Flyin' West Study Guide

Flyin' West by Pearl Cleage

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Contents

Introduction

Pearl Cleage's *Flyin' West* is the story of a small group of African-American women whose lives changed when the West was opened up for people willing to settle in a harsh and untested region. The backgrounds, actions, and feelings of the play's four women and two men reflect themes of determination, racism, miscegenation (intermarriage between races), feminism, pride, and freedom. These themes are evident in much of Cleage's work, which includes plays, novels, and essays.

Flyin' West was published in 1995 by Dramatists Play Service but was performed in Atlanta prior to publication. The play was originally commissioned in 1992 by the Alliance Theatre Company and was produced with the support of AT&T and the Lila Wallace Reader's Digest Fund Resident Theatre Initiative. Critical response was favorable, and audiences were pleasantly surprised at the play's bold content. Besides portraying strong black women in late nineteenth-century America, the play serves as a reminder that the West was settled by a diverse population. Cleage seeks to inform audiences that the Homestead Act enabled people from all races and genders to own land and to use that land to support themselves, or to develop it and sell it for a profit. The women in the play have left the oppressive South in hopes of enjoying the freedom that they have so long been denied. *Flyin' West* remains one of Cleage's most admired works.

Author Biography

Pearl Cleage (pronounced "cleg") was born Decem-ber 7, 1948, in Springfield, Massachusetts, to Doris and Reverend Albert B. Cleage, Jr. She was reared in Detroit, where her father's ministry allowed her to hear speakers such as Malcolm X and Martin Luther King, Jr. Cleage graduated from high school and, during the turbulent 1960s, went to Howard University in Washington, D.C., where she stayed for three years. She went to Yale University in 1969, then the University of the West Indies in 1971, and finally transferred to Spelman College in Atlanta, where she graduated in 1971 with a degree in drama. She also did graduate work at Atlanta University.

In 1969, Cleage married Michael Lomax, a politician. The marriage lasted ten years and produced a daughter named Deignan. Cleage remarried in 1994. Her second husband, Zaron Burnett, Jr., is a writer and producing director of Just Us Theatre Company in Atlanta, Georgia, where the couple met. Cleage was the theater's first playwright-in-residence, and she and Burnett collaborated on several works after she became the artistic director in 1987. Another Atlanta theater, The Alliance Theater, is responsible for debuting some of Cleage's most notable plays. Among these is *Flyin' West* (1992), the play credited with gaining Cleage a widespread audience. The success of this play led to the production of *Blues for an Alabama Sky* in 1995.

Cleage is regarded as an important contemporary African-American writer and feminist. Her work includes plays, poetry, essays, and novels. She has contributed to magazines such as *Ms.* and *Essence,* and she is the founding editor of the literary magazine *Catalyst.* Her work is unique in that it portrays an overlooked chapter in history, the migration of black women to the West. She also addresses modern issues such as racism, sexism, and AIDS. In her first novel, *What Looks Like Crazy on an Ordinary Day*, Cleage depicts the life of a modern African-American woman struggling with her positive HIV status. When this novel was selected for talk-show host Oprah Winfrey's book club, Cleage reached a wide and diverse audience. The book stayed on the *New York Times* best-seller list for almost ten weeks in 1998, and Cleage's writing in general attracted a great deal of interest. Today, Cleage continues to write fiction, essays, poetry, and drama from her home in Atlanta.

Plot Summary

Act 1

As *Flyin' West* opens, Sophie and Miss Leah are at home drinking coffee and talking about land acquisition for African Americans. They are homesteaders who came to Kansas (their farm is outside the all-black town of Nicodemus) to accept free land for cultivation. Miss Leah is a feisty elderly woman who demands respect, and Sophie is a good-natured but strong-willed woman who takes care of Miss Leah without making her feel dependent. The two women discuss the emergence of all-black communities; they resent threats to such communities by white speculators who want to buy their land. Sophie expresses her determination to get a school for the town by the spring. Outside, Fannie and Wil talk about acquaintances they have in common, as well as Wil's travels in Mexico and Fannie's love of wildflowers.

Fannie's younger sister Minnie arrives by train with her husband, Frank. Frank is fifteen years Minnie's senior, and he is clearly in control of the relationship. The couple lives in London and enjoys a wealthy lifestyle. Frank is of mixed heritage and has little in common with his wife's black family. He acts superior, an attitude that carries over into his marriage; he is physically abusive toward Minnie, although she lies to hide it from her family.

Minnie and Frank talk about their life in Lon-don, where they rarely see other black people. This saddens Minnie but suits Frank. He is condescending toward black people in general and is clearly trying to suppress that aspect of his heritage. That night, Fannie, Minnie, and Sophie gather outside to hold hands and perform a ritual that they first performed when they left Memphis to be free in the West. The ritual consists of Sophie leading the other two in declaring their intentions to be free and to honor themselves and the women who came before them.

The next morning, Minnie and Miss Leah talk about children. Miss Leah reveals that she had her first child at the age of thirteen, and over the years, she lost all ten to the slave trade. When she and her husband, James, were finally free, they lost five more children to illness. Miss Leah tells how this destroyed James, who desperately wanted to see a son grow into a man. Minnie tells Miss Leah that she misses being around other black people, and Miss Leah braids Minnie's hair the way she did long ago. Frank reproaches Minnie for making herself look that way.

That night, Frank is gone and Sophie is showing Minnie her plans for the town of Nicodemus. She has drawn a map of the town, complete with a school, library, and everything a self-supporting town needs. While Sophie is out checking the horses, Frank returns drunk and finds Minnie in the guest room in which they are staying. He tells Minnie that he was out gambling with white men and lost all his money, and he blames her for being bad luck. He also tells her that he heard that the land Sophie and Fannie have is worth a fortune to the white speculators who have shown up looking to

buy land. Minnie insists that they will never sell the land because it is their home. Frank becomes enraged and pushes her to the floor. Sophie charges in with her shotgun, pointing it at Frank and getting ready to shoot. Minnie yells for her not to do it because she is pregnant. Presumably, Minnie is afraid that if Frank is killed, she will have no way to support herself and the baby.

Act 2

The next morning, the women are talking about Frank. Sophie is caustic in her remarks, Fannie wants the marriage to work, and Minnie insists that Frank is a good man who has been pushed too far by circumstances. Frank had been receiving money from his white father, but upon the man's recent death, Frank's white brothers stopped sending him money.

The next day is Sunday, but before Fannie, Sophie, and Miss Leah leave for church, they have a birthday present for Minnie. Sophie hands her an envelope containing the deed to her portion of the land. Because she is turning twenty-one, she is able to own land. Frank talks about how much the land is worth and tries to convince the women that they should sell the land, which would fetch fifty thousand dollars per portion. The women insist that they are not interested in the money; they prefer the freedom and self-sufficiency of owning the land.

Wil arrives to escort the ladies to church and to deliver a telegram for Frank. It states that he has been cut off from his family, which now denies him completely. He is angry and feels trapped in the rustic West among people he loathes. After everyone else leaves for church, Minnie and Frank argue about the deed. He insists that they sell the land so that they can resume their former lifestyle, but the land and her family are more important to Minnie. He threatens and demeans her.

On their way back from church, the group meets Frank. He says that Minnie is resting at the house and that he has some business in town. When they get to the house, they discover that Frank has severely beaten Minnie to force her to add his name to the deed so he can go to town and find a buyer for the land. Outraged, they come up with a plan. Wil goes after Frank and convinces him to return to the house. Although Sophie wants to kill him with her shotgun when he gets back, Miss Leah has a better idea. She tells them about a friend of hers who was threatened by the overseer at the plantation where they used to live. Her friend baked him a poisoned apple pie, and nobody ever knew why he died. Miss Leah, rolling out a pie crust, tells them that she has the recipe.

Frank returns and Fannie tells him that they do not like what he did to Minnie, but they forgive him. She also tells him that they have enough money to buy the land. He agrees to sell to them and also sits down to enjoy a piece of apple pie. After a few bites, he starts choking and gasping for breath but realizes too late what is happening. As his body is being removed from the house, Minnie takes the deed out of his pocket.

The final scene takes place seven months later. Miss Leah is rocking the baby while the others get ready to attend a dance. Wil and Fannie are finally engaged, and everyone is happy. Alone with the baby in the final moments of the play, Miss Leah tells the baby (a girl) about all the "fine colored women" who came before her and have made a place for her.

Act 1, Scene 1

Act 1, Scene 1 Summary

Flyin' West takes place at the home of Sophie Washington and Fannie Dove, black women who have homesteaded near the all-black town of Nicodemus, Kansas. It is autumn of 1898, and the women, who are in their 30's have opened their home to Miss Leah, a 73-year-old black woman who owns neighboring property. Sophie and Fannie don't want Miss Leah to be isolated at her home alone during the upcoming winter, and the old woman has grudgingly accepted their offer.

