civil War and during the depression of 1873. In 1878, an influential St. Louis grain broker who originated in New Orleans proposed an annual parade event similar to Mardis Gras to spark public interest and boost attendance for the October fair. The patron of the parade is known as the Veiled Prophet, a more benevolent version of the character created by Irish poet Thomas More in his 1817 poem "Lalla Rookh." This Veiled Prophet is world traveler in search of a suitable location to share his good will. The Queen of the Veiled Prophet was the royal companion of the Veiled Prophet. In the 1959, there most certainly had never been either a Prophet or a Queen of color.

Chapter 9

Chapter 9 Summary

The chapter opens with Jane praying aloud. Jane and Greer have long ago called the police, although they do not expect much in the way of help. Vida has been mildly sedated and a pastor called to comfort her. Jane prays loudly and openly while Greer reads and rereads Betsey's note, trying to imagine what made his daughter feel she did not belong. For comfort, he drums on his congas, inciting Jane's wrath for his heathen, African, low-down ways. She says that if he does not join her in praying, she will leave him. Greer, unable to pray to the white man's Jesus, leaves to search the places he thinks she might run to—clubs where she'd hear the music she loves, Little Richard's favorite fish stand, the spot where "Sugar" Ray likes to get barbecue. Greer wonders how in the world he can explain to his wife that Betsey wants to be an "Ikette"—although perhaps not literally. After hours of fruitless searching, he realizes he needs to make his rounds at the hospital, only to find Betsey waiting for him.

Greer is shocked when Betsey asks if anyone missed her, as if she cannot comprehend the degree of upset she has caused at home. It is not until she walks in the door and sees her grandmother's tears and gets hugged by Charlie that she realizes how worried everyone has been. Yet she still holds onto that vision of her life—marry a Negro man of renown, change the world, dance on the white folks' tables, be somebody, be a heroine in the resistance next to Humphrey Bogart, no, a hero.

Instead of yelling at her daughter and fixating on the beauty transformation her daughter has undergone—the manicure, the new hairstyle, the makeup—Jane hugs her daughter and sees for the first time something of herself fifteen years before when she wasn't always shouting "no" or figuring what was for dinner. She remembers herself when she was not mommy but a good-looking woman with a head on her shoulders.

Chapter 9 Analysis

Jane and Greer's disagreements about religion parallel their disagreements about how to raise their children. Jane's traditional, passive approach would keep the children isolated from harm—and to her that means the white world. Greer's approach is more active. He wants to engage himself, and his family, in anything and everything that supports his mantra (from his conga chant) that "the Negro race is a mighty race," even if it sometimes exposes them to some harsh truths.

Not surprisingly, Greer and Jane have opposite ways of dealing with their daughter's running away. Jane falls back on the passive, more traditional response of praying, and is devastated when her husband will not join her. Greer cannot bear the inactivity and sees religion as another white man's trick. When Jane tries to force him his hand, he leaves first; it is his style to keep moving.

Betsey's vision of herself as an "Ikette" does not necessarily mean she wants to be a singer. In 1959, the Ikettes were still the rhythm and blues back-up group for the Ike & Tina Turner Revue. (They later became successful artists in their own right.) There were always three of them, but not always the same three. To Betsey the Ikettes personify strength, beauty, sensuality and artistic freedom within the safe context of a group, a sisterhood. Betsey wants to be different, but not *too* different.

Jane's yearning for her young self is now almost as strong as Betsey's eagerness to grow up. When Betsey returns home after running away, it is as though they are merely different versions of the same person, looking at each other across time.

Chapter 10

Chapter 10 Summary

The next morning, everyone seems unusually happy, with Greer doing a wild conga rhythm and dancing with his wife before work. He keeps drumming long after the children are up and in attendance, and the children are confused, as they know they need every spare minute now to get ready in time to catch their various buses. Instead of the expected morning quiz, Greer makes an announcement: The following Saturday he expects his family to join a demonstration at the Chase Hotel.

Jane explodes. She declares that he can do whatever he wants but that how could he possibly imagine that she would let any one of her children be confronted by wild dogs, hoses, redneck cops and peckerwoods throwing bottles, eggs, and tomatoes? He answers that it is their struggle, but Jane asks if he would rather have a wife and family or the ability to drink water anywhere in town, because he cannot have both. While he tries to explain that it is for the greater good, she says it is not worth endangering her children, until finally, at a stalemate, she leaves.

Greer takes the children to the demonstration, which is uneventful. The children wonder where there mother has gone, but Betsey reassures them that she will be back soon and that until then they should all help Grandma Vida cook and tidy. Greer stops conga drumming in the morning and gives up the morning quizzes. Vida and the children pray Jane to come home, and when he gets lonely, Allard gets to sleep with Grandma Vida.

Chapter 10 Analysis

Jane sees this announcement by Greer as proof that he values the race far more than he does his own family, and she views it as the ultimate betrayal. Ironically, she does not see that her own frequent escapes from whatever reality her family is facing at the moment have been a more subtle form of abandonment. Where Greer at least wants to wants to involve them in his fight, Jane sometimes runs away from her own children (through solitaire) when their troubles become too much for her to bear. This latest flight is just a more drastic escape.

As to what may have precipitated Greer's overnight decision to become an activist family, it may be his learning Betsey feels like a stranger in her own house partly because the worst thing the others can think of to call her is "niggah."

Chapter 11

Chapter 11 Summary

A new character, Carrie, arrives on the scene. A big woman with a short Afro (before they were popular), pierced ears and two layers of housedress tied with a rope, she eases into the Browns' life and without any apparent effort or strain sets the house back into its proper rhythm. Vida, of course, does not trust Carrie, who looks different, acts different, and talks different from people to whom Vida is accustomed. Still, she can find nothing in particular to complain about as the laundry is always clean, the chandeliers sparkling, and the children fed.

Mr. Jeff, the gardener next door, courts Carrie with secret decanters of brandy and various plants. But Carrie still won't allow Eugene to get too cozy with Betsey, and when Allard catches them kissing behind the garage where he's gone to set a fire, Carrie gives all three a good talking to. Mr. Jeff waits nearby for a good-bye kiss. Theirs seems to be a dignified romance as it unfolds on the Brown premises, featuring mostly small stolen kisses and a few shared embraces.

Betsey misses her mother so much that she has had to move her empty chair from table. Carries assures her that Jane will be back, that Mamas only do things because they love their children so much. We hear a little about Carrie's children, grown and in different parts of the world, and see how the Brown family has fallen into a comfortable routine.

Appalled to realize that not one of the Brown girls knows what a good Negro man wants—a finely pressed dress shirt—she sets about to teach them the finer points of ironing, sewing, and other common everyday things in life as well as a few basic manners. No more will she allow them to answer the door by shouting, "Daddy, there's a white man to see you!" or the phone with "Daddy, there's a colored man on the phone!" Now they must answer "Good Evening, Brown Residence."

Chapter 11 Analysis

Carrie's appearance is so fortuitous as to seem a bit contrived, but we know from Vida's suspicions as well as some of Carrie's more peculiar habits and off-hand comments that she is not exactly Mary Poppins. It's important, though, in this story where class conflict figures so heavily, that it takes someone from a dirt-poor Arkansas family with just a latrine in the cellar to show the better educated, better paid Brown family a few simple courtesies, and ironic that Vida would view these lessons as subversive.

We can assume that the discussion Carrie plans to have with Betsey about her budding romance with Eugene Boyd, focused as it will be on "that stage where a girl's body is way ahead of her brain," springs from her own experience with six children from four low-down husbands, and the past she only mentions in cryptic references and snippets.

Chapter 12

Chapter 12 Summary

Vida believes that Carrie must be some sort of witch who has placed a spell on the Brown family, where the children are quiet, and now act as though they respect one another—and others, too. She prays daily for Jane's return. She tries to get Mr. Jeff to agree with her that Carrie has the children under a spell, but he refuses, saying he believes that they may simply be growing up. This leads Vida to confront Carrie about her "entertaining gentlemen callers" when she is supposed to be looking after the children, and she threatens to tell Dr. Brown about it.

Betsey is afraid that Carrie has been fired, but Carrie assures her that although she has made mistakes in her past, she is not going anywhere this time, that she came to St. Louis to find someplace clear of her past. Betsey, Allard and Charlie all refuse to believe Carrie could have done anything bad, so she shows them photos of her children and explains that she was "evil, triflin' and simple minded, with four husbands, each more low down than the last," for which her children have not forgiven her.

One day as Carrie is polishing crystal, Betsey comes home from school early, fuming and weeping all at once. A teacher has told Betsey that Paul Laurence Dunbar is not an acceptable choice as a poet, since she has never heard of him. Betsey tells Carrie that he is every bit as good as Rudyard Kipling or even Shakespeare—names Carrie claims not to recognize.

When Betsey says it is okay for Carrie not to know who they are, Carrie disagrees, asking why she should be allowed to stay ignorant while white people get to learn. Betsey says she tells Carrie everything, but complains that no one ever insults Carrie. Carrie tells Betsey a story about a time when her honor was slighted, and she had to "call someone out." She suggests that Betsey do the same, though with words, not physically. Betsey decides it is time to stand up for herself, and heads back to school.

Chapter 12 Analysis

It is beyond Vida's ability to believe that someone could, just by listening and applying a little common sense, bring order to the Brown household. According to Vida's logic, Carrie must be using some supernatural power, or be in league with the devil.

The brief discussion of Carrie's previous mistakes, ones that have caused her to leave her home and lose connection with her children, foreshadow some dark calamity around the corner. While the children clearly love and believe in her, Carrie has a realistic view of her own limitations, and still "prays to a benevolent God that she's reformed and moved onto a better way."

The poet Paul Laurence Dunbar comes up often in this book. Here, Carrie surprises us—since she has led us all to believe that she knows little or nothing about poets of any color—by quoting the very line of his that Betsey was trying so hard to learn when we first encountered her. Paul Laurence Dunbar was born in 1872 to ex-slaves, and he died at the age of 33. He was a prolific writer of various genres. He was popular with both contemporary black and white readers. He wrote in both Standard English and black dialect.

Chapter 13

Chapter 13 Summary

After her period of soul searching, Jane comes home. We learn neither where she has been nor what she has been doing, only that she is now determined to show Greer her new understanding of him and his convictions. To her delight as well as her shock, she finds things much changed. When she tries to take Carrie to task for entertaining Mr. Jeff in the presence of her children, for taking them to a church other than her staid Presbyterian church, and for letting them dance like "po' children in the projects," Carrie is polite, respectful, but unbowed. She tells Mrs. Brown that she loves the children, that she was the one who was there at the time, and that she is, after all, a full-grown woman working hard to do her job.

Her sermon to Carrie having not gone well, Jane determines to sit her girls down for The Talk, to discuss the female facts of life. Betsey asks if she means sex, which sends Jane into a stuttering lecture on sitting with one's knees together and holding one's hands just so. As she talks, she becomes increasingly ill at ease. When she gets to the part where she is discussing menstruation, Betsey laughs, stops listening and lags behind to watch Eugene Boyd out the window. Now it is Carrie's turn to give a little advice, and hers is far more blunt and practical: a kiss or two can undo all that good mama talking, so be careful. The two stop to listen when the others come down the front stairs with Jane blurting out at the girls that they should just keep their panties up.

Chapter 13 Analysis

The main purpose of this chapter in terms of plot advancement is obviously to return Jane to the Brown household. At the same time, there is also the more subtle revelation that in her absence, the children have not only survived but also in many ways blossomed. This unsettles Jane, who feels the need to re-establish her role as the dominant maternal figure in the house right away, which no doubt precipitates the disastrous Facts of Life talk.

The two mother figures in Betsey's life share advice on the female facts of life. Jane's message is virtue for virtue's sake. Carrie's message is more pragmatic: enjoy the cuddling and the kissing while you can, but to take no chances on getting pregnant and derailing your life. While she laughs during both lectures, it's clear that Betsey finds Carrie's words more relevant— after all, she has already been kissed, and more than once. Jane's talk deteriorates into a crass command. Meanwhile, Carrie sums up all the wisdom she has learned from the hands-on, hard life she alludes to so frequently, and essentially warns Betsey to keep her brain ahead of her body.

Chapter 14

Chapter 14 Summary

At last, the crises seem to have ended. One afternoon, Jane and Greer even enjoy a late afternoon of languid love making before the children return from school, and when she asks why they don't do this more often, he points out that she's been gone. However, Jane does not want to discuss her "vacation," as she thinks of it.

Carrie has given each of the Brown children chores that not only help keep the house looking good, they make the children feel good about themselves. Everything seems to have fallen into place. Then one Monday morning, Carrie does not show up for work. Betsey tries to cover for her, but her mother and grandmother will not let her do any of the things that Carrie has taught her to do. Betsey shouts at them, and is reprimanded for her impudence.

Moving glasses from the dishwasher, Betsey and Allard collide, shattering the glasses. Vida clutches her heart and surveys what she sees as chaos and wonders aloud where that crazy Carrie could be. The children defend Carrie in her absence.

Meanwhile, Jane receives a phone call and learns that Carrie has been jailed "cause she had to cut a friend of hers." Without missing a beat, Jane tells her that as soon as she is released, she must come and remove all her things from the house as there is no way Jane can have a criminal looking after her children, and hangs up, "quite her personable self." Then she shoos the children off to school without another word.

