

# **The Darker Face of the Earth: A Play Study Guide**

**The Darker Face of the Earth: A Play by Rita Dove**

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# Plot Summary

The Darker Face of the Earth is a play by Rita Dove, which consists of an American antebellum retelling of the Greek tragedy Oedipus.

The play begins with the birth of a baby to Amalia, the nineteen year-old wife of plantation owner Louis giving birth to a baby boy. But Louis is not the father of the baby - it is Hector, a slave. Louis is enraged, but the attending physician encourages Louis not to kill the child. Instead, the doctor takes the baby away with him to Charleston to be raised by another family, and sold when ready. The doctor spreads the rumor among the slaves that the baby has died instead of letting them know the baby has actually survived.

The loss of her baby sends Amalia into a twenty year period of cruelty and intolerance toward her slaves. She hires a harsh overseer whom she goads into being even harsher towards the slaves. Hector, meanwhile, has gone to live in the swamps alone, where he hunts down and kills snakes. Amalia later buys a new slave to work on the plantation named Augustus. Augustus was bought by a British sea captain, who then promised Augustus freedom upon death. But the captain's brother sells Augustus instead in order to pay off debts. Augustus then becomes a wild and uncontrollable slave. Upon arrival at the plantation, the other slaves see that Augustus is rebellious and educated. They admire his hatred of whites and his intelligence. He becomes a natural leader among them.

Augustus soon becomes involved in an insurrection plot, while at the same time beginning a sordid sexual affair with Amalia. Augustus begins turning the slaves, one by one, to the rebellion. When Augustus's plotting is overheard by Hector, Augustus must kill Hector in order to silence him. In so doing, he kills his own father. Word travels to the other conspirators that Augustus has some sort of relationship with Amalia, and the other slaves demand he kill both her and Louis. He must do this in order to prove he is still loyal to the rebellion.

The night of the insurrection, Augustus confronts Louis, who tells Augustus to speak to Amalia about his mother. Augustus then stabs Louis and confronts Amalia. He discovers to his horror that Amalia is his own mother, and Amalia stabs herself. The play ends with the slaves breaking into the house and discovering the dead Amalia and Louis. In triumphal celebration, they raise up a stunned and shocked Augustus in victory. The plantation house is then burned as the slaves leave.

# Prologue

## Prologue Summary

As the prologue opens, Phebe, a teenage slave girl, comes running out of the basement kitchen, to meet her friend Psyche, who is more like her older sister. Phebe finds it amusing that Hector is standing on the porch of the plantation house, looking up at the second story. In the house, Amalia, the nearly-twenty year-old wife of the plantation owner, Louis, has just given birth to a half-black baby. The doctor tending her is horrified, especially at the prospect of the slaves hearing about the baby. Louis is enraged that the baby is not his, and tries to attack Amalia, but the doctor stops him. Amalia retorts that Louis seems to have no problem seducing slave girls.

Louis and the doctor discuss what to do; the doctor suggests selling the baby. Amalia won't hear of it. She says the only mistake in her life has been marrying Louis. The doctor questions what Amalia plans to do when society shuns her, or when Louis gets his hands on the baby. The doctor convinces Amalia to let him bring the baby away to another family in Charleston, who will arrange for the sale when the time comes. The doctor also sees to it that both Louis and Amalia agree to the cover story that Amalia resorted to an affair to get back at Louis for philandering. Amalia then gives her sewing basket to the doctor to hide the baby. Amalia wraps the baby in blue silk.

The doctor tells Ticey, a house slave, that the baby has died, and that Amalia does not want a funeral. Ticey then brings the bad news to Hector and the others. The doctor tells Amalia that he wants to protect her father's name, and that she is truly her father's daughter. The doctor then takes the baby in the basket and leaves. Twenty years then pass.

## Prologue Analysis

The explosive opening of Rita Dove's retelling of the Greek tragedy Oedipus immediately sets the stage for the course of the novel. The oracle predicted that Oedipus would kill his father, so his father sent Oedipus out into the world to avoid such a fate. In Dove's play, the situation is even more dramatic. Interracial relationships in the 1800s meant not only shunning, but utter ruin. For a white woman to have given birth to a mixed-race baby would have been considered even worse - and this is something of which both the doctor and Louis are all too keenly aware.

Louis realizes that not just his wife's reputation, but his own reputation, hang in the balance of things. In the American South, the idea of death before dishonor was not just a motto, but a creed by which men lived and died. The ruination of one's name and reputation would make death seem like a welcome retreat compared to the social castigation that would otherwise be endured.