As the play opens, Sophie and Miss Leah are discussing the increasing prevalence of all-Negro communities; they worry that the threat of white speculators will ruin their independence and their homesteads. Sophie is an assertive and innovative young woman who has launched plans to expand the town of Nicodemus and is only temporarily daunted by the recent letter from a schoolteacher declining the offer of a position for the spring.

Sophie's willfulness and Miss Leah's age make the two women a formidable pair; Fannie, however, is a bit more soft-hearted. As Sophie and Miss Leah continue their cantankerous conversation, Fannie is strolling outside with Wil Parrish, a neighbor who looks after Miss Leah's house and who also has amorous intentions toward Fannie.

After Wil leaves for the evening, Sophie and Fannie discuss the upcoming visit of Minnie, Fannie's sister, who will be bringing her new husband, Frank, for his first visit to Nicodemus. Minnie and Frank live in London, and the only reason Frank is back in the United States is to settle some estate matters related to his father's recent death.

Act 1, Scene 1 Analysis

The main theme in this play is that of freedom. With the exceptions of Fannie and Minnie, the characters were all born into slavery, and their homes in Nicodemus signify the independence and sense of ownership that many other black people in America still could not enjoy. The Homestead Act of 1862 opened up the Western states to those who could claim their tracts of land there, and it spawned a mass exodus of black people, who traveled west looking for a new promised land.

Their commitment to freedom extends past their immediate families as well, as is shown by the establishment of Nicodemus as a town where generations of black people can continue to live and thrive. Sophie and Miss Leah, who had both been born into slavery, are particularly cognizant of the importance of maintaining the vision.

Act 1, Scene 2

Act 1, Scene 2 Summary

Sophie and Fannie await the arrival of the train carrying Minnie and her new husband Frank. It has been almost two years since they have all been together and the excitement is running high. Minnie is overjoyed to see her family, but Frank remains coolly distant and conducts himself in a condescending manner toward the others; it is evident that a stay in Nicodemus, Kansas, is not his preference. Frank and Minnie have lived in London since their marriage and are used to a more privileged, cosmopolitan lifestyle; in England, they mingle with white people, and Frank sees this prairie visit as degrading.

Act 1, Scene 2 Analysis

As striking a concept as the town of Nicodemus may be in 1898 America, the author illustrates through Frank's character that there are places in the world where Jim Crow laws do not apply and black people are considered equal to their white friends and colleagues. Frank's mulatto status and obvious disdain for those who are pure blacks belie his fear that he may not really be welcome in the life he has chosen, even though the world provides the framework for limited acceptance.

Act 1, Scene 3

Act 1, Scene 3 Summary

As dinner preparations get underway in the kitchen, Minnie and Frank settle in the guest bedroom. Minnie is careful to avoid Frank's attentions and re-positions her hat lower on her face so that the others will not see the big bruise above her eye. Minnie's attempt at concealment is short lived, however, as the women soon ask Minnie to get comfortable and remove her hat. None of the others believe Minnie's story about tripping in the train car and injuring her eye, yet they cannot pursue any questions at that time, since Frank appears for dinner.

At dinner, Frank steers the conversation to life in London and his life as a black writer. Particularly pleased to be free of oppression, Frank is quite happy to live where few other blacks do. Minnie, on the other hand misses the ethnic and cultural advantages of Negroes.

After dinner, Fannie and Sophie ask Minnie outside, where the three women hold a dear ritual they originally performed before leaving their Memphis home for the prairie life. Sophie leads the other two in declarations of freedom and the intention to honor not only themselves but also the women who came before them and blazed a trail.

Act 1, Scene 3 Analysis

Two themes emerge in this scene: ethnic pride and domestic abuse. Except for Frank, all of the characters are extremely proud of their Negro heritage and wear their history as a mark of honor and survival. Black culture permeates everything they do, from rituals, to education, to hairstyles. Frank's efforts to set himself apart from all this reveal his need to feel different from other black people; they also make clear his belief that his mulatto status elevates him in a world where white people still pass judgment.

Frank's insecurities have not only taken a toll on his own self-esteem but have led him to physically abuse Minnie. It is as if Minnie is the only person Frank truly believes he controls, and she is the vessel into which he pours all his pain. The author forces us to consider the domestic abuse issue closely by placing it in a story where we may not expect to see it; white abuse toward Blacks is a part of history, but emotional and physical abuse within Black households is an element that is rarely brought to light.

Act 1, Scene 4

Act 1, Scene 4 Summary

When Minnie gets up early the next morning, Fannie and Sophie are already out doing chores, but Miss Leah is rocking in the kitchen. The older woman talks to the girl about the slave life and the ten children who were never completely hers, having been lost to the slave trade. Miss Leah envies Minnie her relatively easy life and the children that will be a part of that life.

Minnie assumes the position of a child at Miss Leah's knee so that the old woman can braid Minnie's hair. As they talk, Minnie shares her longing to be with other black people again and says how comforting it is to have Miss Leah braid her hair and talk just like the old days.

Frank is less than pleased when he emerges from the bedroom to find his wife's hair in braids. The style is that of a picaninny to Frank's way of thinking, but he reserves his wrath until he and Minnie are outside alone, taking care to be especially charming in Miss Leah's presence. Frank then departs for the telegraph office in town, leaving Minnie on the porch rocking herself with knees drawn up to her chest.

Act 1, Scene 4 Analysis

The act of telling stories was a critical part of preserving Negro culture and heritage, and Minnie's longing for that heritage is clear as Miss Leah soothes the soul-starved girl. Miss Leah cannot imagine Minnie's life in London and will never have the opportunity to experience it. All the old woman can do is give the girl a past and a sense of belonging to something that is bigger than herself or the shallow objectives of her husband.

Act 1, Scene 5

Act 1, Scene 5 Summary

Later the same night, Sophie and Minnie are waiting for Frank to return from his trip into town. While they wait, Sophie shares the plans which have been drawn up to develop the town of Nicodemus. Sophie's vision shows a completely self-sufficient town poised for even more growth. In Sophie's mind, the turn of the century in two years will be a pivotal point for black people; she sees it as important that Nicodemus be part of a thriving movement. In the course of this conversation, Minnie asks Sophie her opinion of Frank, but Sophie is evasive with her answer and heads outside to check the horses before turning in.

As Minnie stokes the fire, Frank sneaks into the room. His drunken state does not alleviate his normal cruelty toward his wife. Frank reveals that he had been gambling in town and lost everything he had, though he blames Minnie for his bad luck. To add insult to injury, the white men questioned Frank about the "nigger" woman on the train. Frank never admitted that the woman was his wife but knows that the men figured it out.

Frank also has learned that speculators have arrived in the area and that the land belonging to Sophie and Fannie would be worth a fortune. Minnie declares that the women would never sell the home and that he should forget about any speculation. Enraged by Minnie's tone, Frank pushes his wife to the floor just as Sophie is coming back into the house. Soon Frank is looking down the barrel of Sophie's rifle; Minnie begs Sophie not to shoot Frank, because she is pregnant with his child.

Act 1, Scene 5 Analysis

This is a very important scene, rich with the symbolism of a younger woman learning the potential for a whole race of people. Sophie shares a vision for the town of Nicodemus, but ultimately she is spreading hope for a better life as each new generation learns and works to a greater purpose.

In addition to poignant symbolism, the author uses the technique of irony in the character of Frank Charles. Conflicted by questionable parentage, Frank opts to believe that his white father loved his black mother, even though he had the power to free her and never did. In Frank's mind, his parentage is noble and loving, but probably just the opposite is true. This hypocrisy plays out in his own marriage, as Frank thinks he is recreating the image of perfection, while he is actually repeating the past.

Act 2, Scene 1

Act 2, Scene 1 Summary

The next morning, the women rally around Minnie in the hopes that last night's abuse has not initiated a miscarriage. Sophie stands guard at the door to watch Frank pacing outside. Miss Leah brings tea and comforting words, while Fannie tries to play down the violence and convince Minnie to be loyal to Frank because he is her husband. Minnie contends that Frank really is a good man but has been pushed too far by his family, who has disowned him after his father's death. Minnie's love for Frank overtakes all reason, and she pushes past the others to run to Frank and embrace him.

Act 2, Scene 1 Analysis

The author again raises the issue of domestic abuse, and in this scene she portrays differing views on it, from righteous anger, to submission to a husband at all cost. Unfortunately, black women viewed their lives with limited options due to social and economic constraints, a position that women may find themselves in even today.

Act 2, Scene 2

Act 2, Scene 2 Summary

It is now Sunday morning and Miss Leah and Fannie are ready to leave for church while Sophie finishes breakfast. Sophie is waiting for Minnie to come downstairs in order to give her a birthday gift, a deed to one third of the women's property. Because it is her twenty-first birthday, Minnie has acquired legal rights to property ownership. Minnie is deeply touched by the gift, but Frank can see only the money that could be made by selling the land to the speculators. Frank goes one step further and tries to convince the women to sell off all their land, which would bring in a small fortune; the women are not swayed, though, preferring to remain free and independent on their homestead.

