Blues for an Alabama Sky Study Guide

Blues for an Alabama Sky by Pearl Cleage

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Introduction

In a preface to the published version of her play *Blues for an Alabama Sky*, Cleage comments, "I still believe that theatre has a ritual power to call forth the spirits, illuminate the darkness and *speak the truth to the people.*"

Blues for an Alabama Sky was first produced in 1995. In 1996, it was performed during the Atlanta Summer Olympic Games as part of the Cultural Olympiad. The play is set in Harlem, New York City, in 1930, at a time when, as Cleage states, "The creative euphoria of the Harlem Renaissance has given way to the harsher realities of the Great Depression." Angel is a struggling blues singer and nightclub performer who cannot find a job. Her friend Guy, a costume designer, is also out of work but dreams of being hired to design dresses for the famous African-American singer and dancer Josephine Baker, who is living in Paris. Their neighbor Delia, a social worker, is trying to organize a family planning clinic in Harlem. Their friend Sam, a doctor, works long hours delivering babies at the Harlem Hospital.

Angel, who has no other source of income, allows herself to be courted by Leland, a very conservative, religious young man from Alabama, who claims he wants to marry her. Meanwhile, Delia, with the help of Sam, is successful in convincing a local church to support her proposal for a family planning clinic. Guy finally receives the long-awaited notice from Josephine Baker inviting him to Paris to work for her. Angel, however, has gotten pregnant by Leland and obtains an illegal abortion performed by Sam. Furious about the abortion, Leland shoots and kills Sam.

In writing this play, Cleage was interested in portraying the lives of struggling African-American musicians, artists, and social activists in Harlem during the era of the Harlem Renaissance and the depression. Central themes of the story include economic hardship, reproductive rights, and homosexuality.

Author Biography

Pearl Michelle Cleage (pronounced "cleg") was born December 7, 1948, in Springfield, Massachusetts. She grew up in Detroit, where her father, a minister, founded his own denomination and became widely known for the fifteen-foot-high painting of the Black Madonna and Child, called the "Shrine of the Black Madonna," which adorned his church. Cleage's mother was a schoolteacher who, along with Cleage's father, instilled in her a sense of responsibility to the African-American community. Cleage now describes her political orientation as that of an African-American Urban Nationalist Feminist Warrior.

Cleage studied drama and playwriting at a number of colleges and universities. She attended Howard University from 1966 until 1969, when she married Michael Lucius Lomax, an elected county official in Georgia (they were divorced ten years later). She attended Yale University in 1969 and the University of the West Indies in 1971. In 1971, she received a bachelor's degree from Spelman College and enrolled in graduate courses at Atlanta University. During the 1970s, Cleage worked as a writer, producer, and talk show host for a number of radio and television stations in Atlanta, Georgia. She served as the director of communications for the city of Atlanta and as press secretary to Mayor Maynard Jackson, the city's first African-American mayor.

From 1983 to 1987, Cleage was playwright-in-residence at the Just Us Theater Company in Atlanta, serving as artistic director from 1987 to 1994. In 1986, she founded the magazine *Catalyst*, of which she remained the editor for ten years. From 1986 to 1991, Cleage taught as an instructor in creative writing at Spelman College, where in 1991 she was made playwright-in-residence. During the 1990s, she also served as playwright-in-residence at Smith College and Agnes Scott College. In 1994, Cleage married her longtime companion, Zaron Burnett Jr.

Cleage saw several of her one-act plays produced on the stage at Howard University in the late 1960s and at Spelman College in the early 1970s. During the 1980s, the Just Us Theater Company produced her plays *puppetplay* (1983), *Good News* (1984), and *Essentials* (1985). The year 1992 saw the production of two of her plays, *Chain* and *Late Bus to Mecca*, by the Women's Project and Productions and the New Federal Theater, and *Flyin' West* by the Alliance Theater Company in Atlanta. *Blues for an Alabama Sky* was first produced in 1995. In 1996, it was performed by the Alliance Theatre Company at the Summer Olympic Games in Atlanta as part of the Cultural Olympiad.

Cleage's nonfiction writings include *Mad at Miles: A Blackwoman's Guide to the Truth* (1990), which criticizes the celebrated jazz musician Miles Davis for his treatment of women, and *Deals with the Devil and Other Reasons to Riot* (1993), a collection of essays on American popular culture and mass media. *What Looks Like Crazy on an Ordinary Day—* (1997), her first novel, was selected for the Oprah Winfrey Book Club. *I Wish I Had a Red Dress* was published in 2001.

Plot Summary

Act 1

Scene 1 takes place at 3:00 a.m. Angel, who is drunk, is being helped home to Guy's apartment by Guy and Leland, a young man who happened to be passing them on the street. Angel's boyfriend, Nick, an Italian gangster, has just gotten married and has broken off his relationship with her. During her nightclub performance at the Cotton Club, which Nick was attending, Angel interrupted her dance routine to yell and throw things at him from the stage. As a result, she has been fired, as has her friend Guy, who worked as a costume designer for the club. Guy's neighbor, Delia, awakened by the commotion, comes into his apartment to see what has happened. Delia, a social worker, is trying to organize the opening of a family planning clinic in Harlem. Guy explains that his dream is to get a job as costume designer for the celebrated African-American singer and dancer Josephine Baker, who is living in Paris.

Scene 2 takes place that Sunday afternoon. Since Angel had been living in an apartment paid for by Nick, Guy offers to let her live with him for a while. He doesn't tell her that he, too, has been fired, for fear of worrying her. Delia comes in to see how Angel is doing. Their friend Sam, a well-respected doctor at the Harlem Hospital, also stops by. He has just delivered twins and offers them all a drink in celebration. Sam, Delia, and Guy leave to go out for dinner, while Angel, still too hung over to eat, stays behind. Looking out the window, she sees Leland, whom she does not remember from the night before. After he explains that he helped Guy take her home, she suggests they go for a walk together the following Sunday.

Scene 3 takes place the following Wednesday afternoon. Angel comes home to Guy's apartment, having spent the whole day walking around Harlem, trying without luck to get a new job as a nightclub singer. Guy returns home and tells her that Nick has set up an audition for her at a club owned by his friend Tony T. Angel and Guy get ready to attend a party in honor of the poet Langston Hughes, who has been out of town. Meanwhile, in Delia's apartment, Delia and Sam work together on preparing her speech to convince a local church to support the opening of a family planning clinic.

Scene 4 takes place the following Sunday evening. After Leland arrives for his date with Angel, Guy, Delia, and Sam leave to go out to the theater. Angel and Leland stay in the apartment and get to know one another. Angel learns that Leland is from Alabama and has recently come to Harlem to stay with a cousin. He tells her that his wife, Anna, died eight months earlier in childbirth, which the baby also did not survive. Leland explains that Angel reminds him of his wife, which is why she caught his attention. Angel also learns that Leland is very religious; she admits that she herself does not go to church. Angel kisses him and the lights go down.

Scene 5 takes place the following Friday evening. Guy tells Delia that he has finally received a telegram from Josephine Baker in Paris, stating that she likes his gown

designs and requesting that he send her several sample gowns. After Delia leaves, Leland arrives for a date with Angel, who is not home yet. Guy invites him in but goes out before Angel arrives. Angel comes in, back from her "audition" with Tony T. She explains that Tony T. wanted to take her on as his mistress, supporting her in exchange for romantic companionship. Leland assumes that Angel has turned down Tony T.'s offer, although Angel hints that she has, in fact, accepted it since she has no other source of income. Leland tells Angel that he wants to be her man, although she warns him against the idea. He gives her a dress as a gift. After Leland leaves, Angel looks at the dress, which is entirely too conservative for her taste and looks awful.

Act 2

Scene 1 of act 2 takes place two weeks later on a Sunday afternoon. Guy is preparing a tea party to celebrate sending his five costumes off to Josephine Baker in Paris. Sam, Delia, Leland, and Angel are all there to celebrate. But when Leland finds out that Guy is homosexual, he calls it "an abomination." Guy angrily kicks Leland out of the apartment and then interrogates Angel as to why she intends to marry Leland even though she doesn't love him. Angel explains that she wants to marry Leland because he will provide her with financial stability. Meanwhile, in Delia's apartment, Delia and Sam kiss for the first time.

Scene 2 takes place two weeks later. Sam tells Angel that her test shows she is two months pregnant. Angel still hasn't found a job, and there is an eviction notice on the door of Guy's apartment. Guy, however, is unworried about their financial situation because he is counting on receiving money from Josephine Baker for his costumes. After Guy leaves, Leland, who hasn't come around to see Angel in two weeks, arrives and asks her to marry him. She accepts.

Scene 3 takes place the following day. The building in which Delia had hoped to open a family planning clinic has been set on fire in protest against the clinic. Sam, however, offers an alternative space in which to set up the clinic. Guy arrives home with a cable message from Josephine Baker, saying she loves all five of the costumes he made and inviting him to come to Paris and work for her. She has included a ticket on the boat to Paris, along with plenty of money to prepare for the trip. Angel arrives, and Guy tells her the good news and that he has also purchased a ticket for her to accompany him to France. After Guy and Delia go out to celebrate, Sam arrives. Angel tells him that she said would marry Leland but that she has now decided she wants to go to Paris with Guy and does not want to have the baby. Sam agrees to perform an abortion.

Scene 4 takes place the following morning. Angel returns home from getting the abortion and informs Guy about what she has done. After Guy leaves, Leland arrives with a rocking chair he has made for Angel. He tells her he wants her to rock all of their children in the chair and then gives her a diamond engagement ring. Angel lies to Leland about the abortion, telling him that she lost the baby due to a miscarriage. After he begins to question her, however, she tells him the truth, and Leland guesses that it was Sam who performed the abortion. He tells Angel she's lucky he isn't going to kill her

for aborting his child. As Leland is leaving the building, Sam walks up, and Leland shoots him in the back with a pistol, killing him.