Because of this, the doctor and Louis know they must take care of the baby in some way. The doctor, because of the great respect for which he held Amalia's father, agrees to keep quiet about the whole affair, and to help get rid of the child. This demonstrates further the profound effect reputation can have not just on present generations, but future generations as well. Had it not been for the respect with which the doctor held Amalia's father, it is more than likely that he would never have agreed to assist in covering things up. Indeed, the doctor has nothing to gain whatsoever by becoming enmeshed in a potential scandal.

As the doctor hurriedly carries the baby away, he informs the slaves that the baby is dead, having died shortly after being born. This lie picks up steam among the slaves, and will have far reaching consequences for not just the child, but for both of the parents as well. Indeed, the repercussions of such a birth would, even among the slaves, have had serious consequences - but these, too, have supposedly been averted by the quick actions of the attending doctor. Unfortunately, the idea of fate has already been examined by the characters - and none of them realize that an impending fate means that, no matter what is done, it will be unavoidable in the end.

# Act I

## Act I Summary

Act I, Scene 1 - Out in the fields, a slave girl named Diana collapses, and Phebe and the other slaves implore her to get up, or she'll be in trouble. They are afraid to invoke Amalia's wrath, for since losing her baby, she has become very cruel toward the slaves. They believe she may have even gone crazy. Scylla and some of the other slaves believe that the baby actually lived, and was taken away by the doctor. It is the same night that Scylla received her powers as a prophetess and voodoo practitioner. Scylla predicts a curse will be coming for four people. It is also revealed that Hector has since gone to live in the swamp by himself. Amalia suddenly arrives on scene to discover the slaves being idle, and calls for Jones, the overseer, who has been off drinking. She orders him to get the slaves back to work, and he uses the whip to do so.

Act I, Scene 2 - In the plantation study, Louis looks up at the stars with a telescope while Amalia discusses the plantation with Jones. Amalia reveals she has just purchased a slave named Augustus Newcastle. Jones explains he is the most talked-about slave on the Southern seaboard. Augustus was supposedly sold to a British captain who gave Augustus freedom upon death, but the captain's brother sold Augustus to pay off debts - and Augustus went wild, and always runs away. Beyond that, Jones explains, Augustus can read and write - and an educated slave means trouble.

Act I, Scene 3 - On Sunday, the slaves are let out in the fields to occupy themselves as they see fit. Scipio, Alexander, Phebe, and Diana talk about Jones showing the new slave around. Augustus is strong and handsome, and his skin is lighter than normal. The slaves introduce themselves to Augustus, who is kindly and happy to meet them. As he speaks, the other slaves realize he is very well-educated. At the same time, Hector emerges from the swamp, carrying a dead snake, and declaring he will kill all the snakes in the swamp. Scylla tells Hector to hush up, or the snakes will all hear.

Act I, Scene 4 - It is night at Scylla's cabin. Scylla tells Phebe she has made the spirits angry, and Phebe must protect herself against them by guarding her footsteps and her breath. Phebe then converses with Augustus outside. Augustus says Scylla is full of mumbo-jumbo nonsense. Augustus says he's been cursed countless times, but he's still doing well.

Act I, Scene 5 - Jones calls out that it is noon, and the slaves break for lunch. Augustus recounts being on the British ship and sailing all over the West Indies, and he recalls how beautiful they are. Scylla tells Augustus his stories mean trouble. Scylla calls Augustus uppity and says he is cursed. Augustus questions her motives, wondering why she would work against her own people.



Act I, Scene 6 - Out in the swamp, Hector continues his rounds, but hides as Augustus enters. He approaches a group of conspirators circled around a leader. They tell Augustus he has been a hero to them, and that they are preparing weapons to murder the white people. Not all the conspirators are wholly convinced of the idea of murder, but nevertheless want to rebel. Augustus commits to the group of conspirators. They reveal they have been hiding gunpowder at Dawson's Plantation, and other weapons in other places.

Act I, Scene 7 - Jones, already drinking, drives the slaves in the field harder and harder until lunch. Augustus moves around, speaking to the slaves of freedom and of revolution on the French Island of Santo Domingo, which thereafter became known as Haiti. Amalia overhears this and immediately confronts the slaves and Jones. She orders Jones to make the slaves work an extra hour; and she orders Augustus to come to the house that evening.

Act I, Scene 8 - In the plantation house, Louis continues studying the stars, believing something is out there. Augustus comes to the house, and Amalia questions him about his literacy and education. Amalia says she would have whipped Augustus for his insolence earlier, but that her father said she should never damage her own merchandise. She questions him about freedom and insurrection. They begin flirting and talking of dreams, and they almost kiss.