Wil, who has come to take the women to church, also has a telegram for Frank which had been delivered yesterday. The bad news registers immediately on Frank's face as he reads that his family has officially denied his parentage; he will receive no inheritance from his father's estate. Minnie opts to stay home to comfort her husband after this devastating news, which has made Frank more adamant than ever that Minnie sell her share of the land so that they can return to London and live the life they had before. Once more, Minnie refuses to sell the land, and Frank launches into another vicious verbal and physical attack on his wife.

Act 2, Scene 2 Analysis

Frank embodies the complete antithesis of the ethnic pride that all of the other characters possess. Preferring the life in London, where black ancestry doesn't have much effect on a person's lifestyle, he completely shuts down on the culture and heritage of black people. His emotional disconnection from his roots reaches all the way to his immediate family, where violence erupts when his goals to maintain his preferred lifestyle are further thwarted.

Act 2, Scene 3

Act 2, Scene 3 Summary

As Fannie and Miss Leah return from the morning's church activities, they encounter Frank, who is on his way out and headed to town to take care of a business matter. The women remark on the unusual possibility of any business conducted on a Sunday. Their conversation stops abruptly as they see Minnie stumbling from the house. It is clear that she has been badly beaten. Minnie also reveals that Frank has forced her to add his name to the land deed and that his trip into town is to find a buyer immediately.

Act 2, Scene 3 Analysis

Frank is blinded by greed and desperation, which propels him again into a violent state. Unfortunately for him, he has encountered women who will not tolerate any threat to their security, whether it be physical abuse or the possibility of losing a part of their land. Frank has forced the climax of the play and the women will be forced to take action to remove the threat.

Act 2, Scene 4

Act 2, Scene 4 Summary

The next morning, Wil and Fannie sit on the porch and discuss the horrible events of the day before. Wil cannot understand any reason that a black man would hit a black woman. Their history is full of violence against the race, and in Wil's mind, black people should be especially protective of each other.

In the bedroom, Miss Leah comforts Minnie in an attempt to keep her calm so that no miscarriage will occur. Minnie reveals that she agreed to sign the deed over to Frank so that he would stop hitting her.

Wil offers to kill Frank in an attempt to protect the women, and Sophie is prepared to shoot Frank too; Miss Leah has a better plan. She re-tells a story about a woman on a plantation where she once lived. This woman was a particular favorite of the owner but the overseer was always after her. One day when the owner was gone for the day, the overseer approached the woman with evil intent. The woman headed him off with the offer of some hot apple pie, which the man ate hungrily, unaware that it was laced with poison. The man died and the woman escaped, but not before sharing the apple pie recipe with Miss Leah.

Act 2, Scene 4 Analysis

Unfortunately, violence is no stranger to these women, and they are prepared to take the ultimate step to eliminate Frank. Even Wil will risk the consequences of murder in order to protect the women he cares about. Miss Leah's is the only voice of reason, reminding them of the fate that will befall them at the hands of the white authorities if Frank is brutally murdered. Ultimately, the group listens to the sage Miss Leah and makes plans to benefit from the wisdom she shares about self-protection.

Act 2, Scene 5

Act 2, Scene 5 Summary

As the scene opens, Sophie and Wil are hiding near the house; Miss Leah and Minnie wait in the bedroom, and Fannie greets Frank when he returns. In a very congenial manner, Fannie tells Frank that the family cannot condone what he did to Minnie but that they can forgive him and are willing to buy the land back from him. Frank is open to the idea. It doesn't matter to him where the money comes from, so long as he gets it.

Lulled into a sense of security, Frank takes a piece of the apple pie offered by Fannie and starts to choke and gag after only a few bites. Realizing that he has been poisoned, Frank can only gasp for breath and beg for water, which Fannie does not provide. After Frank falls dead, Fannie signals to the others to come inside, and they inspect his dead body. Minnie experiences a world of mixed emotions as she looks at her dead husband, but she silently reaches into his coat pocket to retrieve the land deed before his body is removed from the house.

Act 2, Scene 5 Analysis

The women in this play have learned the survival skills forced upon them by a lifetime of hardship and violence. Their differing reactions show separate states of maturity, and it is telling that Miss Leah's plan is the one that they ultimately carry out. Their intent had been simply to live a peaceful, prosperous life, and Miss Leah's suggestion offers them a way to retain that.

Act 2, Scene 6

Act 2, Scene 6 Summary

It is now seven months later. Miss Leah rocks Minnie's baby daughter as the other women prepare for a dance. Wil and Fannie are now engaged, and he will arrive soon to escort her. Sophie has plans to attend, but her manner and mode of dress are very prim, indicating her preference of business to frivolity. When Sophie does leave the house, she pauses outside, looks up at the sky and raises her arms and twirls as if embracing the wonder of all that is hers. Inside the house, Miss Leah coos to the baby and begins to tell the story of all the fine black women who have come before her.

Act 2, Scene 6 Analysis

Freedom will be achieved for this family no matter what the cost, and it is Sophie and Miss Leah who lead the effort. These two women are completely dedicated to the principle not only for themselves but for the women of the future. Sophie is in a better position to be able to effect change socially but Miss Leah will continue to tell her stories, so that no other girl or woman will endure the lack of freedom that bound her most of her life.

Characters

Frank Charles

Frank is Minnie's thirty-six-year-old domineering and abusive husband. He is a man of mixed heritage whose mother was a slave owned by his father. Because of his light skin, he is often mistaken for a white man. Frank romanticizes his parents' relationship, claiming that they were in love and that his father wanted to marry his mother, despite the fact that he would not free her. Frank and Minnie live in London, enjoying a wealthy lifestyle because of the money Frank receives from his father. When his father dies, however, the family disowns him, leaving him penniless and desperate. It is this desperation that drives him to the sell Minnie's portion of the homestead. His intentions are discovered by the others, however, and he is killed.

Frank has a superior attitude and looks down on Minnie's family. He regards himself as sophisticated and elite, and he has no respect for the difficult life on the western plains. His duplicity is evident in the way he speaks with false sweetness in the presence of Minnie's family and then beats Minnie behind closed doors.

Minnie Dove Charles

Minnie turns twenty-one years old during the play and is married to Frank, who is fifteen years her senior. While Minnie loves her family very much, she is not strong enough to stand up to her abusive husband. As a result, she rarely sees her family because she lives in London, where she is not happy. Minnie left Memphis with Fannie and Sophie so that they could claim free land in Kansas and make a new life together. When she attends a conservatory (she has a beautiful voice), she meets Frank.

During the course of the play, Minnie reveals that she is pregnant, and when Frank beats her, she is most afraid for her child. When Frank is killed, Minnie does not cry but merely takes the deed to her land from his pocket.

Fannie Dove

Fannie is thirty-two years old and unmarried. She lives with Sophie and Miss Leah outside the all-black town of Nicodemus, Kansas. She and the other women run a wheat farm and have achieved self-sufficiency.

Fannie enjoys the outdoors and is especially fond of flowers. Although she and Wil are very close to each other, it is not until the end of the play that they make plans to wed. In family matters, Fannie is a peacemaker. She believes in love and family, and she encourages Minnie to work out her marital problems with Frank. Still, she realizes that Frank must be stopped, so she participates in the plot to kill him.

Miss Leah

Miss Leah is a seventy-three-year-old woman who spent most of her life in slavery. She gave birth to ten children while she was a slave, and she lost them all to the trade. After she became free, she and her husband had five more children together, but they were all lost to illness. When her husband died, she buried him and headed west in hope of a better life. When her new life is threatened by Frank, she bakes him a poisoned apple pie and serves it to him without remorse.

Miss Leah now lives with Sophie and Fannie. She is a feisty woman who demands respect, speaks her mind, and believes strongly in the oral tradition. Although Fannie wants to preserve Miss Leah's stories in writing, Miss Leah insists that some stories can only be preserved by being told. At the end of the play, she continues the oral tradition by telling stories to Minnie's baby girl.

Wil Parish

Wil is a forty-year-old man who was born into slavery. He is a trusted and loyal friend of the women, but he has a special relationship with Fannie. At the end of the play, they are finally engaged.

Wil is diligent in work and protective in relationships. He offers to "take care of" Frank when the women discuss the problems he poses. When the women ask him to be part of their scheme to get Frank back to the cabin, Wil is more than happy to help. He is respectful of all of the women, and his character provides a contrast to Frank.

Sophie Washington

Sophie is a thirty-six-year-old woman who was born into slavery and is now determined to make the most of her chance at independence. She is strong, both physically and emotionally, and she performs her responsibilities without complaining. She is also a visionary with a plan for what Nicodemus can become in the future. She envisions an all-black town complete with schools, churches, and libraries.