Scene 5 takes place two weeks later. Guy and Delia have not seen Angel since the morning Sam was shot. Guy invites Delia to go with him to Paris, and she agrees. Guy goes out, and Angel quietly slips into the apartment. Delia sees her, but the two women "both understand that things have changed between them forever," and they say nothing to one another. After Delia leaves, Angel sits at the window, calmly drinking a glass of champagne, contemplating her next move.

Act 1, Scene 1

Act 1, Scene 1 Summary

Blues for an Alabama Sky takes place in Harlem, New York, in the summer of 1930. The first scene takes place on a New York City street at three in the morning. Guy Jacobs, a black homosexual man about 30 years old, is helping a friend, Angel Allen, a 34-year-old black woman. Angel is a singer at the famous Cotton Club and is obviously quite drunk. Guy's effort to get Angel home is aided by Leland Cunningham, a man who happened to meet the two friends on the street.

As it turns out, Angel has experienced two devastating events this evening at the Club. Angel learned that her boss and boyfriend, Nick, had married another woman. During her performance that evening, Angel stopped the show to yell derogatory comments at Nick, whom she spotted in the audience; before the night was over, Angel was fired. It will be a few weeks before she discovers that Guy, a costume designer at the Club, has also lost his job because he defended Angel.

Guy and Leland successfully get Angel home to Guy's apartment but Guy's neighbor, Delia, is awakened by the commotion. Delia is a social worker and hopes to follow in the footsteps of Margaret Sanger, the famous family planning advocate, by opening a clinic in Harlem. Although Delia's quiet lifestyle and naïve background keep her in awe of Guy's blatant homosexuality and costume designer profession, the two are friends.

Guy's fervent wish is to go to Paris and design costumes for Josephine Baker; there is a large portrait of the French entertainer hanging over Guy's work area in the apartment.

Act 1, Scene 1 Analysis

The Roaring Twenties are over and the Great Depression has taken its place. Jobs are scarce in Harlem, as they are everywhere; but the lack seems particularly startling in this part of New York, especially for those in the entertainment industry like Angel and Guy. The 1920s were famous for a surge in African-American culture and arts. Performers, artists and authors had thrived, in glaring contrast to these early days of the Depression.

Act 1, Scene 2

Act 1, Scene 2 Summary

Not only has Angel lost both her job and Nick; she also has no place to live because her apartment had been provided by her ex-boyfriend. Guy tells Angel that she can stay with him because they are such good friends. Guy is working at various design and sewing jobs at lesser-rate clubs in the city but hasn't told Angel that he lost his job too because he doesn't want to upset her any further.

Delia stops in to see if Angel is feeling any better. She suggests that Angel might want to take a typing class so that she'll be able to find more suitable, steady work. Angel is too hung over to even consider this; but the arrival of their friend, Sam Thomas, a doctor at Harlem Hospital, picks things up when he provides Angel with the cure for her hangover.

Sam is looking for dinner companions to celebrate his delivery of twins tonight. Delia and Guy are happy to go, but Angel remains at Guy's apartment. Leland Cunningham shows up unexpectedly to check on Angel; she doesn't remember him from the night before. Leland explains that he has come to New York from Alabama to help a cousin in construction work and that he's only been in the city for six weeks. In spite of her distress, Angel, the consummate flirt, agrees to go for a walk with Leland the following Sunday evening.

Act 1, Scene 2 Analysis

The introduction of Leland into the story shows the contrast in lifestyles and value systems between the "big city" and the rural South. Leland is conservative and traditional and the juxtaposition of his rural sensibilities in the midst of the worldly group in Harlem is a masterful study in contrasts. Leland also symbolizes a source of stability and possibility for Angel, whose tenuous life has been devastated, leaving her vulnerable on many fronts. The question is whether his naïveté will be a positive force or the source of his failure to adapt to the city.

Act 1, Scene 3

Act 1, Scene 3 Summary

A few days have passed and Angel returns home at the end of an exhausting day with no prospects of a singing job. The sight of the poor and homeless on the streets has driven her even further into despair. To her surprise, Guy informs her that Nick has made arrangements for Angel to audition at the end of the week for a man named Tony, the owner of another club in Harlem. Angel's spirits are immediately lifted and she and Guy dress up to attend a sophisticated party at a friend's house. The event is in honor of poet Langston Hughes, who has been away from New York for some time.

Across the hall, Sam arrives at Delia's apartment to help her prepare for her upcoming speech at the Abyssinian Church, where the Reverend Adam Clayton Powell Jr. is pastor. Delia must convince the church deacons about the importance of birth control for black women in order to obtain their support for her family planning clinic. It is clear that Sam is romantically interested in Delia, but her naiveté and the difference in their ages makes any encounter impossible, at least for now.

Act 1, Scene 3 Analysis

Even though they're down on their luck at the moment, the main characters interact with some very important and powerful people in the New York of the 1920s and 1930s. Langston Hughes was a famous African-American poet; Rev. Adam Clayton Powell was an important religious and political leader; and Margaret Sanger was the founder of the Planned Parenthood organization. It is a bleak time in American history on some fronts, but vital in the areas of social change.

Act 1, Scene 4

Act 1, Scene 4 Summary

A week has passed and Leland is due any minute for his Sunday evening date with Angel. Angel arrives home just in time after being held over at a rehearsal for her upcoming audition. While she primps for her date, Angel tells Guy that she feels lucky to have met Leland after all her bad luck with men. Leland arrives and meets Sam and Delia; he remembers Guy from their first meeting. When the three friends leave for dinner, Angel and Leland remain in the apartment to talk.

Leland confides to Angel that he is mourning his wife and son, both of whom died during childbirth just eight months ago. There is something in Angel's smile that reminds Leland of his wife and he tells her that he would like to pursue a relationship. Leland is also very religious and is intent on finding a new church. He hopes that Angel will accompany him, but Angel tells Leland that she doesn't attend church and silences him with a kiss.

Act 1, Scene 4 Analysis

Angel is caught between two worlds. The anticipation of the possible nightclub job is colliding with the thought of becoming involved with Leland. Even though Leland represents stability and security, Angel has been in the entertainment business too long to be satisfied with being a housewife. She is also a woman of style and zest and isn't flattered to be compared to a dead woman from the South - an area she left behind long ago in search of a more glamorous life.

Act 1, Scene 5

Act 1, Scene 5 Summary

Guy is on top of the world because he's just received a cable from Josephine Baker, to whom he has sent some gown designs. She likes them and asks that some sample gowns be sent to her in Paris as soon as possible. Guy is fashioning a dress on Delia and talks excitedly during the fitting. Delia then leaves to catch up on some sleep, a rare commodity for her these days because of the demands of the family planning clinic.

Leland arrives for a date with Angel but finds Guy at home alone. When Angel does arrive, she is very upset because this afternoon's audition turned out to be nothing more than an indecent proposal from club owner Tony. Against her better judgment, Angel accepts Tony's proposal to become his mistress in exchange for financial support.

Leland's sense of outrage over this annoys Angel, who feels she must face reality. She tells Leland to go home, that she does not love him. Leland persists in declaring his intentions toward Angel and promises to return tomorrow night. After he's gone, Angel sees a box and opens it to find that Leland has left her a gift in the form of the most shapeless, dowdiest dress she's ever seen.

Act 1, Scene 5 Analysis

The characters are about to reach pivotal points in their lives. Guy has caught the attention of Josephine Baker. Angel will need to decide between Tony and Leland. Delia is investing heart and soul into the clinic. Sam is seriously contemplating a relationship with Delia. The author has perched them at life-changing points which can tip either way, either in favor of their individual dreams or towards the fulfillment of more basic needs.

Act 2, Scene 1

Act 2, Scene 1 Summary

It is now two weeks later and the group of friends will soon gather to celebrate Guy's shipment of five costumes to Josephine Baker in Paris. Angel is setting the table for high tea when Guy returns to the apartment in a disheveled state. Apparently he has been accosted on the sidewalk by some hoodlums who dislike homosexuals. The event is soon forgotten as Sam and Delia arrive. They tell the others that Margaret Sanger spoke at the Abyssinian Church this morning in favor of the family planning clinic.

Leland is there too but is unfamiliar with Sanger or any of the other people mentioned. When Guy attempts to change the direction of the conversation, it becomes obvious to Leland for the first time that Guy is homosexual. Visibly disturbed by this revelation, Leland prepares to leave because Guy's sexual orientation is against the law. Sam tries to calm him but to no avail; Leland departs. Sam then leaves with Delia and goes to her apartment, where the two have their first intimate sexual encounter.

Act 2, Scene 1 Analysis

The author features two important themes in this scene: homosexuality and homophobia. Guy is firmly established in the gay community, as indicated by his choice of the dress designing profession and by the circle of friends and entertainers with whom he associates. When Guy is attacked on the street in this scene he is able to take care of himself, suggesting that this has happened to him before.

On Angel's part, because she knows that Leland has no tolerance for anything non-traditional, she tells Leland that Guy is her cousin in an effort to protect him from Leland's disapproval.

Act 2, Scene 2

Act 2, Scene 2 Summary

Two weeks later, Sam waits for Angel on the apartment building stoop to inform her that test results indicate that she is eight weeks pregnant. This is clearly not news that Angel wants to hear. The evening gets even worse when they see an eviction notice on Guy's apartment door. Guy arrives home and while he doesn't have the full amount needed for the rent, he seems unconcerned because he believes that good news will come from Josephine Baker any day.