## **Act I Analysis**

The first act of Rita Dove's play brings the reader into the harsh realities of antebellum America. What is common on one plantation is common on a thousand others; and it is this harsh reality that the reader comes to understand would have been utterly unforgiving toward Amalia and Hector. The slaves are prodded with whips like animals, and are treated exactly like property. In Scene 3, for example, the slaves are let out in the field to occupy themselves as they want - just like animals being put out of a barn. What is perhaps most jarring to the reader in terms of the plot is that Amalia, who once loved a slave enough to give birth to an illegitimate baby, is the progenitor of such harsh vindictiveness and cruelty towards the slaves.

Because of the cheap price of Augustus, as well as his physical prowess, Amalia believes he will be a good addition to her stock of slaves. Yet everything that Jones, the overseer, tells her about Augustus, doesn't seem to deter her at all. The rumor that Augustus was meant to be freed, is physically imposing, and is also educated, proves to be severely problematic. Indeed, the other slaves are happy and enamored with Augustus. They rally around him, for Augustus is a natural leader. His experiences out in the world in other countries serve to stir up dreams in the hearts of other slaves. His classical education in all manners of subjects also increases the desire of the slaves to be moved beyond their lots as chattel.

At the same time, Augustus's arrival does not go over well with all of the slaves. Scylla notably objects to Augustus's presence, not only for undermining her own role as a

soothsayer, but also because she foresees impending disaster for everyone. Augustus believes Scylla is full of herself, and full of nonsense. The reader, however, realizes that there is more to Scylla's predictions than the other slaves understand.

Alternately, the response to slavery also becomes central to the emerging plot. Beyond discussions of servitude and liberty is the role that religion plays in the slave experience. Religion in slavery can prove to be a very positive and beneficial thing, giving the slaves hope for future freedom - either in the world or in Heaven after salvation. But while some slaves adhere to the ideas of forgiveness and freedom through Jesus Christ, others find much more solace in the battle-strewn Old Testament. An eye for an eye rather than the Golden Rule prove to be more appealing, and that struggle between both elements of the Christian experience can be seen in Act 6: New Testament forgiveness versus Old Testament revenge. Indeed, for the slaves, revenge seems to be the more palatable and savory option.

Yet it can be argued that the slaves are conflating revenge with justice at the same time. The slaves are taking God's role as judge out of His hands, and into their own hands, making their recourse equally reprehensible to the foul treatment that they themselves have received since Europeans set foot on the North American continent.



# Act 2

## Act 2 Summary

Act 2, Scene 1 - Amalia is taken with Augustus, while at the same time, Scylla knows the curse is even closer. Augustus also seems to be quite taken with Amalia as well.

Act 2, Scene 2 - Time goes on, and Augustus and Amalia spend more and more time together, something which Phebe questions. Phebe also explains she was born on the plantation, but didn't know her father, and her mother died of sickness. Augustus brings Phebe into the fold for the insurrection.

Act 2, Scene 3 - Jones is overseeing the transfer of cotton from the field to the cotton house. Phebe has become an ardent supporter of the revolution, and waits impatiently for something to happen. Meanwhile, the slaves begin gossiping about Amalia and Augustus. Some believe that Augustus will be beat into submission, not with a whip, but with flattery and sex. Scylla arrives to warn Phebe of the angry spirits, but Phebe has been emboldened by Augustus, and calls Scylla a curse. Scylla warns them all that looking up to Augustus, and following him, only means destruction for all of them.

Act 2, Scene 4 - Hector is in the swamps hunting snakes when Augustus, and another conspirator, Henry, meet up. They exchange a secret handshake and continue on, and Hector confronts Augustus. Hector knows Augustus is up to no good, and tells Augustus that the curse has been taken away as far as it could be taken. Hector knows Augustus is planning a great evil, and cries out that he won't let Augustus harm her. Augustus tells Hector to be quiet, but Hector cannot be overcome. Augustus then strangles Hector, murdering him.

Act 2, Scene 5 - Louis continues searching the sky while Amalia reads. Jones comes in, telling Amalia that her decision to let the slaves go to rest early means the rest of the crops might perish in the coming freeze. Jones also reports the slaves haven't even been tending their own gardens. Hector is also missing, he reveals. Amalia dismisses it all. As Jones leaves, Augustus comes to visit Amalia, and the two of them make love.