Sophie is not actually a sister of Fannie and Minnie, although the relationship among the three women has developed as if they were all related. Sophie originally joined the family when, in Memphis, she was doing laundry to support herself. She did laundry for Fannie and Minnie, and she eventually became like a sister to them. Sophie is supportive and protective of her friends and family, and she has no tolerance for condescension.

Themes

Ethnic Pride

The characters (with the exception of Frank) take pride in their ethnicity and the obstacles they have overcome to seize opportunities in the West. They believe that their black heritage is a fundamental part of their individual and collective identities and should affect everything they do. Sophie criticizes Frank's poems because anyone reading them "couldn't even tell a Negro wrote them," adding, "We have to see everything differently because we're Negroes."

Having land of their own is important to them because it offers freedom to the characters individually and provides a foundation for emerging all-black communities in which members can share common experiences, foster their unique culture, and support one another's efforts at establishing new lives. At the same time, characters such as Fannie and Miss Leah recognize the importance of remembering the past. Fannie strives to preserve the past by recording Miss Leah's stories. Miss Leah prefers to pass on the past by way of the oral tradition. At the end of the play, she is seen telling her stories to Minnie's baby. She believes strongly that African Americans must recall the past accurately, as she explains in the first scene: "Colored folks can't forget the plantation any more than they can forget their own names. If we forget that, we ain't got no history past last week." This is why she begins to tell the baby about all the strong black women who went before her. She wants the baby girl to grow up knowing how hard her ancestors worked on her behalf.

Frank provides an important contrast to the theme of ethnic pride. Although his mother was African American, he distances himself from that part of his heritage. He strongly prefers to live in London, where his black ancestry matters much less to the English than it does to Americans. He does not miss seeing or speaking with blacks and is more comfortable with his white friends. His denial of his black heritage goes very deep, and he is emotionally disconnected with the experiences of his mother and her contemporaries. He makes inappropriate jokes, such as when Sophie tells him there are not many mulattos in Nicodemus, and he responds, "I can understand why. This is a lot closer to the field than most of us ever want to get! *(Laughs.)*" While Sophie is committed to keeping Nicodemus out of the hands of white speculators, Frank seeks to make a profit by selling his wife's portion of the homestead to those same speculators. Cleage uses Frank as a contrast to add emphasis to the ethnic pride felt by the other characters, whose pride is as hard earned as it is deep.

Freedom

At the heart of the play is the theme of freedom, specifically newly won freedom. Most of the characters in the play were born into slavery and remember that way of life. Although the idea of heading west on the promise of land was scary, they understood

that doing so was their best chance to enjoy a better life and establish new homes and communities for future generations. The sisters connect their freedom with the distant past of their ancestors in the ritual they performed when they left the South, a ritual they continue to perform in the West. They hold hands and say:

> Because we are free Negro women, born of free
> Negro women, back as far as time began, we choose
> this day to leave a place where our lives, our honor,
> and our very souls are not our own. We choose this
> day to declare our lives to be our own and no one
> else's. And we promise to always remember the day
> we left Memphis and went west together to be free
> women as a sacred bond between us with all our trust.

Miss Leah is fiercely protective of the opportunity to own and keep land. She feels that despite the insurmountable gap in power between the races in the South, the rules are more equitable in the West. In the first scene, Sophie tells Miss Leah that some of the black settlements have made rules against selling their land to white speculators. Miss Leah responds, "Ain't nobody gonna give you the right to tell them when and how to sell their land. No point in ownin' it if you can't do what you want to with it." Freedom is even more valuable to her than a strong sense of community.

Sophie and Miss Leah are committed to securing freedom not just for themselves but for future generations. Sophie makes plans for the future of Nicodemus because it is important to her that future black generations have a community that nurtures them. This is especially evident in her focus on getting a teacher so that the school can open. Miss Leah knows better than any other character what it is like to live without freedom, having lived the longest as a slave. She lost ten children to the slave trade, and she continues to feel the depth of her loss. In a discussion with Minnie, Miss Leah says, "None of this makes any sense without the children."

Style

Symbolism

Cleage introduces symbolism by using well-chosen objects to convey meaning. She introduces flower symbolism first. Flowers are beautiful products of nature, and they represent new life and strength. They also represent a lifestyle above simple survival; having fresh flowers in the house is a cheerful indulgence. Fannie brings flowers from outside and places them in water throughout the house, an act that demonstrates her natural tendency to bring the life and vitality of nature indoors. Different flowers express different ideas. For example, Sophie considers sunflowers too large to be displayed inside. This expresses the idea that not everything about the external world is appropriate or comfortable in the women's domestic setting. Roses symbolize independence. Fannie tells the story of her father telling her mother that "colored women ain't got no time to be foolin' with roses," to which her mother responded that if he had time to worry about how she spent her time, she was entitled to grow roses.

Another example of symbolism is Fannie's china, which represents a better way of life than the slave existence endured by the other characters. The china also represents the importance of the past to Fannie. Sophie wanted to leave it behind when they packed up to head out West, but Fannie refused to leave without it because it was her mother's china. The china is significant to Fannie, just as Miss Leah's stories are significant to her, and Fannie wants to preserve both to preserve the past.

Irony

Irony refers to a difference between what appears to be true and what is actually true. It is a complex literary technique that requires contrasts and opposing forces or perceptions. That Cleage uses Frank, a mulatto, as a tool of irony, is therefore appropriate. Despite his cool demeanor, he is deeply conflicted about his mixed parentage. He chooses to believe the romantic notion that his white father and his black mother were genuinely in love and that his father wanted to marry his mother. In reality, his father would not give his mother her freedom. Frank needs to believe that he was the result of a loving and dignified union, when the truth is that he was the product of an imbalance of power and, in all likelihood, of violence. The irony is extended when he recreates the same dynamic with his own wife. He asserts his control over her and dominates her with physical and emotional abuse. The marriage is characterized by an imbalance of power, and he does not recognize that he is recreating the truth of the past. To make the parallel especially clear to the reader, Frank is very light-skinned (like his father), and Minnie is dark (like his mother); he reveals to her that he led some white men to believe that Minnie was his "black whore," not his wife. His blindness toward his own hypocrisy is equally apparent in his desire to return to London, where blacks are treated better; he fails to realize that he is guilty of mistreating his own people, both individually and collectively.

Frank's character is also ironic in the way he tries to impress Minnie's family. He believes that he can demonstrate his superiority to them by pointing out how civilized his way of life is compared to their rustic lifestyle. Because he believes that European civilization is superior in every way to that of the American West, he assumes that everyone else will agree. This renders him incapable of earning the respect of Fannie, Sophie, Miss Leah, or Wil, all of whom see Frank's "finer things" as frivolous and meaningless. They respect hard work, integrity, and freedom. As a result, the more Frank tries to command their respect on his terms, the less likely he is to get it.

Historical Context

The Homestead Act of 1862

The notion of free land in the United States existed from the nation's formative years, but it was not until the Civil War that the idea became reality. During the mid-1840s, the entire United States experienced significant growth, but growth in the West outpaced that of other regions. Despite its expansion, the West consisted of territories that had not yet become states. As a result, they did not have representation in Congress and thus did not enjoy the government programs afforded the older areas of the North and the South. The issue of free land was supported by Westerners, who knew that it would attract more people, and by Northerners, who wanted the newly settled land to become a productive market for manufactured goods. On the other the hand, the South opposed free land, as it would result in agricultural competition and entice many Southerners, especially slaves and other laborers, to leave the South.

In 1860, however, Southern states began seceding, making it easier for the remaining states to pass legislation in favor of free land. Congress passed The Homestead Act, and President Abraham Lincoln signed it in 1862. This Act enabled any citizen who was the head of the household, twenty-one years of age, or a veteran of at least fourteen days of active service to claim a piece of public land equal to 160 acres. Land was available everywhere except in the original thirteen states, as well as Maine, Vermont, West Virginia, Kentucky, Tennessee, and Texas. Once a homesteader had lived on and cultivated the land for five years, he or she got the title to it. The Homestead Act provided a strong incentive to settle the West, and the result was that pioneers settled and developed the region more quickly than it would have been settled otherwise.

Nicodemus, Kansas

In the 1870s, a white man named W. R. Hill, a black homesteader named W. H. Smith, and five black ministers founded the Nicodemus Town Company and recruited settlers to build an all-black community. The town's name is significant, although accounts differ. Some sources say that Nicodemus was the name of a slave who predicted the Civil War, but other sources say he was the first slave to buy his freedom in America.

In September 1877, a group of 350 settlers arrived from Kentucky. Their optimism soon met the harsh realities of the flat landscape, the difficulties of farming, and dwindling supplies. Although about sixty families returned to Kentucky, the others were assisted during the winter by a group of Osage Indians, who provided food.