Guy leaves Angel alone in her distress in the apartment. She is surprised when Leland shows up after not having seen him for two weeks. Angel tells Leland that she is pregnant. Because Leland is still in love with her, he then proposes marriage to Angel. She accepts his proposal and Leland begins to make marriage plans.

Act 2, Scene 2 Analysis

Events are about to climax as Guy and Angel face eviction. The differences in their personalities color their reactions to the situation; Guy holds out hope for his ultimate dream, while Angel resigns herself to a life of wedded misery as a wife and mother.

Act 2, Scene 3

Act 2, Scene 3 Summary

The next day Sam tries to calm Delia, who is distressed because the building where she had hoped to open her clinic has been bombed. She is relieved to learn that no one was injured and is further buoyed by Sam's offer of office space in a building where he'd first set up practice.

Meanwhile Guy receives more good news when a telegram arrives from Josephine Baker, who asks him to come to Paris to design costumes. The cable also includes a ticket for first class passage on a ship and ample funds for expenses. When Angel arrives home, Guy tells her about the cable and informs her that he has also purchased a ticket for her passage.

Delia and Guy head out to a restaurant to celebrate, while Angel stays behind to ponder her decision. Sam arrives at the apartment and eventually, Angel asks him to perform an abortion, because she has decided to go to Paris. Sam agrees and tells Angel to meet him at the clinic the next morning.

Act 2, Scene 3 Analysis

The topics of family planning and women's rights heat up in the form of abortion in this scene. Throughout the play, Sam has agreed to help Delia fight for black women's birth control rights; but now the subject has arisen inside their group of friends. Judging by his response, though, this is not the first time that Sam has helped Angel in this way.

Although Sam will do whatever Angel asks of him, it seems that he would have preferred that Angel had taken advantage of Delia's knowledge of birth control in order to avoid the extreme measure of abortion.

Act 2, Scene 4

Act 2, Scene 4 Summary

The next morning, as Guy prepares some costumes for local delivery, Angel slowly climbs the stairs and enters the apartment. Guy didn't hear her leave this morning so Angel tells him that she had gone to see Sam for an abortion. Guy is supportive and promises to return as soon as he finishes his deliveries.

Leland arrives after struggling up the stairs with a rocking chair he's bought for Angel so that she can rock the baby. He also presents Angel with a diamond ring that had belonged to his mother and which had been worn by his late wife. Too weary for more talk of marriage plans, Angel tells Leland that she has suffered a miscarriage, hoping that this information will cool his ardor. Under intense questioning by Leland, however, Angel finally admits that she has had an abortion.

Leland surmises that Sam performed the procedure and leaves the apartment; but before he does, he tells Angel that she's lucky that he'll let her live after such horrific news. Sam enters the apartment building and encounters Leland. It is apparent to Sam from the tone of Leland's voice that he knows about the abortion. Sam counsels Leland to forget about Angel and to go home. As Sam turns to walk away, Leland pulls a gun from his belt and shoots Sam in the back, killing him.

Act 2, Scene 4 Analysis

The violence related to the family planning clinic has again touched the group of friends. Leland's intolerance for anything that conflicts with his own religious beliefs is compounded by his own personal grief, driving him to murder. Leland mourns not only the abortion of Angel's baby but also the death of the son he lost eight months ago. To Leland, the world has gone mad and there is no safe place for him; not in Alabama, where grief finds him at every turn, or in New York, where his strict conservatism forces him into alienation.

Act 2, Scene 5

Act 2, Scene 5 Summary

Two weeks after the murder, it is the morning that Guy will depart for Paris. Delia is in mourning for Sam and wanders into Guy's apartment as he does some last-minute packing. Champagne is chilling on the table in preparation for a few *bon voyage* toasts. Angel has not been seen since the murder, but Guy has prepaid the rent in case she returns.

Guy senses Delia's melancholy and suggests that she accompany him to Paris for a change of scene. Delia decides to accept his offer and returns to her apartment to pack a few things. Meanwhile Angel slips into Guy's apartment, thinking that everyone is gone; but Delia sees her through her open door.

The two women stare at each other for a long moment. Then Angel gives Delia a picture of Sam. As the two women say goodbye, they silently understand that something has changed inalterably between them. At the end of the scene, Angel sips champagne and looks out the window, pondering her next move.

Act 2, Scene 5 Analysis

The author poignantly depicts the fictional lives of people set against the actual entertainment, artistic and social culture of Harlem in the 1920s as it collides with the Great Depression of the 1930s. The personal difficulties of the characters are a microscopic view of the larger picture of adversity and struggle that is interwoven with history-making advances in reproductive rights, homosexuality, religious and political issues.

In the end, the human character is both challenged and strengthened by internal and external factors, and life does go on.

Characters

Angel Allen

Angel Allen is a thirty-four-year-old woman who, as the play opens, has been fired from her job as a backup singer at the Cotton Club. Angel has just broken up with Nick, an Italian gangster who recently married another woman. Angel, hurt by the breakup, saw Nick in the audience of the nightclub and interrupted one of her dance routines to berate him and throw things at him. As a result of the breakup, Angel has also lost her apartment, paid for by Nick, as well as all of her clothes and other belongings, since he will not allow her into the apartment to collect her things. Guy, her best friend, allows her to live in his apartment while she searches for another job. However, due to the depression, there are no singing jobs available for Angel, and she continues to be out of work while Guy supports her. Her only prospect is not a singing job but an opportunity to become the mistress of Tony T., a friend of Nick's. Angel is a practical woman who, although she would prefer a job as a singer, is not above selling herself to a man in exchange for financial security. In Leland, Angel sees an opportunity for financial stability as his wife, despite the fact that she does not love him. But, after she gets pregnant by Leland, she decides that she does not want the baby and chooses to abort it. She has had at least one abortion in the past, after she became pregnant by Nick. When Guy offers her a ticket to go to Paris with him, Angel decides that this is a better opportunity than marrying Leland. She first tells Leland that she has had a miscarriage and then admits to having had an abortion. After Leland shoots Sam, the doctor who performed the abortion, Angel disappears for two weeks. She returns to Guy's apartment just as Guy and Delia are leaving for Paris. But Angel seems to have cut all ties with her two friends, and the play ends as she sits in the window of Guy's apartment, figuring out what to do next. Angel is a woman who has always been able to do whatever it takes to survive, despite unfortunate personal and financial circumstances.

Leland Cunningham

Leland Cunningham is a twenty-eight-year-old man from Alabama who has been in Harlem only six weeks. Eight months earlier, his wife, Anna, died giving birth to a baby boy, who also did not survive. Leland encounters Guy and Angel on the street in the middle of the night and helps Guy to accompany Angel, who is drunk, back to the apartment. He later tells Angel that he was drawn to her because she looks like his deceased wife. Leland's manner is that of a Southern gentleman, and his dress is neat and conservative. He is very religious, with traditional, conservative values that are very different from those of Angel and her friends. Leland considers homosexuality "an abomination" and is even acquainted with the young men in the neighborhood who have been beating up on gay men. Because of this, Angel lies to Leland about Guy, saying that he is her cousin, rather than explaining that he is a friend who is gay. Leland continues to court Angel, even though her values and lifestyle are clearly very different

from his. He tries to influence her to attend church, but she is not interested. He even buys her a very conservative dress, which is not at all her style. Before long, Leland asks Angel to marry him, and she accepts. After she tells him that she is pregnant with his child, he brings her a rocking chair he has made by hand, in which he says he wants her to rock all of their children. However, when Angel tells him she has miscarried the baby and then admits that she opted to abort it, Leland immediately figures out that her friend Sam was the doctor who performed the abortion. Leaving Angel, he encounters Sam outside of the apartment building and shoots him in the back with a pistol, killing him.

Deal

See Delia Patterson

Guy Jacobs

Guy Jacobs is a thirty-something homosexual man who has just been fired from his job as a costume designer for the Cotton Club. Guy's dream is to be hired by the famous African-American singer and dancer Josephine Baker, who lives in Paris, to design her costumes. He keeps a large picture of her in his apartment and constantly talks about how his life is going to change once she hires him. Guy is acquainted with the social circle of famous Harlem Renaissance poets and writers, particularly Langston Hughes. Guy is Angel's best friend. He defends her unruly behavior at the Cotton Club, even though he is fired as a result. He doesn't hesitate to let Angel live in his apartment with him and even risks some danger at the hands of her former gangster boyfriend in order to sneak into her old apartment and grab some of her things. Guy doesn't tell Angel that he has been fired because he doesn't want to upset her, although this means taking lower-paying, less-glamorous jobs in order to support her. Guy explains to Delia that he met Angel in Alabama and was inspired to seek his fortune in Harlem because of her. He is very supportive and caring toward Angel, even though she can be a difficult person, because, as he tells her, "You let me see how beautiful I was." Guy finally receives a cable from Josephine Baker saying she loves his costumes and inviting him to come to Paris and work for her. She sends him a boat ticket to Paris and plenty of money to buy whatever he needs for his trip. He immediately invites Angel to go to Paris with him, as he now has enough money to buy her a ticket, as well. Angel accepts the offer, but after Leland shoots Sam, she disappears without saying anything to Guy. The day he is to leave for Paris, Guy invites Delia to accompany him in Angel's place, and she accepts. By the time Angel returns to his apartment in Harlem, Guy has already left to board the ship. However, Guy, always thinking of Angel's best interests, has paid the rent on his apartment a couple of months ahead of time, thinking that, if Angel returns, she will at least have a place to stay.