Act 2, Scene 6 - The slaves hold a funeral for Hector. Scylla questions Augustus about what he will do with his hate when everyone is freed, and what good hatred will serve then.

Act 2, Scene 7 - The final plans for insurrection are readied, and Phebe seeks out Augustus to speak to him. She tells him he's mixed up, and too full of hate and passion - and Phebe is in love with him. The conspirators approach Augustus as Phebe leaves. The conspirators are worried that Augustus's attachment to Amalia will prove his undoing. They bring him to the conspirators' headquarters, and leave Phebe in charge of organizing the slaves from Augustus's plantation.



Act 2, Scene 8 - Amalia calls Phebe to the big house because Amalia has seen Phebe going from group to group of slaves out in the field. Amalia tells Phebe to bring Augustus to her, but Phebe lies and says Augustus is keeping to himself in the swamp, and is considering fixing up Hector's shack. Augustus arrives with the task of killing both Louis and Amalia - to prove he hasn't abandoned the cause of rebellion. Augustus goes after Louis with a knife, but Louis holds him off at gunpoint. Louis tells Augustus to go speak to Amalia about his mother, and Augustus then attacks and stabs Louis. Meanwhile, outside, the slave rebellion has begun. Jones has already been killed.

Augustus then goes for Amalia, and asks her about his mother. Amalia tells him that he will want to cut out his eyes and stop his ears after he learns the truth of everything she is about to reveal. Amalia reveals that she is Augustus's mother. The slaves break into the house, and Amalia uses the distraction of the sounds in order to grab a knife and stab herself. She is heartbroken that she could not protect her son from all of the coming violence.

The slaves arrive, and they are overjoyed that Augustus has killed both master and wife. Augustus is absolutely terrified and stunned at the turn of events, and everything that he has learned. They hoist him up on their shoulders in triumph, and everyone exits as fire is set to the house. As the slaves leave, they chant "freedom" over and over.

## Act 2 Analysis

By the beginning of the second act, Augustus has helped set in motion the series of events that are now irrevocable. Scylla says the nets of fate are closing in, and her words are as harrowing as they are real. Slowly, slave by slave, Augustus has converted everyone to the insurrection's banners. At the same time, he has begun an affair with his own mother without realizing that she is his mother. The reader is fully aware of Augustus's actions - and his impending fate - because of the events of the prologue, and because of familiarity with Oedipus. Interestingly enough, beyond the events out of his control (primarily the events in the prologue, and Augustus's purchase by Amalia), Phebe appears on scene with, perhaps, a ticket to some sort of freedom.

Phebe is worried about what will happen to Augustus following the rebellion. Augustus has a chance to back out on things, for the other slaves seemingly will not act without him. Here, the classic debate between human fate and human free-will becomes apparent more so than anywhere else. Perhaps Augustus has a chance to assume some small control over his own life by refusing to participate in the rebellion and in murder. Perhaps he could simply slip away into the swamps rather than take part. Indeed, Phebe seems to love Augustus, and offers the promise of solace. Yet Augustus - bound by pride or fate, or perhaps a combination of both - commits to staying the course at hand.

As Augustus decides to stay on his course, in typical Oedipal fashion, he comes across his own father, whom he kills under slightly different circumstances than Oedipus did Laius. Indeed, the murder of Laius at a crossroads can be seen as metaphorical for

Oedipus to engage in a series of choices that might otherwise have prevented his fate; Phebe for Augustus serves symbolically as a crossroads. Yet both Oedipus and Augustus commit to a course either fateful, or concurrent with fate.

The return of Augustus to the plantation not only fulfills a curse and a prophecy, but also brings him around in a circle of existence. Augustus is born on a plantation illegitimately, and is returned to the same plantation years later. His mother's suicide takes away from Augustus the only force of genuine love in the world centered around him. Augustus, after the murder of his father, the murder of Louis, and the death of his mother, should be a free man. But rather than being emotionally and spiritually free as he was when he was a slave, he is now emotionally and spiritually a slave to the horrors of his own existence, which now run the gamut from incest to murder. Indeed, his newly found physical freedom may also soon be in check, as all slave rebellions in southern America were ruthlessly and violently put down, such as Nat Turner's.

# Characters

## Augustus Newcastle

Augustus Newcastle is a twenty year-old slave who is at the heart of Rita Dove's play, *The Darker Face of the Earth*. He is the illegitimate child of Amalia Jennings Lafarge and her slave, Hector. Upon his birth, in order to cover up a scandal, Augustus is taken away by the Doctor in order to be sold at a later date by another family in Charleston.