More settlers joined the homesteaders after the hardships of the first year, and by 1885, Nicodemus had a population of almost seven hundred people. Nicodemus had also become a proper town, complete with two newspapers, livery stables, a post office, a store, a physician, hotels, restaurants, schools, and churches. The town lost some

momentum when the railroads that brought expansion to the West bypassed Nicodemus, but it continued to be a viable town until the Great Depression in the 1930s. At that time, many residents left in hopes of finding better opportunities elsewhere. Although its population dropped, Nicodemus remained a center for African-American culture and achievement.

Today, Nicodemus hosts an annual Emancipation Celebration on the last weekend of July. Descendants of the original settlers gather from all over the country to celebrate the courage and fortitude of their ancestors.

Jim Crow Laws

Jim Crow laws established a legal foundation for racial segregation in the South. The legalized racism of these laws was what many African Americans fled to the West to escape. Jim Crow laws got their nickname from a black minstrel-type character who often appeared in stage entertainments of the time and who remained completely ignorant and happy despite being cruelly treated by whites. They were first enacted in 1865 to provide for racial separation in public transportation, but the attitudes behind the laws soon led to separation in virtually every aspect of Southern society. While the laws began by addressing railroads, they soon called for segregation in schools, hospitals, theaters, hotels, streetcars, residences, and cemeteries.

Critical Overview

Critical reception of *Flyin' West* has been overwhelmingly positive. Critics commend Cleage for portraying a forgotten chapter in history and for doing so in a way that empowers women. Jane T. Peterson and Suzanne Bennett in *Women Playwrights of Diversity: A Bio-Bibliographical Source-book* wrote that this play "provides a new and unique perspective on the traditional telling of how the West was won." Similarly, Cathy Madison of *American Theatre* wrote, "Frank's fate is ultimately decided by the women themselves. Unwilling as they are to relinquish their land and freedom, they manage to offer a searing new testament to how the West was won." Addressing the importance of Cleage's focus on history in several of her plays (including *Flyin' West*), Freda Scott Giles observed in *African American Review:*

> Cleage seeks to bring us to grips with our American past and to help us understand and acknowledge its impact on present conditions, especially with regard to issues of race and gender. She examines great historical events and movements not through the eyes of leaders and celebrities but through the experiences of the ordinary people who lived them.

Other critics agree that the female characters are admirable and the themes are relevant today. As a feminist, Cleage introduces themes of female power, relationships, and injustice in her plays, and *Flyin' West* is no exception. In *Significant Contemporary American Feminists: A Biographical Source-book,* editor Jennifer Scanlon described the play as blending "serious feminist concerns with melodrama, balancing motifs of sexism, rape, wife battering, miscegenation and racism, betrayal, and murder." The characters in the play face unique challenges, and critics find their courage inspiring. Steve Monroe of *American Visions* found that the characters "entertain audiences with passion and humor, anger and wit, idealism and dignity." Scanlon noted that the story "pivots around a primarily female cast whose efforts to establish, protect, and defend each other and their property withstand attacks not only from outside (whites encroaching upon their territory) but also from inside (one of their own men betrays them)."

Giles was particularly taken with the ways in which Cleage juxtaposed her characters. She remarks, "*Flyin' West* is primarily a study in character contrasts." The starkest contrasts are between Frank and the other characters. Reviewing a performance of the play in *North American Review,* theater critic Robert L. King commended Cleage for making "him deserve the death that the audience vigorously applauded."

Giles concluded her critical analysis of Cleage's historical plays with the comment that the playwright "demands that we air the festering wounds of our history, as black and white Americans and as men and women, so that we can begin to clean and heal them." King gave Cleage credit for an original and important premise that "allows her to raise

questions of race, history, and gender—indirectly for the most part—and to introduce humor with the casual comfort that a true community enjoys."

Criticism

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

Critical Essay #1

Bussey holds a master's degree in interdisciplinary studies and a bachelor's degree in English literature. She is an independent writer specializing in literature. In the following essay, Bussey explains the power, security, risks, and opportunities represented by the indoors and the outdoors in Flyin' West.

Most of the action of Pearl Cleage's *Flyin' West* takes place in and around the home of Fannie, Sophie, and Miss Leah. Their home is a frontier cabin, and although it is rustic and humble, it is priceless in its worth to them. Throughout the play, Cleage portrays the indoors and the outdoors as distinct realities. For the female characters, the indoors represents domestic comfort, immediate security, the familiar, and female power and wisdom. On the other hand, the outdoors represents opportunity, risk, challenges, and future security. As women in 1898, the characters are accustomed to the traditional view of women as keepers of the hearth; their tasks are cooking, cleaning, rearing children, caring for family members, and providing an inviting home atmosphere. The outdoors is where men traditionally work, especially in the context of the women's African-American heritage; slavery has only recently been abolished, and most African-Americans endured its hardships. Farming, ranching, caring for livestock, cutting wood, and hunting and trapping are all activities that take place outside and are associated with men.

For Fannie, Sophie, and Miss Leah, however, there are no men, so it is they who must see that all tasks are performed, indoors and outdoors. Although the outdoor tasks are difficult and physically demanding, the women are glad to take them on because the outdoors represents something new to them: freedom and opportunity. They are responsible for the land because it is theirs, and although traveling west to cultivate land was risky, they did it because they saw it as an opportunity too precious to refuse. The land offers them freedom in the present and in the future because, as owners, they become the decision-makers.

Each character's entrance reveals something about the character and the significance to her of the indoors and the outdoors. First, the audience meets Sophie. She enters the cabin from the outside, rushed, tired, and relieved to sit down for a moment. Sophie is tired from running errands in town and returns home for respite. Her freedom both enables and requires her to carry out duties among the townsfolk, but it is inside the cabin that she feels restored. Once she gets comfortable in a chair, however, she turns to a window and opens it. Relaxing indoors, she gazes appreciatively outdoors. Her sentiment toward the wide open spaces of the West is evident in her recollection of the day she, Minnie, and Fannie left to go west. She says:

> The day our group left Memphis, there were at least two hundred other Negroes standing around, rolling their eyes and trying to tell us we didn't know what it was going to be like out here in the wilderness. I kept trying to tell them it doesn't matter what it's like. Any place is better than here!

Sophie's entrance tells the reader that Sophie is equally comfortable indoors and outdoors, and she appreciates her responsibilities in both contexts. Next, Miss Leah appears from within the house. With the exception of going to church, Miss Leah is always seen indoors. When she enters the audience's view, she sees the open window and is annoyed. As the oldest character, Miss Leah lived the longest as a slave. She worked in the fields, so the outdoors represents hard labor with no reward. The audience should hardly be surprised that she strongly prefers the indoors.

Next, Fannie and Wil make their entrance together. They are first seen outdoors, strolling and chatting. Wil is in work clothes and Fannie is gathering flowers. These characters recognize opportunities in the outdoors. To Wil, the outdoors is where he now works for himself and has the chance to take charge of his destiny. Talking about whether there is room for both flowers and vegetables to grow, Wil tells Fannie, "There's room for everything to grow out here. If there ain't nothing else out here, there's plenty of room." Wil recognizes that just as there is room for all kinds of plants to grow outdoors, there is also room and opportunity for him to grow. For Fannie, the outdoors is a source of beauty and simple luxuries such as flowers. Fannie brings the flowers indoors, which demonstrates her comfort in either setting.

Although Fannie is of the same generation as Sophie (Fannie is only four years her junior), she was not born into slavery, so her perceptions of the indoors and outdoors differ from those of Sophie and Miss Leah. While both Fannie and Sophie appreciate the outdoors, the opportunity they perceive outdoors is quite different. Sophie sees opportunity to work her own land and build a future with her own hands, and she is satisfied to sit inside, relax, and appreciate the outdoors. On the other hand, Fannie recognizes the beauty of the outdoors, and she prefers to bring its elements indoors, as when she puts flowers in water and sets them all over the cabin. Because Fannie appreciates the tangible in the outdoors, she can bring it inside and enjoy it, but Sophie appreciates an intangible aspect of the outdoors—the opportunity to work for herself.

The entrance of Minnie and Frank takes place at a train station. This is significant to the discussion of the indoors and outdoors because their placement in either is less clear. A train station is neither a household nor outdoors. The train on which they have arrived possesses beds, a dining car, seating, and places to relax—an "indoors" that crosses the vast outdoors without acknowledging it. Their lifestyle is quite different from the frontier lifestyle of the other four characters, and they maintain the comforts of a comfortable domestic setting even in the middle of the wilderness. Their divergent perceptions of domestic comfort become clear when they arrive at the cabin. Minnie is right at home, but Frank is miserable. The indoors represents the female realm and the source of female power and wisdom, so this reaction is perfectly consistent with his character. Minnie values family, simple comforts, and fellowship, but Frank is demeaning and cruel toward everything Minnie values. In the cabin, he is out of his element, both physically and emotionally.