We do not see Carrie's departure. Betsey returns home from school to find Carrie's things gone except for a small piece of Carrie's rope belt. Although she does not admit it to her mother, who would remind her that she always picked the most "niggerish" people for friends, Betsey feels Carrie's loss deeply, and tries to take her place. She prays for her. In her heart, Betsey knows that if Carrie cut someone, that someone deserved to be cut.

The story ends as Betsey lingers once more in her tree thinking about life. She realizes that she is already well on her way to being able to make her choices in her life without the constant feeling that she is not good enough. She could even be an Ikette, and Carrie would see no dishonor in that.

Chapter 14 Analysis

That Jane thinks of her time away from the Brown household as a vacation is not something she would be able to voice aloud to her family. Vida sees her daughter's time away as a kind of punishment inflicted on her by her daughter. Although Greer and Jane had many difficult times together, when she left, he lost his drive and enthusiasm for life.

If this story had been told from Betsey's viewpoint alone, we would not have had the opportunity to view scenes such as the morning of Carrie's absence from outside Betsey's vantage point. When we met the Brown family in the first chapter, true chaos reigned. However, here, as Vida clutches her heart, she describes a time and place where everything has gone "haywire:" Betsey is sweeping up broken glass. Allard is tying his own shoes. Sharon is combing her own hair (although Vida thinks doing so in the kitchen is low). Margot is making sandwiches. Charlie is getting things out of the refrigerator. Jane holds onto the sideboard while Greer sits reading the morning paper and drinking coffee. Any neutral observer would call eight formerly helpless and directionless people in one kitchen who are managing to make themselves lunches and get organized a minor domestic miracle. It is only Vida who finds this chaotic because in her world, children do not do things or help—they run around, make noise and cause trouble.

When Carrie disappears abruptly from the household, Jane alone takes it in stride. Although it reinforces Vida's worst fears, and worries Dr. Brown, Jane is thrilled to once more be the undisputed Queen of the household, free once more to impose her own insularity and remove on the family. She has not been home long enough to realize just how much her children have grown up under Carrie's tutelage, and developed into strong-minded, soon-to-be-independent young people. One senses that she is in for some interesting revelations in the weeks and months to come.

Shange chooses to remove Carrie only after Jane has returned. It is possible that this suggests that Jane is somehow ready to provide some of the more real-world mothering and down-to-earth life lessons that Carrie was able to pass on to the children. However, we know Jane has a way to go before that will be completely true. More likely, it is simply that to tie together the central theme, stated so eloquently by Regina—"There is no such thing as ordinary, Betsey. Nobody's ordinary. Each one of us is special and it's the coming together of alla that that makes the world so fine"—it is crucial that the family be reunited, differences and all.

Betsey's final thoughts as she looks out on the city from her special tree limb reinforce that theme. She is special enough to be Betsey, and she belongs well enough that she could be an Ikette. She is no longer different from her family, just special.

Characters

Eugene Boyd

Eugene Boyd is an older boy who plays basketball for the high school. Betsey has a crush on him, and her interest is soon reciprocated. Eugene is friends with Charlie, who brings him by the Brown house, where he flirts with Betsey and gives her her first kiss. Though Betsey rarely sees him, she thinks of him as her boyfriend. He is a decent boy who seems to sincerely care for her. His interest in her and the strong feelings he evokes fill Betsey with ambivalence. Betsey's mother and grandmother also worry about her sexual involvement with Eugene, though this remains quite innocent.

Allard Brown

Allard Brown is the youngest of Jane and Greer's children and the only boy. Throughout the novel, his parents and siblings try to prevent him from setting fires, which he has a fascination with doing. Toward the end of the novel, he re-channels his antisocial interest in fire toward a healthy one in music.

Betsey Brown

The novel is named for Betsey and she is its protagonist, the center of the episodic events of its plot. She is an intelligent and spirited thirteen-year-old girl facing the pains and pleasures of growing up in a black middle-class neighborhood in St. Louis in the late 1950s. The events of Betsey's life are not particularly dramatic - she gets her first boyfriend, changes schools, forms and breaks friendships, briefly runs away, and experiences her mother's temporary abandonment of the family. But Betsey is a particularly sensitive and perceptive person who seriously contemplates the events of her life, often from a special spot at the top of an oak tree. Though many of the tribulations she faces - struggles for autonomy from her family, relationships with her parents and siblings, questions of morality and sexuality - are typical for any young girl, the political circumstances of her life add additional stresses. She is part of the first generation of African-American children to attend racially integrated schools - a step forward in the struggle for civil rights, but a difficult and sometimes dangerous situation for the schoolchildren. Betsey's journey toward learning who she is centers on her developing sense of female identity and African-American identity. The novel charts her consideration of various role models - including other girls, figures from popular culture, household help, and, most importantly, her parents - whose influences she admires, rejects, and eventually integrates.

Greer Brown

Greer Brown is Betsey's father. He is a strong and outspoken man, eager to instill in his children pride in and solidarity with their race. He is one of the few black surgeons in St. Louis - and, indeed, in the whole country. He has a political commitment to helping the under-served, so he works long hours - a decision that angers his wife. While Jane wants him to put family life before politics, Greer seeks to inject family life *with* politics. Afrocentric in his outlook, he plays the bongos and quizzes his children on significant facts of African and African-American culture before school each morning. He is in favor of the children attending St. Louis's newly integrated schools and insists on bringing them to a civil rights demonstration against Jane's strong objections, which causes her to temporarily leave him. Despite their differences, he has a passionate love for his wife.

Jane Brown

Jane Brown is Betsey's mother. She is an attractive and sophisticated woman, with the light skin and 'good' hair of her privileged African-American caste. In addition to raising her four children and her nephew, she also has a job as a social worker dealing with the mentally ill. She has a tense but passionate relationship with her husband, Greer, a surgeon. Her mother, who lives with the family, thinks Jane made a mistake in marrying Greer because of his dark skin and Afrocentric ways. Jane loves Greer deeply but shares some of her mother's snobbishness toward blacks of a lower class. Despite her considerable work and domestic obligations, Jane remains something of a free spirit and enjoys luxury wherever she can find it - in solitaire, coffee in bed, or sex with her husband before dinner. Because of these competing impulses, her household is often in chaos. She disagrees with her husband about religion and how much the children should participate in civil rights politics, over which she leaves him for a time, hoping to retrieve some lost part of a younger self. She returns to the family certain she will not leave them again.

Margot Brown

Margot Brown is one of Betsey's two younger sisters. In the novel, she appears in tandem with Sharon. Both are sweet but boisterous girls.

Sharon Brown

Sharon Brown is one of Betsey's two younger sisters. In the novel, she appears in tandem with Margot. Sharon and Margot contribute to the general chaos of the Brown household.

Bernice Calhoun

Bernice is the first of three servants who come to help out in the Brown household. Betsey first sees her from her tree, observing her poor clothes and hearing her bluesy, autobiographical "Mississippi muddy song." She is, like Carrie, a simple country woman. She has just come up from Arkansas and needs work, so she rings the Browns' doorbell at a moment when Jane is feeling particularly overwhelmed. Jane hires her without first checking her references. Trying to win Jane's favor, she reveals Betsey's treetop hiding place. In revenge, Betsey arranges for the children to wreak havoc in the house the next morning, which results in Bernice's quick dismissal.

Carrie

Carrie is the third and most successful of the housekeepers who come to live with the Brown family. She arrives shortly after Jane has left, thus taking on a maternal role in the household. Carrie, however, couldn't be less like Jane. She is a stout and simple southern woman who has unstylish hair, wears a rope around her waist, and uses the latrine in the cellar rather than one of the bathrooms. She nevertheless wins the affections of Mr. Jeff, the local gardener, and offers the children a balanced view of love and passion. She also teaches them the value of hard work, instilling pride in them for helping to keep the house in order. Vida is snobbish toward Carrie and suspects her of practicing witchcraft. When Jane returns, she criticizes Carrie, feeling threatened by her important role in the family. Jane fires her after she is arrested for taking part in a knifing. Betsey maintains a strong bond with Carrie and tries to do what she would have done in the house.

Charlie

Charlie is the son of Jane's sister. He lives with the Brown family and they treat him like a son. He is in high school and is friends with Eugene Boyd, who becomes Betsey's boyfriend. Charlie is somewhat rebellious, which makes Jane worry about him. On one occasion he is brought home by the police for trespassing with Allard on the grounds of a Catholic school. On the first day at his new, integrated school, Charlie gets in a fistfight with five Italian boys.

Charlotte Ann

Charlotte Ann is Betsey's schoolmate at her all-black school and one of her closest friends. At school they hang around with another girl, Veejay, and after school they sometimes see Susan Linda, a poor white girl who shares their fascination with their growing sexuality.

Daddy

See Greer Brown

Grandma

See Vida Murray

Mr. Jeff

Mr. Jeff is a local man who earns his living as a gardener in Betsey's neighborhood. He falls for Carrie shortly after her arrival and courts her with flowers and sips of alcohol.

Mr. Johnson

Mr. Johnson is one of Greer's patients. He tends to him at a clinic after he is done with his regular job at the hospital because he feels a commitment to care for the most needy patients. Mr. Johnson has health problems and his whole family suffers from "too little of everything." Mr. Johnson and his family represent the privation of black life on the other side of the tracks from the Browns' middle-class neighborhood.

Regina Johnson

Regina Johnson is the second of the Browns' three housekeepers. She is the niece of Mr. Johnson, one of Greer's hard-luck charity patients. She has just graduated from high school and comes from an unprivileged background, but is hopeful for a future with Roscoe, her boyfriend, who wants to open his own gas station.Regina is popular with the Brown children because she is youthful, fun, and stylish. She offers Betsey a forward model of femininity and sexuality that intrigues her. Charlie has a crush on Regina, which leads to her being fired when he resentfully tells on her for kissing Roscoe in front of the children. Later, when Betsey discovers Regina pregnant, apparently deserted by Roscoe, and living at Mrs. Maureen's brothel, Regina becomes for Betsey a cautionary tale about the dangers of sexuality.

Mrs.Leon

Mrs. Leonis Betsey's teacher at her new, integrated school. Betsey is reassured when the lesson on her first day involves African geography. Betsey knows all of the answers.

Liliana

Liliana is one of Betsey's classmates at her first, all-black school. She and Mavis talk knowingly about Eugene Boyd in front of Betsey. Liliana has been held back, so she is older and more sophisticated than Betsey. Though they are not friends, she is a figure of female sexuality to Betsey.

Mama

See Jane Brown

Mrs. Maureen

Mrs. Maureen runs a beauty salon on the rough side of town, one attended by all of the middle-class women of Betsey's neighborhood. When Betsey runs away, feeling misunderstood by her own family, it is to Mrs. Maureen's that she flees. To Betsey, Mrs. Maureen's shop represents a safe and supportive atmosphere that is distinctly black and distinctly female. When Betsey reaches Mrs. Maureen's early in the morning, she is shocked to learn that at night Mrs. Maureen runs a brothel. Despite this revelation, Betsey is affirmed by Mrs. Maureen's and Regina's attentions as they do her hair and make her feel special and grown up before sending her home.

Mavis

Mavis is Liliana's friend, another older girl who has been held back at Betsey's all-black middle school. She and Liliana talk about Eugene Boyd, which flusters Betsey. Betsey thinks of them both as models of adult femininity when she performs her poem in the elocution competition.

Mrs. Mitchell

Mrs. Mitchell is Betsey's teacher at her original, all-black school. She is a white woman who "hadn't reacted like some of the rest when the school turned over from white to black... she liked young minds." Mrs. Mitchell gives Betsey first place for performing a Dunbar poem in an elocution contest.

Frank Murray

Frank Murray was Vida's husband and Jane's father. Vida cherishes his memory and spends much of her private time in reverie, thinking about their courtship and past. Vida describes Frank as a "gentle man" who could pass for white, an implicit contrast to Greer.

Vida Murray

Vida Murray is Jane's mother. She lives with the Brown family, helping out with the children while Jane is at work. However, Vida has a heart condition that makes dealing with the rambunctious children difficult. Vida comes from a long line of middle-class blacks and is proud of her proper conduct, light skin, straight hair, and the fact that she is descended from freemen rather than slaves. She has reservations about Jane's husband, Greer, based on a snobbish application of skin-color hierarchy. Vida disapproves of the casual way the household is run and does her best to instill in the children a sense of propriety. She opposes the struggle for integration, believing that blacks do best in their own separate society. She is a religious woman who remains deeply devoted to the memory of her deceased husband.

Mr. Robinson

Mr. Robinson runs the local soda shop in Betsey's neighborhood near her school. He is part of the close-knit African-American community, reporting back to Betsey's parents when she skips her piano lesson and telling her that he is proud of her on the first day of busing.

Roscoe

Roscoe is Regina's boyfriend. She wears his ring on a chain around her neck and is in love with him, which is a source of fascination for the Brown sisters. He has plans to become a mechanic and open his own gas station, which would be a step up for him on the socioeconomic ladder. He also speaks of marrying Regina, though he worries about the extra responsibility that would entail. Later Betsey encounters a pregnant Regina; Roscoe has gone off to Chicago and says he is saving money to send for her and the baby. But given the circumstances, it seems unlikely that he will do this.