Augustus is purchased and raised by a British sea captain, who treats Augustus as his own son. He travels the world with the captain, particularly to the West Indies. Along the way, Augustus is given a quality, classical education which he later uses to his advantage to impress the other slaves. When the sea captain dies, Augustus is sold into slavery once more by the captain's brother, rather than being freed as per the captain's instructions. Because of this, Augustus becomes wild and has a reputation as a runaway among the various slave owners in the Southern seaboard.

As such, Augustus is purchased cheaply by Amalia to work the Lafarge plantation. Augustus's arrival immediately intrigues all of the other slaves, who see him as a natural leader, for he is strong, kindly, hates whites, and is so knowledgeable. He continually butts heads with Scylla, the conjurer, believing she is full of nonsense. Yet, Scylla tells Augustus that his fate is coming.

Soon after arriving, Augustus begins meeting with other conspiring slaves in the swamp in order to plot rebellion against the plantation owners. At the same time, without realizing she is his mother, Augustus begins a sexual relationship with Amalia. Shortly thereafter, Hector overhears the conspirators, and Augustus kills Hector to keep him quiet.

In order to prove he is still with the conspirators, Augustus is given the task of killing both Louis and Amalia. After killing Louis, Augustus discovers to his horror that Amalia is his mother. Despite having found his freedom physically with the deaths of the plantation owners, Augustus is no longer emotionally and spiritually free the way he was. Instead, he is now emotionally and spiritually scarred and chained by the crimes he has committed, from incest to murder. Likewise, slave rebellions in the United States were always put down violently, and one can only surmise that Augustus met the same fate.

## Amalia Jennings Lafarge

A southern belle, Amalia is both beautiful and very intelligent. She has an affair with a slave named Hector, and gives birth to his son, Augustus. After Augustus is taken away to protect her family's name and reputation, Amalia continues her marriage with Louis in nominal status only. Amalia becomes harsh and cruel toward the slaves, forcing them to work longer and harder.

When Amalia buys Augustus, she is instantly attracted to him, and seduces him. When she discovers the slave rebellion, and that Augustus is her own son, she kills herself with a knife. Hoping to have protected Augustus from hatred and violence in the world, Amalia realizes before her death that Augustus is part of it all.

## **Phebe**

Phebe, a slave girl in her early teens, is thin and lively when Augustus is born. She is kind and gentle, and is attracted to Augustus when he shows up at the plantation twenty years later. Phebe serves as a crossroads for Augustus, potentially offering him an alternative to rebellion and a life of hatred. She appears to be in love with him, but it is a love that is not returned during the course of the play. Phebe is made second in command of the Lafarge plantation slaves, and is likewise present when the truth of Augustus's identity becomes known.

## **Louis Lafarge**

Louis Lafarge is the owner of the Lafarge Plantation, and is the husband of Amalia. A former cavalry officer, Louis has a penchant for seducing young slave girls, which helps to drive Amalia herself into the arms of Hector. Louis, upon discovery that Amalia's baby is not his, wants to kill the child, but the Doctor advises him not to do so. With the departure of the baby Augustus, the Jennings marriage dissolves except in nominal existence. Louis spends most of his time studying the stars while Amalia runs the plantation. Louis believes there is something afoot in the world by studying the stars, and the rebellion and Augustus's confrontation prove it. Louis is murdered by Augustus shortly after telling him to go speak to Amalia about his mother.

## **The Doctor**

The Doctor is the physician who attends the birth of the baby Augustus. Rather than allowing Louis to kill the child, and out of deference to the reputation of Amalia's father, the Doctor carries the child away to Charleston to be raised and sold. The Doctor seals things by telling the slaves that the baby had died shortly after being born.

## **Scylla**

Scylla is a slave woman who receives her powers as voodoo priestess and conjurer the night baby Augustus is born. She commands enormous respect in the slave community, but her position and prestige are undermined by a skeptical Augustus. Nevertheless, Scylla predicts a terrible fate for Augustus and all those who engage in rebellion.

## **Hector**

Hector the slave is the former lover of Amalia, and the father of Augustus. Following news of his son's death, Hector goes to live in the swamp alone in order to catch and kill snakes. The other slaves tolerate him, for they believe he has gone crazy. In reality, Augustus discovers that Hector is actually heartsick. When Hector overhears Augustus plotting murder with the other slaves, Augustus murders him by strangling him.

## **Henry**

Henry is one of the conspiratorial slaves who plot rebellion. He is at first not sold on the idea of murder, looking to the Bible instead, but later commits fully to the plan. It is Henry's meeting with Augustus that is overheard by Hector, which leads to Hector's death.