Delia Patterson

Delia Patterson, whose friends call her Deal, is a twenty-five-year-old social worker who is engaged in a project, spearheaded by Margaret Sanger, to open a family planning clinic in Harlem. Delia's apartment is across the hallway from Angel and Guy's. She is very shy with men but begins to date Sam after they work together on the family planning clinic. Two weeks after Sam is shot, Delia agrees to accompany Guy to Paris. Just as she is leaving, Angel returns to the apartment, but, as the stage directions state, "In that moment, both understand that things have changed forever between them." Delia leaves without saying a word to Angel.

Sam Thomas

Sam Thomas is a forty-year-old doctor at the Harlem Hospital. He works long hours delivering babies but also stays up late drinking with his friends on many nights. Sam is proud of his work delivering babies but is also aware of the problems many African Americans face raising children, due to the financial hardships caused by the depression. Sam is attracted to Delia, but he is aware of her shyness and is careful not to overwhelm her. He helps her to prepare her speech to the church about opening a family planning clinic. In addition to delivering babies, Sam also performs illegal abortions. He has previously performed an abortion for Angel, when she was pregnant by Nick. However, when she asks for another abortion, he is reluctant to go through with it, because this time the father is an African-American man, rather than a white man. However, Angel tells him that she does not want the baby, so he gives her the abortion. When Leland finds out, he shoots Sam in the back, killing him.

Themes

Economic Hardship

A central theme of *Blues for an Alabama Sky* is economic hardship. Cleage set her play in 1930, early in the depression. The writers and artists of the Harlem Renaissance, which flourished during the 1920s, were hard hit by the depression because the struggle for economic stability detracted from the time and resources necessary to pursue artistic endeavors. Cleage thus focuses on the unknowns of the Harlem Renaissance, those struggling singers, dancers, and other artists who were so financially devastated by the depression that they were unable to successfully pursue their dreams. The character of Angel, in particular, is sidetracked from her goal of being a blues singer by the meager job opportunities available to her after she is fired from the Cotton Club. Angel's approach to addressing economic hardship is to rely on a man to support her. After she is fired, Guy takes her in and supports her, even though he, too, has been fired. Angel had been supported by Nick, a gangster who paid for her apartment and nice clothes in exchange for her favors as his mistress. After Nick gets married and breaks up with Angel, he passes her name on to another friend, Tony T., who offers to support her as his mistress. Angel is vague about her response to this offer, but it seems that she accepts it, for lack of any better financial opportunity. However, when Leland asks her to marry him, she agrees, not because she loves him, but because she sees in him an opportunity for financial stability. Angel is a survivor and is not above doing whatever it takes to make her way in the world, even if that means selling her body to the highest bidder. Cleage thus portrays the ways in which a creative or artistic person, such as Angel, who is a singer and dancer, can be diverted from pursuing her dreams by the need to overcome economic hardship.

Family Planning

Family planning and reproductive rights are also important themes of this play. Delia's goal is to open the first family planning clinic in Harlem. As a social worker, Delia is working with Margaret Sanger, a pioneer in women's reproductive rights, to gain community support for the project. Delia's primary concern is to convince the popular Reverend Adam Powell of the Abyssinian Church in Harlem to support the opening of a clinic. Delia explains that she is "trying to give women in Harlem the chance to plan their families" through access to birth control. She comments that, because of the inaccessibility of family planning services, "women are dying." Sam agrees to help Delia prepare her speech to Reverend Powell and the deacon board of the church, but his perspective on the issue is somewhat different from Delia's. He tells her that the issue of birth control in the African-American community is more complicated than she thinks. He explains that some African-American organizations interpret the efforts of Margaret Sanger, a white woman, as an act of "genocide" against the African-American community. He comments, "What does family planning mean to the average colored man? White women teaching colored women how to stop having children." Sam helps

Delia approach the issue as a matter of strengthening the black family through family planning. She changes her speech to focus on asking the church authorities "for their help in building strong families with healthy mothers, happy children and loving fathers all over Harlem." With Sam's help, Delia successfully convinces the church to support the opening of a family planning clinic. Later, Margaret Sanger addresses the church congregation about her plans for the clinic, successfully gaining their support. However, after Sam performs an illegal abortion on Angel and is shot by Leland, press coverage of the incident creates a scandal which causes the community to withdraw support for the clinic.

Homosexuality and Homophobia

Homosexuality and homophobia are also central themes of this play. Throughout the play, Cleage explores the issue of homosexuality and homophobia (prejudice against homosexuals) in the African-American community. She portrays both the vital gay community in Harlem of the 1920s and 1930s and the virulent homophobia, which results in acts of brutality and violence against gays. Guy, who is homosexual, is clearly established in the gay community of Harlem, attending many parties and hobnobbing with famous gay writers. On first moving to Harlem, Guy had earned his living designing costumes for drag queens. One night, friends of his and Angel's, a gay couple, are beaten up by a group of men around the corner from their apartment building. Later in the play, a group of young men attack Guy as he is walking home from the store, but he successfully fights them off. It turns out that Leland knows these men from his prayer meeting. Angel has been lying to Leland in order to cover up the fact that Guy is homosexual. When Leland finds out, he states that he thinks homosexuality is "an abomination." Guy angrily kicks Leland out of his apartment for the insult.

Style

Setting: Harlem, New York

Blues for an Alabama Sky is set in Harlem, New York City, during the era of the Harlem Renaissance. This setting is important to Cleage's fictional story, which takes place in a real historical and geographic context. In order to appreciate the significance of this setting, it is helpful to have an understanding of the significance of Harlem to African-American history. Beginning in the late nineteenth century and throughout the twentieth century, the Harlem district of New York City came to be identified by its high concentration of African-American residents. African Americans began to occupy apartments in Harlem beginning in the 1890s. Lenox Avenue, in particular, became known as the African-American residential area of Harlem, and 125th Street was known as the "Main Stem" of Harlem's commercial district. In *Blues for an Alabama Sky*, Cleage refers to specific streets in Harlem that are historically significant, a stylistic choice that works to firmly locate her play in a specific historical and cultural context. Her description of the "Time and Place" in which the play is set mentions that Margaret Sanger was in the process of opening a family planning clinic on 126th Street. Guy mentions that the apartment Angel had been living in, paid for by her former gangster boyfriend, was on Lenox Avenue. As the play opens, Guy and Leland are helping a drunken Angel stumble down 125th Street in the middle of the night. At one point, Guy tells Angel that, in order to be successful, she needs to look beyond her small, limited world of Harlem, asserting, "For prospects, you gotta look past 125th Street." Angel later states that she does not want to end up "a broke old woman, begging up and down 125th Street." Toward the end of the play, a remark by Guy captures the sense that Harlem had once promised to be a bastion of African-American culture but became a disappointment to many, as the community suffered from the economic hardships of the depression era. He comments, "Harlem was supposed to be a place where Negroes could come together and really walk about, and for a red-hot minute, we did." Cleage thus utilizes a specific historical setting in which to capture the mood of an era through fictional characters.

Historical Fiction

Cleage's play can be categorized as historical fiction because of the stylistic choice of integrating real historical figures into a narrative focused on fictional characters. Cleage successfully and convincingly integrates the historical with the fictional, creating characters who are acquainted with such important historical figures as Adam Clayton Powell, the activist and political leader; Margaret Sanger, the pioneer in family planning; Josephine Baker, the famous nightclub performer; and Langston Hughes, the celebrated poet of the Harlem Renaissance.

Historical Context

Langston Hughes and the Harlem Renaissance

The Harlem Renaissance, also referred to as the New Negro Movement, designates a period during the 1920s in which African-American literature flourished among a group of writers concentrated in Harlem, New York City. Harlem Renaissance writers launched African-American literature into a new era, focusing on the experiences of black life and culture with an attitude of racial pride and self-determination for the African-American community. Two important magazines, the *Crisis* and *Opportunity*, were important promoters of the Harlem Renaissance, publishing the works of many young writers who pioneered the movement. The Harlem Renaissance also influenced artists and musicians exploring similar styles and themes. Langston Hughes (1902-1967) was one of the most important poets of the Harlem Renaissance. His first collection of poetry, *The Weary Blues*, was published in 1926. His influential novel, *Not Without Laughter* (1930), also garnered critical attention. Hughes is referred to many times in *Blues for an Alabama Sky*. The fictional characters of Cleage's play are members of Hughes's social circle, attending parties in his honor and associating with other significant figures of the Harlem Renaissance.

The Depression Era

Blues for an Alabama Sky is set in 1930, a year after the 1929 stock market crash that brought on the depression. The Harlem Renaissance petered out when the depression of the 1930s affected the financial status of many African-American writers and artists. Throughout the play, Angel makes a number of comments describing the economic conditions of the depression in Harlem. She has trouble finding a new job because, as she says, "the Depression has killed all the nightlife in Harlem." She goes on to explain, "There aren't any jobs doing anything, especially singing for your supper. Whole families sitting on the sidewalk with their stuff set out beside them. No place to sleep. No place to wash." Angel later adds, "I've never seen things this bad all over. Nobody's working and nobody's got prospects." Cleage thus demonstrates the effects of the depression on the African-American community in Harlem, particularly on the struggling writers, performers, and artists whose ambitions were thwarted by the economic difficulties brought on by the depression.

The Reverend Powell and the Abyssinian Church

Throughout the play, Cleage makes reference to several important political leaders in the African-American community, such as Reverend Adam Clayton Powell Jr., Booker T. Washington, and Marcus Garvey. The fictional characters in this play are acquainted with the historically real Reverend Powell, a popular pastor of the Abyssinian Church in Harlem. In the play, Delia successfully convinces Reverend Powell to support the

opening of a family planning clinic. Historically, Powell worked as an elected public official, holding offices from the 1940s through the 1960s. In 1941, he was the first African American to be elected to the New York City Council. In 1945, he was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives, to which he was reelected for eleven terms. Powell was active in working for the passage of some fifty separate liberal legislative acts and bills to support civil rights, end segregation, and promote education and fair labor practices. He retired from politics in 1971 and died a year later.