Susan Linda

Susan Linda is a poor white girl who, against the conventions of the time, is friends with blacks, despite the fact that she sometimes uses the offensive word "niggah." Her mother, who is openly racist, works long hours and does not know that Betsey and her friends come to the house. Susan Linda is fascinated with her developing sexuality and leads Betsey and Charlotte Ann as they explore their bodies.

Veejay

Veejay is one of Betsey's schoolmates at her all-black school and another of her best friends. Unlike Betsey and Charlotte Ann, she is not middle-class. She is something of a moral voice for Betsey, leaving when Susan Linda shows them her nipples and

chastising Betsey for getting housekeeper Bernice fired. Veejay's mother is a housekeeper for a white family.

Themes

Identity and Self-Expression

The novel portrays Betsey's growth and development as she strives to understand who she is. Betsey is thirteen years old - an age sometimes considered as marking a passage from childhood to adulthood, or at least a passage into the independence of the teenage years. During this period of transition, Betsey seeks to learn to express her identity in a mature way. The first scene finds Betsey practicing for an elocution contest at her school. She has chosen to recite a Paul Laurence Dunbar poem written in African-American dialect in the voice of a sophisticated and confident woman. In practicing the poem, she strives to imitate the attitude of the adult woman she wishes she could be. She does this by looking to the people who are closest to her as role models, including her mother, women in the neighborhood, and older girls at school.

The poem is not only a way for Betsey to try on a sexual, womanly persona, it is also a way for her to assert her connection to black culture. Early in the novel she masters the poem and wins the contest. Toward the end of the book, she returns to the poem's central idea of self-expression in order to help her assert her racial pride to a white teacher, integrating the power of the poem's message with a more authentic sense of her own voice and values.

Betsey is thoughtful and contemplative by nature, but not always able to act in a way that expresses her truest self. She looks to those around her for hints of the right way to behave as she faces difficult issues related to growing up. Betsey gauges her role models' reactions to different changes she is going through, from her first sexual feelings to her guilt about getting Bernice fired and the resentment she feels as a black girl integrating a white school. She tries on different attitudes and experiments with different approaches.

The most dramatic scene of Betsey's attempt to figure out and express who she is comes when she runs away. She first fantasizes about changing her name, stringing together many different symbols of a wished-for adult self, then gets an elaborate makeover that makes her feel like a queen. After these experiments, she returns home more ready to take on the family responsibilities that fall to her when her mother leaves.

Race and Racism

Betsey's idea of herself as an African American is pivotal to the sense of identity she strives to attain throughout the narrative. Betsey has always been told that she is special, and her middle-class status also creates a distance between her idea of herself and many of the qualities she associates with blackness. Her sense of being different from others of her race derives mostly from her mother's and grandmother's influences. They are light-skinned and come from a long line of relative privilege. On the other

hand, Betsey has grown up in a nurturing and protective black community. A sense of racial pride has been deeply instilled, particularly by her dark-skinned, politically outspoken father, who, as a surgeon, is a self-made success. Her grandmother, mother, and father all give her different messages about what her relationship to the rest of the race should be - and Betsey is confused. The situation is further exacerbated when Betsey is forced to leave her black enclave and attend a predominantly white school. This provokes her to write racist epithets on the sidewalk and to run away to the poor black side of town. While her parents seek, in their own different ways, to give her the strength to deal with racism, it is Carrie who helps her deal with a white teacher's ignorance in a mature and empowering way.

Sexuality

Betsey's explorations of what it means to be a woman are another important aspect of her quest for identity. Betsey is entering adolescence, her body is beginning to develop, and she has a crush on an older boy. Thus her new sexual feelings and the questions about love and moral conduct that they trigger further complicate Betsey's confusion over who she is. The novel shows Betsey accepting her first kiss and having her first boyfriend. But Betsey's relationship with Eugene Boyd makes up a relatively small part of the plot, and her interactions with him are not a very significant source of drama. Much more dramatic is Betsey's discovery of Regina, pregnant and reduced to living in a brothel while she hopes for her boyfriend Roscoe's return.

The novel is also striking for how directly it deals with the sexual relationship between Betsey's parents. Central to Shange's portrayal of Betsey's questions about sexuality are the adult women Betsey carefully observes. It is through watching her parents' tumultuous but highly passionate marriage, questioning Regina and Roscoe about what it feels like to be in love, and listening to Carrie's cautionary tales about her past that Betsey absorbs complex and difficult lessons about what it means to be a sexual person - and about what this means, in particular, for a black woman.

Morals and Morality

Linking the issues of race and sexuality is the theme of morality. In terms of both African-American and female identity, Betsey receives mixed messages about what is the right way to act. Inherently moral in her way of thinking, Betsey takes criticism to heart and tries hard to figure out a code of morality that makes sense to her. A clearer sense of personal morality is key to Betsey's voyage toward maturity, independence, and self-love. Early in the novel, her friend Veejay stands as a voice of morality when she refuses to stay at Susan Linda's house because she disapproves of Susan Linda's sexual self-explorations and objects to the racist language used in the household. Betsey doesn't follow Veejay's example, but she does carefully reconsider her choice later. Veejay acts further as a moral voice when she criticizes Betsey for getting Bernice fired, revealing Betsey's snobbery and sense of entitlement to her and making her feel tremendously guilty. Both of Betsey's parents also offer her moral visions - with her

mother emphasizing family life, self-respect, and proper conduct, while her father stresses racial solidarity and responsibility to the larger community. The novel ends with Betsey's sense of morality more firmly her own. Carrie helps her to take responsibility for the family and to stand up to a racist teacher. She also reassures her that her sexual feelings are okay - "Go on ahead and enjoy bein a girl, but be careful." Later, when Carrie is arrested and fired, Betsey refuses to be influenced by her mother's disapproval and makes her own moral judgment, confident that Carrie "wouldn't hurt nobody less they hurt her a whole lot."

Style

Point of View

The novel is narrated using an omniscient third-person narrator, one that is not a participant in the events described but has access to the characters' private thoughts and feelings. Though the focus of the novel is on Betsey and her development, the narrator explores the perspectives of various characters at different points in the narrative.

For example, the novel opens with a description of Betsey's house that reveals Betsey's individual thoughts about and experiences of living there. However, this alignment with Betsey's perspective shifts when her mother, Jane, awakens. "Something had to be done with all of these children," the narrator states, expressing *Jane's* inner thoughts this time. The chapter closes with grandmother Vida's private musings on the family and neighborhood. Thus this chapter, like the novel as a whole, shifts among different perspectives, often focusing on the generational differences between the Brown women. Shange's central interest is in Betsey and her inner life, but this portrayal is enriched by the contrasting perspectives of those who influence Betsey most strongly.

Setting

Shange's evocation of setting is one of the most significant aspects of *Betsey Brown's* style. The sometimes joyful, sometimes stressful chaos of the Brown household, the atmosphere of Betsey's insular middle-class black neighborhood, and that of wider St. Louis all play key roles in Betsey's emotional and moral journey toward maturity. The novel opens by describing the Browns' large Victorian home, which "allowed for innumerable perspectives of the sun." Betsey intermittently looks out from the house or the tree in its yard onto the city beyond at moments when she is trying to understand her figurative place in the world.

The novel is set in St. Louis in the late 1950s, at a time of particular racial tension brought on by the Civil Rights Movement and, more specifically, by the national debate over school integration. Betsey's personal struggle with racial identity is thus strongly affected by the larger political debate shaking the country, as suggested by Shange's references to the integration crisis in Little Rock, Arkansas. But Betsey is also shielded from some aspects of the conflict by her family and community. Mr. Robinson, who owns the local soda shop, reflects the close-knit ties of the privileged black neighborhood. He expresses pride in Betsey and the other bused children while keeping a parental eye on their doings. In the face of Betsey's growing sense of independence as well as the external pressure of integration, she must learn to understand who she is in a context broader than that provided by her family or neighborhood. Betsey's sense of identity is mapped out on the city of St. Louis most explicitly when she runs away from home to Mrs. Maureen's beauty parlor in the poor black part of town. Rebelling against

the pressures of being the only black girl at an integrated school, she seeks to flee the security of her home and neighborhood in favor of a stronger tie with black culture as well as with other women. After receiving personal confirmation and a makeover, she roams the city, feeling like its "queen" even though the police worry that a young black girl might not be safe there.

Structure

The plot of *Betsey Brown* is best described as episodic. Shange describes events not so much to gather them into the growing drama of a climax and resolution as to capture the quality and pace of everyday life. The plot does not center for too long on any one conflict - Betsey' s mixed feelings about her romance with Eugene Boyd, the strife in Jane and Greer's marriage, or the threats to family members associated with integration and racism. Sometimes material that seems to signal catastrophe - for example, Allard's propensity for setting fires or Charlie's interest in white girls - fails to precipitate a full-blown crisis. Instead, the narration moves from one small, carefully sketched conflict to the next before any crisis comes to loom too large, showing how the different events of Betsey's thirteenth year create a kaleidoscope of questions regarding her sense of herself. The intent of the novel's structure is subtle character development rather than drama and denouement. At the novel's close, there is some resolution as a more mature Betsey is described as someone who is "surely going to have her way," but that way - with its pitfalls of racism and challenges of femininity and sexuality - is still left quite undefined.

Historical Context

Race Relations in the 1950s

Though Shange wrote *Betsey Brown* in 1985, she set the book in 1959, during the period of her own teenage years. The historical details of the novel are very significant, particularly as they relate to the issues of race relations and school desegregation.

In the 1950s African Americans lived in a society largely separate from whites. "Jim Crow" laws - in effect throughout the South and in other parts of the country as well - segregated public facilities, and blacks interacted with whites mostly as their workers or servants. One of the most significant arenas of segregation was in the educational system which, since the 1896 Supreme Court ruling of *Plessy v. Ferguson,* had been based on the principle of "separate but equal" facilities. In reality, facilities were not equal, and blacks received less and lower-quality education than whites, thus perpetuating their economic disadvantage when they entered the workforce. In the early 1950s there were a number of legal challenges to this doctrine, most notably the landmark case of *Brown v. The Board of Education of Topeka,Kansas,* in which the U.S. Supreme Court overthrew *Plessy v. Ferguson* as unconstitutional and ordered public schools integrated.

This was a shock to communities across the country, particularly in the South. Since the court made no specifications regarding the time and manner of desegregation, a number of state governments strongly resisted the mandate, setting off controversy that flared throughout the decade.

In 1954 the State of Missouri required educational segregation by law, but it was relatively quick to accept the Supreme Court's decision and integrate its schools. By contrast, Arkansas and Virginia, among other states, resisted fiercely. In the most notorious example of state defiance - one that Shange refers to specifically - the governor of Arkansas ordered the National Guard to block nine black students from enrolling at the so far all-white Little Rock Central High School. When black students attempted to enter the school another day they were met by an angry mob. President Eisenhower then ordered the National Guard into federal service, commanding them to escort the students and thereby integrate the school. The students required protection throughout the school year and became a symbol throughout the world of America's racial strife.

Segregation did not only affect public education, but all kinds of public and private behavior. For example, social contact between blacks and whites was very limited, and sexual or romantic interaction was strictly taboo. Black men had long been categorized by racist stereotypes as sexual predators, and sexual aggression toward white women was often used as justification for vigilante violence against them. In the novel, Shange refers to the case of Emmett Till, with Jane drawing a worried parallel between Till and Charlie. Till, a fourteen-year-old African American from Chicago, was murdered by two

white men in Mississippi after allegedly whistling at one of the men's wives. In what became an international scandal, the two men were acquitted by an all-white, all-male jury, only to confess the crime to a journalist shortly after the trial.

Little Rock and Emmett Till are symbols of racism in the 1950s and evidence of a deeply scarred and divided society. While the travails of integration are not nearly as sharp for Betsey and her family, these examples help explain the deep conflict and anxiety that the idea of integration brings to the Brown household.

Race Relations in the 1980s

The social climate in the United States in the 1980s, when Shange wrote *Betsey Brown,* bears some similarity to the 1950s, when the novel is set. Both decades were times of social conservatism and traditionalism, contrasting with the radical, tumultuous era that intervened. In 1980 Ronald Reagan ran for president on a platform of "trickle-down economics" and "family values." Winning two terms, he appealed to the white middle- and working-class voters, including many who had previously voted as Democrats. These voters seemed to agree with him that the social change of the 1960s and 1970s had been too extreme.

Reagan was not considered an ally of African Americans. He came out against school busing and affirmative action, and during his presidency some important pieces of civil rights legislation were weakened or reversed. In response to blacks' feelings of disenfranchisement from national politics, Jesse Jackson, a black Civil Rights activist, ran an unsuccessful but nevertheless impressive campaign to be the Democratic challenger to Reagan in 1984, thus gaining stature as an important voice in American politics.

Despite the perception of many whites that African Americans now had equal advantages in American society, data shows that in the 1980s black students were still likely to be educated at predominantly minority schools whose facilities and funding were inferior to those of schools in white neighborhoods. The disparity between educational resources for blacks and whites was most marked in major cities and was virtually always paired with economic disparity. Studies found that African Americans were more likely to be suspended and put into special education classes and that teachers often treated black students with bias.