## **Jones**

Jones is the drunken, slovenly overseer of the Lafarge plantation. He is somewhat bumbling, but nevertheless rules with an iron fist. He defers to Amalia, though he tries to warn her about Augustus, and presents her with strange signs around the slave cabins - such as the slaves no longer caring for their own gardens. He is presumably killed in the slave revolt.

## **Ticey**

Ticey is a house slave who helps tend to Amalia. The night of Augustus's birth, Ticey is told that the baby has died. Ticey in turn goes to tell the other slaves what has happened, and helps to promulgate the notion that Augustus is dead.

# Objects/Places

## Lafarge Plantation

The Lafarge Plantation is the main setting of the play *The Darker Face of the Earth* by Rita Dove. It is located in South Carolina, somewhere near Charleston. It is a prosperous plantation eventually, owned and run by Amalia Jennings Lafarge, and her husband, Louis. It is where the Plantation House, cotton fields, and swamp are located.

## The Lafarge Plantation House

Situated on the Lafarge Plantation, the Lafarge Plantation House is where Amalia seduces first Hector, and then later Augustus. It is where Augustus is born, Louis is murdered, Amalia commits suicide, and where Augustus learns the truth of his parents. It is burned to the ground at the end of the play.

## South Carolina

South Carolina, a southern state in the United States, is the location of the city of Charleston, and the Lafarge Plantation.

## Charleston, South Carolina

Charleston, South Carolina, is a major port city located somewhere near the Lafarge Plantation. It is to Charleston that the baby Augustus is sent away to be raised and sold.

## The Swamp

The swamp, located just beyond the Lafarge Plantation's edge, is where Hector lives alone in a shack, and where conspiring slaves meet to plot rebellion. It is also where Augustus murders Hector.

## The West Indies

The West Indies is a group of islands in the Caribbean where Augustus and his owner, a British sea captain, travel around to trade and do business. It is memories of the islands that fuel the imaginations of the other slaves, and their desire for freedom.

## **Knife**

A knife is what Augustus uses to murder Louis, and it is later by knife that Amalia commits suicide.

## **Gunpowder**

Gunpowder is what is stored and used by slaves in the insurrection to overcome their masters.

## **Cotton**

Cotton is a major cash crop in the antebellum American South. It is what the slaves harvest and refine.

## **Blue Silk**

Blue silk is the elegant material Amalia uses to line baby Augustus's basket before the Doctor takes him away. Amalia's knowledge of the blue silk later proves to Augustus that she is his mother.



# Themes

## Love and Hate

The theme of love and hate is one of the three, major, and overarching precepts in Rita Dove's play *The Darker Face of the Earth*. It informs every major part of the plot, and drives the characters of Augustus and Amalia without fail.

Hate exists predominantly in the characters of Augustus and Louis. Hatred comes to Augustus through his position as a slave, and being helpless against his masters. His hatred serves as a source of motivation for insurrection and plotting to murder the plantation owners. Furthermore, his hatred also proves to be appealing to the other slaves, who have no such fire of their own.

Louis, on the other hand, has hatred toward his wife, Hector, and Augustus. Louis's hatred of his wife, and of Hector, stems from the affair they have had with one another. Louis's hatred of the illicit affair drives him further away from his wife, and causes him to shut himself up inside, studying the stars. Louis's hatred also extends to Augustus, a physical, breathing reminder of the forbidden affair. This causes him to want to kill Augustus as a baby, and later as a twenty year-old breaking into the house.

Love exists as a counterbalance to hatred in the play, and occurs predominantly with the characters Phebe, Amalia, and Augustus. In Amalia, her motherly love serves as a bulwark in protection of her son; her love of Hector serves to prove to be the progenitor of Augustus in the first place. Phebe's apparent love for Augustus serves as a choice of freewill; and Augustus's apparent love -or lust- for Amalia drives him on to doubt the hatred upon which he sustained his life.

Metaphysically, Amalia's love for Hector, and especially for Augustus, makes it possible for Augustus to survive Louis's threats of death. Ironically, it is this act of love which encourages and grows the hatred in Augustus, from the failed attempt to secure his freedom. This hatred wells within Augustus, driving him to rebellion, and to cause his mother to commit suicide.

## Slavery and Freedom

Slavery and freedom is one of the three, major, and overarching themes in Rita Dove's play *The Darker Face of the Earth*. It haunts every major part of the plot because the plot is structured around the parameters of the duality of freedom and slavery.