The Black Arts Movement

In her introduction to *Blues for an Alabama Sky*, Cleage refers to herself as "a child of the Black Arts Movement." During the 1960s and 1970s, the Black Arts Movement, also referred to as the Black Aesthetic Movement, emerged, embodying values derived from black nationalism and promoting politically and socially significant works of literature, often written in Black English vernacular. Important writers of the Black Arts Movement include Amiri Baraka (also known as LeRoi Jones), Eldridge Cleaver, and Ntozake Shange. Cleage began writing in the 1960s and 1970s, during the era of the Black Arts Movement, but her work did not emerge to gain national success until the 1980s and 1990s. *Blues for an Alabama Sky* thus shows the strong influence of the Black Arts Movement, with its focus on issues facing the African-American community, both in response to racist oppression imposed from outside the community and in response to internal divisions within the community.

Critical Overview

Reviewers of *Blues for an Alabama Sky* frequently focus on the play's treatment of issues of race and gender in historical context. Freda Scott Giles, in the *African American Review*, compared *Blues for an Alabama Sky* to Cleage's plays *Flyin' West* (1992) and *Bourbon at the Border* (1997), commenting that, in all three, "Cleage seeks to bring us to grips with our American past and help us understand and acknowledge its impact on present conditions, especially with regard to issues of race and gender."

As critics have also observed, in *Blues for an Alabama Sky*, Cleage focuses on the unknown figures in a specific historical era, the ordinary people who make, and are made by, history, yet remain nameless in official historical accounts. Marta J. Effinger, in the *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, points out that *Blues for an Alabama Sky* is an example of Cleage's "obsession with history." She notes that while Cleage makes reference to a number of notable figures from the Harlem Renaissance era, "it is clear that the play examines what happened to ordinary people when the Harlem Renaissance ended." Giles concurs that in *Blues for an Alabama Sky*, as well as in several of Cleage's other plays, "Great events are seen not through the eyes of leaders and celebrities, but through the experiences of the ordinary people who lived them." As Effinger states, "the lives of black men and women" in this play "are dramatized as a struggle to gain access to the sparse opportunities in the early years of the Great Depression."

Critics also focus on the character of Angel as someone who ultimately does not take responsibility for the consequences of her actions, for her own life as well as for those around her. Giles comments that Angel, "accustomed to living in search of someone to take care of her, changes the lives of friends and lovers by failing to accept her responsibility for the shaping of her own destiny." Giles notes that Angel, "the pivotal character" in the play, "is called to account for her refusal to take responsibility for her actions." Giles goes on to assert:

Angel . . . can only see her destiny in terms of the economic and emotional support of a man, and uses her body as the commodity through which she will achieve this support. Her myopic pursuit of self-interest strains her relationship with Guy to the breaking point and leads her to ignore the dangerous ground she treads in her relationship with Leland.

Effinger comments that the character of Angel "does not triumph" by the end of the play. Effinger states that Cleage once said that *Blues for an Alabama Sky* is her first play in which "one of her black female characters did not overcome obstacles." Effinger remarks that Angel "makes choices that destroy any possible opportunities," adding, "At the end of the play Angel is sitting alone in her apartment with the blues."

Criticism

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

Critical Essay #1

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 the theme of dreams in Cleage's play.

An important theme of *Blues for an Alabama Sky* is the pursuit of dreams. While Angel is easily diverted from her dream of being a blues performer by the immediate concerns of economic hardship, Guy steadfastly pursues his dream without faltering for even a moment.

Guy's dream is to be hired as a costume designer for the famous African-American blues singer Josephine Baker, who is living in Paris at the time in which the play takes place. Josephine Baker (1906-1975) was an African-American dancer and singer who met with tremendous popular success performing in Paris music halls during the late 1920s. As Cleage states in the stage notes, in 1930, the citizens of Harlem were suffering the ill effects of the Depression, while "far from Harlem, African-American expatriate extraordinaire, Josephine Baker sips champagne in her dressing room at the Folies Bergere and laughs like a free woman." For Cleage, as for the character of Guy, Josephine Baker is a symbol of freedom. Guy keeps his dream in sight at all times by placing a large photo of Josephine, as he calls her, in his workspace, a reminder of what he is striving for. Guy is intent on going to Paris to work for Josephine and sprinkles his conversation with French phrases, both real and made up, as if, in his mind, he were already there. He also sips champagne every chance he gets, as if by drinking an alcoholic beverage made in France, he is that much closer to realizing his dream come true.

But Guy doesn't simply indulge in idle dreams. He diligently pursues his dreams. He tells Delia, "I'm going to drive Josephine crazy until she sends for me." Although it seems to others like an unrealistic goal, Guy never once doubts himself. He pursues his dream by first sending sketches of his costume designs to Josephine. In response, he receives a cable asking him to send several costumes for her to try on. At this point, he tells Delia, "As far as I can see, all's right with the world. My dreams are about to come true." Finally, he receives the long-awaited cable inviting him to Paris to work for Josephine, with a first-class ticket and plenty of money enclosed.

Guy associates his dreams of creative and professional success with the idea of romance. He frequently describes everyday situations in the language of the romance novel, which indicates his view of the world as a place of infinite possibility, where one's wildest dreams may come true. He describes Leland, a stranger who helped him to drag a drunken Angel home at 3 a.m., as "A mysterious gentleman who came to our aid and then melted back into the Harlem night." Delia comments, "That's very romantic." To which Guy responds, "That's one of the secrets of life. . . . Learn to spot the romance." For Guy, spotting the romance means taking his dreams seriously and pursuing them diligently. As an example of what he means, Guy shows Delia a new costume design he has sketched for Josephine Baker. He tells her, "I dreamed it. I saw Josephine walking

down the center staircase of one of those fabulous Folies-Bergere sets in this very dress." (The Folies Bergere was a popular Paris music hall where many of Josephine Baker's performances were staged.) Guy again adopts the language of a romance novel when he explains to Angel, who was too drunk to remember being helped by Leland, that the young man "saw a damsel in distress" and came to her rescue.

Angel, by contrast, has lost sight of her dream of becoming a blues singer and is instead pursuing immediate financial gain. As the play opens, she has just ended a relationship as the mistress of a gangster. Guy brings her home drunk and suggests she go to bed to sleep it off. But Angel replies, "I don't want to go to bed. What kind of dreams am I gonna have, hunh? No man. No job." From Angel's perspective, the only dream possible is the dream of a man or a job to meet her financial needs. Guy suggests she come to Paris with him, pursue the dream of a singing career, and "Give Josephine some competition." But Angel has no sense of romance and no sense of imagination with which to envision the ambitious dreams Guy pursues.

Angel is, in fact, disdainful of Guy's attempts to pursue his dreams, referring to him sarcastically as "some kind of genius with a dream." Guy then asks Angel, who has just accepted an offer to be a mistress of yet another gangster, "Is that your dream? Singing for gangsters?" When Leland passes on to Angel the message that Guy has finally received a cable from Josephine, he tells her that Guy said "it was a dream come true." Angel's response, however, is disdainful and pessimistic; she tells Leland, "I'm tired of Negro dreams. All they ever do is break your heart." Angel later comments, "Guy's a dreamer. He always was and he always will be, but I'm gonna hitch my star to somebody a little closer to home." Angel considers herself a practical woman who knows how to survive in a harsh world and will not waste her time on big dreams; she tells Leland, "I know how to take care of myself! I'm not going to be a broke old woman, begging up and down 125th Street, dreaming about fine clothes and French champagne."

Angel's goals, rather, are focused on the material comforts she hopes to gain through being supported by a man. She explains to Guy that, the whole time she was involved with Nick, "I kept thinking something wonderful was going to happen, but it never did. In my mind, I could see myself doing all these things with Nick - riding around in fancy cars, wearing furs, him giving me diamonds." When Guy asks Angel what she sees in Leland, she responds, "A rent check that won't bounce." From Angel's perspective, a rent check that won't bounce is a dream come true. As Guy later comments, Angel sees in Leland "her ticket to Paradise." Angel's idea of paradise is severely limited to practical matters such as paying the rent, whereas Guy's idea of paradise is a romantic dream of life in Paris where he will be acknowledged and rewarded for his creative genius and hard work as a costume designer.

Throughout the play, Guy's unfailing focus on his dream is contrasted with Angel's short-sighted focus on immediate financial concerns. When they receive an eviction notice, Angel is distressed, but Guy tells her not to worry because "I've been feeling Josephine in the air all day!" Angel, however, can think only of the immediate crisis, insisting, "Don't you understand? They're going to put us out on the street in seven days! One week!"

She has no tolerance for the big dreams that prevent Guy from succumbing to such short-term setbacks. Angel insists on seeing only the concrete reality of the here-and-now and refuses to acknowledge any ambitious fantasies about the future. She tells Guy, "Whatever presence you're feeling hasn't got anything to do with Josephine. We're not in Paris. We're in Harlem. We're not strolling the boulevard. We're about to be evicted!"