On the college level, the number of blacks enrolled declined in comparison to the 1970s, a period of great progress for African Americans in higher education. Over the course of the decade the percentage of blacks in college and professional school dropped from 9.4 to 8.6. Against the generally conservative tenor of the period, college students protested against curricula that focused on "dead white men" and the canon was revised at many institutions to include works by more women, people of color, and non-Westerners.

In other realms, racial tension across the country was high. The Ku Klux Klan enjoyed a resurgence, and David Duke, a former grand wizard of the Klan, was elected to the Louisiana legislature. There were numerous racial incidents on college campuses and violent racial conflicts across the country, including the 1980 riots in Miami following the acquittal of four white police officers in the death of an black man. These and other conditions shaped Shange's perceptions of racial integration and race relations as she developed as a writer.

Critical Overview

Shange began her literary career as a poet and performer. Strongly influenced by jazz, she sometimes performed improvisational poetry at bars in New York and San Francisco. One such piece, a collection of twenty poems performed with dance and music by a group of seven women, impressed a New York theater director so much that he worked with Shange to develop it into an off-Broadway production in 1975. *For colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf* quickly became a controversial sensation. The "choreopoem," as Shange terms this experimental work, was shocking to audiences not only for its unusual theatrical form, but for its outspoken message about the double oppression of black women.

The play addresses rape, wife-beating, and single motherhood in the most raw and personal terms. "The work speaks of the physical and emotional abuse that black women experience at the hands of insensitive black men," writes Elizabeth Brown in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography.* "It is about the black women's ability to survive even after they have been knocked down repeatedly.... It is a tribute to black women who strive for and develop a sense of self."

Shange's portrayal of African-American gender relations drew public criticism from black male commentators, who accused her of undermining racial solidarity with her negative portrayals of men. She shared this controversial status with other black women authors of her generation influenced by feminism, including Alice Walker and Gayl Jones. *For colored girls* became a success on Broadway and remains Shange's most well-known work.

Shange went on to write several other experimental plays focusing with candor and sometimes rage on the relationships between black men and women. In the 1980s she began to work less in the theater, instead publishing several collections of poetry and, in 1982, her first novel, *Sassafrass, Cypress and Indigo.* This work tells the story of three sisters, each of whom reflects a different aspect of African-American femininity. Its experimental form includes recipes, poems, and nonstandard spelling and punctuation. *Betsey Brown,* published in 1985, is a more stylistically conventional book and arguably a more optimistic one. Set during the early Civil Rights Movement, it centers on the main character's unique position as a relatively empowered member of the middle class - an aspect of Shange's own experience that she had not emphasized in *for colored girls* or other writings. However, this semi-autobiographical coming-of-age story shares with Shange's earlier works a commitment to exploring the strife within the African-American female psyche as shaped by both racism and sexism, though here Shange's portrayal of oppression is considerably more understated. *In Black Women Writers at Work* Claudia Tate describes the changes the novel represents for the author, remarking that *Betsey Brown* "seems to mark Shange's movement from explicit to subtle expressions of rage, from repudiating her girlhood past to embracing it, and from flip candor to more serious commentary."

Writer and scholar Sherley Ann Williams, writing for the feminist magazine *Ms.,* is most interested in *Betsey Brown's* focus on black middle-class life. Compared to other contemporary novels that equate black authenticity with poverty, argues Williams, *Betsey Brown* "depicts an affluence that is not incompatible with black culture and community. . .. The book speaks to some of the deeper complexities and paradoxes that have helped sustain and perpetuate the positive aspects of the Afro-American experience." However, Williams is less positive about Shange's literary achievement. She finds fault with Shange's sentimental portrayal of servants and the fact that "the characters and the narrators all talk and think alike."

Overall, the popular press failed to embrace *Betsey Brown* as a major achievement for Shange. In a tepid *New Statesman* review, Marion Glastonbury comments that the "drama of political change" that the novel's historical setting evokes "is curiously played down." She notes that the novel, just published, was already slated for production as a musical and asks, "Will the lyrics sound better once we hear the tune?" Susan Schindehitte, writing for the *Saturday Review,* is more charitable about Shange's style, crediting *Betsey Brown* for its "lyricism and personality," while criticizing the fact that "there is no glue to bind [the novel's various] elements into a flowing whole." She too notes the plans to adapt the novel for the stage and goes on to diagnose the novel's weakness thusly: "This isn't really a novel after all. It is dramatist Shange's latest play . . . masquerading as a novel."

While critics tend to find fault with the novel, *Betsey Brown* is a popular choice for high school reading lists due to its relevant themes and accessible style. Furthermore, it remains a significant work in the context of the literary renaissance of black women writers of the 1970s and '80s and their struggles with representing feminist issues from an African-American point of view, as well as for its portrayal of the black middle class.

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1
- Critical Essay #2
- Critical Essay #3

Critical Essay #1

Sarah Madsen Hardy has a doctorate in English literature and is a freelance writer and editor.

In the following essay, she discusses how the protagonist's relationships with three domestic servants shape her developing sense of identity in Betsey Brown.

Betsey Brown has a loose plot, based on a series of episodes in the protagonist's thirteenth year. Betsey faces various trials and tribulations - some large and some small - as she negotiates the dilemmas of being black, being female, and just simply being a teenager in 1959 St. Louis. *Betsey Brown* may seem to lack structure. However, one thing that gives shape to its plot is the series of domestic servants who come to work for the Brown family. Though each woman works for the Browns only briefly, each one is symbolically significant to Betsey's moral and emotional development. Tracing Betsey's interactions with and ideas about Bernice,Regina, and Carrie outlines some of the most important aspects of Betsey's journey toward maturity and self-understanding.

One aspect of Betsey's developing sense of identity that a focus on the servants serves to highlight is her middle-class status. Though she lives in an almost exclusively black neighborhood and, until school desegregation goes into effect, moves almost entirely within a black social milieu, Betsey is by no means typical of the African-American experience. Her father is a doctor in an era when there were few black professionals of any sort and her mother, descended from free blacks rather than slaves, enjoys a long legacy of education and privilege. This special status reflects that of Shange's own upbringing. Until she wrote *Betsey Brown* Shange tended to focus on the hard-luck stories of emotionally and economically downtrodden characters. But in *Betsey Brown,* a semi-autobiographical piece, she examines the particular tensions that arise out of being a *privileged* member of an doubly oppressed group, black women.

In her essay "Roots of Privilege," which appeared *in Ms.* in 1985, Sherley Anne Williams offers the historical context that until the 1920s, middle-class, educated, and light-skinned blacks tended to populate the fiction written by African Americans. With the rise of the literary movement known as the Harlem Renaissance, there was a revaluation of indigenous African-American art forms associated with "the folk" - the supposedly simple, often uneducated black masses. For example, Harlem Renaissance writers such as Zora Neale Hurston and Langston Hughes used dialect in their writing, celebrated the rich African-American oral culture of storytelling, and used motifs from the blues, a form of folk music.

In the mid-century, folk forms still dominated the black arts scene, and as the political radicalism of the Civil Rights Movement took hold, the situation of the common, working black person remained the most popular subject for black authors. "I was embarrassed to be a middle-class person at a time when the black proletariat was so active; the black people I was around were having bridge parties. Everybody in New York and Washington was burning down the city!," Shange admits in a *Journal of Dramatic*

Theory and Criticism interview with Serena Anderlini. *Betsey Brown* shows how Shange came to terms with that shame.

The Browns' first servant, Bernice Calhoun, works for them less than one day and only appears in two short scenes, but her status in the novel is important to Betsey's moral development and her self-consciousness about her privileged status. Significantly, Bernice is introduced through a blues song - Shange's reference back to the Harlem Renaissance tradition of integrating African-American folk music into literary forms. Bernice's song serves as an autobiography. Shange provides little information about Bernice's background other than the lines of the soulful, improvised song, which begins, "well, my name is bernice & i come a long way / up from arkansas & i'm here to stay / i aint got no friends and i aint got no ma / but i'ma make st. louis give me a fair draw." Shange seeks to emphasize the cultural distance between Betsey and Bernice. Bernice embodies qualities associated with a common-folk definition of blackness that Betsey fails to understand or appreciate. Bernice "looks to [Betsey's] mind like a woman in need of some new clothes and a suitcase. Who ever heard of carrying one's belongings in two shopping bags while wearing a hat with five different colored flowers on it?" Betsey sees Bernice's poverty, but she fails to appreciate the richness in the song that "moved as if it weren't usedta having shoes on its feet."

At this point, early in the novel, Betsey - a middle-class city girl - lacks the experience and insight to perceive Bernice's "country honor." Disgruntled by the fact that Bernice has revealed her oak-tree hideaway, Betsey plots revenge against Bernice, rallying her siblings to wreak havoc in the household and get Bernice fired. Never having had to worry about material security herself, she is simply naive as to the repercussions of her actions on Bernice's well-being. Then Betsey's classmate Veejay reveals that her mother is the household servant for a white family, "tak[ing] care of nasty white chirren who act up like y'all acted up this morning." Veejay, who Betsey is surprised to find she has angered, goes on to call Betsey "stupid" and to explain that her mother "don't do it cause she likes it neither. She does it so I could have clothes and food and a place to live." Betsey is suddenly filled with remorse. Veejay's condemnation comes as a revelation to Betsey about her own lack of insight and empathy. She had been "so busy seeing to herself and the skies, she's let a woman who coulda been Veejay's mama look a fool and lose her job." Betsey runs home, hoping to repair the situation, but it is too late - Bernice has hit the road, and she does not appear in the novel again. Betsey's treatment of Bernice stands as a moral error and a lesson to Betsey about the power that she, even as a young black girl, wields over the lives of others.

The next servant the Browns hire is Regina Johnson.Regina also faces Betsey across a cultural divide - she is from a poor and troubled family. But this is mitigated by the fact that she is herself from St. Louis and, more significantly, that she is an attractive young woman just out of high school, "fresh, neat and slender, with a heavy curl across her forehead, the fashion of the day." Furthermore, she is in love - a condition that Betsey is curious about and ambivalently aspires to. For these reasons,Regina is someone Betsey looks up to. With Bernice, all that Betsey perceives are her differences, ultimately failing to see her as fully human. With Regina, Betsey doesn't comprehend the significance of her differences enough.

If Bernice is associated with "Mississippi muddy" blues,Regina is associated with the new black pop stars of Motown.Regina's sexuality is part of the reason she initially fits in well at the Browns'. Charlie is obedient because he has a crush on her and the girls are fascinated with her. But her sexuality also leads to her downfall. Having few emotional or financial resources herself, she does what many women have done and puts all of her faith in her boyfriend Roscoe. A jealous Charlie reports one of Roscoe's visits to Vida.

Proud of her love,Regina leaves. Betsey looks to Regina and Roscoe as she tries to understand her own budding feelings for Eugene. While Betsey worries that "when you're really in love, there's never enough to go around,"Regina seems confident in both her love and her sexuality. "Regina took no mind of her body when she was with him. Her woman gave into his man and there was a hush, subduing her throbs and moans in the midst of the sepia rush that was Roscoe." However, when she meets Regina again at Mrs. Maureen's beauty parlor/bordello and learns that Regina is pregnant and living there, waiting for Roscoe's dubious return, Betsey must reevaluate her idol.

Betsey has run away to the bad side of town, feeling alienated from her family and tired of the white folks at school. She tells Mrs. Maureen that she plans to work for her until she can elope. She complains to Regina about her mother not letting her listen to popular music and goes on, "She doesn't want me to be like everybody else,Regina. She wants me to be special, like I lived in a glass cage or something." While Betsey claims that she "feels so much better when I'm just like everybody else,"Regina explains to her that she is lonely because she *is* special - and different from women like her, whose options are limited. She helps Betsey see that she has broader resources to draw on than just her sexuality and warns her, "Don't you grow up too soon." Fortified by Regina's advice, she marches through the streets of St. Louis with a new appreciation for her uniqueness and the power that she possesses, feeling like the "Queen of the Negro Veiled Prophet."

Carrie, the third domestic servant, arrives at a crucial time in Betsey's development - just after Jane has left the family. Carrie helps Betsey to integrate what she has learned about herself from the hard lessons of Bernice and Regina and to carry on with a new maturity. Like Bernice, Carrie's appearance betrays her simple, rural background. She wears her hair unfashionably and ties her dresses with a rope. She also uses the latrine in the basement rather than any of the modern bathrooms in the house "cause that's what her mama had in Arkansas." This is an example of the "country honor" she shares with Bernice. By now, Betsey has learned enough to overlook appearances and appreciate the values that Carrie has to instill. Under Carrie's guidance, the Brown children learn the value of taking pride in hard work. While Bernice sings the blues and Regina has the girls mouthing along with the pop tunes of Mary Washington, Carrie helps them to make up their own song to sing as they work, expressing pride in their house: "this is our house ... / we keep it shinin / spanking clean / if some white folks ever see it / they'll think they musta done it / but it's us colored kids that run it / this is ours." This responsible attitude is the exact inverse of what the children displayed on Bernice's catastrophic first day of work.