Hector, Augustus, Phebe, and all of the other slaves on the Lafarge plantation have been born into slavery, and know only the small freedoms they are given as slaves. These freedoms include being put out to pasture to amuse themselves on Sundays, and tending their own little cabin-side gardens. The slaves would like to be free, but don't truly grasp what being free would mean until they meet Augustus, who, despite being a

slave, has traveled the world and seen hundreds of places, and has been classically-educated -something especially important denied to slaves.

Indeed, much of the life of slaves is totally up to the slave owners to decide. That Augustus might have been murdered as a child, but was sent away, was a decision wholly out of Hector's hands, but well within the power of Amalia, Louis, and the Doctor. That Augustus was educated and was able to see the West Indies was wholly within the power of the British sea captain. That Augustus was brought back to the Lafarge plantation as a purchased commodity was wholly up to Amalia. But that the slaves would plan an insurrection and murder is wholly up to the slaves themselves.

Consequentially, slavery and freedom are at constant war within Augustus himself, and prove to be a matter of irony. Augustus desires freedom more than anything else. In his mind, in his heart, in his soul, he is free, for he dreams of freedom, he dreams of better places, of better times, and a bright future. Physically, however, he is bound to the plantation and the lot of a slave.

Following the discovery of Amalia as his mother, and her suicide, all of Augustus's great plans are laid to ruin. Now physically free -at least temporarily- without his masters to claim ownership, Augustus has become mentally, emotionally, and spiritually enslaved. He has become enslaved by the crimes he has committed -from incest to murder- and by the horrifying discovery that his mother is Amalia, and his mother is now dead. While the slaves celebrate their triumph, Augustus mourns everything he has lost.

## **Oedipus**

An Oedipian theme is one of three, major, and overarching precepts in Rita Dove's play *The Darker Face of the Earth*. The plot structure of *The Darker Face of the Earth* resembles to a large extent the Greek tragedy *Oedipus* in at least three major ways, and deals with one similar theme, that of freedom and fate.

In terms of plot structure, *Oedipus* involves the prophecy that the son of King Laius would kill him and sleep with his mother, Jacosta. Hoping to prevent this, Laius sends Oedipus away, only later to be killed by Oedipus at a crossroads. Oedipus then assumes his father's place by sleeping with his mother, Jacosta. In Dove's play, Augustus is the illegitimate child that portends scandal and family ruin, and is thus promptly sent away. Yet, Augustus is bought years later by his mother, only to end up seduced by her. Augustus later kills his father, fulfilling a tragic fate foreseen by the slave Scylla. In both plays, both main characters follow a fatal trajectory that brings them full circle to their homes and mothers in ruinous ways.

In terms of the idea of free will and fate, both plays revolve heavily around the concepts of self-determination and predetermination. Whereas Scylla promises fate and tragedy, Phebe worries about Augustus's future, as though it was in his hands. Certainly Augustus had no shortage of chances to alter the course he was on, but chose

deliberately not to do so. Yet, such free choices also mean that the prophecy of fate is fulfilled.

# Style

## Point of View

Rita Dove tells her play, *The Darker Face of the Earth*, from the third person omniscient narrative point of view. While much of the play is driven by character dialogue, an omniscient narrator explains some of the events as they unravel, so that the reader (and potentially the audience, if the play was being acted on stage) could understand the plot as it unfolds. Because of the diverse number of unique characters crucial to the plot, conflicting emotions, sordid and tumultuous events, and metaphysical and philosophical concepts, Dove chooses to allow the play to proceed beyond the oftentimes narrow realm of first-person perspective. Third-person therefore suits the play aptly, and helps to ensure the reader is able to understand and see things from various points of view.

## Setting

Because Rita Dove's play *The Darker Face of the Earth* is an American antebellum retelling of the Greek tragedy *Oedipus*, it is perfectly fitting that she sets her play in the American antebellum south. In the pre-Civil War years, between the ratification of the United States Constitution and the American Civil War, and in reflecting on history, South Carolina serves to be the fire for secessionist sympathies and epitomizes the Southern condition: a land of high ideals in terms of freedom, and pragmatic dismissal in terms of slavery. Indeed, the Civil War began with the bombardment of Fort Sumter in Charleston harbor by Confederate forces in April, 1861. Because of the very Southern persuasion of South Carolina, the state proves to be perfect for the plot's setting.