Rather than banking on dreams, Angel acts according to the principles of luck. She tells Guy that she wishes she could bring herself some luck, and for Angel good luck means finding the right man to provide her with financial support and economic stability. She explains that she is interested in Leland because he "feels like luck to me." Leland later tells Angel that she "had a run of bad luck," but that he will change her luck by taking care of her. Angel flirtatiously asks, "You gonna be my lucky charm?" to which Leland responds, "I'm gonna be your man." From Angel's perspective, a man with money is a lucky charm. Guy, in contrast to Angel, is farsighted in his goals and dreams big, but is also willing to do the work of taking all the baby-steps necessary to realize his dreams. Angel, however, thinks in terms of luck - the idea that events beyond her control will determine her future - and so is not motivated to work toward her goals.

In contrast to Guy, who dreams big and plans far in advance in order to realize these dreams, Angel is shortsighted, seeing only her immediate needs at hand and taking whatever solution will satisfy her concerns for the immediate future. She essentially prostitutes herself to wealthy men in exchange for clothes, lodging, and other material comforts, at the expense of her dreams, her personal feelings, and her long-term circumstances. Guy points out to Angel that she is too shortsighted, unable to imagine any possibilities beyond her immediate surroundings. He tells her, "For prospects, you gotta look past 125th Street. No law says we gotta live and die in Harlem, USA, just 'cause we happened to wind up here when we finally blew out of Savannah. The world is a big place!" Angel, however, responds with her own small-minded vision, retorting that the world is "getting smaller every day." Guy argues otherwise, telling her, "No it isn't. I can look out of this very window and see us walking arm in arm down the Champs Elysees" (in Paris).

Unlike Angel, Guy is able to see beyond his immediate circumstances to imagine a bigger and better future for himself. Angel comments, "Remember how you used to take those old broke-up binoculars whenever we'd go to the beach at home? The only Negro in the world ever tried to see Paris from the coast of Georgia." The image of the broken binoculars, through which Guy nevertheless looks out across the ocean to Paris, symbolizes his long-sighted vision of his dreams, despite the inadequate resources of his immediate situation. Angel, however, always focuses on her immediate financial needs - such as paying the rent - and is unable to use her imagination to envision her dreams, or anyone else's dreams, for that matter. She disdainfully says to Guy, "The myth of the magical Josephine. She practically lives with us but so far I haven't seen her share of the rent money!"

Throughout *Blues for an Alabama Sky*, Cleage emphasizes the importance of dreams to creating a meaningful life. She further demonstrates the difference between idle dreams

of material luxury, and realistic, yet ambitious, dreams toward which the individual is willing to work with diligence and persistence. However, Cleage also explores the effects of poverty and financial hardship on creative individuals, often thwarting their ambitions and consuming them with the need to "pay the rent."

Source: Liz Brent, Critical Essay on *Blues for an Alabama Sky*, in *Drama for Students*, The Gale Group, 2002.

Critical Essay #2

Hart has degrees in English literature and creative writing, and her published writing focuses on literary themes. In this essay, she examines the two female characters in Cleage's play, exposing how they are both sympathetic, as well as contradictory, images of one another.

Pearl Cleage, in her drama *Blues for an Alabama Sky*, has created two strong female characters who develop a relationship that exposes both their similarities and their incongruities. Throughout the passing sequences of the play, the women's stories weave in and out of one another's lives. In the beginning, the women bond with one another and experience mutual benefit, but, in the end, the characters are left connected to one another only through an irreconcilable grief. Cleage presents these women honestly, unafraid of exposing both their strengths and their weaknesses, as she strives, as stated in an interview in *American Theatre*, to be free of creating characters whose main roles are to portray only "the idea of positive images and role models." Rather, Cleage merely offers this relationship of two divergent women; then she leaves it to the audience to pick through the women's various personality traits to create their own role models.

Angel Allen, one of the two female characters in Cleage's play, is a thirty-four-year-old blues singer who is out of a job and has few prospects for her future. Angel is also a woman of the world who has been with many men and who, despite her talents, tends to rely on men to support her. She likes to wear flashy clothes, and she can be very manipulative. Her counterpart, Delia Patterson, is twenty-five years old and a social worker. Delia wears drab, old-womanish outfits to create a professional image that will foster confidence in her clients. Delia is a virgin. She is also a pioneering feminist. In the description of the female characters, Cleage states in the stage directions that Angel looks five years younger than she really is. Delia, on the other hand, because she wears frumpy clothes, looks older than her age. In other words, despite the fact that a nine-year age difference exists between the women, the time is bridged by the differences in the women's personalities. Throughout the play, Cleage repeats this same pattern, showing how the women's differences both bring them together and pull them apart.

The play begins with Angel having to be assisted into her apartment because she is drunk. She has lost both her job and her boyfriend. The audience is introduced to Delia when she runs over to Angel's apartment to see if she can help the intoxicated Angel. In this introductory scene, Cleage sets up the divergent qualities of the personalities of the two women. She juxtaposes the immaturity and carelessness of Angel with the sensibility and level-headedness of Delia. Delia worries about and is very supportive of Angel. She suggests that she can help Angel find a new job by teaching her how to type. Angel, once she is sober, tolerates Delia but eventually turns her nose up at the idea of typing. Angel is an artist and to take a job that requires typing, although it might buy her food, is beneath her. Angel would rather go hungry or rely on someone else to feed her.

Men support Angel both financially and psychologically. Men come first in her life, with her career maintaining only a secondary status. Delia, on the other hand, is independent of men, as much as a woman in the early 1930s could be. She is attracted to and respectful of them, but she does not rely on them for support. She recognizes their power, but she does not see herself as subservient to them. Delia accepts life's challenges in a way that inspires her, while Angel, when faced with difficulties, either turns to men or alcohol.

The women both share an affection for the character Sam, a Harlem doctor. It is through Sam's eyes that the audience is given a masculine point of view of the two women. Angel, upon interacting with Sam in one scene, tells him, "I'm looking for a job. Let's get married." Although her sentiment is not totally sincere, Angel makes this statement as a test, trying to pull out Sam's feelings for her. Sam, who obviously cares for Angel, puts her down gently, telling her that she deserves a better man. The truth of Sam's affections is confirmed shortly afterward, when he reveals that he is interested in Delia. He is attracted to Delia's innocence, her zeal, and her independence. He appreciates Angel's beauty and artistic talent, but he is aware of the shallowness of Angel's motives.

While both women share the desire for a man, Delia develops a relationship with Sam that is built on mutual admiration and honesty. Angel, in the meantime, flirts with Leland, a complete stranger. Leland has been recently widowed, and Angel reminds him of his deceased wife. Whereas Delia opens herself up to Sam, exposing to him exactly who she is, Angel is aware that Leland is looking for a replacement for his wife, and she accommodates herself to his fantasy. Leland wants a "god-fearing" woman, so Angel plays the part.

Delia and Angel, although they have different ways of expressing it, share a passion for life. This is demonstrated, in particular, during a scene in which Delia receives a gift from her aunt. It is a fancy red dress, one that might be worn to a nightclub. Although the red dress clashes with the clothes that Delia typically wears, the stage directions state that she "holds it up against herself and smiles." She looks at herself in the mirror and twirls around before placing the dress back on her bed and returning to her work. Later, when she looks over at the dress, she smiles, again. The color red and the flimsy material, which, if worn, would outline her figure rather than hide it, reflect her femininity and her latent sexual passions. Although she acknowledges these feelings, her work takes precedence over them.

As is seen later, it is through the scene of the red dress that the audience witnesses a connection between the two women. They are both women of passion. They both direct their feelings into their work: Delia focuses her feelings on issues of women's rights, whereas Angel uses her emotions to deepen the effect of her singing the blues. Although the women both can relate to the dress (and its implications), the way they direct and use their passions is quite different. Delia controls her feelings. She is more empathetic about other people because she understands her own psychology. She recognizes her passion, but she is willing to put it to the side when a more rational focus is demanded. In contrast, Angel's emotions are constantly bursting out of her, exposing themselves to, and affecting, everyone around her.

The red dress sets up another interesting aspect of the women's relationship, as shown when Angel comes over to Delia's apartment to announce that she has an audition for a new singing job. As she is talking to Delia, Angel eyes the red dress lying on the bed. When she finishes telling Delia her news, Angel asks Delia if she could borrow something to wear to the audition. Delia confirms what Angel already knows about Delia's normal wardrobe. "Most of my stuff is . . . plain." At that moment, Angel pretends as if she has just noticed the red dress: "Deal! What about this? Is it new?"

With this exchange, the audience sees the transparency of Angel. They also see how manipulative she can be. The difference in the women's wardrobe also portrays their dissimilar roles in society. Whereas Delia's goal is to blend in so that she can get her message across, Angel needs to stand out to capture people's attention. This scene also points out the giving nature of Delia as compared to the taking mode of Angel. However, the relationship works because the women mutually benefit from one another. Delia needs to give. It is through giving that she defines herself. In turn, Angel reminds Delia of her own feminine passion, and it is because of Angel's prompting that Delia decides to open up to Sam.

In the final scenes of the play, both the similarities and the differences between these women are even more emphasized. In regard to Angel, the audience gets to witness the length to which she will go to grab at any opportunity that comes her way in spite of the consequences that might befall the people around her. She first seduces Leland and becomes pregnant in an attempt to secure a marriage. In a twist of fate, she then discovers that Guy (her roommate) has received a large sum of money and has bought Angel and himself tickets to Paris. This is a dream come true for Guy, and his first reaction is to want to share it with Angel. Guy, who is homosexual, is not physically attracted to Angel, but this does not stop him from loving her. He is disappointed and hurt by Angel's desires to marry Leland, but he is even more disappointed when she tells him that she is willing to frivolously abort her pregnancy so she can go to Paris with him.