Like Regina, Carrie has a gentleman caller, Mr. Jeff, who comes by the house and stirs up trouble with Vida, but the older and wiser Carrie handles the conflict with aplomb. Discerning Carrie's womanly knowledge and warmth, Mr. Jeff is attracted to her despite the fact that she is overweight and odd-looking. Betsey watches her and learns how a woman can earn and enjoy a man's attentions without sacrificing her independence or risking her future. While Jane and Vida censure Betsey's sexuality and Regina gives her a glimpse into the consequences of thoughtless passion, Carrie teaches Betsey about moderating between caution and pleasure in matters of love: "Go on ahead and enjoy bein a girl, but be careful."

When Jane fires Carrie for getting arrested, Betsey has the quiet confidence that her role model acted with justice and reason, an opinion she is also now wise enough to keep from her mother. In Carrie's absence, "Betsey just took Carrie's place in the house." Betsey's optimism at the novel's close that she was "surely going to have her way" can be attributed in part to her newfound ability to appreciate and understand a strong woman from a background so different from her own.

Source: Sarah Madsen Hardy, in an essay for *Novels for Students,* Gale Group, 2001.

Critical Essay #2

Brent has a Ph.D. in American culture, specializing in film studies, from the University of Michigan. She is a freelance writer and teaches courses in the history of American cinema. In the following essay, Brent discusses references to popular culture and African-American celebrities of the 1950s in Shange 's novel.

The novel *Betsey Brown,* by Ntozake Shange, is set in St. Louis in the mid-1950s, during which the landmark Supreme Court ruling on *Brown vs. the Board of Education* led to the desegregation of schools in the South. Betsey Brown, the main character, is an adolescent African-American girl, from an educated, middle-class family, who is "bused" to a mostly white high school in the wake of this ruling. Throughout the novel, Shange addresses themes of desegregation and its effect on African-American families, especially children. The novel is also a look at the early period of the Civil Rights Movement, as seen from the perspective of an African-American girl. Throughout the novel, Shange makes references to several popular novels, films, and plays, as well as a number of African-American celebrities during the 1950s.

These references to American culture of the 1950s function to expand upon Shange's theme of race relations in the United States and the historical and cultural roots of the Civil Rights Movement.

Betsey Brown makes reference to two classic titles, *Gone with the Wind and Imitation of Life,* both of which were originally novels by white women concerning racial issues, and both of which were adapted to film. Shange's novel also makes reference to the stage play, later adapted to film, entitled *The Green Pastures,* which was written by a white man, but includes an all-black cast. These references to popular American culture expand upon Shange's theme of racial desegregation and the early Civil Rights Movement. Written by white authors, but concerning characters and issues pertinent to African Americans, all three of these titles have met with a variety of interpretations as to their significance to race relations in the United States.

There are several references throughout *Betsey Brown* to the 1939 movie *Gone with the Wind,* directed by Victor Fleming, and based on the 1936 novel of the same title by Margaret Mitchell (1900-1949). *Gone with the Wind* is a romantic epic tale of the South before, during, and after the Civil War. It remains one of the most popular novels in American history; according to *Encyclopaedia Britannica,* "Within six months [of publication] 1,000,000 copies had been sold; 50,000 copies were sold in one day. It went on to sell more copies than any other novel in U.S. publishing history, with sales passing 12 million by 1965." The novel also won the Pulitzer Prize in 1937. The film version was equally popular, winning nine Academy Awards, and remaining the top-grossing film of all time for over fifty years after its initial release. *Gone with the Wind* stars Vivien Leigh as the Southern belle Scarlet O'Hara, and Clark Gable as romantic lead Rhett Butler, the source of one of the most famous movie lines in American cultural history: "Frankly, my dear, I don't give a damn!"

Although immensely popular, *Gone with the Wind* has come under fire for its racist stereotyping of African-American characters and its sympathetic portrayal of the pro-slavery South during the Civil War. The character played by Hattie McDaniel, an African-American actress typecast as the "black mammy," represents a slave who is faithful to her white "owners" throughout the Civil War, and remains with them even after the Emancipation Proclamation abolishes slavery in the United States. In Shange's novel, reference to *Gone with the Wind* is used as ironic commentary on the story's racist elements, from the perspective of a pre-adolescent African-American girl during the early Civil Rights era of the mid-1950s. In one passage, Betsey Brown associates her grandmother with Scarlet O'Hara. Hearing her grandmother's "Carolinian drawl," Betsey thinks, "There was a way about Vida that was so lilting yet direct that Betsey sometimes thought her grandma had a bloodline connection to Scarlett O'Hara." The irony of this observation works at several levels. Whereas one might expect to observe a *contrast* between the fictional white Southern belle of a Southern slave plantation and an older African-American woman during the early Civil Rights era, Betsey finds in her grandmother a similarity between them. In stating that she thought her grandmother "had a bloodline connection" to the white character of Scarlett O'Hara, Betsey Brown, perhaps unwittingly, alludes to the fact that many African-American families are in fact descendants of white plantation owners. Because of the rampant rape of African-American slave women by white male plantation owners in the South, it is in fact not unlikely that Betsey's grandmother could have a "bloodline connection" to a white Southern plantation-owning family. Through this allusion, Shange suggests that white and black Southerners share strong cultural, familial, and historical ties which are unfortunately obscured by the racism and segregation still practiced in the South during the 1950s.

In a second reference to *Gone with the Wind,* Betsey's grandmother is compared to the white Southern character of "Miss Pittypat," as well as, once again, to Scarlet O'Hara: "Vida hummed to herself, 'Lord, I wanna be a Christian in my soul,' and sat rocking on the pillared front porch. Miss Pittypat couldn't of done better." Again, Betsey Brown's grandmother is compared to a white Southern woman during the slavery era; she sits in a rocking chair on the porch of a large Southern home, humming a Christian hymn to herself. As she does so, Vida thinks, "Jane had never had to say 'I'll never be hungry again,' cause Vida'd seen to it that every one of her chirren ate. Every single one of em." This refers to one of the most famous lines from *Gone with the Wind;* after the South has lost the Civil War, Scarlet O'Hara returns to her family's plantation home, which has been devastated by the war. Formerly a pampered and spoiled Southern belle, accustomed to being waited on hand and foot, Scarlet O'Hara finds the inner strength to vow to herself that she will survive the devastation of her home, declaring dramatically, "I'll never be hungry again!" Shange's reference to this line from *Gone with the Wind* points out the irony of such a statement coming from a wealthy white Southern woman, when African-American women throughout American history have had to find the inner strength to struggle against great odds - such as slavery, poverty, and racist oppression - in order to see that their families will "never be hungry again."

A third reference is made to *Gone with the Wind* when Betsey enters her school in the morning: "Not only were the floors of the Clark School shining like the halls of Tara, but

Betsey's brow was weeping with sweat, as were her panties and underarms.... She felt hot. And there was Mr. Wichiten with the razor strap at the head of the hallway, just a swinging and smiling." Tara is the name of Scarlet O'Hara's family plantation in *Gone with the Wind.* By comparing the hallway of her school to the halls of a Southern slave plantation, Betsey expresses her feeling of oppression upon entering school that morning. She is nervous and sweating because she is going to be reciting a poem in class and hopes to win a prize for the best elocution. But the white school official with the "razor strap" in his hands threatens her like a slave driver.

Shange here is not at all implying that the school full of black children that is run by white teachers is anywhere near as oppressive as was a Southern slave plantation; however, she is expressing through hyperbole a young girl's feelings of oppression at the hands of her white school teachers. Finally, although Betsey Brown's white teacher treats her African-American students with the same interest and respect as she did her white students, Shange has chosen the name "Mrs. Mitchell" for this character; in conjunction with the nearby references to *Gone with the Wind,* it seems clear that Shange had in mind Margaret Mitchell, author of the original novel.

In addition to *Gone with the Wind,* Shange also makes reference to *Imitation of Life,* originally a novel by Fanny Hurst, adapted to film in 1959. This story is about two single mothers, one white and one black. The white woman (played by Lana Turner in the film), becomes a successful stage actress; the black woman (played by Juanita Moore) is hired as a maid who lives with her daughter in the white woman's house. The central drama of the story concerns the daughter of the black woman, who is so light-skinned that she can easily "pass" for white; as a teenager, she runs away from home, shunning her own mother in order to enter society as a white woman. *Imitation of Life* has been interpreted by critics both as racist, or as critical of racism, depending on the interpretation. In Shange's novel, Betsey's first day in an integrated school - which is predominantly white - includes meeting Mrs. Leon, her white teacher who treats her with kindness and respect, thus making a positive example for Betsey's white classmates to follow. Betsey is so impressed with Mrs. Leon's understanding treatment of her that she thinks, "maybe Mrs. Leon wasn't white at all, maybe she was passing, like in that book *Imitation of Life.* Or maybe she was what Jane called 'well-meaning white people.' At any rate Mrs. Leonbroke the ice and the thrill of a new place and new faces came over Betsey as easily as the shadows had blackened her path." By comparing her white teacher to a fictional character who is African-American but "passes" for white, Betsey expresses a feeling of camaraderie - she imagines that her teacher is really African-American, like herself, and this helps her to better cope with the anxiety of her first day at a mostly white school.

When Betsey runs away from home for an entire day, her mother and father take very different approaches to addressing the crisis. While Jane gathers the family around her to kneel down and pray for Betsey's safety and return, Greer drives around St. Louis looking for her. Greer, Betsey's father, understands why she may have run away, while her mother does not. Greer thinks that he cannot possibly explain Betsey's desires to his wife, who remains "down there on her knees with Jesus." Greer concludes, "His whole family looked like a bad scene from *Green Pastures*." *The Green Pastures* was a

play by Marc Connelly, first performed in 1930, which consists of a reenactment of the stories of the Old Testament, in which all of the characters are African-American. The play, written by a white man, is made up of dialogue in what sounds to the modern reader like a highly stereotypical rendition of black English. While the play was extremely popular in the 1930s, it eventually came to be considered by many to consist of gross stereotypes of rural, Southern African Americans as ignorant and childlike, especially in terms of their religious devotion. When Greer says that his entire family, while kneeling together in their living room praying for the return of their daughter, looks like "a bad scene from *Green Pastures,"* he is expressing a degree of disdain for such a passionate expression of religious devotion. This sentiment demonstrates an important set of differences in value between Betsey's father and mother; Greer is much less traditional than his wife, and is disdainful of any behavior on the part of his children or family which suggests catering to white stereotypes of black people. Jane, on the other hand, resorts to prayer in a time of crisis, unconcerned with how her expression of faith might look to an outside observer.

Betsey Brown reads as a veritable *Who's Who* of African-American celebrities during the 1950s and the years preceding the Civil Rights Movement. The narrative refers to prominent and distinguished African-American athletes, musicians, singers, actors and actresses, and political figures. Shange's character of Betsey Brown fantasizes about marrying or emulating a wide range of African-American celebrities who were prominent during the 1950s. Through these many references, Shange celebrates African-American culture and history, as well as calling to mind the importance of such exceptional figures as important role models to a young African-American woman during the Civil Rights era.

Betsey's internal monologue, expressed through the third-person narrator, often takes flights of fancy, in which she imagines a romantic and illustrious future for herself. At one point, Betsey hears music which makes her think of getting married - but only "after she'd run away and made a career of her own, like her mama had and Madame C.J. Walker. Oh yes, Betsey Calhoun would be coming to the altar with something of her own to offer." In fantasizing that she will "make a career of her own," Betsey compares herself to her mother, and to Madame C.J. Walker. Madame C.J. Walker (1867-1919), also known as Sarah Breedlove, was the first black female millionaire in the United States. As a fantasy of a successful African-American career woman,Walker represents the epitome of success in the world of business. In 1905,Walker created a product and process designed for hair styling among African-American women. This process became known as the "Walker System," or "Walker Method," and was marketed by the Madame C. J. Walker Manufacturing Company, of which Walker herself was the president and sole owner.Walker's products were sold by door-to-door sales representatives who targeted African-American neighborhoods.Walker also became known as a philanthropist, donating extensive funds to such African-American causes as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, or NAACP. Betsey's choice of Walker as a role model is significant to the novel, in part because of its setting in St. Louis, Missouri, where Walker first developed her product. In addition, Walker's concerns with issues later associated with the Civil Rights Movement indicates

the historical efforts of African Americans which led up to the dramatic changes in race relations which took place during the 1950s, in which Shange's novel is set.

References to famous black athletes in *Betsey Brown* include boxing champ "Sugar" Ray Robinson, tennis star Althea Gibson, and baseball player Jackie Robinson. In fantasizing about the kind of man she might marry, Betsey Brown thinks to herself, "I'm Miss Cora Sue Betsey Anne Calhoun Brown, soon to be married to a Negro man of renown." Betsey considers a wide array of African-American celebrities as potential husbands. Among them is "Sugar" Ray Robinson: "He's so handsome," Betsey thinks. "He's so sharp. Mrs. Cora Sue Betsey Anne Calhoun Brown 'Sugar' Robinson. Sounds good to me." "Sugar" Ray Robinson (1921-1989) was a widely admired professional boxer who held the world championship six times. Five of these championships were fought during the 1950s, when Shange's novel takes place. According to *Encyclopaedia Britannica,* Robinson "is considered by many authorities to have been the best fighter in history." In addition, "his outstanding ability and flamboyant personality made him a hero of boxing fans throughout the world." Later in the novel, after Betsey has run away from home for a day, her father, Greer, drives around St. Louis looking for her. Having exposed his daughter to a wide array of African-American cultural heroes, Greer looks for Betsey in locations throughout the city which are associated with some of these historic figures. He looks "at the spot where 'Sugar Ray' liked the barbecue." This reference is also significant to the novel's setting in St. Louis - the African-American heroes Betsey fantasizes about are not just distant stars, but are, or have been, members of the African-American community in which she and her family live.