## Language and Meaning

Rita Dove tells her play *The Darker Face of the Earth* in language that is beautiful and poetic. Despite the horrendous conditions of slaves, and the heartbreak endured by many of the characters, the shining spot in the play's dark plot proves to be the way in which Dove writes. The tragedy and hope that the play encompasses are explained beautifully by Dove in the way the characters speak. This serves to demonstrate that, like freedom of the mind and heart in slavery, beauty and love can exist in the darkest places and under the gravest of circumstances.

## Structure

Rita Dove structures her play *The Darker Face of the Earth* into three main sections: A prologue, and two acts, with each act containing eight scenes. The prologue serves as a back story to the main events of the play, which transpire between the first and second acts twenty years later. This straightforward style of structure compels the reader to focus on the plot itself, rather than on how the play itself is structured. This

also allows the plot itself to progress unhindered by what could be a complicated structure that might otherwise drag the reader down; it also allows for the play itself to be acted on stage without difficulties that might otherwise be imposed by the confines of a complicated structure.

# Quotes

"Stepped on a pin, the pin bent, and that's the way the story went!"  
-Phebe, Prologue, p. 17

"There's no way back, is there?"  
-Amalia, Prologue, p. 27

"Miss Amalia went crazy in the head the day she lost that baby boy."  
-Alexander, Act I, Scene 1, p. 36

"My, my. The sun and the moon all in one morning!"  
-Augustus, Act I, Scene 3, p. 49

"I've been cursed enough times to bring down a whole fleet of ships around me -but here I sit, high and dry. So I guess they must be saving me for something special."  
-Augustus, Act I, Scene 4, p. 61

"Bolster your heart with the memory of the atrocities committed upon your mothers. Gird your loins with vengeance, strap on the shining sword of freedom!"  
-Leader, Act I, Scene 6, p. 71

"Half my life I spent dreaming, the other half burying dreams."  
-Amalia, Act I, Scene 8, p. 86

"He can stand up to a glare, but he doesn't know his heart. Look around you, child: It's growing dark."  
-Narrator, Act 2, Scene 2, p. 98

"So keep talking about Haiti and sharpening your sticks. But know one thing: that nigger's headed for destruction, and you're all headed there with him."  
-Scylla, Act 2, Scene 3, p. 105

"Evil isn't the snake, little man. Evil is what grows the snake."  
-Hector, Act 2, Scene 4, p. 110

"If this is all the world they've left us, then it's ours to make over."  
-Amalia, Act 2, Scene 5, p. 119

"All those years folks thought he was crazy -when he was just sick at heart."  
-Augustus, Act 2, Scene 6, p. 125

"Because I care what happens to you more than revolution or freedom. Those may be traitor's words, but I don't care. 'Cause maybe- maybe if you hadn't let hate take over your life, you might have had some love left over for me."  
-Phebe, Act 2, Scene 7, p. 129



"Everything was so simple before! Hate and be hated. But this -love or freedom -is the devil's choice."

-Augustus, Act 2, Scene 8, p. 137

"The stars can tell you everything -war and pestilence, love and betrayal."

-Louis, Act 2, Scene 8, p. 138

"I had the sun and the moon once. And the stars with their cool gaze. Now it's dark."

-Augustus, Act 2, Scene 8, pp. 148-149

## Topics for Discussion

What role does religion play in Rita Dove's play *The Darker Face of the Earth*? How do the slaves use religion? Does it serve to help or hinder them? Is the slave experience more in tune with Old Testament Christianity, or New Testament Christianity? Why? Provide evidence to support your claim.

Discuss the theme of love and hate in Rita Dove's play *The Darker Face of the Earth*. How do love and hate appear in the play, and to which characters do each of these passionate emotions belong, and why? What are the consequences of such emotions?

Discuss the theme of slavery and freedom in *The Darker Face of the Earth* by Rita Dove. How do freedom and slavery exist in the play? How are they dealt with by the characters? How does the theme of slavery and freedom affect Augustus in particular?

Rita Dove's play *The Darker Face of the Earth* touches upon the concepts of free will and fate. Define free will and fate, and discuss the character of Augustus. Is Augustus bound to a predetermined fate, or does he possess any amount of free will that he could use to his advantage? Explain your response.

Discuss the plot structure of *The Darker Face of the Earth* by Rita Dove. In what ways does the plot structure resemble that of the Greek tragedy *Oedipus*? In what ways do both plays differ? Why do you believe this is so?

Discuss the concepts of free will and fate in *The Darker Face of the Earth* by Rita Dove. What are free will and fate? How do they affect the course of the plot? Do you believe Augustus is bound by free will or fate, or a mixture of both? Explain.