After the abortion, Angel faces Leland, first attempting to lie to him, then revealing her true feelings by telling him that she has been pretending to love him and now she's tired of him. Then she announces that she has aborted their baby. In this scene, all that Angel thinks about is herself. She has decided that since Guy is offering to support her, thus giving her a way out of Harlem and, supposedly, out of her misery, she can discard all the other people around her. She has no regard for Leland's feelings. The consequence of her insensitivity toward Leland leads to the death of Sam, whom Leland kills for performing the abortion. The death of Sam leaves Delia in mourning.

When Leland is imprisoned for murder, Angel, unable to face all the trauma she has created, runs away. The only two characters left, at this point of the play, are Delia and Guy. Their relationship is based on Angel: Guy is left with two tickets to Paris, and Delia needs to take a break to heal her wounds. Angel's affect is apparent on both of them. Guy has grown used to taking care of Angel, of having her tag along with him as a sister. He offers the Paris ticket to Delia, as he needs someone to share his joy. Delia, under Angel's influence, decides to be somewhat irresponsible for once in her life. When

Guy asks Delia to go to Paris with him, she decides in his favor. So, in contrast to the earlier scene where Angel takes the red dress from Delia, Delia now takes the ticket to Paris from Angel. Delia has claimed a new outlet for her passions.

The play ends with a confrontation between Delia and Angel. Angel reappears just as Delia and Guy are leaving for Paris. Stage directions take over the final moments of the play, as the only dialogue spoken is Delia and Angel saying short good-byes to one another. The directions state that both women know that things have changed forever between them. Delia leaves "without looking back," while Angel goes to the window to think. This suggests that both women have come to a kind of crossroads in their lives, a time to take stock and revise. They have seen the best and the worst in one another, as well as in themselves. Right before this scene, Delia had remarked to Guy that the newspaper article on Sam's death sounded "so tawdry." Guy's response is: "It is tawdry. And so what? So are we all. Tawdry and tainted and running for our natural lives!" This is Cleage's main point. All people have their own crude sides. No one is different from another, because everyone is just trying her or his own best way to live. Cleage does not offer her definitions of which way is the best. She does not judge either Delia or Angel. What she does is allow them to expose themselves to the audience as honestly as she can. The two women do this best by demonstrating their differences in relation to one another. In their relationship, they learn about one another as well as discover themselves. The attractive elements they unearth in themselves, they keep. The elements that Delia and Angel find fascinating in each other, they try on. If they stumble onto something in themselves that they don't like, hopefully they will discard it. However, Cleage is a realist, and, just as in life, sometimes this doesn't happen.

Source: Joyce Hart, Critical Essay on *Blues for an Alabama Sky*, in *Drama for Students*, The Gale Group, 2002.

Critical Essay #3

Kryhoski is currently working as a freelance writer. In this essay, she considers the exploitation of the African-American woman as a function of the play.

The African-American woman - arguably the most disenfranchised individual in American history - takes center stage in Pearl Cleage's *Blues for an Alabama Sky*. Angel, the main character of the play, provides a portrait of the subjugated or enslaved. However tempted one is to characterize Angel's problems as being a byproduct of her own self-destructive behavior, Angel is a victim. During a time of great poverty, in the face of an economy spiraling out of control, Angel turns away from the camaraderie or goodwill and comfort of her peers to find a way out of the oppression she experiences from day to day.

Angel's life is presented to the audience in bits and pieces throughout the course of the play. From the outset, Cleage throws her audience right into the action, as a drunken Angel weaves her way home after hearing that her Italian gangster lover has "left" her to get married. And, it is through Angel's eyes that Delia learns about Angel's days working at Miss Lillie's as a prostitute. Delia's reaction is one of disgust, responding, "I don't know how you can talk about it like that . . . about what happened to you." Angel accepts her circumstance as a part of life, in her comment, "It was better than living on the street." Angel's friend Guy, too, is often enlightening in his interaction with Angel. He speaks to her, reminding Angel he is, as always, willing to be her support system and protector as Angel moves out of one bad relationship or situation into another. His aim is to comfort her, to smooth over the rough spots in Angel's life. After losing his job defending Angel's honor, he assures Delia, "Don't tell Angel. I don't want her to panic. I can take care of both of us if I have to. It won't be the first time."

Guy's comments reflect the strong sense of community among himself, Angel, Delia, and Sam. All of the characters not only enjoy strong friendships but also the benefits of a mutual support system. They seem to share a relationship based on emotional affinity and mutual trust. Delia, if somewhat naively, good-naturedly responds to Angel's job loss by offering her the opportunity to learn to type. And when Angel sees Delia's new dress, the first bright spot in an otherwise drab wardrobe for the social worker, Delia does not hesitate to lend the dress to Angel for her upcoming audition, meeting her attempt to protest the gesture with, "An audition is something special, isn't it?" A spirit of cooperation, one similar to that of a family unit, quickly takes shape amongst the characters. When Sam cures Angel's hangover with some aspirin and bootleg liquor, Guy does not hesitate to tell Sam, "your reward is that you get to take us all out for Sunday dinner." Sam graciously agrees, and the audience learns that Sam's volunteer efforts to provide dinner for the group are called upon by "Big Daddy" Guy on more than one occasion. But Guy also has a reward for Sam at the play's conclusion, sharing his new found success with Sam by inviting him to travel to Paris, "I will expect you [sic] to accompany me if I'm going to have any chance of returning home alive."

Sam also forgoes a party invitation celebrating Langston Hughes's return to Harlem and instead volunteers his time to assist Delia in writing a speech for Reverend Powell. The speech is of great import. Facing strong opposition from the Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem, Delia calls on Sam to help her convince the congregation of the need for a family planning clinic in their community. Her attempts at mobilizing a hostile community are brave if not revolutionary. According to Sam, in act 1, scene 3, "the Garveyites are already charging genocide and the clinic isn't even open yet." He goes on to say, "What does family planning mean to the average colored man? White women teaching colored women how to stop having children." Sam is cautioning Delia against a community that sees birth control as both a form of murder and a guarantor of white supremacy in number.

In an interview with Annette Gilliam in the *Washington Informer*, Cleage comments, "I will always write about Black people and our efforts to build a community where we can live safely. . . . These will always be my themes, regardless of the forum." The play offers the audience a chance to participate, and through Delia's brave struggles, to experience some of the excitement and enthusiasm fueling what Sam describes as "working tirelessly to save the [Black] race!" Sam shares Delia's vision of "strong families with healthy mothers, happy children and loving fathers all over Harlem." Exercising birth control and participating in family planning is not a means to diminish the Black population but instead a method by which "exhausted women and stone-broke men" can plan for future Black generations. Sam supports Delia but not without personal risk. He doesn't hesitate to offer to Delia the ground floor of his parents' brownstone to house the clinic, despite dangerous threats and a fire "set to run them out" of the original clinic site. Via Cleage, the audience is not only given a more intimate view of the community in Harlem, but insight into the personal motivations and brave efforts of some of its heroes and heroines alike.

Angel does not share the enthusiasm of her friends nor their political convictions. Nursing a hangover, Angel responds to Delia's enthusiasm for her mission by making a groan followed by an appeal to Sam and Guy, "Please don't get her all worked up! I can't take the history of the downtrodden without some aspirin!" It is a humorous moment but also predictable in light of Angel's character. Although this juke-joint song-stress has the support of her offbeat family - a gay tailor, a doctor, and his new-found love interest, a young "free-loving suffragette" - Angel is a fringe element, remaining somewhat aloof from the group, absorbed by self-interest. Nor does she seem to be concerned with the success of her friends, except as a function of her own personal gain. Although embraced by her makeshift family, one showering her with love and unconditional support, she is unable to find solace or comfort in their devotion. "Angel" is an ironic name in and of itself: Angel considers everyone her "little sister," including Guy, yet she is a help to no one. She historically relies on the beneficence of others, leaving Guy to pick up the pieces when she runs out of options.

Angel's failure is, according to some critics, attributable to the destructive choices she makes. These choices destroy any possible opportunities she may have to triumph over her life circumstances. This idea is particularly evident in her interactions with Guy, her longtime male companion who has promised to provide for her, to take care of her,

come what may. In a conversation with Delia, Guy reveals that he was fired from his job defending Angel's honor, his reasoning being that he "couldn't hardly stand by and let Bobby toss her out bodily into the street." Guy also reveals, in act 1, scene 1, that "it won't be the first time" he's had to take care of Angel. Guy's actions are not enough to soothe Angel's spirit. Delia discovers Angel's true attitude toward Guy after hearing her rather condemning comments, "Guy's a dreamer. He always was and he always will be, but I'm gonna hitch my star a little closer to home." Consequently, when Guy's dreams become a reality, Angel has already announced her pregnancy to Leland and has agreed to a loveless marriage. To further complicate the situation, Angel once again reacts to Guy's news by having an abortion and announcing to her fiance that she intends to go to Paris to recuperate from her ordeal. Her actions, in turn, set off a horrible chain of events, events that ultimately cost Sam his life and leave Angel to fend for herself at the play's conclusion.

Angel has been shaped by her society. For Angel, experience has taught her the saddest of lessons: she only has faith in her own sexuality. Her sexual prowess is the only thing that gives her a sense of power and control over her world. The audience learns early on that Angel has worked as a prostitute. Sex was the key component of Angel's relationship with Nick, a relationship in which she was provided for until Nick's marriage. As further reinforcement, Angel is sent on a bogus audition, returning in disgust to report that she had been handed-off to her lover's gangster friend, Tony T. Says Angel of the alleged meeting, "he [Tony] didn't want a singer . . . he wanted to keep a colored woman stashed up in Harlem so he could come by every now and then and rub her head for luck." Consequently, it is not surprising when Angel also resorts to using sex as a way to set her relationship with Leland in motion. In act 2, scene 1, Guy clearly recognizes this quality in Angel and confronts her with it. When Angel criticizes his ability to provide for her, he responds, telling her that she "wouldn't dismiss it all so fast" if he was a "straight man" offering to take her to Paris. And later on in the very same scene, Cleage drives this point home again, in Angel's own words. Angel tells Guy that she can't go to Paris because although she knows he loves her, he doesn't want to take her home. Guy responds by reminding her that she has and can lean on him, and Angel then betrays her own beliefs by making a distinction along sexual lines, pointing out to Guy that he "can't get lost inside" her.