Later in the novel, Betsey discusses a white teacher who has put her down. Carrie suggests she "fight the teacher," not physically, but verbally. In response to the mention of "fighting," Betsey jumps up and down "like 'Sugar' Ray Robinson or Althea Gibson," thinking, "Betsey the champ. Humph. My, my, my." Althea Gibson (born in 1927) was the first African-American tennis player to win the Wimbledon and U.S. singles championships. The height of Gibson's career was during the 1950s, when Shange's novel takes place. In this passage of the novel, Betsey associates "fighting" for her dignity and rights against a white teacher with the physical fighting of a championship boxer, or the competitive physical effort of a famous tennis player. Shange also makes reference to Jackie Robinson, the first African-American baseball player in the U.S. major leagues. The effect of these references to successful black athletes is to paint a picture of America, particularly St. Louis in the 1950s, in which the early actions of the Civil Rights Movement went hand in hand with the success of a number of exceptional African Americans in such traditionally white domains as national and international athletic competitions. The sense of empowerment Betsey feels in calling to mind these successful African-American athletes is equivalent to the sense of empowerment among African Americans for which the Civil Rights Movement was striving.

In addition to athletes, Shange's novel makes reference to several prominent African-American singers, dancers, and actors of the first half of the twentieth century, including Paul Robeson, Dorothy Dandridge, and Eartha Kitt. When Betsey enters school hoping to win an elocution contest in her class, she fantasizes about what prize she might win, wondering if it would perhaps be a Paul Robe-son record. Later, when she is fantasizing

about what type of illustrious career she will have, she considers that of an actress, "like Dandridge or Eartha." All three of these singers/actors met with a significant degree of success, followed by unfortunate circumstances which led to the decline of their careers. Paul Robeson (1898-1976) became well-known for his stage and screen roles during the 1920s, '30s, and '40s. Robeson was also celebrated for musical recordings, particularly in the singing of spirituals. His most famous role was as Joe in the stage and screen versions of the musical *Showboat,* in which his leading number was "Ol' Man River." Robeson was also a left-wing activist, and his American passport was taken away in 1950 after he refused to deny his membership in the Communist Party. This led to general public condemnation of his character during the era of the "Red Scare," and a subsequent decline of his career prospects. Dorothy Dandridge (1923-1965) was known as the first black woman ever nominated for an Academy Award for Best Actress - for her performance in the 1954 *Carmen Jones.* This notoriety would have occurred in the same year in which Shange's novel takes place, and Betsey's interest in her as a celebrity is historically accurate. However, Dandridge's film career was limited by the few opportunities for black women in Hollywood during this time, and her early success eventually led to disappointment. Eartha Kitt was well-known for her nightclub performances as a singer and dancer, as well as several film roles. Like Robeson, Kitt was eventually ostracized and her career virtually destroyed for her left-wing political views, after she publicly declared at a White House luncheon her disapproval of U.S.involvement in the Vietnam War. Through reference to these three figures, Shange reminds the reader of important African-American figures from American popular culture of the 1950s who expressed strong political sentiments, and whose careers were directly affected by the racism and the political climate of their time.

In addition to the many references to popular culture and African-American celebrities, *Betsey Brown* includes a number of references to prominent military and political figures such as Benjamin Oliver Davis, Gamal Abdel Nasser, and Kwame Nkrumah. In fantasizing that she will one day marry any of a number of famous men, most of them African-American, Betsey muses: "I'm Miss Cora Sue Betsey Anne Calhoun Brown, soon to be married to a Negro man of renown. There's Cab Calloway. Machito. Mongo Santamaria. Tito Puente. Colonel Davis. Nasser. Nkrumah. James Brown." While most of these figures are musicians, several were renowned for military and political accomplishments.

Mention of Colonel Davis could include both Benjamin Oliver Davis Sr. and Benjamin Oliver Davis Jr. Davis Sr. (1877-1970) was the first African American to reach the rank of general in the U.S. army. His son, Davis Jr. (born in 1912), was distinguished as the first African American to reach the rank of general in the U.S. air force. In Shange's novel, Betsey is most likely referring to Davis Jr., who was the organizer of the first air unit manned entirely by African Americans, which fought during World War II, after which he was promoted to the rank of colonel. Mention of Davis in Shange's novel is significant to the theme of desegregation and the beginnings of racial integration, because Davis was instrumental in planning the official desegregation of the U.S. air force after the war. In 1954, around the time in which Shange's novel is set, Davis Jr. was promoted to brigadier general (a one-star general). In 1959 he was made major

general (a two-star general), and in 1965 he was promoted to lieutenant general (a three-star general). In 1998, after retiring, Davis Jr. was made a four-star general.

Shange also makes reference to an international diaspora of political leaders of African descent, as well as others not of European descent, through the mention of Gamal Abdel Nasser (1918-1970), who was prime minister and then president of Egypt between 1954 and 1970, and Kwame Nkrumah (1909-1972), the Ghanaian nationalist leader who led the drive for national independence from Britain and became the leader of Ghana from 1957 to 1966. In 1954, around the time in which Shange's novel is set, Nasser had just emerged as the new prime minister of Egypt, and Nkrumah had been prime minister of the Gold Coast (the name of Ghana during the era of British rule) since 1952.

Shange's many references to historically real texts and celebrities of American culture during the 1950s, in the context of her fictional novel, function to expand upon and enrich her central thematic concerns with desegregation and the early Civil Rights era.

Source: Liz Brent, in an essay for *Novels for Students,* Gale Group, 2001.

Critical Essay #3

In the following composite interview, Shange espouses her beliefs on what makes a poet and how geography influences poetic development.

One of the most articulate Black American artists to have emerged in the last few years, Ntozake Shange began the process of identifying and fulfilling her many talents in an academic milieu. An honors graduate of the American Studies program at Barnard in 1970, an NDEA Fellow at the University of Southern California, where she earned an M.A. degree in American Studies in 1973, Shange has lectured or taught at a number of colleges and universities, such as Brown, C.C.N.Y., Douglass, Howard, N.Y.U., Sonoma State, and Yale. Her book-length publications include *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide When the Rainbow is Enuf* (1975, 1977), *Sassafrass: a Novella* (1976), *Nappy Edges* (1978), and *8 Pieces & 'A Photograph'* (1979). Individual poems, essays, and short stories of hers have appeared in numerous magazines and anthologies, including *The Black Scholar, Yardbird Ms., Essence, The Chicago Review,* and *Third World Women.* Theatrical credits, reflecting her work as a writer and a performer, include *For Colored Girls* (1976), *Negress* (1977), *A Photograph: A Still Life With Shadows/A Photograph: A Study in Cruelty* (1977), *Where the Mississippi Meets the Amazon* (197 7 -78), *From Okra to Greens: A Different Love Story* (1978), *Boogie Woogie Landscapes* (1978-79), and *Magic Spell #7* (1979). Her involvement in musical collaborations with David Murray, Oliver Lake, Jay Hoggard, Ramsey Ameen, and Cecil Taylor also reflects the range of her creativity, as does her role as a performing member of The Sounds of Motion Dance Company, directed by Diane McIntyre.

The following interview is a composite of conversations with Shange, recorded while she was visiting the University of Connecticut as a speaker. Shange supplied the answer to the last question by mail, and she has been kind enough to read and edit the typescript.

INT. You have indicated that you feel that Black writers from the East, West, South, and the Midwest represent separate groups, each with its own voice and perhaps a different aesthetic. Would you elaborate on that?

SHANGE. Sure. My craft was seriously nurtured in California and that probably has some influence on what my writing looks like. There's not a California style, but there are certain feelings and a certain freeness that set those writers off from those in the Chicago-St. Louis-Detroit tripod group. They're not the same. In the West we're terribly free to do whatever we want. We're free to associate with Asians and Latins at will, aesthetically as well as politically. And this is reflected in the kinds of things we do, so that the chauvinism that you might find that's exclusionary, in that triangle, you don't find too much in California. And if you do find it, it's in young poets who're just starting. Black, Asian, or Latin, they're only very nationalistic until they realize that all Third World people are working toward the same thing, which for us is the explication of our reality. I sometimes get the feeling that the writers in Chicago are at war, and that they are defending our reality. In San Francisco, that defensive stance isn't necessary, because

the racism in California is so peculiar, they don't really attack us *immediately,* so we're able to do the particularly important job of simply exploring what our lives have been in the Western hemisphere, and making the exploration, not the defense, be the work of the poems. My kids and the people around me should know exactly who we are. And when someone speaks of Third World people's reality, there'll be no mistake about what that reality is. The poetry of the Black writer on the West Coast clarifies - migrations, our relationship to the soil, to ourselves in space. There is an enormous amount of space in the West, and you do not feel personally impinged upon every time you come out of your door, like you do in New York and in Chicago. So, there's a different attitude about being alive. I'm really glad that David Henderson and Ishmael [Reed] live there. I used to live there. It gave us a chance to breathe, to get away from the immediacy of oppression in the East and those particular political events, which all of us experienced, and which we sometimes deal with as a corrective group in our poetry. Black writers on the West Coast got out from under the heavy pressure of those events, but that doesn't mean that we forgot them. It just means that we could deal with them from another angle. The Midwest people: If you see a poem you know where it came from, if it came from Chicago. Their sense of rhythm is almost limited to whatever it is that came up off the Delta. They seldom stray from particular rhythm sequences that I would associate with the blues and with inner-city urban life. This is all right, but it can become a trap. I think there is a tendency to assume that all Black people know that particular rhythm sequence, that all Black people migrated up the Mississippi River, and that is not true. They talk about the cities, about gangs, welfare - as opposed to opening it up and talking about Black folks in other places. There ain't no poems about nobody in the country in Indiana. Nobody knows what kind of life they live, because they are not a part of our scheme of what Black life is supposed to look like. And that means we're leaving out portions of our population in order to formulate some ideology of what we are. This monolithic idea that everybody's the same, that we all live the same lives. That the Black family, the Black man, the Black female are the same thing. A one image. A one something. It's not true, but it's very difficult to break through some of that. We ignore Black Catholics. They don't exist in literature. Maybe in the Renaissance a couple of people admitted to being Catholic, but everybody nowadays has become somebody who was nurtured in the Baptist Church. I don't know why we're trying to become some solid unit of something. Part of our beauty is the fact that we're so much.

INT. And New York?

SHANGE. I don't think poets in New York have ever gotten over. Whereas in California readings are a source of joy, readings in New York are almost scenario, because the impact of theatre, dance, and other art forms (and the fact that you need money to produce anything) has made the playwright, the novelist, and the musician the carriers of good news, as opposed to the poet.New York poets almost *have* to be miserable and unhappy to get over. Some are brilliant, absolutely brilliant. Some others are labeled poets, but I don't count them, I don't deal with them that way.

INT. Why not?

SHANGE. Because I don't think they know what they are doing.

INT. What makes a poet from your point of view?

SHANGE. A very conscious effort to be concise and powerful and as illusory as possible, so that the language can, in fact, bring you to more conclusions than the one in the poem, but that that one conclusion can't be avoided, even though there are thousands of others roaming around. And there should be wit and grace and a movement from one image to another, so that there's no narrowness to the body of your work. That to me would suggest someone is a poet.

INT. You seem to have very definite ideas about what it takes to be a poet. Does that definiteness reflect your academic training?

SHANGE. No. Poetry is my life. And actually, when I went to graduate school, and was studying Afro-American art, I was made to feel like a traitor, because there's a huge strain of anti-intellectualism not only in the new Black Arts movement, but in Black America in general. People think that you aren't doing anything: Studying don't mean nothing. I felt very bad, but I was determined that those people were going to hear from me. Just because I had studied didn't mean that I had lost my voice. The anger about my situation as a student propelled me to make doubly sure that I fulfilled *all* my obligations. I always went to my readings, even if I had a test the next day. Or, if I had to teach the morning after a reading, I *did* it. I have always appreciated my academic background, though not just for the usual reasons that you would expect. I went to Women's Studies, because in Women's Studies, I was at least able to discuss the anger and the awkwardness. I wasn't stifled or shut back.

INT. I can see from your experience why you would see not just richness but truth in our diversity. Do you think that Southern Black writers are shaped in distinctive ways by their experience in the South?

SHANGE. Yes. My sister and I were raised in the Midwest and the North, and we'd go to a lot of poetry readings together. At one reading, there were a lot of women who had formerly been raised in the South. And we were getting very upset by what, in our ignorance, we saw as their romanticization of Southern living. Instead of a streetcar, there would be hills and swamps and a porch and grandma and quilts and iron pots and Mr. So-and-So from down by the church. And I was saying to myself, if it was as wonderful as all that, why in the hell did you all come up here? It was really getting ridiculous. But I thought a little more, and I said, wait. If it's that severe a sense of loss, then perhaps they're not talking about what we are talking about. To children of migrations, leaving the South may have engendered a stunning sense of loss, and that's something that should be respected and dealt with in its own right.