Besides their entrances, the orientations of the characters continue to reveal what kind of women they are. Miss Leah is most comfortable indoors, and she is the character

most closely bonded to everything the indoors represents. Sophie and Fannie pass from the indoors to the outdoors and back again with ease throughout the play, but the ways in which they interact with the outdoors differ. Sophie goes outside for practical purposes; she has duties such as bringing in wood for the fire, checking on the horses, and bringing in laundry. Fannie goes outside for pleasure. She loves flowers and walking outdoors because she appreciates nature not for its tangible offerings but for its spiritual ones. When Minnie arrives at the cabin, she spends most of her time inside. The cabin is her real home, and she misses it terribly. The outdoors and what it represents—risk and independence—frighten her.

The manner of Frank's death at the end of the play is fitting given the indoor/outdoor significance. His plan to betray the women becomes clear, and it is so offensive to them that they can not allow him to go through with it. Further, their anger is fueled by his abusive treatment of Minnie. Sophie remarks, "All the dreams we have for Nicodemus, all the churches and schools and libraries we can build don't mean a thing if a colored woman isn't safe in her own house." The women lure Frank back to *their* circle of power when he is on his way to his realm of control. He is going to town to make a business deal, but the women trick him into coming back to the cabin. Once there, he does not realize that he is under their control. Appropriately, Miss Leah uses an apple pie to kill him. An apple pie symbolizes domestic tasks, female duties, and the comforts of home. The women use this decidedly feminine object as a deadly weapon to kill the man who threatens everything they have worked to secure for themselves. Sophie initially wants to kill Frank outside with her shotgun, but Miss Leah's plan is much more fitting. In his final moments, Frank is forced to realize that for all his abuse (physical, verbal, and emotional) of women, his fate is to become their victim.

The final scene of the play serves to emphasize the importance of both the indoors and the outdoors to the group of frontier women. It is seven months after Frank's murder, and Miss Leah is watching Minnie's baby as the others prepare to go to a dance. As the scene closes, the group has left for the dance, which demonstrates the burgeoning community growing strong beyond the domestic confines of the cabin. This community represents the future, a future that will nurture the family as it continues to grow. Inside the cabin, Miss Leah begins to tell the infant girl about the past and all the women who have worked to make the world better for her. Earlier in the play, Miss Leah and Minnie discuss the importance of children and the pain of having them taken away. Miss Leah says to Minnie:

> They broke the chain, Baby Sister. But we have to
> build it back. And build it back strong so the next time
> nobody can break it. Not from the outside and not
> from the inside. We can't let nobody take our babies.
> We've given up all the babies we can afford to lose.

The cabin represents the culmination of the past in the present as the elderly Miss Leah instructs and supports the tiny infant. Beyond the cabin, a community gathers to dance, and in doing so suggests the future. The group of women have learned to trust and

embrace the indoors and the outdoors and everything that both represent—to realize a life that the generation before them could only imagine.

Source: Jennifer Bussey, Critical Essay on *Flyin' West,* in *Drama for Students,* The Gale Group, 2003.

Critical Essay #2

Kryhoski is currently working as a freelance writer. She has also taught English Literature in addition to English as a Second Language overseas. In this essay, Kryhoski considers the power of race to define perceptions of freedom.

Pearl Cleage, in her work *Flyin' West*, examines the concept of freedom through careful character exploration along colorful lines. Cleage contrasts the character of Sophie to that of Roland, in her consideration of the attempts these characters make to realize freedom. Both take different approaches, based on their own sense of cultural identity. Specifically, Sophie sides with the African side of her biracial past while Frank chooses to identify with the white aspect of his. While there is a clear moral victory at the play's end, it is never clear that either of the characters have formulated an appropriate response to the racism dictating their lives. The result is an illumination by Cleage of the moral ambiguities inherent in racial struggles, ambiguities that not only pit white against black, but also tear families apart.

Besides sharing a common ancestry, Frank and Sophie also share a desire for personal autonomy in their surroundings. Early in the text, the desires of both are to distance themselves as far from the constraints of racial bias as possible. Sophie divulges that she was motivated to move West because "Memphis was full of crazy white men acting like when it came to colored people, they didn't have to be bound by law or common decency." She elaborates, saying that whites were above the law, making living conditions unbearable, adding "I heard there were Negroes going West." Her vision for the future of Nicodemus is one that stretches beyond "just one more place where colored people couldn't figure out how to be free." On some level, both Sophie and Frank clearly recognize the value of personal freedom unadulterated by discrimination.

As coarse as Frank may seem conversationally, his motivations mirror Sophie's. He has moved to England to avoid similarly oppressive forces. Both Minnie and Frank can walk down English streets, people of color among whites, in a world without reprisal and devoid of Jim Crow laws. Minnie shares with her sisters that as a couple, she and Frank even have white friends. In contrast, as an American resident, Frank claims that both he and his wife are "just ordinary niggers," that he'll be reduced to stepping off the street to let "every ignorant white man" pass. Clearly, Sophie and Frank's plights are the same, as are their personal desires for freedom. Yet the terms by which they choose to define freedom and the paths they choose to take to realize freedom are completely different.

Freedom for Sophie is defined at the outset of the play. She claims she'll "have enough" when as far as she can see "there'll be nothing but land that belongs to me and my sisters." What does land ownership mean? It means that Sophie and her sisters have control over their own surroundings, and by doing so, they can effect change in their lives. The type of change Sophie hopes for is one free of whites, consequently, one free of the oppressive forces that have added up to a life of mistreatment, persecution, and savage abuse. She has a vision of "colored folks farms and colored folks wheat fields

and colored folks cattle everywhere you look." Sophie's vision is a noble one, demonstrated in her own wishes:

> I want this town to be a place where a colored woman can be free to live her life like a human being. I want this town to be a place where a colored man can work as hard for himself as we used to work for white folks. I want a town where a colored child can go to anybody's door and be treated like they belong there.

A black community based on self-sufficiency fuels Sophie's vision for the future. Similarly, her personal experiences as a land owner have shaped her dreams. Sophie looks to the task of farming with a sense of accomplishment, as demonstrated in a conversation with Miss Leah. Miss Leah tells Sophie of her initial experience, stating that "Every other wagon pull in here nowadays got a bunch of colored women on it call themselves home steadin' and can't even make a decent cup of coffee, much less bring a crop in!" Homesteading is an avenue by which both Sophie and Miss Leah not only experience a sense of personal achievement but, relative to their accomplishments, can realize a profit, an experience made even more uniquely personal to them. In a world dominated by whites, the prospect of owning a plot of land runs profoundly deeper than the soil comprising it.

Sophie is determined to see nothing but acres of farmland owned by color folks. It is her personal charge to awaken this idea, this spirit in her neighbors. Miss Leah warns that folks don't necessarily see it that way. While the place is a refuge for them, a way to get away from the torment of white folks settling on land where they are largely ignored, Miss Leah recognizes the dangers in expecting her fellow African American neighbors to side with her. She says, "The thing you gotta remember about colored folks all the stuff they don't say when they want to, they just gonna say it double-time later." The privilege of land ownership is the ability to sell one's property at will as well, and no rules will prevent these property owners from selling. To ask her neighbors to see beyond the realm of self-interest, to build a sense of community in order to realize freedom, is an arduous or difficult task. Miss Leah warns of a situation in which Sophie is seeing things from her perspective without hearing the underlying tensions or problems that may face Sophie in her efforts to keep the land.

Frank's aspirations for freedom run along racial lines as well and are framed by his perceptions of people of color. Sophie goes so far as to admit to Minnie she is unnerved by Frank's hatred of all things colored, and with good reason. Her credibility is solidified by exchanges between her and Frank, occurring throughout the play. In his attempts to get to know Sophie, Frank unexpectedly turns to her and says, "Min tells me you're a mulatto." Sophie is startled, and in response Frank qualifies his comments by way of apology for being so obviously personal. He also shares with her that he is a mulatto himself "interested to know if there are many of us this far West." This response proves to be particularly telling as the events of the play unfold. Frank's manner remains characteristically course and ungracious. He seems to be particularly haughty and self-

serving in his conversations concerning race. In a discussion of England, Frank is quick to comment that the only people of color he encounters are those of Eastern Indian decent. Miss Leah is perplexed and asks him if he gets lonely for colored people, to which he responds, "To tell you the truth, I've seen about all the Negroes I need to see in this life," and laughs. This inspires Miss Leah to excuse herself immediately for bed, to avoid being detained by the "long-winded" member of the group. He is also callous enough to speak of a lynching a week in New Orleans, that it's "the same as it's always been" with a chuckle. He's cut off by Sophie when he claims that the victim brought it on himself due to his own crimes. She responds, "I don't care what he was involved in. . . . Whatever it was, he doesn't deserve to die like that." Cleage makes effective use of Sophie repeatedly in the text as a foil, or a character whose qualities strongly contrast those of Frank's, to shed light on the moral forces shaping Frank's conversations. The affront Frank's comments have on Sophie, as well as the audience, proves to be more disturbing still when examined in the spirit of the social dictates driving them.