Angel is a victim of her own harsh surroundings. She unwittingly destroys any chance she may have to be successful, in an effort to feel a sense of power and control. To anticipate disappointment, to predict and even prepare for failure is ultimately a way to avoid the pain Angel feels concerning her own life. It is safer for Angel to engage in cynicism and distrust than to risk having faith in Guy or Leland. This fear is evident in Angel's own remarks: "All I'm afraid of is trying to lean on one more weak Negro who can't finish what he started!" Angel is part of a world in which her voice doesn't matter, in which her success is limited by the kindness of a man. However seemingly cruel Angel's behavior is toward both Guy and Leland, it is understandable. Angel is raging against the confines of the society that defines her, she is one voice struggling to be heard. For Angel, the only means of self-expression, of asserting her own authority and power, is found through rage. In her interaction with Leland, for example, for every action, there is a reaction. Leland has pursued Angel because she reminded him so much of his dead

wife, rather than for any personal qualities she may have had. And when Leland hears that Angel has lost the baby, all he can think about is his pregnant wife and the disappointment he felt when she died, along with his unborn son. Leland does not acknowledge that Angel may have personal boundaries; instead, he crosses them and asserts what he needs, without regard for who she is. Angel recognizes what Leland is doing and lashes out at him in rage in act 2, scene 4, exclaiming, "you want me to lie! That's all you ever wanted. Pretend I'm Anna. Pretend I love you. I'm through with it!" Through the act of abortion, Angel has taken her power back, remaining true to herself.

Says Cleage, in her interview with the *Chicago Sun-Times*'s Hedy Weiss, "When I got to the end of this play, I realized I was trying to make Angel do something that had not been justified by the characters and by their story. . . . I had to come to terms with what it meant for me to create a character that doesn't triumph." Despite the destructive, seemingly cruel behavior Angel engages in during the course of the play, Angel is a victim of circumstance. She is merely pushing against the invisible boundaries imposed on her by society to achieve a sense of autonomy and of freedom. It is in Angel's defiance of authority and the rage she feels against her own society that one can realize the tragic quality that defines her struggles as a Black woman. It is not hard, then, to hear "all those crying colored ghosts" that so plague Angel.

Source: Laura Kryhoski, Critical Essay on *Blues for an Alabama Sky*, in *Drama for Students*, The Gale Group, 2002.

Topics for Further Study

Cleage has set her play in the context of the Harlem Renaissance movement in African-American literature. Learn more about one of the important writers of the Harlem Renaissance, such as James Weldon Johnson, Claude McKay, Countee Cullen, Wallace Thurman, Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, or Richard Wright. What are the major works of this author? What obstacles—financial, social, or personal—did this author overcome to become a successful writer? What central themes does this author address in her or his major works? In what ways did the Harlem Renaissance influence this author? In what ways did this author's work influence African-American literature?

This play takes place during the era of the depression. Learn more about the depression. What events and circumstances led to the stock market crash of 1929? What effect did it have on the United States as a whole? How were the effects of the depression different in the South and in the North? Did it affect African Americans differently from white Americans? What effect did it have on the world economy? When and how did the depression end?

Characters within the play mention two important African-American political leaders from the early twentieth century: Booker T. Washington and Marcus Garvey. Learn more about one of these men. What was his political philosophy? What influence did he have on the African-American community? What attitudes do the characters in this play have toward this leader and his politics?

In Cleage's play, Angel is a struggling blues singer and nightclub performer. Learn more about the history of blues music. How and in what regions of the United States did the blues develop? Who were some of the important figures in blues music during the 1920s and 1930s? Learn more about one of these figures and her or his career.

This play takes place in the era of Prohibition, during which the sale and consumption of alcohol was illegal. Throughout the play, the characters are seen drinking various kinds of alcohol without regard to such legal restrictions. Only Leland points out that Prohibition is still in effect. Learn more about the Prohibition era in the United States. What year was Prohibition instituted? What effect did it have on American culture? To what extent was the illegal sale and consumption of alcohol carried on? When was Prohibition repealed, and how did this come about?

What Do I Read Next?

The much-celebrated experimental play *for colored girls who have considered suicide, when the rainbow is enuf: a choreopoem* (1977), by Ntozake Shange, addresses issues of race, class, and gender in the lives of African-American women.

Ma Rainey's Black Bottom (1985), by August Wilson, is the most celebrated play by an African-American writer of the 1980s. It takes place in Chicago during the 1920s and centers on the blues singer Ma Rainey and her band.

Flyin' West (1995), by Pearl Cleage, takes place on the frontier of the American West and concerns a family of African-American homesteaders.

Bourbon at the Border (1997), published in *Flyin' West and Other Plays* (1999), by Pearl Cleage, is a play about a middle-aged couple in an apartment building in Detroit, reflecting back on their years of political activism during the 1960s.

The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes (1994), edited by Arnold Rampersad, is an anthology of the best poems of Langston Hughes, one of the leading poets of the Harlem Renaissance.

The Power of Pride: Stylemakers and Rulebreakers of the Harlem Renaissance (1999), by Carole Marks and Diana Edkins, provides an historical account of major figures in the Harlem Renaissance, including artists, writers, and intellectuals.

Classic fiction of the Harlem Renaissance (1994), edited by William L. Andrews, is an anthology of short stories by Harlem Renaissance writers such as Jean Toomer, Zora Neale Hurston, Claude McKay, Nella Larson, and Wallace Thurman.

Blues People (1963), by LeRoi Jones (also known as Amiri Baraka), is a classic history of the development of blues music in the African-American community, written by one of the leading figures in the Black Arts Movement.

Jazz Cleopatra: Josephine Baker in Her Times (1989), by Phyllis Rose, is a biography of Josephine Baker in historical context.

Further Study

Cleage, Pearl, *Deals with the Devil and Other Reasons to Riot*, Ballantine, 1993.

Deals with the Devil is a collection of forty essays by Cleage on issues facing African Americans, covering such figures as Malcolm X, Clarence Thomas, and Arsenio Hall, as well as the films *Driving Miss Daisy* and *Daughters of the Dust.*

_____, *What Looks Like Crazy on an Ordinary Day—: A Novel*, Avon Books, 1997.

Cleage's first novel concerns an African-American woman who is HIV-positive and who falls in love with the man of her dreams.

Fabre, Genevieve, and Michel Feith, eds., *Temples for Tomorrow: Looking Back at the Harlem Renaissance*, Indiana University Press, 2000.

Fabre and Feith offer a collection of essays on the continuing influence of the Harlem Renaissance on American culture.

Floyd, Samuel A., Jr., ed., *Black Music in the Harlem Renaissance: A Collection of Essays*, Greenwood Press, 1990.

Floyd provides a collection of essays on African-American music of the Harlem Renaissance.

Hughes, Langston, *The Big Sea: An Autobiography*, A. A. Knopf, 1940.

The Big Sea is an autobiography by Langston Hughes, one of the most important poets of the Harlem Renaissance.

Rodgers, Marie E., *The Harlem Renaissance: An Annotated Reference Guide for Student Research*, Libraries United, 1998.

This is a reference bibliography with brief synopses of publications about the Harlem Renaissance. It is designed as an aid for students wishing to learn more about the Harlem Renaissance.

Spencer, Jon Michael, *The New Negroes and Their Music: The Success of the Harlem Renaissance*, University of Tennessee Press, 1997.

Spencer offers an historical account of the musical developments of the Harlem Renaissance.

Watson, Steven, *The Harlem Renaissance: Hub of African-American Culture, 1920-1930*, Pantheon Books, 1995.

Watson provides a history of the Harlem Renaissance in terms of its influence on African-American culture.

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Effinger, Marta J., "Pearl Cleage," in *Dictionary of Literary Biography*, Volume 228: *Twentieth-Century American Dramatists, Second Series*, edited by Christopher J. Wheatley, The Gale Group, 2000, pp. 53-58.

Giles, Freda Scott, "The Motion of Herstory: Three Plays by Pearl Cleage," in *African American Review*, Vol. 31, No. 4, Winter 1997, p. 709.

_____, Review of *Bourbon at the Border*, in *African American Review*, Vol. 31, No. 4, Winter 1997, p. 725.

Gilliam, Annette, "Romance, AIDS Explored in Pearl Cleage's New Novel," in *Washington Informer*, Vol. 34, February 4, 1998, p. 16.

Weiss, Hedy, "*Blues for an Alabama Sky*," in *Chicago Sun Times*, March 17, 1998, p. 30.

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Introduction

Purpose of the Book

The purpose of Drama for Students (DfS) 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, DfS 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 DfS 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 DfS 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 DfS 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 DfS 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

DfS 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 Drama 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 DfS series.

A Cumulative Nationality/Ethnicity Index breaks down the authors and titles covered in each volume of the DfS 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 Drama for Students

When writing papers, students who quote directly from any volume of Drama 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 DfS 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.□ Drama for Students. Ed. Marie Rose Napierkowski. Vol. 4. Detroit: Gale, 1998. 234-35.

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

Miller, Tyrus. Critical Essay on □Winesburg, Ohio.□ Drama 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 DfS, 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 Drama 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 DfS, 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 Drama 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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