INT. So, were they merely romanticizing, or driving to the heart of a personal reality that you felt cut off from?

SHANGE. I think they were explaining. After a while, I wasn't paying attention to the romantic images. I was trying to deal with the motivation for those images, and I was wondering, why are they telling me this? Why is this supposed to be important to me?

And I decided that it was because they wanted us to know what they thought they had lost. And what they thought they lost is, in fact, as important as what really did go away, because that vacuum has first to be identified and then filled with something. And those acts of identification and repair are going to be, or should be, increasingly personal. But mostly now you get just one picture. A lot of times, Black poets are expected to reflect immediate political need, or current political fashion. I think that tendency is behind the fact that you can't talk anymore about the South as a bad thing. It's like Heaven; you don't criticize it. Just as for a while, it was a terrifying and scary thing to write a poem which was not politically relevant, about yourself when you were a child. Nor could you speak critically of your mother and father; they worked so hard as Black people. So for a long time we didn't have strong poems dealing with *actual* Black family life; you couldn't do it. But, well, we've been here for as long as however we've been here - each of us, separately. And that is something that we're beginning to explore as we try to understand ourselves as mature adults. And some women are sort of easing away to address the real bludgeoning effects that any family has. Cover-ups, romantic or otherwise, are not endemic to us, but that doesn't matter. O.K., so I'm not from the South. I missed that big jolt that was a big thing in the fourth generation migratory Black person, who's been up North since 1917, or something, so I don't know nothing about that fund of experiences, and I just have to be quiet. So, I'm saying, all right, I'll be quiet, but I would at least like to know why those women glorified their losses. Usually, when people make something important, it's because it's not working. It's something that has to be dealt with. And they start addressing it however they can. I think critical explorations are beginning to happen, and in the next five years there will be some really marvelous work, like Black *Nashvilles,* like Black Black-fiction shows, and Black stories about the reality of our lives in the South, as opposed to our dream dimensions of that. It's too crazy now. Everybody had a grandma who was wonderful, or an uncle who came by and did the family errands. Cotton was nice to be picked. That is crazy to me, because it's the same thing that my grandma said she was tired of and the reason that she left. My experience poses not a simple difference but a contradiction to such depictions.

INT. Granting that differences are important to understanding our identity, are there similarities which it is crucial to examine? Are Black women writers, for example, connected by a common set of problems?

SHANGE. I worked exclusively with Black women in college, but since that time I've been working most in a Third World context, in terms of women, at any rate. I moved from New York in 1970 and went to California because at that time there was no space for an independent woman's voice; women were expected to be quiet and have babies, no matter what kind of training they had had. Where I came from, women existed for the pleasure and support of men. I began to wonder, What are we doing? What are we supposed to do when our men are gone? I started writing because I had to have an answer, I had to hear a voice. I absolutely had to hear something. And nobody was going to give it to me. So, I gave it to myself.

I left New York because I could not fight with them. In fact, I thought what they were doing was right. But I just could not live inside those roles. Those same male-oriented

roles and expectations were imposed in our literature. As a young woman, I was starving for Black literature. I didn't care what they said, just so the writers gave me something. For years, I was able to tolerate being chastised and denigrated in American literature and any other kind of literature because that is where we were, and that's how women were regarded. But as my consciousness as a woman developed, I said, hey, you all are doing the same thing to women that you say Faulkner did to *you.* What the hell is going on? But even then I didn't take it as a personal affront, because that's how all of us were trained. I do now, though. I mean, after ten years of women saying, hey, we're people, we think, we feel - I don't expect the same kinds of attitudes. You can't blame somebody because salt wasn't refined when it wasn't refined. Now we know how to refine it, so let's do it.

INT. Do you think this habit of diminishment and neglect in and out of literature has forced Black women to look at life in a special way, has forced them to devise a special aesthetic?

SHANGE. To an extent. The same rhetoric that is used to establish the Black Aesthetic, we must use to establish a women's aesthetic, which is to say that those parts of reality that are ours, those things about our bodies, the cycles of our lives that have been ignored for centuries in all castes and classes of our people, are to be dealt with now. When women reach puberty, they menstruate. What does that mean? Women have relationships with their mothers that are incredibly full of pain and love. A mother functions as part of a husband, not as another woman for the child. Women have relationships to the world that have to do with whether you can *reach* things. Can you put a pan away? Can you lift stuff? Are you afraid of a corner at night - and other things that men do not deal with? And our poetry deals with that, and we use images that have to do with that. Some men have weird notions about women. The title of a manuscript that I have, "Dreams as Real as Menses," means to most women that their dreams are going to come true. Most men hearing that title either stumble over the word "menses" or go "ugh" because they can't see or accept that reality. So it's the same as the Black *man's* struggle, in terms of liberating our reality from the pits, from Hades, and making things we see everyday tangible and speak-able. One has to speak about things inherently female. And that is my persona. A women. And she is going to talk the way she understands. Why must I use metaphors because men understand them? That's the same argument I have with Paul Laurence Dunbar. He knew that he could not be respected as a poet unless he wrote all those sonnets with the English corrected, and they are just awful. This is analogous to what women have been doing all along. Using male-identified symbols and myths to talk about ourselves. That's ridiculous. There are enough females in the world to be joyful, to be knowledgeable, to be loved. We don't have to go across the line. And if men don't understand it, then I would suggest, as I suggest to white students who say they don't understand Black literature, that they should get more serious about the subject. Learn something about women. I'm not going to change what I write to help a man understand it. They've been here as long as I've been here. They rule the damned world, they rule the household, if not the world, and they can certainly learn who their mother was, and who they sleep with at night.

INT. Does your position create friction with Black male writers?

SHANGE. Most of the Black men whose writing I respect, respect mine. And I have very good working relationships with them. I don't have good working relationships with some so-called critics and socio-political poets. They don't want idiom; they want ideology, and they can have it. They're seeing Black poetry as some kind of mammoth creature with four legs and a nose. And my leg is going over there, or over here. It destroys their idea. They don't want to deal with poetry, they want to talk politics. They want to make me run for office. Well, I'm not going to do that. Pablo Neruda did run for office, but he was a poet in the government. My politics, I think, are very correct. I do not have heroes who are not heroes.

INT. Who are some of your heroes?

SHANGE. Toussaint L'Ouverture. Denmark Vesey. Sojourner Truth. Nat Love. Albert Ayler. Jelly Roll Morton. Bessie Smith. Zora Neale Hurston . . .

INT. That's an interesting list. What makes them heroes? Politicians . . .

SHANGE. Politicians don't turn me on. When someone takes charge of your reality and does something to it that is satisfying for them, changing everything that comes after in some way or other, then that is, to me, being a successful and competent human being and a successful and competent Black person. When you take something you believe in and make it affect other people, you're doing a politically significant act. These people did things that changed the way all the rest of us were treated or thought of in the world. I think you have to stop looking to something called "the politician." They're there. That's their job, but it can't just be on them. What are we, sheep? We don't have no feet? No brains? We can't do anything ourselves?

INT. Are you stressing self-reliance, or ...

SHANGE. The most important thing I know is that anything you want to do, especially pertaining to your work, you can do yourself. You don't have to wait on nobody. You don't have to wait on the Black world; you don't have to wait on Ishmael; you don't have to wait on Percy Sutton. If you want to do a show, you go to your little local bar, and toll them that on - whatever their night off is - you want to use their space. And you go and use it to the best of your ability, and get paid $1.37, but get known in your community. Send out your own little press releases. Meet a printer. Have a printer do up just one page of your poems. Give them away, mail them to your friends. Give him fifty dollars and have him do a ten-page booklet. You don't have to wait. Learn how to print your goddamn self. This sense that we have to follow all the patterns established by the country and by our own habit is really quite unnecessary. And if we are, in fact, closer to developing a new way of thinking and new skills, we have no choice but to do for ourselves. Which is not to go back to Booker T., but to take him to the ultimate point of what he said in the first place. You can do what you have to, what you must. You don't have to be recognized by whites. Just go and do it. There's the anecdote: "They don't need to know we can build the Empire State Building, they just need to know we can clean floors?" I don't even care what they know. All I need to know is that Black people

are not going to sit around waiting for the powers that be in the white community or in our community to take care of us.

INT. Did you have a Black audience in mind when you wrote *colored girls?*

SHANGE. It was meant for a women's audience, initially. In most of my work, I'm talking to women, because I'm talking to myself when I write. As for specifically Black audiences, I don't think like that. I write poems, and I take them where I think they'll work. I don't bar much. If I tried to stop a poem, because I don't have an audience for it, I'd be a fool. Poetry is like the only privacy in some areas that I have, so I can't jam it up because Black people might not like it. I write the poem because it's there, and I take it where I can take it. Maybe I can't take it anywhere, maybe I just have to leave it in the house. Some of them I do that with. But I have a right to think and feel what I want, and I can't stop feeling what I feel. Writing with me is a visceral thing. I have to get certain ideas out, or I will get sick, I will cry, I will become catatonic. I don't have a choice.

INT. You've spoken on other occasions about influences. Who among contemporary Black writers has had the most influence on what and how you write?

SHANGE. Ishmael. *Yellow Back Radio Broke-Down, Mumbo Jumbo,* "I Am A Cowboy in the Boat of Ra" - these have been terribly significant to me, because they said, look, you have the whole world to deal with. You do not have to deal with the block in New York City where there are no trees. And there's Baraka. Everything. All the essays. Everything. He's fabulous. I read the stuff out loud. The stories in *Tales,* in *Dante's Hell,* are just some of the most beautiful uses of language and imagery I've seen anywhere at all.

INT. Looking back at your work from *sassafrass* through *nappy* edges are you aware of any changes in the way you see the world or in the way that you express what you see and feel? Are you more concerned with technique? With broadening the scope of your vision? With exhausting your material?

SHANGE. Only the *way* I have to proceed has changed. As a recognized writer I face problems I never dreamed of as an unknown: expectations. I find that in order to work at all now I must virtually obliterate the outside world. I have to construct what I call a "creative myopia" because the wolves are at the door. People say, "How could *you* say *that?"* or "So many people pay attention to your ideas, you are responsible for ... " All that sort of thing is burdensome and interrupts my relationship with myself. More and more I understand why Midwestern writers feel they are under siege. In certain parts of the country, the density of population and poverty surely exacerbate racism. This year the critics had a field day discussing whether or not Black and Latin actors *could* do Shakespeare! In such a world, one admittedly has to flex muscle not just lyricism. I have to do battle with myself to even present the fragile composites of a life - Black and fictional - before such barbarians. I sometimes doubt that I'd have been able to write *sassafrass* had I been aware of this situation. She's too precious to me to endure the wear and tear of this place (the Eastern literary establishment, Black and white). I am more concerned with craft at this point. To protect my characters and landscapes from

unwarranted attacks, I make them taut and as lean as I can. Some whimsy is lost but I doubt anyone in the midst of an urban winter would miss it. There's little possibility of my exhausting my material. I'm still alive and feeling and seeing. I've started drawing and dancing again to make sure that I don't lose touch with the roots of my poetic vision. These roots have so much to do with actuality and yet so very little. But that begins another story.

Source: Henry Blackwell, "An Interview with Ntozake Shange," in *Black American Literature Forum,* Vol. 13, No. 4, Winter 1979, pp. 134-8.

Adaptations

Betsey Brown was adapted for the stage as an operetta in a production by Joseph Papp's Public Theater in 1986.

Topics for Further Study

Research how different communities around the country dealt with the crisis brought on by the Supreme Court's decision to desegregate public schools. How do you think Betsey's experience of busing is affected by the fact that she comes from an educated middle-class background?

Research the case of Emmett Till, which Jane mentions in Chapter 6. Why do you think Shange refers to this historical case in her novel? How does it shed light on the novel's themes of race and sexuality?

Research the life and reputation of Paul Laurence Dunbar. Why do you think Shange chose the work of this black poet in particular for Betsey to recite? How does the Dunbar poem reflect the novel's larger themes?

Music is important to many of the characters in *Betsey Brown.* Look for musical references in the novel and find out about the different artists, then compare the musical tastes of two characters. What does music represent to each of them? What does it say about their style, character, and morals?

Compare and Contrast

1950s: There are a series of legal decisions regarding equal access to educational opportunities for blacks, including the landmark 1954 case, *Brown v. Board of Education,* which lay the groundwork for the civil rights struggles for integration that shake the nation in the 1960s. However, these legal decisions are often resisted by localities, and the process of desegregation still lags at the decade's close.

1980s: In keeping with the socially conservative tenor of the Reagan era, civil rights policies are attacked and, in some cases, reversed. The National Urban League calls the president's record on racial equality "deplorable."

Today: African Americans make up President Clinton's strongest supporters. However, affirmative action and programs of busing for school integration are under fire in state courts across the country. Many districts are phasing out busing as a method of integrating schools. Legal challenges are being brought to universities that use race as a factor in deciding acceptance and financial aid.

1950s: In an atmosphere of post-War conservatism and prosperity, many American women assume a traditional role in the family as supportive wives and mothers, and few have access to economic or other forms of public power.