Yet even more disturbing is his formula for success—to capitalize on his white heritage in order to realize freedom. At the outset of the play, Frank pins his hopes on the inheritance of his white father, only to have his hopes dashed when he discovers he has no claim to such assets. His vision for success in and of itself is a fallacy—what plagues him is something that runs much deeper than whiteness; it is a fact of heritage. He was born to a slaveholder who ultimately denies Frank by leaving his son out of his will. Yet Frank persists by clinging to his Caucasian ancestry rather than embracing his Afri-can roots, as explained by Minnie: "Frank says he doesn't see why he only has to be with Negroes since he has as much white blood in him as colored." But to Sophie, the reality of Frank's background is no different from hers. When Minnie tells Sophie that although Frank's father was a slave owner, he loved and planned to marry Frank's African mother, Sophie points out that without evidence of a marriage, his father's love is a sham. By extension, so are his illusions of being "white," i.e., moving in society with the same freedoms as other white men. To Sophie, Frank is betraying the memory of his mother and, by extension, of his race.

Frank does consistently disappoint Minnie and her family, despite their efforts to receive him. He showers a rain of abuse upon his wife, in one instance calling her a "pickanninny" for plaiting her hair, in another, beating her for causing his luck to change during the course of a card game. Of the card game, he emphasizes that all was well until he was asked about "that nigger woman that kept following [him] on the train." He doesn't share the same perspective on what land ownership could mean for Minnie and her family. He instead blatantly disregards the attempts of his family to keep the land by seizing the deed from his wife with threats of physical harm. In Frank's shortsighted-ness, he only sees a hefty cash return and assured passage to England. In the process, he violates his wife's trust in a brutal assault on her property, willing to desecrate Minnie's dreams in favor of his own. However deluded the idea may seem, Frank is mentally tied to this idea of freedom from persecution as a function of his appearance and his willing embrace of his "whiteness." He is a product of a society where both success and freedom are measured by the fairness of one's skin. But unlike Sophie, he profits from his ancestry by denying and betraying his own family. The irony of this situation is that he was deluded into believing he is somehow exempt from the problems

of and obligations to his own people, that he is somehow above the fray, even after he is rejected by his blood relations.

It could be argued that there is no greater wisdom in the choice of Sophie versus that of Frank—both are based on nepotism (family favoritism). In Frank's case, there is ample evidence in the play to suggest that until recently, his movement in such circles is attributable to his relationship to a white person. Until his father's death, it is alleged that Frank has been supported solely by the good fortune of a white father. He has enjoyed the benefits of money and privilege. By reaping such rewards, he is able to move in circles unheard of in Sophie's present circumstances. Money has sheltered Frank from the un-pleasantries of the discrimination Sophie faces in America. He has been able to act as if he is a free man. His expectations are perfectly reasonable given his history. Frank is a victim of more than just his own naivete, he is victim of the forces which shape both his social and emotional life. On some level, he feels just as betrayed by the white brothers who choose to deny him his inheritance on the basis of color rather than on the wishes of their own father as does Sophie when she discovers Frank plans to intercede in her own dreams of freedom. Can it be argued that Frank is any less adroit under pressing conditions than Sophie in his decision to pose as a white man by moving in primarily white circles?

The illusion of choice and of freewill is a repeated theme with Cleage. Her characters attempt to step outside of their boundaries, which are unforgiving and imposed upon them, in favor of freedom that is seemingly tangible but is often impossibly unrealistic. Frank's discovery that he is no more exempt from societal boundaries drawn by color than is Sophie leads to his eventual demise. Although Sophie and her counterparts triumph in the end, a contemporary audience is left knowing history will render these landowners helpless against the advances of their white neighbors. In this way, racial atrocities are brought to light again and again by Cleage, the emotional dance played out as we see hopes rise and fall. There is no permanent solace or restitution for any of the characters; there is only the delusion that they will somehow be granted amnesty from the prejudice and injustice dictating their lives. In this way the audience becomes part of this deeply human drama. After all, it is a human tendency to believe in the idea of justice prevailing, of rules being followed, of wrongs being righted, even in the most tragic of circumstances, and Pearl Cleage demonstrates this beautifully in *Flyin' West*.

Source: Laura Kryhoski, Critical Essay on *Flyin' West,* in *Drama for Students,* The Gale Group, 2003.

Critical Essay #3

In the following essay, Giles explores the family unit and characters Cleage presents in Flyin' West, *calling the drama "a study in character contrasts."*

Pearl Cleage, highly regarded poet and essayist, first gained widespread recognition as a playwright with the production of *puppetplay* by the Negro Ensemble Company in 1983. The chronicle of a failed marriage, *puppetplay* expressed the divided consciousness and ambivalent emotions of the wife through the use of two female actors to portray her, while expressing the perceptual gulf between marital partners by representing the husband as a seven-foot marionette. Though *puppetplay* was moderately successful, and though several of her other works have been produced outside of the Just Us Theater and Club Zebra, performance venues which she helped to found in her home city, Atlanta, Georgia, it is through an artistic partnership forged with Atlanta's Alliance Theatre and its Artistic Director, Kenny Leon, who commissioned Cleage to write *Flyin' West* (1992), *Blues for an Alabama Sky* (1995), and *Bourbon at the Border* (1997) that Cleage has realized a rare achievement for African-American playwrights: consistent professional production in regional theatres. Each production has further distilled her exploration of essential thematic elements which fuel her dramatic vision.

Through these three plays, Cleage seeks to bring us to grips with our American past and to help us understand and acknowledge its impact on present conditions, especially with regard to issues of race and gender. She examines great historical events and movements not through the eyes of leaders and celebrities but through the experiences of the ordinary people who lived them. The issue at hand and its relationship to our actions remains the focus, rather than the impersonation of an iconic figure. Cleage's interest is in helping us face our responsibility for being part of the flow of history (interview). Describing herself as "a third [-]generation black nationalist and a radical feminist," Cleage defines her task as a dramatist as creation of dialectic and political/social action:

> My response to the oppression I face is to name it, describe it, analyze it, protest it, and propose solutions to it as loud[ly] as I possibly can every time I get the chance. I purposely people my plays with fast-talking, quick-thinking black women since the theater is, for me, one of the few places where we have a chance to get an uninterrupted word in edgewise.

Cleage has turned to the familiar structure of the well-made play, subtly subverting what appear to be stock situations and characters to invoke new ideas. She is a resistant reader of history, turning her audience toward interrogation of "standard" interpretations, be they from black or white perspectives, and is not hesitant to force the audience into

the uncomfortable psychological and emotional areas into which an honest dialogue on race and gender relations must venture.

Flyin' West, for example, turns domestic melodrama into a polemic against domestic violence while it addresses the issues of what constitutes and defines a family, and whether black nationalism will hold together the community of Nicodemus, Kansas, founded by the Exodusters who "flew" West to escape racist oppression during the late nineteenth century. A family of homesteading sisters—Fannie, Minnie, and adopted sister Sophie—augmented by Miss Leah, a survivor of slavery who has passed the long winter on their farm, not only persevere but thrive on the products of their labors. As Minnie approaches her twenty-first birthday, they prepare to turn over her portion of the homestead to her. However, her new husband, Frank, through his verbally and physically abusive behavior, threatens not only Minnie's life, but the homestead itself, since he plans to sell Minnie's share to white land speculators who are attempting to buy out Nicodemus and the surrounding area. Empowered by his legal position as male and husband, Frank feels he can act with impunity, and he can only be stopped by a family conspiracy which leads to his death.

Flyin' West primarily a study in character contrasts. Sophie, oldest sister and head of the family, like Frank, is of mixed race. Frank follows the tragic mulatto pattern of internal conflict and hatred of his black heritage, while Sophie embraces her black identity and the idea of nationalistic autonomy that Nicodemus represents. In defense of the things she loves and believes in, she finds her voice as a woman and a community leader, while Frank plots the course of his own destruction. Another male character, Wil, appears as a suitor for Fannie and contrasting foil for Frank, but it is the struggle for the direction of the family and the community, represented through the struggle Sophie leads against Frank, which is paramount. Despite his painful past and his stature as a recognized poet, Frank is held accountable; his violent acts bring violent retribution. In one of her most well-known essays, *"Mad at Miles,"* Cleage explains that no artist, no matter how brilliant the art, is excused from responsible behavior toward family and community, and that the creations by artists who refuse this responsibility is tainted and should be rejected by the community. Even the creations of a Miles Davis must be rejected in light of his documented abuses of women.

In a similar vein, Angel, the pivotal character in *Blues for an Alabama Sky*, is called to account for her refusal to take responsibility for her actions. Angel, an entertainer riding the last wave of the Harlem Renaissance, must survive in Depression-era Harlem. Through Angel's relationships with Guy, her resolutely un-closeted gay friend and protector; Delia, an idealistic social worker; Sam, a world-weary black doctor; and Leland, a suitor freshly arrived in Harlem from Alabama, Cleage gives us a view of a Harlem embroiled in controversy over the issue of reproductive rights. Using historical fact, she dramatizes the conflict between Margaret Sanger, who opened a family-planning clinic in Harlem with the support of Adam Clayton Powell, Jr., and the remnants of Marcus Garvey's followers and others, who viewed Sanger as an agent of genocide.

To relieve their anxiety over their economic survival, Guy shares with Angel his tenement apartment and his dream of designing costumes in Paris for the legendary

Josephine Baker, who "laughs like a free woman." Angel, however, 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, who tries to recast her in the mold of his deceased wife, who died in childbirth. The disastrous results of Leland's obsession with Angel culminate in a crime of passion which costs Sam his life. In a final act of poetic justice, Guy leaves for Paris, taking Delia, Sam's grieving lover, with him and leaving Angel alone to contemplate her next move.

The action of *Bourbon at the Border* is set in 1995, but actually pivots around the events of Freedom Summer, the black voter registration drive which took place in Mississippi in 1964. Murdered volunteer workers Andrew Goodman, Michael Schwerner, and James Cheney were only three among the casualties of that effort. Two who survived, physically if not emotionally, Charlie and May, are the protagonists of *Bourbon*. Their antagonists are wounds that cannot heal, outrage that cannot be quelled, and guilt over their inability to protect each other from suffering. They share a small apartment near the Ambassador Bridge which connects Detroit, Michigan, with Windsor, Ontario. Their odyssey to escape their pain has led them there, "like desperadoes drinking bourbon at the border and planning our getaway." May's dream, like the dreams of runaway slaves, is to find peace in the Canadian wilderness; she and Charlie cling to the memory of a few happy days they once spent there.

May walks an emotional tightrope as she struggles to negotiate the couple's material and emotional survival, trying to help Charlie regain his balance without losing her own. When Charlie enters the apartment, returning from another in a series of confinements in a psychiatric hospital, he vows to make one more attempt to overcome his despair. Hope arrives in the form of Rosa, their downstairs neighbor, and her latest paramour, Tyrone, a truck driver who helps Charlie get a job where he works. Left with a permanent limp from wounds he received in Viet Nam, Tyrone bonds with Charlie in the realization that they are in actuality casualties of the same war.

At first Rosa and Tyrone appear to be comic relief, bruised but hearty survivors of hard times, dancing to Johnnie Taylor's blues and Motown oldies. Rosa's employment-seeking ventures, including an audition for a job as a phone sex operator, provoke empathetic laughter. However, Cleage makes them much more. Rosa and Tyrone have tried to skate on top of the system, while May and Charlie have paid dearly for trying to change it. They have received nothing but indifference or hostility in return. In an explosive second-act confrontation with Rosa, May recounts the traumatic events of Freedom Summer which inexorably shaped her future and drove Charlie to madness. Through May, Cleage demands that we examine our own positions on the borders between white and black experiences as well as the lines of demarcation of our perceptions of the events, and the ramifications of those events, which surrounded the Civil Rights Movement during the 1960s.

The violence of the past, violence our nation has yet to come to terms with, is eventually manifested in the present, directly and indirectly, and death ensues. May's efforts to

endure the unendurable and to fight to the end a losing battle to regain for herself and for Charlie what was brutally taken from them in Mississippi raise her to tragic stature. She is the most complete and ultimately heroic of the women at the core of Cleage's three "history plays." Through *Flyin' West, Blues for an Alabama Sky*, and *Bourbon at the Border*, Cleage demands that we air the festering wounds of our history, as black and white Americans and as men and women, so that we can begin to clean and heal them.

Source: Freda Scott Giles, "The Motion of Herstory: Three Plays by Pearl Cleage," in *African American Review,* Vol. 31, No. 4, Winter 1997, pp. 709-12.

Topics for Further Study

The land given away by the Homestead Act of 1862 was originally settled by Native Ameri-cans. Research how and when the Native Ameri-cans lost their land to colonists and pioneers. Write an essay about this land, addressing what the land meant to the Native Americans and what it meant to the homesteaders. Do you feel that one group was more deserving of the land than the other?

Why do you think Cleage chose *Flyin' West* as the title of this play, and do you think it is a good title? Explain your answer, and also suggest three other titles for the play.

Read Fannie Flagg's *Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Cafe* or watch the 1991 movie version, *Fried Green Tomatoes.* Write an essay as if you are a film critic comparing and contrasting Flagg's story and *Flyin' West*.

Sophie describes the negative reactions of many of the other African Americans in Memphis when the sisters headed for the West. Imagine you are one of those doubtful people who chose to stay in the South, and write a one-week journal from that point of view. Be sure to include the day Sophie, Minnie, and Fannie left.

Research the beginnings of feminism in the United States. What were some of the original issues that inspired the first feminists, and at what point did African-American women become involved in the movement? How do the characters in *Flyin' West* reflect and/or negate the basic principles of feminism?

Compare and Contrast

1898: The people of Nicodemus are determined to create a strong community, despite the fact that their petition to have the new railroad come through their town has been denied. Railroads bring growth and progress, so the people of Nicodemus are disappointed that the railroad is bypassing them.

Today: Nicodemus is an important historical site but no longer a thriving town, due in part to the fact that the railroad bypassed it.

1898: Homesteaders in Kansas receive 160 acres each to cultivate, although the average farmer can only cultivate 40 acres at a time.

Today: The average farm size in Kansas is over five hundred acres. With modern equipment and technology, farmers are able to farm hundreds of acres, although issues such as soil erosion and depletion complicate production.

1898: The face of agriculture is the family farm. Farms are run by families who live on the land—often for many generations—and have a deep tie to it.

Today: The family farm is the most rapidly declining business in America. The face of agriculture is corporate farms run by large agricultural businesses that oversee large tracts of land, to which they have no tie beyond the financial.

What Do I Read Next?

Cleage's *Bourbon at the Border* (1997) explores many of the same themes as *Flyin' West,* including racism, determination, and suffering. The story is about a black voter registration drive in the South in 1964. In the wake of the violence and killing that results, the two main characters struggle to make sense of it and long to run away to start a new life.

Zora Neale Hurston's classic *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) is about an African-Ameri-can woman who was tried and acquitted for the murder of the last of her three husbands. This novel is known for its use of dialect and its themes of identity, female bonding, and gender relations in the black community.

Written by Lawrence Bacon Lee and edited by Stuart Bruchey, *Kansas and the Homestead Act, 1862-1905* (1979) offers students an in-depth look at the Homestead Act and the factors that influenced its passage and its effects on the opening of the West.

Anna Quindlen's *Black and Blue* (1998) explores the issue of domestic violence in a contemporary setting. Having finally escaped her abusive husband, Fran Benedetto takes her son to start a new life, but lives in constant fear that her husband will find them. Quindlen reveals the psychological struggles of women in abusive situations and how Fran is compelled by her love for her son to change her life.

Further Study

Braxton, Joanne M., ed., *The Collected Poetry of Paul Laurence Dunbar,* University Press of Virginia, 1993.

Dunbar is considered among the most important early African-American poets, and his poetry reflects the emotional spectrum and unique experiences of late nineteenth-century African Americans. Frank and Minnie refer to his poetry in *Flyin' West.*

Chafe, William Henry, Raymond Gavins, and Robert Korstad, eds., *Remembering Jim Crow: African Americans Tell about Life in the Segregated South,* New Press, 2001.

This volume contains the first-hand experiences of African-Americans during the racial segregation of the Jim Crow years. Interviewees include individuals of various economic, social, and geographic backgrounds. The book comes with an audio disk that allows readers to hear some of the interviewees telling their stories.

Painter, Nell Irvin, *Exodusters: Black Migration to Kansas after Reconstruction,* Random House, 1977.

This review relates the events leading up to the migration of many African Americans in the post-Civil War years. Painter also reveals what life in Kansas was like for black homesteaders and factors of their successes and failures.

Spelman College Museum of Fine Art, *Bearing Witness: Contemporary Works by African American Women Artists,* Vol. 1, Rizzoli International, 1996.

This volume captures the art on display during the title exhibition. Various media were included in the exhibit, and twenty-five notable artists contributed work. The photos of the art are complemented by relevant essays written by such prominent African-American women as Cleage and Maya Angelou.

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Bennett, Suzanne, and Jane T. Peterson, "Pearl Cleage," in *Women Playwrights of Diversity: A Bio-Bibliographical Sourcebook,* Greenwood Press, 1997, p. 91.

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King, Robert L., "Flyin' West," in the *North American Review,* Vol. 279, No. 6, November-December 1994, pp. 51-52.

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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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