1980s: There is a backlash against the feminist ideologies of the 1970s that sought to alter traditional gender roles. The Equal Right Amendment (ERA) is defeated in 1982 and the anti-abortion movement is strong. However, the number of women in the workforce - including those in lucrative and powerful positions - continues to grow.

Today: Sixty-one percent of married women have paid jobs, up from twenty-three percent in 1950. In a booming economy, more women seek flexible work arrangements such as job sharing and telecommuting to allow them to combine career and motherhood.

1950s: American culture begins to show indications of a trend toward sexual liberation that

will blossom a decade later. *Playboy,* which begins publication in 1953, makes pornography safe for the suburban coffee table. Alfred Kin-sey publishes his study *Sexual Behavior in the Human Female,* with the shocking statistic that one-quarter of married American women report having had extramarital affairs.

1980s: "Family values" and the rise of the AIDS epidemic lead to a new sexual conservatism in American culture. In May 1985, the government creates a special commission to find new ways to curb pornography. The conservative commission finds unusual allies among feminists when it concludes that pornography encourages violence and debases women. Convenience stores across the country temporarily stop selling soft porn such as *Playboy.*

Today: Though the panic associated with the AIDS epidemic has subsided, a renewed emphasis on monogamy remains. There is a movement among young people to revalue virginity and some youth activists call themselves born-again virgins. Teen pregnancy is down. However, the Internet makes pornography vastly more accessible than it has ever been before.

1950s: Half of all working whites describe themselves as middle-class, while only one-fifth of blacks who are employed say the same.

1980s: Economic stagnation and inflation affect black families disproportionately, but many conservative social commentators attribute the erosion of the African-American family to social rather than economic factors.

Today: In a strong economy, blacks have made small gains compared to whites. One scholar estimates that one-quarter to one-third of blacks can now be considered securely middle-class.

1950s: Rock 'n' roll takes America by storm. Elvis Presley, who derives his style from little-known black blues artists, is rock 'n' roll's unrivaled king. With the popularity of rock, black performers such as Fats Domino and Chuck Berry begin to win a white "crossover" audience. However, parents fear that this new influence will seduce and corrupt their children.

1980s: Hip-hop culture, originating as a black, urban underground musical style in the 1970s, goes mainstream. In 1982 rap group Run DMC has a huge "crossover" hit with a song sampling from heavy metal. In 1985 the record industry introduces parental advisory labeling on music with "blatant explicit lyric content." Tipper Gore founds the Parents Music Resource Center to warn parents about the sex and violence in popular music.

Today: In 1998 rap becomes the top-selling musical format in America, outselling both rock and country for the first time. Some rappers move to shake the genre's reputation for violence and obscenity, putting forth "positive messages" in their music. More than seventy percent of hip-hop albums are purchased by whites.

What Do I Read Next?

For colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf (1975), Shange's groundbreaking "choreopoem" play, combines poetry, music, and dance to explore relationships between black men and women. This work, considerably more experimental than *Betsey Brown,* established Shange's international reputation.

Shange's first novel, *Sassafrass, Cypress and Indigo* (1985), uses prose, poetry, letters, and recipes to portray the lives of three sisters, each of them a different kind of artist, as they confront dilemmas relating to love, feminism, racial politics, and art.

Brown Girl, Brownstones (1959), by Paule Marshall, tells the story of a young Caribbean-American girl growing up in New York and learning about who she is in relation to her family, background, neighborhood, and the big city beyond.

Gloria Naylor's *Linden Hills* (1985) is named for the affluent black suburb where its main characters, two writers, reside. In this novel Naylor explores the emptiness of wealth and the significance of social class among African Americans, borrowing imagery from Dante's classic *Inferno.*

Sarah Phillips (1984), by Andrea Lee, is a coming-of-age story centering on a young, upper-middle-class African-American woman trying to reconcile her racial identity and her unusual economic privilege. This book offers a rare portrait of life in the high society of the black bourgeoisie.

Jessie Fauset, a notable writer from the Harlem Renaissance era, focused most of her fiction on educated, middle-class black characters. Her 1931 novel *Chinaberry Tree* traces two generations of women and paints a portrait of life in an affluent and insular black community.

Further Study

Carroll, Rebecca, ed., with a foreword by Ntozake Shange, *Sugar in the Raw: Voices of Young Black Girls in America,* Crown, 1997.

This collection of nonfiction first-person narratives about the lives of fifteen girls, aged eleven to eighteen, from all across America, addresses issues of self-esteem, identity, and values, offering an authentic portrait of contemporary black girlhood.

Haskins, Jim, *Separate but Not Equal: The Dream and the*

Struggle, Scholastic, 1997.

Tracing back from the 1957 crisis in Little Rock to explore the history of segregated education, Haskins sets a thorough context for the school integration crisis of the 1950s□1970s and also covers the landmark cases of the struggle. This book is aimed specifically at a high-school audience.

Landry, Bart, *The New Black Middle Class,* University of

California Press, 1987.

In this in-depth academic study, sociologist Landry describes the rise of an elite and privileged class of African Americans since the Civil Rights Movement, offering insight into the social stratification of American blacks.

Shange, Ntozake, *See No Evil: Prefaces, Essays and Accounts, 1976-1983,* Momo's Press, 1984.

Shange's nonfiction writings, collected here, express her views on the state of black arts in her early career and illuminate the motivations behind her more experimental works.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Novels for Students (NfS) is to provide readers with a guide to understanding, enjoying, and studying novels by giving them easy access to information about the work. Part of Gale's□For Students□ Literature line, NfS is specifically designed to meet the curricular needs of high school and undergraduate college students and their teachers, as well as the interests of general readers and researchers considering specific novels. While each volume contains entries on □classic□ novels

frequently studied in classrooms, there are also entries containing hard-to-find information on contemporary novels, including works by multicultural, international, and women novelists.

The information covered in each entry includes an introduction to the novel and the novel's author; a plot summary, to help readers unravel and understand the events in a novel; descriptions of important characters, including explanation of a given character's role in the novel as well as discussion about that character's relationship to other characters in the novel; analysis of important themes in the novel; and an explanation of important literary techniques and movements as they are demonstrated in the novel.

In addition to this material, which helps the readers analyze the novel itself, students are also provided with important information on the literary and historical background informing each work. This includes a historical context essay, a box comparing the time or place the novel was written to modern Western culture, a critical overview essay, and excerpts from critical essays on the novel. A unique feature of NfS is a specially commissioned critical essay on each novel, targeted toward the student reader.

To further aid the student in studying and enjoying each novel, information on media adaptations is provided, as well as reading suggestions for works of fiction and nonfiction on similar themes and topics. Classroom aids include ideas for research papers and lists of critical sources that provide additional material on the novel.

Selection Criteria

The titles for each volume of NfS were selected by surveying numerous sources on teaching literature and analyzing course curricula for various school districts. Some of the sources surveyed included: literature anthologies; Reading Lists for College-Bound Students: The Books Most Recommended by America's Top Colleges; textbooks on teaching the novel; a College Board survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; a National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) survey of novels commonly studied in high schools; the NCTE's Teaching Literature in High School: The Novel;and the Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) list of best books for young adults of the past twenty-five years. Input was also solicited from our advisory board, as well as educators from various areas. From these discussions, it was determined that each volume should have a mix of □classic□ novels (those works commonly taught in literature classes) and contemporary novels for which information is often hard to find. Because of the interest in expanding the canon of literature, an emphasis was also placed on including works by international, multicultural, and women authors. Our advisory board members□educational professionals□ helped pare down the list for each volume. If a work was not selected for the present volume, it was often noted as a possibility for a future volume. As always, the editor welcomes suggestions for titles to be included in future volumes.

How Each Entry Is Organized

Each entry, or chapter, in NfS focuses on one novel. Each entry heading lists the full name of the novel, the author's name, and the date of the novel's publication. The following elements are contained in each entry:

- Introduction: a brief overview of the novel which provides information about its first appearance, its literary standing, any controversies surrounding the work, and major conflicts or themes within the work.
- Author Biography: this section includes basic facts about the author's life, and focuses on events and times in the author's life that inspired the novel in question.
- Plot Summary: a factual description of the major events in the novel. Lengthy summaries are broken down with subheads.
- Characters: an alphabetical listing of major characters in the novel. Each character name is followed by a brief to an extensive description of the character's role in the novel, as well as discussion of the character's actions, relationships, and possible motivation. Characters are listed alphabetically by last name. If a character is unnamed□for instance, the narrator in Invisible Man-the character is listed as □The Narrator□ and alphabetized as □Narrator.□ If a character's first name is the only one given, the name will appear alphabetically by that name. □ Variant names are also included for each character. Thus, the full name □Jean Louise Finch□ would head the listing for the narrator of To Kill a Mockingbird, but listed in a separate cross-reference would be the nickname □Scout Finch.□
- Themes: a thorough overview of how the major topics, themes, and issues are addressed within the novel. Each theme discussed appears in a separate subhead, and is easily accessed through the boldface entries in the Subject/Theme Index.
- Style: this section addresses important style elements of the novel, such as setting, point of view, and narration; important literary devices used, such as imagery, foreshadowing, symbolism; and, if applicable, genres to which the work might have belonged, such as Gothicism or Romanticism. Literary terms are explained within the entry, but can also be found in the Glossary.
- Historical Context: This section outlines the social, political, and cultural climate in which the author lived and the novel was created. This section may include descriptions of related historical events, pertinent aspects of daily life in the culture, and the artistic and literary sensibilities of the time in which the work was written. If the novel is a historical work, information regarding the time in which the novel is set is also included. Each section is broken down with helpful subheads.
- Critical Overview: this section provides background on the critical reputation of the novel, including bannings or any other public controversies surrounding the work. For older works, this section includes a history of how the novel was first received and how perceptions of it may have changed over the years; for more recent novels, direct quotes from early reviews may also be included.
- Criticism: an essay commissioned by NfS which specifically deals with the novel and is written specifically for the student audience, as well as excerpts from previously published criticism on the work (if available).

- Sources: an alphabetical list of critical material quoted in the entry, with full bibliographical information.
- Further Reading: an alphabetical list of other critical sources which may prove useful for the student. Includes full bibliographical information and a brief annotation.

In addition, each entry contains the following highlighted sections, set apart from the main text as sidebars:

- Media Adaptations: a list of important film and television adaptations of the novel, including source information. The list also includes stage adaptations, audio recordings, musical adaptations, etc.
- Topics for Further Study: a list of potential study questions or research topics dealing with the novel. This section includes questions related to other disciplines the student may be studying, such as American history, world history, science, math, government, business, geography, economics, psychology, etc.
- Compare and Contrast Box: an □at-a-glance□ comparison of the cultural and historical differences between the author's time and culture and late twentieth century/early twenty-first century Western culture. This box includes pertinent parallels between the major scientific, political, and cultural movements of the time or place the novel was written, the time or place the novel was set (if a historical work), and modern Western culture. Works written after 1990 may not have this box.
- What Do I Read Next?: a list of works that might complement the featured novel or serve as a contrast to it. This includes works by the same author and others, works of fiction and nonfiction, and works from various genres, cultures, and eras.

Other Features

NfS includes □The Informed Dialogue: Interacting with Literature,□ a foreword by Anne Devereaux Jordan, Senior Editor for Teaching and Learning Literature (TALL), and a founder of the Children's Literature Association. This essay provides an enlightening look at how readers interact with literature and how Novels for Students can help teachers show students how to enrich their own reading experiences.

A Cumulative Author/Title Index lists the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the NfS series by nationality and ethnicity.

A Subject/Theme Index, specific to each volume, provides easy reference for users who may be studying a particular subject or theme rather than a single work. Significant subjects from events to broad themes are included, and the entries pointing to the specific theme discussions in each entry are indicated in boldface.

Each entry has several illustrations, including photos of the author, stills from film adaptations (if available), maps, and/or photos of key historical events.

Citing Novels for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Novels for Students may use the following general forms. These examples are based on MLA style; teachers may request that students adhere to a different style, so the following examples may be adapted as needed. When citing text from NfS that is not attributed to a particular author (i.e., the Themes, Style, Historical Context sections, etc.), the following format should be used in the bibliography section:

□Night.□ Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

When quoting the specially commissioned essay from NfS (usually the first piece under the □Criticism□ subhead), the following format should be used:

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Novels for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 335-39.

When quoting a journal or newspaper essay that is reprinted in a volume of NfS, the following form may be used:

Malak, Amin. □Margaret Atwood's □The Handmaid's Tale and the Dystopian Tradition,□ Canadian Literature No. 112 (Spring, 1987), 9-16; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 4, ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski (Detroit: Gale, 1998), pp. 133-36.

When quoting material reprinted from a book that appears in a volume of NfS, the following form may be used:

Adams, Timothy Dow. □Richard Wright: □Wearing the Mask,□ in Telling Lies in Modern American Autobiography (University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 69-83; excerpted and reprinted in Novels for Students, Vol. 1, ed. Diane Telgen (Detroit: Gale, 1997), pp. 59-61.

We Welcome Your Suggestions

The editor of Novels for Students welcomes your comments and ideas. Readers who wish to suggest novels to appear in future volumes, or who have other suggestions, are cordially invited to contact the editor. You may contact the editor via email at: ForStudentsEditors@gale.com. Or write to the editor at:

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